

MYST, MIGHT, MAYHEM

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Opportunity (1)

Zhongliang County.

A large crowd gathered in the marketplace.

The middle-aged woman selling snacks from a stall, the man precariously carrying a water jug on his back, the children running around with friends, and various other passersby all directed their gazes in one direction.

A long procession was passing through the center of the village street.

Creak! Creak!

The sound of thick wooden bars on the carriage wheels could be heard.

Inside the wooden cages, visible between the guards escorting the procession, were prisoners with their hands and feet bound.

“Look at that.”

“Ugh. They’re completely covered in blood.”

Their faces were haggard and full of wounds, as if they had endured severe hardships.

Their white prisoner’s garments were stained red.

Perhaps because of this, the atmosphere in the village as they watched the procession was extremely grim.

The procession continued for a while.

Then, someone picked up a stone from the ground and threw it inside the wooden cage.

“You cockroach-like bastards!”

Thud!

“Urgh!”

The prisoner, with his limbs tied, couldn't avoid the stone and was hit.

Seeing the prisoner's pained expression,

some of the onlookers started grabbing whatever they could and throwing it.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The prisoners inside the wooden cages had no choice but to endure being hit.

“Wretched things!”

“Damn scoundrels!”

“Take this and die!”

None of the guards escorting them stopped this.

Rather, they just watched with mocking laughter.

This was the purpose of publicly transporting prisoners from the start.

To announce their crimes to the world.

“Hmm.”

A middle-aged man was observing them from a second-floor window of an inn.

Sitting properly and sipping tea, the county's government official sitting across from him asked in confusion.

"Why do you react so?"

They were criminals.

The man before his eyes was not one to easily feel sympathy for prisoners.

At this, the middle-aged man glanced at a certain cage.

Unlike the other prisoners, there was one locked up alone.

It was a prisoner whose chest and abdomen were stained red.

“He’s young.”

The prisoner was sitting upright with disheveled hair.

Although half his face was obscured by the unkempt hair, he was clearly a boy at a glance.

At most, he seemed to be sixteen or seventeen years old.

‘...The same age as the young master.’

Seeing that young prisoner suddenly reminded him of the young master he served.

But then he shook his head.

What did age have to do with committing crimes?

The government official, who had been observing him, spoke with a solemn expression.

“It’s difficult to say until the execution, but despite his appearance, he seems to have committed the most serious crime among them.”

Puzzled by those words, the middle-aged man asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The brat you called young is the most vicious of the prisoners transported this time.”

“The most vicious?”

The middle-aged man couldn’t hide his bewilderment.

What was so vicious about that young prisoner?

“...Did he harm people?”

The worst crime in the eyes of the government was treason, called the crime of high treason.

However, those who committed high treason were transported with their crimes publicly announced, so that couldn't be it.

Then, there was only one crime that could be considered the most vicious.

Murder.

“That's right.”

At the government official's answer, the middle-aged man let out a soft sigh.

For ordinary civilians, murder was a grave crime, but for martial artists like himself, killing and being killed was not uncommon.

The government official clicked his tongue as he watched him.

“Tsk tsk. As expected of a martial artist, this doesn’t seem to faze you much.”

“In this world, people die left and right.”

“That may be so. But if you knew that kid’s identity...”

Thud!

Before the government official could finish speaking, a stone flew and struck the head of the boy inside the wooden cage.

The surroundings became noisy.

Blood was flowing from the boy’s head.

However, unlike the other prisoners, the boy showed no signs of movement or groans of pain.

“That young boy is quite a unique one.”

“Does he not feel pain? His head is like that, yet how...”

This sight caught the middle-aged man’s attention as well.

‘That kid...’

For those who have trained in internal energy or received training, enduring pain to some extent is possible.

However, that boy was an ordinary civilian.

Yet, despite being hit directly on the head by a stone hard enough to split it open, he didn’t let out a single groan.

Furthermore, the lack of any movement was truly impressive.

Swish!

As the flowing blood soaked his head, the boy tilted his head upward as if it was bothersome.

This revealed his face that had been obscured by his hair.

Instantly, exclamations of surprise escaped the nearby onlookers' mouths.

The government official was the same.

“Oh my.”

Even though his face was drenched in blood, his handsomeness couldn't be hidden.

With tall and well-proportioned features and delicate lines, his face possessed a unique charm.

Peculiarly, his impression seemed gentle, even kind.

“With a face like that, how could he do such things...?”

The government official was puzzled.

The middle-aged man was staring at the young prisoner with an extremely shocked expression.

“You... Why are you reacting like that?”

At that question, the middle-aged man flinched and shook his head.

“...It's nothing.”

“Nothing?”

He pretended it was nothing, but just a moment ago, he clearly had a face as if he had received a shock.

As the official tried to ask again why he reacted that way, the middle-aged man stood up from his seat.

And he said,

“The tea was delicious. It seems I have an urgent matter to attend to.”

“Oh my. We finally met after so long...”

“I’m in a hurry. Next time we meet, I’ll treat you lavishly at Moon Fragrance Tower[1].”

“Moon Fragrance Tower? Ahem, ahem.”

At his words, the corners of the government official’s mouth twitched.

What man wouldn't be pleased to be treated at the most luxurious courtesan house in the district?

Near the end of the chou hour[2] at dawn,

In the underground level of the Zhongyang County government office's prison building,

Most of the imprisoned criminals were asleep, and even the guards watching over the prison were nodding off while leaning against the walls.

Amidst them, there was only one person who wasn't asleep.

It was the young prisoner with disheveled hair.

The boy locked in the prison was staring blankly at the wall.

‘.....’

It had been four days since he woke up after being thought dead.

Many things had happened during that time.

While it was fortunate that he miraculously survived, when he awoke, he was imprisoned as a criminal.

Moreover, the date of his public execution had already been set.

The punishment was ‘quartering’.

It was a punishment where the arms and legs were each tied to different carts and torn apart, killing the person.

‘...A fitting punishment, I suppose.’

He had brutally killed so many people that he was called the Sickle-slaying Demon.

Regardless of the method, it would be difficult to avoid the death penalty.

Nevertheless, there was no hint of regret or any anxious emotions in the boy's eyes.

Rather, the boy's mind was occupied with something else.

[What? Martial arts? Hey, kid. Have you perhaps ever met a martial artist?]

That's what one of the prisoners transported with him had said.

Thanks to that, the boy was able to solve the question he had been harboring.

'Martial artist...'

He had occasionally heard of them when he accompanied his grandfather to the village.

They said martial artists could run at the speed of a horse and surpassed the strength of ordinary people by cultivating something called qi.

What he had only heard through rumors turned out to be true.

That man had driven him to the brink of death in the blink of an eye.

‘...The result would be the same even if we met again.’

No matter how much he thought about it without sleeping, he couldn't come up with a way to kill that man.

Even if he attempted a surprise attack or set a trap, would it work?

To begin with, that was a monster in human form.

'Are martial artists originally that strong?'

If that was the case, avenging his grandfather might become a distant dream.

No matter how much he struggled, if it was an existence he couldn't kill...

As he was deep in thought, the boy suddenly realized something.

'Martial arts.'

There was only one difference between that man and himself.

The difference between having learned martial arts and not having learned them led to that result.

Then, the conclusion might be simple.

'I need martial arts.'

If the conditions were the same, the outcome could be different.

It seemed he had finally found an answer.

However, there was a problem.

'No, two problems?'

The first was that he needed to get out of here.

If he remained still like this, he would be subjected to 'quartering' and die with his limbs torn apart.

The second was how he could learn martial arts.

'Who do I learn from?'

He needed to find someone to teach him martial arts, but he had no idea how to find such people.

Moreover, even if he somehow escaped from here, he was a prisoner.

If he broke out of prison, a warrant would undoubtedly be issued.

Then, who would be willing to teach martial arts to a criminal like him?

‘...A complicated situation.’

His mind became chaotic again.

He newly realized that his grandfather’s promise had been right.

No matter how much it was for the sake of revenge, he shouldn’t have easily revealed his hidden nature.

'It's like I dug my own grave.'

Even if he realized it now, it was too late.

The consequences had already unfolded.

The one fortunate thing was that even though he was alive, that man didn't seem to know yet.

No, perhaps he knew but left him alone since he was in a situation where he would be executed.

As he was pondering over this,

Swish!

A faint sound came from somewhere.

The boy turned his body.

Sensing something strange, the boy held his breath and focused on the sounds coming from his surroundings.

'What is it?'

At the moment he was curious, something caught the boy's eye.

A faint haze-like substance was spreading from below the right side of the prison cell he was confined in.

The boy's eyes narrowed.

'Is there a fire?'

He wondered if there was a fire in the prison building.

However, that suspicion soon disappeared.

For a fire, there was no particular commotion, and it was too quiet.

But then,

Thud! Thud!

The sounds of something falling could be heard.

Judging from the direction of the sounds, it seemed to be where the guards were stationed.

‘This is...’

The haze that had been spreading was now seeping into the boy’s prison cell.

A faint scent tickled his nose, and a few medicinal herbs came to mind.

‘Lizard’s Tail[3]... Female Ginseng[4], Gromwell Root[5], Scented Solomon’s Seal[6]...’

He had been gathering and cultivating medicinal herbs for nearly ten years while following his grandfather.

With a terrifyingly keen sense of smell, the boy instantly recognized the herbs mixed in the haze-like faint smoke.

‘...Sleeping incense.’

Gromwell Roots and Scented Solomon’s Seal were herbs that induced sleep.

With this combination, those who inhaled this smoke would not wake up for about two hours.

But the boy was different.

'The mixture is crude.'

Unless it was his grandfather's mixture, he wouldn't fall asleep from this level of sleeping incense because he had steadily built up resistance to various herbs since childhood.

'Hmm.'

The boy judged that something was happening.

On a deep night when everyone was asleep, sleeping incense had spread inside the government office's prison.

The boy leaned against the wall and focused on the sounds.

Swish! Swish!

The sound of someone moving while suppressing their presence could be heard.

It was a level of sound that ordinary people would have difficulty noticing, but it faintly reached the boy's ears.

'Who is it?'

They had spread sleeping incense and entered.

It meant they had come in with some purpose.

Very quiet footsteps were moving back and forth in various parts of the prison.

'What are they trying to do?'

He couldn't tell who had infiltrated and for what purpose.

Then, the footsteps headed towards his cell.

The boy lowered his head and deliberately pretended to be asleep.

Swish! Swish!

The footsteps stopped in front of his cell and didn't move.

'Could it be?'

Click!

The sound of the cell's lock being opened followed.

'...Was it me?'

The purpose was clearly the boy himself.

As it turned out this way, various thoughts came to his mind.

That man might have come to the prison to dispose of him, who hadn't died.

But why would he bother to seek out someone who was going to be executed?

'It doesn't matter.'

Regardless of the purpose, it had become clear that he was being targeted.

The boy breathed as evenly as possible.

So as not to let them notice that he hadn't succumbed to the sleeping incense.

Swish! Swish!

The sound of someone entering while suppressing their presence was heard again.

The intruder who had carefully snuck inside.

Even with his eyes closed, he could feel their presence right in front of him.

Tap!

The intruder lightly nudged the boy with their foot.

It seemed to be to check if he was really asleep.

The boy relaxed his body and didn't move.

Convinced that he was asleep, the intruder suddenly lifted the hair covering the front of the boy's face.

The intruder's steady breathing momentarily stopped.

‘.....’

He could sense an emotional disturbance.

The boy, who had learned about ordinary people’s emotions from his grandfather, could sensitively discern their state of mind through their expressions, actions, and breathing.

‘It’s a chance.’

Such agitation was an opportunity to target an enemy.

The boy swiftly raised the wooden cangue[7] restraining his hands upward with great force.

Thud!

“Ugh!”

The defenseless intruder was struck on the chin and staggered backward.

The boy didn't miss this moment and tried to smash the intruder's head with the wooden cangue.

Right at that instant, the intruder kicked the boy's abdomen with their foot.

Thud!

And as the boy was pushed back, the intruder quickly struck acupuncture points on his chest with their fingers.

Tap tap tap tap tap!

It felt as if his body had stiffened and couldn't move.

As he wondered what this phenomenon was, the intruder muttered in disbelief.

“How are you not asleep?”