

Mayhem 121

Chapter 121 – Demon Sword (1)

“If you agree to join me, I will give you one of the legendary demon swords, the Evil Commandment Sword[1].”

-Murmur murmur!

At the Shadow Master’s words, the crowd stirred.

“The Evil Commandment Sword?”

“Yes. He said the demon sword, Evil Commandment Sword.”

“That, that was in the Shadow Master’s possession?”

“Oh my...”

It wasn’t just the warriors wearing the red belts of Corpse Blood Valley who were astonished like this.

Even the executives who had their backs turned looked at the Shadow Master with surprised eyes.

Even the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, who was confident no matter what proposal the Shadow Master made, had his eyes wavering at the mention of the Evil Commandment Sword.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un swept his eyes around and wondered.

He had only mentioned a single sword, so why were they reacting like this?

-Ha... The Evil Commandment Sword.

Then, Cheong-ryeong's voice reached Mok Gyeong-un's ears.

She also seemed quite surprised, as her voice was filled with excitement.

Curious about her reaction, Mok Gyeong-un tried sending a silent message, focusing on the wooden puppet at his chest.

-Do you know what the Evil Commandment Sword is?

-Huh?

It was a doubtful silent message.

But she replied in a surprised voice.

-How in the world did you do that?

-Ah. It's called a silent message. I thought it might work, and it seems you can hear it.

Even though she was sealed in the wooden puppet, it seemed possible because this was also a method of transmitting sound.

-When did you learn this?

-The Summoning Sound Valley Master over there taught me.

-I see you learned it from that flirtatious wench who uses Sound Techniques.

-Yes.

-I think I've heard of it. There are some among the Shaolin monks who know how to use this method.

-Anyway, why are you and everyone else so surprised?

At Mok Gyeong-un's question, Cheong-ryeong clicked her tongue.

However, since Mok Gyeong-un barely knew anything about the martial world, it was right to explain it to him.

-Among the blacksmiths who make weapons, there are those who are called master craftsmen. The weapons made by them gain fame and are called famous swords or unrivaled weapons.

-I think I've heard of them. Like the Heaven Reliant Sword[2], Gan Jiang, or Mo Ye[3], right?

-Yeah. That's it.

-What?

-Gan Jiang and Mo Ye.

-Gan Jiang and Mo Ye?

-Yes. Those are called famous swords, but they are also known as demon swords.

-I didn't know that.

Mok Gyeong-un learned writing and scholarship through his grandfather.

In his studies, he heard various ancient tales and only knew that Gan Jiang and Mo Ye were made by heating a furnace with Mo Ye's hair and nails at the request of King Helü of Wu.

-Do you know who the master of Gan Jiang and Mo Ye was?

-Master? Could it be Ou...

-Yes. The Evil Commandment Sword was made by their master, the great craftsman Ou Yezi.

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes glinted with interest.

That was because if it was Ou Yezi, he was known as the greatest craftsman of his time and even to this day.

The Great Craftsman Ou Yezi[4].

Even now, the swords that could be called the best were made during the Spring and Autumn period, and half of those famous swords were made by the great craftsman Ou Yezi of the Yue (越) Kingdom.

The legendary famous swords such as Great Destroyer, Juque[5], Black, Zhànlú[6], Purity, Chúnjūn[7], Victory over Evil, Shengxie[8], Fish-belly, Yuchang[9], Dragon Gulf, Longyuan[10], Great Riverbank, Tai'e[11], and Artisanal Display, Gongbu[12] were all born from his hands.

These were famous swords that anyone with a little education would know, as there were many well-known anecdotes and tales about them.

-That's interesting. Ou Yezi... But I don't think I've heard of the Evil Commandment Sword before.

-That's to be expected. Those were the swords Ou Yezi wanted to keep hidden.

-He wanted to keep them hidden?

-Literally. There was a strange legend circulating among craftsmen a long time ago.

-What strange legend?

-The legend that if you make a sword using the flesh and blood of a living human as an offering, the greatest famous sword will be born.

Making a sword with a living human?

For ordinary people, it would be a story that not only gave them goosebumps but also made them express shock.

However, at those words, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un's mouth curved up.

-That's cool.

-What?

-No, it's nothing. So, is that Evil Commandment Sword made by offering a living human?

-That's not known for certain. In the historical records of ancient times, there is a record that Ou Yezi succeeded in melting the Guanya black iron, which was said to be unmeltable, and made a few unknown demon swords.

At her words, Mok Gyeong-un asked in wonder.

-You're calling it a demon sword, not a famous sword.

-There's a reason it's called that. It's...

As she was about to answer, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, stepped forward and said,

“The Evil Commandment Sword? How is it that you, Sir Shadow Master, have it?”

At his question, the Shadow Master covered his mouth and replied,

“Ohoho. Somehow, I was fortunate enough to acquire it not long ago. You see, I have a personal hobby of collecting famous weapons.”

“Collecting?”

“Yes. Didn't I give your eldest disciple, Grand Elder Woo Ho-rang, the famous Fierce Tiger Blade that I had in my possession?”

At those words, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, recalled an event from six years ago.

As a gift for his eldest disciple Woo Ho-rang becoming a Grand Elder, the Shadow Master had given him the famous blade Fierce Tiger Blade, Hogul[13].

The Fierce Tiger Blade was a famous blade made by Moo Ha-tae, who was known as the most talented craftsman of his time, possessing a sharpness that could cut through even giant rocks with a single stroke.

It was a blade that suited Woo Ho-rang perfectly.

“...I'm still grateful for that. But what you're talking about now is a demon sword. Isn't it literally a cursed sword?”

‘Cursed?’

What does that mean?

As he wondered, the Shadow Master shrugged his shoulders and said it was fine.

“It’s just a sword that hasn’t found its owner. To the chosen owner, it’s an endless famous sword. Isn’t there a clear example of that? Like the Renowned Cleaving Sword[14] of Wee Tak-hyun, the Vice Alliance Leader of the Righteous Alliance.”

At those words, the crowd stirred once again.

Wee Tak-hyun, the Vice Alliance Leader of the Righteous Alliance.

He was one of the Eight Stars of the Six Heavens and Eight Stars and was known as one of the top five swordsmen in the current martial world.

However, the reason they were surprised wasn’t because of this peerless master named Wee Tak-hyun.

Son Yun frowned and said,

“Are you saying that without knowing how the previous owners of that Renowned Cleaving Sword sword all died of illness within half a year?”

That’s right.

The Renowned Cleaving Sword, another demon sword known to have been made by the great craftsman Ou Yezi.

Because of that sword, countless swordsmen engaged in bloody conflicts, and there were several instances where the owner changed.

However, the owners who possessed this sword all died of illness within half a year without exception.

“That’s too dangerous...”

“But hasn’t Wee Tak-hyun been fine for fifteen years?”

Everyone died.

However, there was a single exception: Wee Tak-hyun, the Vice Alliance Leader of the Righteous Alliance, one of the Eight Stars, known as the Sword of Satisfaction[15].

“He is a peerless master who has surpassed the wall. He’s different from the previous owners.”

With those words, Son Yun looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

No matter how outstanding his talent was, he still considered him an unpolished gem.

Giving a demon sword to such an unpolished gem was a dangerous act.

“Demon swords aren’t called demon swords for nothing. If you really want to entice this child, it would be better to replace it with another collected item...”

“Alright.”

“What?”

In an instant, at Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Son Yun furrowed his brows.

What did this guy just say?

Did he not properly hear why he said that demon sword was dangerous?

As he was thinking that, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“If I go with the Shadow Master, you’re saying you’ll give me that sword called the Evil Commandment Sword, right?”

“You?”

Could this guy possibly be coveting it just because it was made by the great craftsman Ou Yezi?

At this, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, dissuaded him with a somewhat heavy expression.

“Listen, child. That’s not a sword you should covet yet.”

“It’s not a sword I should covet?”

At this question, Son Yun clicked his tongue and said,

“It’s not to belittle you. As I said earlier, a demon sword is literally a demon sword. You seem to be taking my words lightly because you’re young and have a strong desire, but it’s not a sword to approach with idle greed or curiosity.”

This was a sincere warning from Son Yun.

Although Ou Yezi’s demon swords gained attention due to Wee Tak-hyun, just fifteen years ago, four owners lost their lives because of it.

Considering the case of the Renowned Cleaving Sword, Son Yun believed the Evil Commandment Sword would be no different.

-What do you think?

Mok Gyeong-un sent a silent message to Cheong-ryeong.

Then, she replied,

-His words aren't unreasonable.

-What do you mean by that?

-Even before I died, the martial world was engulfed in a storm of blood because of the Great Craftsman Ou Yezi's demon swords.

-It seems there's more than one.

-Yes. It's not known exactly how many there are, but a few are known. Renowned Cleaving Sword, Fear-Killing Sword[16], Evil Commandment Sword...

Although she was dead, the memories were still vivid.

Three swords were discovered in a collapsed royal tomb by a local official and a wealthy merchant.

Those three swords brought a storm of blood to the martial world at that time.

Recalling this, she soon said,

-To be honest, if it were before I died, I would have definitely told you not to covet that demon sword.

-What about now?

-If there is a vengeful spirit in the demon sword, it could also become a source of power for you.

This was Cheong-ryeong's honest opinion.

Mok Gyeong-un had already absorbed Cheong-ryeong's energy, the Gu poison, and even the spiritual beast-level Imaemangnyang, who were weakened due to being sealed, making it his own power.

Considering this, no matter how notorious the demon sword was, she didn't think there would be something so tremendously dangerous to that extent.

-But you're not choosing the Shadow Master because of the demon sword, are you?

At Cheong-ryeong's question, Mok Gyeong-un smiled faintly.

Of course, that wasn't the reason.

Although he was interested in the so-called demon sword, it wasn't enough to change his planned objective.

However,

-That's not the reason, but it turned out to be a coincidence.

-You, mortal...

She had been continuously advising him to choose one of the two Five Kings.

It was because being close to someone in a high position would allow him to get closer to the core.

But Mok Gyeong-un's thoughts were different.

-The Shadow Clan plays the role of shadows, handling information and intelligence, right?

-Mortal... I know you have a lot of interest in things like information, but once you reach a high position, such things will naturally...

While she was speaking, the Shadow Master opened his mouth again.

“Ohoho. The Bright Blade King's words also have a point. Indeed, it's true that demon swords are somewhat dangerous, but since it's also a famous sword made by the Great Craftsman Ou Yezi, I offered it to win that child's favor.”

At those words, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, softly said, “You've thought well.”

He thought the Shadow Master had taken a step back.

However,

“But it's a bit awkward to withdraw what I've said in front of everyone watching, isn't it?”

“What?”

“Then, how about this? What if we let that child hold the Evil Commandment Sword once and see if he has the potential to become its owner?”

‘!?’

At the Shadow Master's words, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun's expression twisted.

He had said that demon swords were dangerous and shouldn't be given, but now he was going further and suggesting to let him hold it, as if he was taking his words lightly.

"Shadow Master, I clearly..."

"Coincidentally, I happened to bring the sword with me."

"You... brought the sword? What do you mean by that?"

-Snap!

The Shadow Master snapped his fingers.

Then, the martial artists who seemed to be from the Shadow Clan, dressed in black and waiting behind the platform, ran off somewhere.

Soon after, they carefully brought back a long wooden box, carried by two people on a wooden plank.

Everyone's attention was focused on the wooden box, which appeared to be the exact length of a sword (劍).

"Why in the world did you bring this?"

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun, asked in an incomprehensible tone.

It was already a dangerous sword.

He couldn't understand why it was brought all the way to Corpse Blood Valley.

At that question, the Shadow Master smiled slightly, clasped his hands together, bowed his waist, and replied,

“I apologize, but I cannot answer that question, so please understand.”

“Understand? Are you avoiding my question now?”

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun’s voice was filled with anger.

His energy was surging, as if he was ready to have a showdown at any moment.

“Ah, ah, ah. No choice, I guess.”

At this, the Shadow Master approached Son Yun and whispered something in his ear.

Then, Son Yun’s eyes, which had been filled with anger, narrowed.

Son Yun also said something softly.

In that way, the whispered conversation between the two went back and forth a few times.

Then, the Shadow Master said in an audible voice,

“What do you think?”

At those words, Son Yun remained silent for a moment before replying,

“...If it becomes a problem, I will have it confiscated at any time.”

“That’s perfectly reasonable.”

What in the world did the Shadow Master say that made the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, suddenly change his attitude?

As he was wondering, the Shadow Master turned his head to Mok Gyeong-un and said,

“Ohoho. That took a bit long. Anyway, since the Bright Blade King also gave his advice, it seems difficult to simply give you this sword, so would you like to hold it once?”

With those words, the Shadow Master nodded to his subordinates.

Then, a warrior opened the tightly closed lid of the wooden box.

The executives who were already curious about the Evil Commandment Sword got up from their seats, turned their bodies, and looked at it.

‘!?’

However, inside the opened wooden box, there was another wooden box.

And on the outside of that wooden box, numerous talismans were stuck all over.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes sparkled.

It might not be visible to the eyes of others, but to Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes, an ominous demonic energy (妖氣) was leaking out through the gaps where the talismans were attached.

‘It really seems to be a demon sword.’

If it weren't for the talismans, the energy would have been even more exposed on the surface.

The Shadow Master pointed to this wooden box with his hand and said,

“Take it out and hold it yourself. If the sword chooses you, I will give you that instead of a substitute. Ah, of course, on the premise that you come to the Shadow Clan.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un walked forward.

And he placed his hand on the wooden box, which was covered in talismans.

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun's eyes watching this turned peculiar.

He recalled what the Shadow Master had said just before.

[It's difficult to say why I brought it, but let me tell you something interesting.]

[Something interesting?]

[I also found out only after obtaining this, but that sword makes human desires surface.]

[It makes desires surface? What do you mean by that?]

[Literally. It makes you unable to control your own desires.]

[How could you bring such a dangerous thing...]

[Aren't you curious? What the true desire of that child who defected to our sect is?]

[...]

Mok Gyeong-un's true desire.

Would the Evil Commandment Sword really reveal that desire as the Shadow Master said?

Chapter 122 – Demon Sword (2)

Mok Gyeong-un's hand was reaching towards the wooden box covered in talismans.

[That sword makes human desires surface.]

[It makes desires surface? What do you mean by that?]

[Literally. It makes you unable to control your own desires. Aren't you curious? What the true desire of that child who defected to our sect is?]

Mok Gyeong-un's true desire.

Since desire is a deep wish, it was akin to one's actual inner thoughts.

Even the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, was curious about it.

Although he had declared his defection, Son Yun didn't really believe it was genuine.

There was a high probability that he did it to avoid the current situation.

Then, what was that fellow's true objective?

-Creak!

The lid of the wooden box covered in talismans opened under Mok Gyeong-un's hand.

As the lid opened, the Evil Commandment Sword wrapped in a leather scabbard was revealed.

The moment he tried to take a closer look, Son Yun felt goosebumps on his arm from something strange that stimulated his five senses.

-Flinch!

‘What is this?’

It's a feeling that can't be explained.

This was felt not through spirit perception, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it stimulated the five senses, no, the sixth sense.

That subtle ominousness one might feel when walking alone on a dark night path.

It was as if it had been maximized.

‘Is this what they call a demon sword?’

It's clearly different from those called famous swords or famous blades.

Those didn't have this unpleasant feeling from the beginning, but this stimulated the senses even while wrapped in leather.

‘Hmm.’

The Shadow Master, who had been observing Mok Gyeong-un's reaction more closely than the contents inside, had a glint of interest in his eyes.

He had already seen it.

That's why he knew that most people would be engulfed in a strange sensation the moment they saw that sword for the first time.

However, Mok Gyeong-un's reaction was different from what he expected.

“Hmm.”

Mok Gyeong-un was unaffected.

Rather, he was looking at the sword in the scabbard with interest.

An indescribably strange ominousness was emanating from that demon sword, yet he showed such a reaction, so he truly wasn't ordinary.

-How is it?

Cheong-ryeong asked Mok Gyeong-un.

Being sealed in a wooden puppet, it was difficult for her to discern the external energy.

At her question, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes narrowed.

-It's...different.

-Different?

The energy Mok Gyeong-un was looking at was similar to the demonic energy of the Two Demonic Beauties, but also resembled the ominous spiritual energy of vengeful spirits.

It was a complex energy that he had never felt before.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un's lips curled up as if he found it interesting.

-I think I'll know if I touch it directly.

The ominous energy emanating from the sword was tempting him.

It was telling him to remove the scabbard and grasp its hilt.

‘If it wants, I should oblige, right?’

Mok Gyeong-un grasped the scabbard and lifted the Evil Commandment Sword.

And with his right hand, he gripped the hilt.

At the same time,

-Shing!

He freed the sword from the leather scabbard.

“Ooh.”

“Is that the Evil Commandment Sword?”

“Ah! It’s indeed a precious sword.”

Exclamations poured out from here and there.

With a small groove carved near the center of the hilt and a unique pattern drawn on the blade, it was as if looking at a work of art.

Half of the blade was black, and the other half was white, adding to the antique and beautiful atmosphere.

-Gulp!

Son Yun, who got to see it up close, unknowingly swallowed his saliva.

The moment he saw the sword, greed arose from deep within his heart without him realizing it.

Even though he wasn’t a swordsman.

However, in that instant, Son Yun drew up his true energy and gathered his senses.

‘Demon sword...it’s definitely a demon sword.’

For someone like him who had no interest in swords to feel greed the moment he saw a sword, it was truly a strange occurrence.

If one were to be bewitched by it, a great disaster would unfold.

Son Yun looked around.

‘This...’

As expected, the concerns he had came to fruition.

Some of the warriors of Corpse Blood Valley and those brought by the executives were walking over with blank eyes as if they were possessed by something.

Judging this situation to be dangerous, Son Yun infused his true energy and let out a shout.

“Roar!”

-Roar! Roar! Roar! Roar! Roar!

At the same time, Son Yun’s shout spread out in all directions like an echo.

This intense shout infused with true energy was none other than the Lion’s Roar[1].

As Son Yun’s Lion’s Roar resonated throughout the entire plaza, those who had been momentarily possessed by desire as if bewitched by something all covered their ears at once.

“Ugh!”

“My, my ears?”

They weren't the only ones who regained their senses after being shaken by the tremendous shout.

‘Huh?’

‘What is this?’

The two Grand Elders also unknowingly half-rose from their chairs for a moment, then gathered their senses with perplexed expressions while circulating their energy.

It was a moment when they directly experienced the power of the demon sword they had only heard about.

Still, it ended at this level because they didn't personally hold it.

‘Mok Gyeong-un?’

Son Yun looked at Mok Gyeong-un with worried eyes.

However, contrary to his concerns, Mok Gyeong-un was looking at the sword with indifferent eyes.

What's this?

There wasn't a hint of greed in those eyes.

The Shadow Master also found this strange.

‘Hmm. What is it?’

He had already seen his subordinates being possessed by desire several times after grasping that sword.

Didn't he himself also reveal the desires he had hidden the moment he grasped it?

[Shadow Master, how could you...]

[Ah ah ah...did I say such a thing?]

He still couldn't forget the expression his dead subordinate had made.

It was truly a regrettable incident.

That demon sword was a genuinely dangerous sword.

The Shadow Master had obtained what he had longed for, but he decided to give up his desire to collect it.

It was an uncontrollable demon.

‘...There's no way he doesn't have desires.’

Even he, who prided himself on having a strong willpower, had revealed the desires he had hidden because of that demon.

However, no matter how outstanding Mok Gyeong-un's talent was, there was no way a greenhorn like him could endure the power of that demon.

Right at that moment,

-Thud!

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes closed, and his head tilted back.

Seeing this, the Shadow Master muttered with gleaming eyes,

“As expected.”

There was no way he wouldn't be captivated by the demon sword.

-Mortal? Mortal?

Cheong-ryeong called out to Mok Gyeong-un, who had suddenly lost consciousness.

She didn't know what was happening.

He had said it was a unique energy and that he would try absorbing it through the Ritual of Binding, but he suddenly lost consciousness.

Just what was going on?

Jeong ran.

After running for a while and reaching the top of the mountain,

‘!?’

Jeong frowned.

He saw black smoke there.

The place where the smoke was rising from was where the house was located.

Seeing this, Jeong threw the water jug and ran like crazy towards that place.

Soon, he arrived there.

-Crackle crackle!

The scorching heat was felt.

The house was burning fiercely.

Jeong's face stiffened terribly.

Jeong, who was hurriedly looking around, ran to the back of the burning house.

There was a small vegetable garden in the backyard.

Normally, his grandfather would wake up early in the morning and pick medicinal herbs in the vegetable garden.

‘Please...please...’

Jeong, who ran to the vegetable garden, stopped in his tracks.

Through his eyes that had widened as if they would burst, he saw something stained with blood.

Things that should be inside the body were scattered in the vegetable garden.

-Gnash!

Jeong gritted his teeth.

And he followed the trail of blood and fragments.

Looking down the hill, Jeong shouted,

“Grandfather!”

His grandfather was there.

The sight of his grandfather with only the upper body remaining, the lower part torn away, was indescribably horrible.

Jeong’s face, looking at this, was distorted like a demon, along with sadness.

The killing intent that had been pressing deep in his chest filled his mind.

-No.

At that moment, everything stopped.

-The killing intent from revenge...this isn’t your fundamental desire.

The entity examining the memories shook its head.

Revenge could also become a desire, but this wasn't the desire that this person fundamentally possessed.

-Show me your true desire.

It wanted to see the desire closest to the purest origin.

That desire was the very reason for its existence.

-You're truly peculiar. Who blocked the origin of your desire?

It dug deep into the depths of the mind and discovered a huge wall filling all sides.

The moment it saw this wall, it didn't hide its bewilderment.

Strong willpower was sometimes projected in this way as a wall.

However, this didn't seem to be created by the will of Mok Gyeong-un, no, the one called Jeong, but rather planted by someone.

-To erect a wall of lamentation in another person's mind. How truly strange.

An artificially created wall.

Here, a strong emotion beyond the sadness and vengeance seen earlier was felt.

This was blocking the origin of this fellow named Jeong.

However, once this seemingly impenetrable wall of lamentation was shattered, the origin of desire that had been accumulating would pour out.

-I will open this for you.

The wall of lamentation that seemed like it would never open.

However, it had the ability to open even this.

There was no need to break the wall.

If the nature of the wall was changed so that it would naturally flow out,

-Slither!

The wall was meant to become a path.

It was right at that moment.

-Whoosh!

Something began to pour out from a part of the wall that had become a path.

It was,

-Darkness?

Deep darkness.

It was difficult to even see it as a fragment of desire.

-What in the world is this?

How could such deep darkness be lurking inside a human?

It began to feel ecstasy upon seeing this.

It thought it was close to the high-purity desire it had been searching for.

It entrusted its spiritual body to the pouring darkness.

If it absorbed this and became one, an individual of sword-human unity[2] made solely of the high-purity desire it had longed for would be born.

-Now, let's become one.

It tried to assimilate with this darkness.

However,

-!?

At that moment, it realized that this darkness wasn't simple.

-This is...

It wasn't high-purity darkness.

This was turbidity itself, dizzying enough to make one lose their mind.

This turbidity that seemed to destroy everything was...

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un, who had his head tilted back, slowly raised it.

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun, carefully observed Mok Gyeong-un.

It was clear that he was possessed by the demon sword, but what kind of desire he had would soon...

‘!?’

Pitch-black eyes like black jade.

They were like an endless abyss.

‘...What happened to his eyes?’

Is that the state of desires being expressed?

Something was strange.

At that moment, one of the Grand Elders, the Flame Demon Grand Elder Bo Hyuk-so, shouted at Mok Gyeong-un,

“You bastard! Come to your senses!”

Judging by Mok Gyeong-un's condition, it seemed like he was definitely captivated by the demon sword.

Thinking that he needed to be awakened immediately, Bo Hyuk-so hurriedly tried to separate the demon sword from Mok Gyeong-un's hand.

Right at that moment,

-Swish!

Bo Hyuk-so grabbed his own neck.

Then, he widened his eyes and broke out in a cold sweat like someone under immense tension.

‘!?’

Just what was he doing?

Bo Hyuk-so's eyes were trembling like crazy.

Seeing his appearance, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, wondered what was happening and the moment he met Mok Gyeong-un's eyes,

‘Huh?’

In an instant, it was as if time had passed quickly, the sky turned red and then darkened, and the ground all around was stained with sticky blood.

It was definitely the same place.

However, all the people around had their necks cut or various parts of their bodies torn off, screaming in agony.

Every being breathing within this plaza was suffering a horrible death or agonizing in the face of it.

‘What in the world...’

What was happening?

As he was engrossed in questions and looking around,

-Crackle crackle!

The bodies of those who were dead or dying all began to burn at once.

The red and crimson flames soon turned blue, gradually darkening from purple, and ultimately transformed into black flames.

-Crackle crackle crackle!

These black flames quickly became a fire demon and tried to devour everything around.

Surprised by this, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, tried to leap back to avoid it.

However,

‘I can’t move.’

His body wouldn’t move as if someone was holding him.

He couldn't understand what was going on.

-Crackle crackle crackle!

The black flames that had devoured everything around had grown enormous and tried to swallow him.

Although Son Yun wasn't greatly afraid of death, it was so eerie that he unknowingly closed his eyes for a moment.

In an instant, silence came, and nothing could be heard.

Then,

-Swish!

Soon, the surroundings brightened, and the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, opened his closed eyes.

However,

‘No?’

The plaza that had been devoured and burned by black flames had somehow returned to normal, and the Flame Demon Grand Elder, Bo Hyuk-so, was seen drenched in cold sweat with heavy breathing.

But that wasn't all.

The Shadow Master also seemed shocked by something, looking around with surprised eyes.

It was as if he had also seen something.

While that was happening,

-Clang clang clang!

A strange resonance sound that hurt the ears spread from somewhere.

‘This sound is?’

The source of it was none other than the demon sword, Evil Commandment Sword.

The blade of the Evil Commandment Sword was trembling wildly on its own, and this resonance sound seemed to be coming from the groove carved in the middle.

It was as if the sword was in agony.

-This can't be...this is...chaos...

Itself.

It trembled in fear, swept away by the chaos-like darkness.

It had tried to become one with this origin, but it felt like it would be devoured by it instead.

While that was happening,

-Whoosh!

In an instant, the overflowing darkness was rewound as if time was going backward, and Mok Gyeong-un, no, Jeong, was sitting in front of the pierced wall of lamentation with his chin resting on his hand.

-!!!!

Seeing his appearance, it trembled even more crazily.

Fear, dread.

These emotions were the by-products of humans that it had never felt before.

But just what was that?

At this, Jeong wiggled his index finger and clicked his tongue, saying,

“Not yet.”

-Snap!

With those words, he lightly flicked his finger.

Then, the will of that entity, no, the will of the Evil Commandment Sword that had dug into his psyche, disappeared from this space as if it had been extinguished.

-Sizzle!

Soon, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes, which had turned black like black jade, returned to normal.

As if nothing had happened.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had regained his senses, frowned and then looked around.

‘Huh?’

However, starting from the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, to the Shadow Master and the other executives, they were all looking at him with serious expressions.

Chapter 123 – Demon Sword (3)

A white-haired man with his entire body bound in iron chains.

Having been imprisoned for a long time, his long beard was unkempt.

Looking at his face in the flickering torchlight, he appeared to be in his mid-thirties at most, but his hair and beard had turned white.

Despite being in an uncomfortable position due to the iron chains, the white-haired man's expression showed no change.

It was as if he had no expression at all.

-Clink!

The man slowly raised his head and looked at the moonlight visible through the iron bars.

Tomorrow, his execution would be carried out.

Would he then be able to understand the sensations of fear and dread?

Those facing death all had expressions filled with agony.

Would he end up like that too?

Even at this moment facing death, he felt nothing.

Why was he born like this?

He didn't know.

As he was pondering, a strong wind suddenly blew into the prison cell.

-Whoosh!

Then, the torch illuminating the cell went out.

[What?]

The drowsy jailer's voice was heard as he got up.

But soon, the sound of something collapsing on the floor followed.

-Thud!

‘What is it?’

As he wondered, the sound of someone walking towards the cell filled with darkness was heard.

It was the footsteps of one person.

But when he looked ahead, he saw two figures in the darkness.

‘Two people?’

Although his danjeon was sealed, they were right in front of him, yet he couldn’t sense their presence at all.

They must be truly skilled martial artists.

As he was thinking that, a small voice was heard.

[Seo Ga-ui, the Thousand Heads Tower[1]... The vicious man who beheaded a thousand people and built a tower with their heads. Sufficient as material.]

[Oh my...]

A sigh followed.

Looking ahead, there was a monk with his hands behind his back, pointing at the cell, and an old man frowning and looking at him.

In the moonlight, he could only tell that he was an old man, but this strange scent he smelled...

‘The scent of charcoal and iron...’

[A blacksmith?]

At the white-haired man's words, interest glinted in the old man's eyes.

The old man stared at him intently and then spoke.

[Young man, why did you do such a thing?]

At the old man's question, the white-haired man, no, Seo Ga-ui, replied with an expressionless gaze.

[I don't know.]

[You don't know? Then you just did it?]

[...I just wanted to know.]

[Wanted to know?]

[I wanted to know what emotions were.]

[Emotions?]

[Yes.]

He had none of the emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, or happiness.

From a young age, he didn't know what they were, so he wanted to know those emotions.

That was what he had desired most in his life.

[I just wanted to know what they were.]

A strange desire, different from ordinary people.

Why did this desire lead to such a twisted end?

[If that was the reason, there were many other ways. Why did you do that to so many people...]

He couldn't finish his words.

The severed heads by his hand all had expressions of despair and pain.

He stacked them like a work of art to build a tower.

[...Because fear and dread were easier than joy or happiness.]

[Easier?]

[In the face of death, everyone shows those emotions.]

[Oh my...]

At his words, the old man clicked his tongue.

Then he soon said,

[This old man finds it hard to understand you, young man. But if you have such a twisted desire and obsession, you have the qualifications.]

[Qualifications?]

[Don't you want to leave something behind in this world before you die, young man?]

[What do you mean by that?]

As he wondered, the old man curled his lips and said,

[How about offering yourself for the birth of an unprecedented sword?]

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un looked at the Evil Commandment Sword he was holding.

He couldn't understand what had just happened.

He tried to absorb the unique energy of the Evil Commandment Sword through the Ritual of Binding, but as it was absorbed into his body, it instantly dug into his mind.

Then, not long after, he regained his senses.

‘Hmm. What is this?’

Various memories that weren't his own were mixed up in his mind.

Whose memories were these?

Memories rose up in fragments, jumbled together.

The most intense memory was,

[Aaaaaaargh!]

Along with the sight of jumping into molten iron, it was a horrific memory of his entire body melting.

It seemed to have happened while he was alive, but what was strange about this scene was that even while suffering like this, he felt ecstasy.

Why did he feel joy while facing such a terrible death?

It was a truly peculiar memory.

‘Huh?’

No.

These fragmented memories.

The only time emotions were revealed was the moment he faced death.

After that, strangely, it wasn't his own memories but the memories of numerous people that were mixed together.

Among them,

‘The Shadow Clan Master?’

The Shadow Clan Master’s appearance was also seen.

It was just a fleeting fragment, but that memory was truly fascinating.

As he was thinking that, a resonance sound came from the sword he was holding.

-Woooong!

Mok Gyeong-un looked at the Evil Commandment Sword.

Then, the Evil Commandment Sword trembled, making a resonance sound.

It looked as if it was trembling in fear and submitting.

Seeing this, the corner of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth curled up.

‘What in the world is this?’

The Shadow Clan Master looked around with surprised eyes.

For a moment, he saw a scene where thousands and tens of thousands of swords overturned everything around, and everyone here became a hive of swords and died.

As he was perplexed, looking at those who died like that, in an instant, the corpses were engulfed in black flames, and everything turned to ashes.

Startled, he came to his senses and realized it was all an illusion.

As if he had seen a phantom.

-Drip!

The human skin mask was drenched in sweat, and the scene was so vivid.

It felt like unstoppable destruction and chaos.

Could one feel such heart-pounding fear from a mere illusion?

“Huff... Huff...”

Interest glinted in the Shadow Clan Master’s eyes.

Not only that, but all the executives around him had surprised faces as if they were possessed by something.

Even the two Great Clan Leaders, Bo Hyuk-so, grabbed their necks and let out rough breaths.

Did they see a phantasm of their necks being cut?

‘What is going on?’

The Shadow Clan Master felt bewildered by this strange situation.

How could it be that not just one or two people, but everyone around him was seeing such illusions?

The Shadow Clan Master looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

‘!?’

His eyes trembled.

Something was strange.

He clearly saw Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes turn smooth like black jade just a moment ago.

But now they were perfectly fine.

Could it be that even that was an illusion?

‘What is this?’

The one holding the demon sword Evil Commandment Sword was Mok Gyeong-un.

But why did they see such illusions?

He had let him hold the sword to find out what his desires were, but he didn’t know why this happened.

‘Could it be?’

As he was thinking that, Mok Gyeong-un lightly swung the sword.

The crisp sound of the sword cutting through the air made the Shadow Clan Master’s eyes widen.

It was the same for the Bright Blade King, Son Yun.

“You?”

He didn’t know what that terrible illusion he had just seen was, but looking at Mok Gyeong-un now, it seemed as if he wasn’t affected by the demon sword at all.

Moreover, that ominous energy that had been felt from the sword was no longer there.

At this, Son Yun asked,

“…Are you alright?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

‘He’s fine?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Son Yun furrowed his brows.

Was he really fine?

Looking at the executives around him, for a fleeting moment, they all had faces as if they had seen something illusory, just like him.

This couldn’t have happened by chance.

“…Can you give the sword to this king for a moment?”

“The sword?”

“Yes.”

The reason Son Yun asked this question was simple.

He knew various tales related to demon swords and knew that those captivated by them would become obsessed with the demon sword.

So, if Mok Gyeong-un was truly chosen as the master by the demon sword and was unaffected, he thought he would readily hand it over.

At that moment,

“Here it is.”

Mok Gyeong-un readily placed his palm on the blade and politely brought the Evil Commandment Sword with both hands.

Seeing this, Son Yun’s eyes narrowed.

Was this child really chosen by the Evil Commandment Sword?

‘...I’ll know if I hold it myself.’

Son Yun reached out his hand towards the hilt of the Evil Commandment Sword in Mok Gyeong-un’s hands.

Then, the Shadow Clan Master hurriedly tried to stop him.

“Your Excellency, the Bright Blade King!”

“It’s fine. I’m just checking for a moment.”

At his words, the Shadow Clan Master looked at him with concerned eyes.

Of course, he knew for what purpose he was trying to hold the sword, but even he, who had reached the proficient-stage Transcendent Realm, had lost his reason for a moment because of the sword.

Even if the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, was a master who had reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm before the wall, it was just as dangerous.

However,

-Tap!

Son Yun grabbed the hilt and lifted it up, but nothing happened.

The sword, which had seemed so ominous just a moment ago, was now shining with the light of an ordinary famous sword, modestly showing off its elegance.

‘What?’

Where did that ominous energy go?

The resonance sound was also not heard.

Son Yun, who had been lightly swinging the sword, looked at the Shadow Clan Master with puzzled eyes.

The Shadow Clan Master also looked at the Evil Commandment Sword with eyes that couldn’t understand the situation.

The sword that had troubled him so much after coming into his possession had become so docile.

He truly couldn't understand it.

‘Did that child really receive the Evil Commandment Sword's choice?’

Seeing that nothing happened even when Son Yun held it for a long time, it seemed that the Evil Commandment Sword, which had chosen its master, had transformed from a demon sword to a famous sword.

It was truly amazing.

The Shadow Clan Master exclaimed,

“Your Excellency, the Bright Blade King. It seems the true master of the Evil Commandment Sword has been determined.”

In this way, Mok Gyeong-un obtained the legendary demon sword, Evil Commandment Sword, made by the great craftsman Ou Yezi.

In the process, the nearby executives saw strange illusions, but even though they found it questionable, they all kept silent as if they had made a promise.

In fact, it was awkward to suddenly mention that everyone saw an illusion of reaching destruction at this gathering, and even though it was just a fleeting moment, it was also a blow to their pride to say that they were captivated by the demon sword's demonic energy.

However, thanks to this, they realized one thing.

If there ever came a time when they had to confront that child named Mok Gyeong-un, they must make sure to separate the Evil Commandment Sword from his hands.

There was nothing unusual at the moment, but they couldn't shake off the thought that it was somehow dangerous.

‘It's regrettable.’

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun, couldn't hide his disappointment at losing Mok Gyeong-un.

Not the Thunderbolt Fist King, Won Byeong-hak, but he chose that Shadow Clan Master.

He never expected such a result to unfold just because of a demon sword.

It was disappointing, but there was nothing he could do.

‘I'll have to be satisfied with this child.’

The disciple the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, gained from the closing ceremony was none other than Mok Yu-cheon.

Another child of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor brought as a hostage.

Of course, this wasn't his choice.

It was entirely Mok Yu-cheon's choice.

[...I want to become stronger. Stronger than that guy.]

It was what Mok Yu-cheon had said in front of the executives.

That guy was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

At his words, most of the executives turned away.

It was because they considered Mok Yu-cheon, who had learned the strange Corpse Technique, a ticking time bomb.

However, the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, was the only one who didn't turn away.

Rather, he said to Mok Yu-cheon,

[You want to become stronger?]

[...Yes.]

[If you follow this king's teachings well, I can make you so.]

At those words, Mok Yu-cheon chose him without hesitation.

In fact, there was a hidden intention behind this.

The Bright Blade King, Son Yun, also didn't look favorably upon Mok Yu-cheon learning the strange evil techniques, but he accepted him as a disciple with Mok Gyeong-un in mind.

In any case, there was no one else he had in mind as a disciple other than Mok Gyeong-un, so it could be said to be a card to prepare for contingencies.

‘His value as a card to suppress that guy is sufficient.’

Mok Yu-cheon, who didn't know this, just wanted to become stronger.

And he hadn't forgotten the request made by the Righteous Alliance's Silent Strides' agent.

His goal was to rise to the highest position possible here and regain his honor as a member of the righteous faction.

‘This child's talent is also not inferior to his, so I should have expectations.’

The Thunderbolt Fist King, Won Byeong-hak, accepted Mu Jang-yak as his disciple.

Originally, he had his eye on Yeon Mu-ung of the Esoteric Realm Gate, but in terms of talent, Yeon Mu-ung wasn't even half as good as Mu Jang-yak.

‘Hmm. Well, it should be fine.’

The Valley Master of Summoning Sound, Hang Yeo-ryang, accepted Mo Ha-rang of the Demon Fire Hall as her disciple, as per her original goal.

Inwardly, she had been conflicted about Mok Yu-cheon like the Bright Blade King, Son Yun, but to her, those from the righteous faction were detestable whether they defected or not.

Therefore, she decided to stick to her original purpose.

Unfortunately, Yeom Ga of the Vermillion Slaughter Cave lost his life, so the remaining disciple, Yeon Mu-ung of the Esoteric Realm Gate, failed to achieve his goal and was chosen as a disciple by the Grand Elder of the Crimson Blood Sect, Dae So-man.

Only the Grand Elder of the Flame Demon Clan, Bo Hyuk-so, returned empty-handed without any achievement.

In this way, the entrance exam of Corpse Blood Valley ended safely.

The disciples who were selected by the executives who came as observers at the closing ceremony left with them to their residences.

Mok Gyeong-un also followed the Shadow Clan Master, whom he had chosen himself.

As they left Corpse Blood Valley, the Shadow Clan Master said,

“Ohoho. What a coincidence. I never thought I would accept a disciple who walks a completely different path from me.”

The Shadow Clan Master’s unique martial arts were Taoist techniques.

On the other hand, the unique martial arts Mok Gyeong-un mainly practiced could be said to be sword techniques.

Therefore, he was regretful about this aspect.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and said,

“I don’t particularly distinguish between swords and Tao, so if you give me teachings, I can learn as much as possible.”

At those words, the Shadow Clan Master spoke with delight, “Oho. Really?”

“Yes.”

“It requires a bit of a price, is that alright?”

A bit of a price? What does that mean?

As Mok Gyeong-un wondered, the Shadow Clan Master covered his mouth with his hand and said coquettishly, “My unique martial arts have strong yin energy, so to learn them, you have to be castrated.”

‘!?’

Chapter 124 – Shadow Clan (1)

In a wide room lit by a single candle.

There was a bed in the room, surrounded by bamboo blinds.

A shadow was sitting on the bed, revealed by the light shining through the bamboo blinds.

The shadow gulped down something that looked like medicinal wine and placed it on the table beside the bed.

“Cough, cough!”

The shadow coughed.

Someone was watching this scene with a somewhat bitter gaze.

It was a white-haired man in his early forties, without a single beard.

This man with snake-like eyes was Mong Seo-cheon, the second-in-command of the Heaven and Earth Society and the Vice Society Leader.

“Society Leader... How about summoning Crying Doctor Hoe Ta?”

Crying Doctor Hoe Ta [1].

Along with Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong[2], whose whereabouts had become unknown long ago, he was called the greatest physician of the era.

Unlike Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong, who was said to have reached the highest realm in medicine, he had mastered both external and internal studies and was so skilled in medicine that he served as the royal physician in the imperial palace in his youth.

“If it’s Crying Doctor Hoe Ta, the Society Leader’s...”

“No. It’s fine.”

A resolute voice came from behind the bamboo blinds.

Hearing this, Mong Seo-cheon clicked his tongue inwardly.

Why was he being so stubborn?

Thanks to his profound internal energy, he could endure, but if he couldn’t release the energy within his body, his illness would eventually deepen.

“Cough, cough. More importantly, I heard the results of the Corpse Blood Valley entrance exam are out?”

“...That’s right.”

“The observers?”

“Bright Blade King Son Yun, Thunderbolt Fist King Won Byeong-hak, Shadow Master, Summoning Sound Valley Leader Hang Yeo-ryang, Flame Demon Clan’s Grand Elder Bo Hyuk-so, Crimson Blood Clan’s Grand Elder Dae So-man, these six.”

“The assignments?”

“Except for the Flame Demon Clan’s Grand Elder Bo Hyuk-so, they each took one disciple.”

“I see. Anything unusual?”

At that question, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon sighed softly and opened his mouth.

“Do you remember sending the two hostage children of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor to Corpse Blood Valley?”

“Yeon Mok Sword Manor? Ah, yes. That happened.”

At the Society Leader’s reaction, Mong Seo-cheon clicked his tongue inwardly.

As expected, sending those two to Corpse Blood Valley seemed to have been a spur-of-the-moment whim.

The Society Leader he had known was that kind of man.

However, it seemed the time had come to face the backlash caused by that impulsive whim.

“The two hostage children...”

“They died?”

“...No.”

“They didn’t die?”

“Yes.”

“They must have been tougher than I thought. Cough, cough. Then, how far did they pass?”

“They passed the final gate.”

‘!?’

At that answer, the shadow behind the bamboo blinds flinched for a moment.

Was he surprised by the unexpected result?

Soon, a voice was heard.

“The hostages passed the final gate... An interesting turn of events.”

“...”

Could this simply be dismissed as an interesting event?

Not just anyone, but those who were brought as hostages from the righteous faction passed the final gate of Corpse Blood Valley.

If this spreads, there will be considerable controversy internally.

In a way, this was no different from a humiliating result for the Heaven and Earth Society.

“This is not a matter to be laughed off. Not the disciples of our sect, but the hostages from the righteous faction jointly took first place.”

“First place?”

“Yes. The Mok brothers both tied for first place.”

At the Vice Society Leader’s words, the shadow behind the bamboo blinds finally threw his head back and burst into laughter.

“First place? Hahahahaha! First place, you say?”

It was quite different from him who had taken the result seriously when he heard it.

He was finding it amusing as if it was someone else’s business.

Then, as if he had suffered internal injuries, he coughed violently, and his breathing became rough.

“Cough, cough... Ha... Ha...”

As expected, his internal injuries hadn’t healed at all.

Yet he was so stubborn.

That monstrous fellow dying was unimaginable, but if he really died suddenly like this, there would be a huge rift internally.

The Vice Society Leader clicked his tongue inwardly and soon said,

“Society Leader, this could potentially lower morale within the sect and cause problems. Rather than this, the fact that he learned the Sword Technique of the Moon...”

“No.”

-Swish!

Suddenly, the entire bamboo blind shook, and a sharp gaze was seen through the gaps.

“Gasp.”

The Vice Society Leader’s expression stiffened as he met that gaze.

The Society Leader’s aura was pressing down on the entire room, making it difficult to even breathe.

It was truly amazing that he could still exert this level of pressure despite lying in bed for a long time.

‘...He’s still alive.’

It wasn’t for nothing that he was called one of the Six Heavens at the pinnacle of the martial world.

Even if he wasn’t in his prime, it seemed there was no one in the fortress who could face the Society Leader.

Not even himself.

-Clench!

Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon clenched his fist, steadied his breathing, and calmed his trembling hand.

Then, the aura that had filled the room disappeared in an instant.

Soon after, the Society Leader opened his mouth.

“No. No. That’s still far from enough.”

‘...What is he talking about?’

Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon slightly furrowed his brows.

It was difficult to understand the meaning of what the Society Leader was saying now.

What was far from enough?

“Just leave the hostages alone.”

“...”

Is he serious?

If it becomes known that he sent them to Corpse Blood Valley and allowed them to become disciples of the observers regardless of their background, there will be those who question it.

Does he not care about that?

However, he couldn't voice any further objections.

"I understand."

In the Heaven and Earth Society, the Society Leader's orders were absolute.

"More importantly, have you found 'it'?"

The Society Leader changed the subject.

At his question, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon shook his head and replied,

"Not yet. However..."

And he quietly said something.

He was about to leave the main building after coming out of the Society Leader's residence.

Someone called out to Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon.

"Vice Society Leader."

At this, Mong Seo-cheon's eyes narrowed.

Just from the voice, he immediately recognized who had called him.

However, the problem was that he hadn't detected this person's location or presence until he called him.

‘...Has he progressed again?’

He had heard that he came out of seclusion a few days ago.

He had heard that there were results, but to think he had progressed to the point where even he had difficulty detecting his presence.

It was truly amazing.

“Young Master Jang.”

As he turned his head, a young man in his late twenties with curly hair and a bright appearance was standing there with a smirk on his face.

He was Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Society Leader.

Although he was considered to be on the lower end in terms of talent among the Society Leader's three disciples, that was only within those three. If compared to his peers, he boasted overwhelming talent.

The Society Leader's second disciple, Jang Neung-ak, said with a smirk that revealed his unique dimples,

“Is the Society Leader still obsessed with finding ‘that’?”

At his question, the Vice Society Leader smiled without a word.

It was because the conversation with the Society Leader should not be revealed to anyone.

That was the case even if it was a disciple.

At this, the second disciple Jang Neung-ak joked and said,

“I don’t understand why the Society Leader is so obsessed with such religious things. It would be better to spend that time searching for Crying Doctor Hoe Ta, don’t you think?”

Mong Seo-cheon inwardly agreed with those words.

However, who could stop the Society Leader’s stubbornness?

“He must have his reasons.”

“Ah, ah, ah.”

The Society Leader’s second disciple, Jang Neung-ak, shook his head at the Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon’s ambiguous answer.

It was always like this.

He was the Society Leader’s right-hand man and had the most influence after the Society Leader, so he wanted to win him over somehow, but it was particularly difficult.

If he tried to get close even a little, he would immediately distance himself.

Fortunately, he hadn’t taken anyone’s side yet.

‘But this is only for now.’

He would soon join him.

Jang Neung-ak said with a raised corner of his mouth,

“I obtained an interesting piece of information, but I’m not sure if you know about it.”

“An interesting piece of information?”

“Yes. I heard that the ones who passed the Corpse Blood Valley entrance exam as the top scorers were the hostages of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor brought by the Bright Blade King. Is that true?”

“...”

At that question, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon silently let out a soft sigh.

As expected, the rumors were already spreading.

The second disciple Jang Neung-ak must have quickly acquired this information, as he had a considerable number of supporters under his command.

If he knew this much, there was no need to hide it.

“That’s right.”

“Heh.”

‘Heh?’

Jang Neung-ak suddenly bit his thumbnail and laughed, holding back his laughter.

Seeing his behavior, worry arose in Mong Seo-cheon's eyes.

Having watched the Society Leader's disciples since they were young, he knew each one's personality better than anyone.

'This doesn't look good.'

When Jang Neung-ak became interested in something, the results were usually not very good.

If it was something that couldn't be touched in the first place, it was fine, but the moment he thought he could touch it, he became full of malice.

"Young Master, just in case, I'll say this..."

"Ah, ah, ah. Vice Society Leader. You don't think I'll do something to them just because they're from the righteous faction, do you?"

"...It's not that, but..."

"I'm just interested in the fact that even the righteous faction has those with such wickedness and talent."

"...Now they will become the strength of our sect, not the righteous faction."

"That's perfect. I hope that strength will be of help to me as well."

At his words, the Vice Society Leader was deeply concerned.

Jang Neung-ak was someone who would try to obtain and achieve what he wanted in any way possible.

Southeast outskirts of the Heaven and Earth Society's inner fortress.

There, the headquarters of the Shadow Clan[3] was located.

As he entered the Shadow Clan, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes glinted with interest.

That was because dozens of hawks and pigeons were flying into one of the buildings, and on the other side, people carrying flags were running over and handing over something that looked like scrolls, which were quickly read by others and burned.

-They're doing their job properly.

Cheong-ryeong's voice echoed in his mind.

-What are they doing?

-As you can see, they're managing the messenger birds and burning the letters that come to the Shadow Clan to maintain confidentiality.

-Oh ho.

It was indeed fitting for an organization that dealt with information and secrets.

While that was happening, the Shadow Master headed somewhere without stopping.

It wasn't a place where messenger birds and confidential documents were exchanged, but where weapons and training grounds were located.

-Creak!

The door opened, revealing an indoor training ground.

It seemed to be a place with thick walls that would provide quite good soundproofing.

As the Shadow Master gestured, the warriors who had followed bowed their heads in greeting and left, closing the door.

Thus, only the two of them were left in the indoor training ground.

What was the reason he brought him here?

As he was thinking that, the Shadow Master spoke,

“Ohoho. This is my personal training ground.”

A space completely isolated from the outside, without a single window.

It seemed to be designed so that no one could interfere or observe.

As he looked around, the Shadow Master said,

“How is it? Do you feel like learning my unique martial arts?”

“...”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un furrowed his brows.

The Shadow Master had told him to think about it until they reached the Shadow Clan.

The Shadow Master's unique martial arts.

Naturally, as the martial arts that made him an executive, it could be called a supreme technique.

However, the problem was that in order to learn it, one had to be castrated.

-Hahaha. How about cutting it off cleanly this time?

Cheong-ryeong laughed as if she found it amusing.

Castration literally meant removing the testicles, which could be considered the center of a man's yang energy.

Although Mok Gyeong-un didn't particularly have any desires or thoughts of prospering his descendants, it didn't mean he wanted to be castrated.

Mok Gyeong-un politely clasped his hands together in a salute and said,

"I apologize, but I don't think I can do that."

"You don't think you can?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll become a subordinate under my command, not my official disciple. Surely you can consider that much?"

“I can’t become an official disciple?”

“Isn’t it obvious? How can you be called a disciple if you don’t learn our sect’s martial arts?”

“...”

It was a reasonable argument.

However, becoming a subordinate of the Shadow Master, not his disciple, was a different story.

The authority itself would be limited, and he would be in a position to merely follow orders.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Do I have to be castrated to learn the unique martial arts?”

“Yes. Of course. If you don’t cultivate the Ghost Yin Technique[4], you won’t be able to circulate energy for the Flying Ghost Blade Technique[5] or the Ghost Shadow Claw Technique[6], and without that, you won’t be able to execute the moves.”

The Shadow Master’s martial arts were based on strong yin energy.

If one couldn’t grasp the energy circulation method of the Ghost Yin Technique, they wouldn’t be able to fully exert the power of the moves.

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un stroked his chin as if he was in a difficult position.

Seeing this, the Shadow Master laughed with his mouth covered and said,

“Ohohoho. I’m not forcing you to be castrated. However, if you want to become my official disciple, it’s a process you have to go through.”

“Do I absolutely need yin energy to learn martial arts?”

“Yes. If it were martial arts that could be executed with yang energy, our sect wouldn’t have needed to be castrated for generations.”

The Shadow Master didn’t choose to be castrated because he wanted to.

It was simply a natural course to learn the sect’s martial arts.

However, because there was much to lose for this, he always gave the choice to those who would become his disciples.

Of course, until now, no one had willingly chosen to be castrated.

The Shadow Master had thought from the beginning that Mok Gyeong-un wouldn’t be able to do it voluntarily either.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un asked,

“Isn’t yin energy the opposite concept of yang energy?”

“You could say that. By nature, men are born with strong yang energy, and women are born with strong yin energy. The Ghost Yin Technique was created to overcome this.”

-Swish!

The Shadow Master extended his hand.

Then, a damp and chilly energy rose from his hand.

-Whoosh! His true energy was on a different level compared to ordinary martial artists.

Once one mastered the Ghost Yin Technique, the wounded area would freeze coldly, allowing them to inflict fatal injuries on the opponent.

The Shadow Master demonstrated the yin energy of the Ghost Yin Technique and said, "To control yin energy with a man's body, unfortunately, there is no other way than castration. Otherwise, it may clash with the yang energy generated within the body, causing one to lose their mind."

"I see."

"I'm not forcing you, so you don't need to feel burdened. To possess this kind of yin energy, there is too much to lose..."

"Is it okay to have something even more yin?"

"Even more yin? What do you..."

-Woooooosh!

Before he could finish his words,

'!?'

The Shadow Master suddenly felt goosebumps all over his body, and a chill ran down his spine.

The energy suddenly erupting from Mok Gyeong-un. It went beyond being yin and was spreading a dreadful death energy that could only be felt from dead corpses.

“Well, well... You have a remarkable talent for surprises.”

Chapter 125 – Shadow Clan (2)

“Well, well... You have a remarkable talent for surprises.”

-Wooooooosh!

The energy suddenly erupting from Mok Gyeong-un.

It went beyond being yin and was closer to a dreadful death energy that could only be felt from the dead.

‘What in the world is this?’

The Shadow Master couldn’t hide his astonishment at the eerie energy that stimulated not only the five senses but even the sixth sense.

He had also accumulated yin energy through the Ghost Yin Technique for many years, but it was incomparably colder and more yin compared to that.

‘Is this enough?’

Mok Gyeong-un inwardly thought at the Shadow Master’s reaction.

That was because the death energy Mok Gyeong-un was showing now wasn’t in its complete form but adjusted to a level that living people could feel.

The complete energy of death was an energy that only the deceased or the Two Demonic Beauties could sense.

-Hmph. You must have really hated the idea of castration.

-Well.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders slightly at Cheong-ryeong's sneer.

What he needed right now was the position of the Shadow Master's disciple and successor.

If he only needed the title of a subordinate, he should have entered under an executive of the Five Kings' level, not the Shadow Master.

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un concealed the energy he had revealed.

This was also quite tricky to control, contrary to how it looked.

He had to reveal the death energy at a subtle level as if from the Peak Realm.

"Is this enough?"

Mok Gyeong-un asked the Shadow Master.

Then, the Shadow Master, who had been amazed by Mok Gyeong-un's death energy, opened his mouth.

“I’ve seen many talented individuals, but you’re the first of your kind. An energy more yin than what can be cultivated through the Ghost Yin Technique...”

It was a rare occurrence.

There weren’t many ways for a man’s body to cultivate yin energy.

Most of them could be said to be extreme or fatal for a man’s body.

Even if he found someone born with yin energy, they had incurable diseases like the Nine Yin Severed Meridians[1] and had extremely short lifespans.

Perhaps that was why the Shadow Master asked with curiosity,

“How did you cultivate this energy?”

At this question, Mok Gyeong-un pondered for a moment.

Then, he followed Cheong-ryeong’s advice ringing in his ears.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Every time I cultivated my internal energy, yin energy accumulated within my body. It might be because of my constitution.”

“Constitution?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.”

At those words, the Shadow Master’s eyes narrowed.

“May I examine your body for a moment?”

The Shadow Master wanted to examine Mok Gyeong-un's body, just in case.

It was hard to believe that a man's body could possess such tremendous yin energy without castration.

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un readily extended his hand.

The Shadow Master placed his fingers on the blood vessels of Mok Gyeong-un's wrist.

-Swish!

And he injected his own yin energy.

The yin energy that entered through the Shadow Master's fingers flowed into Mok Gyeong-un's body along his blood vessels.

‘Control... Control...’

Mok Gyeong-un focused his mind and adjusted the death energy.

Although there was no way the Shadow Master could read the energy of death, it was in case his internal energy had a yin tendency.

‘Will it disperse?’

If it was yang internal energy, it would disperse when it collided with Mok Gyeong-un's death energy.

This was a concerning part, but Mok Gyeong-un didn't mind.

He could make a way, one way or another.

-Swish!

At that moment, the Shadow Master removed his fingers from Mok Gyeong-un's pulse.

Then, with a highly satisfied face, he said, curling his lips,

“Contrary to my concerns, your blood vessels are strong, and your internal organs are healthy.”

What the Shadow Master was concerned about was Mok Gyeong-un's physical condition.

If the state of his body was poor or unbalanced due to the yin energy that exceeded expectations, it would be meaningless even if he learned it.

‘To have such luck.’

Naturally, the Shadow Master couldn't help but feel excited.

Even if they were castrated at a very young age, a rebellious spirit would arise, so he thought Mok Gyeong-un, at the age of 17, wouldn't accept it.

That's why he thought it would be difficult to have a true disciple.

However, if he had this innate yin energy, it seemed he could circulate the techniques of the Ghost Yin Technique, Flying Ghost Blade Technique, and Ghost Shadow Claw Technique.

‘And if done well...’

If he accepted Mok Gyeong-un as a disciple and examined his body, he might be able to create a secret method to stabilize yin energy without castration.

It was truly a joyful day to have such luck come in bundles.

However, the Shadow Master didn't reveal this and said,

“What a coincidence. I didn't expect this, but it seems you coming to me is good luck.”

“Then, will you accept me as your disciple?”

“Of course. Even if it weren't for that, depending on the situation, I would have accepted you as a quasi-disciple...”

-Knock knock!

Before the Shadow Master could finish his words,

Someone urgently knocked on the door of the indoor training room.

At this, the Shadow Master approached the iron door of the training room and knocked in the same way, making a thumping sound.

The only difference was that he knocked only once.

-Thud!

Then,

-Creak!

The iron door of the training room opened, and a middle-aged man with a mustache entered.

“Society Leader.”

“External Affairs Director Yeon. What is it?”

At his question, the middle-aged man called External Affairs Director Yeon, aware of Mok Gyeong-un’s presence, tried to report by whispering in his ear.

Then, the Shadow Master shook his head and said,

“You don’t have to be so conscious. From this moment, that child has become my disciple.”

“Disciple?”

At those words, External Affairs Director Yeon’s eyes widened.

“You don’t mean a quasi-disciple, but...”

“Yes. An official disciple.”

“Ah, ah, ah.”

Then, the External Affairs Director knelt on one knee and clasped his hands together, shouting to the Shadow Master,

“Society Leader. Congratulations on accepting a disciple!”

“Ohohoho.”

The Shadow Master waved his hands and expressed his joy.

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

It was hard to understand what a quasi-disciple was and what an official disciple meant.

Judging by the murmuring of the warriors guarding the door of the indoor training room, it seemed to be a topic of discussion.

At that moment, External Affairs Director Yeon also clasped his hands together and greeted Mok Gyeong-un.

“External Affairs Director Yeon Baek greets the Society Leader’s official disciple.”

“I am Mok Gyeong-un.”

Caught off guard, Mok Gyeong-un also clasped his hands together, bowed his head, and accepted the greeting.

It felt exaggerated, but was this really such a big deal?

As he was thinking that, External Affairs Director Yeon said, unable to hide his excitement,

“I sincerely admire Young Master’s determination. I fully understand the difficult decision you made as a man.”

‘Huh?’

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un frowned.

What was he talking about now?

Did he think he became a disciple because he agreed to be castrated?

-Hahahahaha!

Cheong-ryeong laughed like crazy as if she was holding her stomach.

Even Mok Gyeong-un, who had no emotional response to this matter, found it absurd enough to let out a small chuckle.

However, Mok Gyeong-un didn't need to clarify this.

“Ohoho. I think I caused a misunderstanding. This child won't be castrated.”

“What?”

At his words, External Affairs Director Yeon showed an incomprehensible expression.

He had served the Shadow Master for a long time, so he knew better than anyone that castration was essential to learn his unique martial arts.

But if he wasn't going to be castrated, why was he a true disciple?

To the puzzled man, the Shadow Master said with a smile,

“Should I say he was born with yin energy?”

“Yin energy?”

At the Shadow Master’s words, External Affairs Director Yeon unknowingly looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

Then, discovering something, he said in a surprised voice,

“Society Leader. That sword, could it be?”

The reason for his astonishment was the Evil Commandment Sword hanging from Mok Gyeong-un’s waist.

As the one who served the Shadow Master, he naturally knew about that sword.

“Ah. I gave the sword to this child.”

“The sword?”

“Yes.”

“But that sword is...”

External Affairs Director Yeon swallowed his words, unable to finish his sentence.

That sword was deemed too dangerous and uncontrollable, so he had entrusted it to a monk he was acquainted with to seal its demonic energy.

[It was fortunate that I had to go to Corpse Blood Valley for the observation anyway.]

That taoist was Yeon Hae-pyeong, the third disciple of In Seo-ok, the leader of the Primal Killing Pavilion in charge of Corpse Blood Valley.

‘I’m not sure if this will be alright.’

External Affairs Director Yeon looked at the Evil Commandment Sword with worried eyes.

That sword was a demon sword.

Including the Shadow Master himself, his subordinates, and even ‘those’ who had learned martial arts from him couldn’t control that sword.

But was it okay to give that to a newly accepted disciple?

To the concerned External Affairs Director Yeon, the Shadow Master said understandingly,

“You don’t have to worry. The sword has chosen this child as its master.”

“What? Is that true?”

“Would I ever lie to the External Affairs Director? Ohohoho.”

“Oh my.”

At these words, External Affairs Director Yeon alternately looked at Mok Gyeong-un and the Evil Commandment Sword in amazement.

There was no way the Shadow Master would lie about this.

If this was true, it couldn't be anything but a coincidence.

It had only been six days since the Evil Commandment Sword came into the Shadow Master's possession.

And that sword was going into the hands of the first disciple he gained from participating in the Corpse Blood Valley's closing ceremony...

'Is it fate?'

There was no other way to see it.

Or should he say that the young master was blessed with heavenly fortune?

If it couldn't be controlled, it might be called a demon sword, but if it had chosen its master, it could be said to be the greatest famous sword made by the master craftsman Ou Yezi.

However,

'I'm not sure if it will be alright.'

There was someone who directly obtained that sword under the Shadow Master's orders and desired it more than anyone.

He was worried that it might lead to trouble if that person found out.

Moreover, since this Young Master had become an official disciple, he might show strong opposition, thinking that the rolling stone had pushed out the embedded stone.

'I hope there won't be any problems.'

Although he was worried, he couldn't foresee the future for now.

More importantly, there was a more urgent matter at hand.

“Ah! Society Leader, I think you should go to the Sect Hall right away.”

“What's the matter?”

“Urgent news has arrived from Nineteen, eulmyeong (乙鳴).”

At External Affairs Director Yeon's words, the Shadow Master, who had been smiling, frowned.

‘Nineteen, eulmyeong? The Imperial Palace[2]?’

The basis of intelligence was the code.

All transmissions were conveyed in code, but the Shadow Master had memorized them all, so he could accurately know the location just by hearing words associated with the Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches, and the Five Elements.

External Affairs Director Yeon glanced at Mok Gyeong-un once and said in a small voice,

“It seems they have found it. The underground Golden Prison has the Plum Blossom...”

“Shh!”

Suddenly, the Shadow Master interrupted his report.

He had judged that since he had become an official disciple, he should learn about the affairs of the Shadow Clan, so it was fine for him to hear, but this was an exception.

“Let’s talk about that at the Clan Main Hall.”

“Ah... I understand.”

As the External Affairs Director answered, the Shadow Master turned his head and asked Mok Gyeong-un for understanding.

“Will you wait here? I’ll be back soon. Ah. It would be good if you memorize this in advance.”

The Shadow Master took something out of his bosom and handed it to him.

It was a scroll rolled up, and on the outside, it was written:

[Ghost Shadow Claw Technique]

It was the secret manual of the Ghost Shadow Claw Technique, one of the Shadow Master’s unique martial arts.

Receiving it, Mok Gyeong-un bowed his head and replied,

“I understand.”

“Then, I’ll be back soon.”

With those words, the Shadow Master left the indoor training room with the External Affairs Director.

After they left and closed the iron door, Mok Gyeong-un recalled the report External Affairs Director Yeon had made earlier.

‘Plum Blossom?’

What was that?

What did they find?

Does Plum Blossom (拜火) mean bowing to fire?

It seemed to be cut off in the middle, so this wasn’t all. What kind of matter was it that they maintained strict security even from him, who had become an official disciple?

Well, he thought he would soon find out even if he wasn’t impatient.

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un unrolled the scroll the Shadow Master had given him.

Since he said he would be back soon, it seemed he could pass the time by looking at the secret manual of the Ghost Shadow Claw Technique.

However, it didn’t take long.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had scanned through it in one go, nodded his head.

“It’s quite an interesting claw technique.”

There were energy circulation methods and detailed postures, so he grasped it instantly.

At this, Cheong-ryeong clicked her tongue.

-I don't know about the rest, but I envy that extraordinary brain of yours, mortal.

“Is that so?”

Mok Gyeong-un had been like this since he was young, so it wasn't particularly special to him.

Rather, if this was the original, he thought about entering the mental realm to see how the techniques were executed.

He had been told to memorize it, but there should be no problem if he learned it first.

With that thought, Mok Gyeong-un entered the mental realm while reading the secret manual.

It hadn't even been half a quarter of an hour.

-Bang!

At that moment, the iron door of the indoor training room opened with a rough bang.

‘Huh?’

Mok Gyeong-un, who had almost finished the mental training, opened his eyes.

Turning his head towards the entrance, he saw two boys who seemed to be around 18 or 19 years old, the same age as Mok Gyeong-un, and a young man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties.

The young man with quite a sharp impression had a red, angry face for some reason.

The young man who entered looked Mok Gyeong-un up and down, then discovered the Evil Commandment Sword at his waist and gritted his teeth.

-Crunch!

To him, one of the boys with a particularly prominent chin said as if it was absurd,

“How could this happen? Didn’t senior brother risk his life to obtain the Evil Commandment Sword?”

“Junior brother is right. That sword should be received by senior brother. But how could they give it to a hostage from the righteous faction?”

“I can’t stand this. Brothers, I’ll take it back right now!”

With those words, the boy with the prominent chin kicked off the ground and launched his body towards Mok Gyeong-un.

-Whoosh!

Seeing the boy suddenly attacking, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head, then,

-Smack!

“Huh?”

With one hand, he lightly blocked the trajectory of the claw technique the boy was executing and grabbed his neck with lightning-fast hand movements.

-Clench!

“Kuk!”

Suppressed in an instant without being able to properly execute a single technique, the boy couldn't hide his momentary bewilderment.

Looking at the boy, Mok Gyeong-un said in a dry voice,

“You're risking your life at our first meeting.”

Chapter 126 – Shadow Clan (3)

The name of the sharp-featured young man was Hwan Yun-myeong.

Abandoned by his parents at a young age, he lived in the slums on the outskirts of the Heaven and Earth Society until he was taken in by the Shadow Master at the age of 10 due to a chance encounter.

[Ohoho. Not bad. You're the first kid to attempt pickpocketing me.]

The Shadow Master, impressed by his brazen boldness, took him in and personally taught him academics and martial arts.

Although the opportunity was by chance, Hwan Yun-myeong's talent was unexpectedly outstanding.

That was also why the Shadow Master took him in.

However, Hwan Yun-myeong couldn't become an official disciple.

The reason was,

[Castration?]

[Yes. You have to be castrated to learn the sect's Ghost Yin Technique.]

[...Is it absolutely necessary?]

Young Hwan Yun-myeong, who didn't want to train in martial arts at the cost of cutting off his genitals, showed strong rejection.

The Shadow Master didn't force him to be castrated.

However, since he couldn't become an official disciple, he called him a quasi-disciple from then on.

Although he couldn't become an official disciple due to not being castrated, the Shadow Master treated him just as well and gave him teachings.

Therefore, he had no major complaints.

However, in the year Hwan Yun-myeong turned sixteen, he came to regret his choice.

The reason was that although he didn't know when he was young, if he couldn't become an official disciple, he couldn't become the Shadow Master's successor and learn his proper unique martial arts.

[Let me warn you in advance. If you get castrated, you lose a lot too. For example, you won't be a real man anymore and won't be able to have a family.]

Hwan Yun-myeong, who was an orphan, had a wish from a young age.

Perhaps because he didn't know his parents and was abandoned, he wanted to have a family of his own blood.

That's why he didn't choose castration.

However, after learning that he couldn't become the Shadow Master's successor, he came to regret his childhood choice.

'Damn it!'

It would have been better to be castrated when he hadn't reached sexual maturity yet.

Then he would have become the Shadow Master's successor.

But it was already too late.

It was difficult to discard all the internal energy he had cultivated so far, be castrated, and then learn the Ghost Yin Technique. Moreover, he had already reached sexual maturity.

Having grown up wandering the back alleys, he had been frequenting brothels and red-light districts since the young age of 14.

'No. I can't.'

That's why he couldn't get castrated even more.

If he just got castrated, there were things to gain beyond what he would lose, but he just couldn't do it.

It was such a simple principle, yet he couldn't do it.

Troubled by these worries, he wandered for a while, and during those few years, two young junior disciples entered.

Myeong-tak and Yong-su.

They were also orphans.

Meeting them, he knew at a glance that they were children with talent no less than his own.

However, to Hwan Yun-myeong, they were definitely not lovely junior disciples.

‘...These bastards might surpass me at any time.’

Rather, they were competitors.

If they got castrated and became the Shadow Master’s official disciples, he might not even receive proper treatment anymore.

No, that was a foregone conclusion.

‘No. I can’t let that happen.’

With his thoughts reaching this point, Hwan Yun-myeong fell into numerous worries.

And after much deliberation, he came up with a plan.

He treated the junior disciples better than anyone else and paid more attention to them than his teacher, the Shadow Master.

In response to this kindness, the junior disciples also followed him well as their senior brother.

Having gained their favor like this, Hwan Yun-myeong, out of the Shadow Master's sight, made them reach sexual maturity early and instilled fear of castration in them.

His efforts soon bore fruit.

When given the choice,

[Castration... I can't do it.]

[I, I can't do it either.]

The junior disciples gave up on castration with tears in their eyes.

Since it was originally a choice, not forced, the Shadow Master respected their decision.

[If that is your choice, there's nothing I can do.]

With these words, he looked at Hwan Yun-myeong with somewhat bitter eyes.

What was with those eyes?

Could it be that he knew Hwan Yun-myeong had manipulated them?

When his eyes met the Shadow Master's, Hwan Yun-myeong became extremely afraid that he might have noticed his scheme.

‘He'll abandon me. He'll abandon me. He'll abandon me.’

However, contrary to his severe worries, the Shadow Master's attitude didn't change.

He still treated him like a disciple.

He even asked him to take good care of the junior disciples as their senior brother.

‘Ah. It was needless worry.’

Fortunately.

However, because of this, something occurred to Hwan Yun-myeong that he had never thought of before.

‘What if no one gets castrated?’

Then what would happen?

At first, he just regretted not being able to get castrated.

But when he thought differently, the answer lay elsewhere.

If the Shadow Master never forced castration on the disciples he accepted until the end, he could make everyone refuse like the two junior disciples.

‘If that happens...’

Perhaps he would get a chance too?

The Shadow Master, whom he had watched for a long time, was not someone who went back on his own words.

Then it might be possible.

If no official disciple emerged until the end, he could become the next Shadow Master.

Having such ambition, Hwan Yun-myeong gained new motivation.

He worked harder than before, and his martial arts also improved by leaps and bounds.

And a few years later,

[You're going to observe the Corpse Blood Valley closing ceremony?]

[Yes. I have business at Corpse Blood Valley anyway, and I heard there's a good girl there, so I want to take a look.]

[A girl... you say?]

What was this about?

Could it be that he was giving up on castration and trying to accept a girl with innate yin energy as a disciple from the beginning?

At the Shadow Master's words, Hwan Yun-myeong felt uneasy for the first time in a long while.

He was filled with confidence that he would become the successor since the Shadow Master hadn't accepted a disciple for a long time.

So he waited with an anxious heart.

And,

“Has Master returned?”

“Ah. Young Master. The Society Leader arrived a little while ago.”

“I see. By any chance... did he come with that girl from Demon Fire Hall?”

“Demon Fire Hall? I don’t think so.”

“No?”

“Yes. It seems he brought a male trainee.”

At those words, Hwan Yun-myeong’s anxiety disappeared as if washed away.

He had been worried that if a girl from Demon Fire Hall entered, his position might be shaken, but it seemed things had turned out well.

However,

“But there seems to be a bit of a problem.”

“A problem?”

“The trainee he brought seems to be a hostage from the righteous faction.”

A hostage from the righteous faction?

What was this about?

Corpse Blood Valley was a place of trials that only talents under the Heaven and Earth Society could enter.

How could a hostage from the righteous faction enter such a place?

To the puzzled Hwan Yun-myeong, Internal Director Cho Yeom-hun explained,

“Young Master, please keep this to yourself. I heard that the Clan Leader personally sent two hostages he brought from the righteous faction to Corpse Blood Valley.”

“The Clan Leader did?”

If that was the case, it would be difficult for anyone to directly express dissatisfaction.

But why would the Society Leader send hostages from the righteous faction to such a place?

No, that didn't matter.

Why did Master bring such a troublemaker?

Was he pleased enough to bear that level of risk?

‘Righteous faction...’

Among the people of the Heaven and Earth Society, there was no one who liked those from the righteous faction.

No, just hearing about them made everyone hate them.

Hwan Yun-myeong was the same.

‘This won’t do.’

He should probably speak to Master and tell him to reconsider accepting the righteous faction hostage as a disciple.

No matter how he thought about it, the risk was too great.

Thus, he asked the Internal Director and learned that the Shadow Master and the righteous faction hostage he had newly accepted had gone to the Society Leader’s private indoor training room.

So he headed there.

However, when he went there, he found that the junior disciples had arrived before him.

“This can’t be!”

“How could this happen?”

But they were holding the warriors guarding the indoor training room and making a fuss about something.

What were they making a fuss about?

As he approached,

“Senior Brother! It’s a big problem.”

“A big problem?”

In response to that question, the youngest junior disciple, Yong-su, whose chin was particularly prominent, replied with an absurd expression,

“Master accepted the guy he brought from Corpse Blood Valley as an official disciple.”

‘!?’

At those words, Hwan Yun-myeong’s expression hardened.

What was this about?

An official disciple? Could it be?

“Did that guy say he would be castrated?”

At Hwan Yun-myeong’s question, the second junior disciple, Myeong-tak, shook his head and burst out in anger,

“That’s not it. He said he wouldn’t be castrated, but because he has an innate yin constitution, Master said he would accept him as an official disciple.”

“Innate yin constitution?”

At those words, a sigh escaped Hwan Yun-myeong’s mouth.

What kind of bolt from the blue was this?

He had been at ease because Master didn’t bring a girl.

Moreover, since he was a hostage from the righteous faction, he was about to suggest to Master that it would be better to send him away.

But he accepted such a troublemaker as an official disciple?

‘How...’

But that wasn’t the end of it.

The news that shocked him even more was,

“How could Master do this? Not only did he accept him as an official disciple without being castrated, but he even gifted him the Evil Commandment Sword that Senior Brother risked his life to obtain.”

-Gnash!

The moment he heard those words, Hwan Yun-myeong’s face distorted like a demon.

Normally, he would have maintained his dignity in front of the junior disciples, but he couldn’t endure this at all.

Despite the warriors’ dissuasion, Hwan Yun-myeong entered the Shadow Master’s private indoor training room.

-Bang!

In the middle of the room stood a handsome boy reading a scroll.

He seemed to be around the same age as the junior disciples.

However, neither his age nor his outstanding appearance caught Hwan Yun-myeong's attention.

Rather, his gaze immediately went to the Evil Commandment Sword hanging from the waist of the boy, no, Mok Gyeong-un, the righteous faction hostage.

-Crunch!

It was true.

He had hoped it was false, but Master really gave the Evil Commandment Sword to that bastard.

He had believed that since he had risked his life to obtain it, Master would naturally bestow it upon him, the eldest disciple, once the demonic energy was controlled.

Did that damn righteous faction hostage bastard steal his position and even his sword?

That was his.

‘I’ll kill him.’

He had to get back everything that was his, even if he had to kill that bastard...

“You’re a really interesting person. If you kill me, you can get back what’s yours...”

‘I?’

What?

At the voice ringing in his ears, Hwan Yun-myeong couldn't hide his bewilderment.

Although he was angry, he didn't outwardly reveal his true feelings in front of the junior disciples.

But how did he read his thoughts?

As he wondered,

‘Huh?’

Hwan Yun-myeong's eyes wavered.

At some point, the youngest junior disciple, Yong-su, was holding his broken arm and suffering, and the second junior disciple, Myeong-tak, was looking at him with absurd eyes.

Just what had happened?

‘Why?’

Why was Myeong-tak looking at him with those eyes?

In that fleeting moment of bewilderment, forgotten memories quickly flashed through his mind.

-Whoosh!

[I can't stand it anymore. Brothers, I'll take it back right now!]

The youngest junior disciple, Yong-su, who couldn't hold back his anger and rushed towards the righteous faction hostage.

Contrary to the expectation that he would at least be able to compete to some degree since he was the weakest among them, he was suppressed in an instant and had his neck grabbed.

[You're risking your life at our first meeting.]

[Kuk... Kuk...]

[You were prepared for this, right?]

[What?]

-Crack!

Without blinking an eye, the bastard broke Yong-su's right arm.

[Aaaaaargh!]

‘How could this be?’

Seeing that, Hwan Yun-myeong judged that the bastard was no ordinary skilled martial artist.

Even he couldn't subdue Yong-su, who was at the beginning of the Peak Realm, with just one move like that.

Becoming cautious, he was contemplating what to do,

[You can't take your eyes off this sword. Do you want it?]

[What are you talking about...]

[If you can have it, try taking it.]

‘!?’

-Swish!

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un drew the Evil Commandment Sword he was wearing and threw it.

‘What the hell is this bastard?’

-Catch!

In a daze, he caught the sword’s hilt as if snatching it, but from that moment, he couldn’t remember.

Holding his forehead with his left hand, Hwan Yun-myeong staggered and muttered,

“What, what have I done?”

Mok Gyeong-un approached him and said,

“You mumbled your desires with your own mouth.”

“What... did I say?”

“You said that if none of the junior disciples who enter get castrated, there will be no official disciples, so you will become the successor? What a cute idea.”

‘!!!!!!!!!!’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Hwan Yun-myeong’s eyes widened as if they would tear.

He said that with his own mouth?

He was concerned about the eyes with which the second junior disciple, Myeong-tak, was looking at him, making it hard to say it was a lie.

But then,

-Drip!

“Kuk!”

At that moment, Hwan Yun-myeong felt a sudden pain and looked at his right hand.

The veins on the back of his hand holding the Evil Commandment Sword were bulging and bursting, and black blood was flowing down.

Then, it was trying to spread to his entire arm.

In a panic, Hwan Yun-myeong hurriedly tried to let go of the Evil Commandment Sword.

However,

“Aaargh!”

As if the sword’s hilt was connected to his palm, it wouldn’t come off.

Rather, it was even more painful.

“What, what the hell is this...”

Hwan Yun-myeong tried to somehow remove the Evil Commandment Sword by raising his internal energy with his other hand.

However, the more he did that, the stronger the pain became, and he couldn't endure it.

“Uuugh.”

As he struggled, Mok Gyeong-un approached him and said,

“Shall I remove the sword for you?”

At those words, unable to bear the pain, Hwan Yun-myeong nodded his head frantically.

Then, Mok Gyeong-un said something out of the blue,

“You clearly asked me to remove it with your own mouth.”

“What?”

Why was he saying this?

At that moment, Hwan Yun-myeong saw Mok Gyeong-un's smile filled with malice.

‘Could it be?’

In a panic, he hurriedly said something.

“Wait, hold on...”

-Slash!

Before he could even finish his words,

A sharp blade brushed past and sliced through Hwan Yun-myeong’s right wrist that was holding the sword.

Chapter 127 – Shadow Clan (4)

Inside a soundproof room within the secret special operations building of the Shadow Clan, the External Affairs Director pointed to a messenger pigeon with an encrypted message and spoke.

“Clan Master, it looks certain this time. The known appearance matches, and doesn’t the imperial palace also want to completely uproot ‘their’ origins?”

“Hmm... That’s true. But the fact that he’s being detained in the underground Golden Jade[1] of the imperial palace... This has become quite a headache.”

The Shadow Clan Master stroked his chin as if perplexed.

They had planted spies throughout the Central Plains to observe the unfolding situation, but to think that out of the many possible places, it would be the underground Golden Jade of the imperial palace...

They had found him in the most troublesome location.

“What should we do? Shouldn’t we report this to the Society Leader first? The Shadow Clan has its own reputation to uphold, and for a direct subordinate group of the Society Leader to find him first...”

“No. Not yet.”

“But they keep urging...”

“If this turns out to be misidentified information like last time or deliberately exposed information, it might displease the Society Leader instead.”

“.....”

The Shadow Clan Master’s concern lay in certainty.

Based on the current information alone, there seemed to be a 70% possibility.

However, to report and launch an operation, over 90% confidence was necessary.

“And even if it becomes certain, the means to immediately enter the underground Golden Jade of the imperial palace are far-fetched.”

The place with the strictest security after the inner palace where the emperor, empress dowager, and royal relatives resided was the underground Golden Jade.

It was difficult for even long-term embedded spies in the imperial palace to enter this place.

At the Shadow Clan Master’s words, the External Affairs Director pondered and opened his mouth.

“Then what about trying to infiltrate a spy into the Embroidered Uniform Guard?”

“The Embroidered Uniform Guard...”

Those guarding the underground Golden Jade of the imperial palace were the Embroidered Uniform Guard[2] , a special operations organization.

Unlike other imperial palace warriors, the Embroidered Uniform Guard had many masters skilled in martial arts.

That was why infiltrating the underground Golden Jade was tricky.

“Didn’t the Embroidered Uniform Guard request young disciples from the Righteous Alliance and our Clan to send over when they announced reforms and reorganization more than a decade ago?”

“Request...”

Ah, there had been such an incident.

However, without the Society Leader’s approval, that matter fell through.

‘But now would be a considerably opportune time.’

And why was that?

It was because the imperial palace was currently in disarray due to the emperor’s illness.

As the emperor’s condition worsened, signs of internal strife emerged.

According to the information, the Righteous Alliance dispatching disciples wasn’t simply to form good ties with the government either.

‘Are they trying to intervene in the next succession?’

Whoever becomes the emperor influences the relationship between the government and the martial world.

The Righteous Alliance was likely aiming to enthrone an emperor favorable to the orthodox faction.

Taking this into account, if the Heaven and Earth Society also intervenes through this opportunity...

-Knock knock!

Right then, someone rapped on the door.

-Clan Master!

At the urgent-sounding voice, the Shadow Clan Master personally opened the door and went out.

Not many had the authority to enter the Clan’s Main Hall.

“I apologize for the discourtesy during the meeting.”

The one who knocked was none other than one of the guards watching over the Clan Master’s private indoor training room.

“What is it?”

“I believe you should go to the indoor training room right away.”

‘!?’

-Swish!

A sharp aura grazed past the wrist.

Along with it, something familiar fell to the floor.

-Thud!

It was none other than...

“Aaaaaargh! My arm, my arm!”

Hwan Yun-myeong, the Shadow Clan Master’s first junior disciple, screamed at the sight of his severed arm.

He never thought Mok Gyeong-un would really cut off his arm.

He wasn’t the only one shocked by this scene.

‘This crazy bastard...’

Myeong Tak, the second junior disciple, also couldn’t hide his consternation at Hwan Yun-myeong’s severed arm.

When the youngest Yong-su’s arm was broken, he thought it was somewhat understandable.

However, to a martial artist, the right arm was no different from one's life.

“Wh-what are you doing!”

Myeong Tak shouted at Mok Gyeong-un.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head and spoke.

“What am I doing? I helped him let go of his sword, didn't I?”

Mok Gyeong-un answered with an expressionless face, as if feeling no emotion at all.

Seeing this, a chill ran down Myeong Tak's spine.

What the hell is this guy?

While thinking that, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Hwan Yun-myeong's severed arm, which was still writhing on the floor, and lifted it.

“It's quite fresh. Seeing it move like this even after being separated.”

“Y-you! You!”

Hwan Yun-myeong, who had been holding his severed arm, gritted his teeth and glared at Mok Gyeong-un.

The pain of having one's arm cut off was an agony beyond words.

But more distressing than that pain was the fact that his right arm, as a martial artist, had been severed.

-Tap tap tap!

Hwan Yun-myeong tapped the blood points above his severed arm to stop the bleeding.

And the moment the pain subsided,

‘I’ll kill you!’

Burning with vengeance, he tried to attack Mok Gyeong-un, but...

-Swish!

He couldn’t move due to the blade of the Evil Commandment Sword touching his neck.

The aura emanating from the tip of the sword was enough to separate his head from his body at any moment.

‘...I couldn’t see it.’

Even watching right in front of his eyes, the trajectory was lost to such a degree of swiftness that even his eyes couldn’t follow.

This guy wasn’t someone he could do anything about even with an intact arm.

Mok Gyeong-un grinned and said,

“You want to lose your head too?”

“You... Just what are you? How can a mere hostage of the righteous faction...”

Be this strong?

He knew that those who passed through the Corpse Blood Valley’s gates were far stronger and superior to their peers.

But he was a disciple of a direct executive of the Heaven and Earth Society, not just a subordinate clan.

So how could this be?

-Grind!

His wounded pride made him so furious.

With that, Hwan Yun-myeong gnashed his teeth and spoke as if vowing revenge.

“Haa... Haa... Enjoy it while you can. Although I’ve lost my right arm...”

-Thwack!

“Ugh!”

The moment he tried to say something, Mok Gyeong-un kicked Hwan Yun-myeong’s chin.

He kicked so hard that Hwan Yun-myeong’s teeth seemed to break as he kept spitting out blood.

To the suffering Hwan Yun-myeong, Mok Gyeong-un spoke as if annoyed.

“You’re quite funny.”

“Hnnngh...”

“Just keep your mouth shut like that. And...”

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head to Yong-su, who was holding his broken arm, and Myeong Tak, who was at a loss, and said,

“Have you two grasped the situation now?”

“What?”

“Listening to what this senior brother here has been babbling about, it seems that I, as a formal disciple, have a higher rank than you. Isn’t that right?”

‘!?’

At his words, the expressions of the two hardened.

They had been angry that he had bypassed their own senior brother and was given the Evil Commandment Sword, wasn’t castrated despite being a hostage of the righteous faction, and was accepted as a disciple, so they had tried to teach him a lesson.

But strictly speaking, Mok Gyeong-un was a formal disciple of the Shadow Clan Master and ranked above them.

However, admitting this fact that they didn’t want to acknowledge out of submission to the guy’s power was unforgivable to their pride.

Yong-su, who had been holding his broken arm, spoke to Mok Gyeong-un while suppressing his anger.

“...Don’t be ridiculous! You think we’ll recognize a mere hostage from the righteous faction as a formal disciple?”

“Hm?”

“You should worry about yourself first. No matter what, you cut off our senior brother’s arm, so do you think Master will just let this slide...”

-Swish!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un disappeared from Yong-su’s sight.

‘What?’

Wondering where he had gone, Yong-su suddenly felt someone’s touch on his back.

-Tap!

-Flinch!

The startled Yong-su tried to shake off the hand that put an arm around his shoulder, but...

-Crack!

“Ugh!”

He couldn’t move at all due to the crushing grip on his left shoulder.

Mok Gyeong-un had his arm around him and was gripping his left shoulder, causing so much pain that Yong-su knelt down before he knew it.

-Thud!

But it didn't end there.

-Crunch!

The sound of something breaking came from his shoulder.

On top of having his right elbow broken, Yong-su's left shoulder blade shattered, causing him to grimace in pain and try to scream.

However...

"Mmmph!"

"Shh. You're noisy."

He couldn't scream because Mok Gyeong-un covered his mouth.

To the suffering Yong-su, Mok Gyeong-un grinned and said,

"You all came rushing in, going on about me being a hostage of the righteous faction and whatnot. Have you already forgotten telling me to hand over the sword?"

"Mmmph..."

“And your thinking is quite short-sighted. If I were Master, I think he would say that punishing you for disrespecting a formal disciple was the right thing to do. Don’t you agree?”

“.....”

Yong-su couldn’t refute Mok Gyeong-un’s words.

In the heat of the moment, he had said he couldn’t acknowledge it, but Mok Gyeong-un was already a formal disciple accepted by their Master.

In contrast, they were junior disciples who had refused castration.

‘Damn it.’

Until now, it had been foolish of them not to become formal disciples.

To such Yong-su, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Hmm. Since we’re practically fellow disciples, I was going to end it moderately, but now that it’s come to this, should I just make you a cripple unable to use your limbs? It’d be fun. I’m curious how you’d live if I cut off all your arms and legs.”

-Shudder!

Mok Gyeong-un spoke those chilling words while laughing as if it were nothing.

At his words, Yong-su’s face turned deathly pale.

He might not know about others, but this bastard really seemed like he would do it.

Right then...

-Thud!

The second junior disciple, Myeong Tak, knelt on one knee and politely clasped his hands.

Since the Master held the highest position, prostrating was not allowed, and this was no different from the etiquette shown to a senior brother.

After kneeling like that, Myeong Tak spoke in an earnest voice.

“P-please forgive our rudeness.”

‘Senior Brother!’

Seeing his senior brother’s sudden change, Yong-su found it absurd even while suffering.

However, after being beaten alongside Yong-su, Myeong Tak was mentally broken.

The thought of holding a grudge against Mok Gyeong-un had long disappeared from his mind.

He just desperately wanted to be forgiven.

“We were wrong, so please...”

At that moment...

-Creak! Thud!

The closed iron door of the indoor training room opened, revealing the Shadow Clan Master and the External Affairs Director.

To them, it was like saviors had appeared.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders and whispered.

“You’re lucky.”

With that, he released his grip on Yong-su.

The Shadow Clan Master surveyed the scene inside with a furrowed brow.

‘Oh, dear...’

He had rushed over upon hearing that his three junior disciples had angrily entered the Clan Master’s private indoor training room, worried that an incident might occur.

Although all three he had personally taught had reached the Peak Realm, he had been concerned just in case, but the result was completely different from his expectation.

‘To think they would be this outmatched even without learning the True Essence Techniques of this clan.’

Regardless of the circumstances, it was somewhat disappointing.

But then, something unexpected happened.

Hwan Yun-myeong, who had spotted the Shadow Clan Master, crawled to him with one arm, clung to his legs, and tearfully pleaded,

“M-Master... I want to be castrated. Please castrate me.”

“...What?”

However, that wasn't all.

Yong-su and Myeong Tak also prostrated and pleaded in unison.

“Master, please castrate us!”

Just what was going on?

Chapter 128 – Reunion (1)

It was truly a bizarre coincidence.

Among the junior disciples, the senior disciple Hwan Yun-myeong, the second disciple Myeong Tak, and the third disciple Yong-su had not the slightest desire for castration after awakening to sexual desire.

However, the situation had changed.

They all pleaded for castration.

And for good reason. If they didn't become formal disciples through castration, they might have to suffer under that devilish bastard for the rest of their lives.

“Master, please castrate us!”

Seeing their pleading, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue inwardly.

Their ulterior motives were plain to see.

Until now, they hadn't wanted to remove their genitals due to sexual desire, but now that he had appeared as a formal disciple, they felt their positions were threatened.

They had tried to do something about it with force, but they were no match, so only one option remained for them.

Becoming formal disciples through castration.

‘Meaningless scheming.’

That's what he thought, but it might be the right choice for them.

However, if they suddenly appeared in this state and asked to be castrated, would their request really be granted?

He had doubts, but...

“You won't regret it?”

At the Shadow Clan Master's question, all three hesitated for a moment.

However, they soon glanced at Mok Gyeong-un, conscious of him, then nodded and replied in unison.

“We won't regret it.”

It wasn't a situation for regrets.

Hwan Yun-myeong felt that way even more so.

Not only had he already revealed with his own mouth that the junior apprentice brothers had tried to prevent them from becoming formal disciples, but now that he had lost his right arm, who would accept him?

Hwan Yun-myeong looked at his master with desperate eyes.

Then the Shadow Clan Master covered his mouth and laughed as if pleased.

“Ohoho. Good. Since you chose it yourselves, of course I should grant it.”

“Ah!”

“Thank you!”

At his answer, the junior disciples all knocked their heads on the floor, expressing their gratitude.

Mok Gyeong-un, watching this scene, couldn't understand.

They weren't special cases like him, and they had given up becoming formal disciples for their own desires.

Yet why was he accepting them?

While he was wondering, Hwan Yun-myeong and Yong-su seemed to be smiling at him with relieved expressions.

‘Hmm.’

Why were they making such faces?

The reason was simple.

By getting castrated, their positions had now become equal.

No, since they had entered the clan before Mok Gyeong-un, the situation had reversed.

As his senior brothers, he could no longer bully them...

“Gyeong-un.”

Just then, the Shadow Clan Master called out to Mok Gyeong-un.

“Yes.”

“We can speak casually now, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ohoho. You’ve gained three junior apprentice brothers as soon as you entered, so you’re quite fortunate. As the senior brother, take good care of them.”

‘!!!!!!’

At the Shadow Clan Master’s words, the faces of the three distorted in an instant.

What kind of bolt from the blue was this?

Why was that bastard Mok Gyeong-un becoming their senior brother instead?

Unable to hold back, Hwan Yun-myeong asked,

“M-Master. How can the one who entered last become the senior brother?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“Pardon?”

“Gyeong-un became a formal disciple the earliest, so isn’t he rightfully your senior brother?”

At the Shadow Clan Master’s words, Hwan Yun-myeong scrunched his face as if he had bitten into dung.

He thought that by becoming a formal disciple, he would at least have a higher rank than that bastard, but this couldn’t be happening.

Just then, Myeong Tak clasped his hands in greeting to Mok Gyeong-un.

“Junior Apprentice Myeong Tak greets Senior Brother Mok Gyeong-un.”

“.....”

The quickest change in stance, above all.

Watching this, Hwan Yun-myeong and Yong-su were dumbfounded.

Of course, Myeong Tak paid no heed to their gazes.

In any case, the tide had turned.

Even Master had appointed Mok Gyeong-un as the senior brother without even hearing the circumstances of what had happened inside.

What did that imply?

‘This bastard is the next Shadow Clan Master.’

To survive now, the one he needed to impress was not Hwan Yun-myeong who had stabbed them in the back.

After sending the injured Hwan Yun-myeong, Yong-su, and Myeong Tak to the medical hall of the inner clan and being left alone, the Shadow Clan Master looked at Mok Gyeong-un and spoke.

“You’re not asking anything.”

“About what?”

“Why you’re not asking about the circumstances of what happened inside... And things like why I put you, who entered last, forward as the senior brother.”

“Since Master must have something in mind, does this disciple of yours need to impudently raise questions?”

“.....”

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, the corners of the Shadow Clan Master's mouth twitched.

He had asked because Mok Gyeong-un showed no hint of doubt, but to think he would give such a satisfactory answer.

However, this wasn't the child's true heart.

Based on observing him until the Corpse Blood Valley's discipleship ceremony, this child was a cunning type that was difficult to control.

For such a child to cite discourtesy...

"Ohohoho. While it's an excellent answer as a disciple, there's no need to hide your true thoughts in front of me."

"....."

"Do you have nothing you want to say?"

At the Shadow Clan Master's question, Mok Gyeong-un soon parted his lips.

However, the question was different from what was expected.

"Even though you knew, was it out of affection that you accepted them as formal disciples?"

The Shadow Clan Master's eyes narrowed.

Look at this child.

He never thought he would ask in such a way.

“It seems there was more conversation inside than I thought. Judging by the way you’re asking.”

Contrary to the Shadow Clan Master’s guess, there had been no conversation.

It was just that thanks to Hwan Yun-myeong, captivated by the Evil Commandment Sword’s demonic energy, babbling about his desires, Mok Gyeong-un had learned how their master-disciple relationship had been formed.

“If you can call that a conversation.”

“Ohoho.”

“If it’s uncomfortable, you don’t have to answer.”

“That’s not it. If I must answer, it could be out of affection. But apart from that, there are sometimes things you can overlook while knowing.”

‘Hm?’

Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head.

What did he mean by overlooking while knowing?

From Mok Gyeong-un’s perspective, who valued reason, it made no sense at all.

But one thing was certain: the Shadow Clan Master knew that all the disciples who came in due to Hwan Yun-myeong did not get castrated.

No, it would be stranger if he didn’t know in the first place.

He was none other than the leader of the Shadow Clan, which oversaw information.

“Giving up something for the sake of something else is not an easy thing.”

“.....”

The Shadow Clan Master spoke while covering his mouth.

“Ohoho. You’ll understand what I mean once you face more of life’s hardships and are in a position to lead an organization.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Anyhow, I apologize for causing this incident by not informing those children in advance.”

“Not at all.”

“They probably haven’t memorized it properly yet, so I’ll arrange lodgings for you today, so while resting...”

“I’ve memorized it.”

“What?”

“If you’re referring to the Ghost Yin Technique’s oral secrets, I’ve memorized them all.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, the Shadow Clan Master looked at him as if asking if that was really true.

That's because according to the report, the three had barged in here not long after he had gone to the discipleship ceremony.

No matter how brilliant, it would be difficult to memorize the oral secrets in such a short time.

However...

“Attending to the source, under the scenery, reversing the clouds, reforming the world, reaching compliance, understanding the realm of martial merit.....”

‘!?’

The Shadow Clan Master's eyes sparkled at the Ghost Yin Technique's oral secrets flowing from Mok Gyeong-un's mouth.

Having watched the last gate of Corpse Blood Valley, he was aware that Mok Gyeong-un's talent was incomparably superior to ordinary people.

But he didn't know he would be this outstanding.

‘.....Was it to this extent?’

This exceeded expectations.

He newly sympathized with the ancient sage's saying that one couldn't help but be moved when welcoming an excellent disciple.

The more he knew this child, the more he truly regretted it.

If only his background was under the Heaven and Earth Society, he would walk an even smoother path.

It was unfortunate that he still needed to improve his perception, but he was worth nurturing as a future talent.

“Even if I want to hold back praise, it’s hard to do so. Well done.”

“Not at all.”

“Ohoho. I’d like to proceed with the teachings right away if I could, but it seems difficult today as I haven’t finished dealing with the earlier matter.”

“I understand.”

“I’ve informed the Internal Affairs Director, so he will guide you to your lodging. You probably haven’t had a proper rest while going through the Corpse Blood Valley’s gates, so rest well today.”

“Yes.”

“Then see you tomorrow...”

“Ah. I apologize, but would it be alright for me to take a walk around this area?”

“A walk?”

“Yes. After being in the mountains for so long, I’d like to take a light stroll and look around.”

At those words, the Shadow Clan Master’s eyes sparkled faintly.

However, without revealing it, he spoke as if it were nothing.

“You want to tour the inner city, I see.”

“Yes. If it’s okay.”

“Ohoho. If that’s the case, I’ll assign someone to accompany you.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue inwardly.

Although he had been accepted as a formal disciple and the Shadow Clan Master’s tone had become gentler and more familiar, he still hadn’t lowered his guard against Mok Gyeong-un at all.

The fact that he was assigning someone when Mok Gyeong-un said he would take a walk nearby showed that.

It was annoying, but there was no choice.

“Thank you for your consideration.”

And so, Mok Gyeong-un left the Shadow Clan’s estate accompanied by an escort warrior assigned by the Shadow Clan Master.

“Don’t mind me and just walk around as you please, Young Master.”

“Yes. Thank you for your consideration.”

In fact, it would have been more considerate not to follow.

But there was no choice.

“Hoo.”

Mok Gyeong-un let out a small exclamation as he looked around outside the estate.

He had briefly looked around while coming here, but it was indeed vast.

No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it immense.

‘The inner city itself is large.’

It seemed like it would take quite some time to look around the entire place.

Rather, if he climbed the tallest building and surveyed the surroundings, he felt he could roughly grasp the entire geography of this place.

However, that seemed difficult to do right away.

The escort warrior was watching his every move.

-What did you come out for? It would be better to rest today as that eunuch-like mortal said.

Just then, Cheong-ryeong's voice rang in his ears.

In response, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders and replied through voice transmission.

-Because I felt it.

-Felt? What do you mean?

-I sense Go Chan's spiritual energy not far from here.

-What? You mean that spirit who had entered that assassin wench's body?

-Yes.

The reason Mok Gyeong-un had come out was none other than the Guard Go Chan.

Forming a bond meant not only the spirit could sense the owner's energy.

Mok Gyeong-un could also instinctively detect the location of his bound spirit.

‘It's not far.’

He was located within a radius of about 100 jang.

If the energy was very far away, it would be faint and difficult to notice, but being this close, he felt he could definitely tell where it was.

‘Northwest.’

If he headed in that direction, he would likely meet him.

-Seems like that guy is impressive too. Well, as a bound spirit, it's natural for him to follow since he can't even run away. But the fact that he didn't come close...

-It seems he's maintaining the body he possessed.

-Ha! You mean he infiltrated this place while still possessing a body?

-Yes. That's how it appears for now.

-The body seemed quite useful, but it didn't seem to be at a level capable of sneaking into the inner city... He must unexpectedly have some skill.

-Since he was originally an assassin, he may have done so based on that experience.

-Well, in any case, the more cards we can use, the better. Since there's no risk of betrayal from a bound spirit.

He agreed with Cheong-ryeong's words.

That's why he was looking for the Guard Go Chan.

Seeing that he had followed well and infiltrated this place, his value seemed to have increased compared to before.

And so, Mok Gyeong-un headed towards the northwestern path of the inner city, accompanied by the Shadow Clan's escort warrior.

It was when they had walked about thirty jang.

A group of people could be seen walking from the opposite side.

One of them particularly caught his eye.

‘Hmm.’

It was a youthful-looking man in his late twenties with curly hair and a radiant appearance.

In Mok Gyeong-un's eyes, the man's surging energy was visible.

Surprisingly, the magnitude of that energy was on a level comparable to Bright Blade King Son Yun.

‘Who is he?’

He was at a level where it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call him an executive.

However, it was difficult to make an accurate judgment based on appearance alone.

Just then, someone else entered Mok Gyeong-un's sight.

‘!?’

Behind the curly-haired youth, there was a man who appeared to be in his early thirties, seemingly part of the group.

He was holding a wine bottle in one hand and had his other arm wrapped around the waist of a young and alluring woman.

-Isn't that... Could it be that guy?

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un nodded slightly.

The woman wearing flashy clothes with a neckline revealing her chest was none other than...

-...It seems to be him.

It was undoubtedly the Guard Go Chan, who had possessed Ha Chae-rin.

But why was Go Chan acting like that?

It seemed he had infiltrated the Heaven and Earth Society in a different way than expected.

‘Aaaah, damn it.’

Having also instantly recognized his master, Mok Gyeong-un, the Guard Go Chan couldn’t lift his face, feeling embarrassed.

Chapter 129 – Reunion (2)

Not long ago, in the Crimson Orchid House located on the eastern outskirts of the outer city...

The Crimson Orchid House was famous for its hard-to-obtain fine liquors and its exceptionally talented and beautiful courtesans. Within it, there was a grand and luxurious guest room called Yearned Promise.

As the name suggested, the Yearned Promise guest room was a place that received only distinguished guests. It was a place that entertained only those from renowned clans and clans within the Heaven and Earth Society or those of the Great Clan Leader rank or higher.

As such, the courtesans of the Crimson Orchid House all yearned to go to Yearned Promise and entertain the distinguished guests to form connections.

Even if they couldn’t become the primary consort, quite a few had entered as concubines through Yearned Promise.

However, this time, the competition was particularly fierce.

It was because of a rumor that a guest of the Clan Leader rank from the Heaven and Earth Society had made a reservation after a long time.

[Phew.]

Go Chan, who had possessed Ha Chae-rin, had somehow managed to be included in the group of entertainers.

Due to the competition with the other courtesans, he had wanted to change his approach.

He had invested too much time to give up and leave now.

-Swish.

Go Chan quietly waited for his turn.

The most special time in Yearned Promise was when the courtesans would showcase their talents or arts one by one in front of the distinguished guest.

-Ding~! Ding~!

Currently, a courtesan was dancing in front of the distinguished guest, fluttering her long sleeves to display her skills.

In Go Chan's hand was a geomungo*.

(*T/N: A traditional Korean six-stringed zither)

Since he had passed the audition by playing the geomungo when entering the Crimson Orchid House, he intended to do the same this time.

However, the problem was that someone had already played the geomungo before him.

‘Damn it.’

To be honest, the skills of the courtesan who had played the geomungo before him were a level above his own.

After all, he was originally an assassin, not a musician.

‘I can’t miss this opportunity.’

He knew that the rank of Clan Leader was quite high within the Heaven and Earth Society.

If he could gain access through such a person, he would be able to enter the inner region of the Heaven and Earth Society.

However, not only Go Chan but the other courtesans were also desperate to catch the eye of this esteemed guest.

‘What a fate, to have to compete with courtesans in this.’

No, it was hard to call it fate.

Having died and become a spirit, what fate was there to speak of?

It was the pitiful destiny of a bound spirit.

Just then, a rough voice could be heard from inside.

[Next!]

As soon as the voice ended, the courtesan who had gone inside earlier came out with a disappointed expression.

It seemed she had tried her best to seduce the guest but failed and was in a bad mood.

However, this was already the sixth courtesan like this.

‘Strange.’

Originally, even if it was the distinguished guest-only Yearned Promise, they wouldn’t call for additional courtesans beyond the set number.

But there were 10 courtesans waiting, including himself.

16 courtesans were waiting for the distinguished guest.

Thanks to that, he was able to be included in that number without issue, but just how high of a position must this person hold for the Madam to put in so much effort?

[It’s my turn.]

Just then, a courtesan stepped forward.

She appeared to be in her mid-twenties and was the courtesan who had challenged Go Chan.

As she was about to enter, the Madam whispered something in her ear in a low voice.

Go Chan observed this closely.

The body he possessed, Ha Chae-rin, had learned the art of lip-reading, so he could roughly guess the words just by the shape of the lips.

[He's the disciple of the Five Kings. The Five Kings. This is your last chance.]

‘!?’

At the Madam's words, Go Chan's eyes widened.

He knew they were paying special attention, but the person inside right now wasn't just of the Clan Leader rank but a disciple of the Five Kings, known as the high-ranking executives of the Heaven and Earth Society?

Go Chan couldn't hide his inner surprise.

‘The Five Kings...’

The Five Kings of the Heaven and Earth Society were masters recognized as the strongest, leaving aside political affairs and looking at the entire martial world.

And one of their disciples is here?

He wasn't sure if this would be alright.

‘Will I be discovered with Ha Chae-rin's concealment technique?’

The Four Great Assassins, as their title suggested, possessed a concealment technique that allowed them to hide their energy.

Of course, that concealment wasn't perfect.

Because it involved inserting needles into several acupuncture points to block the energy channels.

Currently, Go Chan had lowered his energy to the level of a second-rate using the concealment technique.

If he completely blocked the energy channels, it would be difficult to react when a dangerous situation occurred.

‘This is troublesome.’

Even the rank of Clan Leader was high, but if he got entangled with a disciple of the Five Kings, he might lose this body.

While he was worrying like that...

[Tsk!]

The courtesan who had gone in earlier came out with a puffed-up face.

It seemed she was told to leave right away, even though she hadn't been inside for long.

[He likes young girls, doesn't he?]

[...]

It seemed she was kicked out immediately because of her age.

The Madam looked at her with pity and then gestured to Go Chan.

It was already his turn.

[Don't upset his mood too much, and if he seems displeased, come out right away.]

[... I will.]

It seemed too late to change the plan.

With a slightly nervous expression, Go Chan entered the Yearned Promise, the distinguished guest room.

Inside, a somewhat rough-looking man in his early thirties with short facial hair was sitting in a relaxed posture, drinking from a bottle.

-Gulp, gulp!

The manly-looking man put down the empty bottle on the table and looked at Go Chan.

His gaze swept over him from top to bottom.

For a moment, Go Chan felt goosebumps all over his body.

The way he was assessing his entire body as if appraising him made Go Chan almost blurt out a curse without realizing it.

‘Damn it. It’s disgusting.’

Soon, the corners of the man's mouth could be seen slightly twitching.

It seemed he was pleased with Go Chan's appearance.

The man opened his mouth.

[Your face is quite pretty. Show me the talent you possess.]

‘Ugh.’

Go Chan barely suppressed his inner thoughts and calmly replied.

[Yes, sir.]

Even speaking with his own mouth, the goosebumps wouldn't subside.

But he had to endure it.

To get to his master's side, he needed to enter the inner region of the Heaven and Earth Society.

-Ding!

Go Chan sat on a chair and placed the pick on the strings of the geomungo.

Before he could even play properly, the man raised one eyebrow and then waved his hand, signaling him to put it away.

‘What's with this bastard?’

For a young man, he was unexpectedly picky, unlike his hearty appearance.

He seemed to be the owner of a personality that was fussy about many things, unlike his open and generous appearance.

Just then, the Madam came out, knocking on a bamboo cane, and said,

[I apologize. Prepare the next girl right away...]

[No. Stay outside.]

[Pardon?]

[I want to see something else in this girl.]

[... I understand.]

The puzzled Madam went back inside the waiting room.

He had tried to showcase his musical talent, but the man who had refused it was now telling him to stay, saying he wanted to see something else?

While thinking that, the man spoke.

[Girl. I see you have learned martial arts.]

‘... So that’s what it was.’

As expected of a disciple of the Five Kings, he immediately noticed that Go Chan had learned martial arts.

Since he had deliberately blocked his energy channels to reveal a second-rate level, he had expected a high-level expert to notice.

However, Go Chan found it difficult to gauge this man's skill level.

He could only surmise that he was at least a master of the Peak Realm.

At his words, Go Chan recited the lines he had prepared in advance.

[It's just a small skill I learned from my late father. It's merely enough to protect myself from ruffians, so please don't think too highly of it.]

[You learned it from your deceased father?]

[My father was a low-ranking warrior within the association.]

[Oh? Is that so?]

The man showed interest in Go Chan's words.

Within the Heaven and Earth Society, third-rate and second-rate martial artists were abundant, so it wasn't particularly surprising, but a courtesan learning martial arts seemed to be perceived differently.

[Even if he was low-ranking, for the child of a warrior of the great Heaven and Earth Society to live as a courtesan in such a place... It's truly a pitiful fate.]

[...]

It would be good to show a teary-eyed look here, but the situation itself was so uncomfortable that it was difficult for Go Chan to put on such an act.

Just then, the man chuckled and said,

[... Did you think I would comfort you like that? The world is full of people in hardship. Becoming a courtesan was your choice, so isn't it ridiculous to expect comfort?]

[Your words are just, sir.]

There was no need to act unnecessarily.

But then, the man suddenly shrugged his shoulders and said,

[But they say life brings a few strokes of luck.]

[...]

[If your meager martial arts can pique my interest, I shall accept you as one of my people.]

[As one of your people?]

[My so-called guards are all dull men, so it's been a bit lonely. Wouldn't it be pleasing to the eyes to have a pretty girl like you?]

‘Look at this?’

Not as a concubine but as a guard?

For a man with a rough way of speaking and who said he wouldn't offer comfort, he was showing generosity in a peculiar way.

He didn't seem to be as narrow-minded as he had thought.

Rather, it worked out well.

He had been at a loss as to what to do if he entered as a concubine, but this might actually be better.

However, he became curious about this fellow's identity.

[Sir, before I demonstrate my skills, may I ask your esteemed name?]

[My name?]

[If you're saying you might accept a lowly... servant like me, how can I not know your esteemed name?]

At Go Chan's question, the man gulped down a bottle of liquor and said,

[You mean me? Hahahaha!]

-Thud!

The man, who had laughed heartily, picked up something that had been placed on the floor and lightly lifted it.

It was none other than...

‘An ax?’

It wasn't the kind of ax used to chop firewood but a massive ax that could split a person in half with a single strike.

Seeing this, someone among the Five Kings came to Go Chan's mind.

‘Axe-Destroying King (破斧王) Ho Taegang.’

He was known as a supreme master who had slaughtered countless experts of the righteous faction with a single ax.

And he was one of the Eight Stars, regarded as the greatest masters of the martial world.

Realizing who his master was, Go Chan unconsciously swallowed his saliva, and the man revealed his identity.

[I am Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Clan Leader of the Destruction Clan.]

‘Damn it.’

Guard Go Chan, who had possessed Ha Chae-rin's body.

Go Chan couldn't lift his face due to extreme embarrassment.

By demonstrating his dagger-throwing skills, he had managed to become a guard of this man, Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Clan Leader of the Destruction Clan, who had come as a distinguished guest to the Crimson Orchid House.

However, although his title was a guard, this fellow was treating him almost like a concubine.

Not only did he make him wear clothes that revealed his chest, but he also had him pour drinks all day by his side.

‘This is driving me crazy.’

He had been going along with the fellow’s tune, enduring it until he could find his master, Mok Gyeong-un, but to think he would end up showing such an embarrassing sight.

He wanted to immediately remove Ho Jong-hyeok’s arm that was wrapped around his waist.

-Kekekeke. That fellow’s soul is that of a man, isn’t it? The way he’s acting, he’s completely become a wench.

Cheong-ryeong laughed at Go Chan’s appearance.

Mok Gyeong-un also found it somewhat unexpected, but in fact, he had no particular feelings about it.

Rather, his gaze was drawn to the curly-haired youth with a radiant appearance and those around him.

They were all exceptional experts, not ordinary people.

Just then, the escort warrior assigned by the Shadow Clan Master hurriedly whispered,

“Young Master, you must quickly pay your respects. The one at the very front is Young Master Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Society Leader.”

‘Jang Neung-ak?’

Ah, so that curly-haired man was one of the three disciples of the Society Leader, the leader of the Heaven and Earth Society, Jang Neung-ak?

He had heard from the Corpse Blood Valley Master, Lee Ji-yeom.

[Aside from the senior disciple, Young Master Na Yul-ryang, it would be difficult for me to describe the appearances of the second and third disciples as I haven't seen them. However, according to rumors, it would be best to be cautious if you meet the second young master.]

He remembered that his reputation wasn't very good.

He had heard that he had a tyrannical temperament, wanting to obtain anything he desired.

Just from his outward appearance, he didn't particularly seem that way.

In any case, there was nothing good about clashing with this person right now, so Mok Gyeong-un clasped his hands in greeting and bowed his head to show respect.

“Greetings to Young Master Jang Neung-ak.”

As he greeted like that, there was no response.

Rather, Jang Neung-ak seemed to have no interest and tried to pass by Mok Gyeong-un and the escort warrior.

‘Is that fortunate?’

It might be better for him not to be interested.

However, it became a bit troublesome.

It seemed difficult to take Go Chan away right away as he was with the entourage of Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Society Leader.

So, he was about to ask through voice transmission who the person with him was, but...

-Tap!

At that moment, Jang Neung-ak, who had passed by, stopped.

Then, turning his head, he said,

“You just now... I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Who are you?”

‘...’

He had hoped he would pass by, but he stopped and asked.

Mok Gyeong-un turned his body and replied while maintaining his posture of greeting with clasped hands.

“I am Mok Gyeong-un, disciple of the Shadow Clan Master.”

“Shadow Clan Master?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a guy named Mok Gyeong-un among the Shadow Clan Master’s disciples?”

“This is the first time I’ve heard of it. Under the Shadow Clan Master... Wait, Young Master, isn’t this brat that guy?”

‘That guy?’

What are they talking about?

At that moment of confusion...

-Swish!

Suddenly, in Mok Gyeong-un’s lowered gaze, a pair of legs appeared in front of him.

“Hoh, so you’re that guy.”

The owner of the voice was none other than Jang Neung-ak.

Based on the vast energy emanating from him, Mok Gyeong-un had estimated that he was quite strong, but his movement was extremely fast.

He was already standing right in front of him.

“You... You’re the hostage of the righteous faction who passed the Corpse Blood Valley’s gates with the highest score this time, aren’t you?”

At his question, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

Not much time had passed since the discipleship ceremony at Corpse Blood Valley had ended.

Yet how did this person already know about him?

While he was thinking that...

-Tap! Swish!

Jang Neung-ak lifted Mok Gyeong-un's chin with the folding fan he was holding in his hand.

Then, smirking, he said,

"I only feel like you're at the beginning of the peak realm, so how could a guy like you have gotten the highest score at the Corpse Blood Valley's gates?"

What should he say in response here?

While he was pondering, Cheong-ryeong's voice rang in his ears.

-Lower your head as much as possible. This isn't the time to clash in terms of strength or influence.

The opponent was the second disciple of the Society Leader.

As he was aiming to be the next Society Leader, he held considerable influence here.

If he carelessly displeased him, his ankles could be grabbed before he could even attempt anything.

Naturally, Mok Gyeong-un had that level of discretion.

Thus,

"It was merely good luck. Thank you for looking upon me favorably..."

Right at that moment...

In the blink of an eye, Jang Neung-ak's index and middle fingers were poking Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

In that fleeting moment, Mok Gyeong-un made a judgment.

‘A test.’

This was clearly a test.

Jang Neung-ak considered his martial prowess to be around the early-stage of Peak Realm, so he had doubts.

Therefore, he was now testing him to reveal his true skills.

Here, Mok Gyeong-un's choice was simple.

“Ugh.”

Mok Gyeong-un blinked and closed his eyes, only slightly flinching his body.

Naturally, he wouldn't be able to dodge, and if he kept his eyes open, it would be considered strange, so he did his best to pretend to be an inferior martial artist.

-Thwack!

In front of Mok Gyeong-un, who had his eyes closed, Jang Neung-ak's two fingers stopped by a hair's breadth.

Jang Neung-ak, who had stopped his fingers like that, chuckled.

A woman in her early twenties with thick lips, wearing red clothes, who was one of his companions, also laughed and said,

“It seems he doesn’t live up to the rumors, Young Master.”

“It appears so.”

Jang Neung-ak also nodded as if he had a similar opinion and withdrew his hand.

Fortunately, it seemed he had successfully deceived him.

-Well done, mortal.

Cheong-ryeong also thought that Mok Gyeong-un had handled himself well this time.

However...

“For someone flinching in surprise, his heartbeat is exceptionally calm, Young Master.”

“What?”

Jang Neung-ak turned his head and looked at someone.

There stood a middle-aged man with long hair, his eyes covered with a black cloth and leaning on a bamboo cane.

He had the calmest energy among them.

It felt like a clear lake, but could he possibly be a blind man?

While he was thinking that...

“If my subordinate’s ears are not mistaken, the person in front was not surprised at all, Young Master.”

“...Not surprised at all, you say?”

With those words, Jang Neung-ak turned his head and glared at Mok Gyeong-un with sharp eyes.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un licked his lips slightly.

He had tried his best to act, but it seemed the situation was becoming troublesome.

Chapter 130 – Ability (1)

The second disciple Jang Neung-ak, one of the candidates for the next Society Leader.

There were many conflicting opinions about his background, and many who took issue with his disposition and conduct.

However, despite his overflowing greed, those who acknowledged Jang Neung-ak believed that his skill would once again establish the Heaven and Earth Society as a pillar of the Central Plains.

Like the senior disciple Na Yul-ryang, Jang Neung-ak had built up quite a significant force.

It was estimated that its size amounted to 30% within the Heaven and Earth Society.

Among such a force, there were the next-generation powerhouses who formed the backbone, and Jang Neung-ak referred to these subordinates of his as follows:

‘Five Mountains Alliance.’

Five enormous mountains.

It literally meant his five cherished subordinates.

Jang Neung-ak, who enjoyed ranking and ordering, regularly had his subordinates compete against each other to determine a new ranking and encourage competition.

As a result, five powerhouses were determined, and they were the Five Mountains Alliance.

Excluding Jang Neung-ak, there were a total of five people present.

Except for the female guard accompanying Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Clan Leader of the Destruction Clan, everyone from the Second Mountain to the Fifth Mountain was gathered.

Most people assumed that Ho Jong-hyeok, a disciple of Axe-Destroying King Ho Taegang, one of the Eight Stars of the Central Plains and one of the Five Kings, would be either the First Mountain or the Second Mountain, but the reality was different.

‘Second Mountain, Wi Maeng-cheon.’

Despite being a blind man who had lost his sight, he was a powerhouse who contended for the position of the First Mountain.

And among the members of the Five Mountains Alliance, he was the only one who was not from the Heaven and Earth Society but brought from outside, and he possessed an ability that everyone avoided as much as his martial prowess.

It was his hyper-senses that had developed after losing his sight.

Among them, his hearing was by far the most exceptional.

[A useful talent.]

Jang Neung-ak highly valued Wi Maeng-cheon's auditory ability.

That's because Wi Maeng-cheon could read other people's emotions or discern the truth from lies with this absurd level of hearing.

-Thump! Thump! Thump!

‘... It's steady.’

Wi Maeng-cheon had been carefully listening to this person's heartbeat since first seeing him.

Normally, he wouldn't pay attention to everyone he didn't know.

However, it started because of the guard beside him.

[Young Master, you must quickly pay your respects. The one at the very front is Young Master Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Society Leader.]

From this conversation alone, Wi Maeng-cheon learned that one of the approaching individuals was meeting his lord, Jang Neung-ak, for the first time.

Usually, when someone was referred to as a disciple of the Society Leader, their heartbeat would noticeably change due to emotional fluctuations during their first meeting, unless they were executives.

However...

‘It’s too steady.’

There was not the slightest change in the heartbeat.

It just kept beating, thump, thump, and it could be said to be too regular to this extent.

Even when sleeping, if one had a restless dream, the heartbeat would change, so how could it be this steady?

To this degree, it was almost at the level of a highly trained assassin.

However, even an assassin’s heartbeat would have variations.

‘Who is he?’

In any case, he was also someone Wi Maeng-cheon was seeing for the first time.

Since Wi Maeng-cheon was blind, he distinguished others through their footsteps, heartbeats, or habitual sounds they made.

But this person was someone whose voice he was hearing for the very first time.

‘He maintains his composure even after seeing the Young Master...’

His martial prowess, sensed through his energy, was around the beginning of the peak realm, which was unusual for someone who was at best a senior warrior or a Great Clan Leader, considering his young age.

And Wi Maeng-cheon realized that Mok Gyeong-un was definitely extraordinary through Jang Neung-ak's test.

Although he had lost his sight, he knew how precious eyes were to people.

Therefore, when someone aimed for their eyes, he could confirm that most people's heartbeats would become incomparably larger than usual.

However...

-Thump! Thump! Thump!

‘... Just what is this guy?’

How could the sound be exactly the same as before?

Judging from the sound of movement and reaction, it seemed like he flinched in surprise, but there was not the slightest change in his heartbeat.

It was as calm as if he were doing daily activities.

‘What is this?’

This was the first time he had encountered someone like this.

Nothing represented emotions as well as the sound of the heart.

But how could this be possible?

After a moment of puzzlement, Wi Maeng-cheon could be certain of one thing.

“If my subordinate’s ears are not mistaken, the person in front was not surprised at all, Young Master.”

“... Not surprised at all, you say?”

At Wi Maeng-cheon’s words, Jang Neung-ak turned his head and glared at Mok Gyeong-un with sharp eyes.

He trusted Wi Maeng-cheon’s judgment, as he possessed excellent ability in reading others.

“You... Were you really not surprised?”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un waved his hands and said,

“... How could that be possible? My eyes were about to be poked, so how could someone not be surprised...”

-Tap!

At that moment, Jang Neung-ak placed the head of his folding fan on Mok Gyeong-un’s chest.

Although he didn’t possess hyper-senses like Wi Maeng-cheon, he could discern heartbeats through a medium without directly touching with his hands.

Soon, Jang Neung-ak snorted and opened his mouth.

“This guy is completely interesting.”

“What? Don’t tell me Maeng-cheon’s words are true?”

The woman with thick lips and red clothes asked as if intrigued.

Then, Jang Neung-ak swept the folding fan up from the chest to Mok Gyeong-un's chin and said,

“Is it because he has guts? Or is he hiding his skills?”

Jang Neung-ak's eyes seemed to pierce through Mok Gyeong-un.

Seeing his appearance, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue inwardly.

He thought he could deceive him with just facial expression management and appropriate acting, but that blind man seemed more troublesome than expected.

It was his first time encountering someone who listened to heartbeats.

-Mortal, stay calm. Even if his hearing is abnormally sharp, your true skills haven't been exposed.

Cheong-ryeong spoke to Mok Gyeong-un.

The situation was different from when they were in Corpse Blood Valley.

If he made an enemy of the Society Leader's disciple, it could go beyond being annoying, and his chances of avenging his grudge might become remote before he could even attempt anything.

‘This guy shouldn't act out rashly.’

Although he had been with him all this time, Mok Gyeong-un's actions were unpredictable.

That's why she was concerned.

In a situation where they weren't fully prepared, the answer was to suppress one's emotions.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un opened his mouth.

"I heard you are one of those closest to the Society Leader."

"Hm?"

At those words from Mok Gyeong-un, one of Jang Neung-ak's eyebrows slightly rose.

It seemed he wasn't too displeased with what he had just said.

Mok Gyeong-un continued,

"The master who taught me said that one must remain calm even in front of a tiger to survive."

At his words, the corners of Jang Neung-ak's mouth slightly curled up.

Unlike his appearance, he seemed to be someone who knew how to speak eloquently.

Referring to him as a tiger meant elevating him as an entity beyond one's capacity, and saying that he maintained composure to survive was lowering himself.

In response, Jang Neung-ak said,

"You seem quite capable in handling yourself."

“Even if I have guts, if the Young Master decides to, you can kill someone like me at any time, so how could I act recklessly?”

“You’re not foolish. Yes, those who know how to handle themselves tend to have longer lifespans.”

-Zing!

Mok Gyeong-un glanced at the folding fan touching below his neck.

Although there was nothing sharp, the aura emanating from the point of contact seemed ready to pierce his neck at any moment.

As expected of a disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society’s leader, he was no ordinary person.

“... I will keep your words in mind.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s answer, Jang Neung-ak chuckled, removed the folding fan from his neck, clasped his hands behind his back, and stepped away from Mok Gyeong-un.

Could this quietly pass?

While thinking that, Jang Neung-ak walked a few steps forward and said,

“But you know, while it’s good that you can handle yourself, if your skills don’t back it up, you can’t have this level of composure. Don’t you agree, Maeng-cheon?”

“That’s right, Young Master.”

“This Young Master thinks that the hostage, you bastard, are hiding your skills as much as your composure. I don’t know in what way or by what method, though.”

At this, Mok Gyeong-un lowered his head and stance and said,

“How could that be possible? I don’t meet the level of your expectations.”

“Someone who doesn’t meet expectations wouldn’t have gotten the highest score at the Corpse Blood Valley’s gates for no reason. Don’t you agree, Jong-hyeok?”

-Gulp, gulp!

At that question, Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Clan Leader of the Destruction Clan, downed the liquor from the bottle, wiped his lips with his sleeve, and replied,

“If you say he got the highest score with his current skills, it would be impossible unless he possessed heaven-bestowed luck or there was corruption within Corpse Blood Valley.”

“This Young Master shares the same thought.”

-Shing!

At that moment, the blind Wi Maeng-cheon slightly pulled out his bamboo cane as if drawing it.

Then, a sharp blade hidden inside was revealed.

“It’s a matter that can be easily revealed if we test him. Young Master, please leave it to me. I will verify it.”

At those words, the red-clothed woman with thick lips also stepped forward.

“Hohoho. I will do it. I want to see if his skills match his handsome face.”

Seeing the two eager individuals, Jang Neung-ak chuckled, shook his head, and then spoke to the muscular giant who had been silent all this time, with a rough beard reminiscent of Zhang Yide[1].

“Jeo Mo-pal.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I want to see this friend’s true skills.”

“Yes, my lord.”

It was as soon as those words ended.

-Bam!

The man who had been still, no, Jeo Mo-pal, suddenly moved.

Possessing a swift movement that didn’t match his giant stature, Jeo Mo-pal instantly tried to strike down on Mok Gyeong-un’s head with his interlocked hands.

-Swish!

In response, Mok Gyeong-un utilized his footwork and spread his body backwards.

Then, Jeo Mo-pal, with his arms lowered from the strike, charged forward like a wild boar.

His momentum seemed like it would crush anything.

However, despite this momentum, Mok Gyeong-un maintained his composure and continued to widen the distance using his footwork.

-Tap tap tap!

“Hmph!”

At this, Jeo Mo-pal stamped his foot on the ground, leaving a deep imprint, and extended his fist towards Mok Gyeong-un, who was increasing the distance.

-Boom!

At that moment...

-Whoosh!

A white light flickered from Jeo Mo-pal's fist, and an invisible, heavy force rushed towards Mok Gyeong-un's face.

This was none other than Fist Wind.

As the Fist Wind infused with qi flew towards him, Mok Gyeong-un found it difficult to dodge, so he crossed his arms and immediately assumed a defensive stance.

-Whoosh!

As the Fist Wind struck his crossed arms, Mok Gyeong-un's body was pushed back about six steps.

-Tremble!

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes narrowed at his trembling arms.

As he had somewhat guessed based on the energy Jeo Mo-pal was exhibiting, his martial prowess had indeed reached the pinnacle of the peak realm.

However, in terms of the strength infused in his fists alone, it was even higher.

It seemed he possessed external and internal energy that was nearly at the transcendent realm.

‘This won't do.’

It seemed difficult to properly face this man with his concealed skills.

However, if he fully revealed his skills, it would turn out as Jang Neung-ak wanted.

‘No other choice.’

It would be better to take a few hits and dodge moderately.

His pride wasn't particularly hurt by this.

It was better to be hit a few times and avoid it than to get involved in troublesome matters right away.

That was when it happened.

-Bam!

Jeo Mo-pal's fist, which had instantly closed the distance, struck Mok Gyeong-un's face, causing his head to turn sideways and collide with the ground.

-Bang!

‘Phew.’

This hurts a bit.

But this level of pain was nothing.

Mok Gyeong-un could endure even worse than this without letting out a single groan.

At that moment, Jeo Mo-pal, who had driven Mok Gyeong-un’s head into the ground and turned him upside down, kicked his abdomen with a qi-infused kick.

-Thud!

-Whoosh!

Mok Gyeong-un, who was hit in the abdomen, was pushed back while arching his back like a shrimp.

Seeing this, Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Clan Leader of the Destruction Clan, clicked his tongue.

“Tsk tsk. He’s done for. Done for.”

When he saw Mok Gyeong-un’s footwork, he had guessed that he would be at the late-stage peak realm, but seeing him being helplessly beaten, he wondered if he wasn’t even at that level.

Jeo Mo-pal might be the lowest among the Five Mountains, but he was an expert with skills approaching the transcendent realm.

When such a skilled person seriously unleashed his martial prowess, how could he be a match even if he was the top scorer at Corpse Blood Valley?

“Hmm.”

‘Is this all he’s capable of?’

Disappointment mixed in the eyes of Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Society Leader.

He had expected him to show as much as he had hoped for to some extent, but seeing him being pummeled like that, his expectations were gradually fading.

Well, even if he had hidden his skills, it was virtually impossible for him to be a match for Jeo Mo-pal of the Five Mountains anyway.

“That’s enough. Now...”

He was about to tell him to finish it moderately, but...

“His heartbeat is still steady.”

“What?”

“Please leave it to me instead.”

-Whoosh!

With those words, someone leaped out.

It was none other than Wi Maeng-cheon, the Second Mountain.

-Shing!

Wi Maeng-cheon, who had drawn the sword hidden in his bamboo cane, instantly flew and slashed at the neck of Mok Gyeong-un, who was being beaten by Jeo Mo-pal.

He unleashed his killing intent to the maximum and showed the momentum to sever the neck in a single stroke.

-Swish!

The moment the blade was about to touch the neck...

-Clang!

-Whoosh!

‘!?’

At that instant, Jeo Mo-pal’s eyes widened.

Mok Gyeong-un had lightly grasped the fist Jeo Mo-pal was throwing with his left hand and had somehow parried Wi Maeng-cheon’s sword with a kick.

“You bastard...”

He was about to say that he was indeed hiding his skills, but Mok Gyeong-un, as if Jeo Mo-pal wasn’t even in his concern, looked at the blind Wi Maeng-cheon and said,

“I was letting myself get hit, yet you’re making things difficult.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

This damn rat bastard was arrogantly saying that he had been letting himself get hit by Jeo Mo-pal?

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Jeo Mo-pal’s anger surged, and he tried to shake off his grabbed fist and send Mok Gyeong-un’s face flying with his other fist.

However...

-Crack!

“Ugh!”

-Thud!

At that moment, along with a groan of pain from Jeo Mo-pal’s mouth, his grabbed right wrist was twisted backwards, and he was forced to kneel on one knee on the ground.

‘Th-this bastard’s energy technique...?’

Jeo Mo-pal couldn’t hide his shock.

This bastard’s energy technique was surpassing his own, which was close to the transcendent realm.