

## Mayhem 191

### Chapter 191 – The Test (2)

Everyone in the training grounds couldn't hide their shock.

It was something no one had expected.

The Society Leader, known as one of the Six Heavens and the current peak of the martial arts world, and rumored to have surpassed the wall of walls, was a truly unrivaled supreme grandmaster without equal.

The Art of Sword Control he wielded was not a technique that a mere later generation disciple, a youngster, could block.

However, an unbelievable event occurred.

-Clang!

The flying sword stopped right in front of Mok Gyeong-un and fell.

This shocked not only Mong Mu-yak and Seop Chun, the two people of the Five Tigers responsible for the next generation, but also the executives Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon and Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon.

‘How on earth... did he do it?’

Hwan Ya-seon looked at Mok Gyeong-un with wide eyes.

He was still kneeling with his head lowered, paying his respects.

But the sword had fallen midway.

Judging from the Society Leader's reaction, it was definitely not him who had done it.

'Is this guy him?'

Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon's eyes flashed with surprise.

That was because, as the one managing even the Society Leader's direct information department, he was familiar with most of Mok Gyeong-un's background.

He was a youngster who had been taken as a hostage of the righteous faction's Yeon Mok Sword Manor just a month ago.

According to the report he had heard from Myeongdowang Son Yun, although he had talent with the sword, he had started martial arts too late and had no great prospects.

Was it possible for such a guy to do this?

'Who the hell is this guy?'

Based on the qi perceived externally, he was a peak expert.

With this level of skill, forget blocking Art of Sword Control, he should have been instantly pierced through.

But how on earth did he do it?

Unlike the two people who were puzzled, there was someone who was admiring him.

She was none other than Cheong-ryeong.

‘Ha!’

Cheong-ryeong was watching everything from inside the wooden puppet.

No one here knew Mok Gyeong-un’s true strength, but she was aware of his true face.

‘...This Mortal guy is truly a monster.’

She couldn’t help but be amazed.

That was because, although Mok Gyeong-un had reached the realm of the Transformation, Art of Sword Control was an even higher-level technique, so it was not something Mok Gyeong-un could handle yet.

However, after seeing the qi connection to the sword being severed twice, she could be certain.

‘To handle the Death Qi so delicately.’

An exclamation naturally escaped.

In conclusion, Art of Sword Control was a high-level technique that gathered qi in the sword itself and manipulated it.

Therefore, it was practically impossible to sever the qi connection using the method Seop Chun had employed.

However, Mok Gyeong-un had taken a difficult gamble.

He had used the Death Qi that disrupts the Yang qi to scatter the Society Leader’s qi concentrated in Art of Sword Control.

At first glance, it might seem easy, but in reality, it was not at all.

To send the Death Qi outside the body and intervene in Art of Sword Control, which moved quickly across space, required delicate and precise control.

This was something that couldn't be done without innate senses and tremendous concentration.

'The mortal's potential and growth speed are truly...'

It was beyond the realm of humans.

From the perspective of someone watching closely, it was so remarkable that he could only be thought of as a monster.

However, apart from this amazement, there was also a concern.

'...You've made a mistake, mortal.'

Cheong-ryeong looked at the Society Leader, whose face was wrapped in bandages, revealing only his eyes.

He's probably that person's descendant.

Whether he's his son or grandson.

'This will only invite that person's scrutiny.'

It was an unavoidable situation since he had aimed for his life, but it would have been better if he had moved his body and dodged with difficulty.

Disrupting a high-level technique in this way was more likely to raise suspicion.

If it were her, she could have even killed Mok Gyeong-un on the spot.

However,

“Hahahahahahaha!”

The Society Leader, who had been staring at Mok Gyeong-un, suddenly burst into hearty laughter.

Then he soon began coughing again.

“Cough cough.”

Blood was mixed in with his cough.

Seeing this, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon spoke in a perplexed voice,

“Society Leader. You shouldn’t overexert yourself.”

“Cough cough.”

-Swish!

The coughing Society Leader soon waved his hand lightly and said,

“No, no.”

The Society Leader straightened his waist.

Then, approaching Mok Gyeong-un, he said,

“Well. What excuse will you give now? Will you say you didn’t do it again this time?”

“...”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un didn’t answer.

Then Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon pressed,

“Won’t you answer right away!”

“.....”

“This guy, truly...”

It was the moment when the angry Mong Seo-cheon was about to express his rage.

Mok Gyeong-un spoke,

“Then I have no choice. Yes, I did it.”

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un raised his head and looked at the Society Leader confidently.

Seeing his behavior, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon was dumbfounded.

Who was the person present here?

It was the Society Leader of the Heaven and Earth Society.

How could someone who had pledged loyalty to the sect and was subordinate behave so impudently?

“How insolent.”

-Shing!

Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon soon half-drew the sword from the scabbard at his waist.

Then, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon blocked his way, clasping his hands together in a formal greeting, and said,

“Vice-Leader. Please calm down.”

“Calm down? Are you defending him because he’s your disciple?”

“How could that be? But isn’t a disciple’s mistake also the responsibility of the teacher who taught him? So please reprimand me instead.”

“Now, to say that...”

“Enough.”

-Swoosh!

At that moment, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon and Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon looked at the Society Leader with startled eyes, overwhelmed by his domineering spirit.

‘This qi is unbelievable.’

‘How can he be called someone with a severe illness?’

The qi emanating from the Society Leader was so immense that it was suffocating, enough to surprise even the two masters.

Mok Gyeong-un’s left eyelid trembled even more as he watched this.

It was truly admirable, even though only a part of it was released.

He had been curious about what it meant to surpass the wall of walls, and it definitely exceeded his expectations by far.

‘...It would be reckless.’

If this was the level with only a partial release of qi, if he used his full strength, it seemed he could annihilate everyone present, including himself, not in a few moves but within a few breaths.

The level itself was completely different.

Is this the current pinnacle of the martial arts world?

While he was in awe, the Society Leader spoke,

“Since you’ve confessed with your own mouth that you did it, shall we hear how you did it?”

At his question, Cheong-ryeong hurriedly advised,

– Make up an excuse. Anyway, living humans cannot detect the Death Qi, the qi of the dead, so there's no way for him to find out.

– Right. That's what we should do.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un also intended to do so.

However,

“That qi you used to intervene in the Art of Sword Control and scatter it... It's quite unique.”

‘!!!!!!’

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un's expression stiffened.

Cheong-ryeong was equally surprised.

– How could that be?

The Death Qi was essentially an undetectable qi.

It was not something living humans could sense, so no martial artist who had faced Mok Gyeong-un until now had noticed it.

But did the Society Leader really sense it?

Cheong-ryeong was momentarily amazed but spoke calmly.

– He might be intentionally probing you because he can't detect the qi. Don't fall for it, mortal.

-...Do you really think so?

Mok Gyeong-un was also puzzled.

The strength of the Death Qi was that it was a qi that living humans couldn't detect.

But if they could sense it, that advantage would be lost.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un cautiously parted his lips,

"You flatter me. I merely applied the qi of my sect."

"Your sect?"

"Yes."

The reason he attributed it to his sect was because of the martial arts world's tacit rules.

Even in a relationship where loyalty was pledged, unless it was a special case, martial arts were a precious asset and secret to that martial artist, so they wouldn't pry into it.

Mok Gyeong-un had aimed for this.

However,

"Hmm. Is that so? But from what I feel, although the Shadow Clan Master's qi has a Yin tendency, your qi seems quite complex."

“...”

At those words, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon also frowned and looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes narrowed.

He hoped it was just a probe, but it seemed the Society Leader was truly detecting his qi.

Although he could waver, Mok Gyeong-un spoke calmly,

“Before my master taught me martial arts, I already learned various martial arts, so that's why.”

“You learned various martial arts?”

“Yes. There's the martial art of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor... I believe the Society Leader is well aware of the reason I came here.”

At these words, the Society Leader's eyes turned strange.

It was because he immediately understood the meaning of what Mok Gyeong-un had said.

The Moon Sword Technique.

That person had deciphered that cursed secret manual that no one else could master.

Recalling this, the Society Leader chuckled and soon spoke with his hands clasped behind his back,

“I did want to see it at least once, but it seems this is the reason why you were chosen by that secret manual.”

“Pardon?”

“Should we take another look?”

With those words, the Society Leader nodded his head.

Then the sword that had fallen to the ground rushed towards Mok Gyeong-un.

– Just dodge it!

Cheong-ryeong shouted.

However, Mok Gyeong-un’s thought was different.

He felt he needed to know for sure whether the Society Leader was probing him or if he had truly detected his qi.

If he had really detected the Death Qi, it was suspicious for him to continuously test him like this.

Therefore,

-Clang!

Mok Gyeong-un concentrated his Death Qi and scattered the qi of the sword flying at him with Art of Sword Control once again.

– No. Didn’t I tell you to just dodge it?

– No. Let's see first.

– What?

– I need to know if he really can detect Death Qi.

Anyway, if someone in the Society Leader's position suspected that qi, it would be difficult to keep dodging.

In that case, it was better to verify its authenticity, Mok Gyeong-un judged.

Right at that moment,

“Your senses are excellent. Then can you handle two?”

“What?”

-Swish!

The Society Leader grasped the sword technique manual and lightly waved his hand.

Then, two swords were drawn from the swords hanging on the wall, and they simultaneously rushed towards Mok Gyeong-un.

-Swish! Swish!

The two swords flew from different directions, aiming for Mok Gyeong-un's head and chest.

‘This...’

Cheong-ryeong clicked her tongue.

Even intervening in one Art of Sword Control required tremendous concentration.

But wielding Art of Sword Control from different directions meant that the Society Leader had already figured out the weakness of the method of scattering qi.

It seemed he was not called one of the Six Heavens for nothing.

‘This time, there’s no choice. You have to dodge or block it.’

She thought that even without her advice, Mok Gyeong-un would have no choice but to move this time.

However,

-Swish! Swish!

He didn’t move even when the swords were flying right in front of him.

The startled Cheong-ryeong shouted,

– Mortal!

It was right at that moment.

-Clang! Clang!

‘!?’

An astonishing scene unfolded before her eyes.

The two swords flying from different directions lost strength almost simultaneously and fell to the ground.

Cheong-ryeong was dumbfounded.

He simultaneously scattered the qi of Art of Sword Control flying from different directions at the same time?

‘This guy... Ha!’

How could he do it to this extent?

It was almost impossible without exhibiting a level of concentration that split one’s mind in two.

It seemed she had underestimated Mortal.

However, she wasn’t the only one surprised.

“You truly astonish me.”

At the Society Leader’s words, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon looked at the Society Leader with wide eyes.

Judging from the Society Leader’s surprised eyes, it seemed to be true.

‘The Society Leader... was astonished?’

Although he was said to have a severe illness, the Society Leader was one of the Six Heavens, the current peak of the martial arts world.

A youngster astonished such a supreme grandmaster of the highest level?

No, it was even ridiculous to call him a youngster.

At the point where he could block the Society Leader's Art of Sword Control in this way, that guy had already surpassed the level of a later generation disciple.

'Who the hell is this guy?'

Where did such a person pop up from?

It went beyond simply dismissing him as a hostage from the righteous faction.

He seemed quite dangerous...

-Bam!

It was at that moment.

-Thud!

Suddenly, the Society Leader's figure appeared in front of Mok Gyeong-un.

The Society Leader placed his hand on the shoulder of Mok Gyeong-un, who was kneeling on one knee.

-Swish!

‘I missed his movement.’

Mok Gyeong-un, who had reached the realm of the Transformation and mastered the Clear and Manifest Water Crossing Steps of the Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang, enabling him to move at ultra-high speeds, was confident in handling most speeds.

However, the Society Leader’s lightness skill was completely different from the Clear and Manifest Water Crossing Steps.

It seemed to grab and pull the space.

Moreover,

‘This is?’

The ground sank centered around the Society Leader’s soles.

How could a stepping technique with such weight possess such swiftness?

At that moment of puzzlement,

-Bam!

‘Gasp!’

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un frowned and looked at the Society Leader.

The inner force penetrating through his shoulder.

It was like the rough waves surging in the ocean.

Usually, when injecting inner force into the opponent's body, one would approach carefully as it could cause injury, but the Society Leader was not like that at all.

-Squish!

The Society Leader's vast inner force tried to destroy his body from within.

If he remained still, his heart meridian could rupture, and his life would be in danger.

In the end, he had no choice but to resist.

Mok Gyeong-un aroused his Death Qi and scattered the Society Leader's qi surging into his body like waves.

-Whoosh!

If it were qi of a similar level, he would have easily scattered it.

However, the Society Leader's true qi, having surpassed the wall of walls and reached the Profound Realm, was at a level that even Mok Gyeong-un, who had reached the Transformation Realm, couldn't touch.

The true qi surging in was too vast to be completely scattered even with the Death Qi.

-Drip! Drip!

The clothes centered around his shoulder were stained with blood.

His blood vessels had burst.

-Grit!

Mok Gyeong-un clenched his teeth.

If it was difficult even with the Death Qi, there was only one way.

'I have to let it flow out.'

Mok Gyeong-un guided the qi entering through his shoulder to the Yongcheon acupoint on the soles of his feet without forcefully responding to it.

Then,

-Crack! Rumble!

The stone floor of the training grounds cracked, and the aftereffects of the true qi rose.

"Ho. Letting the qi flow out. Not bad. Then can you let this out too?"

-Swoosh!

At that moment, the Society Leader's qi intensified even more.

Qi twice as strong as before was surging in.

'Ugh.'

At this, Mok Gyeong-un's face reddened, and soon, his blood vessels bulged out.

His body was already under severe strain.

If this continued, he might really become crippled or even die.

Enduring this, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon, who had been watching, finally stepped forward.

"Society Leader! That's enough..."

"Do not interfere."

Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon blocked him.

If the Society Leader had decided to kill him, no one could object.

Even if it was the Shadow Clan Master, Mok Gyeong-un's master.

'How did it come to this?'

Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon was restless.

Mok Gyeong-un was his disciple and practically a member of the Fire Faith Order.

He couldn't lose him in a situation like this.

However,

-Bam!

At that moment, the Society Leader removed his hand from Mok Gyeong-un's shoulder.

As soon as he removed his hand, Mok Gyeong-un, with severe internal injuries, vomited blood and knelt on the ground.

-Thud!

The Society Leader, looking down at Mok Gyeong-un, clicked his tongue.

He had aggressively injected true qi to the point where all the blood vessels in his body were about to rupture.

He couldn't even let it flow out.

If it was true qi that caused blood vessels to burst, anyone would find it difficult to endure that pain.

However, this fellow didn't let out a single groan or show any signs of pain even in such agony.

It seemed he hadn't passed the Corpse Blood Valley for nothing.

"Interesting. You don't just have one type of qi in your body, but quite a variety of qi."

"Haa... Haa..."

"Your innate senses, mental strength, endurance, everything is extraordinary."

The atmosphere had been as if he would kill Mok Gyeong-un at any moment, but suddenly, the praises flowing from the Society Leader's mouth made everyone look at him in puzzlement.

Has Mok Gyeong-un passed the Society Leader's test?

At that moment, unexpected words spilled from the Society Leader's mouth.

"All of this is beyond what the Shadow Clan Master can handle."

"Society Leader, what on earth..."

"Stay still. Shadow Clan Master."

The Society Leader extended his hand and warned the Shadow Clan Master not to interfere.

Then he looked at Mok Gyeong-un and said,

"What do you think? Would you like to become my fourth disciple?"

'!!!!!!'

Chapter 192 – The Test (3)

"What do you think? Would you like to become my fourth disciple?"

'!!!!!!'

At those words from the Society Leader's mouth, everyone in the training grounds was shocked.

Just a moment ago, they had been concerned about the situation escalating due to his excessive use of force, so this was a completely unexpected situation for them.

‘Disciple? What does this mean?’

The one who showed the most notable reaction was Mong Mu-yak.

As the Vice-Leader’s son, his eyes widened as he alternately looked at the Society Leader and Mok Gyeong-un.

That was because there was something Mong Mu-yak, who took great pride in learning the sword, had longed for all his life: receiving teachings from the Society Leader.

-Clench!

Mong Mu-yak’s fist tightened.

Although his father’s influence played a role, how tirelessly had he worked to catch the Society Leader’s attention after entering the inner fortress of the main building?

Despite becoming one of the Five Tigers, known as the Heaven and Earth Society’s greatest later generation disciples, the Society Leader had never even spared him a glance.

Therefore, the Society Leader’s proposal was both infuriating and envious.

‘Ha!’

On the other hand, the reaction of Seop Chun, another member of the Five Tigers and the Third Captain of the main building, was different.

Rather, his gaze toward Mok Gyeong-un became close to admiration.

He felt the same envy, but he had inwardly been impressed while watching him undergo the Society Leader’s test.

‘He’s an incredible guy.’

Especially, his ability to endure the pain of his blood vessels bursting during the Society Leader’s inner force test without letting out a single groan or showing a pained expression was impressive.

It made him wonder what he would have done in that situation.

‘Is he the type of person who rises to the top?’

With that level of skill, it seemed sufficient for the Society Leader to covet him.

However, while it was something to congratulate Mok Gyeong-un for, he wasn’t sure if this was okay.

As far as he knew, hadn’t Mok Gyeong-un become Shadow Clan Master’s disciple through the Corpse Blood Valley’s closing ceremony just half a month ago?

Seop Chun glanced at Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon with a concerned look.

Naturally, having his disciple taken away wouldn’t be pleasant... Huh?

‘Is... it okay?’

Contrary to his concern, the Shadow Clan Master’s expression was fine.

Rather, until just a moment ago, he had been restless, worrying about what would happen to his disciple, but now, his lips were twitching as if he was trying to hide his excitement.

Seop Chun’s guess was accurate.

‘Ah ah ah. To have such an opportunity come.’

If it were other executives, they would likely object to this situation.

It was a natural principle.

Who would be pleased to have such a talented disciple taken away?

Of course, in a similar context, there was a sense of regret, but to the Shadow Clan Master, Mok Gyeong-un was not only his disciple but also a member of the same Fire Faith Order.

Having such a member become a disciple of the Society Leader, the leader of the Heaven and Earth Society, was a golden opportunity for the Fire Faith Order to enter the center of the organization.

There was a saying that it was darkest under the lamp.

He believed that Mok Gyeong-un becoming the Society Leader’s disciple would lay a great foundation for the reconstruction of the Fire Faith Order.

At this, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon slightly nodded his head while looking at Mok Gyeong-un.

It meant not to worry about him.

“Society Leader!”

At that moment, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon intervened.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Please pause for a moment.”

“Pause? Are you objecting to my authority right now?”

At the Society Leader’s tone, which sounded displeased, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon hurriedly clasped his hands together, lowered his head, and said,

“That’s not it. If the Society Leader, the leader of the sect, desires it, who could raise any objections?”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“I’m just concerned.”

“Concerned?”

“Yes.”

“Cough cough. What are you concerned about?”

At the Society Leader’s question, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon cautiously spoke,

“That child named Mok Gyeong-un became Shadow Clan Master’s disciple through the Corpse Blood Valley’s closing ceremony.”

“And?”

“Having multiple masters is not a problem, but if the Society Leader takes in that child, the meaning becomes different. It becomes forcibly taking a disciple.”

“...”

At those words, one of the Society Leader's eyes revealed through the bandages narrowed.

He didn't seem very pleased.

However, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon didn't stop speaking even while being mindful of his mood.

"Even if the Society Leader asks for the Shadow Clan Master's understanding and accepts that child as a disciple, in this case, there may be objections from the Elder Council and executives."

"Objections from the Elder Council and executives? What does that mean?"

"All the disciples you have taken in are from prestigious martial arts families of our sect. They are the children of those who have made great contributions since the sect's founding."

At those words, the Society Leader scoffed.

It was because he had understood what the Vice-Leader was trying to say.

"Are you saying that his background is a problem?"

"Yes, no matter how much it is the Society Leader's decision, this alone will invite objections from the Elder Council and executives."

"Objections..."

"Although he has pledged loyalty, that child is originally a hostage from the righteous faction. He has no definite merits yet and hasn't been verified, so it seems right to reconsider readily accepting him as a disciple."

At these words, his son Mong Mu-yak nodded in agreement.

Indeed, his father's opinion was correct in this regard.

If he were to accept a hostage from the righteous faction as a disciple, complaints would sprout up everywhere, and people would start doubting the Society Leader's true intentions.

Already, due to his illness, he hadn't shown himself at official events for a long time, so hoping that there wouldn't be any complaints at all was truly a miscalculation.

"No way."

While the Vice-Leader was objecting, there was someone else who was also objecting.

It was none other than Cheong-ryeong.

As soon as the Society Leader made the proposal, Cheong-ryeong flew into a rage and sent an opposing opinion to Mok Gyeong-un.

– Ignore that bastard's proposal! It's a clan that plays with others using flattery and deception. It could be dangerous instead.

Mok Gyeong-un was puzzled by her agitation.

In fact, this was a good opportunity.

Even without going through other disciples, it meant he had gained an opportunity to directly communicate with the Society Leader.

Moreover, since he was already at odds with the Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang, if he became the Society Leader's disciple, Na Yul-ryang would lose justification to openly attack him.

That way, he could expand his power under the Society Leader's protection.

There was no way Cheong-ryeong wouldn't know about this golden opportunity.

However, for her to object to this extent,

'Is it a grudge?'

Just from her voice, he could tell how angry she was.

Because of that, Mok Gyeong-un could be certain.

She wanted the destruction of the Heaven and Earth Society due to a deep-seated grudge, but at the center of that grudge was the Society Leader.

No, to be precise, it would be the Society Leader's predecessor.

However, with the passage of a hundred years, the previous Society Leader would have already grown old and died.

Therefore, for Cheong-ryeong, the focus of all her resentment would be his bloodline.

'...She can't tolerate me entering under the bloodline of someone who is practically her enemy?'

It seemed that was her state of mind.

Mok Gyeong-un was not used to the emotions of others.

However, he had directly experienced the emotion of hatred when he lost his grandfather, so he could fully understand why she was getting emotional.

Nevertheless,

– Please calm down.

– Calm down? This isn't a matter to be calm about. Even without becoming that bastard's disciple, there are plenty of ways for you and I to exact our revenge. So don't fall for his empty flattery.

– Then it would take too long.

– You, Mortal!

– Cheong-ryeong.

– Are you going to ignore my advice again and do as you please? Emotions are clouding your judgment.

– Nonsense! I am sufficiently rational...

– There's an opportunity to officially approach the Society Leader, and it's darkest under the lamp, so we can foster strength and lure him into letting his guard down. Cheong-ryeong, you should be able to think of this much.

– ...

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Cheong-ryeong panted and didn't answer.

It was difficult for her to control her anger due to her grudge, but she recognized that Mok Gyeong-un's opinion made more sense at the moment.

– Think rationally. Shouldn't we rejoice instead?

– Rejoice?

– Yes.

– Do you think this would be joyful for me?

– Yes. It's joyful. Wouldn't it be the best for Cheong-ryeong if, after becoming the Society Leader's disciple and gaining his trust, we could plunge the blade of betrayal into his heart?

– !!!

At Mok Gyeong-un's excited voice, as if the mere thought of it thrilled him, Cheong-ryeong's anger subsided for a moment.

She had only thought of killing him, her anger flaring up at the thought of his bloodline.

But after hearing Mok Gyeong-un's words, she realized he was right.

'Letting that bastard's bloodline know what betrayal is?'

Yes.

This Mortal guy was right.

Just killing him wouldn't be satisfying.

They needed to take away everything related to him and make him experience the same feelings as her.

Only then would this hundred-year-old grudge be resolved.

– Can you really do that to him?

– If you want.

– ...Then do as you wish.

Cheong-ryeong said.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un's lips twitched, then he knelt on one knee, clasped his hands together in a formal greeting toward the Society Leader, and spoke in a loud voice,

“How could I refuse such an honor when the Society Leader is willing to accept me? Please take me in as your disciple!”

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon shook his head.

“Please reconsider.”

Although he said that, Mong Seo-cheon had already half given up.

The Society Leader never took back the words he had spoken.

Throughout his presentation of the reasons, the Society Leader had been looking at him with a displeased gaze.

The outcome was already predictable.

He would eventually push through with his intention.

At that moment, the Society Leader spoke,

“Do you think I would care about such things?”

‘Ah ah ah.’

Is it going as expected?

However,

The Society Leader, who was about to continue, suddenly frowned and didn’t speak.

This continued for a brief moment.

It was unclear why he was suddenly acting like this.

Then the Society Leader continued,

“...However, the Vice-Leader’s opinion also makes sense.”

“Pardon?”

“He has pledged loyalty, but there’s the issue of his background, and his merits haven’t been sufficiently verified, so objections from the Elder Council and executives are natural.”

‘What?’

Suddenly, the Society Leader was advocating for his opinion.

Although he had his moods, he rarely withdrew his opinion in situations like this.

But why was he doing this?

While he was puzzled, the Society Leader said,

“However, this child is the sole successor of the Moon Sword Technique.”

“...”

“That alone is enough to appease the concerns about his background. Isn’t that right?”

“...That’s right.”

The Moon Sword Technique.

Ah, he had forgotten about that.

Among the Elder Council and executives, except for a few, no one knew about this fact.

However, if they were to learn that Mok Gyeong-un had mastered the Moon Sword Technique, which had been lost for a hundred years, it would create a huge stir.

Not considering this important factor was an error in judgment.

At that, the Society Leader continued,

“However, this time, I will respect the Vice-Leader’s opinion.”

“Pardon?”

“If he successfully completes this mission, this child’s merits and ideals will be sufficiently verified. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s...”

“That’s?”

“...The Society Leader’s words are correct.”

This mission was very important.

Whether the Society Leader could return to the front lines or not could be determined through this mission.

Therefore, if he were to succeed in this mission, it would be enough to acknowledge his merits.

Moreover,

‘If he goes to the imperial palace, it will be swarming with those righteous faction bastards. If this guy doesn’t ask for their help or attempt to escape, he will certainly be verified as a person of our sect.’

His rapid growth and attitude were quite irritating.

He even thought that he might become a poison to the Society Leader instead.

However, if all of the above were satisfied, there would be no problem with the Society Leader accepting him as a disciple.

Rather, it would be a blessing for the sect to gain an outstanding disciple.

But,

‘I should tell Mu-yak just in case.’

He felt he should have his son Mong Mu-yak monitor him.

If he were to discover even the slightest hint of different intentions, he would need to swiftly deal with him.

At that, the Society Leader turned his gaze to Mok Gyeong-un and said,

“Did you hear?”

“Yes.”

“Complete this mission successfully. Then I will accept you as my fourth disciple.”

“The mission?”

Mok Gyeong-un asked in puzzlement.

He had come here without hearing anything in the first place.

Then the Society Leader chuckled and pointed at the Vice-Leader with a nod, saying,

“The Vice-Leader will explain the mission.”

With those words, the Society Leader approached Mok Gyeong-un and whispered,

“I hope you will meet my expectations.”

Then the Society Leader turned around, his hands clasped behind his back, and left the training grounds.

Watching his departing figure, Mok Gyeong-un licked his lips.

‘This has become troublesome.’

He thought it was an opportunity to directly become the Society Leader’s disciple.

If that happened, he believed he could find out about the Ghost Sword within a short period of time, but as expected, nothing was easily resolved.

He had no choice but to take on that so-called mission.

Only then could he become the fourth disciple.

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-Thump thump!

Walking along the corridor, the Society Leader placed his palm against the wall and coughed violently.

“Cough cough.”

The coughing lasted longer than usual.

Next to him, someone who had been hiding revealed themselves from a shadowed area.

“You have overexerted yourself.”

“It seems so for the first time in a while.”

The Society Leader wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and spoke.

The guy was more outstanding than expected, so he had to draw out more true qi, straining himself quite a bit.

The person who revealed themselves tried to support the Society Leader, who was leaning against the wall.

Then the Society Leader shook his head.

“No. It’s fine.”

“But...”

“There’s no need to make a fuss. I know my body better than anyone.”

“Understood.”

At the Society Leader’s words, the man in the shadows slightly lowered his head and answered.

Then, as if suddenly remembering, the Society Leader asked him,

“By the way, what was that thing you said earlier? That the guy seemed familiar?”

It was the Society Leader who had reluctantly postponed accepting him as a disciple due to the voice transmission telling him to stop.

If it weren’t for that, he wouldn’t have accepted the Vice-Leader’s objection.

At the Society Leader’s question, the person obscured by the shadows answered, “...It’s not certain.”

“Not certain?”

“He definitely resembles someone, but his identity, name, everything is too different.”

“Resembles? Who does he resemble? Cough cough.”

The Society Leader coughed violently and staggered. The man hurriedly walked forward to support him.

Thanks to that, the man’s face, which had been obscured by shadows, was revealed under the bright lantern light.

He was a middle-aged man with a long scar above his left eyebrow, and in his right hand, he held a black sword that looked as if it had been burned.

The man, supporting the Society Leader, answered the previous question, “The Sickle-slaying Demon.”

“The Sickle-slaying Demon? Who is that?”

It was an unfamiliar nickname that the Society Leader had heard for the first time.

Then the man spoke in a meaningful voice, “A dead man who should have died.”

## Chapter 193 – The Test (4)

“A dead man who should have died.”

At the words of the middle-aged man with a long scar above his left eyebrow, the Society Leader, who had released his support and caught his breath, asked in puzzlement,

“Haa... Haa... A dead man who should have died?”

“Literally.”

The Society Leader’s eyes narrowed.

If you think about it in reverse, the phrase ‘a dead man who should have died’ also means ‘not dead and alive’.

And if you delve deeper, it can also be interpreted as ‘thought to be dead’.

‘The Sickle-slaying Demon...’

It was a nickname he had never heard of in the martial arts world.

Just who was this Sickle-slaying Demon for him to say such a thing?

If he personally mentioned this person, it couldn’t be someone to just brush off.

After being lost in thought for a moment, the Society Leader spoke,

“Answer me.”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill him directly?”

“Yes, I ruptured his internal organs with a palm strike and pierced his chest where his heart is with this sword.”

The scarred middle-aged man held up the black sword that looked charred.

At this, the Society Leader asked,

“With that extent of injury, he should have definitely died.”

Surviving was even more impossible.

As if agreeing, the man nodded and answered,

“Yes, he should have died.”

“...But you’re saying this because you think that child earlier might be the Sickle-slaying Demon who died by your hand?”

“The possibility is extremely low.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“It goes beyond ‘resemblance’ to the point where he looks like the same person.”

“Looks like the same person?”

At those words, the Society Leader frowned.

Then soon,

“Could it be...”

“Society Leader, let me say this in advance, but it’s completely different from ‘that’.”

“Different?”

“Yes.”

“Then is that really possible?”

“That’s why I’m also concerned.”

Concerned.

In the end, even the slightest possibility couldn’t be ruled out.

At this, the Society Leader stared intently at the man and asked, coughing,

“Cough cough. Why did you kill that Sickle-slaying Demon?”

“He was digging into ‘our’ traces.”

'!?'

At the middle-aged man's answer, the Society Leader's eyes turned strange.

It was a kind of agitation.

What was the meaning of 'our' that caused him to react like this?

Soon, the Society Leader spoke,

"Digging into traces. Then that changes the story. Left Guardian."

"Yes."

"Verify the truth about the death of that guy called the Sickle-slaying Demon."

So far, there was no connection other than the resemblance.

Therefore, the Society Leader requested confirmation.

At this, the middle-aged man clasped his hands together in a formal gesture and answered,

"Understood. If there is even the slightest possibility of him being the Sickle-slaying Demon, what should be done? For the sake of the future, it would be better to deal with him immediately..."

"..."

After catching his breath for a moment, the Society Leader spoke in a murderous voice,

“No.”

“But...”

“If that’s the case, wait until he completes the mission.”

“Ah ah.”

The man, understanding the Society Leader’s intention to utilize him until the end, grinned and answered,

“I will do as you command.”

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When Mok Gyeong-un and Seop Chun, one of the Five Tigers and the Third Captain Commander of the main building, and Mong Mu-yak, another member of the Five Tigers and the Vice-Leader’s son, were standing side by side.

In front of them, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon, with his hands clasped behind his back, spoke,

“Since there was a delay and time is limited, I will now explain the mission.”

‘Mission...’

It was truly a troublesome situation.

If it was a confidential mission important enough for the Society Leader to personally summon them and the Vice-Leader to explain, it definitely wouldn’t be an ordinary mission that could be taken lightly.

Mok Gyeong-un glanced at Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon, who was standing by the entrance, far behind Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon.

Seeing that even he, who was in charge of information and confidentiality, was kept at a distance, it could be inferred that this mission was not discussed with the Shadow Clan Master at all.

If that's the case,

'...It means the Shadow Clan Master cannot be trusted in this mission.'

Mok Gyeong-un could deduce this from the fragmentary information.

At that moment, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon began the explanation,

"I will first talk about the objective of this mission. The goal is to abduct a person imprisoned in a certain place and bring them back to our sect."

At those words, Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the main building, lightly raised his hand and asked,

"Is the person we need to abduct a member of our sect?"

At that question, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon stared intently at Seop Chun and eventually answered,

"No. For now..."

"If not, is it an enemy?"

At Seop Chun's follow-up question, the Vice-Leader frowned and answered in a somewhat heavy voice,

“Whether the person being abducted is an enemy or ally is not something you should be concerned about. Your job is solely to use any means necessary for the mission and bring that person to the main building of our Heaven and Earth Society’s inner fortress.”

“...”

Just who is it that information about the person to be abducted is restricted?

Seop Chun spoke in a somewhat puzzled tone,

“That may be so, but I’m asking how we’re supposed to abduct a person, not an object, with such limited information.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un also nodded.

Seop Chun’s questioning was valid.

At this, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon shook his head and answered the question,

“Information about the person to be abducted will be revealed once you leave the sect and arrive at the place where they are imprisoned.”

‘Once we arrive at the place?’

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un realized.

He didn’t know who they were supposed to abduct, but it seemed that information about the person to be abducted shouldn’t be leaked within the sect before they left for the mission.

From this, two things could be inferred.

One,

‘Is it someone who could create negative public opinion?’

Judging from the Society Leader’s personality, although he had a fickle side, he was quite authoritarian and tended to push through with what he wanted to do.

If the Society Leader kept information confidential about the person he wanted to bring, there was a high probability that the executives or members of the Heaven and Earth Society would view it negatively.

Second,

‘Spies...’

Revealing the information only after reaching the location of the target to be abducted was a precaution against the information being known to internal members.

This could be to thoroughly maintain secrecy for the success of the mission, but conversely, it also meant that there could be spies within the inner fortress.

‘...Not even discussing the mission with the Shadow Clan Master could mean they judged that there might be spies even among the key executives.’

The corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth twitched as his thoughts reached this point.

Although all of this was mere speculation, if even a part of it was true, it had the potential to create a stir in this massive organization.

At that moment, the Vice-Leader said,

“Any more questions?”

“No.”

-Swish!

Realizing that further questioning would only confirm that information about the mission was restricted, Seop Chun lowered his raised hand, having nothing more to say.

Then Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon spoke with his arms crossed,

“This mission will naturally be revealed later, but until then, it requires confidentiality. So don’t have too many doubts. Understood?”

“Yes!”

Everyone answered simultaneously.

Then Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon continued,

“The personnel deployed for the mission are divided into an advance team and a follow-up team. The advance team has already departed, so once you arrive, you will hear more details from them.”

‘Advance team?’

It seemed there were more people they had to work with.

Whatever the mission was, Mok Gyeong-un hoped it would be something that could be completed as quickly as possible rather than being difficult.

Of course, with only this fragmentary information, it was still impossible to gauge the situation.

“The first gathering point where the advance team is waiting is Annak in Henan Province Province.”

‘Annak?’

At those words, the eyes of the three people, including Mok Gyeong-un, turned strange.

That was because Annak in Henan Province Province was right near Kaifeng[1], the capital where the imperial palace was located.

If the first gathering point to meet up with the advance team and receive information was Annak, then...

‘...It’s the capital.’

All three of them could guess the true gathering point for the mission.

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After the brief explanation of the mission was over, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon, who had been waiting for Mok Gyeong-un before departure, called him over with a gesture.

Keeping a distance from the others, the two began a conversation.

“Master.”

“It has turned out quite coincidentally.”

“Yes.”

“Did you hear where the mission will be carried out?”

“They didn’t tell us. They only informed us of the first gathering point.”

“Is that so? Then...”

“The capital Kaifeng seems certain.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon smiled.

It wasn’t because he was his disciple, but this fellow was indeed clever.

“Ohoho. That’s right. It’s Kaifeng. To be precise, it’s the imperial palace in Kaifeng.”

‘!?’

At the mention of the imperial palace, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes flashed with surprise.

He had suspected it might be in the capital, but he didn’t expect it to actually be the imperial palace.

“There are eyes watching, so don’t show any signs.”

“Understood.”

“There’s no time, so for now, I’ll inform you about our sect’s spies in the imperial palace.”

“Thank you.”

In fact, the main reason why Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon and his disciple Mok Gyeong-un were assigned to this mission was precisely this.

If Mok Gyeong-un, the successor of the Shadow Clan, was directly involved in the mission, the Shadow Clan's spies in the imperial palace would cooperate even more desperately.

The involvement of Mong Mu-yak, the son of Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon, was in a similar context.

The spies of the Society Leader's direct subordinates managed by Mong Seo-cheon were also in the imperial palace, so they would obediently cooperate with Mong Mu-yak.

“...is there. Memorize it in your head. You can do it, right?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“And take this with you.”

The Shadow Clan Master handed Mok Gyeong-un a jade token with a tiger engraved on it.

“What is this?”

“If you have this token and the code I told you, they will cooperate without question.”

“Yes.”

Mok Gyeong-un accepted the jade token.

However, he felt something else on his palm as he received the token.

It was,

‘A ring?’

It seemed to be a ring worn on the finger.

It appeared to have been intentionally handed over hidden under the jade token.

Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon spoke in an even more whispering voice than before,

“It’s the identification token of a member. Keep it with you.”

“Why this?”

“From now on, I will give you an order as a senior member of our order, not the Heaven and Earth Society.”

“...”

‘As a senior member?’

Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

Is this mission somehow entangled with the Fire Faith Order as well?

While he was puzzled, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon quietly whispered,

“The person you will be abducting in this mission is the Holy Guardian of our order.”

'!?'

The Holy Guardian?

He had heard about this from Hwan Ya-seon before.

In the Fire Faith Order, there were two highest positions, one being the Sect Leader and the second being the Holy Guardian, who communicated with the sacred fire and was in charge of rituals.

However, according to what Hwan Ya-seon had told him, the Sect Leader of the Fire Faith Order had lost his life, and the Holy Guardian's whereabouts were unknown.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un quietly asked,

"Why is the Society Leader looking for him?"

It didn't make sense.

Didn't he say that the Fire Faith Order had left the righteous path and was rejected by martial artists?

Then why was the Society Leader of the Heaven and Earth Society trying to abduct the Holy Guardian of the Fire Faith Order?

To Mok Gyeong-un's question, Hwan Ya-seon answered,

"...I can't tell you the details now. However, the success or failure of this matter depends solely on you."

"What is the mission?"

“If you succeed in the abduction in the Society Leader’s confidential mission... Before returning, smuggle out the Holy Guardian.”

“...”

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes turned strange.

He had guessed that there might be conflicting issues at some point while pretending to be a member of the Fire Faith Order and having a foot in both camps, but he didn’t expect it to come in this way.

‘Ah ah ah... This has become troublesome.’

If he failed in the abduction or if something went wrong while smuggling out the abducted Holy Guardian, he could become a traitor to the Heaven and Earth Society.

No, he would already be considered a traitor the moment he tried to smuggle him out.

On the other hand, if he ignored the Shadow Clan Master’s order, it would definitely lead to a difficult situation.

It was truly a dilemma where neither choice was easy to make.

‘What should I do?’

Whatever it was, it seemed the moment had come when a choice was necessary.

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While Mok Gyeong-un was conversing with Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon was also giving a secret order to his son Mong Mu-yak, in addition to information about the spies.

“Keep an eye on Mok Gyeong-un.”

“Mok Gyeong-un... you mean?”

“Yes, monitor his every move.”

“Father, why?”

“Aha! Who told you to address me like that in a formal setting?”

At the reprimand of his father Mong Seo-cheon, Mong Mu-yak lowered his head and answered,

“...I apologize, Vice-Leader. But why are you giving such an order?”

“To verify his loyalty.”

‘Ah!’

Right.

Even if he pledged loyalty in the Corpse Blood Valley, his roots were in the righteous faction.

It was too early to completely trust a guy who had only pledged loyalty half a month ago as a person of the Heaven and Earth Society.

“If... there are grounds for suspicion, what should I do?”

At those words, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon took out a small red gourd-like object from his bosom.

Then he handed it over to his son Mong Mu-yak.

“Take this with you.”

“Is this by any chance?”

“Yes. If that guy makes contact with people from the righteous faction or shows any suspicious signs, use this. You know how to use it, right?”

“Yes.”

How could he not know?

He had witnessed its tremendous effects with his own eyes.

However, he had doubts about whether this would work properly on that monster-like guy who endured even the Society Leader’s profound true qi without letting out a single groan.

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While Mok Gyeong-un and Mong Mu-yak were each receiving secret orders from the Shadow Clan Master and the Vice-Leader, Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the main building who was waiting alone, muttered with a sigh and shrugged his shoulders,

“This is the fate of someone without backing.”

Seop Chun’s position was different from the other Five Tigers.

His family, which originated from a small to medium-sized martial arts clan and had joined the Heaven and Earth Society twenty years ago instead of during its founding, had no influence in the sect.

Therefore, he was like a pawn that could be used and discarded at any time.

Even in this confidential mission, unlike the others who had reliable executive patrons like the Vice-Leader or the Shadow Clan Master, he had no backing to protect him in case of emergency.

That meant if an unexpected situation were to occur, his sacrifice could be demanded if things took a turn for the worse.

“Tsk.”

Truly a gloomy and boring life.

Lost in thought, Seop Chun furtively glanced at Mok Gyeong-un.

Although meeting him for the first time today, he seemed to be no ordinary guy.

Should he say he was exceptional?

There weren't many people who gave him this feeling.

‘Perhaps only the Eldest Young Master.’

The Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang.

He was on a completely different level compared to the Society Leader's other disciples.

Was this the feeling of someone walking the path of hegemony?

That was the impression.

However, interestingly, the same feeling emanated from Mok Gyeong-un, who was only seventeen years old, to a mysterious extent.

He didn't seem like someone who would be under anyone.

'Hmm.'

Come to think of it, if this mission was successfully completed, the Society Leader had promised to take him in as his fourth disciple.

That meant the guy would also gain the qualification to be a successor.

Although his support base was weak.

Seop Chun, who had been intently watching Mok Gyeong-un, faintly raised the corners of his mouth.

'Life is only lived once anyway. Should I take a gamble?'

Chapter 194 – Loyalty (1)

In a room with only a single candle lit on the lantern.

A man in his early thirties with a small stature was sitting cross-legged in front of the bed.

On the bed lay a man with a handsome appearance, his right eye and head wrapped in bandages. He was none other than Na Yul-ryang, the chief disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Master.

Na Yul-ryang's left eye, which had been closed as if dead, opened.

-Swish!

Na Yul-ryang turned his head and looked at the man sitting cross-legged.

Noticing this, the man shook his head and spoke,

"You really don't look good."

"..."

Although he had a deep voice, the man had a peculiar voice that sounded like it belonged to a boy before puberty.

Na Yul-ryang, who had been staring intently at this man, spoke,

"How long have I been like this?"

"Three days."

"Three days?"

At those words, Na Yul-ryang snorted as if he couldn't believe it.

Since reaching adulthood, he had never been particularly injured, and he had never been unconscious for this long.

-Grit!

Everything that had happened during his confrontation with that guy flashed through his mind.

Including the last moment when he had turned into a poisonous human shield and embraced him.

-Sting!

But why did his right eye hurt so much?

That wasn't all.

There was pain in his right wrist and right ankle as well.

At this, the puzzled Na Yul-ryang was told by the man, clicking his tongue,

"Your right eyeball is gone, and the bones in your right wrist and right ankle are crushed."

"..."

At those words, Na Yul-ryang's expression distorted.

More than the other injured areas, the fact that his right eyeball was gone made his nerves tingle from head to toe.

'This is not a pleasant feeling.'

It was an emotion he was experiencing for the first time.

Even when he got angry, it usually ended with just a feeling of unpleasantness, but this lasted longer.

Is this the emotion called rage?

To Na Yul-ryang, who was expressing his anger like that, the man said,

“Since you’re awake, that’s a relief. Just before, that person was insisting on having a duel with the Poison King, and I had to break a sweat to dissuade him.”

“Poison King?”

“Yes, why did you fight with that dangerous old man in the first place? Did you suddenly want to subdue the Five Kings or whatever with force?”

At the man’s words, one of Na Yul-ryang’s eyebrows rose.

Nevertheless, the man spoke without any fear,

“Did I say something wrong?”

“...”

If it were anyone else, no one would have been able to speak so bluntly to Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang.

However, Na Yul-ryang showed displeasure at the man’s words but didn’t directly express anger.

Was it because he trusted the man that much?

At that moment, Na Yul-ryang stared intently at the man and spoke,

“Does everyone know that I ended up like this?”

“No. How is that possible? If it were a minor injury, that would be one thing, but if it became known that you suffered an injury of this extent, it would have shaken things up considerably even internally.”

The information had been blocked, hiding it from everyone.

At the man’s words, Na Yul-ryang let out a soft sigh and said,

“Then only you and that old man know about it?”

“Yes, that person was so stubborn in coming to see you that there was no other way.”

The man shrugged his shoulders with a disgusted expression.

At this, Na Yul-ryang asked,

“Did you tell him not to do anything unnecessary?”

“I told him to endure until you woke up if he cared about the Eldest Young Master.”

“...You did well.”

If the fact that he had suffered serious injuries had been revealed externally, quite troublesome situations would have arisen.

The judgment of the man, no, Mu-yak, was correct.

This man, called Mu-yak, was the closest confidant among Na Yul-ryang’s trusted subordinates.

No, he was also the only one with whom Na Yul-ryang interacted freely, regardless of their status.

“What are you going to do?”

“Huh?”

“The eye can’t be helped, but even if you use a healing technique, it will take a month for the broken bones to recover.”

“...”

“Can you endure until you’re fully healed?”

“Endure? No.”

That was impossible.

Apart from his own injuries, if that guy wasn’t dealt with now, there was a high probability that he would become quite troublesome.

He had witnessed him gaining enlightenment and surpassing the wall right before his eyes.

He possessed monstrous talent, not inferior to himself.

At present, he might have the upper hand, but if such a guy was left alone, he would continue to grow.

‘I want to kill him myself, but.’

That would be inefficient for now.

There was no need to act emotionally.

Anyway, since that guy had also received help from the Poison King, Elder Baek Sa-ha, there would be no complaints if he moved them.

“Convey this to the old man.”

“You’re going to do it after all.”

“I don’t have time to wait until I’m fully healed.”

At his words, Mu-yak shook his head as if he had expected it and said,

“Of course you wouldn’t. But before that, it would be better to hear this first.”

“This first? If it’s not an urgent matter...”

“I think it’s urgent.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems the movements of the Second Young Master, Jang Neung-ak, and the Young Lady, Wi So-yeon, are suspicious.”

At those words, Na Yul-ryang scoffed.

“Leave them be. Those guys are not important. Rather...”

“It seems they are trying to join hands.”

“...What?”

At those words, Na Yul-ryang frowned.

What does this mean?

Jang Neung-ak and Wi So-yeon are trying to join hands?

“Why is that?”

They were practically nemeses.

Both Jang Neung-ak and Wi So-yeon were desperate to become the successor.

Why would they suddenly join hands?

However, it didn't end there.

“I thought the same at first, but while you were unconscious, the situation became more complicated.”

“Became complicated?”

“Yes, last night, all the executives supporting the two disciples gathered for a meeting. But they weren't the only ones.”

“If not only them, then someone else was there too?”

“The Poison King and the Shadow Clan Master also joined the gathering.”

‘!?’

At those words, Na Yul-ryang’s expression stiffened.

Not only did all the executives supporting the Second Young Master Jang Neung-ak and the Young Lady Wi So-yeon gather for a meeting, but the Poison King and the Shadow Clan Master also joined?

“...These bastards.”

Their support factions had been at a level not even worth keeping in check one by one.

However, if the Three of the Five Kings, Bright Blade King, Destroying-Axe King, Annihilation Poison King, the Two of the Three Elders, Shadow Clan Master, Water Clan Elder, and the Two of the Four Valley Masters, Summoning Sound Valley Master and Sun Rock Valley Master, combined their forces, the situation would be different.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that these alone had gathered a force slightly exceeding 50% of the sect’s power.

‘How did they?’

It was a situation that was utterly incomprehensible.

These people had different goals, so they weren’t the type to join hands like the two disciples.

But they suddenly decided to join hands?

This was...

“It seems they are determined to properly confront you.”

“...Properly confront me?”

“Yes. Otherwise, they couldn’t have so cleverly taken advantage of this situation where you suffered serious injuries.”

“...”

“It doesn’t make sense for that old bastard Poison King to have done this to prepare for the situation that will unfold after you wake up.”

‘!?’

The moment he heard those words, something flashed through Na Yul-ryang’s mind.

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un’s face.

‘Ha?’

Come to think of it, that guy Mok Gyeong-un had also become Elder Baek Sa-ha’s disciple.

If he was the joint disciple of the Shadow Clan Master and the Poison King, he could simultaneously move the two of them.

Now the picture was somewhat coming together.

He didn't know how he had persuaded the disciples, who were like oil and water, but the one who had created this situation wasn't them.

"Mok Gyeong-un."

"Pardon?"

"That guy Mok Gyeong-un is the one who orchestrated this."

"...What are you talking about? If you mean Mok Gyeong-un, isn't he the disciple from the righteous faction hostage that the Shadow Clan Master recently accepted?"

"Yes, that guy did it."

At Na Yul-ryang's confident words, Mu-yak spoke with an incomprehensible tone,

"Eldest Young Master... Even so, that seems a bit far-fetched. What can that youngster, who has only been the Shadow Clan Master's disciple for a little over half a month, possibly do..."

"That youngster did this to me."

"A youngster did this to you... Wait, what did you just say?"

"I said that guy did this to me."

'!!!!!!'

At those words, Mu-yak was so shocked that he stared at Na Yul-ryang with wide eyes.

What on earth does this mean?

It wasn't the Poison King who inflicted these serious injuries?

"...That's impossible. Even if he passed the Corpse Blood Valley's gate as the top disciple, he would be at most at the Danju level, so how could such a youngster..."

"He surpassed the wall during our fight."

"Wall?"

Mu-yak was dumbfounded.

For a moment, he doubted his own ears.

Wasn't that righteous faction hostage youngster only seventeen years old?

"What do you mean by wall? That can't be. Surpassing the wall means..."

"He has reached the Transformation Realm."

At his words, Mu-yak stared intently at Na Yul-ryang.

It was definitely not a joke.

No, in the first place, Na Yul-ryang never joked.

There was no way these words coming from his mouth could be false.

Mu-yak shook his head as if he was disgusted and said,

"If that's true, his growth rate is unbelievably fast. He surpassed the wall during a fight? This is really..."

Although he couldn't finish his words, what he was trying to say was clear.

Monster.

He had surpassed the limits of an ordinary human.

The only beings Mu-yak considered as such were his lord, Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang, and that guy who was called the strongest among the Five Tigers.

But now, another monster had appeared, so it was truly a calamity.

Mu-yak, who was dumbfounded, barely managed to speak,

"Are you really certain that this Mok Gyeong-un orchestrated this situation?"

"..."

Although he didn't answer, Na Yul-ryang was certain.

That guy was of the same kind as himself.

This wasn't a move that could come from the minds of the two disciples or a stubborn old man like the Poison King.

It was a move to keep him in check, no, to confront him.

‘You, who are not even the disciples, want to have a proper duel with me?’

He truly had guts.

“Ha...”

“Eldest Young Master?”

“Ha... Hahahahahaha!”

Suddenly, Na Yul-ryang, who had been frowning, burst into crazy laughter.

At that sight, Mu-yak couldn’t hide his puzzlement.

If what Na Yul-ryang said was true, this was a very serious matter.

But why was he laughing like this?

In the first place, he had rarely shown such laughter, so it seemed he was revealing it after a very long time.

After laughing for a while, Na Yul-ryang stopped.

Then,

“Not bad.”

“...What is?”

-Swoosh!

At that moment, with a tremendous spirit and murderous intent, Na Yul-ryang's entire body emanated.

"It will be worth killing him."

Finally, a prey worth hunting had appeared.

Na Yul-ryang genuinely felt the thrill of the hunt.

To think that an enemy worth staking everything on and crushing had emerged like this from within.

This sense of elation was the first in a long time since that day.

Na Yul-ryang looked at Mu-yak and said,

"From now on, I will enter the Nine Palace Seclusion Chamber to recover and revive my senses."

"What? The Nine Palace Seclusion Chamber?"

Mu-yak couldn't hide his inner surprise.

Recovery was, of course, necessary, but entering the Nine Palace Seclusion Chamber meant that he would train in some way.

"It won't take long. Mu-yak, in the meantime, persuade all the remaining executives who claim to be neutral."

At those words, Mu-yak's eyes sparkled.

He had been worried that he might lose his motivation due to the serious injuries.

But if it was to this extent, there was no need to worry.

Rather, it seemed that Mok Gyeong-un had made a mistake.

Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang had already considered the disciples to be no match for him, so he had stopped increasing his power or keeping them in check.

Such a lord had acknowledged Mok Gyeong-un as prey and an enemy.

This was nothing short of the worst omen for that guy.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, around the same time.

In a deep forest near Changning, Hengyan Province.

Mok Gyeong-un, Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the main building, and Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader, who had been traveling north for three days without proper rest, using lightness skills to match the gathering time at the assembly point, decided to camp here for the first time to replenish their stamina.

They had divided their roles and briefly separated from each other.

Since the surroundings were damp, probably due to rain, Mong Mu-yak went deeper into the mountains to find dry firewood, Mok Gyeong-un went hunting for a meal, and Seop Chun took charge of arranging the campsite and preparing traps around it in case of an emergency.

-Snap!

Mok Gyeong-un grabbed the neck of the rabbit he had spotted and twisted it.

For Mok Gyeong-un, who had lived in the mountains for a long time, night hunting wasn't a difficult task.

He already had two rabbits hanging from his left hand that he had caught earlier.

"This should be enough, right?"

"Yes. Rabbit meat... I want to eat it after a long time."

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"Is that so? Then I'll knock one of them unconscious, so do you want to possess them for a while and have a meal?"

"Hoo. Should I?"

She had been feeling stuffy being inside the wooden puppet for too long.

She wanted to possess someone and have a meal for a change, like when she was at the Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

With that, Mok Gyeong-un returned to the designated campsite.

Seop Chun seemed to have experience with this as well, as he had arranged the surroundings well.

"He hasn't come back yet."

It seemed Mong Mu-yak was still gathering firewood.

It wouldn't be easy to find dry branches since the wood was wet.

However,

“...Why is that guy staring at us so burdensomely?”

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head.

That was because as soon as Mok Gyeong-un appeared, Seop Chun had been staring intently at him with a suspicious expression, as if he was anxious about something.

“Hmm.”

It didn't seem to be because he was hungry.

If he were hungry, he should have looked at the rabbits brought back from hunting.

“Do you know that mortal guy has been glancing at you continuously for three days?”

“More or less.”

It would have been strange not to notice when he was staring like that.

So he had been somewhat wary, wondering if he had received a secret order from the Society Leader or the Vice-Leader.

Right at that moment,

Seop Chun looked around and suddenly got up and approached Mok Gyeong-un.

He didn't know what he was doing, but,

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un brought his index and middle fingers together to form a sword finger seal.

If he were to do something unnecessary, it would be better to deal with it in advance.

However,

“Mok Gyeong-un.”

“Why are you doing this?”

At Mok Gyeong-un's question, Seop Chun approached within five steps and scratched his head as if he was embarrassed about something, and said,

“I'm quite shy about these things, but...”

“Shy?”

“Yes. Bringing this up first to a friend younger than me is quite embarrassing.”

“...What do you want to say?”

“Whoa. Don’t be so impatient. I said it’s embarrassing.”

“...”

Why on earth was he acting like this?

While he was puzzled, Seop Chun cleared his throat and said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“Ahem. If you become the Society Leader’s disciple, wouldn’t you need a loyal subordinate to be your right-hand man?”

‘!?’

Chapter 195 – Loyalty (2)

“Ahem. If you become the Society Leader’s disciple, wouldn’t you need a loyal subordinate to be your right-hand man?”

‘!?’

At the words of Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the main building, Mok Gyeong-un couldn’t hide his puzzlement.

He had been wary, wondering if the glances Seop Chun had been stealing at him throughout their journey north were due to a secret order from the Society Leader or the Vice-Leader.

However, at this sudden question, he was momentarily at a loss for words.

– This mortal guy is quite an interesting fellow.

– Interesting, you say?

– I wondered why he was glancing at you for three days, but all he wanted to say was puhahahaha—

Cheong-ryeong, who had been telling him to be careful until just a moment ago, burst out laughing.

Well, in a way, it was something to laugh about.

However, Mok Gyeong-un didn't take these words at face value.

– It could be a trap.”

– A trap?

– Yes.

– Hmm. Why do you think so?

– It could be a ploy to plant a spy on me.

– A spy...? Well, that's a possibility.

Cheong-ryeong also suddenly agreed with this.

It was quite suspicious for someone they had just met for the first time due to this confidential mission to suddenly express their desire to join his subordinates.

Moreover, wasn't he the Captain Commander who protected the Society Leader?

At this, Mok Gyeong-un spoke without showing any particular change in expression,

“I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Hmm. You really don’t know what I’m saying? Even though I said it so blatantly.”

“Blatantly... What do you mean?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s feigned ignorance, Seop Chun scratched his head and spoke in a disappointed tone,

“I thought we would be on the same page, but it’s disappointing. Alright.”

“What is it?”

“No, if you say it like that, what about my position when I’ve expressed my desire to join under you?”

In the end, Seop Chun was blatantly expressing his intention.

At Seop Chun’s words, Mok Gyeong-un put down the rabbits he had hunted on the ground and said,

“You want to join under me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why, you ask? Didn’t I just say it? If you successfully complete this mission, you’ll be selected as the Society Leader’s fourth disciple.”

“And?”

“And that’s why I asked if you wouldn’t need a loyal subordinate by your side?”

“Well...”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s unenthusiastic answer, Seop Chun couldn’t hide his awkwardness.

He had agonized for three days over how to express his intention and had barely taken advantage of the moment when Mong Mu-yak was away.

However, he didn’t expect such a lukewarm, if not cold, response.

At this, Seop Chun spoke, expressing his disappointment,

“Do you perhaps not like me?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Seop Chun seemed to be a quite honest person without much greed compared to the people Mok Gyeong-un had seen so far.

He also had no particular pretense when interacting with others.

“Then why are you hesitating? I’m getting disappointed.”

“Liking someone and trusting them are separate matters.”

“Trust?”

“Yes.”

“Then you don’t find me trustworthy?”

“Do you think you can be trusted?”

“No, why? Even though I may not look like it, I’m someone who always keeps my word once I make a promise. If I consider someone as my own, I definitely take care of them and follow them.”

-Thump thump!

Seop Chun thumped his chest, showing his confidence.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un spoke without any particular change in expression,

“Words can say anything.”

“It’s not just words. If you accept me, I’m prepared to repay that trust, no, to pledge my loyalty as your right-hand man.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Then why do you want to join under me?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Seop Chun looked directly into his eyes.

In fact, Seop Chun had also expected that if he asked to be accepted as a subordinate when they had only met recently, it would naturally raise suspicion.

So instead of empty flattery, he decided to express his honest feelings.

“It’s a gamble.”

“A gamble?”

“Yes.”

“Really... What a novel answer.”

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

He was curious about what passionate reason or justification Seop Chun would come up with, but he never expected him to say it was a gamble.

“...I’m sorry for saying it like this, but wanting to join under you is purely a gamble for me.”

“A gamble... Well, I guess it could be.”

“Yes. To be honest, even if you become the Society Leader’s fourth disciple, that’s just the beginning for you.”

“...”

“The Eldest Young Master and the other disciples are already running to become the successor with many supporting forces secured.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and’? You’ll be in the most disadvantageous position if you become his disciple. You have no support base except for the Shadow Clan, your original sect, and as a former hostage from the righteous faction, it will be difficult for you to gather supporting forces.”

Seop Chun was expressing his opinion in an almost brutally honest manner.

Of course, if revealed as it was, Seop Chun’s opinion was accurate.

Mok Gyeong-un smiled lightly and said,

“I see.”

“Don’t take it too badly. I think a person who wants to be a loyal subordinate should be able to speak this frankly.”

“Speak frankly...”

“There’s a saying that good medicine is bitter, right?”

“Is that so? So in conclusion, you’re saying you’re taking a gamble because I’m in a disadvantageous position.”

“Ahem, that’s right.”

“Then why bother going through that inconvenience? Just join under the other disciples. Don’t take an unnecessary gamble.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s outright rejection, Seop Chun spoke in a flustered manner,

“No, no. If I were going to do that, I would have done it long ago.”

“It’s not too late. If there’s a disciple you like...”

“There isn’t.”

“Pardon?”

“I said there isn’t. A disciple I like.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un asked in puzzlement,

“Why isn’t there anyone you like?”

“They’re just all a bit, you know.”

“What do you mean by ‘all a bit’?”

At this question, Seop Chun sighed and caught his breath before answering,

“This is just between us, but I don’t like the Second Young Master, Jang Neung-ak, because he has the least talent among the other successors and is crafty.”

“And?”

“The Young Lady, Wi So-yeon, has decent talent and seems desperate in everything, but it’s like she’s being swayed by her subordinates, should I say?”

‘Hoo.’

For a Guardian of the main building, he had a surprisingly accurate assessment.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un asked,

“What about the Eldest Young Master?”

“...It’s ambiguous.”

“Ambiguous, you say?”

“He lacks human touch. I can understand that as someone walking the path of hegemony, but... There are too many talented people around him, so I don’t think there’s a place for me.”

“There wouldn’t be no place for you.”

“I just don’t want to be satisfied with simply joining their subordinates like a nobody.”

“...”

“Most of the disciples already have later generation disciples from prestigious martial arts families within the sect serving them.”

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un asked in puzzlement,

“Aren’t you also one of the Five Tigers?”

The Five Tigers was a title given only to the top later generation disciples.

With such a title and being the Third Captain Commander of the main building, anyone would have no choice but to make use of him.

Or so he thought, but,

“No. There’s a limit because I have no backing.”

“Backing?”

“Unlike them, I’m from a small to medium-sized martial arts family, so there’s a limit. Even if I join under those who already have loyal subordinates, there’s a ceiling to how high I can rise.”

“You’re quite honest.”

“Of course. Even if I join under someone, my goal is to be recognized and succeed within that group.”

As his words ended, Cheong-ryeong’s voice echoed in Mok Gyeong-un’s ear,

– He’s a guy I like.

– You like him?

– He has pure desires like honor and success. And fundamentally, he’s very honest with his own emotions. A guy like this will risk his life for a master who recognizes his worth.

– Your evaluation of him is quite positive.

– That’s how it seems to me. What about you?

– I don't dislike him. But I'm still not sure.

– Do you have doubts?

– Yes.

The timing was not appropriate.

If it were a different moment rather than during this confidential mission, or if he weren't the Guardian Commander who protected the Society Leader, he might have found it intriguing at this point.

It was rare to find a pawn who willingly offered their loyalty.

– So are you going to just ignore him? Or keep him at a distance?

– I think I'll put him through a proper verification process.

– Verification? In what way?

– It's enough to confirm that he's not a person of the Society Leader or the Vice-Leader.

– Confirmation?

While Cheong-ryeong was puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un said to Seop Chun,

“So you're saying you want to be with me even though I still have no support base and there seem to be many vacant positions around me?”

At these words, Seop Chun scratched his head as usual and said,

“Vacant positions... Yes, I can’t deny that’s not the case, but that’s not all there is to it.”

“If that’s not all, then what is it?”

“Should I say it’s just a feeling?”

“A feeling?”

“Yes, I’m unexpectedly good at reading people, and you’re definitely not someone who will be under anyone.”

“...”

Mok Gyeong-un smiled without a word.

It was a sign of affirmation.

At his reaction, the corners of Seop Chun’s mouth twitched.

As expected, this guy had this side to him.

Those who had limits or lacked self-confidence only hid their true selves, but this fellow didn’t do that.

This was precisely the quality of a leader walking the path of hegemony, in his view.

“That’s why I wanted to gamble on you. If you’re someone who can even surprise the Society Leader, one of the Six Heavens, I think you can even defeat that monstrous Eldest Young Master.”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m not giving you too much credit. It’s reality, isn’t it? Ah! This isn’t empty flattery. I’m saying this because I really think so.”

“Thank you for that.”

Seop Chun, who seemed to have loosened up compared to earlier, asked expectantly,

“Ahem. Then can you accept me as your right-hand man?”

“That would be difficult.”

At those words, Seop Chun spoke in a deflated voice,

“Wow... Even though I’m talking like I’ll give you my liver and gallbladder, you should at least say you’ll consider it.”

“Words can say anything.”

“No. Then should I perform honorable suicide ritual right here for you to believe me?”

“There’s no need for that. I’m just stating a fact.”

“A fact?”

“Yes.”

At those words, Seop Chun asked in puzzlement,

“What do you mean by that?”

“I already have people who are like my right and left arms.”

At this, Seop Chun frowned.

What does this mean again?

He’s saying he already has loyal subordinates like his right and left arms?

“...Could they be subordinates assigned by the Shadow Clan?”

“No.”

“Then were there fellow disciples in the Corpse Blood Valley who showed interest in you?”

“Ah. There are those too.”

“...Hey!”

“Yes.”

“No matter what, I’m a talented person who can be considered among the top five later generation disciples of the Heaven and Earth Society, so isn’t it a bit much to compare me with those youngsters who are still immature?”

Seop Chun spoke in a disappointed tone.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and answered,

“Both of them are stronger than you.”

“What...? Ah, no, who on earth are they? Who is stronger than me?”

Seop Chun asked, as if he couldn’t understand and was frustrated.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged and said,

“I can’t tell you that. You’re not my person yet.”

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

“On purpose?”

“I have confidence that I can work hard and support you like crazy so that you can become the best. You should give the right-hand man position to someone like me.”

Seop Chun sincerely wanted to become Mok Gyeong-un’s most loyal subordinate among his subordinates.

That was why he was already betting on him, who had no power or anything.

“That’s far from enough.”

“Argh. This is frustrating. Then should I crawl like a dog if you tell me to, or even lick your soles?”

“That’s obviously what you should do.”

“What?”

Seop Chun stared at Mok Gyeong-un with a dumbfounded look.

Does this guy think a right-hand man is some kind of slave?

He was about to let out a hollow laugh because it was so absurd, but,

“If you want to be a right-hand man, shouldn’t you be prepared to at least do this much?”

“There were conditions too? Ha! Alright. Tell me. I’ll show you that I’m prepared to go that far.”

“You should be able to serve me in life and death, and sometimes, if necessary, you should be able to become a woman too.”

“...”

Seop Chun narrowed his eyes and stared intently at Mok Gyeong-un.

Was he playing word games with him?

This was no different from telling him to give up on the right-hand man position.

“...Is this a joke?”

“Does it seem like a joke?”

“Haa.”

Seop Chun let out a deep sigh.

Then he clasped his hands together and spoke in an earnest voice,

"If you're saying things that are so incomprehensible, it seems like you already have a designated person for the right-hand man position, so at least make me your left-hand man. I need to be given at least that much to have the motivation to serve you."

"I didn't consider such things, but since you ask, it seems like I have someone who is like a left-hand man too."

"Ha...! How great must the person who becomes your left-hand man be that even that position is already designated?"

"Should I say they have waited for me for generations?"

To be precise, they had waited for Cheong-ryeong.

However, if it was loyalty that spanned generations to that extent, they could be trusted.

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Seop Chun snorted as if he couldn't believe it.

As far as he knew, it had only been a little over a month since he had been captured as a hostage from the righteous faction, so where would there be someone who would pledge loyalty to him for generations?

"...Do you dislike me that much?"

"No. I like you."

“If you like me, why are you making such absurd jokes and refusing to accept me as a subordinate?”

“Do I have a reason to joke?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s serious tone, Seop Chun frowned.

He couldn’t understand this guy’s true intentions at all.

He even thought that he might have done something unnecessary by saying he was taking a gamble.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“If you prove one thing, I don’t know about being a right-hand man or a left-hand man, but I think I can accept you as my person.”

“No, no. You should at least give me the right-hand man position. I want that position even out of spite.”

“I told you it’s impossible.”

“Isn’t that too much? If it’s to this extent, you should say you’ll give it to me.”

“It’s already decided.”

Seop Chun was gradually losing steam.

“Haa... This is really too much.”

At this, Mok Gyeong-un smiled faintly and said,

“If you want the right-hand man position that much, work hard for generations. If you’re lucky, someone from your descendants might become the right-hand man.”

At these words, Seop Chun raised his voice in an angry tone,

“Forget it. I’ll just give up. What do you mean descendants? What’s the point if I can’t become the right-hand man myself?”

“Don’t be so hung up on such things.”

“Hung up, you say? I’m betting on you, so you could at least give me that much of a position.”

“It’s not a gamble, but properly lining up.”

“What?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s arrogant expression, Seop Chun’s eyes changed.

Properly lining up, he said?

Then does this guy have the ambition to properly aim for the successor position?

He felt a strange sense of elation at the thought of seeing a bit of his unknown intentions, but then Mok Gyeong-un said,

“So do you have any intention of proving it?”

“...”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Seop Chun controlled himself inwardly.

Right. Who would take it at face value if he asked to be made a right-hand man after only knowing each other for three days?

What was important right now was to have this guy acknowledge his abilities and loyalty.

If he continued to show such an attitude, his thoughts might change.

He talked as if he had something, but how many people in the Heaven and Earth Society would side with this guy?

In the end, he would have no choice but to acknowledge him.

“Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll do anything, so tell me.”

“Ah. It seems he’s coming over there.”

“Huh?”

The sound of rustling and a familiar presence was felt not far away.

It seemed Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader, had found dry firewood.

But what does he mean by ‘it seems’?

While he was puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un raised the corners of his mouth coldly and spoke in a meaningful voice,

“Kill Mong Mu-yak.”

'!!!!!!'

### Chapter 196 – Loyalty (3)

Mok Gyeong-un said with a sardonic smile,

"Kill Mong Mu-yak."

'!?'

Seop Chun's expression instantly hardened.

He had been curious as to what Mok Gyeong-un would demand of him to prove his loyalty.

But this was a request he truly did not anticipate.

Seop Chun whispered urgently,

"Hey. Are you doing this on purpose?"

"On purpose?"

"No matter how much you want me to demonstrate my resolve for loyalty, killing Mong Mu-yak right now is not..."

"Hmph."

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un scoffed.

Then he said,

"It's all just talk after all."

Seop Chun's brow furrowed at those words.

Could it be that this wasn't just testing him, but he really meant for him to kill?

Suddenly, Seop Chun's eyes met Mok Gyeong-un's.

For a moment, he felt a chill run through his entire body.

It was truly unsettling.

'This bastard.....'

Was he really in his right mind?

"Hey. We're in the middle of a secret mission. Are you not considering that?"

"So what?"

"Wh-what do you mean so what? If Mong Mu-yak dies, how will we make contact with the advance team at the first rendezvous point and get help from the direct subordinates of the Society Leader in the Imperial Palace?"

"....."

"Are you even listening to me?"

“I wonder.”

“Don’t give me that. Proving loyalty. I can do that however you want. But killing Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader, right now means making both the Vice-Leader and the Society Leader your enemies. Are you not thinking about that at all?”

Seop Chun could not understand.

Since they hadn’t completed the mission yet, he hadn’t become the Society Leader’s fourth disciple.

But making such a demand as if he were already the fourth disciple and engaging in an internal power struggle was the worst judgment.

“Hmm.”

“Think carefully. This really won’t do.”

“That’s troublesome.”

“What?”

“All this advice and whatnot is fine, but fundamentally, I want a dog that follows its master’s commands without question. And you seem unfit for that.”

“You!”

-Flinch!

Suddenly, Seop Chun’s eyes met Mok Gyeong-un’s.

He hadn't been aware of it until now, but he understood why this guy gave off a similar feeling to the Eldest Young Master.

Even while saying such arrogant and provocative words, there was no emotion felt in his eyes.

To the perplexed Seop Chun, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"Only about thirteen or fourteen are left now."

"....."

The bushes rustled as footsteps approached.

Soon, Mong Mu-yak would arrive here.

It meant to make a decision.

'He's crazy. Fucking insane. If we really kill Mong Mu-yak, not only will the mission get screwed up, but everything will be messed up. No matter how much it's to prove loyalty, this is too much. Making enemies before we even start..... !?'

Many thoughts flashed through Seop Chun's mind in an instant.

Proving loyalty.

There must be other ways he could prove his loyalty to this bastard.

But insisting on killing Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader, even at the risk of such a reckless move.....

‘He didn’t trust me from the beginning.’

That was it.

The reason Mok Gyeong-un gave this order was simple.

It was because of his position.

As the Third Captain Commander of the inner fortress, he could be acquainted with other successors and frequently contact those in power.

Furthermore, he could be considered a person close to the Vice-Leader.

Taking all this into account, Mok Gyeong-un had no choice but to be suspicious of him even if he pledged loyalty.

But what if he killed the Vice-Leader’s son here?

‘Putting aside the situation, from his point of view, I become a trustworthy person the moment I make the Vice-Leader my enemy. Is that it? Ha!’

There was no better way to test loyalty.

Because by doing this, he too would become an enemy of the Vice-Leader.

‘Damn it.’

He understood the intention, but it was extremely troublesome.

Even if he proved his loyalty, if he did such a thing, he might lose any prospects as a successor even if he became the Society Leader's disciple.

Was he really prepared to handle that..... Ah!

'No.'

This was a test and a trial.

Come to think of it, he seemed to have taken it too seriously.

Unless Mok Gyeong-un was an idiot, there was no way he wouldn't know what he was worried about.

If that was the case,

'Right. He just wants to see my resolve!'

Seop Chun now believed he understood Mok Gyeong-un's true intention.

He meant that if he could confirm that he would kill even the Vice-Leader's son without question at his command, he could trust him.

But this bastard wouldn't really intend to kill Mong Mu-yak right away.

If he did that, there would be more to lose than to gain.

'Then it's different.'

As long as he showed his resolve, that would be enough.

This bastard would prevent the worst-case scenario.

Still, he had to show that he followed orders, so although it didn't suit his style, he would have to put on a show of being at odds with Mong Mu-yak.

"Alright. I'll do it."

Seop Chun said to Mok Gyeong-un.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged and replied,

"I told you words alone are meaningless."

"I said I'll do it. Don't nag."

-Rustle!

Soon, Mong Mu-yak appeared, carrying dry firewood using spare clothes.

Mong Mu-yak, who was already a man of few words, silently looked at the three rabbits lying on the ground.

'He got them.'

Although he didn't show it, he was hungry after three days of fasting.

While it was said that high-level martial artists could control their appetite to some extent through qi circulation or internal energy, if there was no food intake, prolonged fasting would inevitably lead to difficulty.

Mong Mu-yak said to them,

“Who will start the fire?”

He asked this, but the one he was looking at was Seop Chun.

It meant for Seop Chun to start it.

At his words, Seop Chun approached Mong Mu-yak without a word and said,

“You managed to get them? Good work.”

“.....”

As expected, there was no response.

At Mong Mu-yak’s attitude, Seop Chun felt slightly irritated.

‘Anyway, this bastard doesn’t know how others feel..... No, this is good.’

He was hesitant to attack him outright, but if he provoked him like this, it would serve as a suitable justification, and he could act emotionally.

“Phew. Whatever. Give me the firewood.”

With that, Seop Chun reached out to Mong Mu-yak to receive the firewood.

Then, instead of handing it over directly, Mong Mu-yak put the firewood he was carrying down on the ground, as if telling him to pick it up himself.

-Thud!

“Figure it out yourself.”

And he tried to turn around.

That moment,

“Pick it up.”

‘!?’

Mong Mu-yak, who was turning his body, furrowed his brow.

Even when he usually acted cold, Seop Chun only grumbled and left it at that.

But now, those words were laced with a sharp edge.

Was he very upset?

Well, they had been heading north for three days straight without rest while fasting, so everyone was tired and on edge.

Should I just pick it up for him?

‘.....’

No.

Although he had the thought that it was possible, he didn't feel like picking it up for him.

The moment he picked it up, it would be like he was yielding.

At this, Mong Mu-yak retorted sharply,

“Don’t be so sensitive over such a...”

It was at that very moment.

-Whoosh!

Seop Chun launched himself toward Mong Mu-yak.

It was such a sudden attack that Mong Mu-yak was startled for a moment and tried to gain distance, but Seop Chun’s sword strike infused with qi had already grazed his left shoulder.

-Shik!

“Ugh! What are you doing!”

Mong Mu-yak, whose shoulder was cut, twisted his body with footwork and hurriedly threw a kick at Seop Chun.

Of course, Seop Chun easily dodged it by twisting his body.

As soon as he dodged, Seop Chun's left-hand sword energy struck Mong Mu-yak's abdomen.

-Bang!

"Khuh!"

-Whoosh!

Mong Mu-yak's body was pushed back about five steps from the sword energy he received.

Mong Mu-yak's expression distorted terribly.

Up until the first strike, he thought it was an attack made out of an emotionally agitated impulse.

However, the sword energy just now to the abdomen went beyond that.

As a result, he suffered internal injuries.

"Cough."

-Drip, drip!

Dark blood flowed from the corner of his mouth.

'Let's have a go at it.'

"You son of a bitch!"

-Whoosh!

Mong Mu-yak, his eyes wild with internal injuries, launched himself at Seop Chun.

-Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

In an instant, the two masters, who had earned the title of Five Tigers, clashed for about ten exchanges.

They didn't draw their unique weapons, the sword and saber, but they raised their qi and aimed for each other's vital points as if to kill.

Being like troublemakers in the main sect, they knew each other quite well.

Therefore, each move was close to a stalemate.

-Bam, bam, bam, bam!

Up to nearly 30 seconds into the confrontation, neither of them was pushed back.

However, even if they possessed equal martial arts, as the confrontation dragged on, superiority gradually began to show.

-Shik!

'Hnng.'

Little by little, wounds appeared on Mong Mu-yak's body.

On the other hand, Seop Chun had not been grazed even once by Mong Mu-yak's sword energy.

This gave a hint as to who was more intuitive, experienced, and skilled between the two.

Seop Chun was about half a step ahead.

-Swish, shik!

Seop Chun, who had cut part of Mong Mu-yak's back with flashy footwork, glanced at Mok Gyeong-un.

Mong Mu-yak's clothes were gradually being stained with blood.

If the confrontation dragged on, he was likely to win.

'You saw that, right?'

Although they didn't use swords and sabers, they didn't hold back against each other, so he thought this much was enough to prove his resolve.

He hoped Mok Gyeong-un would tell them to stop soon.

However,

'What the?'

Mok Gyeong-un was leaning against a tree with his arms crossed, just watching.

With a look in his eyes that seemed not very pleased.

At this, Seop Chun felt incredulous.

'It's dangerous if we go on.'

He had already grasped most of the weaknesses in Mong Mu-yak's swordsmanship.

If he put his mind to it, he was confident he could end the match within three moves.

Of course, that ending meant the process of driving the opponent to death.

'How else do you want me to prove it? Now that you've confirmed my resolve, tell us to stop.'

Seop Chun blatantly gave Mok Gyeong-un a look.

Wasn't this enough?

However,

-Shh!

Mok Gyeong-un made a gesture of slitting his own throat.

Seeing this, Seop Chun's eyes wavered.

'Wh-what?'

He wasn't going to stop them, and what did that gesture mean?

Could this bastard really mean for him to kill Mong Mu-yak?

'He's out of his mind.'

If Mong Mu-yak died, everything would be messed up.

Even before properly starting the successor's battle, he might end up with enemies and be unable to do anything.

Seop Chun used lip-reading to say this was not it.

'This much is enough. We have to stop here. If we go any further, everything will.....'

It was at that very moment.

-Shik!

In an instant of their fierce clash, someone intervened between them.

'!!!!!!'

At that moment, Seop Chun's eyes widened as if they would tear.

Something brushed past and fell to the ground.

It was,

"Aaarrggghhh!"

None other than Mong Mu-yak's left arm.

A scream erupted from Mong Mu-yak's mouth as his arm was severed below the elbow.

He could endure it if it was just a wound, but the pain of having an arm cut off was beyond imagination.

Seop Chun turned his head with an exasperated look.

There stood Mok Gyeong-un, raising his qi-infused hand with an indifferent gaze.

“You..... You really.....”

“Do my words sound like a joke to you?”

“The Vi..... Vice-Leader! If you really kill the Vice-Leader’s son, the aftermath.....”

“Do you think stalling and pretending is proving loyalty?”

“.....”

For a moment, Seop Chun was at a loss for words.

It seemed he had misjudged this bastard.

This Mok Gyeong-un wasn’t just similar to the Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang, but beyond him.

Seop Chun was stunned for a moment.

‘..... Did I make the worst gamble of my life?’

This wasn’t the picture he wanted.

He didn't want to step on a landmine from the start, but rather wanted to start together with this bastard even if he had no foundation.

To the perplexed Seop Chun, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and tapped his own head.

"Don't use your head. I don't want a dog that interprets things on its own. When I give a command to bite, I want a dog that can thoroughly tear out the opponent's throat."

"You....."

"Ah, ah. I said words are meaningless, didn't I?"

"....."

Mok Gyeong-un pointed at Mong Mu-yak with a flick of his finger.

The meaning was very clear.

It meant to finish it.

"Ugh, ugh."

Mong Mu-yak, holding the severed end of his arm and suffering, took faltering steps backward.

For the first time, he spoke with a face full of fear,

"Wh-why are you doing this?"

Seop Chun's expression distorted even more as he watched this sight.

The milk had already been spilled.

Although he had held back, he had pushed Mong Mu-yak to the brink, and even if he hadn't done it himself, he had even cut off his arm.

At that point, there was no way to salvage the situation.

'My resolve was half-baked.'

It seemed that from the moment he wanted to become the right-hand man of the one who had to walk the path of a villain, he should have been prepared for such an outcome.

-Clench!

Seop Chun, who had been biting his lip hard, finally sighed and,

-Shing!

Drew his unique weapon, the Gwangmudo.

'Resent me.'

He apologized to Mong Mu-yak in his mind.

Although they had no relationship of grudges, from the moment he tried to join Mok Gyeong-un's ranks, he had crossed a river of no return.

Seop Chun swung his saber at the neck of Mong Mu-yak, who was stepping back trying to escape.

His single saber strike, devoid of any distracting thoughts, held not a shred of hesitation.

-Clang!

That moment.

His single saber strike, aiming to sever Mong Mu-yak's head in one breath, stopped right in front of him.

'!?'

Seop Chun looked at Mok Gyeong-un with widened eyes.

Because the one who had blocked the Gwangmudo's blade was none other than Mok Gyeong-un's hand.

Seop Chun stared at him with an expression of incomprehension.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"Just do it."

"What?"

"Tsk, tsk. If you had been like this from the beginning, there would have been no need to even cut off his arm."

"You! You!....."

-Flinch!

For a moment, Seop Chun, who was about to say something out of disbelief, couldn't continue his words.

The moment he saw that face full of malice, with a smile reaching his ears, a chill running up his spine kept his lips from moving.

#### Chapter 197 – Loyalty (4)

The Third Captain Commander of the inner fortress of Heaven and Earth Society, Seop Chun, who had witnessed Mok Gyeong-un's true face filled with pure malice, momentarily lost his words as a chill ran up his spine.

It seemed he had been mistaken after all.

Seop Chun had felt that Mok Gyeong-un was similar to Na Yul-ryang, the Society Leader's great disciple.

But that wasn't the case.

Certainly, both of them were definitely different from ordinary people.

However, if the Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang gave off a cold feeling of being emotionless and solely pursuing the path of a villain, Mok Gyeong-un appeared to be pure evil itself.

How could such a person exist?

A trembling rose from within him.

At that moment,

-Thump!

Mong Mu-yak collapsed.

The state of Mong Mu-yak, who had his eyes rolled back and his body trembling, did not look good.

It seemed that on top of having his arm cut off, he had suffered a great shock from nearly having his neck sliced as well.

Thanks to that, Seop Chun, who had been gripped by fear for a moment, was able to come to his senses.

“You went too far.”

“What?”

“I said you went too far!”

“In what way?”

“If it was for loyalty, what I did earlier was more than enough to prove it. But what was the reason for pushing it this far? If we had ended it then, as you said, like this.....”

“I told you pretending is meaningless.”

“That’s.....”

“Is there any other way for you to prove right here that you weren’t going to monitor me on the Vice-Leader’s orders or work for other successors?”

“.....”

Seop Chun couldn't answer to this.

Although he had crossed the line, what Mok Gyeong-un said was correct.

No, should he say it was wise?

'Thanks to this, I have no choice but to be in the same boat as this bastard.'

It was from the moment he attacked the Vice-Leader's son, Mong Mu-yak.

From his position without any backing, he had no choice but to follow Mok Gyeong-un to avoid becoming an enemy of the Vice-Leader.

"Haa."

But he couldn't help feeling conflicted.

Just a moment ago, he wanted to achieve great things together with Mok Gyeong-un and make his family name and his own name resound not only throughout the Heaven and Earth Society but the entire Central Plains.

But now that he had seen the true face of the evil inherent in Mok Gyeong-un, he was frightened.

Was he truly someone he could trust and follow?

Wouldn't this be the worst choice?

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

“..... To be honest, I’m afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

“I’m afraid of you, and just now, I had doubts about whether choosing you would be the right decision for me.”

“Very honest of you.”

“Even if I had steeled my resolve, I can’t help it after seeing your true self.”

“True self.....”

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

Then, he approached Seop Chun, lightly tapping his shoulder, and said,

“I like that. I commend you for facing me head-on and not turning away even after seeing that side of me.”

“.....”

It was a truly peculiar compliment.

Should he take this as a compliment?

But what was it that strangely made him waver at the words of this guy who was younger than him?

Was it because of the leadership qualities this guy possessed?

Or was it this guy's capacity?

Seop Chun opened his mouth.

"I have a wish."

"A wish other than being my right-hand man and left-hand man?"

"Yes, I have one."

"What is it?"

"Fear is fear, but I hope there will be a sense of fulfillment in following you."

At those words, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un's mouth twitched.

A sense of fulfillment.

From the moment he joined him, he would walk a path stained with blood, so would this person be able to feel a satisfactory sense of fulfillment from that?

As he was pondering this, Cheong-ryeong's voice was heard.

-No need to think too much.

-.....?

-There is no such thing as a master-servant relationship without giving and taking. Rather than making a fuss about a sense of fulfillment, you just need to appropriately fulfill their desires.

-I see. I'm learning something again.

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Cheong-ryeong cleared her throat and said,

-Ahem. Why are you acting like you're learning something new?

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and said to Seop Chun,

"Don't worry too much. If you faithfully perform your role, you will undoubtedly obtain what you desire. I can certainly promise you that."

At these words, Seop Chun let out a soft sigh.

Hearing such words from Mok Gyeong-un made him feel much better.

He hoped it would really turn out that way.

That way, this choice wouldn't become the worst.

-Thud!

With the matter settled, Seop Chun knelt on one knee and clasped his hands, shouting to Mok Gyeong-un,

"Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander. I pledge my loyalty to Young Master Mok Gyeong-un. Please accept it."

"....."

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at Seop Chun, who was pledging his loyalty.

A glint of interest shone in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes as he looked at him.

Seop Chun was a different type of subordinate from those he had brought under his command so far.

He had come to him of his own accord.

And even after seeing a side close to his true nature, he didn't turn away from it and even showed honesty about that fear.

-This isn't bad either.

-It's because you gained a subordinate in a proper way.

-Is that so?

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled at Cheong-ryeong's words.

A proper way.

This was the one thing he didn't particularly agree with Cheong-ryeong's words.

He was simply making the most optimal choice for the situation.

“I accept.”

Mok Gyeong-un said to Seop Chun.

Then Seop Chun bowed his head to the ground, paying his respects.

Since his loyalty was accepted, he was showing proper etiquette.

It was said that the ruler, the master, and the father who gave birth to you are one and the same.

So, one shows respect with a bow.

Having fulfilled the etiquette, Seop Chun stood up and said,

“Since I have decided to serve you as my lord, I will address you with respect from now on. Please speak comfortably, my lord.”

“I will do so gradually.”

“You don’t have to be formal. Feel free to.....”

“When the time comes, I will do so. For now, this is more comfortable for me.”

Seop Chun didn’t hide his puzzlement.

But what could he do if Mok Gyeong-un, his lord, said he would do so?

He was only following his lord’s will.

More than that, this seemed to be the priority.

Seop Chun checked the condition of the collapsed Mong Mu-yak, the Vice-Leader's son, and sighed, saying,

"Phew. The bleeding is severe, and his condition is not good."

It was as expected.

-Tap, tap, tap, tap!

Seop Chun pressed Mong Mu-yak's acupuncture points to stop the bleeding, hurriedly raised his severed left arm above his heart, and tore a piece of cloth to tightly tie it so that there would be no more bleeding.

After taking these measures, Seop Chun clicked his tongue and said,

"My lord, do you have a plan?"

"A plan?"

"Yes, I don't want to blame what has already happened, but he is the Vice-Leader's son. Moreover, he was selected for this mission, so is it okay to do this?"

Seop Chun was genuinely concerned.

Would Mong Mu-yak, whose arm was cut off, still be willing to carry out the mission with them?

Or would he return like this and report it to the Society Leader or the Vice-Leader?

If that happened, everything would be messed up.

However,

“Are you worried?”

Mok Gyeong-un showed no such concern.

Was he not worried at all even when things might turn into a disaster?

To Seop Chun, who was furrowing his brow, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“More importantly, search his body to see if there’s anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said to search him.”

“..... Understood.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s command, Seop Chun was momentarily puzzled but searched the collapsed Mong Mu-yak’s belongings without further question.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy other than silver coins and the Heaven and Earth Society’s identity tags.

However, he found something unexpected hidden in a small pouch inside his leather shoes.

-Rummage, rummage!

“Huh?”

What was this?

Inside was a small red bottle.

What the hell was this that he had hidden inside his leather shoes?

Seop Chun, who was staring at it with questioning eyes, soon brought it to Mok Gyeong-un.

“He was hiding this.”

“Is that so?”

Mok Gyeong-un, holding the small bottle about the size of two fingers, shook it.

It was difficult to guess what was inside with just this.

So Mok Gyeong-un gestured to Mong Mu-yak with his head and said to Seop Chun,

“Wake him up.”

“Is it okay to wake him up right now?”

“Is there any reason not to?”

“Understood.”

Seop Chun pressed one of Mong Mu-yak's acupuncture points and infused internal energy into him.

Soon, Mong Mu-yak, who had lost consciousness, opened his eyes.

"Gasp."

Mong Mu-yak, who had opened his eyes, abruptly sat up and looked at Seop Chun with a perplexed expression while coughing.

"Cough, cough....."

For a moment, Mong Mu-yak thought he had been dreaming.

But soon, he discovered his severed left arm and realized this was reality.

Mong Mu-yak frowned, unable to bear the pain.

Seop Chun couldn't hide his inner guilt towards him.

'..... He lost his arm because of me.'

If he had attacked with the intention to kill from the beginning, as Mok Gyeong-un said, perhaps the incident of his arm being cut off wouldn't have happened.

For a martial artist to lose an arm, it meant problems with balance and everything else, signifying a sharp drop in combat power.

He fully understood the guy's state of mind.

Then, Mong Mu-yak spoke with eyes full of mixed emotions,

“Have you betrayed us?”

At his question, Seop Chun hurriedly waved his hands and said,

“No way. Why would we betray Heaven and Earth Society?”

“Then why!”

Mong Mu-yak raised his voice.

Filled with anger, he glared at Seop Chun and then shifted his gaze to Mok Gyeong-un, saying,

“Why did you do this?”

He held up his severed arm.

He wanted to cut off their arms in the same way, but knowing he was at a disadvantage, he barely suppressed his anger and lowered his voice.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile,

“Are you resentful that your arm was cut off?”

“You!”

The anger he had barely suppressed flared up again at the mocking tone.

Seop Chun warned him,

“Calm down.”

“Calm down? If you were in this situation, do you think you could calm down? How could you do this if you’re not spies or traitors?”

“.....”

Seop Chun couldn’t answer to this.

He felt too sorry to tell him that he had attacked to prove his loyalty.

But Mok Gyeong-un didn’t seem to have such feelings at all.

With a still-smiling face, he approached Mong Mu-yak.

Then, he held out the red bottle and said,

“More importantly, what is this?”

‘!?’

Mong Mu-yak, who had been unable to control his anger just a moment ago, quickly calmed down.

‘How did that...?’

That was what his father, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon, had given him.

[If that bastard contacts the righteous faction or shows suspicious signs, use this. You know how to use it, right?]

Mong Mu-yak instinctively crossed his ankles and checked if the bottle hidden inside his leather shoes was there.

But it wasn't.

'Damn it.'

They must have searched his belongings.

The person his father, the Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon, had told him to use this on was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un holding that, he was extremely perplexed.

Unable to say anything, Mok Gyeong-un asked him again,

"It's your own item, so you won't say you don't know, right?"

"....."

"Why aren't you answering? Do you not know what this is?"

At the repeated questions, Mong Mu-yak finally made an excuse,

"..... It's something necessary for this mission."

"Mission?"

“Yes.”

Come to think of it, he hadn’t used it yet, and if he made an appropriate excuse that it was for a secret mission, it would be a solvable problem.

What could he do to him with this?

But then, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and said,

“Something necessary for the mission?”

“Yes, it’s nothing special.”

“Ah, I see.”

“When the mission starts, you’ll find out.....”

“Since it has practically already started, it wouldn’t matter if we found out now, would it?”

Mong Mu-yak calmly responded to Mok Gyeong-un’s persistent questioning.

“The advance team said they would inform me of the exact purpose, so I truly don’t know either.”

“The advance team?”

“Yes.”

If he made this excuse, they wouldn’t be able to question him further.

However,

“Hmm, is that so?”

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been nodding his head, opened the lid of the red bottle he was holding.

-Pop!

“Wh-what are you doing? Close it right now!”

Mong Mu-yak shouted at Mok Gyeong-un in a moment of panic.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head and said,

“Why are you so startled?”

“Close it quickly! I said close it!”

“This is strange. Why are you making such a fuss about closing it as soon as I open it when you claim you don’t know what it is?”

“That’s.....”

“Do you really not know?”

“I..... I was just told it’s dangerous. That’s why, so please close it.”

Mong Mu-yak pleaded, almost begging.

But Mok Gyeong-un instead held the bottle closer to him.

Then Mong Mu-yak frantically struggled, trying to distance himself.

“You really!”

“Hold him.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s command, Seop Chun pressed down on Mong Mu-yak’s shoulders.

“L-let go!”

Seeing him react with such disgust, as if he were having a seizure, Mok Gyeong-un became genuinely curious about what was inside this bottle.

So, he brought the bottle closer and said playfully,

“Even if it’s dangerous, it wouldn’t hurt to use a little, right? Since you won’t be able to carry out the mission with that body anyway, for our sake.....”

“It’s, it’s the Explosive Shattering Worm!”

“Pardon?”

“What’s inside is the Explosive Shattering Worm. It’s very small and can enter through the mouth or nostrils, so please close it. I’m begging you.”

In the end, Mong Mu-yak revealed the truth.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and closed the lid of the bottle.

“You said you didn’t know, but you did?”

“.....”

“Don’t tremble so much. I had blocked the opening with internal energy.”

At these words, Mong Mu-yak gritted his teeth.

This bastard was toying with him.

But even if he showed his emotions here, there would be nothing beneficial for him.

“..... For the mission, I was told to keep it a secret and know about it alone. I didn’t hide it out of ill intent.”

“I’m sure. What exactly is the Explosive Shattering Worm?”

Mok Gyeong-un had never heard of it either.

So Mong Mu-yak said,

“It’s a bug that inhabits the remote deserts of the Western Regions.”

“Since it’s called a worm, that’s natural. But judging from your reaction, it seems quite dangerous?”

“..... Yes. If it enters the body, it burrows into the blood vessels and circulates through the meridians.”

‘It burrows into the blood vessels?’

At these words, Seop Chun clicked his tongue.

Just listening to it, it sounded like a terrifying and highly dangerous bug.

But why did he bring such a dangerous thing, saying it would be used somewhere in the recapture mission?

As he was puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Just circulating through the meridians would be dangerous enough, but I don’t think that’s the end of it.”

“.....”

“There are other problems, right?”

‘Cunning bastard.’

It was difficult to deceive him at all.

In the first place, since it was already a situation where he couldn’t deceive him, Mong Mu-yak revealed the truth.

“..... This bug is very vulnerable to sunlight.”

“Sunlight?”

“Yes. That’s why in the Western Regions, it’s also called the Desert Night Crawler.”

“Desert Night Crawler?”

“It takes only one or two hours to lay eggs and become an adult. However, this bug is so vulnerable to sunlight that it explodes and dies if it’s exposed to even a little light.”

“That means.....”

“Yes. If infected with the Explosive Shattering Worm, the moment you’re exposed to sunlight, the meridians throughout your body will burst, and you’ll die.”

“Ha!”

At Mong Mu-yak’s words, Seop Chun shook his head.

In a way, this seemed more dangerous than even the deadliest poison.

With poison, there was at least a possibility for a high-level martial artist to perform qi circulation and detoxify it on their own.

But would it be possible to catch and remove one by one the tiny bugs that enter the body and flow through the meridians?

It might be impossible.

“It’s impressive that they found such a bug.”

“I don’t know how they found it either. I heard that because it’s vulnerable to light, it parasitizes moles, earthworms, and insects deep underground in the desert, making it difficult to discover.”

“But here it is?”

Mok Gyeong-un shook the bottle wildly.

Then Mong Mu-yak said anxiously,

“Be careful. No matter how sturdy the bottle is, if it accidentally breaks, it will be a real disaster.”

“I’m sure. But why did our Vice-Leader’s son bring such a dangerous thing?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Mong Mu-yak sighed and replied,

“Didn’t I say? I brought it for the mission.”

“The mission..... I see.”

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un whispered in Mong Mu-yak’s ear,

“But that mission is to use it if Mok Gyeong-un, the hostage bastard from the righteous faction, contacts other righteous faction members or shows suspicious signs in the Imperial Palace, right?”

‘!!!!!!’

Instantly, Mong Mu-yak’s face turned pale and stiffened.

How the hell did this bastard know about this?

Chapter 198 – Loyalty (5)

Mong Mu-yak's face stiffened.

How did this bastard know about the secret order his father, Vice-Leader Mong Seo-cheon, had given him before departing on the confidential mission?

When high-level martial artists have a private conversation, they use internal energy to control the sound from spreading in all directions.

So unless one reads lips up close, it's difficult to discern what was said.

'Father had his back turned and was at a distance.'

But how does he know without a single word out of place?

It was so absurd that he was utterly perplexed.

To the speechless Mong Mu-yak, Mok Gyeong-un whispered with a smile,

"You see, such a secret order doesn't really need justification and just depends on the will of the person carrying it out, don't you think?"

"Wh-what are you....."

"The suspicious signs would ultimately just be a hunch, so it's interesting that such an order was given."

"No. That's not it. This is truly just in case....."

"Just in case..... What a nice phrase. But I'm not generous enough to let someone who targets my life based on their arbitrary judgment off the hook."

At these words, Mong Mu-yak felt like his heart would explode.

Although he had an arrogant and haughty personality, it didn't mean he was bold in everything.

'Is he trying to kill me?'

If it were others, he would have tried to escape the situation even if it meant selling out his father.

But strangely, those words didn't come out.

That's because if the bastard had cared about such things from the beginning, he wouldn't have been able to cut off his left arm.

'This bastard will definitely do it.'

Convinced that Mok Gyeong-un would kill him, Mong Mu-yak finally surrendered.

"N-no, really. Even if I received the order, it was truly just in case. I never intended to frame you."

"I wonder."

"I mean it!"

"Hmm."

Mok Gyeong-un stroked his chin as if pondering.

Then Mong Mu-yak became even more restless and pleaded with Mok Gyeong-un.

“Believe me. I swear on my family’s honor that I had no such intention.”

“You stake your honor too easily.”

-Flinch!

Sharp qi was felt from Mok Gyeong-un’s hand.

‘D-damn it.’

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un show no openings, Mong Mu-yak became anxious.

It felt like Mok Gyeong-un would slice his throat at any moment.

Then, Seop Chun’s voice reached his ears.

“If you truly had no such intention, pledge your loyalty to the Lord.”

“What?”

What did he just hear?

Pledge loyalty?

“What the hell are you..... Lord? Did you just say Lord?”

Mong Mu-yak’s eyes widened.

Come to think of it, although they usually acted like rivals, he knew Seop Chun well.

As the Third Captain Commander of the main sect, Seop Chun's position was different from other executives or any other society members, so he couldn't openly support anyone.

He was in a position to directly guard the current Society Leader.

But Lord?

"Yes. I said Lord."

"You....."

"I have decided to serve Young Master Mok Gyeong-un as my Lord."

"Huh?"

Mong Mu-yak was truly dumbfounded.

They hadn't even succeeded in the secret mission yet, so he hadn't become the fourth disciple.

But the main sect's Guard Captain, who shouldn't support anyone due to his position, decided to serve this bastard as his Lord?

For what reason?

He couldn't comprehend it at all.

-Shh!

At that moment, Seop Chun clasped his hands together and apologized to Mok Gyeong-un.

“Forgive me, my Lord. It’s not my place to intervene, but since he is the Vice-Leader’s son, it would be better to make him an ally rather than an enemy.....”

With these words, Seop Chun glanced at Mong Mu-yak.

‘This is the best consideration I can give you.’

He had lost his left arm because of him, and now his life was in danger due to that bastard’s secret order.

The only way for him to live was to pledge loyalty to Mok Gyeong-un.

Although they had acted like rivals, he hoped he would make a wise choice.

‘No, please do it.’

If he died now, inevitably all the arrows of suspicion would naturally point to them.

Then the Vice-Leader would become an enemy.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“That’s unnecessary.”

“Pardon?”

“No matter what, he is the Vice-Leader’s son.”

“That’s.....”

“Would the Vice-Leader’s son yield to the power of others and be forced to pledge loyalty to someone else? Hah, no way. He has pride, so he would rather commit suicide for his father than do such a thing even if he dies. Right?”

“.....”

Mong Mu-yak couldn’t answer to Mok Gyeong-un’s words.

If he agreed here, he would have no choice but to choose death.

Certainly, it was right to preserve his pride, but death was the end of life.

It was too frightening for everything to end.

“No answer? You’re trying to preserve your pride after all? See. You’re befitting of the Vice-Leader’s son. Rather than wasting time, it’s better to cleanly kill him here.....”

“W-wait!”

“Wait?”

“Loyalty..... I will pledge loyalty.”

“Pardon? I didn’t hear you well. What did you say?”

“I, I will pledge my loyalty.”

-Thud!

Mong Mu-yak hurriedly pressed his head to the ground.

Although his pride was hurt, surviving was the priority for now.

Come to think of it, he could pretend to pledge loyalty and then return to the Heaven and Earth Society to wait for an opportunity.

Anyway, with his left arm severed, he could no longer continue the mission.

‘Yes. Humiliation is only for a moment.’

The moment he escapes from here and reports to his father, this bastard is finished.

Mong Mu-yak was determined to endure this moment.

Then Mok Gyeong-un lifted his head.

-Shh!

Mok Gyeong-un was licking his lips.

The moment he saw that face, his heart raced like crazy as a chill ran up his spine.

What the hell was this guy?

It was as if he was disappointed that he couldn’t kill him.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“I suppose life is better than pride.”

“.....”

“No answer?”

“Th-that’s right! You are correct.”

“But you know what?”

“What is it?”

“It might be better to die.”

“Pardon?”

Mok Gyeong-un grinned.

That smile was so full of malice that Mong Mu-yak felt nauseous and like he would vomit.

He was holding it back, but it was the first time he was so afraid of someone.

He couldn’t believe this bastard was from the righteous faction.

‘I need to escape quickly.’

He wanted to return to the Heaven and Earth Society.

Then Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Well, anyway, since you say you’ll become my person, I should reward you for that.”

At those words, Mong Mu-yak waved his hands.

“Ah, no. How could I expect a reward?”

He just wanted to be sent back home.

That way, he could inform his father and the Society Leader about the true colors of this crazy, evil bastard.

But,

-Shh!

When Mok Gyeong-un extended his hand, something flew into his grasp.

-Smack!

It was none other than,

‘Th-this is.....’

Mong Mu-yak’s severed left arm.

“Urgh.”

It was truly bizarre.

He was fine when he saw other people's corpses, but seeing his own severed arm made it difficult to hold back his retching.

'He really has terrible taste.'

Seeing this, Seop Chun clicked his tongue inwardly.

He would already be suffering from having his arm cut off, so how shocked would he be to receive that as a reward?

Since he couldn't continue the mission and could be sent back, he should be treated well, but he didn't understand why Mok Gyeong-un was doing this.

Then Mok Gyeong-un said,

"I'll return your arm."

".....Urgh..... Thank you."

Mong Mu-yak forcibly swallowed the rising vomit and tried to receive his severed arm.

But Mok Gyeong-un shook his head.

"That's not what I meant."

"Pardon? Then what?"

“Extend your left arm.”

‘!?’

Mong Mu-yak made an expression of incomprehension at Mok Gyeong-un’s request.

Why was he telling him to extend his left arm?

Was he toying with him now?

Then Mok Gyeong-un let out a soft sigh and pulled Mong Mu-yak’s severed left arm.

-Grip!

“Ugh. Wh-what is this.....”

“I said I’ll return your arm.”

“Return it, what do you.....”

“The blood vessels and nerves need to be reconnected, so I’m asking for your understanding in advance.”

“Under.....”

-Shik!

“Khh.”

-Spurt!

At that moment, a sharp qi brushed past, and blood flowed from the left arm where the bleeding had stopped.

The pain was less than when it was first cut off, but it was unavoidable, so Mong Mu-yak's face contorted.

Then Mok Gyeong-un placed the severed arm against the cut surface of Mong Mu-yak's bleeding left arm.

Both Mong Mu-yak, the person involved, and Seop Chun were dumbfounded.

Did he really think the severed arm would reconnect just by attaching it like this?

If that was the case, he was truly insane.....

"Seop Chun."

"Yes?"

"Hold it so it doesn't fall off."

'!?'

What the hell was he trying to do?

Seop Chun looked at him with an expression that was hard to understand.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un urged in a small voice,

“Don’t make me say it twice.”

“Y-yes!”

Seop Chun, who had grasped Mok Gyeong-un’s personality, hurriedly carried out the order.

He didn’t know why he was doing this nonsense, but he held the severed arms as ordered so they wouldn’t fall off.

Then Mok Gyeong-un made a sword finger with his right hand and placed it on one part of the severed area.

And with his left hand,

-Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

‘Im (Arrival)! Tu (Fight)! Jeon (Front)! Jae (Present)! Jin (Array)! Gye (All)!’

He formed the abbreviated hand seals of the Nine Character Mantra.

As he formed the hand seals, a red heat flowed from the tip of Mok Gyeong-un’s right-hand sword finger.

Mong Mu-yak was startled by the heat.

What the hell was he trying to do?

Then Mok Gyeong-un moved the sword finger along the severed area.

In that state,

‘The Great General of the East, the Azure Emperor, help me. The Great General of the Center, the Yellow Emperor, help me. The Great General of the West, the White Emperor, help me. The Great General of the North, the Black Emperor, help me. The Great General of the Center, the Yellow Emperor, help me.’

He chanted the incantation inwardly.

-Sizzle!

Along with this, an agonizing pain arose from the severed area where the sword finger passed, as if it were being burned.

The pain was more excruciating than when the arm was cut off.

Naturally, a scream had to burst out.

“Aaaarrrggghhh!”

“How noisy.”

“Aaaarrrggghhh!”

“Tsk, tsk.”

-Shh!

Mok Gyeong-un waved his left hand, and Mong Mu-yak’s mouth was shut due to the profound internal energy.

“Mmmppphhh!”

Smirking at Mong Mu-yak, whose eyes were even glistening with tears, Mok Gyeong-un continued to move the sword finger along the severed area.

-Sizzle!

‘Woo-gan-gan-gak-gak-woo!’

“Mmmppphhh.”

Mong Mu-yak twisted his body, trying to struggle in agony.

Of course, Seop Chun was holding his arms, and Mok Gyeong-un was also pressing down on his body, including his mouth, with internal energy, so he couldn’t move an inch.

Soon, Mok Gyeong-un’s sword finger completely circled the severed area.

-Sizzle!

As he removed the sword finger, the severed area was glowing red.

Mok Gyeong-un smiled upon seeing this.

Then Seop Chun asked,

“Do I have to keep holding it?”

“No, you can let go.”

‘If I let go, it will fall off.’

He didn’t know what he did, but it seemed like he had cauterized the wound with something like burning internal energy.

But how could a severed arm reconnect with just that?

It would surely fall off.

Seop Chun was inwardly puzzled but let go of his hands as ordered for now.

However,

‘What?’

Surprisingly, Mong Mu-yak’s severed arm, which he thought would fall off, didn’t.

What the hell did he do?

There was no way it could stick like that just by cauterizing the flesh with burning internal energy.

“My Lord. What did you do?”

“This.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Mok Gyeong-un lightly slapped the back of Mong Mu-yak’s connected severed hand.

-Slap!

-Flinch!

Why was he doing that? As he was puzzled, an even more surprising thing happened.

“This..... this is..... what.....”

Mong Mu-yak, who had been in so much pain that he even shed tears, couldn't hide his astonishment as he looked at his left arm.

-Twitch!

The fingers below the severed area were trembling and moving slightly.

Seop Chun, who was watching this, also widened his eyes.

‘..... No way.’

He thought it was a pointless prank, but the severed arm really seemed to have reconnected.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un twitched the corners of his mouth.

‘It succeeded.’

This was a sorcery technique called the Three Wonders Method.

It was a technique from a secret book hidden by Cho Tae-cheong, the Three-Eyed, a master of healing arts.

It was a miraculous technique that could even reconnect a severed arm if a few tricky conditions were met.

For example, there were several conditions, such as the severed body part must not exceed one hour.

The biggest constraint among them was that the recipient's original energy would be consumed.

Naturally, the stronger the technique, the greater the conditions and constraints, but it didn't matter since it wasn't consuming his own original energy.

"Aaah!"

Besides, there was no need to downplay it when the person involved was so moved.

Mok Gyeong-un said to Mong Mu-yak,

"It will take some time for the severed blood vessels and nerves to fully reconnect, so be careful and splint it for about five days."

"....."

At these words, Mong Mu-yak looked at Mok Gyeong-un with trembling eyes.

What the hell was this bastard's true identity?

How was this possible without being Hua Tuo or Bian Que?

While he was moved, he also felt somewhat terrified of this bizarre ability.

To him, who was so speechless that he couldn't easily part his lips, Mok Gyeong-un said with the corners of his mouth raised,

"Now there won't be any significant issues in continuing the mission."

'Huh?'

Instantly, Mong Mu-yak's expression stiffened.

#### Chapter 199 – Water Demon (1)

"Now there won't be any significant issues in continuing the mission."

'Oh no!'

Instantly, Mong Mu-yak's expression stiffened.

He had been inwardly moved that the sensation in his severed arm had returned.

But there was something he had forgotten.

Now he had no choice but to go on the secret mission with Mok Gyeong-un.

'Damn it!'

He should have used his injury as an excuse to immediately return to the Heaven and Earth Society and report this guy's dangerousness to his father, the Vice-Leader, but that plan was completely ruined.

To the perplexed Mong Mu-yak, Mok Gyeong-un said as if he had forgotten,

“Ah! And there’s one more gift for you.”

‘Gift?’

In the midst of his troubled state, when Mok Gyeong-un said he would give him something, Mong Mu-yak looked at him with a face full of suspicion.

Then Mok Gyeong-un took something out from his bosom.

It was a bracelet made of chains.

‘Huh?’

Was he really giving him a gift?

To the puzzled Mong Mu-yak, Mok Gyeong-un said with a sardonic smile,

“It’s nothing special, but I’d like you to wear this.”

\*\*\*

-Swoosh!

On a late afternoon with heavy rainfall.

A soldier with a protruding mustache was leading the way through a dense forest, guiding someone.

That someone was wearing a bamboo hat along with a bamboo raincoat, and in one hand, he was holding a black sword that looked charred.

Glancing at this unidentified man, the soldier clicked his tongue.

For over an hour, he showed no signs of fatigue while trudging through the muddy mountain path in the downpour.

‘Martial artists are different.’

“Haa..... Haa.....”

On the other hand, even though he was a native of this place, he was out of breath and panting from exhaustion.

The weather was chilly, and his breath was visible.

Traversing the mountains in this weather was no different from an act of insanity, but money was the culprit.

‘So many silver coins.’

The silver coins in the pouch the man had shown were too numerous to count.

A soldier’s salary was barely enough to make ends meet, so his eyes couldn’t help but waver.

Simply put, it was too much money to refuse.

Moreover,

‘There’s nothing wrong with receiving this much money just for guiding someone to a place.’

After walking for about an hour deeper into the forest, the soldier saw red cloth pieces tied to several trees and said,

“We’re here, sir.”

The soldier pointed to a plot of land between the trees with red cloth pieces tied to them, where not a single blade of grass grew.

It was a truly bizarre place.

The color of the soil had a dark reddish hue, and the surroundings were eerie.

Although the sun hadn’t set yet, it was the first time he had come when it was this dark with such heavy rainfall.

Perhaps that’s why he felt an inexplicable chill running down his spine.

Then the man spoke,

“Dig the ground.”

“Pardon? You want me to dig the ground?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, I only agreed to guide you to the place where the dead prisoners are buried.....”

“I’ll pay you more.”

At the man's words, the soldier looked at the ground that had turned into mud from the rainwater.

It was harder to dig wet soil than dry soil.

Moreover, he felt somewhat queasy about digging up the ground where corpses were buried all by himself.

However,

'Oh, to hell with it.'

It was difficult to resist the temptation of the silver coins.

So, for about an hour, the soldier dug the ground.

Since it was a place designated by the government office to bury the corpses of prisoners, there were tools like pickaxes nearby, so he didn't have to do it with his bare hands.

'Son of a bitch.'

This was really too much.

Although he was doing this for the silver coins, since he was doing it alone, it would take quite some time, so the soldier thought the man would at least help a little.

But all he did was cross his arms and watch.

In the end, he did it all by himself.

-Thud!

‘Ah!’

The soldier who had struck down with the pickaxe swallowed his dry saliva.

This feeling just now wasn’t soil.

Soon, several corpses were revealed.

“Ugh.”

He felt like vomiting.

The stench of rotting corpses was even more pungent because of the rain.

‘But how can he identify anything with the corpses so decomposed?’

Then, the bamboo hat-wearing man, who had been watching with his arms crossed, approached and examined the decomposing corpses.

If they were in coffins, the decay would have been less severe, but since they were prisoners, they were simply buried in the soil, reaching a state where it was difficult to discern their condition.

“Hmm.”

Nevertheless, the man continued to examine the corpses.

Then he stopped at one corpse.

Unlike the other corpses, it was the only one with just a head.

As expected, the face was rotten beyond recognition.

The bamboo hat-wearing man looked at it and asked,

“Why is there only a head for this corpse?”

“Ah.....”

The soldier hesitated on what to do upon seeing the corpse.

That was a corpse that was silenced by the magistrate’s orders.

What he was asked to do was guide them to this place and dig up the soil anyway, so he had no obligation to reveal the secret that had to be kept.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know either.”

“You don’t know? It hasn’t been years, but only a month and a few days since it happened. To say you don’t remember that.....”

“I really don’t know. I’m just a lowly soldier.....”

-Shh!

“Gasp!”

Before he could finish his words, the black sword touched his neck.

If it pierced just a little, a hole would be made in his neck.

Startled, the soldier hurriedly said,

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?”

“Have you ever had a hole pierced through your neck?”

“The..... The magistrate told me not to speak of it.”

“I see. But I need to know. So speak.”

“If you threaten a government official like this.....”

“I don’t think it would be a problem if your corpse mixed in with the prisoners’ corpses.”

The killing intent flowing with those words.

‘Eek!’

Terrified, the soldier finally revealed the truth.

“I-I’ll tell you.”

“Speak.”

“There..... There was a vicious prisoner called Sickle Slaying Demon among the death row inmates.”

At those words, the corners of the bamboo hat-wearing man's mouth slightly rose.

He had finally found it.

The traces of that bastard.

He seemed to have wasted quite some time looking for a soldier with no relatives and willing to take money.

The bamboo hat-wearing man said to the soldier,

"And?"

"But the day before his execution, an incident occurred in the prison."

"Incident?"

"Yes."

"What kind of incident?"

"Whether it was done by someone who held a grudge against Sickle Slaying Demon, he was found dead with his head cut off during the night."

"..... Found dead?"

"Yes, but then his body disappeared without a trace, leaving only his head."

At those words, the bamboo hat-wearing man's eyes narrowed.

Someone suddenly entered the government's prison and killed a death row inmate.

But the inmate's body, except for his head, had disappeared?

This wasn't something that could be overlooked.

"But why did the government office just let this slide?"

"We-well, he was going to be executed anyway, and if this gets out....."

"Ah."

The bamboo hat-wearing man waved his hand.

There was no need to hear more.

It would have put the magistrate in charge in a difficult position.

So they must have kept the fact that someone had infiltrated the prison and committed such an act a secret.

Anyway, such information was of no significance to him.

What mattered was,

'They didn't take the head but took the body. That means.....'

There was indeed sufficient room for suspicion.

Now, if he investigated the Yeon Mok Sword Manor, an answer to this suspicion would emerge.

Then the soldier, who had been terrified, cautiously said,

“Y-you can just give me the silver coins you originally promised, so please.....”

“Ah. You mean the payment?”

“Yes.”

“Right, I should give it to you.”

“Ah!”

The soldier’s face brightened.

He had been worried that the man might just take the money and leave, so it was a relief.

However,

-Stab!

“Ack!”

The black sword pierced the soldier’s neck.

With a final scream, as the sword was pulled out, the staggering soldier collapsed into the pit he had dug, with an expression full of agony.

-Splash!

The pit was filled with muddy water from the collected rainwater, which quickly turned red.

“I’ll at least give you enough for the underworld toll.”

-Ting!

The bamboo hat-wearing man flicked a silver coin into the pit.

Then he promptly left the place.

\*\*\*

-Swoosh!

The downpour was so heavy that it was difficult to see.

It was literally a torrential rain.

Piercing through this downpour, three men were moving northward.

They were Mok Gyeong-un, Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the Heaven and Earth Society’s main sect, and Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader.

The downpour that had started the day before yesterday had already continued for three days.

Even for masters of the martial arts world, traveling in this heavy rain wasn't easy.

Mong Mu-yak, who was using light-body skills at the very rear, glanced at his splinted left arm.

Gradually, the sensation was returning, and his fingers could move properly.

'Phew.'

But now, this wasn't particularly joyful.

In a way, it was like being given a disease and then the cure, and as his severed arm healed, he had no choice but to continue the mission.

'Damn it.'

It might have been better if his arm had remained severed.

Then he could have returned and reported all of this to his father, the Vice-Leader.

This bastard was more terrifying than any person he had ever seen.

Not only did he have an inhuman side, but he had also mastered all sorts of miraculous skills beyond martial arts, making him even more frightening.

A prime example was,

-Shh!

This chain bracelet he was wearing on his right wrist.

[Since you've already pledged loyalty, I'd like you to wear this chain on your arm and swear an oath to me.]

At that time, although it felt somewhat ominous, he thought there wouldn't be any problem with wearing a bracelet, so he followed those words for now.

But after making that oath, he realized.

He realized that he could no longer refuse anything Mok Gyeong-un said.

At one point, he thought about attempting to escape, but the moment he had such thoughts, the chain dug into his flesh, nearly making him lose his right arm.

As a result, Mong Mu-yak could no longer harbor any ill intentions.

Now he was no different from this bastard's slave.

'Damn it.'

All that came out was cursing.

As he was grumbling inwardly and lamenting his situation,

The leading Mok Gyeong-un and Seop Chun, who had been advancing through the heavy rain, suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Wondering why, he looked ahead and,

“Ah!”

A sigh mixed with perplexity flowed out of Mong Mu-yak’s mouth.

That was because a river overflowing from the heavy rain appeared before them.

-Swoosh! Gush!

Seop Chun spoke in a troubled tone,

“This..... It will be difficult to cross the river.”

Looking at the river’s currents, it wasn’t at a level where one could swim across even if they had mastered martial arts.

In the first place, it wasn’t a distance that could be covered by swimming.

The river’s scale wasn’t as vast as the Yangtze River, so if the river hadn’t overflowed due to the heavy rain, they could have borrowed a boat or raft to cross the distance.

But now, they could be swept away by the currents and risk an accident.

“I was worried because of the heavy rain, but it seems difficult to cross the river right away.”

“I agree.”

Mok Gyeong-un nodded his head, seemingly agreeing with Seop Chun’s words.

In the face of the laws of nature, even a master of the martial arts world was merely human.

“For now, my Lord, I think we should rest in that nearby village and wait for the rain to stop.”

At Seop Chun’s words, Mong Mu-yak interjected.

“Hey. Have you already forgotten?”

“Huh?”

“The most important thing in this mission is to make it to the rendezvous point on time. If we’re delayed by even a day, it becomes difficult to meet the deadline.”

At these words, Seop Chun sighed and said,

“That may be true, but how do you propose we cross the overflowing river?”

Floods and overflowing rivers were natural disasters, not man-made ones.

In the first place, it wasn’t a problem that could be solved by human power.

However,

“..... We need to find a way to cross.”

Mong Mu-yak’s stubbornness was evident.

That was because the given deadline to reach Annak, Henan Province, was ten days.

Ordinary people could never make it in ten days, but for them, who were masters above the Transcendent Realm, it was a distance that could barely be covered if they diligently used light-body skills with minimal rest.

“So, by what means?”

“Hmm, that’s.....”

-Shh!

Mong Mu-yak then looked at the nearby village not far from the riverbank.

The main occupation of those living in a village situated by the river was usually related to the river.

Staring intently at that place, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“I can see boats moored near the village entrance. And that boat over there.....”

A large boat was moored by the overflowing riverbank.

That wasn’t the size of an ordinary boat.

“It looks quite big. With a boat of that size, couldn’t we cross the river?”

“Ah! It might be possible.”

Mong Mu-yak nodded his head in agreement.

The currents were so strong due to the heavy rain that it seemed impossible to cross with small boats or rafts, but with a boat of that size, it seemed possible to cross by drifting downstream with the currents.

However, there was another problem here.

Seop Chun raised this issue.

“But, my Lord. With a boat of that size, it seems impossible to control without boatmen and workers.”

If it were an ordinary raft, although not as skilled as boatmen, they could row and cross.

But that boat seemed difficult for them to control with their own strength.

In the end, they needed the help of the boatman who owned that boat.

“I don’t know if the boat owner will launch the boat in this weather.”

“He must have that boat to make a living anyway, so if we pay him enough, he’ll launch it.”

“Well.....”

Seop Chun answered indifferently to Mong Mu-yak’s words.

They had brought enough travel expenses and had sufficient money to pay for the boat fare.

But the rain was too heavy, the river was overflowing, and the currents were so fast that the boat could capsize and wreck if they were unlucky.

“Even if the money is good, would they readily take a gamble where their life is at stake?”

To Seop Chun’s question, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and said,

“They will.”

“What?”

Why was the Lord so confident?

As he was puzzled,

“It would be better than having their throat slit and dying for refusing.”

“.....”

Mok Gyeong-un was already planning to launch the boat with the premise of threats.

Chapter 200 – Water Demon (2)

Swoosh!

The downpour was still incredibly heavy.

The name of this village near the river was Sohachon (Small River Village).

Although it was called a village, as befitting a place with a ferry dock, it was a village of considerable size in the area, with about a hundred and fifty boatmen and fishermen living together.

The village itself was adjacent to the river as it operated the ferry dock.

“If the river rises any more, a few houses will be swept away.”

On the way to the village, Seop Chun clicked his tongue and spoke.

As he said, although they had piled up an embankment with soil to block it, looking at the churning waters, it wouldn't be surprising if it collapsed at any moment.

Unlike Seop Chun, who was worried about this, Mok Gyeong-un and Mong Mu-yak had no interest at all.

Mong Mu-yak's mind was occupied with nothing but finding the owner of the large boat, and Mok Gyeong-un had no interest in the affairs of others if they were unrelated to him.

However, there was one thing that caught Mok Gyeong-un's eye.

'Hmm.'

It was an old man with white hair sitting on one side of the embankment that looked unstable, wearing a bamboo raincoat.

He had looked there due to a strange sense of incongruity and was puzzled.

The waters were so rough due to the heavy rain that the embankment looked like it would collapse at any moment, but what was that old man doing?

Upon closer inspection, a curved bamboo stick was visible in front of the old man.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head.

'Fishing?'

Was he really fishing in this heavy rain?

It was utterly incomprehensible.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been puzzled, soon lost interest and tried to head towards the village.

But Mok Gyeong-un, who was about to leave, hesitated.

'..... What is it?'

For a moment, he had tried to pass by without much thought, but something was off.

He was more sensitive to qi than anyone else.

But just now, he hadn't felt any qi from that old man.

As if he had blended in with the surrounding objects.

-Shh!

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head and looked towards the embankment again.

However,

'!?'

The old man who had been there until just now had suddenly disappeared.

He looked around just in case, but as if he had never existed in the first place, there was no sign of the old man.

The perplexed Mok Gyeong-un asked through voice transmission,

-Cheong-ryeong. Did you see that old man just now?

-Old man? What old man are you talking about?

-The old man sitting on the embankment and fishing or something.

-An old man fishing? In this weather, what fishing is he doing?

-.....

-Did you see something?

-..... No. I guess I was mistaken.

Even Cheong-ryeong, whose vision was open, didn't see him.

Was it really an illusion?

“My Lord?”

Seop Chun, who had been standing still, called out to Mok Gyeong-un in puzzlement.

“What's the matter?”

“It's nothing.”

With those words, he shrugged his shoulders and quickened his pace again.

The three of them passed the village monument inscribed with Sohachon and entered the village.

-Swoosh!

Due to the heavy rain and the dark evening, there was no one on the streets.

Mong Mu-yak looked around and said,

“Someone who owns such a large boat must be a wealthy family or clan leader in this village.”

“You’re stating the obvious.”

Seop Chun sneered at those words.

Then Mong Mu-yak glared at him, revealing his displeasure.

To the two people growling at each other, Mok Gyeong-un nodded his head towards somewhere and said,

“There’s an inn over there.”

“Ah!”

Fortunately, there was an inn not far from the village entrance.

Rather than entering any random house and asking, it seemed faster to go to the inn and find out.

So the three of them crossed the raindrops and entered the inn.

As they entered the inn with their leather shoes soaked with moisture, the interior, which was older and more dilapidated than expected, was revealed.

However, unlike the dilapidated interior, there were quite a few guests in the inn.

Perhaps it was thanks to the heavy rain that had been going on for days, they seemed to be outsiders who were stuck and staying.

-Thump, thump!

As they entered, the gazes of the guests naturally turned to Mok Gyeong-un and his party for a moment.

Even though they were wearing bamboo hats, they were carrying swords and weapons at their waists and backs, so it was a natural reaction.

However, it wasn't just the guests who showed this reaction.

Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak, who had only been thinking about finding the boat owner, also had their eyes drawn to a few of the guests.

That's because,

'Martial artists.'

The guests sitting at the table in the innermost part and those at the rightmost table were martial artists who had mastered martial arts.

What was truly peculiar here was that the six on the right seemed to be wanderers or villains based on their attire and rough appearance.

On the other hand, the attire of those sitting in the innermost part was very neat and tidy.

Judging by their almost uniform attire, they looked like escort warriors.

The person they were escorting was obviously the woman in the center with her face covered by a veil.

She was wearing blue silk clothes embroidered with butterfly patterns, and just by looking at that, it could be inferred that she was of a noble status with considerable elegance.

“My Lord.”

Seop Chun called out to Mok Gyeong-un.

The reason was because of the beardless old man sitting next to the woman.

He was smiling and serving the woman with utmost devotion, but unlike the others, his qi was concealed, making it difficult to gauge his martial arts level.

It wasn't just Seop Chun who felt this.

‘Who the hell is that old man?’

No matter how much he focused his qi sense, he couldn't discern the old man's level.

If he, who had reached the pinnacle of the Transcendent Realm, couldn't discern it, it meant the old man was a master of an even higher level.

Seeing their wariness, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile,

“Don’t mind them. We came here to secure a boat, didn’t we?”

But Mok Gyeong-un didn’t care about this at all.

Anyway, there was no reason to pay attention to them as they had no acquaintance or reason to clash.

“Understood.”

At this, Seop Chun went towards the inn’s kitchen and called for the innkeeper.

Meanwhile, the veiled woman looked at Mok Gyeong-un with interest and said in a low voice,

“In the midst of being trapped in this village, a treasure has walked in on its own.”

At her words, the beardless old man, who had been talking about this and that to please her, slightly furrowed his brow.

Then he cautiously said,

“Prin..... No, young lady.”

“Yes.”

“Is it because of that handsome young man who just entered?”

At this question, the veiled woman slightly nodded her head.

Trapped in the village inn for three days due to the incessant heavy rain, her attention was drawn to one of the new guests who had entered the inn.

That's because his wet hair and face were too beautiful.

Such a face was rare to see even in 'that place'.

"Duke. The rain will probably continue for a few more days before it stops, so I'd like to receive service from that man with exceptional beauty."

"Young lady. I apologize, but those people....."

"They're martial artists, right?"

"That's right."

"I can tell that much just by looking at their weapons."

"Yes, yes, you have excellent insight. But do you remember what I told you in advance, young lady?"

"That I should avoid getting involved with martial artists?"

"Yes, yes. That's right. So please....."

"Duke. Didn't you say something before you became my esco..... escort?"

"....."

"You said that even in the martial arts world, there aren't many masters of your caliber."

"That may be true, but....."

“Then are you saying you can’t even grant this request to alleviate my boredom and frustration?”

‘Oh my.’

The beardless old man couldn’t hide his difficulty at the veiled woman’s words.

From the moment they entered the inn, he had discerned through qi sensing that those guests were not ordinary people.

Those men who appeared to be in their late twenties were masters of the Transcendent Realm.

‘If they have reached such excellent levels at such a young age, they are likely to be the sons of prestigious families or disciples of major sects in the martial arts world.’

The boy who looked to be 17 or 18 years old, whom the veiled woman had singled out, also hadn’t even come of age, but he seemed to possess outstanding talent, appearing to be at the peak of the Transformation Realm.

The old man looked at them with a troubled gaze.

‘What should I do?’

Even food can cause severe indigestion if eaten incorrectly.

This was precisely such a situation.

It wouldn’t be a problem to mess with those worthless wanderers on the other side, but those of this level were different.

If he carelessly provoked them, it could become troublesome, and getting caught up in gossip during a secret mission wasn't a very good direction either.

However,

'If I keep suppressing her, she will definitely explode.'

The veiled woman had been raised so nobly that she had to have her way to be satisfied.

How many incidents had occurred even on the way to Guangzhou?

He had barely managed to coax and appease her to come this far.

'It has piled up to the limit.'

Her mood was close to the worst, having been trapped in this damp and dilapidated inn for three days due to the continuous heavy rain.

If he just kept saying no, her anger would eventually be directed at him.

Then,

'It would make things difficult for this old man as well.'

The veiled woman's anger wasn't a big problem.

If it somehow reached 'that person's' ears and was misreported, it could make things difficult in the future.

Therefore, although it was somewhat troublesome, some compromise seemed necessary.

The old man cautiously said to the veiled woman,

“Then how about doing it this way?”

With this, the old man told her what he had in mind, and although the veiled woman showed a dissatisfied expression, she eventually nodded her head reluctantly and gave permission.

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-Swoosh!

Behind the inn.

Mok Gyeong-un and his party followed the old woman, who was the owner and innkeeper of the inn, through the kitchen to the back of the inn.

After coming out to the back, the old woman looked around and said,

“No. What’s the rush for you young folks to find that boat?”

At the old woman’s question, Seop Chun politely said,

“Ma’am. We are in a situation where we need to cross the river urgently.”

“I understand what you said earlier, but launching a boat in this weather with such rough waves could lead to big trouble.”

“I’m aware of that, but we have our own circumstances.”

At Seop Chun's words, the old woman shook her head and clicked her tongue.

Then she pointed somewhere with her hand.

It was the hillside to the northwest of the village.

The downpour was so heavy that he hadn't noticed, but there was a large estate-like structure on that side.

As expected, it seemed to be a wealthy family that was doing quite well in the village.

However,

"The owner of that boat lives over there, but there's no use going."

"Thank you for telling us."

"I'm telling you it's no use, but are you turning a deaf ear?"

"Pardon?"

"The owner of that boat..... In other words, the master of that house has done evil deeds and is now dying from divine punishment."

At those words, Seop Chun furrowed his brow.

Divine punishment? What does that mean?

"What do you mean by that?"

“Didn’t I say it? The master of that house is dying.”

“Is the master of that house the boatman?”

“That’s right.”

“But you said he’s dying?”

“Didn’t I say so? That fellow has been possessed by a water ghost, and his condition is unspeakable. If you go there for no reason, you might also get cursed, so just wait for the rain to stop.”

At the old woman’s words, Seop Chun made an expression of incomprehension.

He thought he might be sick, but what does it mean to be possessed by a water ghost?

As he was puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile,

“Let’s go and see for now.”

At his attitude of not caring at all, the old woman shook her head.

“I’m telling you this out of concern that you outsiders might get cursed for no reason, but you don’t believe me. Well, if you want to die from a curse, suit yourself.”

With those words, the old woman swiftly entered the inn.

Seeing this, Seop Chun muttered in an unpleasant tone,

"That old hag has no manners. Tsk."

Divine punishment and water ghosts, aren't those just ghost stories?

He didn't understand why she was saying such things.

Then Mok Gyeong-un said,

"Anyway, now that we know who the boat owner is, we'll find out if we go."

"Well, you're right."

So they were about to head straight to the estate where the boat owner was said to be.

But after walking only a few steps, someone called out to them.

"Excuse me. Young masters."

-Flinch!

At that call, Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak instantly turned around with eyes filled with wariness.

That's because no matter how heavy the downpour was, they should have been able to sense the presence at the distance where the voice was coming from, but they had failed to do so.

Their eyes widened as they turned around.

'Who is this person?'

The one who had called out to them was none other than the beardless old man who had been in the inn.

He was already cautious from the moment he first saw him because he couldn't discern his level through qi sensing, so why did that old man call out to them?

As they were puzzled, the old man clasped his hands together and said,

"I apologize for calling out to you on your way, but this old man is called Elder Beom."

At the old man's words, Mong Mu-yak said in a voice mixed with wariness,

"For what reason did you call us, sir?"

"Ah. Young masters. There's no need to be so wary. This old man didn't call you to harm you."

As if he had noticed their wariness, the beardless old man, who had introduced himself as Elder Beom, said with a smiling face.

At this, Mong Mu-yak asked again,

"Then may I ask for what reason you called us?"

"Hohoho. The young master seems to be in quite a hurry."

"....."

"Alright, I'll get straight to the point. I unintentionally overheard your situation earlier. It seems you were looking for a large boat to cross the river, am I right?"

At Elder Beom's words, Mong Mu-yak furrowed his brow.

He said unintentionally, but in the end, he had eavesdropped on the conversation between the old woman and them, hadn't he?

He was about to feel displeased when Elder Beom said,

"Actually, this old man also went to find the boat owner at the request of the young lady I'm serving."

"You mean you went to find the boat owner?"

"That's right. But judging by the fact that we're currently waiting for the rain to stop at the inn, I'm sure you can roughly guess what happened, can't you?"

At his words, this time Seop Chun asked in puzzlement,

"You couldn't borrow the boat?"

"That's right. This old man also met the boat owner, but he was already on the verge of death, in no condition to steer the boat."

On the verge of death means his life is in danger?

At Elder Beom's words, Seop Chun looked at Mong Mu-yak with an expression of "What should we do?"

If the life of the boatman who could control the boat was in danger, whether it was payment or threats, it was all meaningless.

However,

“Thank you for the information. But it doesn’t seem like you called us just to tell us that.”

Mok Gyeong-un said to Elder Beom.

Then Elder Beom replied with a smile,

“You’re right. So, the young lady I’m serving wants to build a rapport with you young masters while waiting for the weather to clear up. If it’s alright, could you spare some time?”

“Rapport?”

“That’s right. We’re both in a situation where we’re waiting, so there’s not much to do anyway. And the young lady has shown so much interest in you that this old man is making this request.”

With those words, Elder Beom clasped his hands together once again.

He spoke in such a polite manner that Mong Mu-yak and Seop Chun exchanged troubled glances.

In fact, they were in the middle of a secret mission, so it wasn’t a situation where they could come into contact with someone else.

Even if they had to wait for the rain to stop.

So Seop Chun, likewise, politely clasped his hands together and said,

“We appreciate your invitation, sir, but we are in such a hurry that we ask you to convey our apologies to the person you’re serving.”

“Oh my.”

At Seop Chun's words, Elder Beom clicked his tongue.

Then he made a troubled expression and said,

"This is quite a dilemma. Since you can't cross the river right away anyway, is there a need to push yourself so hard?"

"The situation is unavoidable."

"Oh my. Oh dear."

"Then, sir, we'll be on our way....."

Before he could finish his words,

-Flinch!

At that moment, the expressions of Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak stiffened simultaneously.

It was due to the intense qi emanating from Elder Beom.

Although his hands were clasped behind his back, Elder Beom's qi pressed down on them as if reminiscent of a sharp sword.

'Pinnacle..... The pinnacle-stage of the Transcendent Realm.'

He had somewhat guessed, but Elder Beom was a tremendous master.

Just from the true energy emanating from his qi, the gap could be clearly felt to that extent.

In terms of the Heaven and Earth Society, he was at a level comparable to an executive.

Elder Beom revealed his qi in such a menacing manner and said with a smile,

“Listen, young masters. This old man is making this request. Please build a rapport with the young lady, even if it’s just for the sake of this old man’s face.”

Although his words were polite, it was almost half a threat.

Seop Chun couldn’t hold back his displeasure and said,

“Are you threatening us now?”

“Hohoho. How could that be a threat?”

Elder Beom had no intention of actually harming them.

He intended to let them know the gap appropriately and then have them attend the gathering the young lady wanted.

At least to show that he had done his best to fulfill the young lady’s order.

“You can consider it cooperation, not a threat. It’s not a difficult thing, so I hope you can do it.”

With that, Elder Beom raised his qi even more and tried to pressure them.

Right at that moment,

From behind, a low voice reached Elder Beom's ear.

"Sir."

-Flinch!

Instantly, Elder Beom's eyes widened.

This voice belonged to the youngest young man the young lady had singled out.

'When?'

Clearly, the three of them had been standing side by side, but he had suddenly disappeared.

Elder Beom couldn't help but be perplexed by this.

Then a gentle voice resonated in his ear.

"It seems you don't know what a threat is. Shall I enlighten you?"