

M. in Hell 171

Chapter 171 - Oh Kang-Woo: Warrior of Light (3)

"I'm sorry. I was going to tell you all eventually, but... I guess this is how it comes out," Oh Kang-Woo expressed.

"I-I don't understand," Gaia voiced while making a shocked expression. "How could you, a human, be the demon king of Hell... and what do you mean when you say Satan raised a rebellion...?"

"I will explain from the beginning," Kang-Woo said. "Five years ago, on the Day of Calamity, I was absorbed by a black gate and fell into Hell."

"What...?"

"What do you mean..."

"I don't know why I fell into Hell either. I'm not sure if it was a simple coincidence or if someone caused it to happen deliberately, but I can tell you that I fell into Hell on that day."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo continued explaining, "I wasn't even a Player. I was only a weak human, so I did everything I could to survive. While doing that, some of the demonic energy of Hell entered my body, and—"

"You became a demon," Gaia realized with a trembling voice.

Kang-Woo nodded.

Someone who had accepted demonic energy into their body couldn't stay human. They either died because they couldn't resist the power of demonic energy, or they became a demonic beast devoid of reason due to being unable to resist their desires... Or they turned into a demon.

"That's right. After becoming a demon, I fought to survive for a very, very long time."

"What do you mean? It's only been five years since the Day of Calamity," Cha Yeon-Joo said with a hardened expression.

Kang-Woo made a bitter smile. "It's been five years on Earth, but an incomparably greater amount of time has passed in Hell."

"Just how many years did you spend there for you to be saying—"

"Ten millennia."

"What?"

"I was stuck in Hell for ten millennia."

A heavy silence fell over them once more.

Ten millennia... was such a long time that they couldn't even imagine what it was like. It was too hard to get a grasp on how long that was, so no one was able to say anything in response.

[It is the truth. For the past ten millennia, the demon king went from the First to the Ninth H—]

"Balrog, be quiet."

[As you command.]

What Balrog said this time was of help to Kang-Woo.

A murmur spread among the others upon hearing Balrog testify that Kang-Woo had indeed spent ten millennia in Hell.

Yeon-Joo was so surprised that she couldn't keep her mouth closed.

"R-Really? You spent ten millennia in Hell?" she asked with a trembling voice.

"Yeah."

"And... you became the lord of Hell?"

"I did, for a time."

"Does that mean you aren't anymore?"

Kang-Woo nodded.

Everyone's attention focused on him.

'This is where it begins.'

From here on was the important part.

Everything he'd said until this point was the truth—about how five years ago, he'd fallen into Hell on the Day of Calamity and eventually become the lord of the Nine Hells during the ten millennia he spent in Hell.

'But a true lie...'

A true lie contained 99% truth with just 1% lie woven in between.

Kang-Woo told them the story he'd put together in his mind.

"There are very powerful demons referred to as 'princes' in Hell. I've been containing them in Hell by battling them."

"Containing them?"

"Yeah," Kang-Woo replied with a nod. "Because they had their sights on Earth."

"..."

"Among them, Satan was especially very interested in Earth."

"Th-Then did you become the demon king to stop the princes of Hell from invading Earth?" Gaia asked.

"No, that's not it."

He smiled bitterly and shook his head.

'I shouldn't overexaggerate.'

He couldn't make himself seem excessively righteous or altruistic. A setting that went against what would be expected from a normal human would ruin the story's plausibility.

"I'm not that righteous of a person. I just ended up becoming the demon king while fighting for my life so that I wouldn't be killed by demons," Kang-Woo continued with a calm voice. "But... I couldn't stand still when I saw that they were trying to invade the world I was born in. A long time had passed by, but I still had fond memories of Earth."

"But if Satan ended up coming to Earth, that means..."

"Yes. It's as you're thinking."

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists and bit his lip.

'Let's get into the right mood.'

The most important thing was his timing and performance.

He trembled as he said quietly, "I lost to Satan. No matter how much I struggled, I was no match for him after he awakened the Demonic Sea and his 666 Authorities."

"Ah..."

"Satan took my power and usurped my position as the demon king. He consolidated his forces, created a massive Rift, and crossed to Earth with the other princes of Hell."

"..."

"I followed Satan to Earth..." Kang-Woo stated with sunken eyes and a strong voice, "...to stop him."

Gaia remained silent.

Kang-Woo could see that she was in turmoil.

'I get it.'

It was unlikely that Gaia had thought of the possibility that the demon Satan and Kang-Woo were the same individual. Kang-Woo had created many alibis, so there was no way the others would think that.

Regardless, they would still have a hard time believing in Kang-Woo's words now that they knew he was a demon.

'From here on...'

There was a saying that trust was contagious. This was something that people experienced in their daily life. Humans were simple creatures. If a person were unsure as to whether they should buy something, they were more likely to purchase it if someone nearby said it was a great item. After all, there was a reason why the term 'wingman' was a thing.

'I will create the wave.'

Kang-Woo turned his head toward Si-Hun. Si-Hun's eyes turned hazy as he looked at Kang-Woo.

[Authority of Subordination has been activated.]

[You have successfully controlled your Familiar's actions.]

"I believe you, hyung-nim."

"P-Protector Kim Si-Hun?" Gaia asked in a flustered voice.

Si-Hun nodded without hesitation. "Gaia, think of everything hyung-nim has done until now."

"..."

"If he were on the demons' side, why would he fight so hard against them?"

"B-But..." Gaia uttered hesitantly.

She understood what Si-Hun was saying... but how could they trust the words of a demon without any doubt whatsoever?

"I trust Kang-Woo too," Han Seol-Ah chimed in.

She was the next to step up.

"At first, after seeing how much Kang-Woo liked kimchi stew, I honestly thought he was a bit of a weirdo," Seol-Ah said, gazing at Kang-Woo sadly. She extended her hand and carefully caressed his cheek. "But now... I understand. It must be because you endured that immeasurably long time in Hell all by yourself."

Tears dripped from Seol-Ah's eyes.

She didn't know what kind of place Hell was, but she could imagine based on Kang-Woo's reactions the first time they'd met.

'He must have been so lonely,' she thought while biting her lip.

Among all the people here, she was the one who'd known Kang-Woo the longest. She recalled all the time she'd spent with him.

'That must have been why he had such lonely eyes.'

Seol-Ah had occasionally seen deep sorrow in Kang-Woo's eyes, and she was now finally able to understand the reason behind it.

"It's okay. After meeting you, I've never been lonely, Seol-Ah," Kang-Woo expressed and held Seol-Ah's hand, which was caressing his cheek.

'I didn't expect this.'

He hadn't thought that Seol-Ah would step up to defend him. Nevertheless, thanks to her support, the small wave he'd made through Si-Hun had gotten bigger.

'I'll twist things even more.'

Kang-Woo couldn't just ride the wave that he had made. Just like how a healthy amount of push and pull was important in a relationship, it was also important when lying.

He held out the Guardians' white mask in his possession toward Gaia.

"Regardless, it doesn't change the fact that I've been deceiving everyone," Kang-Woo said. He placed the mask in Gaia's hand. "Effective immediately, I will leave the Guardians. I will forever disappear from your lives."

"Ah..."

"H-Hyung-nim!"

"Wh-What are you talking about, Kang-Woo?!"

Everyone was shocked by his bombshell of a declaration.

Kang-Woo hadn't controlled Si-Hun with the Authority of Subordination this time, but Si-Hun still quickly ran toward him. Meanwhile, Seol-Ah shouted, seemingly about to cry.

There was no need to mention how Tian Suyan, who had blatantly announced that she had feelings for him, reacted. Kang Tae-Soo shook his head in shock.

"Th-That's a load of shit, you son of a bitch! Do you have any idea how much I've invested in you?!" Yeon-Joo shouted with her face turning red.

After everyone's heated reactions, all of their attention was placed on Gaia.

"Kang-Woo..."

She touched the mask he had returned to her while making a sad expression and biting her lip.

'Can I trust Kang-Woo?'

Gaia thought of all the time she'd spent with him.

She hadn't known him for a long time. It had only been a couple of months... but she'd learned a lot about him during that time.

'Kang-Woo is...'

Kang-Woo was the one who had gotten the angriest after discovering that Satan had killed Alec Osborne and targeted Si-Hun's life. He was also the one who had learned about the Demon Cult's plans and tried harder than anyone else to stop them.

After Satan plundered the Guardians' vault, it was Kang-Woo once again who had woken them up from their complacency. He was also the first one who had noticed Reynald had been in danger and shed genuine tears after he died.

Moreover, Kang-Woo had always given her advice whenever she had been about to fall into despair.

'Kang-Woo...'

How could she suspect him?

Gaia tightly gripped the mask he'd given her. Her thin hands were trembling.

"I trust you," Gaia stated.

"...Gaia."

"It doesn't matter if you're a demon or a demon king," Gaia continued quietly. "No darkness can cover the light that is within you."

After all, Tirion, the God of Heroes, had chosen Kang-Woo.

'There must be a reason Lord Tirion chose Kang-Woo.'

She had felt Tirion's energy through Reynald, and she could tell how much he despised the demonic. Despite that, Tirion had chosen Kang-Woo.

'There is no way he wouldn't have known.'

There was no way Tirion hadn't known about Kang-Woo's true identity after connecting with him. Despite that, Tirion remained inside Kang-Woo. That could only mean one thing.

'He saw the light within Kang-Woo.'

Gaia couldn't help but think that.

"Kang-Woo. Please remain in Guardians. We... need you," Gaia voiced and returned the mask to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo looked surprised, but he accepted the mask.

"Thank you for believing in me," he said.

Right then...

Fwoosh—!!!

The black demonic energy flowing out of his body started to be dyed with brilliant golden light.

"Aahh."

The others gasped upon seeing a bright light shine from Kang-Woo.

"I swear that I will save the world along with the Guardians, no matter what," Kang-Woo declared.

They could sense his strong determination in his voice.

Kang-Woo, who was still surrounded by golden light, put the white mask back on.

He was a man who had been born in darkness, but he had now become light. Despite possessing the body of a demon, he was a hero more devoted than anyone else to justice and to protecting the world. This was the birth of Oh Kang-Woo, Warrior of Light.

'What an incredible production~!!'

Chapter 172 - What?

After the appearance of Lucifer's retainers and the incident with the Demon Cult and Balrog, the Korean group's time in South America came to an end.

Once the Demon Cultists confirmed that Balrog had lost, they quickly escaped, and the monsters returned to normal soon after. The US soldiers helped the indigenous people emigrate and then began building a restoration base in Venezuela, the only area in South America they could manage.

Oh Kang-Woo's group left the remaining tasks to the US soldiers and Grace McCubbin and returned to Korea. On the way back, there were hardly any conversations between Kang-Woo and the rest.

One of the reasons was that there was a demon, who was over five meters tall, standing by his side constantly. However, the biggest reason was that Kang-Woo had revealed his hellish past.

Even though they'd said that they trusted Kang-Woo, it was hard for them to treat him the same as before.

'I guess it's similar to hearing that your friend used to be a violent criminal in the past.'

It might be different with Kang-Woo though since he'd become a demon to survive after falling into Hell alone.

'To them, I'm probably like someone who ate human flesh to survive on a deserted island.'

That was probably the best comparison. They could understand Kang-Woo's circumstances, but they had a hard time truly accepting it because of their preconceived notions.

'Well, I'm sure it'll be resolved over time.'

Time didn't solve everything, but Kang-Woo thought that, in his case, it would make things better. What they needed wasn't time to trust Kang-Woo again but time to sort out their thoughts and accept a demon as a comrade.

'In any case, the situation itself has improved.'

The saying 'A blessing in disguise' was the best way to describe the situation.

When his identity, which he'd done his best to conceal, had been exposed because of Balrog, Kang-Woo had racked his brain to figure out how to overcome the situation. Nevertheless, everything ended up working out well. He would be able to move more freely from now onward.

'The biggest advantage is that I'll be able to use Balrog without restraint.'

If Kang-Woo had to keep hiding the fact he was a demon, he'd have trouble using Balrog as an ally. Moreover, even if Kang-Woo were to use Balrog, he would have had to put on all kinds of ridiculous facades just like he'd done with Vaal Zahak.

Being able to use Balrog freely as an ally had made the gamble much more worthwhile.

'Although it might look like a small matter, it isn't.'

Balrog's power was comparable to that of the Guardians as an entire group. Kim Si-Hun might have the potential to surpass Balrog, but that wasn't the case yet.

Leaving everything aside, Balrog's value could be summarized in Kang-Woo's next thought.

'Balrog can face the princes of Hell.'

It was unlikely that Balrog would be able to defeat a prince of Hell though. Everyone praised Balrog for being as powerful as a prince of Hell, but it was an undeniable fact that he was inferior to them in actual combat. However, if Kang-Woo were added to the equation, the pair would be a match for the princes.

So, it was a huge gain for Kang-Woo that he could use Balrog without worrying about what the others would think.

'The same can't be said for Vaal Zahak though.'

Vaal Zahak had pretty much been labeled as Satan's subordinate. If Kang-Woo were to use him openly, there was a chance that he'd be accused of being the actual person who had killed Reynald.

'That can't happen.'

Kang-Woo had only been accepted as a warrior of light thanks to the existence of Satan. If it were revealed that he and Satan were the same being, everything would be over for real. All of humanity would take out their weapons and fight against him.

For Kang-Woo, who dreamed of a comfortable life, that was something he had to avoid no matter what.

[I'm sorry, my king. I had no idea of your circumstances...]

"Well, you had no way of knowing, so it's okay."

They were in a building that was near the apartment building where Kang-Woo lived.

Balrog was easily five meters tall, so Kang-Woo couldn't let him into his home. That's why Kang-Woo had bought a building and remodeled it so that Balrog could stay there.

Kang-Woo was currently sitting in that very building. It had a ceiling that was three stories tall.

Balrog lowered his head as he knelt before Kang-Woo.

[I never expected the demon king would be deceiving the humans.]

"Deceive? What are you talking about?"

[Hm? Are you not assuming yourself as a warrior of light to stab the humans in the back when the time comes?]

"That's nonsense, man."

Kang-Woo sighed and shook his head.

What kind of nonsense was Balrog saying? Kang-Woo was trying really hard to protect Earth.

He proceeded to explain his objective to Balrog.

After listening to Kang-Woo's explanation, Balrog said, [The princes of Hell have revived...? N-No, more importantly, my king! Why would someone as grand as you protect weaklings like humans?! You must conquer this world and make it bow down to you!]

"I'm not interested," Kang-Woo replied with a bored voice. "I've fought for more than long enough. I want to rest now."

[Ngh...]

"Well, you're a demon, so you probably won't understand."

Demons didn't understand the concept of peace and security. They were immortal, so such a thought process had been made impossible for them.

'If they could think that way, they would grow infinitely in number.'

Like humans, demons reproduced and left descendants. Among them, there were even some who were capable of asexual reproduction. If they were a race that wanted peace and security, there would probably be almost a hundred billion demons in Hell.

'I'm not sure how angels do it, but demons maintain a population balance by killing each other.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure who had made demons, but he couldn't help but think they'd done a meticulous job. Of course, even among demons, there were a few who wanted to live a peaceful life, but they were the minority. The majority loved to battle and trample on their opponents, and Balrog was among the majority.

"You're not thinking of going against my will, are you?"

[Of course not.]

Balrog bowed his head.

He instinctively yearned for destruction and conquest, but there was something that took priority over such instincts—the commands of his master, Kang-Woo. Balrog wouldn't hesitate to risk his life if it were for Kang-Woo.

[If the demon king wishes for peace, then I will kill all of your enemies so that they cannot interrupt your rest.]

"Uhh... Well, sure. Anyway, since I finished explaining my situation, let me ask you a few things."

[Please ask me anything.]

"Have there been any changes in Hell while I was gone?"

Kang-Woo wasn't worrying about his army that he'd left behind.

'The ancient demonic beasts.'

It was the abnormality that he had heard about from Doomguard that had his concern. Apparently, the ancient demonic beasts, creatures that never left their territory, had been expanding their territory.

Since the Demon Cult had begun summoning demons from the Ninth hell, Kang-Woo thought that it would be better if he heard more about that.

[I actually had something to report to you in regards to that.] Balrog's expression crumpled. [I believe Amon is planning something.]

"Amon?" Kang-Woo uttered with a frown.

Amon had been in Satan's faction. However, he'd ultimately deserted it and joined Kang-Woo instead. Amon had low physical combat capabilities, but he possessed exceptional knowledge in regards to magic. He was also the one who had helped Kang-Woo use the Hell Armaments to create a dimensional rift that led to Earth.

"What do you mean by that exactly?"

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as he exuded a thick bloodlust.

Balrog trembled a bit. He raised his head and looked into Kang-Woo's eyes. They were still white with black irises.

[I am not exactly sure either. I do not have any evidence, but... he has been fully immersed in his research ever since you left for Earth and hasn't come out since.]

"But he's always been like that."

[But this time is quite serious. I haven't seen his face at all since you left for Earth. I even tried to force myself in, but he'd blocked the door with a powerful barrier.]

"He even blocked the door?"

Kang-Woo furrowed his brows. Amon's behavior was indeed odd.

'Well, I never really trusted him from the start.'

After all, the reason why he'd accepted Amon as a subordinate was that he had been the only one who knew how to use the Hell Armaments to create a Rift.

"...Has he betrayed us?"

[I am not entirely sure, but it is a fact that, the ancient demonic beasts started moving after he locked himself up. We even detected Behemoth making a move.]

"Behemoth made a move?"

Behemoth was the strongest of the ancient demonic beasts and was also the father of Leviathan, one of the seven princes of Hell.

'Leviathan was a crossbreed of an ancient demonic beast and a demon, if I remember correctly.'

There was not much known about Behemoth besides the fact that he was Leviathan's father. He had never made a move during the ten millennia that Kang-Woo had been in Hell.

"Damn."

Kang-Woo felt uneasy.

However, what was even more unpleasant than the uneasy feeling was that he couldn't do anything about it.

'It's not like I can go back to Hell.'

He couldn't summon them to Earth to get rid of them, but it was also impossible for him to return to Hell.

'I don't even want to fucking go back.'

Kang-Woo had gone through all sorts of hardships to return to Earth. He had no intention of going back to Hell.

"What about the others? I heard from Doomguard that he was investigating it."

[Doomguard and Argus are investigating but haven't been able to find the exact reason.]

"Damn."

Kang-Woo never thought he would have to worry about the Nine Hells after returning to Earth.

'If I knew things would turn out like this, I would've killed Amon before coming here.'

Despite thinking that, he knew it didn't make sense.

He'd thought that once he was back on Earth, he would have nothing to do with Hell from that point onward. He'd never thought of the possibility of there being Gates or a Demon Cult.

'The only thing I can do at the moment is to grow stronger.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

There was nothing else he could do to deal with the situation.

'I wasn't able to reach 130 in Demonic Energy either.'

Additionally, the Demon Cult was probably going to back off for a while after failing with Balrog's summon.

'Do I have to wait until Lucifer's forces attack the Demon Cult?'

The only thing he could think of doing was to wait until Lucifer's forces crossed to Earth from the continent of Aernor. Then he would attack them.

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed deeply.

His head was hurting.

'I can only hope nothing more complicated happens.'

His brain capacity was already reaching its limit.

[More importantly, my king.]

"Yeah?"

Balrog looked around before asking, [Where is Lilith?]

"What do you mean? Lilith is in Hell."

Kang-Woo shook his head as if he didn't even want to hear anything about Lilith.

[Pardon?] Balrog tilted his head in confusion. [But Lilith came to Earth before me...]

"What?" Kang-Woo's eyes widened. "What the fuck?"

Lilith was already on Earth?

Chapter 173 - The Letter She Left

"W-wait. What are you talking about?"

Oh Kang-Woo's vision blurred, his ears heated up, and his head started swimming. He had never expected nor imagined to hear something like that.

"Lilith is already on Earth?"

Balrog nodded.

[Yes. She went around proudly boasting that the demon king had finally called her before going...]

Balrog frowned aggressively. Balrog already looked scary, so his scowl made him look like a character from a horror movie. He anxiously bit his lip and said with sincere concern, [Kuh. That damn girl is so arrogant just because she's beautiful... My king, you mustn't fall for her temptations.]

Kang-Woo coldly replied, "Shut up."

[Pardon?]

"Shut the hell up for a second."

Kang-Woo trembled while grabbing his hair.

'No.'

Squelch.

The sound of dozens of green tentacles wriggling... Sticky mucus flowed down from the tentacles, and thousands of suckers licked his skin. Eighteen eyes and a long tongue similar to a snake's brushed past his lips.

'Oh God, fuck.'

They were memories of the past...

They were his trauma—a stigma that was imprinted in his mind. They were memories, emotions, and feelings he could never free himself from.

'Si-Hun, I'm sorry for calling you stupid.'

He'd thought Kim Si-Hun was stupid for being unable to overcome his past trauma.

But what about him?

'Save me.'

In the dark nights of Hell, every time that Kang-Woo tried to fall asleep in his bed, which he had painstakingly made in Hell where fluffy things were nonexistent... tentacles would enter his blanket. When he hurriedly lifted it, he saw eighteen red eyes looking up at him.

Damp hands lifted his clothes, and mucus dripped over him and trickled down his body while wetting his clothes. As he opened his mouth to scream, a long tongue swiftly shot out and entered his mouth.

"I love you, my king."

'AAAAAAHHHHH!'

Just like a student who had met his bully... like prey that had come across a predator... he felt chills, and his body started to tremble.

"L-Lilith is... on... E-Earth?"

Fear took control of his body, and memories of those dark nights haunted him.

One could say that if he hated her so much, he could have just prevented her from entering his chambers, but it wasn't that simple.

Sleeping together with Lilith was pretty much impossible to refuse because not only were they in an alliance, but she was also his 'bride,' although in name only.

Take, for instance, a country where the king did not sleep with his queen at all and the people of that country cared deeply for, loved, and worshiped her.

Kang-Woo could not afford for his army to be split when he was already struggling to face the forces of the seven princes of Hell, so he had no other choice but to sleep with her.

"Urp."

He wanted to throw up. He covered his mouth with his hands.

Maybe it was hard to believe from how he had reacted, but it wasn't that he hated Lilith. There was no way that he would hate her when she was so devoted to him while expressing her loyalty and love for him.

'That was the problem.'

If she were an enemy, he would've been able to just kill her. But she was an ally. Not just that, she was one of the five most important figures within his demon army. Not only that, she loved him so much that she'd probably even rip out her own heart to give to him if he wanted it.

Politically and sentimentally, it was hard for him to reject her completely.

'Yeah, for fuck's sake, it's my fault for being a sucker.'

He thought about Balrog and Lilith. If he were asked to choose whether they were important to him or not, he would most definitely choose that they were. After all, they'd spent over a thousand years together and had gone through all sorts of hardships.

Even someone who had just the tiniest bit of humanity left would grow to be attached to someone after going through thick and thin with them.

[Is something the matter?]

"Haaa. No, forget it."

He sighed and shook his head. He'd spent a lot of time with Lilith for numerous reasons, and that had given him trauma that he could never escape from.

"That aside..."

He narrowed his eyes.

'If she came here, it was probably back then.'

He recalled what had happened in Japan—when he'd barely been able to stop Lilith from being summoned.

The battle with Akiyama, the lunatic Demon Cultist, and the events after that... Lilith's body hadn't appeared from the Rift, so there was a chance her soul had entered Kurosaki Yurie's body.

"Ah."

A short exclamation left his mouth.

Kurosaki Yurie... He was finally starting to understand her weird actions.

Kang-Woo's expression paled.

'Yeah. That's why she did it.'

The reason why the granddaughter of the emperor had stood by his side instead of Fujimoto Ryoma's...

How easily she had listened to his requests to the point it was suspicious...

Everything could be explained if Lilith was inside Kurosaki Yurie.

"Huh? Wait."

An exclamation mark appeared above his head, and his eyes widened.

'Isn't this a good thing?'

The only reason he shunned Lilith was because of her appearance. People might criticize him for shunning someone for their looks, but in Lilith's case, her looks were too much.

'Spend a thousand years stuck with her, and let's see if you can still say the same shit.'

It was as if a giant squid stuck itself onto someone twenty-four seven and said it loved them.

Kang-Woo stood up and clenched his fists.

'If Lilith is inside Kurosaki Yurie...!'

The core problem would be solved.

Kurosaki Yurie's beauty was on par with Han Seol-Ah's.

'Well, it's not like I want to do that kind of thing with Lilith after all this time.'

Seol-Ah's face popped up in his head. Kang-Woo nodded while licking his lips.

'Anyway, this is good news.'

He wasn't sure how strong Lilith was after having entered a human's body, but the source of a demon's power was their soul. Even Lucifer had recovered his power thanks to his soul and his Hell Armament, so there was a chance she'd have recovered her old strength.

Balrog and Lilith...

'I hope I'm not creating the demon king army on Earth.'

He felt a bit uneasy, but the situation was overall encouraging. He took out his smartphone, searched for Kurosaki Yurie's number, and called her.

Brrrrr.

"Mm."

No matter how long he waited, she did not answer. He called a few more times.

"She isn't answering."

He frowned.

'It can't be helped.'

Kang-Woo turned his body.

[My king?]

"I have to go somewhere, so stay here."

[If you have business to take care of, I will join you,] Balrog said, motivated.

"No, it's fine. It doesn't require many hands. Also, if you go out in your current body, it would just cause chaos."

[Ngh.]

"I'll call you if something happens, so keep this in your ear."

Kang-Woo handed him a communication device that fit Balrog's ear, and Balrog politely accepted it.

[I will wait for your call.]

Kang-Woo did not respond. He walked out of the building, used the Authority of the Sky, and rose into the air.

'Kurosaki Yurie is in Tokyo, I believe.'

He had heard that she lived in the emperor's castle.

He stomped in the air, and his body shot forward at incredible speed.

* * *

Kang-Woo reached Tokyo in less than an hour and was standing atop the luxurious castle. He found the door and entered.

"Wh-Who goes there?!"

The bodyguards guarding the castle's interior quickly surrounded him.

Kang-Woo took out a white mask.

"I am a member of Guardians. I am here because there is something I need to tell Princess Kurosaki Yurie."

"Guardians...?"

"Ah, wait."

Guardians was a secret organization that wasn't publicly known, but the chief executives of each country knew about them and worked together with them. It was only natural that the guards protecting Kurosaki Yurie knew about Guardians.

"Please, step aside."

At that moment, a young man appeared from behind the guards.

"C-Captain Ito."

"I know him. He is indeed a member of Guardians, so you may go back to your positions."

"Yes, sir!"

He was a young man who looked calm and had narrow eyes.

Kang-Woo remembered seeing him in photos.

"Are you Ito Shinji?"

Ito Shinji was a member of Guardians and one of the protectors chosen by Gaia.

"I am. This is our first time meeting in person, Kang-Woo. I've heard a lot about you from Gaia."

"There's something I must tell Princess Kurosaki Yurie."

He didn't have time to make formal introductions, so Kang-Woo told him his reason for coming.

Ito Shinji's expression darkened.

"Could you follow me for a second?"

Kang-Woo followed Ito Shinji into a plain-looking room. There were no traces of someone being inside.

"This is..."

"Princess Kurosaki Yurie's room."

"Is she out at the moment?"

"No."

Ito Shinji shook his head with a grim expression.

Kang-Woo frowned.

'Wait, is she...'

"Princess Kurosaki Yurie has been missing for the past month."

'Fucking hell.'

His uneasy feeling was right.

'Where the hell did she go?'

If it was about a month ago, it was while the world was working together to collect the Rift Seeds.

"Do you know where she went?"

"No. We've searched throughout the entire country, but..." Ito Shinji sighed. He went to Kurosaki Yurie's drawer and took out a white envelope. "This is a letter that Princess Kurosaki Yurie told me to give to Mr. Oh Kang-Woo if you ever came to visit her."

"... What does it say?"

There was no way they hadn't read it. Someone who was like the leader of the country had suddenly disappeared, so Kang-Woo was sure they had already checked the letter.

Ito Shinji shook his head while smiling bitterly.

"It's written in unknown letters. She had probably set it up so that only you could understand it."

"Why didn't you contact me first?"

"She said that if we contacted you first, the letter would burn and disappear. I am not sure how that is possible, but we couldn't take any chances."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo grabbed the letter.

'What is she planning to do?'

He ripped the envelope open and took out the letter. As soon as he touched the paper, the black letters started to move. The letter was written in Korean.

'When did she learn Korean?'

Leaving his question aside, he started to read the letter.

[To my dear demon king,

If you are reading this letter, you must have figured out my identity. If you hadn't, you would have no reason to come visit 'Kurosaki Yurie.']

'How perceptive.'

She was completely different from Balrog in that sense.

Kang-Woo nodded and started to read the following paragraph.

[First, I would like to apologize for having hidden my identity despite having come to Earth by borrowing the body of this human.]

'Oh yeah. Now that I think about it, why was she hiding her identity?'

[I didn't have the courage to stand before you... with this filthy appearance, my king.]

"What?"

He couldn't help but curse.

"What the hell is she talking about?"

Filthy?

Kurosaki Yurie was a beautiful girl by all standards.

[I have been searching for ways to get out of this filthy appearance to return to the one you used to love.]

"No."

[And while I have been, I finally found a way.]

"Fuck no."

He couldn't say anything but 'no.'

[Fufufu. Are you not already excited? My dear demon king, my heart is already about to burst from the thought of reuniting with you.]

"No, but why...? Why the fuck..."

[There are quite a few humans familiar with controlling demonic energy. They are going to help me recover my original appearance.]

"F-Fucking what?"

[Come to think of it, you said that the Demon Cult dared to serve the likes of Satan as the demon king, did you not? Fufu. I will take this opportunity and make sure they learn who the true demon king is.]

"A-Aaaahhh."

His agape mouth could not close.

[I will join the Demon Cult and spread the identity of the true demon king. And once I recover my original appearance, I will come back to you.]

His hands trembled. He felt like he was about to cry.

[My dear king, please wait a bit longer.]

[Sincerely, your Lilith. Chu ❤️]

When he saw the last heart, he couldn't resist anymore.

Rip! Rip!

"ARRRRGGGHHH!"

He ripped the letter apart and roared.

"WHY?! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS TO ME?!!!"

"Wh-What is the matter?!"

He extended his hand and grabbed Shinji's collar.

"What the fuck? What the fuck did I do wrong?!!!"

"I-I beg your pardon?"

"Why me?! Why fucking me?! What did I do wrong?!!!"

"Why am I the only one who can't be happyyyyyyyyyy?!!!"

Chapter 174 - In Search of Her

"Kang-Woo?" Ito Shinji asked.

"Haaa. Haaa."

Oh Kang-Woo panted heavily. He looked at Ito Shinji with bloodshot eyes.

Shinji was frightened by Kang-Woo's sudden change in attitude.

"Wh-What is the matter? Just what was written in that lett—"

"CCTV."

"I'm sorry?"

"Please show me all of the CCTV footage around the area when Princess Kurosaki Yurie disappeared."

"But we've already investigated—"

"Please show me."

Rumble.

The entire building shook. A strong bloodlust poured out of Kang-Woo.

"Kuh!"

Shinji's expression hardened after he felt a huge pressure weighing down on his entire body. It was a huge energy that he wouldn't even fathom the idea of resisting.

"U-Urghh."

His hands trembled. He couldn't breathe properly. Shinji looked up at Kang-Woo in disbelief.

'This is...'

The power of a hero who'd received the power of Tirion, God of Heroes.

He'd heard the rumors, but actually seeing the power of a god with his own eyes made him tremble.

"J-Just a moment, please."

Shinji moved quickly, and Kang-Woo followed him. Shinji guided him into a room with dozens of monitors. It was probably the room from where they watched over the emperor and Kurosaki Yurie.

Shinji pointed to one side.

"The videos over there are the ones that were recorded when Princess Kurosaki Yurie disappeared."

"Thank you."

Kang-Woo sat down. The Kurosaki Yurie of one month before could be seen on the screen.

'She's fortunately still in her human appearance at the time of the video.'

Going back to her original form couldn't be that easy, so he still had some hope.

'I have to find clues.'

It was something he had to do, even at the expense of his life.

Kang-Woo looked through the footage and found a video of Kurosaki Yurie sneaking somewhere in the middle of the night. He watched her easily jump over the castle's walls and meet up with a man.

"Pause it."

Kang-Woo looked at the man she'd met.

'I can't see his face.'

He wasn't sure what magic had been used, but only his face was blurry. It didn't matter how much they zoomed in; they couldn't see the man's face.

"We've tried to search for the man's identity, but as you can see, his face is completely covered."

"Is it the same for the footage after this?"

"Well..." Shinji slurred the end of his sentence. Then, he sighed and resumed the footage. "You should watch to the very end."

The man grabbed Kurosaki Yurie's hand, and then...

"Ah."

She and the man disappeared as if they'd teleported.

Shinji said, "After this, we weren't able to find traces of Princess Kurosaki Yurie."

"Shit."

Kang-Woo let out a short curse, pulled at his hair, and sighed.

'I have to find her.'

It wasn't just to stop Lilith from returning to her original horrifying appearance.

'I mean, I want to stop that from happening too.'

His mind was in jumbles. A portion of the letter popped up in his head. She had written that she would spread his name throughout the Demon Cult.

'Fuuuuuuuck.'

That was the biggest problem. She wanted to spread his identity throughout the Demon Cult.

'That could seriously mess things up.'

He had somehow managed to resolve the situation back when Balrog had worshiped him in front of his comrades, but what if the Demon Cult began worshiping him as the demon king on top of that?

'If that happens, it will really be the end.'

He would no longer be able to use Satan's name as the one leading the Demon Cult.

Kang-Woo anxiously bit his lip.

'But chances of that happening should be low.'

He wasn't sure who the Aspects of Evil leading the Demon Cult were, but they'd probably nurtured the forces of the Demon Cult for more than a thousand years.

There was no way they would offer Kang-Woo their forces just because of Lilith's words, which lacked credibility.

'The problem is...'

Lilith was far more capable than anyone could imagine.

He couldn't relax. After all, it was Lilith who had created a solid force for him when he had become the public enemy of the seven princes of Hell. She had outstanding skills when it came to controlling people.

Kang-Woo looked at the footage of Lilith and the unknown man disappearing a couple times.

"Is there nothing you've discovered about this man?"

"He's around 170–175 cm tall and probably weighs around 60kg. As you can see, he doesn't have any wrinkles on his hand, so he can't be more than forty years old."

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. What Shinji said were things one could guess by looking at the footage, so it was as if they hadn't learned anything at all.

'Shit.'

Around 170–175 cm tall, weighing about 60kg, and in his twenties to thirties... These were the physical characteristics of most young Japanese men.

'I can't make any conclusions based on this.'

Even though the Japanese population had decreased after the Day of Calamity, they couldn't point out who the man Kurosaki Yurie had met up with was just based on these specifications.

'First, based on the letter...'

The man was likely the Demon Cultist whom Lilith had made contact with.

Shinji continued, "There is one clue we managed to acquire from the footage that could identify the man."

"What is it?"

"Pay attention to this part here."

Ito Shinji replayed the video in slow motion, focusing on when the man, who had been waiting for Kurosaki Yurie atop a building, jumped down from the rooftop.

Considering a Player's superhuman physical capabilities, it wasn't impressive.

"Here."

Shinji pointed to the falling man's stomach. Although it was just for a short moment, the man's stomach was visible through his fluttering clothes.

On the stomach was...

"A scar."

"Yes. It seems like his stomach was pierced with a sword."

"..."

"Therefore, we've searched through hospital records, but... we haven't been able to figure out that man's identity yet."

Shinji's explanation ended.

Kang-Woo fell into thought while looking at the man's scar.

'Wait...'

A Demon Cultist, a scar on his stomach, and someone Kurosaki Yurie would contact...

Those three facts were entwined in Kang-Woo's head. His eyes shone.

'Akiyama.'

The man who'd summoned Lilith in the past.

He'd summoned her for an absurd reason, and the other Demon Cultists worshiped her to the point that they actually seemed crazy.

And...

'He's a fucking pervert.'

He'd summoned Lilith because she was supposedly the dream of all men.

Kang-Woo frowned.

'The Demon Cultist Lilith contacted was Akiyama.'

He couldn't think of anyone else who fulfilled these three conditions.

"... Mr. Ito."

"Yes?"

"If you knew this man's face, could you find his location?"

"Huh? Y-Yes, but how will you—"

"This is him."

Kang-Woo infused his energy into the Key of the Demonic Sea, which was on his right middle finger. The Key of the Demonic Sea could be turned into things other than weapons, and he could transform it into anything he imagined. That's how useful this Transcendent-grade weapon, the Key of the Demonic Sea, was.

Gurgle.

The Key of the Demonic Sea turned into a black liquid and transformed in the air, creating Akiyama's face based on Kang-Woo's memory.

"This is..."

"There are a few things that make me suspect this man is the culprit. Please start investigating by using this man's face."

"J-Just a moment, please."

Shinji took a picture of the face created with the Key of the Demonic Sea and ran off somewhere.

"Fuuu," Kang-Woo sighed and clenched his fist.

'I managed to find a clue.'

He had managed to find something through the fact that Lilith had made contact with Akiyama. He just had to wait for Shinji to find out more about him.

'Please.'

His legs trembled anxiously, and he looked at the ceiling with a desperate expression.

'I hope I'm not too late.'

* * *

The remains of destroyed buildings filled a dark, empty tunnel. It was the place where the Demon Cult had tried to summon Lilith in the past. It was under Sapporo Station, which had been destroyed after Kang-Woo and Fujimoto Ryoma had become involved in the ritual.

A woman was walking down the tunnel filled with heaps of rubble.

"It seems the preparations are finally complete."

A man with freckles quickly nodded. "Yes, they are!"

"Fufu. Well done, Cardinal Akiyama."

"N-Not at all! I am willing to do anything as long as it will help you recover your true form!" Akiyama said, smiling widely as he looked at her.

"How is it going to work exactly?"

"We are going to create a massive Rift that connects to the Nine Hells. We will then drag demonic energy out of it to recreate your body based on the information engraved in your soul."

"Hmmm. Is something like that possible?"

"Huhu. This is all thanks to the knowledge given to us by the Aspects," Akiyama proudly said.

"Now that the Gaia System has weakened considerably, we can do much more than before."

"Is Satan among the Aspects you speak of?"

"Mm. I'm sorry. That's something not even I know. Information about the Aspects is highly classified even within the Demon Cult..."

"I see."

"B-But once you regain your true form, I am sure you will be able to meet with them, Lady Lilith!" Akiyama said in a fuss.

Lilith nodded while smiling. A colossal amount of sexiness emitted from her.

Akiyama was beaming with his mouth wide open.

Lilith said, "I'm glad. I've wanted to meet with them. Oh, and have you finished what I asked you to?"

"Oh, we are still in the middle of it."

Akiyama nodded.

What Lilith asked of him was... to spread the existence of the true demon king.

Akiyama secretly distributed the Book of Hell, which Lilith had written herself, throughout the Demon Cult.

"But does the demon king really exist? From what I've learned from the Demon Cult, the seven princes of Hell maintain the balance of the Nine Hells."

"Fufu. You will learn soon enough." A wide smile appeared on her face. "If the preparations are complete, let us begin right away."

"H-Hehe. You will regain your true form at last, Lady Lilith."

"Hoho. You can look forward to... the reward that I will be giving you," Lilith sexily said while stroking Akiyama's chin.

But that was only for a short while. After turning away from Akiyama, she took out her handkerchief and scrubbed her hand clean as if she'd touched something filthy.

"H-Hehe."

Having not seen Lilith wipe her hand, Akiyama smiled like an idiot while staring at her back.

'Finally!'

He clenched his fists. Soon, he'd be able to meet the Succubus Queen.

'She's already this beautiful, so...'

He couldn't even imagine how beautiful she'd be once she recovered her true form.

Akiyama excitedly put his hands on top of the magic circle. The dozens of Demon Cultists who were there to help him began chanting.

"Guys! This is the moment when our long-cherished dream becomes reality!"

A single tear dripped down Akiyama's cheek.

"Pull up Hitomi, guys!!"

A black Rift started to form.

Chapter 175 - Advent of Lilith (1)

"Okay, we will start the ritual now."

The magic circle shone. A black Rift appeared, and demonic energy sloshed out of it.

For humans, demonic energy changed their body into that of a demon. For demons, it gave them even greater power.

Of course, the presence of demonic energy in the air didn't mean that all demons possessed the ability to harness that power. If that were the case, all the demons in Hell would be able to grow infinitely stronger. A highly advanced technique was needed to use the demonic energy in the air.

The Demon Cultists began chanting, "Zazas, zazas, nasatanada zazas."

As the chant continued, the black light flowing out from the magic circle intensified.

'As expected of the knowledge given to us by the Aspects.'

Akiyama's eyes shone.

The Aspects of Evil were the almighty beings who led the Demon Cult. It was said that they'd been alive for thousands of years. The word 'knowledgeable' wasn't even adequate to describe them.

'I wonder if the demon king that Lady Lilith talks about is more powerful than them.'

Akiyama was a loyal Demon Cultist, so he couldn't help but have some doubts about it. The knowledge that the Aspects of Evil had given them was too glorious for them to simply believe what Lilith said.

How to summon a demon, how to fuse with a demon's soul by summoning it inside your body, and even how to nullify the Gaia System that had been created with the power of a god... The information on all of those things was from a plane of knowledge unreachable to humans.

'I'm sure Lady Lilith is mistaken.'

Akiyama hadn't read the Book of Hell. He'd been busy working on the ritual to return Lilith to her original form, so he'd just assisted in its distribution with the help of the Demon Cult branch in the Middle East.

'I'll read it later.'

He was curious about the contents of the book, which led Lilith to confidently claim that they would soon know who the true demon king was.

'No, that isn't what's important right now.'

Akiyama turned his head and gazed at Kurosaki Yurie—no, Lilith lying on the altar.

"Ehehehehe."

It was obvious he'd laugh like an idiot after seeing such a beauty.

'I wonder what reward she'll give me.'

He stroked his weapon, the red whip. His heart seemed to have been set alight with passion, and an exciting sensation spread to the lower part of his body. He imagined Lilith looking down at him in disgust and stepping on him with her high heels.

"That is a reward in this industry."

Akiyama licked his lips, drooling as he recalled the scenes that he had dreamed of.

Immersed in his delusion, he put more effort into casting the spell. Black demonic energy moved toward Lilith, enveloping her.

"Whoa."

Little by little, new skin was being created by the demonic energy that encompassed her. The human body of Kurosaki Yurie was slowly turning into that of a demon.

Rumble!

"Huh?!"

"C-Cardinal Akiyama! The Rift is acting strangely!"

"W-We cannot control it very well!"

Akiyama's subordinates shouted in desperation.

With a hardened expression, Akiyama yelled, "Do not falter! Get a hold of yourselves, guys!"

"Kurgh! Cough!!"

One of his subordinates who was also casting the spell suddenly coughed up blood and collapsed.

CRACK!

The size of the Rift became bigger, and even more demonic energy flowed out from it.

"Kuh!"

It was an unexpected situation.

Akiyama bit his lip.

"Y-Your Eminence! The Rift is going out of control!"

"W-We have to stop it!"

His subordinates hurriedly shouted.

The dimensional wall worked as a sort of dam—a very solid one that blocked dimensions. What Rifts did was pierce that dam for a short while.

If this Rift that they were dealing with were to run wild, a huge amount of energy from Hell might come out at once and bring about great danger to those around the Rift.

"Kuh!! Sh-Shit!"

Normally, Akiyama would stop the ritual and close the Rift.

"No! We cannot give up!" Akiyama shouted.

However, they'd been waiting for this for a very long time and had experienced the bitter taste of failure before. They couldn't just give up here.

"Guys! We will keep pushing forward!"

'Toward our dream!'

* * *

"We've found it."

Oh Kang-Woo, who had been staying in the castle and helping Ito Shinji, quickly stood up and walked over.

"Where?" he asked.

"Take a look at this footage," Shinji said and pressed a remote control.

CCTV footage appeared on the monitor, showing Akiyama getting on a boat on the coast.

"His name is Akiyama Ichiro. He officially went missing a few years ago. After conducting an open investigation, we managed to find a witness who testified that they sold him a boat."

"Sold him a boat?"

"Yes. Apparently, he bought a giant cruiser that cost billions of yen and had set sail somewhere with dozens of people."

"Did you find out where he went?"

"If we were to make a prediction based on their route, it's most likely Sapporo."

Sapporo... was a place where restoration measures had yet to begin after an SS-rank Gate appeared there.

'They must be going to where they performed the ritual the first time,' Kang-Woo thought.

There was a high chance that was the case.

In the first place, the demon they'd tried to summon there was Lilith. So, Sapporo was the ideal location for the ritual, and it likely still had all of the basic infrastructure required from the last attempt.

'I should have killed him back then.'

Kang-Woo regretted not having killed Akiyama when he had the chance.

He said, "I will go to Sapporo."

"I will have a private jet ready for—"

"No need."

Kang-Woo jumped up and levitated.

'It would be best if I could request assistance, but...'

He didn't even have time to do that. Actually, it would be better for him to go alone to stop Lilith from blabbering things about Kang-Woo being the true demon king, similar to what Balrog had done.

Before leaving, Kang-Woo made sure to reassure Shinji by saying something warrior of light-esque.

"I will rescue the princess no matter what."

"...We will trust you and wait here, Kang-Woo."

Then Kang-Woo opened a window and flew toward Sapporo with a blazing will.

'I will stop the advent of Lilith.'

BOOM!

He shot forward, breaking the sound barrier. The wind raged around him as a powerful shockwave spread out.

'Faster.'

Tokyo and Sapporo weren't that far away. Kang-Woo flew to Sapporo with all his might.

'I see it.'

He saw an island across the sea. It was Hokkaido.

Kang-Woo frowned deeply while looking at it.

"Shit!"

He could feel an enormous amount of demonic energy, even greater than when Balrog had been summoned, shake all of Sapporo.

'Something's off.'

The demonic energy was running wild.

He'd seen the Demon Cult's rituals numerous times, but this was his first time seeing one like that.

'It's not because of Lilith.'

He had no idea what would happen if the demonic energy kept running amok like that.

Kang-Woo quickly went toward where the demonic energy was leaking out from.

Rumble—!!

At the location of the ritual, a demonic energy vortex was shaking its surroundings.

"Zazas, zazas, nasatanada zazas!!!"

There, Kang-Woo saw Akiyama chanting desperately. There were other Demon Cultists as well, but they'd all died.

Kang-Woo summoned Gungnir.

'Wait.'

His hands stopped moving in midair. He realized that the one barely keeping the wild demonic energy under control was Akiyama.

'Shit.'

Closing the Rift was the priority. If it got any bigger, there was no guessing what could happen.

Kang-Woo turned to the Rift and saw a woman lying on the altar.

Squelch, squelch.

He gasped at the sight. The woman had tentacles, which wriggled around while making disgusting noises. Lilith's body was getting closer to its original form.

"A-Aaahhh!"

The nightmarish memories returned to Kang-Woo. His mouth fell open, and he trembled anxiously.

'I have to stop it.'

He had to close the Rift no matter what.

Kang-Woo approached the Rift and summoned up all of his demonic energy.

Crunch—!!

There was immense pressure on his hands.

This Rift was incomparable to the one that Lilith had been summoned through the first time. The vortex of demonic energy that was running amok was as powerful as a waterfall pouring out from a collapsed dam.

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo felt like he would be crushed by the flood of demonic energy. He now possessed power comparable to that of the seven princes of Hell, but blocking this colossal flood of demonic energy with just his body was too much.

"Raaaahhhh!"

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Predation, but it didn't have much effect. It was like trying to scoop water from a waterfall with a basket. The only solution was to close the entrance with immense power.

"Y-You! You're from back then!" Akiyama shouted.

"Kuurrghh!" Kang-Woo frowned and turned his head to face Akiyama. "Come help me, you crazy fucker!"

Kang-Woo was sure that Akiyama knew what would happen if the Rift ran completely out of control.

"No! I cannot do that until the ritual is over!"

"You dumb fuck!! Forget the fucking ritual. We're all gonna die at this rate!!"

"I don't care! If it's for her, I would gladly give up my life!"

"ARRGGHH!! YOU MOTHERFUCKER!!"

The ritual continued. Kang-Woo saw Lilith returning to her original form as he tried to close the Rift.

Kang-Woo shouted to Akiyama with a pale expression, "You horny ass dipshit!! Stop!! Stop it!! What does the succubus queen matter if you're dead?!"

"When do you think that a man dies?"

"What?"

Akiyama continued with a passionate gaze and a firm voice, "When he loses everything but his two balls?"

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!!!"

"No! That is not when a man dies!!"

"STOP FUCKING AROUND AND STOP THE RITUAL!!!!"

Akiyama continued with the ritual even while coughing up blood.

"A man dies when... he has everything but his two balls!!!"

BOOM. Akiyama stomped on the ground.

As he persisted with the ritual, blood spurted from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

"A horny ass dipshit, you say? A delusional perverted otaku, you say? A pathetic virgin who has never held a girl's hand, you say?!"

"I didn't go that far, dude!!" Kang-Woo interjected.

"I... will never give up!! Even if this is a delusion or a useless dream...!! I will not give up on my ideals!!!"

Akiyama raised his hands, and the demonic energy from the Rift concentrated on Lilith. That explosive amount of energy allowed dozens of tentacles to emerge from her body.

"S-STOP!! STOP IT!! L-LILITH IS—!" Kang-Woo yelled as his face turned even paler.

"Today...! My ideals...! Will surpass dimensions!!!"

"STOP, YOU MOTHERFUCKERRR!!!!"

Chapter 176 - Advent of Lilith (2)

"AAAAHHHHHH!!" Oh Kang-Woo released a scream mixed with curses.

The Rift was going out of control, and Lilith was getting closer to how she looked in Hell. Meanwhile, Akiyama continued to spout unintelligible bullshit.

Kang-Woo was irritated by all of those things.

'Shit! Shit! Shit!!'

He'd felt relieved when he learned that Lilith had entered Kurosaki Yurie's body.

Kang-Woo had felt bad; he'd rejected Lilith's advances numerous times simply because of her appearance. She had been so devoted to him that he had even considered enduring it all and suggesting that they sleep together.

Despite that, he hadn't been able to take the initiative to approach her. Kang-Woo had become a demon, but his fundamental human senses and standards of beauty had not changed.

'But...!'

He felt like everything was about to turn into dust. The paradise he had pursued... His paradise garden was about to be covered in sticky tentacles.

'No way!'

Kang-Woo bit his lip and gazed at the rampaging Rift.

The Rift was over thirty meters tall. It wouldn't be weird if a dragon emerged from it, let alone Lilith.

'I'll close this Rift no matter what.'

The only way to stop both the rampaging Rift and Lilith's transformation was to close the Rift.

"Fuuu."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath. He concentrated his power in his hands, and the enormous demonic energy within his blood surged.

CRACK!!

The sound of boulders splitting open rang out.

Kang-Woo's hands were on the verge of being flung away from the Rift.

'Authority of Titanic Might.'

He applied more pressure on the Rift and activated the passage that led to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core. Dense demonic energy that was of a completely different quality from the demonic energy of the shallow end spread through his hands.

'I will stop it.'

Rumble!!

The earth shook, and a powerful repelling force shook Kang-Woo. The rampaging Rift was slowly but surely getting smaller as Kang-Woo's demonic energy suppressed it. This feat was as impressive as if someone were blocking a broken dam with the palms of their hands.

"Kuh," Kang-Woo groaned.

Black blood spurted out of his nose and flowed down to his mouth.

"What?!" Akiyama exclaimed in disbelief as he stared at Kang-Woo.

'What the hell is he?' Akiyama wondered.

Kang-Woo was closing the rampaging Rift purely with physical strength and absolutely no magic involved. It was unbelievable. Akiyama couldn't understand how Kang-Woo was doing that.

No, it was impossible. Not even a prince of Hell could close a rampaging Rift with just brute strength.

'Is he really human?' Akiyama thought.

He was starting to wonder if Kang-Woo was even a human. It didn't matter how strong a human was; they would never be able to stop a natural disaster—even more so if it was a dimensional disaster.

Akiyama gulped while looking at Kang-Woo, who had surpassed the limits of a human.

'I cannot give up.'

Nevertheless, he had to complete the ritual before the Rift was closed.

Akiyama chanted desperately. He glanced at Lilith, who was surrounded by black demonic energy, and saw something squirming inside the black demonic energy. However, he thought it was just part of the process of turning into a demon.

"Raaaahhhh!!!" he yelled.

Akiyama did his best to control the demonic energy. The ritual was almost over.

* * *

"ARRGGHH!!!" Kang-Woo roared.

His blood vessels bulged all over his body. He was using his demonic energy to its utmost limit, so he felt like he was about to explode from the inside out. If the Ten Thousand Demon Core were a water tank, it would be similar to the tank being on the verge of bursting from being overfilled with water.

'But...'

Nonetheless, he couldn't give up after making it this far.

Kang-Woo looked down at the Rift that he had squashed down. It had shrunk to about three meters in height. The Rift had been reduced to a mere 10% of its original size.

Riiing.

[You have absorbed demonic energy from the Rift.]

[Warning. The quality of the demonic energy is too poor. Commencing demonic energy refinement.]

A message window appeared in front of Kang-Woo, but he didn't have the mental capacity to pay it any mind. Kang-Woo clenched his teeth and applied more pressure on the Rift.

Then...

Fwoosh.

The Rift finally closed.

"Huff! Huff!"

Kang-Woo was panting as he turned to look around him.

"Hehehe. You're too late," Akiyama said with a triumphant smile. He turned toward the altar and knelt. "Aahhh! Lady Lilith! Please, show me your true form!"

Akiyama's gaze was burning with lust.

Squelch.

Mucus dripped to the floor as Lilith stood up.

"Huh?" Akiyama uttered, his eyes widening in shock.

The demon before him had dozens of wiggling tentacles and eighteen red eyes that gazed at him as her tongue, which was as long as a snake's, licked her lips. She was a horrifying monster that wouldn't even appear in his worst nightmares.

Akiyama's mouth gaped open with surprise. The true form of the succubus queen was much too different from what he'd imagined.

"Th-The hell?"

"Fufufu. Thank you, worthless human. Thanks to you, I was able to recover my true form," Lilith said.

"Th-That's... the succubus queen's true form?"

While Akiyama trembled in distress, a wide smile appeared on Lilith's face.

"Hohoho. You seem to be lost for words by my inexplicable beauty."

"N-No..."

"Well, it's only natural since you've laid eyes upon me after only looking at filthy human women."

"What the..."

Akiyama slumped to the floor. He then turned his head to look at Kang-Woo.

"Huff, huff." Kang-Woo was looking at Lilith in despair while panting heavily. "I... told you to stop, you... son of a bitch."

"A-Aahhh..." Akiyama let out an utter that was full of despair as he looked up at Lilith with a pale expression.

Lilith's tentacle hands touched Akiyama's forehead.

"Well done, human. I would like to give you a reward, but..."

Her eyes focused on Kang-Woo, and the tips of her mouth rose all the way up to her ears.

"Gasp."

It wasn't merely a figure of speech. Lilith's lips tore and stretched up to her ears.

"...I cannot when my king is looking," she said.

Lilith oozed a suffocating aura of sexiness. Despite her horrifying appearance, she was unexpectedly alluring.

Akiyama's eyes dimmed as if he'd been possessed by a ghost.

CRACK!

Sharp tentacles pierced Akiyama's head. He died with his eyes open.

After getting rid of Akiyama, Lilith quickly walked toward Kang-Woo.

"D-Don't come any closer," Kang-Woo stammered.

"My, what are you talking about, my dear king?"

Lilith instantly approached and embraced him. Kang-Woo had used too much of his power to close the Rift, so he couldn't escape from her grasp. The dozens of tentacles that had emerged all over her body wrapped around him.

Squelch.

Transparent and sticky mucus dripped onto him and flowed downward.

"Haaa, Haaa. My... My lovely king."

"Fuck."

Kang-Woo could feel Lilith's excited breaths on him as she gazed fixedly at him with her eighteen eyes.

'Someone save me,' he thought.

He'd never felt such fear ever since returning to Earth.

Kang-Woo opened his mouth and spoke with a trembling voice, "It's... been a while."

"I'm sorry, my king. I knew you were desperately hoping to be reunited with me, but I wasn't able to come see you right away."

'I never hoped for such a thing.'

"But you can be at ease now, my king. I have been able to free myself from that disgusting appearance and return to my true form."

'Please go back to your human form.'

Kang-Woo felt a burning sensation on his lips.

"Are you no longer able to... return to human form?" he asked.

"I can."

Lilith snapped her fingers. The dozens of tentacles that had emerged all over her body retracted into her skin, and she returned to looking like Kurosaki Yurie.

'Oh!'

Kang-Woo's gaze brightened.

Lilith took a deep breath and put her hands on her cheeks.

"I'm embarrassed to show you such a filthy sight, but... I made it so that I am able to return to human form because it would be difficult to live in the world of humans in my original form."

"Yeah. Living here while looking like a demon would severely restrict your daily life," Kang-Woo replied, nodding in agreement.

Lilith, who'd taken the appearance of Kurosaki Yurie, smiled.

"Hoho. That's right. My true form is too beautiful for humans to handle, after all."

'The fuck is she talking about?'

"Haaa. It's hard being so beautiful."

'No.'

Kang-Woo's head hurt.

'Wait.'

His eyes lit up.

Regardless of the reason, Lilith was thinking of staying in human form to be able to live among humans.

'In other words...'

Most of the time, she would look like Kurosaki Yurie.

'Fuck yeah!!'

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists.

Lilith was able to have a human form. This was an unexpected profit that he could never have even imagined back in Hell.

Kang-Woo nodded and said, "Yeah, you're right. Humans would not be able to handle your beauty."

"You're making me blush, my king."

Lilith's cheeks turned red.

"I don't want useless flies roaming around you."

"Hoho. Are you getting jealous, my king? You're so cute."

Kang-Woo grabbed her waist and pulled her in aggressively.

"Kyaa!"

"Lilith, I don't want you to show your true form to other people."

"Aahhh, my king..."

"That's why you should always stay in your human form, at all times."

"B-But this form is far too ugly."

Lilith turned her head away while making a sad expression.

"No, Lilith, your appearance doesn't matter," Kang-Woo stated. He shook his head with a firm expression, raised his hand, and softly brushed her cheek. "What's important is that you're Lilith, not how you look."

"Aahhh..."

Tears dripped from Lilith's cheeks.

'I did it.'

The tips of Kang-Woo's lips curved upward.

"I understand. It looks ugly... but if it is what you wish, I will use this human appearance for my daily life," Lilith replied.

'Hell fucking yeah!!'

Kang-Woo wanted to raise both hands and shout in excitement.

'I... I finally did it!!'

He'd finally freed himself from Lilith's horrifying tentacles. That was the moment when his long-standing desire became a reality.

Lilith laughed lightly while looking at Kang-Woo, who felt moved.

"Fufu. Do not worry, my king."

"Hm? Worry about wh—"

"I will use my true form when I enter your chambers."

"What?"

"Oh, you. Why are you acting innocent? You know what I'm talking about."

"No, wait."

"Fufufu. I will always be in my true form when we're alone together, so please do not worry too much."

Lilith fidgeted restlessly while smiling brightly.

"I was honestly worried that the concept of beauty between humans and demons was too far apart because of the humans that kept calling me beautiful even when I was in my human form, but you seem to like my true form better. Fufufu, I knew you would, my king."

Kang-Woo felt as if he'd been struck in the back of his head. His mind was blanking out.

He quickly opened his mouth to speak. He didn't even have time to think; he blurted out his honest thoughts.

"Y-Your current form is more beautiful."

"Pardon?" Lilith uttered, looking at him in confusion.

"You're right. At least in my eyes, you look far more beautiful as a human."

"Oh, you sure love to joke, my king."

"Believe me."

"I had no idea you were such a jealous type."

"Please..."

Lilith lightly poked Kang-Woo's nose with a broad smile and said, "You have no need to worry. I will only use my true form when we're alone together."

"Don't."

"Fufufu. Come to think of it, we're alone at the moment, so I should return to my true form."

"No, please don't fucking do that," he pleaded anxiously.

Despite his struggles, Kurosaki Yurie's skin started to split, and horrifying tentacles sprouted out of the gaps.

"Lilith, please. Listen to me. You're more beautiful as a hu—"

"Aahhh, I truly feel much better in my true form."

"You're more beautiful as a human!!!"

In despair, Kang-Woo quickly let go of Lilith as her face split open and her eighteen eyes appeared.

"You're so shy, my king."

"Lilith! I'm gonna be completely honest with you! I can only see you as a disgusting monster right now!!!"

"Oh, how cute you are~"

"Please, just listen to meeeeeee!!!" Kang-Woo roared.

His eyes teared up. He was starting to regret lying to her. He should've just told her the truth from the beginning. However, one always felt regretful only when the situation was too late to salvage.

"I love you, my king," Lilith expressed. Her face inched closer to Kang-Woo's. "Let's be together for eternity."

As if she were a shy girl, Lilith kissed Kang-Woo's cheek instead of his lips.

"Smooch~ ♥"

The tentacles, which were constantly leaking mucus, wrapped around Kang-Woo.

Right then...

Crackle—!!

A torrent of demonic energy engulfed their surroundings. Demonic energy flooded out from Kang-Woo; it was as if a massive explosion had occurred inside of him.

"KYAA!"

Lilith was flung backward.

Riiing.

[The refinement of the demonic energy from the Rift has been completed.]

[Demonic Energy has reached 130.]

[Unlocking your Eighth Awakening Trait.]

Heroes always awakened amidst crisis.

Kang-Woo was dyed in darkness.

Chapter 177 - Eighth Awakening Trait

'Ah.'

Oh Kang-Woo felt as if a single ray of light had beamed down and cleared his hazy consciousness. His demonic energy stores, which had been depleted after forcibly closing the gate, had been completely refilled. He was surging with vitality.

'Nice.'

Kang-Woo looked down at his hands.

His Demonic Energy stat had finally reached 130 points. The stats' effects rose greatly every ten points, so the effect of the Demonic Energy stat was different from before.

The passage that led to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core had not expanded since he hadn't absorbed the souls of demons. However, the absolute amount of demonic energy had increased so much that it couldn't be compared to before.

"M-My king?"

Kang-woo could feel Lilith staring at him in confusion.

He glanced at her and sighed.

"First, return to your human form."

"But—"

"Lilith," Kang-Woo said quietly but firmly.

He narrowed his eyes. This was as far as he was willing to take this comedy skit with her.

"Do not make me repeat myself."

"As you command," Lilith replied with a bow.

Kang-Woo gazed at her with a bitter smile. He'd managed to put out the biggest fire.

'The fundamental problem hasn't been solved, though.'

Lilith was following his command now, but she would keep reverting to her demon form as long as she believed that her true form was more beautiful than her human form. She was capable of doing anything if it was to seduce Kang-Woo.

He felt like he was blacking out just from the thought of getting surrounded by those horrible tentacles again. Nevertheless, he didn't have the mental capacity to think about how to resolve that at the moment.

Squelch, squelch.

'Urp.'

The sight of Lilith's tentacles retracting back into her skin was horrifying.

'Let's take this time to look at something else.'

While Lilith was returning to her human form, Kang-Woo took his eyes off her and checked his status window.

'Eighth Awakening Trait.'

After absorbing demonic energy from the Rift, he'd reached 130 in the Demonic Energy stat. Thanks to that, he'd fully unlocked his Eighth Awakening Trait. He couldn't help but be excited about it.

[Eighth Awakening Trait: Prince Slayer (Rank: SS)]

[Effect: The Player can use the Authorities of the seven princes of Hell through their souls.]

"This is..."

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

The description was short, but the content was shocking.

'The Authorities of the seven princes of Hell...'

The powers of Satan and the other princes of Hell were buried deep in the Ten Thousand Demon Core, in the Abyss. Even when Kang-Woo used to rule over the Nine Hells, he hadn't been able to draw demonic energy from the Abyss.

'I can use the princes' Authorities now.'

This meant that what had been impossible for him back in Hell had been made possible on Earth.

Naturally, he couldn't hold back a grin.

'Based on the description, it seems I can use Reaper of Souls on the princes.'

Being able to absorb the souls of the princes of Hell had been nothing but a possibility before. However, after reading the description of his new Trait, he was certain that he could absorb their souls with Reaper of Souls.

'There's a high chance that the souls of the princes of Hell are related to the second condition of Demonic Soul.'

Based on the pattern so far, the Awakening Traits and the conditions for becoming a Demon God were related. In that case, his Eighth Awakening Trait was definitely related to the second condition of Demonic Soul.

'But...'

Kang-Woo frowned.

His Eighth Awakening Trait was mind-blowingly powerful. He'd also obtained a clue for the Demonic Soul's second condition.

'The problem is... the condition itself.'

Even Kang-Woo couldn't help but be a bit overwhelmed at the thought of absorbing the soul of a prince of Hell.

'In the first place, I don't even know if all the princes have revived.'

The only one whom he knew had revived was Lucifer, but Lucifer was in another dimension that he couldn't interfere with.

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath.

'It's not like there's no way whatsoever.'

He just needed to make Lucifer, the only prince whom Kang-Woo knew had revived for certain, cross over to Earth. Kang-Woo had already thrown the bait. He had instigated conflict between the Demon Cult that Satan led and Lucifer's forces.

'The problem is whether Lucifer would come to this world in person just because of that.'

If Lucifer were able to cross over to Earth, then the chances of him invading it wouldn't be low. There wasn't anything more tempting to a demon than the Demonic Sea that Satan had managed to take from the demon king.

"The princes of Hell, huh?"

Nevertheless, that wasn't the only problem... Even if Lucifer were able to get to Earth, would Kang-Woo be able to beat him?

'I can't be sure.'

Kang-Woo wasn't inferior to Lucifer, but it wasn't guaranteed that he would win.

Alongside Satan and Bael, Lucifer was one of the strongest among the seven princes. He was ranked third. Bael was the strongest prince, and Satan and Lucifer were ranked beneath him.

Kang-Woo was still not quite strong enough to face Lucifer in a one-on-one battle at the moment.

'But...'

With Balrog's and Lilith's help, there was a chance Kang-Woo could win.

"Hmm..."

He groaned.

'There are too many variables.'

Kang-Woo didn't like that.

Firstly, the chances that Lucifer would arrive on Earth alone without his forces were very low. Secondly, Kang-Woo wasn't sure he'd be able to face Lucifer in a three-against-one formation with Balrog and Lilith.

'In that case...'

The gears in his mind turned quickly.

Then Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

'I'll use the Demon Cult.'

He was aiming to play both ends against the middle. While the Demon Cult and Lucifer's forces fought, Kang-Woo would attack Lucifer and slice his head cleanly off his body.

'It's worth trying.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

When he learned through Vaal Zahak that Lucifer had been revived, Kang-Woo had instinctively felt that he would have to face the princes of Hell soon.

'Tsk. This reminds me of when I was in Hell.'

The battle against the seven princes that had gone on for a thousand years... The memories of that long war passed through his mind.

He heard a beautiful voice say, "The transformation is complete, my king."

Kang-Woo turned his head to see Lilith, who had returned to looking like Kurosaki Yurie.

'Ah, I'm happy.'

Kang-Woo felt like a heavy burden had been lifted from him when he saw that Lilith could change back to a human appearance. Of course, the ideal scenario would have been if she were unable to revert to her demonic form, but this was more than adequate.

Kang-Woo sat on a nearby piece of wreckage and said, "Tell me what happened after you infiltrated the Demon Cult."

The most important thing right now was figuring out how much of his identity she'd spread among the Demon Cult.

Lilith replied, "I have not been able to do much because I've been more focused on trying to recover my original body that you love so much. So, I have not had the time to engrave your name throughout the Demon Cult."

That was good news.

Lilith bowed and continued, "I apologize for not being able to deal with things faster. I will spread your name across the entirety of the Demon Cult as soon as p—"

"Ah, about that. There are a few things I need to tell you."

Kang-Woo explained to her his relationship with the Demon Cult as well as his current situation. The more he explained, the paler Lilith's face became.

"I-I'm sorry, my king!"

Lilith bowed down, slamming her forehead onto the ground.

She said tearily, "W-Without being aware of your true intentions, I... ended up doing something as stupid as giving the enemy information..."

"Of course, I have no intention of letting this go unpunished."

Even though she hadn't known about his circumstances, Lilith had made a grievous mistake. It was different from what had happened with Balrog. Lilith had spent quite some time on Earth and knew about Kang-Woo's existence and identity. Despite that, she'd done things as she wished without considering his situation, so this wasn't something he would overlook.

"...I will accept any form of punishment," she stated quietly with tears in her eyes.

Kang-Woo sighed. "Let's talk about this later."

"I will... pay for my sins with my body!"

"No."

"I will return to my original form this instant and satisfy you with the utmost devotion!"

"Don't."

"I will put my name as the Succubus Queen on the line and send you to paradise!"

"Please, don't."

Kang-Woo quickly stopped her from returning to her demon form.

Then he asked with a weary expression, "So, the Demon Cult doesn't know anything about my identity?"

"..."

There was silence, and Lilith fidgeted anxiously.

Ultimately, she gave a careful reply. "I wouldn't say that. I've been spreading the Book of Hell within the Demon Cult..."

"Book of Hell? What's that?"

"It's a book I wrote about your thousand-year-long war in the Ninth Hell. After all, the Demon Cultists still believe the seven princes rule over Hell."

"A book, huh?"

The best way to engrave the existence of the demon king into the Demon Cult was indeed to spread information about the long war between the seven princes and the demon king in the Ninth Hell. After all, the one who had come out victorious after defeating the seven princes was the demon king.

"I'm guessing you couldn't distribute it publicly," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Yes. After all, they treat the seven princes as gods."

Then Kang-Woo still had a chance.

His gaze sharpened.

"Where is the book being distributed?"

"I have heard that it is the Demon Cult branch in the Middle East."

"I see."

Lilith even gave him information about a Demon Cult branch.

'This isn't bad at all.'

Kang-Woo had thought Lilith's actions were just simple trolling that did nothing but harm him.

However, the Guardians—even with all of their forces involved in the search—hadn't been able to find traces of the Demon Cult. So, obtaining information about a Demon Cult branch was a huge harvest.

'Maybe I should've had her infiltrate for a bit longer.'

He thought that using Lilith as a spy wasn't a bad idea. However, he shook his head soon after.

'That'd be difficult since Akiyama is dead.'

It had been all thanks to Akiyama, Lilith's ardent follower, that Lilith had been able to be so active in the Demon Cult so quickly. Without him, she wouldn't be able to move about so freely in the Demon Cult.

'First, I'll have to go to the Demon Cult branch in the Middle East.'

It was worth visiting that place just to check how far the Book of Hell had been distributed.

"Come to think of it, what happened to Kurosaki Yurie?"

"I have complete control over the consciousness at the moment, so she is asleep at the moment."

"Can you wake her up?"

"Yes, if my king commands it," Lilith replied with a nod.

It was good news that Lilith had control over the body. Kang-Woo felt bad about Kurosaki Yurie, who had lost control over her body out of the blue, but he didn't have the mental capacity to care about the life of someone he didn't know.

'It's hard enough living my own life.'

Kang-Woo wasn't Alec Osborne, so he didn't feel the need to live while caring about the lives of every single person.

"What about Kurosaki Yurie's ability?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Her ability?"

"Yeah. She has the ability to borrow power from other worlds."

"Mm... I am not sure about that. At least, I cannot use that ability."

"So, that's the ability of Kurosaki Yurie herself, huh?"

Lilith nodded in response.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'This might be worth paying attention to.'

There might come a time when he would need Yurie's ability.

Before the Gaia System had weakened due to the Rift Seeds, the Demon Cult had tried to summon Lilith through her.

It meant that if Kang-Woo were able to use Yurie's ability effectively now that the Gaia System had gotten even weaker, there was a good chance that he would be able to summon the seven princes of Hell or beings of even greater power.

'Poor girl.'

Thinking about the innocent Yurie, who had unfairly lost her body to a demon, made Kang-Woo tear up. He thought that he should help her regain consciousness and take back more control of her own body.

"People should always help one another in life," Kang-Woo commented.

He stood up and nodded.

He wanted to help the innocent girl escape from the clutches of a demon right away, but he couldn't do that at the moment.

'Let's go.'

Currently, Kang-Woo's most urgent task was to go to the Demon Cult branch in the Middle East.

Chapter 178 - Demon Delegates

'This should be the place.'

There was a small city on a sandy plain in the middle of a desolate desert. Despite being referred to as a city, this place was now a dreary ruin where no one lived. Only monsters could be seen roaming around.

An intense sun shone over this area of the Middle East as Oh Kang-Woo walked to the location Lilith had told him about.

He clicked his tongue.

"Tsk. So, they were hidden in a place like this. No wonder it was so hard to find them."

The Demon Cult branch was in an area that was considered extremely remote even in the Middle East.

After the Day of Calamity, only half of Earth's countries remained, with the rest having been reduced to ruins. So, if the Demon Cult hid in a place like that, there was no way they would be found.

'Authority of Stealth.'

Kang-Woo hid his presence and put on a mask. His goal was to infiltrate this branch of the Demon Cult.

'I'll destroy it later.'

It was the only base where Lilith had secretly distributed the Book of Hell. There was a chance they had a connection with the other Demon Cult branches.

'I also need to check how far the Book of Hell has been spread.'

Perhaps they could even have information he could've never imagined. In any case, it would be too much of a loss to immediately eliminate the Demon Cult base that he'd finally found after so much searching.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder and easily found traces of the Demon Cult. An image of a base hidden under the ruined city appeared in his mind.

"Found—"

He cut himself off mid-speech, and his face suddenly crumpled with seriousness. Kang-Woo then rechecked the traces of demonic energy he'd just felt.

'I knew it.'

He narrowed his eyes as he became sure of what he was feeling.

'There's a demon.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure who it was, but he knew the demon was from the Ninth Hell. However, it wasn't as powerful as an archdemon; it was a demon of a level somewhere between the intermediate and lower levels at best.

Despite being from the Ninth Hell, the demon was no match for Kang-Woo. It wouldn't even be a good warmup for his battle against the princes of Hell.

"Hm," Kang-Woo murmured.

It wasn't a problem that there was a demon inside the Demon Cult. After all, he couldn't stop them from summoning demons all over the world.

'But...'

He searched the underground base again with the Authority of the Beholder. An image of demons and Demon Cultists appeared in his mind.

'Something's off.'

There were five demons, and they were all sitting inside a room. Sitting across from them were three Demon Cultists, and they were talking about something.

'Are they in a meeting?'

From the outside, it could almost pass off as a fairly normal scene of business partners negotiating a deal, rather than demons and Demon Cultists.

'Well, it isn't like demons spend the entire day fighting.'

Still, the scene of five demons sitting and talking with Demon Cultists made for a strange sight.

'I'll have to check it out.'

Kang-Woo looked around.

The base was located underground, but there was probably an air vent since people were living inside it. He used the Authority of the Beholder to analyze the structure of the base and easily found a vent leading outside.

"Is this some '80s spy film? To think I'd have to infiltrate through an air vent," Kang-Woo complained.

Nevertheless, there was no better way in. He was using the Authority of Stealth, but that didn't mean he could roam freely throughout their base.

The air vent, which barely fit one person, was protected by some sort of magic contraption.

"Tsk."

That wasn't a problem for Kang-Woo though.

With a snap of his fingers, his demonic energy spread and crushed the magic circle. He made his way through the air vent, using a route based on what he'd seen of the base's structure with the Authority of the Beholder.

At some point, he heard the voices of demons.

[I never imagined that there would be humans on Earth capable of using demonic energy.]

[Their level of demonic energy control is miles above the black mages of Aernor.]

[An average demon from Hell would be no match for them.]

'What?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

Upon hearing the demons mention Aernor, he had a strong feeling that something wasn't right.

'What's going on?'

Kang-Woo continued to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Not at all. We are nothing but a bunch of flies compared to the demons of the Ninth Hell."

[We are not of the Ninth Hell.]

"Oh, right. I believe you said you were the retainers of Prince Lucifer."

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

'Lucifer's retainers?'

He was having a hard time understanding what was going on.

'Why the fuck are Lucifer's retainers here?'

Then he was reminded of Halphas, Malphas, and Phenex. He'd used them to throw bait to catch the massive fish that was Lucifer.

However, if these demons Kang-Woo was eavesdropping on were truly Lucifer's retainers, then why were they talking so relaxedly with the Demon Cultists? It didn't make sense, especially since Lucifer's retainers Malphas and Phenex had died at the hands of Satan, the leader of the Demon Cult.

'What the hell is going on?'

Kang-Woo's thoughts were in a jumble. He frowned and focused on the conversation.

[He is not a prince.]

[Lord Lucifer has gone beyond the realm of a mere prince of Hell and has obtained Divinity.]

[Call him Evil God Lucifer.]

"Aahh, my apologies."

The Demon Cultists bowed their heads.

It seemed like they didn't think it was a lie.

"But why would the retainers of Lord Lucifer, who resides in another world, come here...?"

[We are here to hold you all accountable for the sin that your leader has committed.]

"I beg your pardon?"

The Demon Cultists tilted their heads in confusion.

[We have heard everything through Lord Halphas.]

[Are you planning to act dumb?]

"I apologize, but we—"

SLAM!!

The demon slammed his fist down on the table.

[How dare you try to make excuses?! Did you think we would not know that your leader, Satan, killed Lord Phenex and Lord Malphas?!] he angrily shouted.

"...I'm sorry?"

"Satan?"

The Demon Cultists looked at the retainers of Lucifer in confusion.

'Oh, fuck.'

Kang-Woo was barely able to suppress a curse from escaping his mouth.

He figured out what was going on. Just like how countries sent delegates to other countries, Lucifer had sent his retainers to Earth as delegates.

'Delegates?'

Kang-Woo laughed silently in disbelief.

Lucifer's retainers said that they were going to hold the Demon Cult accountable for the crimes of Satan. However, the fact that Lucifer had sent delegates meant something else...

'He wants to avoid war against Satan.'

Lucifer was trying to resolve the situation by talking it out.

'Lucifer, you bastard...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

It was a short conversation, but he'd been able to get valuable information.

'He must be in quite a predicament.'

Demons didn't have the concept of talking things over instead of fighting. Their conversations always involved blood and flesh.

'Yet, he sent delegates in this situation?'

Moreover, Satan had attacked Lucifer first, so the fact that Lucifer had sent delegates to talk things out showed his desperation.

'There are two possibilities why he did that.'

The first one was that he judged that he would not be able to win against Satan, who possessed the Demonic Sea. Demons didn't have shit for brains after all. In fact, they often surrendered if they were at a disadvantage.

'But...'

Kang-Woo thought that the probability of that being the case was low. The Lucifer he knew wasn't a demon who'd give up his desire to obtain the Demonic Sea.

'In that case...'

He narrowed his eyes and thought of the other possibility.

'Maybe he's in such a predicament that he can't afford to worry about Satan.'

Kang-Woo didn't know what situation Lucifer was in exactly. Perhaps he was desperate because of the archangels that he had fought in the past, or maybe it was because of a god. Either way, it didn't matter to Kang-Woo.

'What's important is that he's desperate enough to try and talk things over with Satan despite having been attacked first.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

"W-We are not sure what you all are talking about."

"The being we serve is not Satan."

[What?]

The demons' faces crumpled with shock.

Right then...

BOOOOM—!!

The ceiling exploded.

[Wh-What just happened?!]

"Kuh! Wh-What in the..."

The five demons inside the room and the three Demon Cultists were thrown into chaos.

Tap.

As the ceiling crumbled, something dropped down from it.

"Huh...?"

The eyes of the Demon Cultists widened when they saw a being enter the room from the ceiling.

The being, who was shrouded in pitch-black darkness, was wearing the red demon mask that symbolized the Demon Cult. It was as if the mask was floating in the darkness.

'Who is that?' the Demon Cultists wondered.

They had never seen or heard about a being like the one standing before them.

'Perhaps... another Demon Cultist?'

The Demon Cult branches operated separately, so it wasn't weird for them to not know the other Demon Cultists despite being in the same organization.

[You are...]

[N-No way.]

The demons trembled in fear. The powerful demonic energy pouring out from being in the red mask made them afraid.

[I am Satan,] the red-masked demon said without hesitation.

[S-Satan!!]

[Kuh! G-Get back, all of you!] the demon standing in the middle of the group of five demons told the others. Then he took a step forward and knelt on one knee in front of Satan. [Th-This lowly being greets the prince of Hell. I am Darkin, one of Lucifer's retainers.]

[Why are you on Earth? I believe I made myself perfectly clear through Halphas.]

[That is...] the demon, Darkin, began cautiously. He took out a crystal orb the size of a person's head. [Lord Lucifer would like to talk with you, Lord Satan.]

[Talk?]

[That is correct.]

[...]

There was silence.

Then Satan slowly extended his hand toward the crystal orb that Darkin handed to him.

[Ke... Kekeke.] A chilling laugh leaked out from behind the mask. [KAHAHAHAHAHA!!!]

[L-Lord Satan! What is—!!]

CRACK!

Satan destroyed the crystal orb.

[Talk? Talk, you say? KAHAHAHAHAHA!!! How funny! How very funny!]

He roared with laughter and casually extended his hand.

Wrath, the Hell Armament that was akin to the symbol of Satan, showed itself. It was a sword that had a pitch-black blade—a sword of darkness.

Satan swung the sword.

Bash!!

Darkin's head exploded and shattered into pieces as soon as Wrath's edge touched it.

[Demons do not talk!]

It was time for war!

Chapter 179 - No Such Thing as Compromise for Demons

[Kurgh!!]

Black blood sprayed in all directions. Four of the five demons instantly died from Satan's attack.

[Wh-Why are you doing this?!] the one surviving demon quickly shouted.

The red mask tilted.

[Why, you ask?] Satan snickered. [Do demons need a reason to go to war?]

[Kuh...]

[Talk? How absolutely ridiculous. I would expect nothing less from Lucifer, that pathetic mongrel.]

[Do not insult Lord Lucifer, Satan!!] the demon shouted while glaring at him.

Satan turned toward the demon and challenged, [Then prove to me that he is not pathetic.]

He extended his hand and grabbed the neck of the three-meter-tall demon.

Satan continued, [We were born to kill and crave blood. Tell Lucifer this: if you are not confident enough to cross over to this world yourself, stay the fuck out of my sight.]

[You... have no idea what situation my lord is in.]

[Hahaha! You are right. I do not know or care about his situation,] Satan said. The yellow irises behind the red mask stared at the demon. [But what I do know is that he seems to be in quite a predicament, which means this is the perfect opportunity for me to take his soul.]

[This is not the time to be fighting among ourselves! Are you unaware of the forces of the celestial realm moving to eradicate the demons?!]

'I knew it had something to do with the celestial realm,' Kang-Woo thought.

[Earth will be next after the continent of Aernor! Do you want the demons to be eradicated by the forces of the celestial realm while we engage in battle?!] the demon desperately shouted.

Satan laughed. [The celestial realm? Has he been struggling against those insignificant beings all this time?]

[Insignificant, you say?!] the demon continued shouting like a madman. [They are not insignificant! You must know how weak the Nine Hells have become at the hands of Demon King Oh Kang-Woo! He's driven Hell to the brink of extinction! The celestial realm has been accumulating power during all those years of war! If we do not work together, we will not be able to stop them!]

The demon rambled on about the desperate reality that the demons had been placed in, but Satan paid no heed to it.

[I killed the demon king with my own hands and acquired the Demonic Sea. The forces of the celestial realm are no match for me,] Kang-Woo replied relaxedly. [Tell Lucifer this: stop cowering from the angels and come to find me. Fight me, and take the Demonic Sea, if you can.]

[Must you truly choose the path of self-destruction?!]

[Self-destruction? What a ridiculous word.] The red mask tilted. [Since when have demons battled while caring about when they would meet their demise?]

[...]

[Not only is he weak and cowardly, but he is also disgraceful.]

Satan waved his hand, producing a strong force that pushed the demon back and embedded him in the wall.

[Listen well, retainer of Lucifer,] Satan said with a laugh. [There is no such thing as compromise for demons.]

* * *

"Well, that takes care of that," Kang-Woo mumbled while looking down at the unconscious demon.

He had controlled his strength, so the demon would soon open his eyes. Then he would return to Lucifer and report to him what had happened here.

'No matter how much of a predicament Lucifer is in, he won't be able to let it slide this time.'

Lucifer was not patient enough that he would try and talk things out again since Kang-Woo had firmly expressed his will as Satan.

'He will come here.'

As a prince of Hell, Lucifer had been humiliated in an unforgivable way. He would take action to kill Satan.

'And he will fight the forces of Satan, the Demon Cult.'

Kang-Woo grinned.

He had the feeling that the image drawn in his head would soon become a reality.

'That aside...'

Kang-Woo thought about what he'd heard from Lucifer's retainer.

'So, demons are on the brink of being exterminated.'

He narrowed his eyes.

It wasn't something he could be happy about though. Demons were necessary for him to regain his strength and become even stronger. They were like nutrition to him, so losing them wasn't good news for him.

'If the celestial realm were to exterminate the demons, I may be able to live in peace, but...'

The chances of that happening were low. If the angels were trying to exterminate the demons, then Kang-Woo would be a target too.

'I guess it means I'll have to fight that Michael guy or whatever his name was.'

He couldn't help but curse.

'But it's not an imminent thing.'

Lucifer's retainer had mentioned that Earth would be the angels' next target after the continent of Aernor. In other words, as long as Lucifer's forces remained, the angels wouldn't attack Earth.

'And after what happened today, they'll think that Satan killed Demon King Oh Kang-Woo.'

Kang-Woo knew he wouldn't be able to deceive them forever, but his act as Satan would be enough to buy him some time to prepare countermeasures.

'I'm going to raise the conflict between Lucifer's forces and the Demon Cult to its utmost limit.'

He was after Lucifer's soul. It wasn't going to be easy to get it, but it wasn't impossible.

'And for that plan...'

Kang-Woo turned his head and looked at the three Demon Cultists who were stricken with fear.

"Eek!"

He walked toward them.

"A-Are you..."

"T-Truly Satan?"

They stammered at the sudden appearance of Satan.

Kangoo smiled and tapped his mask. The red demon mask turned into a white one with a shield engraved on it.

"Huh?! Th-That mask!"

"The Guardians?!"

They shook their heads as if they couldn't understand what was going on.

"There are a few things I wanted to ask you," Kang-Woo said.

His original reason for venturing to this base was to check how far the Book of Hell had spread. Meeting Lucifer's retainers had been nothing but a coincidence. Now, it was time to achieve his original goal.

"Hah! Like we would answer questions from a retainer of Ga—"

Whack!

The head of the Demon Cultist who was yelling exploded.

A wide grin appeared on Kang-Woo's face, and he walked toward the other two Demon Cultists.

"It's not up to you to choose whether you answer or not," he stated.

"E-Eek!"

The two Demon Cultists looked at each other.

"Mm. Come to think of it..." Kang-Woo began as he narrowed his eyes.

"I don't think that I'll need two mouths..." he said in a playful tone of voice. "Who wants to speak first?"

* * *

"So... you don't know how far the Book of Hell has been spread?"

The two Demon Cultists nodded.

"Y-Yes. Its contents seemed unsubstantiated, so... a few branches just took a few copies out of curiosity."

"And where are those branches?"

"W-We don't know. We weren't informed of the exact locations of the other branches. We simply gave them the copies while exchanging information and materials required for summoning rituals."

"But you must have a meeting place for those exchanges."

"We do, but..."

The eyes of the two Demon Cult members quivered.

That answer was the extent of what they could say.

"I guess you'll die if you say it."

"..."

There was silence.

The two Demon Cultists looked at each other.

"W-We can tell you the country where the meeting takes place!"

"Where?"

"Ch-China."

The scope was far too wide. This information wasn't very useful.

'But at least I managed to find out that the secret Demon Cult meetings take place in China.'

Kang-Woo would need to ask Tian Wuchen to investigate China.

'First off...'

He got his thoughts in order.

'I obtained three pieces of information.'

The first piece was that Lucifer was being attacked by the forces of the celestial realm. The second was that the Book of Hell hadn't been properly distributed. Moreover, most of the Demon Cultists thought of it as a novel, so he didn't need to worry too much about it.

The third was that there was a secret meeting place for Demon Cultists in China, and that might be where the Chinese Demon Cult branch was.

'Not bad.'

Kang-Woo thought that he'd obtained enough useful information here.

"How many Demon Cultists are in this branch?" he asked.

The two Demon Cultists quickly proceeded to shout in response.

"Th-This is only a small branch of about fifty members!"

"And we have never taken part in demon-summoning rituals!"

They then knelt in front of Kang-Woo and raised their two arms.

"W-We will turn ourselves in."

"We will subject ourselves to lawful judgment."

Guardians was an international organization that fought for the good of the world. Just like how law enforcement authorities couldn't just kill a serial killer if they turned themselves in, the Guardians'

rules dictated that they had to be humane toward Demon Cultists who had surrendered. The Demon Cultists had sacrificed numerous innocent people to obtain power, but they still had human rights.

"Hm," Kang-Woo murmured.

He couldn't simply ignore them as he had done before.

'Because I'm also a member of the Guardians.'

Kang-Woo had the title Warrior of Light now, so he couldn't infringe on human rights.

He sighed and shook his head. It seemed he had no choice but to treat them as humanely as he possibly could.

"Haaa. I guess I have no choice."

"Ah..."

"I'll let one of you live.

"Huh?"

The Demon Cultists' eyes widened.

"There's one more thing you have to do for me, but I don't need two people for that. So, I'm going to let one of you two live."

"W-Wait!"

"We've surrendered to the Guardians, have we not?!"

"You have."

Kang-Woo used the Key of the Demonic Sea to create two daggers without a word and threw them at the protesting Demon Cultists.

"What are—"

"Kill each other."

"I'm sorry?"

"The one that wins will live."

Gasp...

The Demon Cultists' eyes widened after hearing Kang-Woo's horrifying condition.

"This goes against human rights..."

"How could someone called the Warrior of Light do something like this!"

"Guys," Kang-Woo said and snapped his finger.

An enormous energy spread and weighed down on the Demon Cultists.

Kang-Woo told them quietly, "What I gave you two is a choice, not the right to choose."

"..."

Silence fell, and the two Demon Cultists trembled while looking at each other. They were moving slowly, but it was obvious that they would soon grab the daggers.

Kang-Woo sat on a chair and crossed his legs.

"Urgh!"

"D-Die!!"

They grabbed the daggers and charged toward each other. Dark red blood splattered all over as a battle to live took place.

Stab!

"Kurgh!"

'You shouldn't move like that,' Kang-Woo thought.

"ARRGGHH!!"

'Ugh, they're so bad at fighting.'

"Kuh!"

'Oh, nice!'

Kang-Woo watched the battle between them with great interest. The fight was fierce and bloody.

"Y-You scum!!"

"How could you do something so horrifying in the name of light?!"

The two Demon Cultists shouted and cried amid the fight.

Kang-Woo tilted his head.

'Guys, I gave you both an equal chance to live based on your skill levels.'

He could've killed both, but he'd given one of them a chance to survive through their own strength and will.

'Is this not the epitome of humane?'

Kang-Woo shook his head.

After listening to their criticism, he thought about how he could have done things more humanely, but he couldn't think of a better way than this.

"That's not very fair of you," Kang-Woo replied.

They were criticizing him as if he were a piece of trash.

Kang-Woo frowned at the injustice and said, "People would think I'm scum if they didn't know any better."

Chapter 180 - Summit (1)

There was a small city in a desolate desert in the Middle East. Under it was a Demon Cult branch that had been secretly constructed.

At present, multiple explosions were going off in succession inside that very branch.

BOOM!

Rumble!

"ARRGGHH!!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

The cultists in the branch's office were surprised by the explosions. They took out their weapons and began casting spells.

"D-Don't tell me..."

"C-Could those demons earlier have done it?"

It was something that they'd been afraid would happen.

A few hours before, some demons had arrived at their branch. These demons hadn't been summoned by the Demon Cult; they had appeared on Earth through a different method.

The Demon Cultists could think of no better reason than those demons for the cause of the explosions.

BOOM!

"R-Run!"

"S-Sir?!"

The office door opened, and the branch manager ran in with blood all over him. There was a fearful expression on his face.

"I-It's an attack!! Lucifer's retainers have attacked us!!" he yelled.

"Lucifer's retainers?"

"Why would they..."

The Demon Cultists tilted their heads in confusion upon suddenly hearing their branch manager mention the name of a prince of Hell.

As if squeezing the remaining energy out of his body, the branch manager said desperately, "They won't stop with this one attack! Run! Run away and let the rest of the cult know! The demons from the continent of Aernor will be coming to Earth!!"

Cough. He coughed up some blood.

Blood was leaking from all over the branch manager's body. It was as if he had been stabbed many times with a sharp dagger.

"It's a war! Lucifer's retainers have declared war on the Demon Cult!!" he screamed to his subordinates before falling unconscious.

"..."

There was a short silence. The Demon Cultists looked at each other briefly, but they quickly turned and fled.

More explosions went off, and the Demon Cult's underground base crumbled. As desert sand poured into it, the entire base shook.

"W-War!"

"It's war!!!"

The cultists thought of the branch manager's last words and swiftly escaped from the underground base.

"Huff, huff."

The branch manager had been left alone.

A young man wearing a white mask walked out from behind him.

"Well done," the young man said.

"Y-Your promise..."

"I will keep it, of course," Oh Kang-Woo affirmed with a nod.

The bloodied branch manager's expression lightened.

"Th-Then please take me out of here," he pleaded desperately while watching the wreckage pour into the crumbling base.

Kang-Woo crouched down next to him.

"Why should I?"

"Wh-What? Y-You promised that you would spare me..."

"Sparing you and taking you out of here are two completely different things."

"U-Urgh!!!"

The branch manager's expression crumpled in despair.

Kang-Woo waved his hand and walked out of the office, leaving the branch manager there by himself.

The branch manager bit his lip tensely. He'd expected that things would end up like this.

'I can't die here,' he thought.

He took out a black gem the size of a thumb. It was a demonic crystal, which had been created with concentrated demonic energy.

With this gem, he could obtain an explosive amount of demonic energy. Of course, if he weren't careful, the rampaging demonic energy could turn him into a demonic beast. Nevertheless, he didn't have time to worry about that.

"Oh, I haven't seen one of those in a while."

Gasp!

The branch manager was surprised by Kang-Woo's sudden reappearance.

"Wh-Why are you—"

"I didn't think you would just roll over and die, so I waited to see what you had up your sleeve. And like I thought, you had something pretty nice," Kang-Woo said, forcibly taking the demonic crystal away from the branch manager.

"N-No!"

"Well, I'm pretty sure it won't be of much use to me anymore, but I guess it's better than nothing. I'll make good use of it. Thanks, dude."

Kang-Woo patted the branch manager's shoulder.

The branch manager, who was now lying in a pool of his own blood on the floor, screamed out, "ARRGGHH! YOU MOTHERFUCKERRRRRRR!!!"

Rumble.

The underground base crumbled.

* * *

Crunch.

"I knew it wouldn't be of much help."

Kang-Woo chewed on the demonic crystal out of boredom.

A demonic crystal would have been of great help in the past, but he had grown so much that it didn't have much of an effect now.

'Like I thought, I have to kill a prince.'

There was no other way for him to grow drastically stronger. Of course, there was still the alternative of killing other demons and building his strength little by little instead.

'Lucifer's retainers weren't bad.'

He'd used the Authority of Predation and devoured the corpses of the four demons he'd killed earlier. Doing so hadn't caused his Demonic Energy stat to rise, but it had allowed the passage that led to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core to expand. He needed to expand the passage even more to use the power of a prince of Hell in the future.

'If something goes wrong, it might burst.'

Even if Kang-Woo could absorb the soul of a prince right at that moment, he wouldn't be able to use its power immediately. The passage that led to the deep end wouldn't be able to handle the massive pressure generated by the flow of demonic energy. It would burst like a ripped hose.

If that happened even once, it would be the end for Kang-Woo. Just like how the Rift ran wild when Lilith was summoned, the demonic energy within him would run amok, and he would explode.

"I guess I have no other choice but to comb through China."

Kang-Woo couldn't just stand still and wait for Lucifer to invade Earth. He had to keep hunting demons and completely expand the passage that led to the deep end.

According to the information he had been given, there was a secret Demon Cult meeting place in China. In that case, there was a high chance that the Demon Cult had a branch there as well.

'But it's too big.'

China was a huge country. Its size was way beyond that of Korea. After all, China was one of the biggest countries in the world.

Trying to find the Demon Cult's secret meeting place, which didn't even operate at all times, was close to impossible. Moreover, he couldn't bank on getting help from normal civilians as if he were searching for a wanted criminal. If he wanted help, it would need to be from an army of Players.

'It's not something Tian Wuchen could arrange.'

If Kang-Woo truly wanted to do it, Players from all over the world would have to join the search.

'Does Guardians have such authority?'

Guardians as an organization was well-connected with the chief executives of each country... but that didn't mean Guardians could use them however they wanted.

Guardians could make the US take action, but that was only because of Grace McCubbin's influence. They couldn't even make a single country take action as they wished, let alone the entire world.

'I'll have to take some measures of my own.'

A massive threat like the Demon Cult couldn't be stopped by an organization that didn't even have thirty members. The members of Guardians were too restricted in their actions unless they were able to borrow power from other countries.

'Even if Guardians' members move as fast as possible, they won't be able to match the reach of an army.'

It wasn't a matter of their capabilities; it was a matter of numbers. Moreover, there weren't any information-gathering groups that they could use, like the ones in martial arts novels—such as the Beggar's Gang or Hao Society, which were made up of lower-class people.

Kang-Woo couldn't ignore the strength of numbers.

"Okay."

He was done making his plan, so there was no reason for him to hesitate.

Kang-Woo created a gate that led to the Hall of Protection.

As he crossed over to the other side, he saw Kim Si-Hun walk out of the training room. Si-Hun was covered in sweat as if he had just finished training.

"Ah, hyung-nim! I heard the news from Mr. Ito! You found Princess Kurosaki Yurie?" Si-Hun asked.

"Oh, yeah, I guess."

"I would've come right away if you'd contacted me..."

"It wasn't that hard," Kang-Woo said while making a forced smile.

In reality, he'd desperately needed help from Si-Hun or the other members of Guardians. However, he couldn't let them meet Lilith.

"Anyway, are you pretty much living here now?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Yes, Master said that he doesn't have anything more to teach me, so he said that I should focus on training alone for the moment."

'It hasn't even been a year since he began teaching him, yet he ran out of things to teach?'

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

"What about your mother?"

"Her illness has been fully treated. She said she wants to live in peace and quiet, so I bought her a house in Chuncheon."

"Don't forget to visit her often."

Si-Hun's mother was the person who'd given Si-Hun his trauma, so interacting with her more often would help him overcome his trauma.

"Okay, hyung-nim. More importantly, what brings you here today?"

"I came here to see Gaia," Kang-Woo answered and walked over to Gaia's room.

He opened her door and told her the plan he'd thought of.

"A summit?" Gaia asked, tilting her head in surprise.

"Yes, I'd like to suggest gathering the chief executives of each country to matters regarding the Demon Cult."

"Mm..." Gaia murmured as if she was in a dilemma. She sighed and replied, "That'll be difficult. No matter how desperate the situation is, each country has its own problems. Even if a summit actually takes place, you shouldn't expect any major change to happen."

It wasn't easy to make the countries cooperate. The government of each country was already struggling to keep their country safe, so they did not have the leeway to worry about the circumstances of other countries. No, even if they did, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that no country was willing to make sacrifices for world peace.

"But we have to try at the very least. I would appreciate it if you could schedule a world summit held in the US," Kang-Woo persisted.

"It won't be easy."

It was beyond the capabilities of Guardians... but Gaia couldn't reject a proposal from the Warrior of Light.

She nodded and said, "I understand. I will give it a shot."

"Thank you." Kang-Woo nodded in gratitude.

* * *

A black sphere was squirming in a deep, dark cave made of ice. It was a giant sphere over thirty meters in diameter.

A woman wearing a black robe and a red demon mask walked toward it.

"Apostle of Evil Julia greets the Aspect," she said.

[What... is it?] a quiet voice flowed out of the black sphere.

It was a goosebumps-inducing voice, full of horrifying malice.

"I have come to report the many incidents, big and small, that have been occurring in the Demon Cult lately."

[Speak.]

The voice took on a solemn tone.

Julia knelt before the dignified being.

"First of all, the Aspect of Fire will awaken shortly."

[I see.]

"Should I give the order to move according to the plan?"

The black sphere squirmed. It was a silent approval.

Julia continued, "Next... the Balrog summoning failed. To be more precise, we failed to control Balrog after he was summoned."

[It matters not. No one on Earth can possibly control him now that the demon king is no more. Having him run wild is more than enough.]

"It seems... he was killed by the retainers of Gaia, so I do not believe we can expect that."

[Balrog was killed by the retainers of Gaia, you say?]

The black sphere felt shaken for the first time.

It was well aware of the demon Balrog. No human could be a match for him even if they had been chosen by a god.

[Hm. Something will have to be done about this.]

"We will gain a good opportunity soon. I will take care of it myself."

[I will leave it in your hands. Is that everything?]

Julia shook her head and said, "The Middle Eastern branch was attacked."

[Is that worth reporting?]

"It was apparently attacked by the retainers of Lucifer."

[What?]

The black sphere squirmed again. It sounded as if it couldn't believe what it was hearing.

[There must have been a misunderstanding. I don't believe Lucifer would move so carelessly. If he sends a delegate, try to convince them and send them back.]

"Understood," Julia replied with a bow.

[The most important thing is waking Mammon up and proceeding with the plan.]

"Understood. I will inform the Chinese branch to awaken the Aspect of Fire as soon as possible."

Julia stood up.

After bowing once more, she said to the black sphere, "May your will be done, Lord Satan."

A breathtaking wave of demonic energy flowed out of the black sphere.