

Myst, Might, Mayhem

#Chapter 51 - Read Myst, Might, Mayhem Chapter 51

Chapter 51

“How?”

Surprisingly, Mok Gyeong-un was moving perfectly fine, and on top of that, he had even untied the ropes restraining him.

How did this guy release the pressure points?

As he wondered, Mok Gyeong-un lightly struck his chest.

-Ta-ta-ta-ta-tak!

Soon, the mute acupoint was released, and his voice tried to come out.

“You...”

Mok Gyeong-un whispered to him.

“Shh.”

At this, Mok Yu-cheon lowered his voice and whispered back.

“...How did you release the pressure points?”

Mok Gyeong-un didn't answer his question.

Because there were no pressure points applied in the first place.

No, they were applied for a very short time, but due to his yin death energy, Bright Blade King Son Yun's true energy dispersed not long after.

Mok Gyeong-un had merely been quietly observing the situation.

“You don't need to know that.”

As he avoided answering, Mok Yu-cheon frowned and said,

“Don't tell me you're trying to... escape?”

Mok Gyeong-un smiled silently.

It was a sign of affirmation.

Mok Yu-cheon was flabbergasted and asked,

“By what means? The warriors of Heaven and Earth Society will be guarding all around.”

“Now is the opportunity. Most of them, starting with Bright Blade King, are gone. There are only four men guarding outside the carriage. Six more are spread out nearby keeping watch.”

‘!?’

For a moment, Mok Yu-cheon was puzzled.

His eyes had been covered and his meridians sealed just like him, so how does he know all this?

Moreover, this fellow is merely a third-rate martial artist who would struggle to detect presences within a few jang, let alone sense all that.

Mok Gyeong-un spoke to the skeptical man.

“If you tell me just one thing, I’ll help you escape too.”

“What?”

“That’s why I only released the mute acupoint.”

‘Huh?’

Come to think of it, his body still had no sensation.

Not because the ropes weren’t untied, but because the paralysis acupoint hadn’t been released.

“What are you playing at? If you’re going to free me, do it properly...”

“Sorry, but I don’t need to accommodate you once we’re outside, so I’d appreciate it if you just answer my question.”

A subtle killing intent emanated from his voice.

Together with his expressionless face and indifferent eyes, it created a peculiar atmosphere.

It was a completely different feeling from usual.

“You, what the

“Who is Ghost Blade?”

“What?”

“I asked who Ghost Blade is.”

Mok Yu-cheon furrowed his brow at Mok Gyeong-un’s question.

Is he really asking because he doesn’t know who Ghost Blade is?

There shouldn’t be a single person in the martial world who doesn’t know of that individual’s notoriety.

“...Are you seriously asking because you don’t know?”

“Yes.”

“Are you messing with me right now...”

“Just answer the question.”

He didn’t add anything else, but Mok Gyeong-un exuded an intimidating aura as if he would kill him if he didn’t answer.

Even before, it was strange, but is this fellow really the cowardly Mok Gyeong-un?

“You’re not going to answer?”

“...He’s one of the Six Celestial Demons.”

“Six Celestial Demons?”

“What... are you really?”

Mok Yu-cheon couldn’t comprehend Mok Gyeong-un’s reaction that seemed to genuinely not know.

In the current martial world, there are six great leaders considered to be at the pinnacle.

Their martial prowess is said to be heaven above heaven, so the martial artists of the Central Plains call them the Six Celestials.

Below them, not reaching their level but still attaining the highest realm, there are eight supreme masters.

They are known as the Eight Stars.

“How can you not know about the Six Celestials and Eight Stars...”

“I don’t know about Eight Stars or whatever, but where is that Ghost Blade?”

Mok Yu-cheon stared intently into Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes at that question, then sighed and said,

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“How would I know about someone who disappeared seventeen years ago?”

“Disappeared?”

“Yes. And no one has been able to uncover Ghost Blade’s true identity to this day.”

“No one knowing means everyone is clueless?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Hmm.”

Mok Gyeong-un stroked his chin as if troubled by Mok Yu-cheon’s words.

The scars left on his deceased grandfather and the scar on the side of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor Sect Leader were very similar.

That’s why this Ghost Blade individual was the prime suspect.

But if no one knows that person’s identity, it becomes difficult to know where to start investigating again.

However, there was one curious point here.

‘He said Ghost Blade disappeared seventeen years ago... Then why did the man target Grandfather?’

If the scars were the work of the same culprit, it had to be Ghost Blade.

But he couldn't understand why someone who had disappeared suddenly targeted his grandfather.

As he pondered this, Mok Yu-cheon opened his mouth.

"Maybe if you go to Heaven and Earth Society, you might be able to find out."

"What?"

"I heard rumors that the masters Ghost Blade targeted were all renowned experts in the righteous faction, so he might be a master from Heaven and Earth Society or the imperial family."

"Heaven and Earth Society or the imperial family?"

"Yes. Although I don't know why you're curious."

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes sharpened at those words.

If so, the enemy who killed his grandfather might be in either Heaven and Earth Society or the imperial family.

At that moment, a voice rang in his ear.

-Mortal, hurry.

It was Cheong-ryeong's voice.

Mok Gyeong-un said,

"I'll keep my promise."

With those words, he reached out his hand to release the other acupoints.

However,

"I appreciate you releasing the acupoints, but don't do anything unnecessary."

"...Unnecessary?"

"If we escape now, Yeon Mok Sword Manor will be in danger."

"In danger, you say."

"We're hostages. You know what that means too. What do you think they'll do to Yeon Mok Sword Manor if we disappear?"

Mok Gyeong-un scoffed at Mok Yu-cheon's words.

Mok Yu-cheon frowned.

What kind of reaction is this? As he wondered, Mok Gyeong-un spoke in a cold voice.

"What does that have to do with me?"

"What?"

"Then stay here."

"You!"

-Thwack!

Mok Yu-cheon, struck on the back of the neck with a hand technique, immediately fainted.

With his usual martial prowess, he would never have allowed Mok Gyeong-un to land a blow, but his acupoints were sealed, rendering him unable to circulate his internal energy, so he was helpless.

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un carefully laid the unconscious Mok Yu-cheon on the floor.

From his perspective, it might be infuriating, but it truly had nothing to do with him.

Whether Yeon Mok Sword Manor was ruined or they all died, it wasn't his concern.

It was the real Mok Gyeong-un's concern.

Also,

'It's a pity I was planning to use him as bait.'

That was the reason he tried to release Mok Yu-cheon's acupoints.

'Heaven and Earth Society.'

Mok Gyeong-un pondered as he looked down at Mok Yu-cheon.

If, as he said, this Ghost Blade was really in Heaven and Earth Society, it could be an opportunity.

But the risk was quite significant.

They were interested in the secret manual in his mind.

So there was a possibility they would mercilessly kill him after uncovering it.

'It's better to thoroughly prepare before approaching them.'

That was the rational choice.

With his current martial arts, a reckless approach could backfire.

Then shall I step out for now?

Mok Gyeong-un carefully walked to the door of the luggage carriage.

The four masked individuals guarding the surroundings had been temporarily rendered unconscious by Cheong-ryeong's technique, so he could just leave.

-Creak!

Mok Gyeong-un opened the door.

However,

-Gasp!

The moment he opened the door, he felt something strange, even if only for an instant.

As he hesitated, Cheong-ryeong appeared and said,

-Go northwest. Don't stop. I will deal with those monitoring you.

"Alright."

-Whoosh!

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un launched his body.

Although he had practiced the Light Body Technique for four days, this was the first time properly utilizing it.

The Light Body Technique can be basically divided into footwork and lightness skill.

Lightness skill is a running technique to move faster over long distances or close the gap.

-Pa-pa-pa-pa-pat!

As the death energy flowed through the Yongcheon (feet) acupoint, his body shot forward at great speed.

It was incomparable to normal running.

The surrounding scenery rapidly changed.

In just half a moment, he seemed to have traveled a considerable distance.

However,

-Mortal, why are you making that expression?

“It’s the same.”

-The same?

“It’s repeating.”

-Repeating?

-Tak!

Mok Gyeong-un stopped his lightness skill and pointed to a tree wrapped in vines, saying,

“I feel like I’m seeing that tree for the fourth time already.”

Cheong-ryeong, right beside him, frowned at his words.

Then she said,

-Are you sure you’re not mistaken?

“How could that be?”

-If it was some kind of sorcery or technique, I couldn’t have failed to notice.

“...That’s true.”

-It could be because you’re tense. Hurry.

With those words, Cheong-ryeong tried to move forward.

But Mok Gyeong-un didn't budge from his spot.

Cheong-ryeong became irritated.

-Why are you doing this again? If we don't hurry, we won't be able to escape this place.

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at Cheong-ryeong and spoke.

"You... Who are you?"

-What?

"I asked who you are."

She made a flabbergasted expression and said,

-Mortal, have you gone mad? Right now, to me, who...

-Swish!

Before she could finish speaking, Mok Gyeong-un reached out his hand.

It was the Art of Binding technique.

Cheong-ryeong's body was forcibly pulled, and before she knew it, her neck was offered up to Mok Gyeong-un's palm.

-Ack! Wh-what is this...

"You chose the wrong person to imitate. No, if you were going to do it, you should have done it properly."

If it was the real Cheong-ryeong, she would never have overlooked his comment about the tree being the same.

No, in the first place, someone of her high caliber wouldn't easily fall for such a thing.

-Mortal, you're making a mis-

"It doesn't seem to be a mistake."

The peculiar energy surging through his palm.

It was far from the unique death energy possessed by vengeful spirits.

And if it was Cheong-ryeong, she wouldn't have been pulled by the Art of Binding, but rather would have lightly flung him away.

-Wooooong!

At that moment, a bizarre occurrence unfolded.

Cheong-ryeong's body rippled, then scattered, revealing a wooden puppet in his palm.

The wooden puppet had a talisman attached that read "Wooden Fetching Spell[1]".

-Sizzle!

The talisman in his palm soon burned to ashes.

-Pa-pa-pak!

Mok Gyeong-un immediately clasped his hands together, forming the Immovable Mind Seal[2] mudra.

Then, closing his eyes, he chanted an incantation.

"....."

The scattering ashes flew off somewhere.

Then, swiftly circling the tree entwined with vines,

-Swish!

they were sucked into the tree.

Witnessing this, Mok Gyeong-un launched his body towards it.

-Whoosh!

He charged at the tree entwined with vines, and the moment he collided with it,

-Shhhh!

His field of vision changed, revealing a middle-aged man wearing an eye patch, diviner Jo, sitting on a large rock beside a bonfire.

There were ashes on his upper garment, which diviner Jo brushed off, then he smirked.

'Ha... Look at this fellow.'

Diviner Jo was sincerely impressed.

At Yeon Mok Sword Manor, he had confirmed that the fellow's talent was extraordinary.

However, he didn't have much faith in a martial family's disciple self-learning sorcery, so he took this opportunity to test Mok Gyeong-un with the Spirit Training Method and the Truth Seeking Technique.

Spirit Training Method

It is a technique that transforms a willow puppet into a target the opponent trusts or is close to.

By deceiving the opponent's five senses, it makes them perceive the willow puppet as someone imaginary, an advanced technique effective for gathering information by catching the opponent off guard.

Yet, this fellow not only saw through the fakery in just half a moment, but even escaped from the technique.

'To find the escape path like this...'

There is an orthodox method to finding the escape path in a technique.

But Mok Gyeong-un forcibly broke the Spirit Training Method, and in that instant, used the remnants of the talisman to find the Life Gate and his location through the Summoning Harmonization Technique, a tracking method.

'His adaptability is no joke.'

Such exceptional talent was truly hard to come by.

It was incomparable to the disciples he had accepted thus far.

diviner Jo raised the corners of his mouth and said to Mok Gyeong-un,

"You... become my disciple."

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"You... become my disciple."

'!?'

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes sharpened at diviner Jo's words.

He was already quite displeased from being manipulated by the technique earlier.

'Did he do something unnecessary?'

Mok Gyeong-un surveyed his surroundings, rolling his eyes.

No one was visible for now, and no unusual presences were detected.

Was it because of his confidence in handling things alone that he lured him here with the technique?

'Ten steps.'

With this distance, he seemed capable of subduing him.

He had become faster after learning the Light Body Technique.

And compared to martial artists, the physical abilities of sorcerers were significantly inferior.

'If I kill him before he uses sorcery...'

"There's no one around, so it's a misconception if you think you can do anything to me."

"..."

He wasn't as inattentive as expected.

But there was definitely no presence.

And he hadn't taken out any talismans or anything.

Trying once wouldn't hurt...

-Gasp!

Mok Gyeong-un hesitated.

The moment he slightly lifted his foot off the ground, he felt the surrounding energy distorting.

That strange energy when he let go of the carriage.

It was similar to that, but this time it was sharp like swinging a weapon.

"Quite sensitive, aren't you?"

A glint of interest flashed in diviner Jo's eyes.

Naturally, he had expected that if the fellow was smart, he would find a way to escape the technique.

That's why he had prepared in advance.

"To survive in this treacherous world, preparation must be thorough. That's the first lesson I'll give you."

"..."

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un surveyed his surroundings.

No talismans or anything like that were visible.

But why did he feel that ominous sensation the moment he tried to take a step?

Sorcery indeed had depths the more one delved into it.

Mok Gyeong-un looked at diviner Jo and spoke.

"...I never said I would become your disciple."

"Do you think you have a choice?"

"I can see you have a lot of interest in me, but I also have my own stance."

"Stance? Ha."

Diviner Jo scoffed.

Then he immediately took something out from his waist.

It was a wooden puppet with a talisman attached that read "Seal".

Diviner Jo tossed and caught it, saying,

"Don't you want to get this back?"

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head slightly.

Then, out of curiosity, he sent death energy into his eyes and looked at the wooden puppet, and it seemed like something was inside.

But the energy was barely detectable, making it difficult to notice without focusing.

“Have you already forgotten what you were trying to protect?”

“Don’t tell me that’s...”

“Yes, it is. Did you think I would leave such a dangerous thing there?”

“...”

“You’re an interesting fellow. Even among excellent sorcerers, few have taken a vengeful spirit as a familiar.”

Diviner Jo only realized it after sealing the evil spirit into the wooden puppet.

Not only did he self-learn sorcery, but he also took a vengeful spirit as a familiar, something even outstanding sorcerers struggled to do.

He was undoubtedly a talent that couldn’t be more desirable as a disciple.

“I don’t know how you did it, but if you obediently agree to become my disciple, I can return this to you.”

He thought it was a pretty good offer.

The fellow must have done considerable research of his own to take a vengeful spirit as a familiar.

So he believed he wouldn’t easily want to lose his servant ghost.

However,

“You don’t have to return it.”

“What?”

“It has already left my hands, so what can I do?”

“...Huh?”

Look at this guy.

He must have struggled a lot to make the vengeful spirit his servant ghost, but he’s giving it up so easily?

Is he deliberately putting on a strong front?

“Then you’re fine with me destroying this vengeful spirit?”

“Do as you wish.”

The complete lack of reluctance was absurd.

His thinking differs from ordinary sorcerers.

No, is it because he originally comes from a martial arts background?

“Hmm.”

If he destroyed this vengeful spirit as the fellow said, it would make him seem narrow-minded.

After all, a master’s capacity should appear vast.

Diviner Jo tossed the wooden puppet towards Mok Gyeong-un.

“Take it.”

-Tak!

“...Why are you giving it to me?”

“Do you think my capacity is so small that I would covet something belonging to a prospective disciple?”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un scoffed inwardly.

He desperately wants him as a disciple.

What should he do?

For now, there were three options.

Kill diviner Jo and escape, taking somewhat of a risk without knowing what trap there might be?

Or pretend to agree to be his disciple while dealing with him and escaping?

Lastly,

‘...Infiltrate Heaven and Earth Society by becoming his disciple, despite the danger.’

It was the riskiest among the three.

If he encountered the person who appeared back then, sensing his pursuit, he could definitely be killed before even taking revenge.

'The second option seems better after all.'

It was the most appealing method.

It was also the method he enjoyed using the most originally.

At that moment, diviner Jo spoke.

"If I were you, I wouldn't refuse the offer."

"Why?"

"Becoming my disciple would at least increase your chances of survival, so why hesitate?"

"..."

"Having arbitrarily learned the manor's secret manual, do you think you have a high probability of surviving if you go there? I think not. It's a place where your life hangs by a thread based on the sect leader or executives' moods. If you become my disciple, you can at least raise that probability."

"..."

Mok Gyeong-un showed no change in expression.

Seeing his reaction, diviner Jo clicked his tongue inwardly.

Is this approach ineffective with this fellow?

Well, he's someone who bargained with Bright Blade King while holding a sword to his own throat.

'Does he have no attachment to his life? Or is he thoroughly calculative?'

If it's the latter, the method needs to be changed.

diviner Jo clicked his tongue and said,

"You're the type to just break if I push too hard, I see. Fine, then how about this? Although you'll learn it anyway if you become my disciple, I'll teach you the sorcery to contain a familiar in a medium."

“...What does that mean?”

“It’s exactly as it sounds. Don’t you have a similar example in your hand right now?”

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un looked at the wooden puppet in his hand.

The wooden puppet with “Seal” written on it emitted no energy whatsoever.

Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes sparkled as he stared intently at it.

“Seems like you’re interested in this sort of thing.”

diviner Jo smirked.

He had thought the fellow would naturally show interest.

‘He would definitely need it if he wants to carry that vengeful spirit around intact.’

Otherwise, sorcerers would try to subdue it without knowing it’s a familiar whenever it’s noticed.

What Mok Gyeong-un needed right now was this sorcery, he believed.

And that prediction was spot on.

‘Concealing a familiar’s energy...’

Mok Gyeong-un was already seeking such a method.

It was a more appealing offer than the earlier mention of his life.

If there were outstanding sorcerers or supreme masters like Bright Blade King around, he couldn’t keep Cheong-ryeong or the evil spirit close.

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un’s interest, diviner Jo said,

“How about it? Are you inclined to become my disciple now?”

“If I become your disciple, I can learn what you just mentioned?”

“Of course.”

At this, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Then teach me that technique first. I will become your disciple then.”

“Teach you first? Hahahahaha! Teaching it is not difficult at all. But if you want to learn it, you have to swear an oath first.”

It wouldn't be that easy.

Mok Gyeong-un licked his lips slightly, having expected he wouldn't readily agree.

diviner Jo took out something else from his waist.

It was a small iron chain.

“Take it.”

-Swish!

-Clang!

Mok Gyeong-un caught it and looked puzzled.

Then diviner Jo said,

“Wear that on your wrist and say this: I, Mok Gyeong-un, will become Jo Ui-gong's disciple and follow his will.”

“...”

Suspicion clouded Mok Gyeong-un's eyes at those words.

“Wear this iron chain and say it?”

“Yes.”

“...It doesn't seem like you're just telling me to do it.”

“Of course not. How can I trust and simply accept as a disciple someone who tried to escape despite being practically a hostage?”

“Then what happens if I make that oath?”

The man, now revealed to be diviner Jo Ui-gong, answered with a smile.

“A restriction is imposed.”

“Restriction?”

“If you make that oath, you won't be able to harm me in any way. It's almost absolute.”

‘Of course, you’ll have no choice but to obligatorily follow my commands.’

When accepting a disciple he liked, diviner Jo Ui-gong would pass on this Oath Chain.

By staking one’s own self and swearing an oath through the Oath Chain, one becomes absolutely unable to refuse his orders.

But he didn’t mention that, knowing the fellow wouldn’t readily comply if he did.

‘How will he respond?’

But the fellow was so suspicious that he might not easily swear the oath.

While he was thinking that, Mok Gyeong-un put on the iron chain and spoke.

“Please keep your promise. I, Mok Gyeong-un, will become Jo Ui-gong’s disciple and follow his will.”

The moment those words ended,

The iron chain subtly shook and rattled.

Seeing this, Jo Ui-gong raised the corners of his mouth in satisfaction.

‘With this, I’ve got him.’

He was the type who had to obtain what he wanted to feel at ease.

Jo Ui-gong took out something folded in leather from his bosom.

“Take it.”

-Swish! Tak!

Mok Gyeong-un snatched it with one hand.

It was titled:

[Corpse Inquiry Secret Manual]

“What is this?”

“It’s a sorcery technique I created. Memorize it entirely and return it while we head back to Heaven and Earth Society.”

“...You’re not keeping your promise?”

“How could that be? The sorcery you want is also in there.”

“Thank you.”

“Call me Master.”

“Thank you, Master.”

Pleased with being called Master, diviner Jo Ui-gong got down from the rock he was leaning on, grasped his walking stick, and walked off somewhere.

Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Aren’t you going to release the technique you set up?”

If he didn’t undo it, he couldn’t even take a single step.

In response to this question, diviner Jo Ui-gong smiled and said,

“I’ll give you about an hour.”

“What?”

“The method to undo the sorcery is also in there, so look for it carefully. If you can’t find it and return within that time, quite an arduous situation will unfold. Hahahahaha!”

With those words, diviner Jo Ui-gong entered the forest to the southeast and disappeared.

Mok Gyeong-un let out a soft snicker.

Is he already trying to teach him?

‘Interesting.’

He didn’t care what method was used.

As long as he could extract what he needed, that was enough.

-Swish!

Not long after, someone lightly descended from the sky.

It was none other than Cheong-ryeong.

-The sorcerer has finally left your side.

Mok Gyeong-un looked at her with suspicion in his eyes.

“You’re not a fake, right?”

-Fake? What nonsense are you spouting? More importantly, it was amusing to see you caught in the sorcery, jumping in place alone. You should have done it a bit longer.

“It’s really you.”

-... On what basis are you so certain it’s really me?

“Well... There are reasons.”

Should he say it’s a feeling?

Cheong-ryeong asked Mok Gyeong-un.

-But why did you do such a thing, unlike your usual self?

“What thing?”

-I’m asking why you made such an oath when that chain seems to contain quite a strong curse.

“To obtain this.”

Mok Gyeong-un waved the Corpse Inquiry Secret Manual at her.

She snorted and said,

-You did that to get that sort of thing? Did you suddenly become stupid? Or are you confident you can escape that curse?

“There’s no need to escape or anything.”

-What?

Mok Gyeong-un casually removed the iron chain he had on his arm.

She frowned and asked,

-Is it originally that easy to take off?

“No. In the first place, an oath is something you have to swear by staking your own name.”

-Ha!

At those words, Cheong-ryeong finally understood why Mok Gyeong-un had made such an oath.

Mok Gyeong-un wasn't his real name in the first place.

Naturally, there was no way the oath would be established and a curse imposed.

'So that's how it is.'

That brat wouldn't do something detrimental just to learn sorcery.

-Since you got what you wanted, are you going to attempt to escape again?

"... I was considering it, but now I'm conflicted."

-Changed your mind?

"Yes. I'm thinking it might be better to enter the darkest place."

Although the risk was significant, in a way, it was the darkest place.

Cheong-ryeong showed a peculiar gaze at Mok Gyeong-un's words.

Mok Gyeong-un asked,

"Seems like you have something to say. I also had something I wanted to ask."

-What kind of sophistry is saying you have something to ask when you say I seem to have something to say?

"I mean I want to ask first."

-What is it?

"Why do they think it's real after seeing the sword techniques you showed, not the Eight Postures of Destruction?"

That was something he had been curious about.

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Cheong-ryeong closed her mouth.

-...

"Do you not want to tell me?"

-Phew.

She silently smoked her pipe and exhaled the smoke.

Usually, such a reaction meant she had no intention of telling him.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, if that’s the case, there’s nothing I can do.”

-...

“I need to take a look at this for now. That way, both the evil spirit and Cheong-ryeong can be by my side...”

-Are you really going there?

“What?”

-To Heaven and Earth Society.

At her somewhat serious question, Mok Gyeong-un recalled the gaze on the rooftop.

Those blood-red eyes seemed as if they would dye everything in blood.

But even now, that fury slightly shows.

“Depending on the situation.”

-... How coincidental.

“What is?”

-The situation.

“Hmm. What are you trying to say?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Cheong-ryeong exhaled a long puff of smoke and extended her hand to Mok Gyeong-un, saying,

-If you’re really going there, become my disciple.

“... Hm.”

Mok Gyeong-un scratched his head.

Today, he seemed to hear people telling him to become their disciple here and there.

He even heard it from Cheong-ryeong of all people.

“Uh... I don't know your reason for saying that, but there's no need for a master-disciple relationship between us...”

-The weight is different.

“What?”

-Becoming my disciple means you will bear the karma of the moon and carry out a bloody purge.

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-The weight is different.

“What?”

-Becoming my disciple means you will bear the karma of the moon and carry out a bloody purge.

‘A bloody purge?’

Cheong-ryeong's aura, brimming with murderous intent, was different from usual.

But thinking about it, she was a vengeful spirit.

Her resentment was so deep that she had existed in this world for over a hundred years.

Mok Gyeong-un opened his mouth while making eye contact with her.

“As I thought, you have a connection with Heaven and Earth Society.”

-... I won't deny that.

“But why are you talking about moon's karma and bloody purge when it comes to becoming your disciple?”

-It's exactly as you heard. I desire a price in blood.

“In simple terms, revenge.”

At those words, Cheong-ryeong took a long drag from her pipe as if displeased and exhaled the smoke into Mok Gyeong-un's face, saying,

-Phew. Though the weight may be different, if put in your terms, yes, it's revenge.

A glint of interest flashed in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes at her words.

It was due to the shared sentiment of revenge.

He too was wandering like this to avenge his grandfather.

However, unlike her, he would resolve this grudge while alive, not after death.

She said,

-What will you do? Will you become my disciple?

"Don't you think you should at least tell me why I need to become your disciple for me to decide whether to accept or not?"

-That's...

"That's?"

-No. If you're not going to Heaven and Earth Society, just forget what I said.

"... Seems like you have the ability to raise someone's interest and then make it fizzle out."

-Hmph. I wasn't saying it to pique your interest.

"..."

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at Cheong-ryeong.

In fact, Mok Gyeong-un had no interest whatsoever in other people's circumstances or stories.

Even if they shared the sentiment of revenge.

He had told Cheong-ryeong to share her circumstances, but it was merely to see if she could convince him why he should become her disciple.

"Can I ask you one thing?"

-If it's a question I can't answer, don't even bother asking in the first place.

“That’s up to you. Given Cheong-ryeong’s caliber, you must have died a very long time ago, so hasn’t time already taken revenge for you?”

Cheong-ryeong scoffed at Mok Gyeong-un’s words.

Then she asked,

-If it were you, would you just let your enemy go, thinking time will resolve everything?

“No.”

-Why not? Isn’t that what you were implying just now?

“... I got hit back.”

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders and continued,

“You’re right. If you’re going to take revenge, you have to see it through to the end. You can’t just leave everything related to that person alone.”

Family, relatives, everything precious must be taken away.

If one is going to take revenge, there’s no reason to consider circumstances or hold back.

At least, that was Mok Gyeong-un’s idea of revenge.

Cheong-ryeong opened her mouth, her red lips quivering.

-Our intentions align. I feel the same way. I can’t forgive that his despicable bloodline still breathes or that the truth is buried, insulting me. In that case, I’ll take everything away with my own hands. Even if it means staining everything with blood.

-Woooooong!

Mok Gyeong-un pointed his hand while looking around.

Perhaps due to her immense fury being unleashed, the surroundings were in chaos as if a storm was raging.

Even the surroundings were being dyed in a blood-red hue.

“Calm down.”

-...

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, she seemed to realize this and calmed herself.

Then the sudden changes in the surroundings stopped as if nothing had happened.

Witnessing this, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue inwardly.

If Cheong-ryeong was like this, how dangerous and powerful would a vengeful spirit of even higher caliber be?

He was curious.

But that wasn't what mattered now.

"Cheong-ryeong."

-Speak.

"Even if I'm not your disciple, couldn't we carry out your revenge together if the situation aligns?"

-No!

"What?"

-It only has meaning if you, a mortal, inherit the moon's karma.

"So what exactly is this moon's karma?"

-You will naturally find out if you go there as my disciple.

"You're stubborn. Then I just won't become your disciple."

-What?

A frown formed on Cheong-ryeong's beautiful brow.

She spoke in a voice filled with irritation.

-Then you won't go to Heaven and Earth Society?

"No. I'll go. I've decided to go."

-Then why!

A resounding cry rang in his ears, and Mok Gyeong-un furrowed his brow.

Cheong-ryeong wanted to forcefully have her way, but she couldn't due to the relationship between a familiar and its master.

It was truly an annoying relationship.

Because of this, she was restrained and unable to do anything.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"Sorry, but I don't like being controlled by someone. That applies even to you, whom I currently trust to some extent."

-... Annoying.

"Still, there's no other way..."

-I said it's annoying!

Cheong-ryeong shouted, her hands trembling.

She was furious at the reality of being a young brat's familiar and being manipulated.

She had barely escaped from being sealed and possessed the caliber to move freely, not just as a ground-bound spirit, but what was this?

She wanted to kill him and vent her frustration.

But if she did that, the hundred years she had endured, ruminating on her grudge, would become meaningless.

'Damn that stubborn mortal!'

It was frustrating that that boy hadn't even lived half of a hundred years.

After glaring at Mok Gyeong-un for a long time, she opened her mouth.

-Fine. Let me at least tell you this. I don't know the current situation, but originally, Heaven and Earth Society was born from three lineages.

"Three lineages?"

-One of them is the Moon Lineage.

"... And Cheong-ryeong is a person from that Moon Lineage?"

He's quick-witted, at least.

Cheong-ryeong didn't deny it.

-This is all I can tell you for now. Since a hundred years have passed anyway, it's meaningless to investigate what happened back then. Not everything from that era will remain the same, so you just need to inherit the moon's karma.

She stared intently into Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

With other humans, she could tell what they were thinking just by looking at their eyes or expressions, but she couldn't figure out what this particular mortal was thinking.

She wasn't sure if his emotions other than anger were genuine.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un readily said,

"Alright."

-Phew. Your stubbornness is really... What?

"I said I'll learn from you."

-You'll become my disciple?

"Yes. But I have a condition."

-... What condition?

"Let's just skip the formalities of calling each other master and disciple."

-Presumptuous mortal.

"Even if you're my servant ghost, I don't call you master either."

-...

She clicked her tongue at Mok Gyeong-un but soon nodded.

Well, it didn't matter anyway.

Normally, as the one receiving martial arts instruction, it would be proper to clarify the master-disciple relationship, but she was already dead.

What meaning did etiquette and morality in this world hold?

-Tsk tsk.

Seeing her like this, Mok Gyeong-un faintly smiled.

In fact, if he was going to Heaven and Earth Society anyway, he was in a position where he needed to learn the remaining techniques of her swordsmanship and the essentials of qi circulation from her.

If anything, he was the one who needed to make the request.

-Why are you nitpicking?

“It’s nothing. More importantly, we need to hurry.”

-What do you mean?

“It’s difficult to keep doing this here.”

Mok Gyeong-un opened the Corpse Inquiry Secret Manual he was holding.

He needed to undo the technique so he could lift his feet within an hour, and he also needed to grasp the sorcery to conceal Cheong-ryeong’s energy.

Half a moment before an hour passed.

The surroundings were hectic.

The masked individuals who had been absent were returning one by one.

‘Hmm.’

Diviner Jo Ui-gong looked towards the northwestern forest with slightly disappointed eyes.

It was taking longer than expected.

In fact, an hour wasn’t that long.

Because even for a designated technique, grasping sorcery within an hour was quite difficult.

In this situation where he had to find what technique it was within the Corpse Inquiry Secret Manual, it was quite pressing.

‘I thought it might be possible.’

If he failed, the given situation might have been more difficult than he anticipated.

Then there was no choice.

He would have to personally go and undo the technique for him.

It was at that moment.

'!?'

A figure walking out of the dark forest was seen.

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

“What?”

“How did this fellow...?”

The masked individuals who spotted Mok Gyeong-un were surprised to see him outside the luggage carriage and tried to subdue him again.

Diviner Jo Ui-gong stopped them.

“Halt.”

“But...”

“That child is now my disciple. I merely had him train for a bit.”

“What?”

The masked individuals glanced at Mok Gyeong-un and diviner Jo Ui-gong with slightly surprised eyes.

They seemed taken aback, not expecting him to really accept him as a disciple.

However, diviner Jo was their superior, and they couldn't disobey him, so they soon returned to their positions.

Diviner Jo said to Mok Gyeong-un, who was looking around.

“You're later than expected.”

No, in fact, it was beyond expectations.

He had really found and undone the technique within an hour.

However, having accepted him as a disciple, he intended to refrain from praise as much as possible.

Mok Gyeong-un slightly bowed his head and replied,

“If I’m late, I apologize... Master.”

“I have expectations for you, so don’t disappoint me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Anyway, undoing the technique must have consumed a lot of mental strength, so rest for a bit. We’ll depart as soon as Bright Blade King arrives.”

“Understood.”

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un looked around.

But he had been curious about something for a while.

The masked individuals had brought in pairs of boys who looked around 15 to 18 years old.

They all had hoods covering their faces, so he couldn’t see in front of them.

Mok Gyeong-un asked in a low voice,

“Who are they?”

In response to that question, diviner Jo Ui-gong chuckled and replied,

“They are new recruits gathered by each faction.”

“New recruits?”

“Since we’re here anyway, you can consider it killing two birds with one stone.”

It was difficult to understand what he was saying.

In the first place, he seemed to be deliberately vague about it.

“You’ll find out later, so there’s no need to be interested in such things now. From now on, you’ll ride in my carriage with me, so go and rest there in advance.”

He pointed to a clean-looking carriage, not a luggage carriage.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un shook his head and said,

“I apologize, Master. Is it alright if I just ride in the luggage carriage I was originally in for a while?”

“What?”

Diviner Jo Ui-gong made a puzzled expression but soon spoke as if he understood.

“Ah. Is it because of your younger brother?”

Of course not, but Mok Gyeong-un nodded as if it was.

Jo Ui-gong clicked his tongue at him and said,

“You’re unnecessarily bringing hardship upon yourself. If you change your mind, switch to my carriage.”

“Understood.”

“Ah. And I’m warning you, but this time you were able to leave because I intended it, but don’t even dream of trying to help your younger brother escape or anything like that. If you do something needless, you’ll witness Yeon Mok Sword Manor being annihilated.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Since I’ve become your disciple, such a thing won’t happen.”

“Of course it shouldn’t.”

Diviner Jo Ui-gong grinned.

Anyway, since he was wearing the Oath Chain, he wouldn’t be able to disobey his orders.

Mok Gyeong-un said to him, who was smiling,

“Master, is it possible for you to send away the person monitoring inside the luggage carriage with your authority?”

“That’s…”

“If it’s difficult even with Master’s authority, it’s fine. I just wanted to quietly memorize this while inside the carriage.”

Mok Gyeong-un spoke, holding up the Corpse Inquiry Secret Manual.

At his words, diviner Jo Ui-gong, who was about to refuse, soon nodded.

It was because the former part of what he said bothered him more than the latter.

“Do you think I lack even that much authority? Alright.”

“Thank you.”

“But don’t do anything that might arouse suspicion. Even if you’ve become my disciple, it won’t be good to provoke Bright Blade King.”

“Understood.”

The corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth slightly rose as he bowed his head in gratitude.

Mok Gyeong-un entered the luggage carriage, closed the door, and took out something from his bosom.

It was a small wooden puppet the size of a finger, shaped like a person, with the character “Connect” engraved on it.

Mok Gyeong-un smiled and whispered softly,

“It’s a success.”

-... Success or whatever, I’m suffocating. Being trapped in this damn wooden puppet.

The voice coming from the wooden puppet was none other than Cheong-ryeong.

Mok Gyeong-un had successfully concealed her energy.

If diviner Jo Ui-gong found out that he had not only undone the technique within an hour but also roughly grasped this technique, he would have been astonished.

He thought Mok Gyeong-un had barely undone the technique and came out.

Mok Gyeong-un placed the wooden puppet on his palm and said,

“Just bear with it for a bit.”

If she came out of this, the unique energy of a vengeful spirit would be revealed.

It wouldn’t be good for diviner Jo Ui-gong to notice.

At that moment, the wooden puppet trembled and moved on its own, wriggling on Mok Gyeong-un’s palm.

Then a grumbling voice came out.

-Now I've even possessed this damn wooden puppet. You have no idea how difficult this is, you mortal.

The method Jo Ui-gong had taught was none other than possessing a medium.

It was a technique similar to sealing.

So Cheong-ryeong couldn't exert any power inside this wooden puppet... or so he thought, but that wasn't the case.

The evil spirit was unable to, but she could break the wooden puppet and come out at will.

It seemed to be due to the difference in caliber.

"Be careful. It cracked again."

-How much more careful can I be here? Even a decent physical body can't endure this body of mine.

"That's true."

It was enduring thanks to the technique that controlled her energy.

Otherwise, the wooden puppet would have shattered long ago.

Cheong-ryeong, now a wooden puppet, sat on his palm and said,

-But if this technique is used well, it seems I can somehow endure even in a weak body.

That was the one thing she found consoling.

"Yes. So please bear with it for a bit. Once we get there, I'll have you enter a suitable body."

-Alright.

"Anyway, I've secured a decent training place until we reach there.

He hadn't had high expectations, but securing the inside of the luggage carriage was quite a gain.

Otherwise, it would have been difficult to do anything.

At least while traveling, the conditions were set for him to quietly receive that sword art from Cheong-ryeong and practice the reverse qi circulation technique.

-But what are you going to do with that fellow?

-Kek kek kek!

Cheong-ryeong moved the clumsy hand of the wooden puppet and pointed at someone.

It was Mok Yu-cheon, who was still unconscious.

Mok Gyeong-un approached him, tied the loosened cloth to cover his eyes, and then,

-Ta-ta-ta-tak!

he struck the mute acupoint again.

With this, Mok Yu-cheon returned to his original state.

“Keeping him like this will keep him quiet, right?”

-... You're really something else.

Chapter 54

In a dark forest.

A woman with an enchanting appearance, wearing a bamboo hat, was hanging from the top of a tree, gazing in a certain direction.

A very faint light could be seen in the distance.

About a hundred jang away, that place was the campsite of Heaven and Earth Society.

'shit. What am I doing?'

Grumbling inwardly, her identity was Ha Chae-rin, a candidate for the sect leader of Flying Killing.

No, it was Guard Go Chan, who had possessed Ha Chae-rin's body.

He had been tracking Mok Gyeong-un ever since he was practically kidnapped after being immobilized by Bright Blade King.

Normally, when tracking, one would get closer than this, but due to the monstrous master Bright Blade King, he maintained this distance out of fear of getting too close and being discovered.

‘At least I can follow since I roughly know the location.’

The problem lay elsewhere.

As a familiar, he was connected, so he could instinctively sense where Mok Gyeong-un was.

However, there was no way to get close.

In fact, if it weren’t for being a familiar, it would have been the perfect opportunity to distance himself from Mok Gyeong-un, but the farther he got, the more strangely anxious he became, making it impossible to escape.

No, it was impossible from the beginning.

Because if Mok Gyeong-un died, he too would be annihilated.

‘Phew. How did it come to this?’

Even he found his predicament ridiculous.

He had retired due to lack of talent and aimed to live quietly, but not only did he die absurdly, but now he was trapped in this wench’s body, serving as a slave.

‘I’m so unlucky.’

It would be difficult to have such a wretched fate.

Anyway, to remain in this world even a little longer, he had no choice but to serve Mok Gyeong-un well.

‘I need to find a way to infiltrate somehow.’

For now, he was doing this while keeping an eye on Bright Blade King, but he couldn’t just keep following at a distance.

He needed a way to naturally infiltrate Heaven and Earth Society.

‘Right. Instead of continuing like this, I should find that method first.’

He was a former assassin, after all.

He was experienced in infiltrating places.

And if he delved into Ha Chae-rin's memories, there was an infiltration method he had never tried before.

'Seduction?... My ass.'

He shuddered as he unnecessarily recalled a memory.

No matter what, he wanted to maintain his last shred of self-respect.

-Thud thud!

Half a month passed like that.

The method of travel was repetitive.

Every other day, they would pass through somewhere, and each time, the masked individuals would bring boys aged 15 to 18.

Repeating this, the number of people had already swelled to over a hundred.

Curious as to why they were doing this, he asked diviner Jo Ui-gong a couple of times, but the answer he received was that it wasn't something for him to be concerned about.

"Why would that be?"

At Mok Gyeong-un's question, a voice rang out from the wooden puppet on his shoulder.

-I don't know.

"Didn't you say you were in Heaven and Earth Society?"

-It's been a hundred years since I left. How would I know how the organization operates now?

She also found it difficult to understand why.

There was one speculation, but the method was quite strange.

She wondered if there was a need to bring in manpower in this way.

“I keep feeling like the way you speak sometimes makes it sound like Heaven and Earth Society belonged to you.”

-...

“You’re not denying it?”

-Nonsense.

Cheong-ryeong strangely disliked talking about the past.

Was it because even recalling memories made her angry?

Or was there something she wanted to hide?

Mok Gyeong-un found this strange, but it was only for a fleeting moment, and he soon erased that question from his mind.

What mattered was from now on.

“We’ll be arriving soon.”

-Why are you getting nervous?

“I don’t know.”

-It’s good to be nervous. Even if you learned the sword techniques of the Moon Lineage from me, at your level, you’re barely at the threshold of first-rate at best.

The beginning of first-rate.

That was Mok Gyeong-un’s current martial arts level.

Just half a month ago, he was barely at the threshold of going from third-rate to second-rate.

However, by absorbing and internalizing a significant amount of death energy gained from the fight at Yeon Mok Sword Manor, he formed a danjeon equivalent to half a gap.

In terms of internal energy alone, he had reached first-rate.

If others knew about this, it would be a shocking event.

In fact, although she was talking about it casually, Cheong-ryeong was also quite surprised.

'It can't be attributed to luck alone.'

Even though he had encountered the Postures of Thought Destruction, known as the supreme secret manual, and various situations that were almost predestined, it was hard to deny that he was remarkable.

Reaching the beginning of first-rate in less than a month after starting to learn martial arts was truly astonishing.

Perhaps because he started late, martial fortune followed him.

'But he still has a long way to go.'

Even if he had grown at an amazingly fast pace, the situation remained unfavorable.

Considering that even when she was alive, there were quite a few masters above first-rate in Heaven and Earth Society, there might be even more now.

With Mok Gyeong-un's current skill level, forget about avenging his grandfather, it was impossible to even carry on the moon's karma.

'He needs to become stronger faster.'

To do that, there was a need to push him even harder.

From first-rate onward was the realm of enlightenment.

If he couldn't gain enlightenment, it could take a year or even a decade to advance further, and if he was unlucky, he could remain stagnant for life.

At a glance, there were countless mountain peaks, and a river like a single vein of blood flowed between them.

The place below the setting sun was quite spectacular.

With the river as a base, the mountain peaks formed natural fortifications, creating a large city.

This was the base of Heaven and Earth Society, which currently held a third of the power in the martial world of the Central Plains.

The inner city located in the center of the city.

-Creak!

As the city gate opened, a large-statured man riding a horse like a victorious general entered, and the warriors lined up in two rows from the inner city cheered.

“Woooooah!!!!”

The man at the forefront was Son Yun, one of the Five Kings of Heaven and Earth Society, known as Bright Blade King.

Behind him followed a procession of about three hundred people.

The men in black attire were the warriors of Heaven and Earth Society, and about a hundred were the boys they had brought this time.

Startled by the cheers, the boys trembled and took one step forward at a time.

The procession passed through the main road of the inner city and led to a wide square.

‘Hoh.’

A glint of interest flashed in the eyes of Bright Blade King Son Yun, who arrived first at the forefront.

It was because an unexpected person was waiting.

-Tap!

Son Yun lightly descended from his horse.

And he performed a fist-palm salute to someone waiting.

“Bright Blade King Son Yun pays his respects to Vice Leader Mong.”

In response to that greeting, a man who appeared to be in his early forties with snake-like eyes, white hair, and no beard, reciprocated with a fist-palm salute and said,

“You must have had a tough journey, Bright Blade King.”

The man responding was none other than Mong Seo-cheon, the second-in-command of Heaven and Earth Society.

It was quite rare for the vice leader to come out and greet him personally, even if Son Yun was one of the Five Kings.

Son Yun laughed heartily and replied,

“Hahahahaha! What hardship could there be? I just went out to get some fresh air after a long time.”

“It was a mission that could have been dangerous, as you had to cross the territory of the Righteous Alliance, yet only Bright Blade King would say he went out for fresh air.”

“Anyone who sees this might think I’ve returned victorious from a war. Let’s end the formalities here. Where is the leader?”

He had to report since he was given a special mission.

At that question, Vice Leader Mong let out a soft sigh and opened his mouth.

“Bright Blade King. That’s precisely why I came out personally to urgently convey the leader’s order.”

“Urgently convey an order? What do you mean?”

Bright Blade King Son Yun asked, puzzled.

He had even sent a messenger pigeon to inform them of the general situation, so he didn’t know what this was about.

Vice Leader Mong said to him in a whispering voice,

“The leader has ordered to send everyone you brought, without exception, to the Corpse Blood Valley immediately.”

“That’s quick. Well, that’s why I brought them anyway...”

“Not just them.”

“What?”

“The leader said to also send the child from Yeon Mok Sword Manor who allegedly learned that thing and the child you brought as a hostage to the Corpse Blood Valley.”

‘!?’

At those words, Bright Blade King Son Yun frowned and said,

“... What does that mean? Did he really give that order?”

“Yes.”

At the firm answer, Son Yun was momentarily at a loss for words.

Although he couldn't retrieve the secret manual itself, for the first time in a hundred years, someone had appeared who read that cursed manual and learned the sword techniques of the Moon Lineage, whose lineage had been severed.

Yet he was told to send him to the Corpse Blood Valley without even verifying it?

"That can't be. I will go and see the leader right away."

"You can't meet the leader now."

"What are you saying? This is an order directly given by the leader. In that case, he should at least extract the oral secrets from the boy's mind before sending him, this is..."

"Bright Blade King. He said it was an order given with the leader's authority."

"... Ha!"

Bright Blade King Son Yun was genuinely at a loss.

However, the leader's orders were absolute.

-Thud!

Someone roughly opened the door of the luggage carriage and entered.

It was none other than diviner Jo Ui-gong.

Mok Gyeong-un said,

"We've arrived..."

"Things have gotten complicated."

"What?"

At Jo Ui-gong's sudden words, Mok Gyeong-un asked back, puzzled.

"What do you mean things have gotten complicated?"

In response to that question, Jo Ui-gong replied in a somewhat absurd tone,

"The leader has ordered to send you to the Corpse Blood Valley."

“Corpse Blood Valley?”

“Hah... For such a ridiculous situation to unfold.”

“... I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“There's no time. First, take this.”

What Jo Ui-gong took out from his bosom and handed over was a ring with tiny letters engraved on it.

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes sparkled upon seeing the letters engraved on the ring.

They were incantations used for specific talismans.

“You can perform sorcery with hand seals for a few things engraved here even without talismans.”

“How do I...”

“Listen carefully. The probability of surviving intact in the Corpse Blood Valley is less than one in ten.”

“What does that mean?”

“Survive somehow. I will report to the branch leader and get you out of there no matter what, so endure at all costs.”

“By endure, you mean...”

It was at that moment.

“This is as far as you go.”

-Rumble rumble!

Before Mok Gyeong-un's words could finish, warriors wearing red belts and red headbands barged into the luggage carriage.

“You!”

Mok Yu-cheon, who had regained consciousness, glared at Mok Gyeong-un.

He had been unconscious for half a month, with his fainting acupoint struck except for two meals a day and one chance to relieve himself.

Naturally, he couldn't help but be angry at Mok Gyeong-un, who had done such a thing.

"What have you done to me..."

-Thwack!

"Ugh!"

However, he couldn't say anything due to a warrior striking him from behind with a staff.

Although the fainting acupoint, mute acupoint, and paralysis acupoint were released, he couldn't even resist because a needle called the Forbidden Gate Lock was inserted into his six major acupoints, sealing his internal energy.

"Hey. Shut up and walk."

"..."

Mok Yu-cheon, who had been twitching his lips in displeasure, soon closed his mouth and obeyed the order.

For now, he had no choice but to follow their commands.

'shit.'

He didn't know what kind of humiliation this was as soon as he woke up.

Is this how Heaven and Earth Society treats hostages?

He was walking in a single line on a dark and narrow sloping path, following the person in front, and it felt like being captured as a prisoner and going to perform forced labor.

'What are they trying to do?'

Unlike the confused Mok Yu-cheon, Mok Gyeong-un was exceptionally calm.

It was also because he already knew something had gone wrong due to diviner Jo Uigong's warning.

'What is the Corpse Blood Valley?'

For now, that was the only question he had.

What were they doing that they even inserted the Forbidden Gate Lock and sent them there?

Even Cheong-ryeong didn't know what the Corpse Blood Valley was.

With that question in mind, they walked for about three hours without rest, and soon a wide and shallow valley with torches lit on all sides came into view.

'Were there this many?'

Countless boys were waiting there, lined up in rows.

With the addition of the hundred or so people, including Mok Gyeong-un and Mok Yu-cheon, there seemed to be roughly eight hundred at a glance.

As they arrived like that, a resounding voice rang out.

"Welcome to the Corpse Blood Valley."

Everyone's gaze turned in that direction.

There was a large incense burner and a huge rock.

On top of that rock stood a man wearing a gray demon mask, with his hands behind his back, looking arrogant.

As everyone looked, the demon mask opened his mouth.

"From now on, there is something you must do."

With those words, he took something out from his bosom.

It was none other than an iron ball that seemed to be the size of a finger joint.

'What is it?'

'What are they trying to do?'

As everyone wondered what it was, the demon mask said,

"The designated time is two hours. In the valley water, there are iron balls that look similar to this. Find them and come to this large incense burner. Those who fail to find them will die."

'!!!!!!'

Chapter 55

Heaven and Earth Society.

Two people were walking side by side on a path surrounded by a wall leading to the main building.

They were Bright Blade King Son Yun, one of the eight executives of Heaven and Earth Society and one of the Five Kings, and diviner Jo Ui-gong.

While walking, Jo Ui-gong spoke as if frustrated.

“I should have told the vice leader that I accepted him as my disciple.”

At his words, Bright Blade King Son Yun clicked his tongue and replied,

“It’s no use even if you tell him.”

“Why is that?”

“Have you ever seen the leader withdraw an order once given?”

“...”

At those words, diviner Jo Ui-gong couldn’t open his mouth.

As Son Yun said, the leader never took back an order once given, and sometimes even punished severely if it couldn’t be carried out.

Considering that, persuasion was unlikely to work.

“Tsk... I thought I had finally found a useful fellow.”

“Is he even useful?”

He was the first to read that cursed secret manual.

How many people had died trying to read it?

Moreover, he learned the sword techniques of the Moon Lineage that had been severed a hundred years ago, yet they sent such a fellow to the Corpse Blood Valley without even seeing his face.

This was an incomprehensible decision, no matter how much the leader did it.

The Corpse Blood Valley is a place where nearly 8 or 9 out of 10 people die, even though each faction sends somewhat useful fellows.

It wasn't called by a name meaning corpses and blood for nothing.

"I'll have to ask the valley master to report it for now. I can't just let that precious fellow die like this."

At those words, Son Yun looked at Jo Ui-gong with interested eyes.

He wouldn't say this unless he really liked him.

He too found the fellow to be a waste.

If they persuaded him properly and made him an ally or extracted the sword techniques from his mind and revived the Moon Lineage, it would be good, so why not do that?

Why send him to the Corpse Blood Valley, which could be considered the worst selection process...

'Could it be?'

Bright Blade King Son Yun's eyes narrowed.

Could the reason for sending him to the Corpse Blood Valley be that?

'Are they trying to test him?'

Corpse Blood Valley.

"The designated time is two hours. In the valley water, there are iron balls that look similar to this. Find them and come to this large incense burner. Those who fail to find them will die."

-Murmur murmur!

At the words of the man wearing the demon mask, the boys stirred.

It was the middle of the night now.

Although warriors wearing red belts were holding torches here and there, there was no way the inside of the valley water would be properly visible.

In this dark place filled with countless pebbles, finding that small iron ball?

It was literally like finding a needle in a sand beach.

At that moment, a boy who appeared to be around 17 years old, standing in the front row, raised his hand and spoke.

“Isn’t it too harsh to kill someone for failing to find a mere iron ball? Everyone here has been recruited from each faction, so even if that’s the case...”

“Do you not want to do it?”

The demon mask interrupted and asked.

The boy hesitated with a tense expression and soon said,

“The selection process doesn’t seem to be about finding or not finding the iron ball...”

-Smack! Thud!

“Ugh!”

At that moment, before he could even finish speaking, the boy’s dying scream was heard as he collapsed on the ground.

‘!!!!!!’

Those next to him couldn’t hide their bewilderment upon seeing this.

That’s because the iron ball was deeply embedded in the boy’s brow, and it seemed he had died instantly because of it.

As they were taken aback, the demon mask spoke in a loud voice.

“Those who question the orders or give up will also die.”

The murmuring sound instantly turned into silence.

Everyone realized the reality now that someone had lost their life.

‘These crazy bastards.’

Mok Yu-cheon cursed inwardly.

It was absurd to suddenly order such a thing, but die if you can’t find the iron ball?

He had come as a hostage for the sake of his family.

Yet he didn't know what kind of nonsense this was for someone like him.

'If only they hadn't blocked my qi channels...'

If he could focus his inner vision, he might have found it more easily.

But with his internal energy sealed, this was literally an act of bringing hardship upon oneself.

While he was thinking that, the demon mask spoke.

"By the way, there aren't as many iron balls in the valley as there are people here. So you better hurry."

'!?'

There aren't as many iron balls as the number of people here?

Everyone couldn't hide their bewilderment.

Doesn't that mean some of them will definitely die?

"The moment the incense stick burns out is the two-hour mark. Light it."

At the demon mask's order, one of the warriors in red belts waiting next to the large incense burner lit an incense stick.

-Sizzle!

Then the boys who had been murmuring and not knowing what to do rushed toward the valley all at once.

With eight hundred people running at once, the ground shook for a moment.

Everyone seemed to have their qi channels blocked, as no one used lightness skills.

At least it could be considered a fair situation.

"shit!"

Seeing this, Mok Yu-cheon glared at Mok Gyeong-un but soon ran like the other boys.

-Splash! Splash!

There was no other way in the current situation.

He had to find the iron ball first.

Otherwise, he would die.

Mok Yu-cheon, who had entered the valley following the other boys, looked down.

'shit...'

How was he supposed to find this?

It was dark.

No, he could barely see the ripples of the water, and he couldn't see what was inside the water.

Finding it with the naked eye was impossible.

-Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pak!

"Ugh! Where the hell is it?"

"Aaaah!"

Frustrated voices of the boys could be heard here and there.

They too couldn't see inside the water, so it seemed they were digging through the pebbles in the valley water with their hands to find it.

Naturally, as a result,

"Argh!"

"M-my hand..."

Their hands were bound to get injured.

Some even broke their fingernails while recklessly flipping over rocks.

If they protected their hands with internal energy, such things would be rare, but it was natural to get hurt with bare hands.

-Swish!

Mok Yu-cheon's fingers also hurt from being scratched by sharp rocks and pebbles.

But there was no other way.

There was no way to find the iron ball other than using his hands.

What if he couldn't find it within an hour?

-Thump thump!

As he became anxious, his heart raced.

He had never experienced this kind of tension in his life.

Then, Mok Yu-cheon turned his head slightly and made an absurd expression.

'What is that guy doing?'

Everyone was busy jumping into the valley water to search.

But that bastard Mok Gyeong-un was just watching with his arms crossed.

He was acting as if it was someone else's business.

'Crazy bastard.'

Instead of coming into the valley and checking what's inside, what the is he doing over there?

Has he gone mad wanting to die?

Mok Yu-cheon, who found it ridiculous, soon turned his gaze away.

Whether they were half-brothers or not, if he couldn't find his share of the iron ball now, he would die.

-Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pak!

While everyone was frantically digging through the valley water like this, the incense stick had already burned down nearly halfway.

The two hours were almost up.

Now only half the time remained.

It was at that moment.

"Put it out."

With a shout, the warriors in red belts holding torches between the valley water threw the torches into the water, extinguishing them.

It was already dark, but with the torches on the water gone, it became difficult to even see the people around.

“shit!”

“How are we supposed to find it?”

Complaints erupted from here and there.

But even as they screamed like that, they didn't take their hands out of the water.

Because if they didn't find it, they would lose their lives.

“Valley Master. This time, more than half might be weeded out.”

A middle-aged warrior next to the demon mask whispered.

That's because no one had found it even as the two hours were almost up.

Until now, there would be one or two people who found the iron ball within two hours in each group, but this time, there was no one.

“Seems like there aren't many tough ones.”

The one called Valley Master, the demon mask, nodded in agreement.

It might be the least number of people selected in history.

By now, one or two people should have found the iron ball and brought it, making the rest more anxious and focus on their senses like crazy.

This was a gateway to stimulate the five senses and survival instincts.

Those who were eliminated here were worthless beings with no value to survive.

‘The Esoteric Realm Gate[1], Vermilion Slaughter Valley[2], and Demon Fire Hall[3] said they sent talented individuals, but they seem to be nothing more than trash compared to what I expected.’

While he was thinking that, it happened.

“I found it!”

Finally, the first person to find the iron ball among this group appeared.

It was an 18-year-old boy, and although the hand holding the iron ball was covered in blood and a mess, he was smiling brightly, showing how happy he was.

Seeing the boy like this, those around him couldn't hide their envy.

But soon, as if realizing there was no time, they dug through the pebbles in the water even more.

-Splash! Splash!

“Huff huff...”

Somewhat tired, the boy who found the iron ball walked towards the shore, exhaling rough breaths.

‘I did it. I did it.’

To have such luck.

Not only did he survive, but he was the first to find it.

With this, he could make a good impression.

It was at that moment when he was feeling good.

-Splash splash!

The sound of someone running from behind was heard.

Looking back, a burly-looking boy was running towards him.

“Hand it over!”

He targeted him so blatantly.

It seemed he was trying to snatch it before he got out of the water.

There was bound to be one or two of these bastards.

‘shit!’

The boy was tired but ran like crazy.

Even after getting out of the water, the burly-looking boy showed no intention of giving up and shouted as he ran.

“You bastard! If I catch you, I’ll beat you to a pulp!”

-Pa-pa-pa-pa-pak!

The guy was not only big but also too fast.

He didn’t expect him to close the distance this much.

If he was really caught, the iron ball he had worked so hard to find would be snatched away by that guy.

The boy turned his head slightly and tried to run with all his remaining strength.

However,

‘!?’

What?

When did this guy get in front of him?

Was there someone who didn’t enter the valley?

The startled boy tried to change direction, but at that moment,

-Pak!

the boy who was in front of him rushed towards him at a tremendous speed.

He was so fast that he was caught before he could even change direction.

‘This damn bastard!’

Their internal energy should be sealed too, so how can he be this fast?

It was literally a situation of being caught between a rock and a hard place.

Enemies in front and back.

As the situation became urgent, the boy made an unexpected choice.

‘You think I’ll let scum like you snatch this?’

The boy put the iron ball he was holding into his mouth right there and gulped it down.

The burly boy who saw this from behind shouted in frustration.

“You son of a bitch!”

This way, it couldn't be snatched away.

The boy grinned.

However,

“You're really troublesome.”

-Pak!

“Huh?”

The boy's head was grabbed by two hands.

Then,

-Crack!

at that moment, his neck was twisted.

The boy, with his neck broken, died on the spot without even being able to scream.

‘!?’

The burly-looking boy who had chased him up to five steps behind couldn't hide his bewilderment.

He too had intended to snatch the iron ball, but he hadn't planned to kill the boy in front of him.

Yet such a thing had happened right before his eyes.

But what was even more shocking was,

-Squelch!

‘!!!!!!!’

not only did he kill the boy, but he also ripped out the boy's throat with his bare hands.

And then, forcibly shoving his hand below the neck,

-Urk! Splat!

he took out the iron ball the dead boy had swallowed.

The blood-soaked hand and iron ball.

-Drip drip!

Blood stained the ground.

'T-this crazy...'

The moment he saw this, the burly-looking boy was at a loss for words.

What kind of guy is this?

While he was taken aback, the beautiful boy, no, Mok Gyeong-un, turned his head, shook his blood-soaked hand once on the ground, and opened his mouth.

"Why? Do you want it?"

-Shudder!

At that question, the burly-looking boy shook his head like crazy.

He had made eye contact with the guy, and it felt like his heart would burst, and his legs went weak, as if he would collapse at any moment.

Chapter 56

There is a saying that if you lose your momentum, it's over.

The burly-looking boy had his momentum completely crushed by Mok Gyeong-un's cruel hands and couldn't even think of attacking.

No, it would be more accurate to say he felt fear and terror.

To this boy, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile,

"If you don't hurry, you won't be able to find this."

Mok Gyeong-un shook the blood-soaked iron ball.

Seeing this, the burly-looking boy seemed to have a moment of realization and tried to turn his body and run towards the valley.

However, his legs soon gave out, and he fell.

After falling a few times like that, the boy barely managed to muster strength and enter the valley.

-Splash splash!

But he wasn't the only boy turning his body like this.

About three boys were returning to the valley with startled faces, and they too had aimed for the first iron ball like the burly boy.

However, they also became terrified of Mok Gyeong-un.

'... He's completely crazy.'

'No matter what, this is too much.'

'He killed without hesitation to snatch it just to survive.'

Moreover, the way he killed was enough to make one click their tongue.

A fear was etched that if they attacked recklessly, they too might end up like that.

"Ah..."

There was someone who let out an exclamation while watching this scene.

He was the man in the demon mask called Valley Master by the warriors in red belts.

A warrior next to the demon mask said to him,

"... Looks like we've got a real piece here."

"Indeed."

"I don't think I've ever seen it progress like this before. The real weeding out should have started with that one iron ball."

This wasn't simply about who found the iron ball first.

Making the number of iron balls less than the number of people and extinguishing the torches were all calculated actions.

The first iron ball was the signal flare for the weeding out process.

A fight would break out to claim that one, and through this, everyone would realize.

It didn't end with just finding the iron ball.

The real key was how to protect it and bring it to the incense burner.

But the beginning had changed.

“By the way, not only is his hand technique remarkable, but his strength is no joke. To rip out a throat so easily even with the qi channels sealed by the Forbidden Gate Lock.”

Most of the warriors were amazed by Mok Gyeong-un's cruel hand techniques and strength.

However, the demon mask was intrigued from a different perspective.

‘To obtain the iron ball without getting a single drop of water on his clothes.’

It was the first time since taking charge of the Corpse Blood Valley.

It was a case of acquiring the iron ball without even entering the water.

Since an example was made by killing one person and a time limit was set by lighting the incense stick, no matter how cunning one was, they would typically jump into the valley water first.

But even though everyone else ran, that fellow stayed in his spot alone.

‘It means he aimed for it from the beginning... Interesting.’

Has there ever been such a cunning fellow while conducting this gateway?

It was something that couldn't be done without considerable boldness.

Thinking this way, even his cruel hand technique seemed to be intentionally calculated.

Meanwhile, Mok Gyeong-un approached the front of the incense burner.

“Is this enough?”

Mok Gyeong-un showed the blood-stained iron ball to the demon mask sitting on the rock.

The demon mask nodded and shouted.

Then he opened his mouth.

“You... What is your name?”

‘!!!’

At that question, the eyes of the surrounding warriors sparkled with interest.

That’s because it was quite rare for the demon mask, the Valley Master, to show interest to the extent of asking for a name in the mere first gateway of the Corpse Blood Valley.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un replied,

“Mok Gyeong-un.”

At those words, the eyes visible through the gaps in the mask narrowed.

‘Mok Gyeong-un?’

Since the number of people reached eight hundred, he wasn’t accurately aware of each individual.

But he remembered the name Mok Gyeong-un.

It was because he had received an order to have him join late.

‘... Is he one of the two from the Mok family who were brought as hostages?’

This was another surprise.

He naturally thought he would be from a place with a notorious reputation among the Esoteric Realm Gate, Vermilion Slaughter Valley, Demon Fire Hall, or the recruited groups.

But to hear he was from Yeon Mok Sword Manor, known as a righteous and famous martial family.

The demon mask recalled what had happened just half an hour ago.

[What? You’re saying to have the boys from Yeon Mok Sword Manor who were brought as hostages also join the Corpse Blood Valley?]

[It’s the leader’s order.]

[I will naturally obey if it's an order, but are you sure? It's not a place those weak boys from a righteous faction can endure.]

[That's not something you need to be concerned about, so follow the order.]

He thought it was fine if they intended to torment them a bit and then kill them.

But seeing this, his thoughts changed.

As expected, the leader couldn't have sent them without a reason.

'So this was it. But unexpected.'

If he hadn't known the fact that he was from Yeon Mok Sword Manor, he never would have thought he was from the righteous faction.

Everything from the aura he exuded to everything else was rather closer to this side.

'I'll know if I watch him.'

If he's a fellow closer to this side, he will survive somehow in the Corpse Blood Valley, known as hell.

The demon mask, who had been staring intently at Mok Gyeong-un, took something out from his bosom.

Then,

"Take it."

he flicked it towards Mok Gyeong-un with his finger.

-Swish!

What he flicked with his finger flew accurately towards Mok Gyeong-un's chest.

Mok Gyeong-un caught it with one hand.

'This is?'

It was a thin, round silver plaque with the character "One" engraved on it.

"It's a plaque proving you passed this gateway with the highest score. Keep it along with the iron ball you brought."

'Gateway? Highest score?'

Mok Gyeong-un inwardly wondered as he looked at the silver plaque.

From the use of the term “highest score,” he could infer one fact.

‘Is it a competition?’

[Listen carefully. The probability of surviving intact in the Corpse Blood Valley is less than one in ten.]

Based on what diviner Jo Ui-gong had said, it seemed to be a structure of surviving through competition.

Two had already died.

No, if his prediction was correct, a bloody competition would soon begin.

-Splash splash!

Mok Gyeong-un’s prediction was spot on.

Someone else had found an iron ball.

Since some had seen the first boy who found it foolishly cheering and causing trouble, they didn’t do such a thing this time.

The moment they found it, they ran out of the valley water.

It was certainly the right choice, but,

“Looks like that guy found it!”

“Catch him!”

he stood out too much.

Running out of the valley water alone naturally drew attention.

More than a dozen people rushed at the same time to catch the guy.

“shit!”

It was a chaotic scene of running away.

But then, someone jumped out of the water, grabbed the guy’s neck, and twisted it like Mok Gyeong-un had done.

-Crack! Splash!

With that, the second death occurred.

After snatching the iron ball from the dead guy, he gestured at the charging boys and warned,

“Come at me if you want to die.”

The 18-year-old boy who had taken off his top had a sturdy body, with bizarre patterns drawn all over his upper body.

The boys who recognized this couldn't charge at him in anger.

“shit!”

“It's the Vermilion Slaughter Valley.”

Vermilion Slaughter Valley.

It was one of the three most notorious groups under Heaven and Earth Society.

Despite having only about thirty disciples, each and every one of them was a formidable master, and everyone found them creepy and feared them for their unique martial arts and secret techniques.

“What a bunch of cowards.”

The boy, who ran a hand through his hair, spoke in a disappointed tone and strode towards the incense burner.

As the boy brushed past Mok Gyeong-un, he whispered,

“Don't think you'll stay ahead in the next gateway.”

It was a clear declaration.

In response, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

He had no desire to waste energy on unnecessary things.

‘If he annoys me...’

He licked his upper lip as if his interest was piqued.

This place seemed quite nice.

Because he didn't have to be mindful of killing like at Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

The boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley, who didn't see Mok Gyeong-un's face, went to the front of the incense burner and showed the iron ball to the demon mask.

"Pass!"

In the meantime, chaos erupted here and there near the valley water.

Those who found iron balls appeared one after another, and as they ran towards the incense burner, the boys who were desperate from not finding them rushed in, and fights broke out.

And those fights went beyond simply subduing each other, creating a situation of killing and being killed.

"It has begun."

At the warrior's words, the demon mask nodded and looked in that direction.

At the point where two had already died, the boys no longer hesitated to harm and kill each other.

The area near the valley water was a complete pandemonium.

-Pu-pu-pu-pu-puk!

"Kuk!"

Amidst that, there were a few who stood out.

A beautiful girl with short hair and a pale face found a sharp-shaped rock somewhere and was advancing forward, mercilessly stabbing those who charged at her.

Despite not being able to use internal energy, her movements were so fast that the charging boys were helplessly defeated.

"I know who that wench is."

"It's the Demon Fire Hall."

"You recognized her."

How could he not recognize her?

That swift and efficient dagger technique that only targeted vital points.

It was the Linked Killing of the Demon Fire Hall.

Although they are now called the Three Great Assassin Groups, the Demon Fire Hall was once called the Four Great Assassin Groups.

However, they quit the assassin business and came under Heaven and Earth Society.

“Impressive.”

She only grasped a sharp rock, but if her internal energy seal was released, it was enough to have expectations.

While that was happening, the demon mask pointed at someone with his hand.

“That boy seems to be from the Esoteric Realm Gate.”

“Oh my!”

An exclamation slipped from the warrior’s mouth.

A boy with a muscular and sturdy physique was charging forward like a bull, and the boys he collided with couldn’t withstand it and were sent flying.

-Pu-pu-pu-pu-puk!

The Esoteric Realm Gate was renowned for their external technique called Iron Thread Technique, and indeed, perhaps because they trained their external energy instead of internal energy, his physical strength was tremendous.

“Hoo hoo.”

The boy from the Esoteric Realm Gate, who had pushed away all the numerous charging boys and arrived.

“Pass!”

And following him, the girl from the Demon Fire Hall also arrived.

“Pass!”

Like this, in addition to them, boys arrived one by one in front of the incense burner, engaging in a bloody fight to claim the iron balls.

Among them, there was a boy who had been waiting for this moment.

This boy had actually obtained an iron ball before anyone else, but he had been waiting for it to become a chaotic battle, fearing that he would become a target if he came out when no one had found it yet.

The boy ran to the front of the incense burner with great difficulty, held up the iron ball, and shouted,

“I found it.”

The boy smiled, the corners of his mouth twitching.

In fact, before the iron ball search began, the boy had secretly taken the one embedded in the forehead of the boy who had been killed by the demon mask for raising a question.

‘Stupid fools. There was such an easy way.’

It seemed foolish that no one was aware of this.

While he was thinking that, the demon mask shouted,

“Fail!”

“What?”

“It’s exactly as I said.”

What does this mean?

Why did he not pass?

He couldn’t understand.

“Wh-why? I clearly found the iron ball, so why...”

-Swish!

At that moment, something sharp brushed past his neck.

Soon, the boy’s head fell to the ground.

“I’m sure I told you not to question the orders.”

-Clang!

The warrior in the red belt who had decapitated him muttered and sheathed his sword into the scabbard at his waist.

-Thud!

As the boy fell with his neck severed, the iron ball dropped from his hand and rolled on the ground.

The rolling iron ball stopped in front of Mok Gyeong-un, who had passed first and was sitting close to the incense burner.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un looked at the iron ball he was holding and chuckled.

[Sixty-three]

The iron ball Mok Gyeong-un had was engraved with the small letters "sixty-three."

However, the decapitated boy's iron ball had nothing engraved on it.

He had used his wits but unluckily lost his head.

On the other hand,

'Should I say I was lucky?'

In fact, Mok Gyeong-un had also tried to extract the iron ball from the forehead of the boy who had died for raising a question before the start.

But someone had already taken it in that short time, so he had changed his method.

Thanks to that, he could be considered fortunate.

However, this feeling didn't last long.

Rather, Mok Gyeong-un licked his lips, regretting the feast unfolding before his eyes.

-Waft waft!

As people died one after another due to the bloody fight over the iron balls, the energy of death overflowed all around.

If only his qi channels weren't sealed by the Forbidden Gate Lock, he would have performed the reverse qi circulation right away.

'Hmm.'

But did he really need to gather this energy through qi circulation?

Out of curiosity, Mok Gyeong-un slightly extended his arm towards the void in the direction where the death energy was flowing and chanted the oral secrets in his mind.

'Boundless and unceasing... The two energies combine to form the heart...'

It was the Art of Binding technique.

Chapter 57

Out of curiosity, Mok Gyeong-un slightly extended his arm towards the void in the direction where the death energy was flowing and chanted the oral secrets in his mind.

It was the Art of Binding technique.

[Can you feel it? That's the subtle principle of the Art of Binding technique. You can pull and attach anything. That's no exception even for energy.]

Cheong-ryeong had definitely said that.

Although the distance was far, the death energy was filling everywhere as so many boys were dying.

With this much, it might be quite possible.

'Boundless and unceasing, the two energies combine to form the heart above. The original form is innate, the supreme form is acquired. The demonic barrier opens the supreme bloodgate.'

Even though his qi channels were sealed by the Forbidden Gate Lock, the Art of Binding technique wasn't a concept deployed with internal energy.

This was a special power that came solely from the oral secrets themselves.

The hand extended towards the empty void.

The corners of Mok Gyeong-un's mouth twitched as he concentrated.

-Whoosh!

The confirmation that started with a light heart, thinking it would be fine if it didn't work.

Fortunately, it fit.

The death energy rippling all around began to be sucked into Mok Gyeong-un's hand.

It was a tremendous amount of death energy.

'It's adhering.'

Originally, he thought only the nearby death energy would be sucked in.

But a coincidental event occurred.

As the death energy around Mok Gyeong-un was sucked in, the unique flow created by it caused the energy spreading in all directions to ride that flow.

Perhaps he could obtain even more death energy than at Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

Mok Gyeong-un inwardly spoke as he looked at the boys still engaging in a bloody struggle.

'Kill and die more.'

The more they killed each other, the more he benefited.

There was one gaze looking at Mok Gyeong-un with a puzzled expression.

It was the demon mask.

'... What is he doing?'

Most of the attention was on the valley where the struggle was taking place.

But the demon mask had unconsciously glanced at the front of the incense burner and discovered Mok Gyeong-un extending his arm slightly towards the valley.

'Hmm.'

He didn't know what the he was doing.

So he heightened his qi sense and looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

But he couldn't feel anything.

'Is it an overreaction?'

Well, with his qi channels sealed by the Forbidden Gate Lock, there was no way he could do anything.

It was a situation where even qi circulation was impossible.

However, he couldn't help but be quite bothered by his actions.

While he was thinking that, the warrior next to him spoke.

"The incense stick is almost burned out."

Time was almost up.

In the meantime, the number of boys who had entered slightly exceeded 400.

The boys who died fighting among themselves alone were close to 200, and the remaining 200 were engaged in a bloody battle.

-Sizzle!

The incense stick was precariously burning down to the bottom line.

The demon mask raised his hand.

Then, the warriors in red belts who had been waiting around the edges of the valley simultaneously drew the weapons at their waists.

-Shing! Shing!

At this sight, the boys fighting over the iron balls became even more desperate.

If they didn't hurry, they would die.

It awakened the hidden tenacity and strong desire to live within the boys.

"Die, die!"

-Smash! Smash!

"Get out of the way!"

-Crunch!

"Argh! Y-you bit me, you bastard?"

Smashing heads with rocks, and if that doesn't work, even biting and clinging on.

It was downright gruesome.

Even those who were watching and had managed to sit in front of the incense burner after fighting couldn't just look at it as someone else's business.

This was just the beginning.

But among them, one boy stood out.

“Aaaaah!”

-Crack!

“Ugh!”

As if he had awakened, he was indiscriminately killing the surrounding boys, having been inconspicuous until now. It was none other than Mok Yu-cheon.

Mok Yu-cheon, who couldn't accept killing others without any grudge, had aimed only to find the iron ball and stand in front of the incense burner.

However, the situation had pushed even Mok Yu-cheon to the edge of a cliff.

“Haa... haa...”

The moment he found the iron ball, the boys trying to kill him to snatch it, and the incense stick that had almost burned out.

This situation eventually made even Mok Yu-cheon the same as them.

‘shit! shit!’

He didn't know how many he had killed, but in the end, Mok Yu-cheon was able to reach the front of the incense burner after fending off all the boys targeting his iron ball.

Arriving at the incense burner, he raised the blood-stained iron ball.

“Pass!”

The moment he heard that shout, all the tension dissipated, and he plopped down on the ground.

The first thought that came to Mok Yu-cheon as he sat down was this:

‘I'm alive... I survived.’

A sense of relief that made him shiver.

He had managed to survive a hellish moment.

The fear that he might die brought about a tenacious fierceness to live.

However, soon, a sense of self-loathing came over him as he looked at his blood-stained palms.

'... What... have I done?'

Certainly, it was for his own survival, but what is this?

It felt like he had become a beast for a moment, not a human.

While he was thinking that, the demon mask's shout was heard.

"The incense stick has burned out completely. Kill them."

"Chong!!!"

As soon as that order was given, screams continuously erupted from the valley water not long after.

The boys whose danjeon were sealed couldn't even resist.

The warriors counted the number of boys sitting in rows in front of the incense burner.

And that number was determined.

The total number of surviving boys was 468.

It could be said that nearly 40% had died.

'60%... not bad.'

However, the demon mask had no significant interest in those who died.

Rather, if about 60% survived in the first gateway, it wasn't bad for the initial weeding out process.

After the counting was finished, the demon mask spoke to the boys in front of the incense burner.

"I sincerely congratulate those who have passed the first gateway."

"..."

The boys just listened quietly.

Although it was only for two hours, they were exhausted from doing all sorts of things to survive.

Looking at them, the demon mask continued.

“Since you obtained the iron balls, you must have realized. The numbers engraved on the iron balls are different for each one. Remember them well. That will be your designation here.”

“...”

“Then we will immediately begin the second gateway.”

-Murmur murmur!

At the demon mask’s words, the boys who had been catching their breath stirred.

They thought they could rest a bit now.

But they were going to proceed with the second gateway right after the first one ended?

Especially for those who passed late when the incense stick was almost burned out, it was naturally agonizing.

‘shit.’

Mok Yu-cheon was the same.

Putting aside the self-loathing, he hadn’t even recovered his stamina yet, so how long could he endure if he had to do this nonsense again?

Regardless of their reactions, the demon mask pointed to the mountain beyond the valley with his hand and said,

“The second gateway is to endure on that mountain from now until dawn.”

‘Until dawn?’

It was late at night now.

It was around sunset when they had set out for this place.

After walking for about three hours without rest and then going through the first gateway for two hours.

Considering this, they had roughly three hours left until dawn.

'Is it just enduring this time?'

If that was the case, it could be said to be more manageable than finding iron balls.

Even if there were crazy ones obsessed with competition, if they just found a suitable place and hid, they could conserve their stamina and rest.

Since the Forbidden Gate Lock was still inserted, they wouldn't be able to utilize their qi sense, so it was quite possible.

Most of them seemed to have similar thoughts, showing relieved expressions.

However, it couldn't be this simple.

The demon mask spoke.

"I will state the conditions that come with it."

'Conditions?'

What does that mean again?

"There are forty flags stuck on the mountain. The number of people who can be at a flag is eight. Exactly eight people must be at that location until dawn."

-Murmur murmur!

At those words, everyone stirred again.

As expected.

It couldn't go easily.

"It can't be more or less than eight. If such a case occurs, you die."

"..."

Silence hung in the air.

Upon hearing the conditions, everyone was thinking about the gist of this gateway.

This was the same for Mok Yu-cheon.

'There are roughly five hundred people here. But if there are forty flags, it means only three hundred and twenty can survive.'

It was announcing another bloody competition.

However, there was a difference.

If they found a flag, the eight people had to work together for about three hours to defend it.

‘Group cooperation!’

Everyone grasped the gist of this gateway.

Of course, there would be many variables, but depending on how they cooperated, they could have conditions to endure efficiently.

-Swish!

With this, everyone’s gazes naturally turned towards each other, not the demon mask.

There was no need to find a flag and form a team there.

If they gathered the strongest and most useful teammates here and now, they might be able to easily overcome this gateway.

‘Then...’

Their gazes turned to those at the very front of the incense burner.

They were the first to pass the first gateway and had overflowing stamina.

Joining their group or recruiting them was the only way to gain the most advantageous position.

‘Hmm.’

It wasn’t just those who passed late who were contemplating this.

Those who passed first were also making their own calculations.

The boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley, who passed second, also looked around and pondered.

‘I quickly passed the first gateway and succeeded in managing my stamina, but the second gateway is immediately following. According to the conditions, it will be a situation where I can’t let my guard down for even a moment.’

In that case, he might not be able to rest all night.

With the small number of flags and maintaining the headcount, there were bound to be many annoying situations.

'It's a situation where I have to stay up all night.'

But if the third gateway immediately followed this, the key was still conserving stamina.

In a situation where they couldn't perform qi circulation, that was huge.

If their internal energy wasn't sealed, they could take turns circulating qi and recover their stamina, but now it was an extreme situation.

'... I may have to avoid situations where I have to fight unnecessarily.'

That was the only way to fully preserve his stamina.

Indeed, from that perspective, it was better to team up with the most useful guys.

The boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley looked to his left and right.

Mok Gyeong-un and the muscular boy from the Esoteric Realm Gate.

'Hmm.'

Along with himself, they were the first to pass the first gateway.

Rather than looking for someone far away, it was more efficient for those with the most overflowing stamina to stick together and easily pass this gateway.

'I was going to finish first in the second gateway, but...'

For this time, it seemed better to join hands.

The boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley furtively glanced at Mok Gyeong-un to his left.

He was trying to extend his hand first and establish a cooperative relationship.

However,

'!?'

He saw Mok Gyeong-un's lips twitching.

Those eyes that seemed to find it interesting, as if he was enjoying this situation.

It was enough to make him feel unpleasant.

‘... It won’t work.’

He had absolutely no desire to reach out to this bastard.

Strangely, his instincts were telling him.

That he was the one who needed to be eliminated first among those here.

While he was thinking that, Mok Gyeong-un whispered first.

“Do you want to team up with me?”

What?

Did this guy also judge that it would be advantageous to side with him?

But after seeing that face just now, his desire to team up had disappeared.

“... No.”

At this, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders and licked his lips.

‘What a pity.’

He wanted to kill him first.

Chapter 58

An odd, uncomfortable feeling that for some unknown reason, it seemed they shouldn’t team up together.

Because of that, the boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley, who had given up cooperating with Mok Gyeong-un, whispered to the boy from the Esoteric Realm Gate next to him.

“You’re from the Esoteric Realm Gate, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll get straight to the point. Let’s not waste energy and do this gateway together.”

“...”

At the Vermilion Slaughter Valley boy's proposal, the Esoteric Realm Gate boy frowned as if considering it.

It certainly wasn't a bad offer.

Gathering with more capable people was a way to pass the gateway more easily.

'Hmm.'

The Esoteric Realm Gate boy had seen the Vermilion Slaughter Valley boy earlier, hiding in the water and then pouncing on another boy to snatch the iron ball.

It could be said to be a fairly excellent strategy.

From that perspective, he could be helpful in this gateway, which required building a more strategic cooperative relationship than the iron ball struggle.

However,

'... Do I really need to show even a bit of my skills to someone I might face in the next gateway?'

If they were together for three hours, he would end up revealing quite a lot.

The less his faction's martial arts skills were revealed, the better.

He judged that it would be more advantageous to avoid cooperating with the Vermilion Slaughter Valley and Demon Fire Hall boys, who were likely to survive until the end along with him.

So the Esoteric Realm Gate boy said,

"I refuse."

"... You'll regret it."

"We'll see who regrets it."

The Esoteric Realm Gate boy scoffed at his aggressive response.

Then, as a last attempt, he tentatively asked the short-haired girl from the Demon Fire Hall.

"Hey. Demon Fire Hall. What about you..."

"Get lost."

“ ... ”

Rejection before he could even ask.

The Esoteric Realm Gate boy closed his mouth with an irritated expression.

Perhaps cooperating with them was impossible from the start.

“Huff... huff...”

The boys looked at the mountain beyond the valley with tense faces.

The moment the signal was given, a three-hour period more physically demanding than the earlier iron ball struggle would begin.

It was that moment when their eyes and ears were focused.

“Begin!”

As soon as the demon mask’s shout was heard, the boys rushed towards the valley water all at once.

Just like before, even in this gateway, it was advantageous to secure a higher position by hurrying.

-Splash splash!

The valley water was completely stained with blood due to the dead bodies.

The scent of blood flowing from this valley water heralded another ordeal.

A warrior watching them said to the demon mask,

“They’ll soon realize that the previous gateway was relatively easier.”

“ ... ”

No gateway was easy.

However, this gateway wasn’t just about finding teammates that suited one’s taste and defending the flag.

‘It would be good to find the flags quickly.’

If they were perceptive, they would soon understand the meaning of the flags.

The 468 boys who entered the mountain after the starting signal was given.

Once the warriors in red belts were out of sight, the boys took three types of actions.

The first was those who ran towards the mountain without stopping.

‘The flags... I need to find the flags!’

They were the type who believed they had to find the flags first.

Because the number of flags was limited, they considered that a priority over finding teammates.

Of course, this wasn’t a wrong choice either.

If they found teammates but couldn’t secure a flag, it would be meaningless.

Nearly half, about 200 of them, were of this type.

This included the muscular boy from the Esoteric Realm Gate and the girl from the Demon Fire Hall, who were regarded as strong candidates to survive until the end.

And the second type.

“Hey. Let’s team up.”

“... You mean together?”

“Yeah. There’s no point in securing a flag first like them. It’s better to form a team in advance and seize the flags.”

“Huh?”

“That way, it’s easier to defend the flag too.”

In this way, the boys who stopped each found teammates that suited their taste or could be helpful.

Since time was pressing, it was happening quickly.

Still, during this process of forming teams, there were no attacks on each other.

They also implicitly avoided fighting here, knowing that once the teams were formed and they entered deep into the mountain, the stamina depletion would be even more severe.

‘Yeah. This is how it should be.’

The boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley snickered inwardly.

With himself as the lead, he had succeeded in making those who entered from fifth to fifteenth place as his teammates.

No, it would be more accurate to say that they had voluntarily joined his group from the beginning.

Normally, if the top eleven joined together, there would be eight members, but some of them ran without stopping to find the flags first, so the team was formed like this.

‘This will do.’

It could be said to be the most dominant team.

Since they had passed the iron ball struggle in the upper ranks, they were composed of individuals who possessed both skill and strategy.

So if they could just secure a flag, all they had to do was focus on conserving their stamina as much as possible.

“Let’s go!”

With that, the boy from the Vermilion Slaughter Valley, who had formed his team the fastest, headed towards the mountain.

Other boys also quickly formed teams and moved.

Among them was Mok Yu-cheon, but,

‘... Not that guy.’

Mok Yu-cheon shook his head, looking at Mok Gyeong-un in the distance.

Even though they were half-brothers, they were still brothers, so he had considered joining forces with him.

However, he absolutely didn’t want to.

His affection had fallen as far as it could after being immobilized helplessly during the journey here.

'Whether he lives or dies, it's not my business... No.'

For now, his priority was his own survival.

Fortunately, the guys nearby offered to team up with Mok Yu-cheon, so he was able to join them.

Although it was creepy since they weren't from the righteous faction, he had no choice but to survive.

He had to grasp at straws.

'I will survive.'

No matter what.

Persuading himself like that, Mok Yu-cheon also set off with his teammates.

Meanwhile,

-What are you trying to do, mortal?

Cheong-ryeong, who was in Mok Gyeong-un's bosom, asked.

In response, Mok Gyeong-un quietly answered in a whisper,

"I thought I'd try to find teammates."

-... Why are you doing such a useless thing? Just find a flag and they'll naturally flock to you.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

Of course, what she said was also true.

It was still early, and in a situation where the location of the flags was unknown, if he just secured one first, they would naturally join him even without pre-forming a team like this.

-Are you trying to manage your stamina or something?

Forming a team in advance was to reduce risk by joining forces and conserve stamina.

It could be seen as preparing for the next gateway in advance.

However,

“That’s not it.”

-What?

If it’s not that, why is he trying to form a team now?

Cheong-ryeong couldn’t help but find it strange.

In the first place, she knew well that he wasn’t the type to cooperate with others on anything.

But here, Mok Gyeong-un encountered an unexpected problem.

“This is troublesome.”

-Heh.

Cheong-ryeong let out a scoff.

That’s because, unexpectedly, when Mok Gyeong-un approached the boys to form a team, they distanced themselves as if on guard.

Some had seen Mok Gyeong-un’s cruel hands when he passed first.

So they seemed to be reluctant to form a team with Mok Gyeong-un.

Although they whispered softly, he could hear their voices.

“It might be better to get rid of that guy now.”

“Did you see? How he ripped out the throat to take out the swallowed iron ball.”

“He’s completely crazy.”

That aspect made them avoid Mok Gyeong-un.

A considerable number found it burdensome to team up with Mok Gyeong-un, who had such a tendency, and thought it would be better to isolate him and eliminate him.

Because of this judgment, they were in a hurry to avoid him when he approached.

-Seems like you made quite an unpleasant impression, mortal.

“I guess so.”

-You just wasted time for nothing.

“Hmm.”

As Cheong-ryeong said, if it was like this, it might be difficult to find teammates.

He wanted to start a bit more comfortably, but should he change his approach?

While he was thinking that,

A boy with short hair timidly approached Mok Gyeong-un.

“... Do you need a teammate?”

“Yes. But...”

“We’re seven people. Want to join us?”

At the boy’s suggestion, those around him whispered.

Who the hell is trying to bring that guy in?

If they had even a little bit of sense, it would be better to exclude that guy in advance since it would be annoying to compete with him later.

That was,

-Swish!

because there was a girl waving her hand towards Mok Gyeong-un.

She had exceptional beauty, and around her, five boys were accompanying her like bodyguards.

It was a team formed with the sole girl at the center.

A boy whispered softly,

“Sohwa[1]. Are you sure? That guy is a bit...”

“Yeah. Even the other guys aren’t accepting him in the same team because they judged it’s better to exclude him in advance.”

Another boy agreed.

At this, the girl named Sohwa smiled and said,

“Trust me.”

“I trust you. But...”

“While other stupid guys think it’s the answer to exclude him in advance, that’s not it. Having that guy with us will be advantageous for us too.”

Sohwa had considered it but thought it would be beneficial to accept Mok Gyeong-un.

Apart from his cruel hands, he was a guy with enough strength to rip out a throat with one hand even with his danjeon sealed.

If they had this guy with them, other teams wouldn’t recklessly attack them.

And,

“We can just use him until dawn and then kill him. Do you think he can handle seven people alone, no matter how strong he is?”

She had even planned to eliminate him after using him.

Of course, if this happened, one person would be left out at the end.

But for this, one person was supposed to keep a distance and follow behind in advance.

If that bastard died, that empty spot would be filled.

‘Stupid guys. A useful pawn is meant to be used and discarded like this. Make him fight to his heart’s content on our behalf, conserving our stamina and killing two birds with one stone.’

She scorned both her teammates and the other guys.

The brain is meant to be used.

Like that, within an hour, most had formed teams and entered the mountain.

The team led by the sole girl named Sohwa was the same.

From now on, it was a matter of quickly finding a flag and securing it.

Otherwise, they would have to snatch a flag claimed by another team.

While moving like that, Sohwa subtly approached Mok Gyeong-un.

“You were quite impressive earlier.”

“Was I?”

“I’m Sohwa. What’s your name?”

“I’m Mok Gyeong-un.”

“Mok Gyeong-un?”

Sohwa tilted her head.

It was a name she had never heard before.

His cruel hands and seemingly considerable skill made her curious about his background, but she couldn’t tell from just his name.

‘Among the martial families, there’s only one place with the Mok surname on the righteous side.’

Yeon Mok Sword Manor, the famous martial family of Anhui Province.

But there was no way someone from that righteous Mok family would be here.

Then the only way was to ask directly.

“Where are you from?”

“Does that matter?”

‘Does he mean he has no intention of telling me? Well...’

Even if they had a cooperative relationship now, they would have to compete again later.

The answer was to hide oneself as much as possible.

‘This guy... is quite handsome though.’

To call Mok Gyeong-un’s appearance pretty would be an understatement; his beauty was exceptional enough to be described as having outstanding looks.

It was even more so up close.

Because of that, her interest was slightly piqued, contrary to her original plan.

'Should I try seducing him?'

Men were simple and surprisingly vulnerable to a woman's seduction.

If she just pretended to show a little interest, they would fall for it on their own.

In that sense, if she could make this guy hers, she might be able to use him a bit more without the need to eliminate him.

-Swish!

Sohwa slightly loosened the collar of her top to reveal her cleavage and stuck close to Mok Gyeong-un.

At this age, men's sexual desire was at its peak.

So the effect was definite just by showing her ample cleavage and having their bodies touch.

Sohwa, who had pressed her body against him, whispered,

"You know. I like a guy like you."

At this, Mok Gyeong-un glanced at her.

Then he smiled and said,

"I feel the same way."

'Heh. As expected.'

Handsome or not, it didn't matter.

If she deliberately seduced them, any man would fall for it like this.

-Tap!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un placed his arm on her shoulder.

'Ha. Look at this.'

Since she seduced him, he was openly showing confidence.

If it was like this, she might be able to seduce him faster than expected.

If she coaxed him well and used him as her shield until the end and survived, she could adequately...

"I've been choosing since earlier."

"Huh?"

What is he talking about now?

-Grip!

Mok Gyeong-un's wrist, which had been wrapping around her shoulder, grasped her neck.

Then,

-Crack!

in an instant, he twisted her neck.

It happened so abruptly that she couldn't even scream or do anything, drawing her last breath and dying on the spot.

'!!!!'

Everyone was momentarily taken aback.

They had just been watching, thinking she would coax Mok Gyeong-un.

But who would have known such a situation would unfold?

A boy shouted,

"Y-you crazy bastard, what are you doing?"

At the boy's shout, Mok Gyeong-un said, the corners of his mouth twitching,

"Should I say it's a delightful mealtime?"

In front of his eyes, all of them were appetizing prey that would fill him with death energy.

The mountain was vast, so shouldn't he start comfortably?

Chapter 59

-Crack! Thud!

'!!!!!!'

The sight of Sohwa dying with her neck twisted left the teammates momentarily speechless.

Since they had all gathered around her as their center, this death was all the more perplexing.

Among them, one boy couldn't hold back and shouted,

"Y-you crazy bastard, what are you doing?"

No one had anticipated this situation.

They had only thought to somehow use him and then discard him, trusting her.

They still had stamina left and were watching with their own eyes, yet this happened right in front of them.

Mok Gyeong-un said, the corners of his mouth twitching,

"Should I say it's a delightful mealtime?"

"What nonsense are you spouting!"

Another boy seemed to have come to his senses and retorted to Mok Gyeong-un's words.

Then, signaling to the other boys with his eyes,

-Rumble rumble!

the six of them surrounded Mok Gyeong-un in a circle.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un slightly tilted his head and opened his mouth.

"Unexpected."

"What?"

"I thought you would be in disarray like bees following a queen bee."

'!?'

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, the boys' expressions twisted fiercely.

He had described them as fools infatuated with Sohwa, the sole girl, and unable to break free, so what fool wouldn't understand that?

"You bastard, kill him..."

"Don't get riled up!"

One boy shouted.

Then, taking a stance with his fists towards Mok Gyeong-un, he said,

"Don't get agitated and fall for his scheme. Even if Sohwa is dead, the advantage is ours."

"You're right. I almost fell for his trick."

If they got excited and attacked one by one, they might be picked off instead.

The sealing of internal energy was the same condition, but the fact that he did this meant he had some confidence in dealing with them.

"We'll subdue him with a coordinated attack. And let's kill him painfully as the price for killing Sohwa."

"Alright!"

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

"What a display of friendship."

-Pak!

As soon as he finished speaking, Mok Gyeong-un kicked the ground.

The dirt rose up to knee height, and Mok Gyeong-un's body instantly reached right in front of the boy facing him.

'Wh-what?'

The startled boy tried to block Mok Gyeong-un with a push kick.

However,

-Grip! Rip!

Mok Gyeong-un snatched the boy's ankle with one hand and pulled it.

At that moment, the boy's balance crumbled, and his body was tilted backward.

"Ugh!"

He knew Mok Gyeong-un was strong, but this was beyond expectations.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had pulled the boy's ankle, swung the boy's body towards another boy right next to him.

-Whoosh!

'shit!'

The surprised boy hurriedly ducked to avoid it.

But that wasn't the end.

Using the centrifugal force to spin around once, this time he turned downward,

-Thud!

"Ack!"

and smashed the head of the crouching boy with the head of the boy whose ankle he was holding.

The two heads collided so hard that the sound of something breaking was heard.

It seemed both boys had their skulls shattered.

'what the is this guy?'

Two were taken out in an instant.

What kind of strength does he have that he's so strong without even using internal energy?

"A-attack simultaneously!"

As one boy shouted, two boys charged at Mok Gyeong-un.

One aimed a kick at his face, while the other slid on the ground from the opposite side, targeting Mok Gyeong-un's ankles.

This way, his balance would be broken no matter what.

Or so they thought, but,

-Pak! Whirl whirl whirl!

Mok Gyeong-un instantly kicked the ground and spun his body like a top in mid-air to avoid it, and then,

-Swish! Thwack!

“Argh!”

he stomped on the crown of the sliding boy’s head with the top of his foot.

-Thud!

The boy, who had hit his chin on the ground, rolled his eyes back and lost consciousness.

“You bastard!”

Momentarily surprised, the boy who had aimed for his face didn’t miss this chance and kicked the left leg Mok Gyeong-un was supporting his body with to knock him over.

However,

-Thwack!

“Ack!”

The boy grabbed his ankle and staggered.

He was clearly the one who had kicked, but his ankle hurt as if it would break.

‘Wh-what the?’

“What are you doing!”

Taken aback by the sight of the staggering boy, another boy ran towards Mok Gyeong-un, intending to smash his head with a sharp rock.

But before he could do that, Mok Gyeong-un kicked the boy’s ankle.

-Thwack!

“Ack!”

The kicked boy’s leg shot up, and his body tilted in the opposite direction and fell.

-Thud!

In that instant, Mok Gyeong-un stepped on the boy’s neck.

-Crack!

The boy, whose neck was twisted, died on the spot.

Seeing this, the staggering boy and the only boy who hadn’t attacked couldn’t hide their bewilderment.

Four were taken out in an instant.

Although their internal energy was sealed, they had also learned martial arts and had a numerical advantage, so they thought they could somehow subdue him.

But that expectation was completely off the mark.

‘This crazy...’

This guy’s pure strength alone was close to the second-rate level.

Only then did they feel regret.

When Sohwa suggested bringing him in, they should have somehow stopped her.

They had messed with the wrong person.

“Aaaah!”

At that moment, the only boy who hadn’t attacked chose to flee.

He had no confidence in dealing with that monster-like guy.

If five of them had attacked and failed, how could he handle it alone?

‘That bast...’

The boy with the twisted ankle cursed inwardly at the fleeing boy.

But even though he cursed, he understood.

Now, running away was the right choice...

-Swish!

At that moment, the boy with the twisted ankle's eyes widened.

"Gasp!"

-Thud!

The ankle of the boy who had been running to escape was pulled back, and he fell.

What the is going on? While wondering, he saw Mok Gyeong-un extending his hand towards the fallen boy and making a pulling gesture.

Then,

-Rip!

At that moment, the boy's leg, no, his body was being dragged backward.

'!!!!!!'

It was an unbelievable sight.

'S-Seizing Objects in Mid-Air?'

Seizing Objects in Mid-Air[1].

It is a technique where a profound internal energy master pulls objects or desired things with true energy.

Seeing something that only a supreme master at the peak of transcendence could do being performed right in front of his eyes, the boy couldn't help but be shocked.

'No way.'

What the is going on?

Not only is he doing this, but his internal energy should definitely be sealed, right?

It was a moment of confusion.

"N-no, no!"

-Skid skid skid!

The fallen boy tried to hold onto the ground somehow to resist, but he was dragged, leaving long nail marks.

The ankle of that boy was caught by Mok Gyeong-un's outstretched hand.

-Pak!

-Crack!

"Aaaargh!"

As soon as he grabbed the ankle, Mok Gyeong-un twisted it.

The boy, whose ankle was bent in the opposite direction, screamed, but Mok Gyeong-un stepped on the back of his neck.

-Crack!

The screaming boy's breath was cut off.

'Aaah.'

The face of the boy with the twisted ankle, who had been watching this, turned deathly pale.

They had really messed with someone they shouldn't have.

The term monster didn't fit him; evil spirit was more appropriate.

How could such a guy exist?

Even if the seal on his internal energy was released, could he handle this evil spirit who could use Seizing Objects in Mid-Air?

-Tremble tremble!

His body was shaking violently.

He wanted to regain his balance, but his legs went weak, and he fell.

-Thud!

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head towards him, smiled, and walked over.

Then, bending his knees and lowering his body, he said,

“Ah. What did you say just now?”

“Sp-spare...”

-Tap!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed the boy's head.

The boy screamed and tried to shake off his hand, but,

-Crack!

Mok Gyeong-un twisted the boy's neck.

Then, looking into the eyes of the boy who had died with his head twisted, he smirked.

“It's good that I don't give false hope, right?”

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un, holding the dead boy's head, chanted the oral secrets of the Art of Binding technique in his mind.

It was a delightful mealtime.

He had to absorb the death energy when the loss was minimal.

-Ta-ta-ta-ta-tak!

‘D-damn, he's completely crazy.’

The running boy.

The boy was trembling because of the scene he had just witnessed.

He had heard screams while keeping his distance and was startled, so he had approached closer, but he was terrified upon seeing that sight.

He hadn't even gotten close to the flag, but Sohwa and her teammates had been indiscriminately killed.

No, it was almost at the level of a massacre.

‘An evil spirit. An evil spirit.’

Moreover, was his internal energy really sealed?

It seemed like it wasn't.

In the end, that looked like Seizing Objects in Mid-Air, pulling with true energy no matter how he looked at it.

'Does that make sense?'

A technique that only a profound internal energy master could perform, yet a guy who's not even seventeen years old can do it?

It was utterly confusing.

But even though his mind was in turmoil, one thing was certain.

'I have to let them know.'

Whether it was the other guys or the people of the Corpse Blood Valley conducting this gateway, he had to inform them.

He's already a dangerous guy, but if he's the only one whose internal energy isn't sealed, it's no different from cheating...

-Pak!

At that moment, as if he had collided with something, the boy's body was thrown backward.

Startled, the boy performed a falling technique, turned around, took a stance, and looked ahead with surprised eyes.

But he couldn't see anything.

what the?

'What did I collide with?'

Puzzled, he stood up and unconsciously turned his head.

At that moment,

"Gasp!"

the boy screamed and fell backward.

'Th-this...'

The boy doubted his own eyes.

In front of his eyes, there was a blurry form of something, and it was a giant monk wearing a skull rosary around his neck.

The Demonic Monk was looking down at him with white eyes, and it felt like his heart would stop.

Chapter 60

-Mortal, you're really...

Cheong-ryeong clicked her tongue.

She had wondered why he was joining as a teammate when it didn't suit him.

But to think he had this kind of plan.

-Did you intend this from the beginning?

"How could I miss such a convenient opportunity?"

Mok Gyeong-un smiled and approached the last remaining person, no, corpse.

That corpse was the girl named Sohwa, the first one whose neck Mok Gyeong-un had twisted.

Mok Gyeong-un placed his hand on the girl's head and chanted the oral secrets of the Art of Binding technique in his mind, absorbing the remaining death energy.

-Whoosh!

The absorbed death energy spread throughout his body.

Directly absorbing it like this allowed him to secure a larger amount compared to when it tried to disperse into the air during the iron ball struggle.

However,

'I should go in order of who died first from now on.'

Absorbing in the order of who was closest resulted in a significant loss of Sohwa's death energy.

It hadn't completely disappeared, but it was less compared to the others.

‘Still, not bad.’

He had already secured a much larger amount of death energy than at Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

If he could just remove the Forbidden Gate Lock inserted in his qi channels, he could greatly expand his danjeon through qi circulation.

“Seems like coming here was a good choice.”

-Good choice? Don’t tell me...

At that moment, the sound of someone’s presence was heard from somewhere.

-Rustle!

Soon, someone revealed themselves.

It was a boy.

Seeing the boy approach with familiar eyes, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and said,

“You could have just killed him, but you possessed him?”

“I thought it might be necessary, so I brought him.”

As soon as he finished speaking,

-Thud!

the boy’s body collapsed, and the blurry form of the evil spirit appeared.

Mok Gyeong-un said with satisfaction,

“Thank you very much.”

He had ordered one thing, but to have his intentions understood like this.

He couldn’t be anything but an excellent familiar.

Mok Gyeong-un approached the fallen boy.

After twisting the boy’s neck, he absorbed the death energy.

It didn’t take long.

Having finished all this, Mok Gyeong-un stretched his muscles with a refreshed expression.

“Phew. Feels good.”

-Mortal. What do you intend to do?

“What do you mean?”

-From the looks of it, you don't seem like you'll be satisfied with just these guys.

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un smiled.

Then, looking up at the mountain, he said,

“I should have a delightful mealtime until dawn. As much as possible.”

Anyway, according to the passing criteria, as long as he left at most seven people, that should be enough.

A damp and dark cave at the foot of the mountain.

-Sizzle!

The demon mask walked in with two warriors holding torches.

As soon as they entered the cave, the expressions of the two warriors stiffened.

That's because from the moment they entered the cave, a strange energy stimulated their qi sense.

It was quite different from human presence or energy.

It was unpleasant and gave them goosebumps.

'It's suffocating.'

That was the state of mind of the two warriors.

However, the demon mask entered deeper as if he was used to it.

As he did so, a voice came from deep within the cave.

“Are you the Valley Master of the Corpse Blood Valley?”

“That’s right.”

“The fire is bright.”

At the voice coming from inside, the demon mask signaled the two warriors to stop.

“What?”

“You two wait here.”

“But...”

“Wait.”

“Yes, sir!”

Leaving them behind, the demon mask went deeper into the cave alone.

Inside, someone wearing a taoist robe with yin and yang symbols was standing.

As if he had been waiting, he clasped his hands together and bowed his head.

“You’ve come?”

The demon mask asked him,

“Are the preparations done?”

“Is there even a need to ask?”

“What is it this time? I heard they’re quite dangerous compared to last time.”

At these words, the man in the taoist robe smiled and replied,

“Of course they’re dangerous if released carelessly.”

“I suppose so. Are they the ones behind the iron bars?”

“That’s right.”

At the answer of the man in the taoist robe, the demon mask looked back.

But a strange sound came from there.

-Oink oink!

'Hmm.'

It sounded like a pig's cry.

There's no way there would actually be pigs, so what could they look like?

The demon mask was curious and tried to peek at where the iron bars were.

Then the man in the taoist robe blocked him and said,

"It's better not to approach too closely. No matter how controlled they are, even those who haven't reached maturity are fierce beasts."

"Fierce beasts..."

Beasts beyond beasts, was it?

The demon mask looked behind the man in the taoist robe.

There, something dangerous with rat-like eyes was staring intently at him.

"What did you call that thing?"

"It's a Gal-jeo. Brought from the Northern Sea near Mount Beihu."

Gal-jeo...

Even the name sounded ominous.

The demon mask turned around and said,

"Alright. Release them when you see the signal."

Half an hour had passed since the flag defense battle began.

The mountain was vast, and perhaps because the flags were meticulously hidden, no one had discovered them yet.

But there was someone who found it first.

It was the boy from the Esoteric Realm Gate.

The boy's name was Yeon Woo-ung, and as soon as he found the flag, he ran towards it with excitement.

'Found it!'

If the flag had been a brighter color, it would have been easier to find, but the color was dark, and the location was cunningly concealed in the bushes, making it difficult to find.

But there was a reward for searching thoroughly without rest.

'The pole is quite long.'

Yeon Woo-ung, who had approached close to the flag, grabbed the pole.

It was to pull out the flag and secure a suitable location.

However,

'Huh?'

the flag, which he thought would be easy to pull out, wouldn't budge from the ground.

The pole itself wasn't that heavy, so why was that?

Puzzled, Yeon Woo-ung soon discovered the reason.

'What?'

The bottom of the flag was connected to a large lump of iron.

The size was quite big, and even for Yeon Woo-ung, who had trained external techniques and had muscular strength, it felt quite heavy to lift.

'Holding the pole and moving will be even heavier.'

In that case, he had to hold the iron lump at the bottom and move.

At first, he wondered why they had made the flag this way, but soon he thought it was rather fortunate.

If it was this heavy, it would be difficult for other guys to move the flag.

Since their internal energy was sealed.

'This gateway might be easier than expected.'

He thought that among those who found the flags, there would be some who maliciously try to eliminate other flags or seize them to reduce the number of people passing.

But if the flag was like this, it would be difficult to carry and move, so there would be few who would go to the trouble of seizing someone else's flag.

'Good. Then I need to gather teammates and defend the location.'

He just needed to endure until dawn.

Meanwhile,

on a mountain ridge 200 zhang northwest of where Yeon Woo-ung from the Esoteric Realm Gate was.

There was someone who had discovered another flag, albeit later.

She was none other than the girl from the Demon Fire Hall.

The girl's name was Mo Ha-rang.

"Ah..."

The joy of finding the flag was short-lived, and she too couldn't hide her perplexity upon seeing the iron lump connected to the bottom of the flag pole.

'Heavy.'

The iron lump was extremely heavy for her to lift.

It couldn't be helped since her qi channels were blocked, and the martial arts she had learned were based on swiftness, so her muscle mass wasn't thick, making it even more difficult.

'Moving is impossible.'

Even if she tried to secure a good location with the flag, she needed teammates.

Defending the flag alone was a difficult task.

'It would be nice if I could break the pole.'

[The flag must be in its complete state.]

There had been a warning beforehand, so the iron lump was also one with the flag.

In the end, the only answer was to wait.

However,

'Huh?'

Mo Ha-rang, who had been fiddling with the upper part of the flag pole by chance, frowned.

It was because something was engraved on the upper part of the flag.

Without holding a torch and only relying on the moonlight shining through the bushes, it was difficult to see with the naked eye, but,

-Rub rub!

when she touched it with her hand, she could roughly tell what was written.

'Yi Won Geom Se Ji Woo Yeok Hyeon... !?'

As she rubbed and deduced what the engraved text said, she could be certain.

It was the stance formula of a sword art.

And it was a bit different from ordinary sword arts.

'Could this be?'

If her guess was correct...

-Tap!

'Huh?'

Mo Ha-rang's eyes narrowed.

The oral secrets had ended.

Up to this point, one might not feel anything particularly strange, but it wasn't the case for her.

'Incomplete.'

In her view, the oral secrets were incomplete.

If it was the stance formula of a sword art, there was no way it would end here.

Most martial arts aim to effectively subdue and kill the opponent, but conversely, they also serve the purpose of protecting oneself.

Mo Ha-rang closed her eyes.

-Swish swish!

A sword art was visualized in her mind.

It was a bit lacking to be called an advanced sword art, but the sword techniques weren't bad.

However, according to these oral secrets, four gaps would be created.

It meant that there were exactly four spots that couldn't be blocked with the available sword techniques.

'... An incomplete sword art.'

This was strange.

If she wanted to overlook it, she could.

But they had engraved the oral secrets of a sword art on the flag pole right below the flag, which could be easily passed over without much thought.

Moreover, it was an incomplete set of oral secrets.

No matter how she thought about it, she couldn't help but be bothered by it if she just passed it by.

Then, she suddenly had this thought.

'Could it be?'

She hoped it wasn't the case, but she felt she had to check.

She boldly decided to give up the flag she had barely found.

Still, as if she had some lingering attachment, Mo Ha-rang stared at the flag for a while, then broke the upper part of the pole where the oral secrets were engraved.

-Snap!

'If it's not mine anyway.'

There was no need to let other guys have it.

Mo Ha-rang buried the broken upper part of the flag in the ground out of sight and ran.

About two hours had passed like that.

Unlike before, there were people who found flags here and there, and teams were formed.

And naturally, as intended in this gateway, there were also confrontations when two teams simultaneously discovered one flag.

The two teams fiercely fought a bloody battle to claim the flag.

Their internal energy was absent, so it was almost like a brawl, but in the end, the victor was decided.

“Huff huff...”

The winning teammates exhaled rough breaths, covered in blood.

They newly realized how difficult it was to fight without internal energy.

A boy barely got up and surveyed the surroundings.

‘Ah...’

Out of the eight teammates, only five survived.

He had hoped no one would die, but that was just wishful thinking.

Fortunately, they had defended the flag, and they just needed to find three more teammates.

Whether that would be easy, he didn’t know.

“What should we do?”

“We have to defend the flag and wait, right?”

“Of course. We might lose the flag if we wander around.”

Everyone seemed to agree.

But one boy offered a different opinion.

“Wait a minute. If we just stay here and defend the flag, won’t we be at a disadvantage if another intact team appears?”

“Ah...”

That made sense too.

It was truly a dilemma.

But they couldn't give up the flag they had barely claimed.

While they were thinking that,

"You found the flag?"

-Gasp!

Everyone's gaze turned to where the voice came from.

Seeing someone standing there, they tensed up for a moment but soon felt relieved.

It was because they saw only one person standing.

'Thank goodness.'

If it had been another intact team, they would have been in trouble.

As that one person approached and revealed his face, the expressions of the relieved teammates stiffened.

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

The guy with the cruel hands, whom they were reluctant to accept as a teammate, had appeared.

"Stop right there! Don't move! Who are you?"

A boy stopped Mok Gyeong-un from approaching and asked.

"Who, you ask?"

"Didn't you join the team with some woman?"

This boy had seen Mok Gyeong-un join the team with Sohwa, the sole girl.

That's why he was asking this.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un made a regretful expression and said,

"Ah. They were all defeated."

“Defeated?”

“Yes.”

Mok Gyeong-un moved his eyes, glanced at the corpses around, and casually said,

“Our team also fought another team over the flag, like you guys, and they were all defeated, so I barely escaped.”

“You escaped alone?”

“Yes. With my tired body, I couldn’t face four of them alone.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, the boys looked at him with suspicious eyes.

But it wasn’t just suspicion.

They had just experienced a similar situation, so they thought it could certainly happen.

To them, Mok Gyeong-un spoke in a gentle voice,

“Since we both lost teammates, I think we fit together, so if it’s not a burden, could you accept me?”

“...”

They hesitated at this proposal.

The reason they didn’t accept him as a teammate in the first place was because he was creepy.

That wariness wouldn’t easily dissipate.

So they whispered cautiously and discussed among themselves.

“What should we do?”

“That guy is a bit weird. Should we just let him go?”

“But then what about the flag? It’s barely been two hours.”

There were still more than two hours left until dawn.

If other guys attacked during that time, they would inevitably lose the flag.

Then they would have to find a flag again, but it would be difficult with just five people.

“... Let’s accept him.”

“Accept him?”

“Yeah. Anyway, even that guy knows that we have to cooperate to pass this gateway, right?”

“Well, that’s true. Because eight people are needed to pass.”

No matter how reckless he was, he would still think.

That they had to join forces and defend this flag to pass this gateway.

Considering this, no matter how much of a troublemaker he was, he absolutely couldn’t harm them.

Having become convinced like this, one of the boys said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“Alright. But remember, until dawn, we are one. If we betray each other, we’re dead. Keep that in mind.”

At the boy’s words, Mok Gyeong-un nodded.

But his lips were twitching as if holding back laughter.

‘Ah. This is too good.’

It felt like they were setting the table for him.