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Chapter 13: Eunru Valley (1)

I walked into the inner part of Eunru Valley without hesitation.

My confident stride made Number Seven, who was following behind, look curious—wondering if I had some kind of plan.

“There’s one immortal truth I’ve learned in life.”

“An immortal truth? What is it?”

“If you gather a bunch of people together, no matter the situation, a hierarchy always forms.”

Just like how society is divided into nobles, commoners, and outcasts, even within that hierarchy, further divisions of nobles, commoners, and outcasts emerge.

“At first glance, it might look like everyone here is equally ruined, but this place is still a part of the Heavenly Demon Cult, which strictly follows the law of the strong.”

As we headed farther in, clusters of houses began to appear.

And the ones living there were clearly different from those near the entrance in the slum-like shacks—starting with their appearance.

“Those people...”

“They’re the ones who’ve managed to survive in this hellish competition. But they’re not ‘nobles’ either.”

They farmed, or hunted and gathered in the mountains. Some had even learned a bit of martial arts.

They had some skills that allowed them to survive, but they weren’t the ones I was looking for.

“Let’s keep going.”

Eunru Valley didn’t end here.

Several such housing clusters were scattered around, and deeper inside was where the 'informants' I sought would be.

Number Seven's eyes twitched.

"A-Are you sure this is okay, Young Master? If we go any farther, getting back out won't be easy..."

I scoffed at her.

"You're more timid than I thought. And you call yourself an informant of the Sa Clan?"

"Kh, ahem!"

"For people like us, the deeper we go, the better our chances of survival. Wandering around the outskirts is more dangerous."

Her eyes widened.

"Why is that?"

"Most of the people out here have nothing to lose. But the ones inside have a lot to lose."

"Ah!"

Black Dagger Number Seven let out a gasp as she realized what I meant.

"So let's go. No time to waste."

I walked further into the valley at a relaxed pace.

Truthfully, I had another reason for picking up the pace.

'Who the hell is it?'

The feeling of someone watching me hadn't gone away for a while now.

I could feel Number Seven's gaze from behind, but that wasn't what had me on edge.

There was no malice in the gaze, but the sticky curiosity it radiated made me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

'Damn it, whoever this voyeur is, if they keep it up even after we go deeper, I won't let them off easy.'

I twisted my lips and cursed the unknown watcher inwardly.

As we moved deeper into Eunru Valley, the presence of people around us diminished drastically.

In contrast, I began to clearly feel the gazes of martial artists radiating unmistakable Qi.

“There are a lot of plants around here. Is someone cultivating them?”

Though people were rarely seen in the inner valley, there were many fields and paddies that clearly showed human care.

“Looks like it.”

“Heh, this place has its own rustic charm.”

Number Seven let out a soft laugh, seemingly enjoying the tranquil atmosphere of the area.

“Even if they’ve been cast out of the main sect, maybe they find spiritual comfort in growing plants like this.”

I frowned at her comment.

Just as Number Seven reached out to touch the plants in a nearby paddy—

“That’s an Illusion-Killing Herb.”

I stopped her with a single sentence.

Flinch!

Illusion-Killing Herb was a type of spirit herb, but it was a toxic one infused with lethal poison—not something to be touched barehanded.

“Looking closely, there’s some Poison-Transfer Flower too.”

Number Seven immediately backed away from the field.

What she had just tried to do was no different than grabbing a Red Antler Mushroom with bare hands.

“W-What the heck is this place!?”

“A secret cultivation field, probably. Not the base ingredient for Black-Spotted Blood, though.”

Number Seven seemed too shocked to say anything.

She was clearly not a field agent, despite her appearance.

‘She might be younger than she looks. Why did Sa Biyeon send someone like her?’

No—wait. Come to think of it, Sa Biyeon’s role was only to pass on information. The one who dragged this girl all the way here was me.

‘Damn it, that was a mistake. If that’s her level, her martial arts are probably trash too.’

Just as I was about to say something to her—

“Hey, you brats over there.”

A rough voice came from deeper inside.

When I turned my head, five thugs appeared—wielding blades and clubs.

One of them, with a long scar on his face, growled as he looked our way.

“I heard a well-dressed little punk showed up, and I see you’ve made it all the way here. No way that was just coincidence.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll keep it simple. If you don’t wanna get hurt, get lost.”

I silently stared at them.

‘Aside from the guy in the middle, the rest are just small-time thugs.’

They were most likely laborers hired by whoever ruled this part of Eunru Valley.

“Can’t do that. I’m here to meet your boss.”

“Hah!”

The thug let out a mocking laugh.

“Thought I’d send you back quietly since you looked like some noble brat from the main sect, but you’re asking for a beating!”

He then glared at his four lackeys.

“Break an arm—don’t go overboard.”

“Yes, boss!”

The goons began to approach, swinging smooth clubs in their hands.

At that, Number Seven immediately took a step back.

“I specialize in movement techniques, just so you know.”

“Didn’t expect anything from you in the first place.”

I sighed and stepped forward.

At the same time, the approaching thugs picked up speed.

“Get him!”

“Die!”

“If I really die, you guys’ll be in trouble though?”

I snapped back at them as they hurled crude threats, then dashed forward to meet them head-on.

Honestly, in terms of martial arts, these guys were garbage—not even third-rate.

They were just used as laborers because they had all their limbs intact and a sturdy build.

In terms of pure martial arts, you could easily find someone stronger than those guys among the drug addicts sprawled out near the entrance.

“Huaaah!”

The first one to charge swung a club with both hands, aiming roughly at my shoulder.

Since he was a grown man putting his weight into it, a direct hit could have cracked my arm or shoulder bone...

‘This is sigh-worthy.’

I lightly stepped aside, dodging the attack with a basic footwork technique, then immediately kicked his shin.

Thud!

“Aaaaargh!”

“You pathetic bastard!”

Three of them cursed and charged at me all at once when their comrade was taken down in an instant.

“You think you’ll be any different?”

I didn’t even need to use my internal energy.

The insight that awakened alongside my senses clearly laid out their movements like some kind of future vision.

Dodging attacks from three directions was as easy as shifting my upper body slightly.

Then I lightly tapped each of their shins—once per person. That was all it took.

“Whoa!”

“Argh!”

“Guh!”

All four of them went tumbling to the ground, and the thug in the middle frowned as he watched.

“...So you’re an expert.”

“So? Feel like guiding me now?”

“Hoo!”

Realizing he was facing someone far above his level, the thug gave up quickly and raised his hands.

“Follow me. I’ll take you to the Old Lords.”

Smirk.

‘Old Lords, huh? What a grand title.’

So Number Seven and I followed the thug’s lead as he guided us deeper into the innermost part of Eunru Valley.

The innermost part of Eunru Valley—cold, shaded, where sunlight barely reached.

There stood a rather well-built manor, surprisingly refined for a place like this.

I looked around the estate and let out a soft laugh.

‘Not bad at all. In a place like this, this level of luxury is basically imperial.’

Well, if they were pushing that many high-priced contraband items, then even in Eunru Valley, they wouldn't have any financial difficulties.

An old man with only one arm walked out from inside the manor.

“This is a surprise, Magang. You brought a guest.”

It was a subtle reprimand for not chasing me away.

The thug called Magang lowered his head.

“I apologize, Third Old Lord.”

“Forget it. You must’ve brought him because you couldn’t handle him.”

Their exchange made me chuckle inwardly.

‘What a dramatic act.’

They reprimand, then comfort themselves by saving face. What a show.

‘Still, he’s decent. Almost qualifies as first-rate.’

If he hadn’t lost an arm, he would’ve probably received decent treatment in the main sect and enjoyed a proper retirement.

The old man, referred to as the Third Old Lord, slowly nodded toward me.

“I pay my respects to a noble guest of the Six Great Demonic Clans.”

“Gasp!”

Magang gasped audibly.

I lifted the corner of my lips into a faint smile.

“Did you say the Six Clans?”

“Yes.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“No young man, not even of age, would willingly walk into a death trap like this unless he belonged to one.”

“You sound confident. Are you even strong enough to back that up?”

My remark was slightly sarcastic, but his expression immediately stiffened with anger.

“Though I may have lost an arm and ended up here, I haven’t fallen so low that I’d take insults from a mere late-stage beginner.”

“Not fallen? Someone who trained in palm techniques and lost an arm is completely ruined.”

His internal energy might be borderline first-rate, but without his dominant arm, he couldn’t confidently take on even an average second-rate martial artist.

Unless he had trained in weaponry, maybe.

“H-How did you know that?!”

“It’s obvious. No need to act so shocked.”

I shot him a crooked glare.

“You said I was from the Six Clans, right? Then try guessing which one. If you get it right, I’ll acknowledge you and reward you in the name of my clan.”

“Ahem...!”

The Third Old Lord’s expression shifted at the mention of a reward.

If I truly belonged to one of the Six Clans, I wouldn’t lie about something like this. And if he guessed correctly, the reward wouldn’t be light—he knew that well.

After a long silence, he finally opened his mouth.

“Are you from the Hidden Shadow So Clan?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well... If we trace our supply chain far enough, it ultimately leads to the Illusion Clan. And the Illusion and So Clans have been at odds for generations, so I assumed you might be from the So Clan.”

‘So the Illusion Clan is behind these guys?’

That was news to me—even back when I was the Inner Administrator.

I felt oddly pleased by this discovery.

The Shocking Illusion Clan.

One of the Six Great Demonic Clans, specializing in illusion arts and formation techniques. Given their nature, it wouldn’t be surprising for them to use all sorts of contraband.

Of course, they wouldn’t acquire it openly. Instead, they’d gather it slowly and discreetly, like this.

“Not a bad deduction.”

“Then...?”

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong.”

“W-Wrong!?”

He had decent insight, judging by how he guessed the So Clan. Direct descendants of the Ma Clan always wear fixed clothing; the Pa Clan carries giant swords.

The Jin Clan, as evident from Jin Yeowoon, has members who are all massive—easy to rule out.

That left the Sa Clan, So Clan, and Illusion Clan. Since the Illusion Clan was their supplier, that ruled them out. Between the Sa and So Clans, he chose So—probably because the Sa Clan’s scions wear flashier clothes.

“My name is Jin Yeomyung.”

Apparently, he had heard of me, because the Third Old Lord widened his eyes and pointed at me.

“D-Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan!? And you’re the Eldest Son!?”

To them, it was like royalty had come slumming in the ghettos.

The thugs who had raised their clubs against me went pale and immediately dropped to their knees.

In that moment, Number Seven urgently sent a whispering voice transmission.

—W-Wait! Are you really okay revealing your identity like this?

—Why not? I plan to use them anyway, so what's the harm?

—What if they're the suppliers of Black-Spotted Blood?

—Doesn't matter. I'll just suppress them with the power of the clan.

Unless Black-Spotted Blood had already spread beyond control several years down the line, I could easily crush it at this stage.

Besides, I didn't think they were the true culprits to begin with.

“T-To think the esteemed Young Master of the Jin Clan would come to a place like this...”

The Third Old Lord's tone and expression instantly shifted into one of politeness.

“Black-Spotted Blood.”

Flinch!

“That drug—its source seems to be this place. You know something, don't you?”

“T-That is...”

“You seem tight-lipped. Want me to loosen that mouth a little?”

“W-Wait!”

The Third Old Lord took a step back.

Even if I wanted to torture him right here, he wouldn't be able to resist at all.

That's how absolute the status of a direct descendant of the Six Great Demonic Clans was within the Heavenly Demon Cult.

But instead of torture, I reached into my robe and pulled out a pouch, then tossed it to him.

“Take it.”

“T-This is...?”

The moment the Third Old Lord caught the pouch, he felt its heavy weight settle into his palm.

When he slowly opened it, inside was a pile of gleaming gold ingots.

Gulp.

The Third Old Lord swallowed hard.

No matter how skilled a first-rate martial artist he may be, buried in a place like this, chances to handle that kind of fortune didn't come often.

“Um...”

Just as he was about to speak—

“T-This is bad, Third Old Lord! We've got an intruder!”

From outside, a one-legged old man suddenly burst into the manor.

“T-The Second Old Lord?”

The one-legged elder, referred to as the Second Old Lord, shouted urgently at the Third Old Lord holding the pouch of gold.

“He's no ordinary martial artist! You need to come join us right now!”

Judging by how he ignored everyone else in the manor and went straight to the Third Old Lord, it seemed the situation really was dire.

But then—

“Huh?”

“An intruder?”

Not just me and Number Seven, even the Third Old Lord tilted his head in confusion.

Number Seven blinked and said,

“Aren't we the intruders?”