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I smiled leisurely and asked back.

“What do you mean? Are you referring to the fact that this place is the intelligence network of the Black Gold Sa Clan?”

At the mention of the name “Black Gold Sa Clan,” the sleeves of the man holding his hands together tightened noticeably.

“I’ll ask again. How did you know?”

A murderous aura began emanating from all directions.

Oh? These punks dared to exude killing intent?

“How insolent.”

My smile deepened even more.

“I may not be known for respecting elders, but I certainly know how to hit them.”

“Pardon? What do you—”

Smack!

His face twisted violently to the side with a satisfying slap.

“.....”

“How dare a mere agent of the Sa Clan show killing intent to a descendant of the Jin Clan? And on top of that, you reach for a hidden weapon in your sleeve?”

“My apologies.”

Oh Gunjong quickly returned his head to its original position and bowed.

His right cheek must have been stinging like mad, but Oh Gunjong hid his emotions skillfully.

Still, maybe he couldn't completely hold back the heat in his chest, because the next words out of his mouth were rather brazen.

"However, even if you are descendants of the Jin Clan, this location is not publicly known to the other Six Great Demonic Clans."

It wasn't me who reacted angrily to those words—it was Jin Yeowoon.

"Ha! So what? Are you planning to silence us forever?"

"As if... we would go that far."

Oh Gunjong's Adam's apple bobbed slightly.

What if Jin Yeomyung and I really died here?

There would be war, and either the Jin Clan or the Sa Clan would be completely wiped out.

"Until the main clan delivers its official stance, we'll simply detain you for a while."

"Think you can manage that?"

"I alone am more than enough to subdue the two of you."

His eyes gleamed with unwavering confidence.

Even though I'd slapped him across the face, Oh Gunjong was undoubtedly a Master Level expert, someone whose name would be known in any city.

I sneered at him.

"Go ahead and try."

Clench!

He fell for the provocation. Oh Gunjong began to release his crossed arms.

"That's far enough."

A calm, low woman's voice echoed from the second floor above.

'What's all this commotion?'

Sa Biyeon, who had been elegantly writing in a book, paused mid-stroke.

She started to move toward the source of the noise below, and upon recognizing a familiar male face, she slightly furrowed her brow.

‘Jin Yeomyung? What is he doing here?’

Regardless of the circumstances, the atmosphere downstairs didn’t seem good.

She intervened hastily.

“That’s far enough.”

Immediately, the gazes of both Jin Yeomyung and Jin Yeowoon turned toward Sa Biyeon.

“Oh, we meet again, Lady Sa.”

“You’re the Young Master Jin.”

Sa Biyeon looked at them with her signature expressionless face.

“What’s going on here?”

“I was about to ask you that. What is someone close to the Young Cult Leader doing in a place like this?”

It was a rather sharp question, yet Sa Biyeon responded calmly.

“Didn’t you just state with your own mouth that this place belongs to the Black Gold Sa Clan? Then it isn’t particularly strange that I’m here, is it?”

“Ah, I suppose that’s true.”

I nodded nonchalantly.

‘What is with this man?’

Though her expression didn’t betray anything, Sa Biyeon was inwardly flustered.

‘There shouldn’t be many in the clan who even know this place belongs to the Sa Clan.’

Of course, if one traced the power structure in reverse, it wasn’t impossible to guess that one of the Six Great Demonic Clans was involved.

But to so openly name the Sa Clan meant this man had considerable confidence—or intelligence.

‘Is the Jin Clan’s intelligence network better than expected?’

Sa Biyeon composed her face once more.

“I’ll ask again. What is your business here?”

Though the manager’s identity had been unexpected, now that we had crossed paths, it was time to get to the point.

I cleared my throat slightly and continued.

“I’ve heard that recently, something strange has been circulating around the red-light districts and back alleys of Black Market and other cities.”

“Hmm? Something strange?”

Jin Yeowoon tilted his head in confusion, while Sa Biyeon and Oh Gunjong’s expressions stiffened slightly.

“If I recall correctly... it was called Black-Spotted Blood, wasn’t it?”

“How do you know about that?”

“How wouldn’t I? Do you know how much money I’ve thrown around in various places to gather intel?”

“.....”

“Wolhyang from Seven-Star Courtesan kept nagging me, saying some nasty drug was spreading lately. I came to check it out myself.”

For a brief moment, Sa Biyeon’s face showed a flicker of disgust. But being skilled at masking her emotions, she quickly reverted to her usual calm expression.

“You’re well-informed. Yes, that’s right. A strange and unidentified drug has recently been spreading in Black Market and the surrounding alleys.”

“From what I’ve gathered, it’s a type of Dream Hallucinogen. The problem is, no one seems to know where it’s coming from.”

Dream Hallucinogens were typically created for anesthetic or hallucinatory effects.

They were usually used in medicine or certain formation techniques, but when misused, the consequences could be catastrophic.

“...You’re quite knowledgeable.”

Truthfully, it wasn’t a widespread issue just yet.

It had only begun to circulate among the poor or low-tier physicians. It would take quite some time before it reached brothels or taverns I might visit.

However—

‘If we assume the enemies had been plotting against the Cult since long ago, then this must have been one of the many things they tried.’

Initially, the records described it as a mere anesthetic or painkiller.

But at some point, it spread widely among the lower ranks of the Cult, causing immense corruption and damage.

The previous Cult Leader—now the current one—had to decisively eradicate it. Until then, the Cult suffered from internal and external turmoil.

“At the very least, I can confirm it came from outside the Cult. Even with the power of the main clan, we haven’t been able to trace the source of the raw ingredients.”

“You, the one managing Black Market, don’t even know the source?”

That must have hit a sore spot. She bit her lip slightly.

“I only suspect that one of the sub-organizations under another of the Six Great Demonic Clans is behind this. Even though it’s called Black Market, that doesn’t mean we control all of Black Market in Daesan.”

“Hm, that’s true.”

“But since the amount being distributed among the general public isn’t large yet, we haven’t dug too deeply. Honestly, this isn’t the only headache in the back alleys.”

Naturally.

That substance wouldn’t become a major issue until a few years later.

“By the way, why would the Jin Clan’s eldest son be interested in something like that?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Wolhyang kept whining, so I came to resolve it.”

A flicker of doubt appeared in Sa Biyeon's eyes.

"Is that really the only reason?"

"Do I look like someone who would wander around dark alleys for fun?"

Her eyes narrowed.

She seemed deeply suspicious, but for now, suspicion was likely the only thing she could rely on.

"Tsk, I thought I might learn something useful by coming here, but what a shame."

I grumbled deliberately and shook my head.

"Let's go, little brother."

"What, we're leaving already?"

"There doesn't seem to be any useful information here, so there's no reason to stay. I had high hopes for the Sa Clan's intel, but I guess it's nothing special."

Just as I turned away—

"Wait!"

Sa Biyeon's urgent voice stopped my steps.

Smirk.

"What is it?"

"....."

Her face crumpled bitterly as she saw my expression that clearly said, just as planned.

She didn't particularly lose anything, but for some reason, she couldn't help feeling a strange sense of defeat.

Sa Biyeon let out a small sigh.

"I don't know the exact source, but I can at least share the information I've gathered so far."

"Great. You should've said so from the start."

“But even for someone like you, Young Master Jin, I can’t hand it over for free.”

“Well, coming from a member of the Sa Clan, that’s only natural.”

“Let’s make a deal.”

‘A deal’—one of Sa Biyeon’s favorite catchphrases.

“What’s your price?”

“Complete resolution of the issue. Even if it means using the full power of the Jin Clan. I won’t tolerate half-hearted poking around.”

If the Jin Clan carelessly interfered in the back alley matters, the consequences would fall not on the Jin Clan, but on Sa Biyeon herself, who managed Black Market under the Sa Clan.

“Fine. If the wound won’t heal, I’ll cut it out entirely.”

“.....!”

Sa Biyeon was actually startled by my cheerful and immediate agreement.

The ‘power of the clan’ was like a sword in its sheath—the less you wield it, the more powerful it becomes.

And ironically, the moment you try to wield it, the harder it is to use.

“.....I’ll send the person in charge of this case to the Jin Clan. He’ll be of help.”

I nodded with satisfaction.

That alone meant I wouldn’t have to start from scratch, scouring the ground for leads.

“Thank you. Leave this matter to me.”

My tone immediately shifted into formal speech.

“It’s only a deal. However, another one of the Six Clans may be involved. Will you be alright with that?”

I spread my arms theatrically and shook my head.

“No problem. Even if another Clan is involved, it can’t be more than a sub-branch. Would they really dare go up against the eldest son of the Jin Clan?”

“Well, you do have a point.”

Indeed, my argument was quite persuasive.

Bringing out a butcher’s blade to deal with a chicken, as they say.

“Then take care. Let’s meet again before the next exchange gathering.”

“I hope so.”

With that, I left the Hidden Gold Pavilion with Jin Yeowoon.

And then—

“They’re gone.”

Watching the two brothers from the Jin Clan disappear into the distance, Sa Biyeon tilted her head toward the second floor of the building.

“Young Cult Leader.”

“.....”

Where her gaze landed, Cheon Yura, who had been quietly concealing her presence this whole time, sat silently.

“Hmph!”

She scoffed and turned her head, clearly in a bad mood.

“Why are you in such a foul mood again?”

“Biyeon, wouldn’t you feel upset?”

Cheon Yura’s voice turned icy.

“The man who holds the position of this Young Cult Leader’s husband still sneaks around brothels and entertains courtesans, doesn’t he?”

“Ah, well...”

Her words were painfully accurate, leaving Sa Biyeon with no response.

“It’s not enough to just call him trash! I thought a bit more of him after what the Cult Leader said!”

In truth, after the exchange duel, Cheon Yura had heard the following from the Cult Leader:

—Perhaps, it seems the child from the Jin Clan changed his mind midway through.

—What do you mean by that...?

—I believe he intended to lose at first. But he changed his mind halfway and fought you seriously.

—Is that true?

—Strange as it sounds, the boy didn't even seem to realize he was giving it his all. His eyes weren't on victory... only on you.

—.....!?!?

—Which makes it even stranger. Unless he holds some special feelings for you, such a thing should be impossible.

That conversation had been swirling in Cheon Yura's head, tying her thoughts in knots.

"There's nothing more to see. I'm heading back!"

Clearly furious, Cheon Yura stormed out, not wanting to stay a moment longer.

"Y-Young Cult Leader?!"

Had she already forgotten that she came here just earlier, asking, "What could that guy possibly be thinking?"

But the ever-prudent Sa Biyeon couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

And so Cheon Yura disappeared, escorted by guards from the Guardian Hall.

Left behind with unfinished work, Sa Biyeon tapped her finger lightly against the desk as she recalled the earlier conversation.

'Did Young Master Jin really get that information from a brothel?'

As the one who ruled over Black Market, Sa Biyeon naturally had access to detailed data on various illicit trades.

'The drug hasn't even spread that far yet—not to the point of reaching a mere brothel.'

Investigations and tracking were still ongoing, but the back alley problems in the Cult didn't end with just that single issue.

'There are things out there that are far more lethal and spreading more aggressively. So why did Young Master Jin specifically single that one out and come to see me?'

I instinctively knew.

Mentioning the courtesan was nothing but an excuse.

'He has some other objective.'

No matter how he was known as a wastrel to the outside world, he was still the First Heir of the Jin Clan, one of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Especially during the exchange duel, he had taken the Young Cult Leader's sword strike to the end. That level of skill wasn't something someone could maintain if they had been negligent in their Martial Arts.

'He's someone with a tremendous mental fortitude. I have no way of predicting what his actual goal is.'

What kind of information was so important that the First Heir of the Jin Clan had to move personally to uncover it?

Tok, tok, tok.

I lightly tapped the edge of the desk with my fingers, then rose from my seat.

"Oh Gunjong."

"Yes, Lady Sa."

Oh Gunjong, who had been waiting outside, quickly approached me.

"Call for Chilho. I have something urgent to discuss with him."

"If you mean Chilho... Ah, I'll contact him immediately, but are you sure?"

"It's fine. This is exactly the kind of situation he's meant for."

"Understood. I'll prepare it right away."

Oh Gunjong nodded, clearly understanding my intentions.

“Brother, why did you lie?”

“What are you talking about?”

After leaving the Black Market, Jin Yeowoon spoke to me.

“I mean all that stuff about the courtesan—saying this and that in front of that woman. It was all just an excuse.”

“What, you noticed?”

As I thought, he's more perceptive than expected.

“I'm not an idiot. If you had really been frequenting the courtesan house recently, I would've gotten reports about it immediately.”

I looked at him, a bit annoyed.

“...You even get reports on things like that?”

“When it comes to you, even if I do nothing, people bring me information without me asking.”

It made sense.

Since the issue of succession had come to the forefront, there were plenty who'd try to curry favor with Jin Yeowoon, a leading candidate.

“So? Why did you lie?”

I replied nonchalantly.

“Because it's dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Despite how it might seem, the Black Gold Sa Clan's intelligence network within the Cult is second only to the Cheon Clan. Yet they still haven't been able to uncover the identity of the one they're after.”

To be exact, they might have caught a trace, but they hadn't reached the core.

“Aren't those people not direct subordinates of the clan?”

“They're not direct subordinates, but the operations are run by the main family's direct line. At the very least, their capabilities should be close to the main family's level.”

“So what, you lied on purpose because that Sa Clan woman is dangerous?”

“To be precise, it was for the Young Cult Leader.”

I let out a soft sigh.

“Sa Biyeon is the Young Cult Leader’s only true confidante and source of information. If anything were to happen to her, the Young Cult Leader would be left with no one she can trust.”

Jin Yeowoon scoffed.

“You’re saying the Young Cult Leader, the heiress of the Cheon Clan, has no one to trust? The Cheon Clan must be swarming with people even more eager than me to devote themselves to her.”

“That’s exactly why this situation is dangerous—because it involves the Cheon Clan.”

“...What?”

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“The Cheon Clan is involved?”

“It’s not confirmed yet, but that’s what I believe.”

“Brother, are you messing with me right now?”

Jin Yeowoon’s expression twisted with a frightening intensity.

“Do you really think anyone in the Cheon Clan would dare harbor other thoughts when the current Cult Leader’s authority is that formidable?”

“That’s exactly why they have to operate beneath the surface. If they get caught, it’s all over.”

I locked eyes with Jin Yeowoon.

It hadn’t surfaced yet, but I already knew what was going to unfold within the Cheon Clan from here on.

“The current Young Cult Leader has several critical weaknesses. What do you think they are?”

He was still young, but Jin Yeowoon knew a fair amount about the power dynamics within the cult.

“First and foremost, her gender. It’s not like there’s never been a female Cult Leader in history, but I’ve heard their authority was always weaker.”

“You know your stuff. What else?”

“The existence of the current Cult Leader. Female leaders traditionally hold weak authority, and to make matters worse, the current Cult Leader holds absolute power under the title of Heavenly Demon!”

Jin Yeowoon’s voice brimmed with deep respect for the current Cult Leader.

“That’s right. Unless she achieves something exceptional, the Young Cult Leader will begin her reign with a major disadvantage.”

To overcome that weakness, she enforced a reign of iron so brutal that she earned the epithet “Heartless.”

“Is there anything else you know?”

“Ahem! Well, I guess not? That’s about all I know.”

I nodded.

“Well, even knowing that much is quite impressive at this point.”

“Are you teasing me? Then why don’t you keep going? What other weaknesses does she have?”

“It’s simple. The Young Cult Leader has very little support from within the Cheon Clan.”

“Huh?”

“More precisely, the elders and collateral branches of the Cheon Clan who should be supporting her are all fractured.”

The current Cult Leader, Cheon Taejong, had only one child: Cheon Yura.

But that didn’t mean she was the only young person of the Cheon surname in her generation.

“There are quite a few youths from the collateral branches of the Cheon Clan in her generation. Among them, many have been recognized for their talent.”

“Oh, those guys?”

Jin Yeowoon tilted his head slightly, as if recalling who they were.

“I wouldn’t exactly say they’re proven talents. They all seemed pretty questionable to me.”

“And that’s the point. ‘Questionable’ means there’s still a chance.”

I held back my words slightly.

It was true that their evaluations were ambiguous, but I, knowing what was to come, understood that those assessments were deceiving.

“And if they were truly just mediocre, things wouldn’t have escalated like this.”

“Hm, is that so?”

“In the end, the elders of the Cheon Clan—those who should have united to support the Young Cult Leader—are instead scheming to raise one of those guys to the position of Cult Leader and seize power for the next generation.”

Looking back now, there were many suspicious signs at the time.

‘No matter how complicated things were inside the Cheon Clan, this wasn’t something that should have dragged on this long.’

The Cheon Clan’s internal conflict.

It was the greatest crisis Cheon Yura had faced before ascending to the position of Cult Leader.

It was also the event that sparked the first major rupture within the Heavenly Demon Cult, which had been teetering due to various internal disturbances.

“So? You’re saying the current situation is related to those collateral branches of the Cheon Clan?”

“Exactly. They’re probably planning to use this as one of the cards to slowly pressure the Young Cult Leader.”

“Hmm. It’s not entirely implausible... Fine, let’s say that’s true.”

Jin Yewoon stroked his smooth chin, still looking like something didn’t quite add up.

“But that’s not what I’m really curious about. I don’t care that much about the Cheon Clan or whatever.”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m wondering why you’re moving so actively over something this petty.”

Flinch!

Honestly, the only reason I knew things would escalate was because I’d seen the future. To Jin Yeowoon, this was just some petty ‘back-alley’ matter.

No—truthfully, even if it did grow bigger later, Jin Yeowoon wouldn’t care in the slightest.

It was far too trivial a matter for the great heir of the Jin Clan to bother with, just as he said.

I cleared my throat and made an excuse.

“I mean, I’m acting on behalf of the clan to form a good relationship with the Young Cult Leader, so of course I can’t just stand by if something happens to her, right?”

“I guess that makes sense... but honestly, isn’t this going a bit too far?”

As he tilted his head again, Jin Yeowoon casually dropped a line.

“Brother.”

“What?”

“Did you fall for the Young Cult Leader or something?”

“.....”

For a moment, I was speechless.

I should’ve immediately denied it—but for some reason, the words wouldn’t come out.

Only after nearly ten seconds of silence was I able to open my mouth, feigning a sneer.

“Nonsense. I’m just putting in a bit of effort, that’s all. Don’t read too much into it.”

“Really?”

“I’ve got a few more places to check out, so go on ahead. You’re not interested anymore anyway, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

As he said, Jin Yeowoon’s face now showed no trace of interest.

The only reason he'd tagged along was to figure out how I'd gotten stronger.

Jin Yeowoon nodded.

"Yeah, I mean... who'd fall for a woman obsessed with martial arts and lacking even a shred of grace?"

Twitch!

I clenched my fist without realizing it.

And as always, sharp-eyed Jin Yeowoon flinched and looked over at me warily.

"W-What's wrong?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You looked like you were about to hit me..."

"Would a brother ever hit his younger sibling for no reason? Just get going already."

"Well, fine."

Grumbling, Jin Yeowoon headed back to the Jin Clan.

With that annoying leech gone, I shook my head, feeling a bit relieved.

"Well, shall we really start digging now? I'm curious what's hiding in this pit."

The next day, an agent sent by Sa Biyeon came to see me.

"It's an honor to meet the Young Master of the Jin Clan. Please call me Black Dagger Number Seven."

Clad entirely in black cloth, save for the eyes, with the character for 'seven (七)' marked on her back.

'A thin voice.'

The heavy cloak and slightly altered voice were meant to conceal their identity, but they couldn't fool my eyes.

"Alright, Number Seven. Nice to meet you."

“I heard you wanted detailed information on Black-Spotted Blood. This is everything I’ve gathered so far. Here.”

Number Seven took a thick bundle of documents out from inside their robes and handed it to me.

As I accepted them, I said,

“Did the investigation hit a wall at Eunru Valley?”

“Gasp! H-How did you know that?”

“What do you mean ‘how’? It’s obvious if you just think about it.”

The Heavenly Demon Cult had the Cheon Clan and the Six Great Demonic Clans at its peak, with hundreds—no, thousands—of medium and small families and sects under them.

The back alleys were no different.

Unusual places like Black Market were managed directly by one of the Six Clans, but generally, areas were controlled by affiliated families or the victors of local power struggles.

But even among those, there was a lawless zone abandoned by all such families.

Its name was Eunru Valley.

The Hidden, Filthy Valley.

“If Lady Sa shook her head, then of course it means you’ve already combed through every back alley in all cult strongholds.”

“Y-Yes, that’s correct.”

“Eventually, you had no choice but to turn your eyes toward Eunru Valley. But that place is especially difficult to investigate because of its nature.”

Eunru Valley wasn’t just a pit full of people abandoned even by the back alleys.

Sure, most of the inhabitants were trash waiting for their second go at life, but mixed among them were more than a few formidable individuals who couldn’t be ignored.

Those who lost in competition and now lived without a future.

Demonic cultivators who had committed crimes and been exiled from their clans or sects.

Even spies sent from the orthodox or unorthodox factions.

“Let’s go.”

“...Pardon?”

“To catch a tiger, you’ve got to enter the tiger’s den, don’t you think?”

“E-Even if we go in, we’ll only be eaten by the tiger though...”

“...”

To the guy clearly reluctant to go, I stared her down and calmly said just one thing.

“Shall I relay your words to Lady Sa?”

“I apologize! I’ll lead the way!”

Black Secret Number Seven, who had only come to deliver intel, now wore a miserable face as she was roped into acting as a guide.

She probably knew that protesting would be pointless, given the massive difference in status between us.

“If you were an ordinary person, sure, you’d probably get eaten by a tiger. But we’re martial artists. If you’ve learned martial arts as a warrior of the Heavenly Demon Cult, taking down a tiger should be nothing.”

“B-But I’m not a combatant...”

“Quiet.”

I dragged Number Seven along.

‘Huh, but what’s this feeling?’

Something made my skin crawl.

Not some skin disease—my hyper-attuned senses were sending a signal.

‘Someone’s watching me?’

We were a bit away from the Jin Clan’s main estate.

‘At this moment... the most likely suspect would be someone from the family.’

It made sense if the family head had assigned someone to secretly watch me.

However—

‘Why does this presence feel familiar?’

Even though I was only at the level of a second-rate martial artist, I had brought over the senses of my past life, so I was confident that my perception could rival even top-level experts.

Which meant... I wasn’t wrong.

‘Well, there’s no hostility, so it doesn’t matter.’

I dismissed the thought and moved on.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, sir!”

Number Seven and I headed to Eunru Valley.

And not long after the two of us disappeared—

A woman with sharp features appeared where we had just been.

Her already sharp face twisted into a scowl, giving off a chilling murderous aura.

The Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, looked at the spot where we had vanished and sighed.

“Ugh... why am I even...”

At her sigh, the escort nearby sent her a sound transmission.

– Young Cult Leader. What shall we do?

“We follow them.”

The escort hesitated, surprised by her decisive response.

– But this is not something the Young Cult Leader should personally concern herself with...

“Biyeon advised me that if we leave this alone, it may snowball into something huge later on.”

— ...

“At first, I was a bit annoyed, but the more I think about it... I feel like that man already knew.”

— Jin Yeomyung was known not long ago as a complete wastrel.

“Ha! Do you think a man drowned in drink and pleasure could block my sword?”

The escort fell silent.

Indeed, even among those nearing the age of thirty, there were few martial artists capable of blocking the Young Cult Leader’s sword.

“This is just a passing curiosity. Father said I’ve been training too much and should take a break, so let’s take this opportunity to see how that man handles the situation.”

— But Eunru Valley is too dangerous. Please wait, I’ll request reinforcements.

At those words, Cheon Yura’s expression turned icy.

“Reinforcements? Do you really think trash like them could do anything to me?”

— Even so!

“Silence. Just shut up and follow me.”

The escort panicked.

Cheon Yura had combined overwhelming talent with unmatched effort—she had never met a true rival until now.

But that only applied within the narrow sphere of the cult’s elites.

Having trained solely within the confines of the Lesser Demon Hall, she was still naïve to the ways of the world.

If he insisted on calling for reinforcements now, her prideful and headstrong nature might cause her to draw her sword on him instead.

‘Damn it... I just have to hope nothing happens.’

Eunru Valley.

Located on the far southern edge of the Heavenly Demon Cult, this place was dozens of li away from the main stronghold, yet still boasted a dense population of over two thousand.

The problem was that most of these people didn't live normal lives.

"Damn, the stench is already overwhelming."

I scowled at the pungent odor emanating from Eunru Valley's entrance.

People were sprawled all over filthy mats spread across the ground.

Most of them were missing limbs—due to one misfortune or another.

Literal castaways just waiting for death.

Black Secret Number Seven glanced at them before asking me,

"Can you really obtain information from a place like this?"

I clicked my tongue.

"Hearing you say that, I can tell you're not a field agent."

Hit right on the mark, Number Seven fell silent.

"Watch closely. It's places like this—no, exactly places like this—where it's easiest to find information."