

Mayhem 211

Chapter 211 – On the Boat (2)

Whoosh!

The rain was still a downpour itself.

Before boarding the boat, three men were gathered together.

They were Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the Heaven and Earth Society's main branch, Mong Mu-yak, the Deputy Commander and son of the Vice-Leader, and Ja Geum-jeong, the exiled monk and Demon Subduing Fist Master of Shaolin.

These three had gathered for a single reason.

And that was,

“I'll be honest. Ja Geum-jeong. I can't trust your oath of loyalty.”

It was because of the exiled monk Ja Geum-jeong's oath of loyalty.

The reason Mong Mu-yak was expressing his disapproval was simple.

It was due to Ja Geum-jeong's background and notoriety.

He was a former monk of Shaolin, considered the root of the righteous martial world, and after becoming an exiled monk, he committed eccentric acts like a madman, regardless of right or wrong.

Could such a person really be trusted?

At Mong Mu-yak's attitude, Ja Geum-jeong snorted and said,

"I don't care if you bastards believe me or not."

"What?"

"Even in a fucked-up situation, I always keep my word."

At his words, Seop Chun clutched his stomach and laughed.

"Hahahaha! A fucked-up situation, you say. Are you saying swearing loyalty to our Lord is fucked up?"

"Did you think this drunkard would say he's happy about it?"

Ja Geum-jeong was someone who never hid his own emotions.

At his words, Mong Mu-yak became even more wary, but on the other hand, Seop Chun, who originally had a hearty personality, rather liked it.

"You wouldn't be happy, of course. You were caught in the Lord's scheme and swore loyalty, so how could you feel good about it?"

"Hmph, you're stating the obvious."

"But Ja Geum-jeong, you're also a man of honor, so whether you like it or not, I believe you'll keep the oath you made yourself."

"Stop emphasizing what this drunkard has said over and over. Even without you bastards nagging, I'll protect that damn fellow until I die."

Ja Geum-jeong had a temperament of not looking back once he decided on something.

So although he couldn't contain his anger and lashed out at that moment, he was ultimately pressured by Mok Gyeong-un's oppressive aura and swore loyalty.

In fact, there was a sentiment he couldn't reveal even to them.

'...It's for Mun-hae, Master, and Shaolin.'

It was truly strange.

Ja Geum-jeong felt an odd fear from a fellow who hadn't even reached his prime.

Even if not right now, if that bastard made up his mind, it seemed he would bring great harm not only to his friend, the monk Imun-hae, but also to Shaolin.

This was a premonition stemming from pure instinct.

Caught in this premonition, Ja Geum-jeong swore loyalty after receiving an agreement from Mok Gyeong-un that he would never touch them.

That moment was truly disheartening.

'Did I leave Shaolin and live just to end up like this?'

That was the moment he thought so.

He was suddenly gripped by this thought.

'...Lived to end up like this... Huh?'

There was something his master and Sutra Pavilion Master, Grand Monk Gong-jeon, always taught.

He said that everything has cause and effect and a natural course, and no matter how much one tries to escape it, one can only flow according to that natural course in the end.

Perhaps even him having these eyes and becoming an exiled monk was to face this moment.

‘Natural course.’

When he considered all of this to be the natural course, the afflictions in his heart disappeared.

Since he had already made up his mind to do it, regret and lingering attachment were all useless, and he just thought that if this was also the path he had to take, he would do his best.

Then Mong Mu-yak said to him,

“I’ll be watching.”

“No. This drunkard said he’ll do it, so who are you to say this and that...”

“Aaah. Please calm down. This friend originally talks like that.”

Seop Chun grinned and stopped Ja Geum-jeong.

At first, he was wary of him, who was called one of the Three Madmen, but after actually getting to know him, he thought he was honest rather than crazy and got along well with him.

Ja Geum-jeong also seemed to feel the same way, as he said,

“Still, you’re the only one who can be reasoned with.”

“Instead of ‘you, you,’ since it’s come to this, how about we introduce ourselves? My name is Seop Chun, and I’m twenty-nine years old. As you can see, I mainly use a sword. Mong Mu-yak, you do it too.”

“Introducing myself so embarrassingly...”

“We’ll have to be together to serve the Lord anyway, so are you going to act like that?”

At Seop Chun’s words, Mong Mu-yak shook his head and said briefly,

“Mong Mu-yak. Twenty-six years old, a swordsman.”

“There! Our introductions are roughly like this, so will you do it too?”

At these words, Ja Geum-jeong stared intently at Seop Chun.

In fact, he also didn’t particularly like introducing himself like this.

But since he had decided to serve Mok Gyeong-un as his lord and might have to be with them for life, it was awkward to just let it pass.

“Ahem, as you know, my name is Ja Geum-jeong, and I prefer the Strong Fist technique.”

“Why don’t you mention your age? Are you skipping it because you’re much older than us?”

At those words, Ja Geum-jeong frowned.

He had never told anyone his age since leaving Shaolin.

So he hesitated, wondering if he really had to say it, but eventually spoke.

“My age is... twenty-six.”

‘!!!!!!!!!’

As soon as those words ended, both Mong Mu-yak and Seop Chun were dumbfounded.

Based on his fierce face and the atmosphere he exuded alone, Ja Geum-jeong looked to be in his mid-forties.

But he’s in his twenties?

‘This kind of face is the same age as me?’

Mong Mu-yak made a dumbfounded expression.

Was he the only one who couldn’t fight the ravages of time and had his face wither away?

This kind of old face was the first he had ever seen.

The exiled monk Ja Geum-jeong glared at Mong Mu-yak and said,

“You bastard, I really don’t like the look in your eyes. Should I send you to Buddha’s side today?”

He was ready to strike him at any moment.

Seop Chun had to hurriedly stop him.

Rumble rumble rumble!

Through the rollers made of dozens of wooden pillars, the boat reached right in front of the river.

Originally, it would need to move a bit more to float the boat on the river, but since the water had been overflowing due to the downpour for a long time, it didn't take that long to move it.

Everyone who needed to board the boat had already boarded.

"Slowly! It needs to move more slowly!"

"Yes!!!"

At the command of the resentful soul Ha-yoon, who was possessing the body of the captain Woo In-yeom, the retired naval soldiers moved in unison, and the bow of the boat entered the river.

Splash!

Certainly, because the boat was large, when the bow entered, the water surged upward.

But along with that, the boat that was moving forward started to tilt sideways with a creaking sound.

This was due to the tremendous current of the river swollen by the downpour.

"...Is this really possible to cross?"

Seop Chun, who had been watching this with excitement while standing at the front of the bow, grabbed the deck and clicked his tongue.

If this was the case with just the head of the boat entering, it was worrisome that the boat would be swept away and capsized as soon as the entire boat entered.

Then, as if the bow suddenly received strength, the tilted part started to straighten up.

“Huh?”

What was going on?

The current was still rough, but the boat was straightening up on its own.

That was because,

“Those things are...”

“Those things? Geum-jeong, what do you see?”

In Ja Geum-jeong’s eyes, numerous resentful souls were clinging to the side of the boat’s bow.

They were supporting the boat that was about to be swept away by the current.

It was a truly amazing sight.

With the boat’s performance itself and the help of this many resentful souls, it seemed there was a sufficient possibility of crossing the river.

After some time, the hull was completely in the water.

Creak! Creak!

The boat was rocking in the tremendous current, and it was a mess.

Everyone in Mok Gyeong-un's party had learned martial arts, so they didn't easily fall over, but they couldn't help their bodies swaying.

It wouldn't be strange if the boat capsized at any moment.

However, fortunately, numerous resentful souls were supporting this boat.

Wooooo!

Huuuuu!

Before boarding the boat, they had completely destroyed the main hall of the estate and held a memorial service for the resentful souls, so it might have been a kind of repayment for that.

Thanks to that, despite the rough current, the boat didn't capsize and slowly moved forward.

Of course, to be precise, it was moving diagonally to match the current.

The resentful soul Ha-yoon, who was possessing the body of Woo In-yeom, tapped his head and said to Mok Gyeong-un,

"According to the experience and knowledge in this person's head, it will take time to cross the river, but if we move like this, we can somehow cross it."

"I see. Thank you for your efforts."

“ ... ”

Mok Gyeong-un smiled and bowed with his hands clasped to the resentful soul Ha-yoon.

There was a glint in Ha-yoon's eyes as he watched that sight.

That was understandable because, in the first place, although they had fought, they had reached an agreement, so there was no need to argue, but this human was truly unique.

He was a resentful soul.

Even monks were afraid of or wary of someone like him, but this human was treating him normally.

Was it to look good because they had to safely cross the river?

‘No, no. It's different.’

This person had no difference in the way he looked at the dead or the living.

It was as if he was looking directly at the existence itself.

A truly strange human indeed.

Was it because of this aspect that a high-ranking existence like her followed this human?

While he was lost in thought, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“If it's not rude, may I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Apart from your ill fate with the Woo family, reaching the Blue Spirit rank means you held a grudge lasting over a hundred years, so may I ask what that is?”

“...”

It was a question that was sufficiently rude.

If he was with a high-ranking resentful soul and had such excellent monastic technique skills, he should know well what a grudge meant to a resentful soul.

However, Mok Gyeong-un was staring intently as if he was genuinely curious.

As if it was pure curiosity.

“...”

He could have just ignored it, but since there was no point in making an enemy with someone like this anyway, the resentful soul Ha-yoon finally opened his mouth.

“I couldn’t protect.”

“What do you mean you couldn’t protect?”

“I couldn’t protect the one I had to protect at all costs.”

“Ah...”

Mok Gyeong-un looked at the resentful soul Ha-yoon with a puzzled expression.

Since most grudges stemmed from lamentation and the desire for revenge, he had thought Ha-yoon would talk about some object of resentment.

But the grudge of the resentful soul Ha-yoon unexpectedly stemmed from loyalty.

He couldn't leave this world for a long time because of his self-blame for not being able to protect someone.

"He was more upright than he looks."

Cheong-ryeong also seemed to view the resentful soul Ha-yoon differently, as she evaluated him like that.

However, Mok Gyeong-un didn't have as much of an impression as her.

He just thought that the resentful soul Ha-yoon had held a grudge for a long time for this reason.

"I see. Thank you for your answer."

With these words, Mok Gyeong-un left the bow with a smile.

Everyone had gathered at the bow to watch the boat move, but he was heading to the stern where no one was.

"He's absurd."

"What is?"

"I thought the mortal bastard was considering that fellow as a divine spirit when he asked what kind of grudge he held."

"His rank is high, so it's tempting, but there are no vacant positions now."

"That's true."

The number of servant spirits Mok Gyeong-un could currently take was limited.

If it were possible, he would have taken every resentful soul he met as a servant spirit and exploited them.

Mok Gyeong-un had asked out of pure curiosity about the resentful soul Ha-yoon being followed by resentful souls that were mere evil spirits, regardless of their rank.

Walking leisurely like that, Mok Gyeong-un stopped halfway to the stern.

"Why are you doing that?"

"...Will you say you can't see it this time too?"

"What? What are you..."

Cheong-ryeong discovered something.

That something was a person sitting on the deck at the rear of the boat, holding a curved long bamboo fishing rod.

Just by looking at the back of the white hair, one could tell that he was an old man.

“How did that old mortal board the boat?”

“...That’s what I want to ask.”

When they were launching the boat, he wasn’t visible anywhere nearby.

But how did he get on the boat?

The puzzled Mok Gyeong-un asked Cheong-ryeong,

“First of all, you can see him, right?”

“Yes.”

Then Mok Gyeong-un opened the demonic power he had obtained from his right Samgan eye.

First, he was curious about the identity of that person.

Judging by the bamboo raincoat he was wearing, he didn’t seem to be a spiritual body like a resentful soul or a monster-like existence.

But it was extremely strange that there was no sign or indication of his presence at all.

However,

Throb!

The moment he opened the power of the Third eye, strong pressure and red blood vessels surged in Mok Gyeong-un’s right eye,

Splatter!

Then, bloody tears flowed from his right eye.

The startled Cheong-ryeong shouted,

“Mortal!”

Pak!

Mok Gyeong-un, feeling the intraocular pressure that seemed like it would burst, hurriedly closed the power again.

And then he grabbed his right eye, which was shedding bloody tears.

It was to disperse the residual true energy that had raised the intraocular pressure by inducing death energy.

Sss!

Fortunately, Mok Gyeong-un’s judgment was correct.

As the energy dispersed, the intraocular pressure quickly subsided as well.

“Why are you doing that?”

“I can’t read his energy.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean it literally.”

When he opened the power of the Third eye, he could examine the flow of energy in detail with his right eye.

He could even read the traces of primordial energy, demonic energy, and spiritual energy, regardless of what they were.

But the moment he opened it, his vision turned pure white.

He couldn't understand why, but he tried to read the energy while enduring the white light, but the intraocular pressure rose, and he couldn't open his eyes properly due to the pain.

‘Why is my eye filled with white light? Unless the entire surroundings are filled with energy... !?’

For a moment, Mok Gyeong-un's left eye narrowed.

It was hard to believe.

‘...Could it be?’

Right then,

“Mortal! Behind you!”

At Cheong-ryeong's cry, Mok Gyeong-un looked at the deck where the old man in the bamboo raincoat holding the bamboo fishing rod had been sitting.

There was no one there.

That meant, as Cheong-ryeong shouted, someone was behind him, but,

‘I can’t even sense his presence.’

This was a separate issue from the heavy rain pouring down.

The opponent was a monster who could completely conceal his presence.

In a split second, while he was contemplating what to do, a voice came from behind.

“It wasn’t mere coincidence that you saw this old man earlier.”

‘!?’

Chapter 212 – On the Boat (3)

“It wasn’t mere coincidence that you saw this old man earlier.”

‘!?’

At the voice coming from behind him, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes sharpened.

‘Earlier?’

Mok Gyeong-un recalled the moment before entering the village.

The old man’s figure that had disappeared in the instant he took his eyes off him.

‘...He was definitely only looking at the river then. But does that mean he noticed that I was looking at him?’

Realizing this, Mok Gyeong-un’s thoughts became complicated, unlike before.

The old man behind him seemed to be a monster whose strength he couldn’t even guess.

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

“Mortal. Did you not notice at all?”

‘...’

He hadn’t noticed.

Both with his physical eyes and his energy perception.

Grip!

Mok Gyeong-un found that his hand had unconsciously tensed up at some point.

He hadn’t been this tense even when he met the leader of the Heaven and Earth Society, one of the Six Heavens who was called the pinnacle of the current martial world.

Of course, although the leader had weakened due to prolonged illness, this felt completely different.

The gap was so overwhelming that all the techniques he was devising in his head felt meaningless.

‘Just who is this old man?’

Cheong-ryeong was equally surprised.

The Mok Gyeong-un she had been watching never showed much tension no matter what powerful opponent he faced.

That was probably due to his strong mental fortitude of not fearing death or pain.

But this was the first time she saw this mortal bastard being so tense.

Just who is the identity of this old mortal?

While she was puzzled, the old man opened his mouth.

“I was just trying to express my gratitude, but this is interesting.”

“...What’s interesting?”

“I was wondering how you saw me, but your energy is extraordinary.”

“Just what are you...”

“Even this old man, who has lived a long time, has never seen someone like you, young man, possessing the energy that dead beings or monsters would have.”

‘!!!!’

At the old man’s words, Mok Gyeong-un’s left eye trembled.

This was a first.

A living being, not a resentful soul, was accurately detecting his death energy.

Moreover, even the fact that he possessed demonic energy in his body.

How did he discern his energy when he was clearly a living existence, not a spiritual body?

While he was surprised, the old man said,

“Hmm. But this isn’t all. Death energy, cold energy, poison energy... even the demonic energy of a monster, you possess all sorts of dangerous energies.”

‘What?’

Mok Gyeong-un was genuinely dumbfounded.

Just who is this old man?

He was reading most of the energies without even making contact with his body.

However, judging by the fact that he didn’t mention the demonic energy that converged all these energies into one, it seemed he couldn’t detect that.

But from the moment he read the death energy, it was as good as discerning most of the energies.

So Mok Gyeong-un bluntly said,

“...Elder. Just who are you? Why did you board this boat?”

It was doubtful whether he would give an answer, but while asking this, he concentrated his true energy on the soles of his feet.

It was in preparation for any situation.

Right then,

“Young man. I have no intention of harming you, so relax.”

“He’s reaching for your back!”

Papapapapak!

At Cheong-ryeong’s words, Mok Gyeong-un reflexively used the Brilliant Water Surpassing Step to try to distance himself from the old man with high-speed movement.

Mok Gyeong-un, who instantly put distance between them, turned his body.

But the old man, whom he thought would chase after him or make some kind of response, was standing still with his hands behind his back.

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes gleamed as he got to see the old man’s face directly.

He had an impression from seeing him holding the bamboo fishing rod and not being able to see his face properly, but it was completely the opposite.

The old man's face was not dark and dull, but exceedingly white, and his white beard was neat as if he had groomed it.

He had an aura as if he might have been a scholar in his youth.

However, there was one place that uniquely didn't match this atmosphere – his eyes were extremely fierce.

Then the old man opened his mouth.

"I thought you were cold-blooded, but you have a more curious side than I expected."

"I don't like being grabbed from behind."

"Is that so? But with your level of cultivation, you should have already guessed that no matter how much you struggle, it would be meaningless against me."

"..."

Mok Gyeong-un didn't deny those words.

The bamboo fishing rod the old man was holding behind his back.

At some point, that fishing rod started to feel like a sharp sword.

It felt like if it moved and flew towards him, his body would be split in half the moment it grazed him.

Perhaps because of that tension, all of Mok Gyeong-un's nerves were focused solely on the old man.

Then, the old man looked at Mok Gyeong-un's face and spoke with a glint in his eyes.

“Even though you’re young, I thought you would be over thirty, but this is unexpected.”

“Thank you for seeing me as mature, but I haven’t even passed my prime yet.”

“Haven’t even passed your prime? Hohohoho.”

The old man burst into laughter.

Puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un asked,

“Why are you laughing?”

“It’s a truly coincidental and mysterious thing. To see such talent on a boat like this again.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Just old memories coming to mind.”

Mok Gyeong-un showed no particular interest in the old man’s tone that seemed to recall memories.

Mok Gyeong-un’s concern was solely one thing.

Why did this old man of unknown identity board this boat and approach him?

Then the old man lightly shook his head and said,

“Relax. If I had intended to harm you, I would have done so long ago.”

“...I apologize. I’m very suspicious.”

“Is that so? It’s good that you’re honest.”

“Thank you for taking it well. But if you’re not trying to harm me, why did you board this boat?”

“Aah. Right, right. You asked that. My memory isn’t what it used to be after passing a hundred years old.”

‘A hundred?’

At the old man’s words, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

Although his beard and hair were white, he had fewer wrinkles than expected.

Judging by his appearance alone, even considering that he was a profound expert, he had thought he would be around sixty to seventy years old.

But he’s saying he’s this old?

While he was inwardly surprised, the old man said,

“I seem to have unintentionally made you wary, but I just wanted to express my gratitude.”

“Gratitude...?”

“That’s right.”

Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head.

He had no particular contact or connection with the old man, so he couldn't understand what he was grateful for.

While he was puzzled, the old man intently looked in the direction of the land they had left, where the village was located.

As Mok Gyeong-un followed his gaze and looked there, the old man parted his lips.

"When I came to this place after a long time, I found that someone had dug up the grave and shrine of an old acquaintance of mine."

"An old acquaintance?"

"Yes. He was a truly upright man with deep loyalty."

At the old man's words, Mok Gyeong-un couldn't hide his inner surprise.

Could this old man... have been an acquaintance of the resentful soul Ha-yoon?

"Ha!"

Cheong-ryeong also seemed surprised, as she let out an exclamation.

That was understandable because the resentful soul Ha-yoon was a high-ranking resentful soul of the Blue Spirit rank.

To reach this rank, one had to remain in the world for over a hundred years while holding a grudge.

That meant the old man really was over a hundred years old.

Then Mok Gyeong-un asked, puzzled,

“Cheong-ryeong might know that he’s over a hundred years old, right?”

Cheong-ryeong had absorbed the demonic energy of the Sea King and reached the Indigo Spirit rank, but in reality, she had spent about a hundred years as a resentful soul.

If that was the case, it could mean that this old man roamed the martial world in the same era as Cheong-ryeong.

However,

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“That person is not in my memory.”

“Are you sure?”

If he had lived such a long time and possessed unfathomable strength, he must have been famous in his youth.

But Cheong-ryeong seemed to have no idea.

“Could it be that you can’t recognize him because his appearance has aged?”

“Aged? Hmm. Yes, that could be. Then try to find out the old mortal’s name. It might be someone I’ve heard of.”

Appearance and voice inevitably change over time, so it was possible not to recognize him.

It was even more so for someone who had lived for over a hundred years.

So Mok Gyeong-un decided to find out the old man's name through conversation.

"...By any chance, is the person you're referring to someone named Ha-yoon?"

"Yes, that's him. In fact, while I was pondering what to do while fishing, you destroyed that estate. Thanks to that, it seems my dead friend's grudge has been somewhat relieved, so it's fortunate."

"..."

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un was puzzled.

Something was confusing.

Whether the old man could see resentful souls or not.

Since he could even detect death energy, which could be called the energy of the dead, it seemed like there was nothing he couldn't do, but it was strange.

Judging by the way he was speaking now, it didn't seem like it, so it was ambiguous.

Without revealing this doubt, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"That wasn't intentional."

“Whether it was intentional or not, I wanted to express my gratitude for doing what I was going to do on my behalf.”

Listening to the old man’s words, it seemed that Woo In-yeom and his family were destined to be punished in some way.

In any case, what was certain was that fortunately, this monster-like old man didn’t really seem to intend to harm him.

If that was the case, he could ask without worry.

Mok Gyeong-un respectfully clasped his hands together, bowed his head, and said,

“I apologize, but since meeting like this is also a connection, may I ask for your respected name as a junior?”

“My name?”

“Yes.”

To that question, the old man shook his head and replied,

“It’s a name that has long been forgotten. What will you do by hearing such a name?”

“But...”

“Hohoho. Do you think a connection won’t be made just because you know or don’t know a name? Connections tend to take shape in one way or another.”

“...Since you put it that way, I have no choice.”

It seemed the old man had no intention of revealing his name or identity.

Mok Gyeong-un, who judged that there was nothing good about prying further to someone overwhelmingly stronger than him, quickly gave up.

He should be grateful just for not having ill fate with such a monster-like person.

Then the old man said,

“So I want to make a small repayment for this gratitude and connection.”

“Repayment?”

“By the looks of it, you seem to have learned the sword.”

The old man suddenly reached out his hand towards Mok Gyeong-un.

Then,

Pak!

‘Huh?’

The scabbard of the Evil Commandment Sword at Mok Gyeong-un’s waist flew off with the sword intact.

Then it was sucked into the old man’s hand.

Puzzled by what his intention was, the old man said,

"I hope this will be a sufficient repayment."

Shing!

As soon as those words ended, the Evil Commandment Sword slipped out of the scabbard, revealing its blade.

Surprised, Mok Gyeong-un shouted,

"Elder, that sword is..."

He was about to say it was dangerous to hold it carelessly because it was a demonic sword.

But an amazing sight unfolded.

The moment the old man gripped the hilt of the Evil Commandment Sword that had been drawn from the scabbard,

Woooong!

A strong resonance poured out from the Evil Commandment Sword, and the blade vibrated rapidly, but soon, not long after, it stopped.

'He subdued the sword?'

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un was genuinely unable to hide his surprise.

The one who held the Evil Commandment Sword was supposed to reveal their desires due to its demonic nature.

But even though the Evil Commandment Sword revealed its demonic nature while emitting a resonance, its sword spirit was rather suppressed not long after.

While he was amazed, the old man muttered,

“Truly coincidental. The demonic sword of Ou Yezi...”

The old man discerned the identity of the sword in an instant.

As expected, he was no ordinary old man.

“Elder. Are you alright?”

He obviously looked fine, but Mok Gyeong-un asked out of courtesy.

Then the old man looked at the sword and showed a gentle smile.

“Young man, you make me recall many old things that were about to be forgotten.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“No. Never mind. Rather, look at this.”

As soon as those words ended, the old man wielded the Evil Commandment Sword he was holding and drew a magnificent trajectory as if performing a sword dance.

Swish! Swish swish swish!

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes didn't leave the sword as he watched this.

The clean trajectory that seemed to draw the full moon in the night sky was too shocking.

How could a sword technique that looked so simple have no flaws?

Swish swish swish swish!

The sword strikes were so outstanding and flawless that he couldn't take his eyes off them.

Cheong-ryeong was equally surprised.

She was also an excellent swordsman when she was alive, so she could tell that each stance the old man wielded went beyond a simple sword technique and led to a peerless sword move.

However, the sword moves the old man displayed with the Evil Commandment Sword felt quite familiar.

'Why does this sword feel so familiar?'

Mok Gyeong-un felt the same way.

At some point, everything about the sword techniques the old man wielded felt extremely familiar.

It was clearly a sword technique he was seeing for the first time, but it felt familiar.

What on earth was going on?

While he was filled with doubts, Cheong-ryeong spoke in a surprised voice.

“...This can’t be.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Mortal...”

“Yes?”

“...It’s the Moonless Void Sword.”

‘Moonless... Sky Sword!?’

At that moment, the formula of the moves written on the paper Cheong-ryeong had hidden, which he had seen in the treasury of Corpse Blood Valley, came to Mok Gyeong-un’s mind.

While showing the hidden formula, Cheong-ryeong had said,

[Consider it your fortune. These are the only remaining sword moves of the Moonless Void Sword, one of the Five Great Sword Techniques that once symbolized the Old Martial World.]

Along with that, the peerless swordsman he had seen in a state of selflessness while imprinting the formula began to overlap with the old man.

Chapter 213 – On the Boat (4)

Moonless Void Sword[1].

That was the sword technique written on the paper Cheong-ryeong had hidden in the treasury of Corpse Blood Valley.

She had called the Moonless Void Sword one of the Five Great Sword Techniques that symbolized the Old Martial World.

‘Ah!’

The trajectories of the sword drawn by Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes.

In Mok Gyeong-un’s mind as he watched this, the image of the peerless swordsman he had seen in a state of selflessness while imprinting the formula overlapped with the old man.

Swish swish swish!

The refreshing sword path reminiscent of the full moon. This caused a thrill that made the memory of that time pale in comparison.

Entering the treasury of Corpse Blood Valley and experiencing a state of selflessness through imprinting as Cheong-ryeong had told him to recite the sword techniques, but this sword technique caused an incomparable thrill compared to those.

Swish swish!

‘It’s different.’

What surprised Mok Gyeong-un even more was the difference in the sword techniques.

Even in the sword techniques he had seen in a state of selflessness, there were no unnecessary sword paths, and each sword path was beautiful yet thoroughly focused on killing the opponent.

However, the sword techniques the old man displayed went beyond this and even broke free from the framework of existing sword paths.

‘Aah...’

It was like seeing a new world.

Confucius said that when one reaches the age of seventy, one can follow one’s heart’s desire, go where the heart leads, and do what the heart wants without deviating from any rules, laws, systems, or principles.

The old man’s sword was like that.

It evolved the techniques freely, breaking away from the framework of existing techniques.

Nevertheless, amazingly, this was still the Moonless Void Sword.

‘...I’ve never thought about it this way. So this is how techniques can be displayed.’

It completely shattered conventional wisdom.

Mok Gyeong-un couldn’t help but be genuinely amazed.

This wasn’t a sword that could be displayed simply by imprinting it in one’s head and remembering it.

This shock didn’t only come to Mok Gyeong-un.

Although she had no physical body, Cheong-ryeong was also an excellent swordsman when she was alive, so the moment she saw this, she was astounded and achieved an awakening.

‘This is the sword...’

She was the one who had gained enlightenment after seeing the two techniques of the Moonless Void Sword and created the sword technique of the Moon.

But after seeing this, a new understanding of the sword blossomed in her mind.

At this moment, a gap arose between Cheong-ryeong and Mok Gyeong-un.

Unlike Cheong-ryeong, who was trapped in a wooden puppet and purely observing the sword techniques themselves, Mok Gyeong-un was also seeing how the surrounding energy moved with each sword swing.

This difference could be said to be quite significant.

Swish!

Not long after, the old man stopped swinging the sword.

As he stopped, a faint glow was flowing from the blade of the Evil Commandment Sword.

It was as if even the Evil Commandment Sword, called a demonic sword, was paying homage to the amazing sword techniques the old man had demonstrated.

Looking at the Evil Commandment Sword, the old man opened his mouth.

“Excellent. Thanks to you, this old man’s sword could shine even brighter.”

Woooong!

At those words, the Evil Commandment Sword vibrated and emitted a sword cry.

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

If the sword spirit of that demonic sword, which was so picky about people, was like this, he thought the old man must have reached the highest realm in swordsmanship.

The old man looked at Mok Gyeong-un and said,

“Did you see it?”

“Yes.”

“How much do you remember?”

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un stopped himself from answering that he remembered everything without much thought.

He felt that the meaning behind the old man’s question wasn’t that.

He could remember everything.

He could even display the exact movements the old man had made.

But that was just a shell.

So Mok Gyeong-un replied,

“I don’t remember well.”

When he said that, the old man’s eyes narrowed.

Inwardly, the old man was surprised.

Although he had shown the sword to Mok Gyeong-un, he thought there would be a limit to what he could realize.

But he never expected to hear such an answer from Mok Gyeong-un.

“You don’t remember well?”

“Yes.”

“...I see.”

The corners of the old man’s mouth twitched.

Since he was a swordsman, he thought this much would be a sufficient repayment.

But it seemed Mok Gyeong-un’s potential was beyond what he had thought.

So the old man raised the sword again.

Then,

“Then look again.”

Swish swish swish swish!

This time, he performed a sword dance just like before.

However, just like earlier, the trajectory of the sword was incomparably beautiful.

But there was a difference – the sword path had become even simpler.

If the previous one was like a waxing moon, now the sword technique had become even more concise and clear, as if it had become a half moon.

Unlike the first time, the sword technique ended halfway through.

As he lowered the sword, the blade of the Evil Commandment Sword vibrated even faster.

The old man asked Mok Gyeong-un,

“How about this time?”

“...Even as I’m watching, I can’t remember.”

Hearing these words, the corners of the old man’s mouth rose even higher.

Then the old man held the Evil Commandment Sword again, assumed a stance, and said,

“I see. Then look again.”

As soon as those words ended, the old man displayed the sword technique again.

The sword technique was quite different from before.

The sword became even more concise and closer to simply swinging rather than being beautiful.

Nevertheless, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes didn't leave the trajectory of the sword.

It was like the gaze of someone in a state of selflessness.

Swish swish!

The old man's sword ended even faster than the second time he displayed it.

It was almost not even half as long.

After swinging the sword like this, the old man stared intently at Mok Gyeong-un's eyes and asked,

"How is it?"

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un let out a long sigh.

Seeing this, the old man's eyes gleamed even more.

The old man had realized from this breath alone that Mok Gyeong-un had been with him.

Eventually, Mok Gyeong-un opened his mouth.

"With my lacking talent, I forgot everything even though I saw it before my eyes."

'!!!!'

Hearing those words, the old man burst into hearty laughter.

“Hahahahaha!”

After laughing like that for a while, the old man stopped and said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“I just wanted to make a small repayment, but it has become interesting.”

“...It seems excessive for a small repayment.”

“This is also your fortune.”

At the old man’s words, Mok Gyeong-un suddenly recalled it.

Strangely, he had felt the Moonless Void Sword in the sword techniques the old man had displayed, and he had felt an overlap with the peerless swordsman he had seen in the formula from the Corpse Blood Valley report.

So he wanted to ask.

“Elder, by any chance, the Moonless...”

“Hohoho. I almost took this with me.”

“What?”

Shing! Click!

Before he could even ask, the old man cut him off and sheathed the Evil Commandment Sword into its scabbard.

Then he threw the Evil Commandment Sword towards Mok Gyeong-un.

As Mok Gyeong-un lightly caught the sword, the old man said,

“It seems the repayment is sufficient, and you should also wrap it up, so this old man will take his leave now.”

“What?”

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un frowned.

They were still in the middle of the river, so where was he going?

With this level of current, no matter how much of an expert one was, it was impossible not to be swept away.

So Mok Gyeong-un said,

“Can’t you wait until the boat arrives and then get off?”

“The place this old man is going to is not across the river.”

“But here...”

“It’s fine. And don’t pay too much attention to a passing connection.”

With those words, the old man shouldered the bamboo fishing rod and tried to move towards the deck.

It was truly an insane act.

He couldn't let him go like this without even properly finding out his identity.

Mok Gyeong-un tried to stop the old man.

"Eld..."

Swish!

At that moment, the old man's figure disappeared.

Mok Gyeong-un hurriedly flew towards the deck where the old man had approached.

And he looked outside the boat, but he couldn't see anything.

No matter how dark and heavy the rain was pouring on the river, Mok Gyeong-un's eyesight was different from ordinary people.

But he couldn't see anything around him.

'...What the hell?'

Was he really a living human?

He disappeared in an instant, and there was no way to know where he had gone.

"Cheong-ryeong, did you see it?"

"..."

So Mok Gyeong-un asked Cheong-ryeong.

But Cheong-ryeong didn't respond.

Thinking something might be wrong, he touched the wooden puppet in his bosom, but she was still sealed inside it.

That meant she seemed to be lost in deep thought to the point of not hearing his words.

'Did Cheong-ryeong also realize something after seeing that?'

It seemed to be the case.

Indeed, he also wanted to organize the things the old man had shown him earlier.

After looking around for a while, searching for traces of the old man, Mok Gyeong-un eventually gave up and sat cross-legged on the floor.

Then he closed his eyes and recalled the sword the old man had displayed from the beginning.

The bow of the boat.

Seop Chun, the Third Captain Commander of the Heaven and Earth Society's main branch, gulped down the liquor contained in the gourd bottle passed to him by the exiled monk Ja Geum-jeong.

"Phew. This is killer."

"Hehehe. You bastard at least know the taste of liquor."

“Hahahaha! How can you call yourself a man if you don’t know the taste of liquor? Drinking while being drenched by the pouring rain on a boat that seems like it might capsize at any moment, the taste is truly exquisite.”

“Liquor should originally be drunk in a place like this to be thrilling.”

“Well said.”

“In that sense, another sip!”

Gulp gulp!

“Hey. Is that a sip? Are you planning to drink it all by yourself? Let me drink with you.”

They were two people who got along exceptionally well.

At some point, they had their arms around each other’s shoulders, drinking sip by sip, and were in high spirits.

Seeing these two, Mong Mu-yak, the son of the Vice-Leader, clicked his tongue.

‘Foolish ones.’

With the rain pouring down like this, can they even feel if the liquor is going into their nose or mouth?

Anyway, they were guys who didn’t suit him.

It was at that moment when he was looking at them with disdain.

Thud!

Mong Mu-yak closed his eyes and collapsed to the floor.

He wasn't the only one.

Seop Chun and Ja Geum-jeong, who had been in high spirits with their arms around each other's shoulders, had also closed their eyes at some point and lay on the floor, falling asleep.

Seeing them like this, the resentful soul Ha-yoon, who was holding the rudder, frowned.

It was strange that they had suddenly collapsed all at once.

But then,

"I almost forgot about you."

At the voice coming from the side, the resentful soul Ha-yoon was startled and turned his head.

There stood an old man wearing a bamboo raincoat and shouldering a bamboo fishing rod.

Seeing this, Ha-yoon tried to kneel on the floor.

"Elder!"

But before he could do that, the old man shook his head and stopped Ha-yoon from kneeling.

Then the old man said,

"If I had paid a little more attention, your grave wouldn't have been dug up. I'm sorry."

"No. How is that your fault, Elder? It happened because I was lacking in virtue."

At Ha-yoon's words, the old man shook his head.

"Even after all this time has passed, you're still the same. It's time for you to let yourself go now."

"No. I still need to receive more punishment."

"Don't say that. That child wouldn't want you to be like this either."

"..."

Ha-yoon lowered his head silently with a bitter look in his eyes.

The old man tapped his shoulder as if to encourage him.

Then Ha-yoon raised his head again and said,

"I apologize. Your lamentation must be deeper than mine, yet you still comfort this unworthy one. I am simply grateful."

"You don't need to be grateful. Understand?"

"..."

"Anyway, the matter has been resolved safely, and I got to see your face after a long time, so this old man will take his leave now."

At those words, Ha-yoon couldn't hide his regret.

He had hoped not to see the old man this year, but he had never missed visiting this place once every ten years to take care of the grave and shrine.

It wasn't a bad thing for him, but it wasn't the same for the old man.

"...You still haven't found it?"

At that question, the old man shook his head.

"It's not easy."

"I'd rather find a suitable human body and help you..."

"No. It would be helping me if you push yourself appropriately and go to a good place."

"...Elder."

"You don't have to do that. I'm in a good mood today because I recalled old memories."

At those words, Ha-yoon asked, puzzled,

"Memories, you say?"

"I greeted a young man who did my task on my behalf, and it reminded me of that fellow after a long time."

‘!?’

At those words, Ha-yoon’s eyes gleamed.

“By that fellow, do you mean your son-in-law?”

The old man showed a faint smile.

It was a sign of affirmation.

Seeing that, Ha-yoon couldn’t hide his inner surprise.

It had been a really long time since the old man had mentioned him.

If that was the case, it meant the old man also highly regarded that extraordinary young man...

“To the extent of reminding you of him, is he that great?”

To this question, the old man recalled earlier and spoke in a meaningful voice,

“His talent alone would make even that fellow pale in comparison.”

!!!!!!!

Chapter 214 – Secret Mission (1)

Scrape scrape.

The hull of the boat scraped against the shore as it moved up.

Splash! Splash! Splash!

The anchors attached to the left, right, and rear of the boat were lowered, but the boat still shook due to the rough current.

However, they succeeded in crossing the river in less than half an hour.

Seop Chun, Ja Geum-jeong, and Mong Mu-yak, who had woken up by the time they arrived, seemed to be in a dazed state, with blank expressions on their faces.

They couldn't even properly recognize when they had fallen asleep and woken up.

They only had the feeling that they had taken a short nap.

'Hmm.'

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been looking at them strangely, approached the resentful soul Ha-yoon standing in front of the rudder and greeted him with a polite bow.

"Thanks to you, we were able to cross the river safely. Thank you."

"I only kept the agreement, so there's no need to thank me too much."

"An agreement is an agreement, and gratitude is gratitude."

"I understand. Then be careful as you disembark."

"Ah! Before you go, may I ask you one more thing?"

“...What is it?”

“By any chance, did you see an old man carrying a bamboo fishing rod? No, do you know him?”

At these words, the resentful soul Ha-yoon momentarily hesitated.

But he soon shook his head and replied,

“I don’t know.”

“Do you really not know?”

“...That’s right.”

At the resentful soul Ha-yoon’s answer, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and lightly bowed again, then turned to leave.

Watching Mok Gyeong-un’s back, the resentful soul Ha-yoon recalled what had happened earlier.

[If he asks about me, tell him you don’t know anything.]

There was a request from the elder, so he hid it, but that cunning young man seemed to have noticed.

At least the fact that the elder and himself had a connection.

However, unless the elder wanted it, it was better not to know his identity.

‘...If he truly possesses talent exceeding his, as the elder’s discernment suggests, surely the connection will be made again someday.’

Around the beginning of the evening hour.

In front of an abandoned temple of Guan Yu on the east side of Mount Giju in Annak County of Henan Province.

There, sitting around a bonfire, were three men eating roasted deer meat.

Among the three men who appeared to be in their mid-twenties, one man stood out in particular. His face was white as if he had applied powder, and his lips were red as if he had applied rouge.

He was even eating the meat by daintily tearing it off instead of biting into it in one mouthful.

Seeing him like this, a man with droopy eyes and a blue headband around his forehead clicked his tongue and said,

“Yoo-bong, you’ve completely become a eunuch.”

“Hohoho. I’ve been living as a eunuch for nearly two years now, so it’s only natural to say that.”

“Putting other things aside, can’t you do something about that laughter?”

“How can I change what’s already ingrained in my mouth? Please bear with me a little, Master Gan-yang. Hohoho.”

“Haa.”

The grating laughter was so annoying that the man with a blue headband around his head, called Gan-yang, let out a sigh.

Across from him, a man with a beard, who was tearing off and eating the meat, stopped and called out in an irritated voice,

“Gan-yang.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve waited long enough, so how about we start heading back?”

“Head back, you say?”

“That’s right. Anyway, the rear unit won’t be arriving today.”

“But Ok-gi...”

The man called Ok-gi interrupted Gan-yang, who was about to say something, with a raised voice.

“It’s not just one day, but it has been raining for nearly half a month. Rivers are overflowing everywhere, and there have even been landslides. How can they possibly meet the deadline?”

As he said, the damage caused by the rain that had continued for half a month was indescribable.

Especially around the rivers, they had heard that it was impossible to even launch boats.

Considering this, Ok-gi judged that even if they were masters, it was impossible for them to gather at the rendezvous point by the deadline.

“Hmm.”

Gan-yang stroked his chin with a troubled expression.

The Imperial Guard Martial Examination was three days away.

They had to arrive in the imperial capital, Kaifeng, within two days before that and fully brief them on the true purpose of the secret mission and the necessary requirements.

Moreover, this wasn't the end. There was also someone they had to meet before taking the martial examination.

“It would be difficult with just us.”

“It's not about being difficult. We're already late. Even if they arrive tomorrow, at that point, it's no different from the mission being disrupted.”

“...”

“Didn't we already consider the situation where the advance team wouldn't arrive on time? Let's just head back.”

At Ok-gi's words, Gan-yang sighed.

No matter how he thought about it, it was unreasonable.

Due to the heavy rain, the rivers had overflowed, and they probably couldn't even cross for several days.

In fact, the probability of them reaching this place in three days, let alone tomorrow, was slim.

“Phew. Alright. You’re right. Let’s withdraw now.”

At Gan-yang’s decision, Ok-gi finally showed a satisfied expression.

From the beginning, he hadn’t been too keen on the rear unit coming.

The ministry had said they would dispatch capable recruits as requested by ‘that place,’ but they were nothing more than rookies who lacked real combat experience or even assassination experience.

On the other hand, they had been trained for this day.

They were waiting for the day they could make a significant contribution and return to the society in glory.

But to carry out the mission with those rookies as the main force?

No matter how he thought about it, he couldn’t accept it.

‘I’ll show them that we can do it well enough without those bastards.’

With that thought, Ok-gi removed the remaining deer meat from the wooden stand and was about to extinguish the bonfire.

Right then,

Rustle!

The presence of someone was felt from the bushes to the southwest.

At this, everyone, including him, hurriedly reached for their weapons and turned their heads.

Then someone emerged from the bushes, revealing their appearance.

“Ah. It seems we arrived on time.”

‘!?’

Seeing the face illuminated by the bonfire, Ok-gi couldn’t help but exclaim inwardly.

That was because he was momentarily surprised by the beautiful face that seemed like a woman’s.

Then, three more people appeared behind him.

The one who particularly stood out was a man with a muscular and sturdy physique, though not very tall, wearing a broken rosary around his neck and having a fierce impression.

On either side of him were a man in his late twenties who appeared to be holding a somewhat light sword, and a youth with a tall and handsome appearance but giving off a cold feeling.

‘Could it be?’

At their appearance, Ok-gi’s expression stiffened.

Could these people be the rear unit?

‘No way.’

No matter how much they hurried, it was difficult for the rear unit to meet the deadline.

In the first place, they couldn't even cross the river, so how could they arrive today?

At that moment of bewilderment, the leader of the advance team, Gan-yang, said to them,

"Heavenly Mandate."

This was a pre-arranged code phrase.

At Gan-yang's words, Mong Mu-yak stepped forward and replied,

"Earthly Fate."

At those words, Gan-yang's expression brightened.

That was because the rear unit, which he thought wouldn't arrive on time, had arrived at the point when they were about to withdraw.

Clap!

Gan-yang clasped his hands together in a polite bow and was about to greet them.

"Welcome. The leader of the advance team, Gan..."

Then Ok-gi interrupted.

"It's not certain yet if they are the rear unit or not."

"What are you talking about? How can those who know this location and the code phrase..."

“What if something goes wrong because of that? We need to be sure of everything!”

Gan-yang couldn't hide his embarrassment at Ok-gi's firm attitude.

He had been filled with dissatisfaction ever since receiving the notification from the society about the rear unit.

“Listen, Ok-gi...”

“The society informed us of three people. But they are four. Moreover, they even met the deadline that was impossible to meet. Doesn't this seem strange at all?”

‘He has a point.’

At those words, a hint of wariness appeared on Gan-yang's expression.

It was indeed strange to dismiss it as just dissatisfaction with the rear unit.

Shing!

Then Ok-gi drew his sword, aimed it at the rear unit, and said,

“We were told by the society that the rear unit consists of three people. What is your identity?”

Mong Mu-yak, who became upset by his attitude of interrogating while even pointing a sword at them, stepped forward.

“Who are you suspecting now?”

“If you've done something suspicious, you should explain it. Are you arguing about it now?”

In a normal situation, even if the other party acted sharply, he would have first clarified the circumstances.

However, like all members of the rear unit, Mong Mu-yak was currently in a very sensitive state.

In order to meet the deadline, they had arrived here after enduring heavy rain for nearly ten days without even getting proper rest.

But being confronted with such a tone, he couldn't help but feel irritated.

"Argue? Who..."

"Ah. Please calm down."

Mok Gyeong-un stopped him.

"But My Lord..."

'My Lord?'

At the word 'My Lord,' Ok-gi and the entire advance team frowned.

Of course, without minding this, Mok Gyeong-un said,

"The three of us came as the rear unit, and this person is my servant."

'What? Servant?'

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, the exiled monk Ja Geum-jeong made a dumbfounded expression.

He had intended to watch and see how to handle the situation if a problem arose, but he never thought he would be introduced in such a way.

Ok-gi, who couldn't hide his displeasure, looked at Ja Geum-jeong and snorted.

"You brought a servant on a secret mission? Do you expect us to believe that now?"

"He's not someone I brought from the society, but a servant I acquired along the way."

At Mok Gyeong-un's nonchalant reply, Ok-gi's expression hardened fiercely.

He had asked for an explanation, but Mok Gyeong-un was only spouting nonsense.

Even Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, found this unacceptable and half-drew the sword at his waist.

"Does this situation seem like a joke to you? Do you think we'll just let it slide if you say you brought an unknown servant on an important secret mission given by the society?"

"Is it because of this person's identity?"

"No, that's not the point..."

"Have you heard of Ja Geum-jeong, by any chance?"

"Whether it's Ja Geum-jeong or whoever... What?"

Gan-yang's expression, which had been about to raise his voice thinking the conversation wasn't going anywhere, suddenly stiffened.

For a moment, he doubted his ears.

The Ja Geum-jeong he knew was an exiled monk of Shaolin and was more notorious as one of the Three Madmen in the martial arts world than by his nickname, the Demon Subduing Fist Master.

'Impossible!'

There was no way.

How could the crazy exiled monk that even Shaolin had expelled become this person's servant?

No matter how he thought about it, it didn't make sense.

However,

'...'

Gan-yang's gaze turned towards Ja Geum-jeong.

From the moment he first saw him, he thought he had seen that appearance somewhere before.

The broken rosary, sturdy physique, and fierce impression were all exactly as he had heard in the rumors.

Although the situation didn't make sense, the thought that it might be true left Gan-yang at a loss for words.

But Ok-gi was different.

“Ha! Do you think we’ll believe such nonsense? Even if Shaolin expelled him, do you think the Ja Geum-jeong, notorious as one of the Three Madmen, would become a servant to a greenhorn who hasn’t even reached his prime? If you have common sense, such words...”

Grab!

“Urk!”

Before he could even finish speaking, someone grabbed Ok-gi’s neck like lightning and lifted him up.

It was none other than the exiled monk Ja Geum-jeong.

‘Th-this bastard...’

Ok-gi, who thought he had let his guard down for a moment, tried to use the sword he was holding to slash Ja Geum-jeong’s arm.

But before he could do that, Ja Geum-jeong twisted his wrist.

Crack!

“Kuuk!”

Clang!

As a result, he dropped the sword.

Regardless, Ja Geum-jeong, with veins bulging on his forehead, panted and said,

“Whether someone becomes a servant or a slave, who the hell are you to run your mouth? Should I break your neck right here and send you to Buddha’s side?”

“Urk urk...”

Ok-gi’s pupils shook as if an earthquake had hit.

‘It’s really Ja Geum-jeong?’

Ok-gi’s martial arts had reached the pinnacle of perfection.

He prided himself on being ranked relatively high among his peers in the righteous faction.

However, if someone possessed the strength to grab his neck with one hand, lift him up, and render him immobile, it had to be Ja Geum-jeong.

In the midst of this, Mok Gyeong-un said to Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, with a smile,

“If the number of people has to be exact, why don’t we reduce it by one person on this occasion?”

‘!!!!!!’

Hearing those words, Ok-gi’s face instantly turned pale.

Chapter 215 – Secret Mission (2)

“If we need to match the exact number of people, why don’t we just reduce it by one?”

Mok Gyeong-un spoke with a nonchalant smile, leaving not only Ok-gi but even Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, unable to hide their bafflement.

‘What the hell is up with this guy?’

Is he really the one sent by the Society Leader?

How can he say such a thing so casually?

Just then...

“Kkugh!”

“Hey, mister. So if I kill this kid and take his spot, will that work?”

The Demon-Subduing monk Ja Geum-jeong tightened his grip around Ok-gi’s neck and sneered.

Suffocating with his face turning beet red, Ok-gi flailed about, desperately trying to pry off Ja Geum-jeong’s hand to no avail.

The gap in their martial arts was too wide for him to budge an inch.

“Kugh!”

Ok-gi’s eyes were about to roll back.

‘D-Damn, I’m really going to die!’

Sensing that Ok-gi was on the verge of suffocating, Gan-yang hastily tried to stop this.

But before he could intervene, someone else stepped in.

“Adding one more person won’t be an issue. So please stop.”

It was Yoo-bong, one of the advance team members.

Irked by Yoo-bong’s effeminate tone and mannerisms despite his made-up face, Ja Geum-jeong raised an eyebrow.

“And who are you to say that, boy?”

“Hohoho. I’m not exactly a ‘boy’.”

“What? Are you saying you’re some kind of wench then?”

“I’m not a wench either. Anyway, now that I know you’re a Demon-Subduing monk, I kindly ask that you release him.”

At Yoo-bong’s words, Ja Geum-jeong scoffed.

“That’s not for you to decide.”

As he spoke, Ja Geum-jeong’s gaze fell upon none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

Seeing this, Yoo-bong’s eyes sparkled.

He had been observing and assessing the situation from the start.

As a result, Yoo-bong found it strange but learned that the youngest member who had yet to even reach his twenties, Mok Gyeong-un, was the de facto leader of the rear team.

‘That kid is the core of the rear team.’

He wasn’t sure why they had chosen the member with the weakest martial arts as the leader, but if they were to submit here, they would continue to be pushed around.

Thus...

“Paat!”

Yoo-bong sprung into action, aiming to subdue Mok Gyeong-un.

If he could just bring him under control, the entire rear team would have no choice but to follow their lead.

Especially that crazy Demon-Subduing monk.

“Papapak!”

Instantly reaching right in front of Mok Gyeong-un, Yoo-bong reached out to grab his neck.

However, before his hand could even touch him...

“Where do you think you’re going!”

“Chwak!”

Seop Chun’s Wind Demon Blade was already slicing towards Yoo-bong’s wrist.

Yoo-bong quickly bent his elbow and infused hidden force into it, skillfully deflecting the blade.

“Taeng!”

The thin and light Wind Demon Blade momentarily curved from the rebound.

“Parararar!”

The blade trembled wildly.

The impact of the hidden force reached even the palm gripping the sword handle.

‘Kuk.’

Not missing that brief instant, Yoo-bong kicked towards Seop Chun’s abdomen.

“Pak!”

However, Seop Chun was not one to easily fall for such an attack.

Instead, he lifted Yoo-bong’s kicking leg upward and...

“Ppeok!”

He struck the opposite side of the curved Wind Demon Blade with his fist, dissipating the hidden force.

Using the rebound from lifting the leg, he lightly leaped and tilted his head back, easily dodging Yoo-bong’s roundhouse kick with his other leg.

“Ppaak!”

The roundhouse kick narrowly grazed Seop Chun’s hair.

Not missing a beat, Seop Chun executed the 2nd stance of the Folding Blade Technique, Rotating Butterfly Warning, with the Wind Demon Blade that had its hidden force dissipated.

“Chwahchwahchwahchwak!”

“Huh?”

As the blade rotated in a wide trajectory towards his neck, Yoo-bong hastily dodged with a fox-like movement using a mysterious lightness skill, hopping over it.

“Tatatatatak!”

‘What kind of lightness skill is that?’

‘His blade wielding is no ordinary feat.’

Seop Chun and Yoo-bong, who had exchanged several attacks in a brief moment, marveled at each other’s skills and distanced themselves by more than four steps.

But there was another person surprised by their duel – Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team.

He had thought himself the most outstanding in martial arts among the advance team.

However, he never expected Yoo-bong, who was said to have spent nearly two years as a eunuch in the imperial palace, to possess such astonishing prowess.

'He was hiding his martial arts?'

Gan-yang clicked his tongue inwardly.

Just then, Yoo-bong glanced at Seop Chun with a troubled expression.

Breaking through this person seemed far from easy.

Thus...

'It's a shame, but there's no other way.'

From his bosom, he took out something and threw it towards Seop Chun like a concealed weapon.

"Seuk!"

Naturally assuming it was a dart, Seop Chun swung his Wind Demon Blade to deflect it.

However, the moment the blade's edge sliced the object Yoo-bong had thrown...

"Papapapak!"

'Gunpowder?'

It was none other than gunpowder.

As the gunpowder exploded, red and blue sparks flew, causing Seop Chun to momentarily lose sight, frantically swinging his blade to prevent Yoo-bong from closing in.

But Yoo-bong's target wasn't him.

It was Mok Gyeong-un.

Amid the flying sparks, Yoo-bong aimed to subdue the one he considered the weakest but the core of this group.

However, there was a fact Yoo-bong was unaware of.

"Resorting to underhanded tricks, I see."

'What?'

"Pak!"

'Huh!?'

Mok Gyeong-un lightly deflected Yoo-bong's hand that was reaching out to perform the Golden Silk Hand technique, grabbed his face, and smashed it straight into the ground.

"Kwang!"

"Ack!"

Yoo-bong, his head slammed against the floor, trembled in pain.

With this single move, Yoo-bong realized it.

The strongest one among the rear team, no, among everyone present, was none other than this guy.

‘To...to think I made such a mistake...’

It was a grave error on his part to consider this guy the weakest and attempt to subdue him without knowing that fact.

“Kkeueung.”

The sound of deflating lungs flowed from Yoo-bong, but his consciousness didn’t last long.

Perhaps suffering a concussion, his eyes rolled back, and he passed out, foaming at the mouth.

Mok Gyeong-un released his hand from Yoo-bong’s face and spoke with a smile.

“Let’s put an end to this pointless power struggle. I believe you’ve sufficiently realized that further attempts are meaningless, no?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, unwittingly swallowed his saliva and nodded his head vigorously.

Inside the Guan Yu Shrine with lanterns lit.

The attitude of the dejected advance team trio was now shrunken, unlike before.

But there was something that made them shrink even further.

And that was...

“Mong Mu-yak, Vice Commander of the Headquarters’ Direct Oversight.”

“Seop Chun, Third Captain Commander of the Internal Affairs Headquarters.”

“Mok Gyeong-un, disciple of the Shadow Clan Master.”

Upon hearing their identities, the advance team was stunned.

‘Damn, these crazy...’

There was also a request from ‘that place’, so they knew some high-level pinnacle-stage grandmasters would be sent as the rear team through the communication talisman.

However, they thought expendable pawns would be sent for this mission, considering its low success rate and potential dangers.

But learning the identities of these individuals, the advance team couldn’t hide their astonishment.

Wasn’t the Vice Commander of the Headquarters’ Direct Oversight the son of the Vice-Leader?

Moreover...

‘A Captain Commander of the Headquarters? That’s the Society Leader’s personal guards. Ha!’

These people couldn’t be treated recklessly based on their status alone.

Furthermore, these two belonged to the Five Tigers, considered the best among the Heaven and Earth Society’s young pinnacle-stage masters.

On the other hand, the only one they learned about for the first time was Mok Gyeong-un.

‘The Shadow Clan Master took on a disciple?’

A disciple of the Shadow Clan Master meant he was a direct successor of the executive.

They had been dispatched for missions outside for as long as two years or at least nearly a year.

As such, they weren’t well-informed about internal affairs during that time.

Hearing that Mok Gyeong-un was the Shadow Clan Master’s disciple, they couldn’t help but be surprised.

‘If he’s a recently accepted disciple, why is he so powerful?’

Especially Yoo-bong, who had been subdued by Mok Gyeong-un in a single move, felt that way even more.

With this level of martial arts, it would be hard to believe even if he had learned under an executive of the Five Kings level, let alone a Sect Leader level executive.

‘Moreover, everyone from the Vice-Leader’s son to the Headquarters’ Captain Commander addresses him as their lord.’

Just what is his true identity?

Could it be that being the Shadow Clan Master’s disciple is merely a front, and he’s actually the Society Leader’s disciple?

The mystery deepened further.

In any case, thanks to the rear team revealing their identities, the advance team could also discern two facts.

The first was that this rear team included the successors of the two departments in charge of information and spies within the Society.

That likely meant they would utilize the spies embedded within the imperial palace.

The second was...

‘...We absolutely must not fail.’

Dispatching such individuals, who have a high chance of becoming major figures in the future, on a secret mission meant that failure was not an option – it had to be accomplished no matter what.

Realizing this, Mok Gyeong-un asked them.

“Well then, can you tell us what our mission is now?”

Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, answered while kneeling.

“Allow me to explain the mission. But before that, may I ask how much the rear team members are aware of?”

To that, Seop Chun replied.

“We know it involves infiltrating a certain location to abduct an imprisoned individual and bring them to the Society.”

“You were only told a rough outline.”

“I presume it was to prevent information leaks until we reached the gathering point.”

“It seems so. Then, I will inform you of the mission. First and foremost, our destination is the capital, Kaifeng.”

‘...As expected.’

At his words, Seop Chun nodded.

He had already guessed as much when the gathering point was Annak, Hanam Province, near Kaifeng.

Of course, unlike Seop Chun, Mok Gyeong-un and Mong Mu-yak, who had already been briefed on the exact mission by the Shadow Clan Master and Vice-Leader, showed no particular reaction.

On the other hand...

“Kaifeng? Don’t tell me this mission involves recklessly entering the imperial palace?”

Ja Geum-jeong, the Demon-Subduing monk who had pledged loyalty to Mok Gyeong-un but knew nothing, asked jokingly.

To this, Gan-yang nodded in affirmation.

“That’s correct.”

“What? The imperial palace? So we’re really going to infiltrate the palace?”

“Yes. Our mission is to enter the imperial palace and abduct an individual imprisoned in the underground Golden Jade of the palace.”

‘!?’

At his words, Ja Geum-jeong made a dumbfounded expression.

He was quite surprised to learn they were from the Heaven and Earth Society, but he never expected the mission to be so bold as to infiltrate the imperial palace.

Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue and spoke.

“They’ve completely lost their minds. Doing such a thing will brand us as traitors, no matter what they say about being untouchable.”

Even Ja Geum-jeong, known as a lunatic and one of the Three Lights of Shaolin, considered this an utterly insane act.

The imperial palace wasn’t simply a place where the emperor resided and conducted state affairs.

It was also a place where the power of an entire nation was concentrated.

Attempting to abduct someone from there was beyond unthinkable – it was virtually impossible.

“Traitors? No, they must have a death wish.”

Gan-yang responded to his reaction, finding it absurd.

“Of course, that would be the outcome if we fail. However, we have sufficiently planned the operation, considering numerous variables.”

“Hah, seriously. Never in my life did I expect to hear about robbing the imperial palace.”

Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue again, still seemingly unwilling.

Regardless of his reaction, Mok Gyeong-un asked.

“That’s all well and good, but I assume we’re not just barging into the palace. How are we going to enter, and what’s the plan to abduct that person?”

“The reason we hastily summoned you all to the gathering point is precisely because of the issue of entering the palace. In exactly three days, the Guard Trials will be held.”

“Guard Trials?”

The Guards, or Siwibu[1], are the palace guards.

But what exactly are the Guard Trials?

Puzzled, Gan-yang explained.

“The Guard Trials are essentially a promotion assessment conducted within the Guards.”

“A promotion assessment? What does that have to do with infiltrating the palace?”

“It does. Because if you pass the Guard Trials and get promoted, you’ll be elevated to the Embroidered Uniform Guard.”

“Ah!”

The Embroidered Uniform Guards[2].

Like other Guards, they are also palace guards who protect the imperial palace.

However, there is a crucial difference – the Embroidered Uniform Guard serves as the emperor's personal bodyguards and a special agency.

They even possess extralegal powers as they act on behalf of the emperor to inspect the Six Ministries.

And the Embroidered Uniform Guard manages all the Golden Jade prisons within the imperial palace.

'So that's it.'

Now the picture was clear on how they planned to infiltrate the palace and abduct that person.

Just then, Seop Chun nodded as if understanding but soon furrowed his brows.

"Wait a minute. We're not even members of the Guards, so how are we supposed to take the Guard Trials?"

Yoo-bong answered that question instead of Gan-yang.

"Hohoho. You're perceptive. Of course, we have a plan for that."

"You have a plan?"

"Yes, from now, we will head to Kaifeng and meet a certain esteemed individual. And we will request their assistance."

"Who is this person? Someone with enough authority to get us into the Guards?"

Puzzled, Yoo-bong smiled and replied.

“It’s Her Highness, the Imperial Concubine Seo.”

Chapter 216 – Secret Mission (3)

In the inner court of the imperial palace, there were 87 women donning the robes of concubines.

This meant that there were 87 women who had received the titles of Talented Maiden, Noble Consort, Consort, Imperial Consort, and Noble Imperial Consort.

Among these numerous imperial concubines, there were two consorts who were the most favored by the emperor.

One of them was none other than the Noble Imperial Consort Seo, Seo Yang-hyo.

The emperor’s favor towards her was so immense that despite the presence of the empress’s grown children, the seven-year-old child she bore became the crown prince.

As a result, she became one of the four individuals wielding limitless power within the imperial palace.

Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, spread out four fingers and spoke while folding them one by one.

“If we were to name the four individuals with the greatest power in the current imperial palace, they would be His Majesty the Emperor’s younger brother, Prince Gyeong, the Grand Preceptor who also serves as the Supreme Commander of the Central Overseers among the Three Excellencies, the powerful minister Hang Yoon, His Majesty’s second prince, Prince Jong, who was originally the most likely candidate for the throne, and Noble Imperial Concubine Seo, the mother of the current crown prince.”

He slowly listed them out because Mok Gyeong-un had mentioned being completely unaware of the power dynamics within the imperial palace.

Having spent his time only in the mountains, Mok Gyeong-un had learned a lot through books but was not well-versed in how the martial arts world or the current Central Plains operated.

“So, one of the four most powerful figures in the imperial palace is Noble Imperial Concubine Seo.”

“That’s correct.”

“Then why would such a person help us?”

Mok Gyeong-un raised a question, finding it incomprehensible.

He had heard that the relationship between the imperial palace and the martial arts world had improved significantly, but the non-aggression treaty remained unchanged, and only the righteous sects actively interacted with the palace.

So why would Noble Imperial Concubine Seo, one of the powerful figures in the palace, assist the Heaven and Earth Society, which had even confronted the righteous sects in the past?

As he pondered, Yoo-bong spoke in a quiet voice as if revealing a secret.

“Because we were the ones who supported her from the time she was a noble consort until she became the current Noble Imperial Concubine.”

“The Heaven and Earth Society supported Noble Imperial Concubine Seo?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

‘Hoho.’

It seemed their claim of having a plan was not an empty one.

If Noble Imperial Concubine Seo had received support from the Heaven and Earth Society to reach her current position, it would be difficult for her to simply ignore their request for assistance.

At that moment, the Demon-Subduing monk Ja Geum-jeong, who had been sipping alcohol from a gourd with a dissatisfied expression, spoke up.

“Hmph. She might agree to a reasonable request, but will she really accept a request that could affect her own position?”

“.....”

At his words, none of the advance team members denied it, remaining silent.

Then, Gan-yang spoke.

“The Demon-Subduing monk is right about that. When people reach a high position, they tend to easily forget all the hardships they endured to get there.”

“So there’s a possibility of rejection?”

“We won’t deny that. The current Noble Imperial Concubine Seo is not the same as before. As the mother of the crown prince, she has risen to a position where it’s difficult for us to exert pressure on her.”

When a concubine becomes the mother of the crown prince, the title “Imperial” is added to her existing title of “Noble Consort.”

From that point on, she essentially wields limitless power.

In this regard, the Heaven and Earth Society found it not entirely pleasing that she, whom they had supported for a long time, had reached such a position. In a sense, she had escaped their control.

“It won’t work unless there’s a mutual benefit between both sides.”

“That’s right. That’s why we need to meet Noble Imperial Concubine Seo in advance. Fortunately, with you all joining as the rear team this time, it aligns with her requirements.”

“Requirements? So there have already been discussions?”

Seop Chun asked, puzzled.

To that question, Yoo-bong answered.

“Yes. We can’t abruptly demand that a powerful figure like the Noble Imperial Concubine, who holds the highest position in the inner court, immediately comply with our request.”

“.....Then what are those requirements?”

“She requested that we send properly trained late-stage warriors, just like how the major and minor sects of the righteous faction do.”

At Yoo-bong’s answer, Mong Mu-yak clicked his tongue.

Mok Gyeong-un then asked.

“Why do you do that?”

“She’s not an ordinary woman, indeed.”

“Pardon?”

“Asking the Society to send properly trained late-stage warriors is no different from telling us to move openly in the light, not through spies or from the shadows.”

Seop Chun also expressed his astonishment.

“Ha! Even if she helps, she wants to prevent any situation that could harm her.”

“It seems so.”

In the case of spies, their ties can be cut off if necessary.

But if the Society officially dispatches late-stage warriors, the situation becomes different.

Not only is it difficult to sever ties if a problem arises, but it also leads to a situation where responsibility must be taken.

-What do you think?

Cheong-ryeong asked Mok Gyeong-un.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and said.

-She’s a clever woman.

-It seems so. If we move officially, naturally, the one making the request is the one who needs to be mindful. Moreover, they’ll have to take responsibility if something goes wrong. She’s making sure of that.

-That's not all.

-Not all?

-Yes.

-Her hunger has been satisfied.

-Her hunger has been satisfied?

-Yes.

-Ah, so that's what you meant.

Cheong-ryeong understood what Mok Gyeong-un meant by those words.

A hungry person may say desperate things due to their hunger, but once that hunger is satisfied, the situation changes.

They no longer want to make desperate pleas or have a leash around their neck.

Considering this, it's not a matter of whether she will readily accept the request or not now that she has gained power.

Mok Gyeong-un spoke up.

"She may have been raised by this side, but she's no longer a pawn that can be controlled as desired."

Gan-yang agreed with those words.

“That’s why we need to appease her to some extent while obtaining what we want. That’s the key to this mission.”

At Gan-yang’s remark, Yoo-bong added with a smile.

“But you don’t need to worry too much. Noble Imperial Concubine Seo, whom we have been observing, has not forgotten the help she received from the Society. She simply wants to prevent anything that could negatively impact her and the crown prince, so if we can assure her of that, she will be of great assistance to us.”

Everyone nodded at these words.

In any case, their purpose was not to do something to the imperial palace through Noble Imperial Concubine Seo.

They merely aimed to accomplish the mission assigned by the Society.

As everyone was coming to terms with this, Mok Gyeong-un alternately glanced at Gan-yang and Yoo-bong from the advance team with a peculiar look in his eyes.

However, he didn’t say anything in particular.

Having learned from the advance team how the secret mission would proceed, the rear team, who had not rested at all since arriving here, decided to take a break for about an hour.

Exhausted, Seop Chun fell into a deep sleep, while Mong Mu-yak engaged in meditation.

Ja Geum-jeong spent his time sipping alcohol from a gourd, using the roasted deer meat prepared by the advance team as a snack.

In a quiet place slightly away from the Guan Yu Shrine, Cheong-ryeong, who had come out of the wooden puppet for the first time in a while, was showing something to Mok Gyeong-un while wielding her long pipe.

It was none other than a sword technique.

Watching this, Mok Gyeong-un exclaimed in admiration.

“Ah!”

The sword technique Cheong-ryeong was demonstrating was the Moon Sword Style.

However, the Moon Sword Style had changed.

It had become more refined and flawless compared to the original Moon Sword Style she had taught him.

Moreover, the sword technique had evolved into a set of movements that incorporated much more complex variations, capable of deceiving and pressuring the opponent.

After showcasing the evolved Moon Sword Style, Cheong-ryeong asked.

-What do you think?

“The sword technique has become flawless.”

-Is that all?

“The variations have also increased, making it an even more troublesome sword technique to face.”

At those words, Cheong-ryeong smiled and nodded.

-That’s right. After observing that old man’s sword technique on the ship, I realized what was lacking in the Moon Sword Style. So, I took the opportunity to supplement it.

“Excellent.”

-You memorized everything, right?

“Yes.”

-Then forget the previous one.

“Yes, of course.”

With an improved sword art available, there was no need to remember the flawed one.

Cheong-ryeong put the long pipe in her mouth and spoke while puffing out smoke.

-By the way, you also witnessed that old man’s swordsmanship along with me. Haven’t you realized anything?

“Realization?”

-Yes. Did you not gain any insight after seeing that swordsmanship?

The swordsmanship the old man displayed on the ship was truly shocking.

As a result, Cheong-ryeong observed it and filled the gaps in the Moon Sword Style, refining the sword techniques to evolve it closer to perfection.

Now, she was confident that it could surpass his Heaven Sword Style.

If even she had gained such insights, it would be a lie if this fellow, Mok Gyeong-un, claimed to have realized nothing after witnessing it.

This guy's talent was at a level that even she couldn't fathom.

She was curious about how that swordsmanship had approached him.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un drew his Evil Commandment Sword.

-Sreung!

And with the sword, he assumed a stance she had never seen before.

Puzzled, Cheong-ryeong asked.

-What is that?

The stance Mok Gyeong-un had assumed was neither the old man's nor her Moon Sword Style.

To her question, Mok Gyeong-un replied.

"Originally, the Moon Sword Style required a total of four sword techniques for the first stance. But this time, two more techniques were added, harmonizing six techniques."

At those words, Cheong-ryeong smiled and said.

-Yes. I originally thought four techniques were the most suitable and the limit for a single stance, but that was just my fixed mindset. If more techniques are needed, they can be incorporated to diversify the variations of the stance and compensate for weaknesses.

She considered six techniques to be the most ideal.

The current Moon Sword Style was the result of such refinement.

“Yes. Seeing that, I realized there was no need to be bound by fixed ideas.”

Cheong-ryeong’s eyes sparkled at those words.

-Don’t tell me... you also refined the sword techniques like me?

“No. You know the Moon Sword Style better, so there’s no need for me to refine it.”

-Then what?

“I just pondered what would be the most efficient and ideal sword technique for me.”

-Wait... don’t tell me?

Is this guy saying he created his own sword technique?

Creating a sword technique was by no means a simple task.

It wasn't merely about swinging the sword, but required the harmony of sword techniques to manifest stances, the sword intent to infuse the sword with qi, and the most suitable breathing path to maximize the power of the stances. All three elements had to be in place.

Reaching a level where this was possible was referred to as attaining the realm of a Sword Saint.

'Even I spent years refining the Moon Sword Style with that fellow after overcoming the bottleneck.'

But no matter how impressive the swordsmanship he witnessed was, it was beyond common sense for someone who hadn't even learned martial arts for long to create his own sword technique.

However...

-Seuk!

Mok Gyeong-un slowly began to move the Evil Commandment Sword.

As if drawing strokes with a brush, Mok Gyeong-un executed sword techniques in a completely different trajectory from the Moon Sword Style.

-Chwak!

The first technique was simple.

It was just a horizontal stroke, and the second technique was a vertical stroke.

But as more techniques were added, the variations naturally became more prominent.

The Moon Sword Style consisted of a total of 24 techniques, and originally, four sword techniques were combined for each stance. But now, with a total of 30 techniques, six sword techniques were combined for each stance to further enhance the variations.

-Chwak! Chwahchwahchwak!

The sword techniques displayed by Mok Gyeong-un exceeded ten.

Given the nature of the sword as a weapon, it was natural for thrusting and slashing to be harmonized.

As a result, overlapping techniques were bound to appear.

About half of the sword techniques shown by Mok Gyeong-un resembled those of the Moon Sword Style.

However, at some point, the techniques began to differ.

-Chwahchwahchwak! Chwak! Chwak!

The trajectory of the sword extended to completely unexpected angles.

Witnessing this, Cheong-ryeong couldn't help but feel puzzled.

She got the impression that each and every sword technique Mok Gyeong-un demonstrated did not overlap in trajectory at all.

'There's no need to make them so different.'

It seemed that due to his lack of experience in this area, he was approaching the creation of sword techniques in an overly complicated manner.

With such an approach, the stances would inevitably become difficult as well.

The sword techniques needed to be combined to create stances, but excluding the initial ten techniques, it looked daunting to figure out how to combine the remaining ones.

-Chwak!

“Phew.”

In the end, Mok Gyeong-un had demonstrated a total of 24 sword techniques.

Seeing this, Cheong-ryeong clicked her tongue and said.

-There’s no need to deliberately make the trajectories different. Creating sword techniques like that will ultimately result in overlapping useful techniques, and the rest will be discarded.

“No. I’ll use all of them.”

-You don’t need to be greedy with something like this. Mok Gyeong-un.

“Is that so?”

-Trying to make the trajectories completely non-overlapping is also being trapped in a fixed mindset. If you truly realized something, don’t be bound by it.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

-Are you ignoring my advice again? Tsk tsk.

He’s so stubborn.

Cheong-ryeong thought there was no point in saying more.

If he tried to combine the sword techniques he created like that, he would eventually realize that her words were right.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un assumed the initial stance again.

Then...

“This will be the first stance.”

It was at that very instant.

-Chwahchwahchwahchwahchwahchwak!

Mok Gyeong-un linked the sword techniques and executed a stance.

However, Cheong-ryeong’s eyes trembled wildly as she watched this.

‘What?’

The reason being, she was curious about which techniques he would combine to execute the stance, but the result unfolding from Mok Gyeong-un’s hands completely overturned all her expectations.

Cheong-ryeong was momentarily dumbfounded.

She had naturally assumed that out of the 24 techniques, at most four to six would be combined.

However, the combination of sword techniques Mok Gyeong-un was demonstrating now...

‘He’s harmonizing all twenty-four sword techniques into a single stance?’

It was a combination of techniques that completely defied conventional wisdom.

24 non-overlapping trajectories were unfolding at an incredible speed, forming a single stance.

-Chwahchwahchwahchwahchwahchwahchwahchwak!

It was a sword technique that seamlessly integrated offense and defense without any gaps.

After executing the stance, breath flowed from Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth.

The hand gripping the sword trembled, as executing twenty-four techniques simultaneously had strained his muscles.

‘!!!!!!!’

Witnessing this, Cheong-ryeong was left speechless.

When told not to be bound by fixed notions, he created a stance that defied common sense.

‘This guy... he’s really insane.’

Chapter 217 – Craftsman (1)

A single stance consisting of 24 sword techniques.

Witnessing this, Cheong-ryeong was left speechless.

When told not to be bound by fixed notions, he created a stance that defied common sense.

Throughout her life and even in death, she had thought about the sword for so long, but she had never considered increasing the number of techniques in this manner.

In the first place, it wasn't something that could be achieved simply by increasing the number of techniques.

-You... how...

"Phew. Phew. It seems it will take some time to get used to this."

She was dumbfounded by Mok Gyeong-un's nonchalant attitude.

With each additional sword technique, the number of movements naturally increased, inevitably straining the muscles.

Moreover, if a single stance was like this, performing twenty-four stances was equivalent to not only overexerting the body but pushing it to its limits.

'...What a monstrous fellow.'

This sword technique was not something that could be executed in a short period of time.

It was a sword technique that would be challenging to execute even after several years of training, yet this punk, Mok Gyeong-un, visualized it in his mind and physically manifested it in a single attempt.

Calling it innate talent was an understatement.

Astonished, Cheong-ryeong finally managed to suppress her amazement and asked.

-How did you come up with this?

"I'm not sure. When I saw the swordsmanship of that elder, I noticed that within its simplicity lay complexity. However, I felt that with my current abilities, I wouldn't be able to wield such a sword."

The swordsmanship the old man had demonstrated became increasingly simple.

Yet, within that simplicity, Mok Gyeong-un sensed profound principles.

At this point, Mok Gyeong-un realized that it was not something that could be achieved by merely imprinting it with the eyes and memorizing it.

"In that case, I thought if I were to manifest all the ideal trajectories to thoroughly slay an opponent, wouldn't it become a nearly flawless sword technique?"

-Ha!

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

They had witnessed the old man's swordsmanship together, so how could the results be so different?

No, perhaps it was possible because it was him.

In the first place, since he hadn't learned the sword for long, there were no limits to his imagination.

'I have no choice but to acknowledge it.'

Mok Gyeong-un's sword talent had already surpassed her own.

With him, reaching the pinnacle of swordsmanship that all swordsmen dreamed of might be possible.

Two days later.

The imperial capital, Kaifeng.

Upon arriving in Kaifeng, Mok Gyeong-un's group couldn't help but express their sincere admiration.

They knew it was called the center of the Central Plains and, being the imperial capital, it would naturally be prosperous, but its scale was incomparable to even the outer city of the Heaven and Earth Society, considered the largest among single forces.

The outer city of the imperial capital seemed to stretch endlessly, and even reaching the outer walls, which could be seen in the distance, would likely take more than half an hour by carriage.

As everyone marveled at the city, there was one individual who seemed restless with a darkened expression.

It was the Demon-Subduing monk, Ja Geum-jeong.

Seop Chun asked, puzzled.

"Are you feeling unwell? Your complexion has been poor since yesterday... Wait, are your hands trembling?"

Ja Geum-jeong's hands were even shaking.

Seeing this, Seop Chun expressed concern.

However, Ja Geum-jeong shook his head and said.

“We need to find it... quickly.”

“Find what? Are you looking for a doctor?”

“No. Help me find an inn or a tavern.”

“...”

Seop Chun stared intently at Ja Geum-jeong’s face.

Come to think of it, he had been complaining about running out of alcohol since yesterday afternoon.

So, was he experiencing withdrawal symptoms from not drinking?

“...You’re quite something.”

This level of addiction was almost severe.

No matter how skilled he was, could his liver withstand drinking so much?

Shaking his head, Seop Chun glanced at Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team guiding them.

After entering the city, Yoo-bong, the eunuch of the imperial palace, had left midway.

He said he would go ahead and prepare for the meeting with Noble Imperial Concubine Seo.

The place they were currently heading to was Hong Bong Meat, the largest slaughterhouse in the capital city.

The reason they were heading to the largest slaughterhouse was simple.

[There is a highly skilled craftsman there.]

“It’s huge.”

Mok Gyeong-un remarked upon seeing the slaughterhouse.

Typically, a slaughterhouse is divided into four areas: the cattle and pig pens, the meat storage, the slaughter area, and the vendor stalls.

However, the scale of these four areas was much larger than an ordinary estate.

Pointing to it, Gan-yang from the advance team said.

“There are a thousand cattle and pigs inside. Naturally, it’s operated on this scale.”

“I see.”

“Since this place also supplies meat to the imperial palace, I’ve heard they only handle the highest quality. You’ll understand once we go inside.”

With that, they entered through the main gate of the slaughterhouse.

As they stepped inside, the smell of cattle and pig feces and the stench of blood assaulted their nostrils.

It certainly seemed like a slaughterhouse.

-Buzzing noise!

Inside the main gate, there were vendor stalls with meat sorted by parts, and in front of them, a large crowd of customers had gathered.

“Tsk tsk. There are so many bodhisattvas obsessed with meat.”

Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue and spoke.

Despite being a Demon-Subduing monk, he surprisingly refrained from eating meat even after leaving Shaolin.

Therefore, he seemed displeased with the slaughterhouse.

With a puzzled expression, Seop Chun said to Gan-yang.

“Is there really a ‘craftsman’ in a place like this?”

No matter how he looked at it, this place was too conspicuous.

Even if it’s darkest under the lamp, it was too crowded.

Moreover, if this place supplied meat even to the imperial palace, wouldn’t officials frequently visit here? Could they really carry out such a task?

“That’s correct. So, don’t worry too much.”

“Hmm.”

Seop Chun still seemed dissatisfied.

Just then, among those near the vendor stalls, a hairy man noticed their group carrying weapons, unlike the other customers, and approached them.

“My lords, what brings you here?”

In response to his question, Gan-yang took out a prepared token from his bosom and handed it over.

Then, he casually said.

“We’re here to select some good rind meat. May we take a look?”

Upon receiving the token, the man examined it closely and then revealed his yellow teeth, saying.

“If you’re looking for rind, pork rind is the best when grilled.”

“Pork rind sounds good. We’d like to select the meat to be slaughtered. Is that alright?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? I’ll guide you, so please follow me.”

With that, the hairy man pointed to a pavilion and took the lead to guide them.

However, as Mok Gyeong-un was about to follow behind him, he suddenly paused.

Noticing this, Mong Mu-yak, who was beside him, asked.

“My lord, why are you hesitating?”

“...”

Without answering the question, Mok Gyeong-un turned his head and looked towards the main gate.

-Rumbling noise!

The sound of wheels rolling could be heard.

Soon, the entire main gate opened, and individuals who appeared to be government slaves entered the square, pulling carts.

However, Mok Gyeong-un's gaze was not on them but on the person walking at the very back of the cart procession with his hands behind his back.

He was wearing a blue flying fish robe and a unique patterned mask.

Behind him, four individuals wearing navy blue flying fish robes with their faces covered in cotton cloth were also following.

They seemed to be officials, but all of them...

“They have cultivated martial arts.”

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Mong Mu-yak frowned and said.

“My lord, please turn your head and enter inside for now.”

At Mong Mu-yak's urging, Mok Gyeong-un turned his head and followed the group beyond the pavilion.

As they moved away from the square, Mong Mu-yak spoke in a low voice.

“What a coincidence.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The officials in flying fish robes earlier are from the Embroidered Uniform Guards.”

“The Embroidered Uniform Guards?”

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes sparkled with interest.

He seemed to understand why Mong Mu-yak called it a coincidence.

The identity they were trying to infiltrate for their secret mission was none other than the Embroidered Uniform Guards, so who would have thought they would encounter them by chance in a place like this?

Mong Mu-yak clicked his tongue and said.

“Yes, the Embroidered Uniform Guards.”

“...Aren’t the Embroidered Uniform Guards the imperial palace guards?”

“That’s right. It’s strange. Not even the Guard troops, but the Embroidered Uniform Guards in a place like this...”

“What? The Embroidered Uniform Guards?”

Seop Chun, who was walking ahead, interjected with a frown.

Mong Mu-yak then said.

“Shh. Be quiet. Right now, in the vendor square of the slaughterhouse, the Embroidered Uniform Guards...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Gan-yang whispered.

“You don’t need to concern yourselves too much. The Embroidered Uniform Guards personally inspects the meat that enters the inner palace since it’s used for the meals of the imperial family.”

“Ah...”

Handling food ingredients might seem trivial, but it wasn’t.

Food ingredients and medicinal herbs were not only consumed by palace residents and officials but also by the imperial family and even the emperor, so the imperial palace paid the utmost attention to their inspection.

Assassination attempts through food ingredients and medicinal herbs had been carried out since ancient times, making it particularly important.

“I see. But do most of the Embroidered Uniform Guards cultivate martial arts?”

“Yes. Since the Embroidered Uniform Guards are under the direct command of the emperor, I’ve heard that each of their martial arts is at least first-rate or above. Among those in high positions, there are quite a few who would be considered experts even in the martial arts world.”

“What is the rank of the one wearing a blue official robe with a golden belt depicted with flying fish?”

In response to that question, Gan-yang asked back with a somewhat surprised expression.

“Did you say a blue official robe with a golden belt?”

“Yes.”

“A blue official robe with a golden belt indicates a Thousand-men Commander, a 5th-rank senior Embroidered Uniform Guards. With that rank, he must be a significant figure even within the Embroidered Uniform Guards.”

The organizational structure of the Embroidered Uniform Guards’s executive ranks is as follows:

Lesser Banner, Sogi (Junior 7th rank); Chief Banner, Chonggi (Senior 7th rank); Probationary 100-men Commander, Sibaekho (Junior 6th rank); One Hundred-men Commander, Baekho (Senior 6th rank); Deputy Thousand-men Commander, Bucheonho (Junior 5th rank); Thousand-men Commander, Cheonho (Senior 5th rank); Pacification Commissioner, Yukcheonho (Junior 4th rank); and Assistant Commander-in-Chief, Jinmusa (Senior 4th rank).

[TL/N: Read more notes on the rankings after this chapter]

“If he’s a significant figure, how skilled is he?”

In response to Seop Chun’s question, Gan-yang stroked his beard and replied.

“A Thousand-men Commander (Cheonho) of the 5th rank senior in the Embroidered Uniform Guards would be an expert who has at least reached the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm.”

“‘At least’? The imperial palace’s Embroidered Uniform Guards is no ordinary force.”

“Yes. Since they have been exchanging with the righteous sects and recruiting many experts, their level has become much higher than before.”

At Gan-yang's words, Seop Chun grinned and said.

"Hahaha. Still, if the level of a Thousand-men Commander is that high, if this friend or I join the Embroidered Uniform Guards, we would receive a rank of at least Pacification Commissioner or above."

Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak were among the Five Tigers, the highest-level pinnacle-stage Transformation Realm warriors of the Heaven and Earth Society.

With their martial arts approaching that of the executives, they were confident they could receive high ranks in the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

At Seop Chun's confidence, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head and said.

"I wonder about that."

"Pardon? Why do you say that?"

"That Thousand-men Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guards we saw earlier, the one with the mask..."

"What about the Embroidered Uniform Guards?"

Just as Mok Gyeong-un was about to say something, he shook his head and said.

"Never mind."

Suddenly stopping mid-sentence, Seop Chun couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"Let's go for now."

“ ... ”

He wanted to ask what Mok Gyeong-un was trying to say, but given his personality, it seemed unlikely he would answer.

Curious, Cheong-ryeong asked.

-What were you trying to tell him?

-That masked Thousand-men Commander from earlier... he had sealed some of his qi points.

-Sealed his qi points?

-Yes.

Mok Gyeong-un could see the general flow of qi with his naked eyes without opening the power of the Third Eye in his right eye.

In Mok Gyeong-un's eyes, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guards Thousand-men Commander had sealed three major qi points.

So, based on the qi emanating from him, his level seemed to be at the pinnacle stage of Peak Realm, but...

-If he unseals them, I don't think Seop Chun would be a match for him.

-Was he that skilled?

-Yes.

For some unknown reason, that person was sealing his own qi points to conceal his true abilities.

Mok Gyeong-un was about to mention this but decided not to, as the conversation would have become lengthy.

-But there was one more unusual thing.

-What is it?

-Through the gaps in the mask, I noticed that person's eyes were blue.

‘!?’

Jinyiwei, or Embroidered Uniform Guards ranking (From Highest to Lowest)

(Zhǐhuīshǐ) – Commander-in-Chief: The highest-ranking official in the Jinyiwei, responsible for overseeing all operations and reporting directly to the emperor.

(Zhǐhuī Tóngzhǐ) – Vice Commander-in-Chief: Assisted the Commander-in-Chief in managing the Jinyiwei and assumed command in their absence.

(Zhǐhuī Qiānshǐ) – Assistant Commander-in-Chief: Aided the Commander-in-Chief and Vice Commander-in-Chief in their duties and handled specific tasks as assigned.

(Zhènfǔshǐ) – Pacification Commissioner: Responsible for maintaining order and suppressing rebellions in the provinces.

(Qiānhù) – Chiliarch: Commanded a unit of approximately 1,000 men.

(Fù Qiānhù) – Deputy Chiliarch: Assisted the Chiliarch in commanding the unit.

(Bǎihù) – Centurion: Commanded a unit of approximately 100 men.

(Shì Bǎihù) – Probationary Centurion: A trainee or candidate for the position of Centurion.

(Zǒngqí) – Chief Banner: Commanded a banner, which was a military unit that varied in size.

(Xiǎoqí) – Lesser Banner: Assisted the Chief Banner in commanding the unit.

(Jiāngjun) – General: A high-ranking military officer responsible for leading large formations of troops.

(Jiàowèi) – Captain: Commanded smaller units within the Jinyiwei.

(Lìshì) – Strongman: Physically strong individuals who served as bodyguards or enforcers.

(Cān Mǒumǒu Shì) – Participant in Certain Affairs: Officials assigned to specific tasks or investigations.

(Xiàolǐng) – Drill Master: Responsible for training and drilling the troops.

Chapter 218 – Craftsman (2)

-Through the gaps in the mask, I noticed that person's eyes were blue.

-What? Blue eyes?

Blue eyes.

It refers to someone with blue irises while also signifying a person from the Western Regions.

People from the Western Regions live to the west of the Central Plains.

Although there was a considerable distance between the vendor stalls in the square and the pavilion at the back behind the main gate, Mok Gyeong-un, who had reached the Transformation Realm and possessed more developed senses than ordinary people, noticed the blue eyes showing through the gaps in the mask.

-Are you certain?

-The eye area of the mask protrudes, so it was dark inside and not very visible, but my eyes could see it.

-Hmm. That's quite peculiar. This isn't Tibet or Xinjiang, so it's strange to have someone from the Western Regions as an imperial official.

This was more than just a rare occurrence.

Although there had been much openness and exchange with martial artists recently, the imperial palace was still more closed-off and conservative than any other group.

This was because the Han people prided themselves as the center of the Central Plains in this nation.

They even arrested all those associated with the Baihua Religion, which originated from the Western Regions, accusing them of deceiving the world and the people, and exterminated their families.

In the imperial palace of such a nation, employing someone from the Western Regions as an official, not even a slave, was quite extraordinary.

-There must be a reason for it.

-That's a carefree response. But the mere fact that someone from the Western Regions who has cultivated martial arts is in the imperial palace's Embroidered Uniform Guards warrants caution. Try not to get entangled with them.

-I'll keep that in mind.

In any case, their purpose here was singular.

It was to abduct Fire Faith Order Holy Guardian, who was said to be imprisoned in the underground Golden Jade of the imperial palace.

Regardless of their background or motives, it had nothing to do with him.

As they followed the hairy man's guidance, pig pens emitting a strong odor of livestock feces came into view.

The squealing sounds were deafening.

The hairy man led them inside the pens without stopping.

At this, the Demon-Subduing monk Ja Geum-jeong muttered with a frown.

"Don't tell me we're really here to slaughter pigs?"

Mong Mu-yak shook his head and said to him.

"If you don't know anything, just follow along."

"So you're telling me to keep my mouth shut? Hmph."

“Tsk tsk.”

Mong Mu-yak clicked his tongue in displeasure.

As they walked through the pens, the hairy man stopped at an empty pen.

He then used a fork to push aside the pile of straw there.

Underneath, there was a wooden entrance.

The hairy man grabbed the rusty shackle on the entrance and pulled.

-Screech!

As the door opened, stairs leading underground were revealed.

Seeing this, Seop Chun remarked with admiration.

“They sure made a place like this.”

Who would have imagined a secret underground passage hidden inside a pig pen filled with the stench of feces?

The hairy man grinned and pointed downwards with his thumb.

“Follow me.”

With that, they descended the stairs.

After descending to a depth equivalent to two floors, a cavity about ten-feet wide came into view.

Inside the cavity, which was lit by lanterns, there were various tools and a workspace.

The hairy man pointed to a reception chair on one side of the workshop and said.

“The craftsman will be here soon, so please wait a moment...”

-Tatatatak!

Before he could finish his sentence, someone hurriedly descended the stairs and rushed towards the hairy man.

Judging by the blood-stained leather apron he was wearing, he seemed to be a worker from the slaughterhouse.

“Brother Song, a word with you.”

At his words, the hairy man asked for Mok Gyeong-un’s group’s understanding.

“Please wait a moment.”

Gan-yang nodded, indicating not to mind it.

The worker and the hairy man then moved a short distance away from them and engaged in a whispered conversation.

Although they spoke in low voices, Mok Gyeong-un, whose hearing had become more developed as his martial arts improved, could hear their conversation clearly.

“We’re in trouble.”

“What’s the trouble?”

“The person who requested the production last time seems to have been an official.”

“What?”

“So we need to have these people wait for a while.”

At their whispers, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

It seemed they had encountered some problem.

Just then, the hairy man approached them, bowed his head in apology, and said.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, but could you please wait here for a moment? The craftsman may be a little late due to an urgent delivery.”

“Why would that be a problem? We’ll wait then.”

Gan-yang spoke in an understanding tone.

In any case, they were in the position of making a request, so they couldn’t complain.

As the slaughterhouse workers who had asked for their understanding went outside, Gan-yang glanced at Mok Gyeong-un and the rear team and said.

“It won’t take long.”

At this, the Demon-Subduing monk Ja Geum-jeong interjected.

“Who knows? Will it really be so?”

“Pardon?”

“I heard those guys talking earlier about some officials. Didn’t you hear?”

It seemed Ja Geum-jeong had also overheard their conversation.

Gan-yang asked back.

“Officials?”

“Yeah. The lord mentioned seeing the Embroidered Uniform Guards earlier. Isn’t that who they were referring to?”

At his words, Gan-yang stroked his chin, looking troubled.

The Embroidered Uniform Guards had simply come to inspect the meat to be delivered to the imperial palace and take it.

But he couldn’t fathom what this was about.

Seop Chun said to him.

“If something happens to the craftsman, won’t it hinder our mission?”

“That’s...”

“Didn’t you say this person is the only one who can create the human skin masks within the time frame?”

“...That’s right.”

The purpose of their visit was to commission the creation of human skin masks.

Human skin masks refer to leather masks made using human skin or pig hide that are indistinguishable from real human faces.

The owner of Hong Bong Meat here was known for slaughtering livestock on the surface, but in the underworld, he had a high reputation for crafting extremely sophisticated human skin masks.

Of course, not many in the martial arts world were aware of this.

“But even so, as the Demon-Subduing monk said, if those officials are from the Embroidered Uniform Guards, it’s best for us not to intervene.”

“What a coincidence on this day of all days. Dammit!”

It was truly an uncanny coincidence.

Since they needed to infiltrate the Embroidered Uniform Guards, it was best not to cause friction with them right away.

If they stirred up trouble and it affected the Guard Trials, everything would be for naught.

“Let’s wait for now. It’s not like we have an alternative plan.”

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, everyone nodded in agreement.

About an hour passed.

Just then, the sound of the secret underground door opening came from above, and someone descended.

They thought it might be the craftsman, but it wasn't.

The one who came down was the hairy man who had guided them.

However, unlike before, the hairy man's complexion and expression didn't look good.

Gan-yang spoke.

"Is the craftsman not here yet?"

"I apologize for the wait, but I'm afraid I have even more regrettable news for you."

"What do you mean?"

"The craftsman is currently unable to accept any requests."

"Unable to accept requests?"

Gan-yang raised his voice.

The hairy man then bowed his head and spoke in a groveling tone.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot disclose the circumstances. So, I kindly ask the guests to please leave.”

“What? You’re telling us to leave now?”

Gan-yang looked dumbfounded and abruptly stood up from his seat.

Startled, the hairy man flinched and took half a step back.

Gan-yang pressed him.

“Are you violating the rule of accepting requests from those who bring the token? Moreover, didn’t we wait here despite arriving first, considering your circumstances?”

“Ah, I’m aware of that. However, we truly cannot accept any requests at the moment. Even if you threaten my life...”

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un spoke up.

“I smell blood.”

‘!?’

At his words, everyone looked at him in surprise.

Mok Gyeong-un pointed at the hairy man’s hand with his index finger and said.

“That hand.”

The hairy man furrowed his brows at those words.

What was he saying about smelling blood from this distance? He wasn't a dog or anything.

The hairy man waved his hands and said.

“Naturally, there's the smell of blood since our job is slaughtering...”

“No. It's not the smell of cattle or pig blood but human blood.”

“Th-that's...”

“It's not just that. Judging by the scent of dried purple orchids and large knotweed mixed with the blood, it seems you hastily applied a hemostatic.”

At these words, the hairy man's eyes widened.

He was already skeptical when Mok Gyeong-un mentioned the smell of blood, but now he was mentioning purple orchids and large knotweed, leaving him perplexed.

Both herbs were hemostatics used in slaughterhouses.

Occasionally, cuts occurred during the slaughter work, and those herbs were used at such times.

But he had smelled it even though it was mixed with the scent of blood?

The startled hairy man spoke in a trembling voice.

“...How did you know that?”

“Ah. I’ve studied herbs a little.”

‘A little?’

At those words, everyone looked at Mok Gyeong-un with surprise.

Was it possible to do this by simply studying herbs a little?

Even in this underground room, the smell of leather and metal was mixed, making it difficult to detect other scents.

Yet, Mok Gyeong-un had distinguished the scent of blood and herbs from the hairy man’s hand, which was astonishing.

Just then, the hairy man suddenly approached Mok Gyeong-un, knelt down, and said.

“D-Do you perhaps know medicine as well?”

“Medicine?”

As Mok Gyeong-un asked back, the hairy man, who had even lowered his head, pleaded in a desperate voice.

“Please help us!”

A building located between the pig and cattle pens.

“Ugh...”

Inside a room in the building, a middle-aged man in his fifties wearing a shaggy leather outfit was suffering in agony with a pale face.

That was because both of his wrists had been severed.

The slaughterhouse workers beside him had tightly wrapped cloth above his severed wrists to stop the bleeding, but the blood didn't seem to clot easily.

One of the workers said to the man, who was in pain.

“Master, please endure a little longer. The doctor will arrive soon.”

“Haa... haa... but... my daughter...”

“Young master Mo has gone to bring the young miss back immediately.”

“Hurry and bring my daughter first... ugh.”

“Please calm down. It will be serious if you continue like this.”

The workers tried to dissuade him as he attempted to get up despite his agony from his severed wrists.

Just then, the door opened, and six men, led by the hairy man, rushed into the room.

They were Mok Gyeong-un's group.

One of the workers abruptly stood up and shouted.

“No, Brother Song. What is the meaning of this? Why did you bring the guests here?”

The hairy man pointed to the middle-aged man, who was referred to as the master, and said to Mok Gyeong-un.

“The master’s severed wrists are not clotting. We have called for a doctor, but something might happen before then. Please help us.”

“Wait, what is going on here?”

Gan-yang was dumbfounded as he witnessed this.

What on earth had happened for the master’s arms to be severed like that?

Seeing this, Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak simultaneously looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

That was because, although they didn’t know the details, Mok Gyeong-un had previously used his techniques to reattach Mong Mu-yak’s severed arm.

So they glanced at him with a glimmer of hope.

-Step step!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un approached the master.

The workers beside him tried to block the way with a guarded look in their eyes.

The hairy man, called Brother Song, scolded them.

“Don’t interfere! He’s here to help.”

At those words, the hesitant workers stepped aside.

Mok Gyeong-un then approached the suffering master and quickly pressed the acupuncture points on both of his arms.

-Tatatatak!

As he pressed the hemostatic points, the blood seeping from the cloth-wrapped severed area noticeably stopped.

The master, who had been in agony, looked at Mok Gyeong-un with a surprised expression.

“Haa... haa... who... are you?”

“Let’s talk about that later. Where are the severed hands?”

Mok Gyeong-un looked around and asked.

That was because he couldn’t see the master’s severed hands.

Instead of the master, one of the workers beside him slammed the table and spoke in an angry voice.

-Bang!

“Those bastards took the master’s severed hands wrapped in leather.”

“They took the severed hands?”

Mok Gyeong-un showed a troubled expression at those words.

Just then, the master, who seemed to be able to endure a bit after the bleeding had stopped, spoke with difficulty.

“G-Guests, I don’t know who you are, but please leave. I’m in no condition to accept any requests or help anyone...”

“Who are the ones that took the severed hands?”

“What’s the point of asking that...”

“If you want to save your hands, it’s best to tell me.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, the master and the workers showed incomprehensible expressions.

How could they possibly save the already severed hands?

As they were puzzled, the hairy man, referred to as Brother Song, spoke to Mok Gyeong-un with a troubled look.

“The ones who severed the master’s hands and took them away are from the Embroidered Uniform Guards. I apologize, but even if you follow them, you won’t be able to retrieve the hands.”

“Damn it!”

Seop Chun cursed at the hairy man’s words.

As he suspected, it was the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

If the Embroidered Uniform Guards, the imperial palace guards, had severed the hands of the master, no, the craftsman who was supposed to make the human skin masks, there was no way to do anything about it right away.

Just then, Mok Gyeong-un turned around.

“My lord?”

Mong Mu-yak called out to him in confusion.

Mok Gyeong-un shook his head and said.

“There’s no other way. I’ll be back soon, so please wait here.”

“Pardon? But my lord...”

-Swish!

Before he could finish his sentence, Mok Gyeong-un’s figure dispersed like smoke and disappeared from their sight.

The master and the workers’ eyes widened at the sight.

Although Hong Bong Meat was a large-scale slaughterhouse, it was located on the southwestern outskirts of the city due to the nature of slaughter work.

The outskirts were surrounded by forests, making it relatively less frequented by people.

-Rumble rumble!

A procession of carts loaded with meat was proceeding there, and at the very back, there was a carriage and four Embroidered Uniform Guards in navy blue flying fish robes riding horses side by side as if escorting it.

Among them, an Embroidered Uniform Guards with droopy eyebrows riding on the right side clicked his tongue and said.

“What a foolish wench.”

The Embroidered Uniform Guards with a beard riding next to him said.

“Indeed. No matter how much they are her father’s hands, it’s quite daring of her to chase after us and make a fuss.”

“She has no sense.”

“Understandable. What child wouldn’t be distraught over their parent’s plight?”

“Well, that’s true.”

“But I wonder how the Thousand-men Commander will deal with that wench. His Excellency personally ordered us to bring the severed hands, so it’s unlikely he’ll return them.”

As he spoke, the bearded Embroidered Uniform Guards glanced at the carriage.

Inside that carriage were the Thousand-men Commander and that wench.

Just then...

The carriage that had been following the cart procession suddenly came to a halt.

“Huh?”

Wondering what was happening, the Embroidered Uniform Guards steered their horses to the side to look at the front of the cart procession.

There, someone with their face covered in black cloth stood with their hands behind their back.

The Embroidered Uniform Guards with droopy eyebrows, dumbfounded, rode his horse to the front of the cart procession, drew his sword, and shouted.

-Sreung!

“Who dares to block the way of the procession?”

In response to his shout, the person with the covered face chuckled and said.

“How foolish of you.”

“What?”

“If I were going to tell you, why would I have covered my face?”

“You insolent bastard!”

-Pat!

Enraged, the Embroidered Uniform Guards with droopy eyebrows immediately leaped off his horse and swung his sword with fierce momentum towards the person with the covered face.

However...

-Clang!

His blade was blocked by the index finger of the person with the covered face.

Having his blade blocked by a mere finger, the Embroidered Uniform Guards with droopy eyebrows was so surprised that he couldn't hide his bewilderment.

‘A-An expert!’

Chapter 219 – Craftsman (3)

Everyone was baffled by Mok Gyeong-un's sudden disappearance.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un's group, consisting of the advance and rear teams, were amazed in a different sense, knowing that he had utilized an incredibly fast lightness skill.

Then, Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, spoke softly to Mong Mu-yak and Seop Chun from the rear team with a troubled expression.

“Shouldn't we have stopped Young Master Mok?”

“Stop him? How could we have done that?”

He had vanished before they could even say anything.

How were they supposed to stop him?

“If there’s friction with the Embroidered Uniform Guards now that the mask production has already gone awry, it could further disrupt our plan.”

Gan-yang thought the human skin mask production was already a lost cause since the master’s arms had been severed.

If they clashed with the Embroidered Uniform Guard under such circumstances, it could make infiltrating the imperial palace even more difficult.

At his words, Seop Chun spoke as if telling him not to worry.

“Just wait and see. Our lord is not someone who lacks judgment. And as for the mask production...”

Seop Chun hesitated, unsure how to phrase it.

He was about to say that if their lord, Mok Gyeong-un, could find the master’s severed hands, he could reattach them with his mysterious medical techniques, but he wasn’t sure if they would easily believe it.

After all, it was hard to believe that severed arms could be reattached.

Just then, someone suddenly rushed into the room, panting heavily.

“Gasp! It’s... it’s a big problem.”

“Brother Mo!”

The hairy man recognized him and called him Brother Mo.

Brother Mo then spoke to the slaughterhouse workers with a tearful voice, as if apologizing.

“Miss... Miss Song-ah has been arrested by the Embroidered Uniform Guard for obstructing official duties.”

“Wh-what? Obstructing official duties?”

“No, Mr. Mo, you just watched it happen?”

Shocked by the sudden news, the slaughterhouse workers were perplexed and outraged.

At that moment...

“These damn bastards!”

-Pak!

The hairy man, with an enraged face, pulled out a slaughter knife hanging on the room’s wall.

He seemed ready to rush outside at any moment.

Just then, someone scolded him.

“Stop right there!”

The hairy man, who was about to run out, frowned and stopped in his tracks.

The one who stopped him was none other than the master.

The master spoke with difficulty as he struggled to get up.

“Haa... haa... What do you think you can accomplish by getting involved?”

“But Young Miss Song-ah...”

“Do you want to make matters worse?”

The master, who had reprimanded him, then looked at Seop Chun and his group and spoke.

“Haa... haa... You’re martial artists, right?”

At his words, Gan-yang, the leader of the advance team, nodded and replied.

“That’s correct. But Master... You’re bleeding heavily, so don’t strain yourself and sit down for now...”

-Thud!

Before he could finish his sentence, the master knelt on the floor.

“M-Master!”

“Why are you...”

The slaughterhouse workers became restless at his action.

Nevertheless, the master ignored them and said what he wanted to say.

“Haa... haa... I’m... fine. But I have a request for you.”

“A request?”

“Please help us.”

Gan-yang was troubled by his plea.

It was already a difficult situation with Mok Gyeong-un acting on his own, and if they also clashed with the Embroidered Uniform Guard, it could seriously hinder their mission.

“Master... I understand your desire to save your daughter, but...”

“Haa... haa... That child... cough cough... is not my daughter.”

“What?”

Didn’t everyone refer to her as the young miss?

If so, she should be the master’s daughter, but what does he mean by that?

Just then, the hairy man, who had been gripping the handle of the slaughter knife, also knelt on the floor like the master.

“Please help us.”

“Brother Song!”

Surprised by his sudden action, the slaughterhouse workers tried to dissuade him.

At that moment, the Demon-Subduing monk Ja Geum-jeong alternately glanced at the master and the hairy man called Brother Song, then burst into laughter.

“Hahahahaha. Now I get it.”

-Clang!

The Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows couldn't hide his bewilderment.

‘This guy... is an expert!’

The Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows was a One Hundred-men Commander of the senior 6th rank, an expert at the entry-stage of the Peak Realm.

If someone could block his sword strike, infused with his 7-star martial power, with a mere finger, it meant that the martial prowess of this unknown expert with a covered face far surpassed his own.

‘With an expert of this level, the four of us need to attack together, or the Thousand-men Commander needs to step in.’

-Pat!

Realizing he couldn't handle it alone, the Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows hastily distanced himself and raised one hand behind his back, sending a hand signal to the other Embroidered Uniform Guards for help, and spoke.

“Who are you to interfere with our Embroidered Uniform Guard's affairs?”

He deliberately emphasized their identity as the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Among the people of the Central Plains, there was no one who didn't know that the Embroidered Uniform Guard were the emperor's personal guards.

He did so to instill a sense of caution in his opponent.

No matter how skilled in martial arts, he wanted to convey how dangerous it was to provoke them.

In response to his words, the person with the covered face, no, Mok Gyeong-un, whose face was covered with a black cloth, chuckled and said.

“Oh? So you're from the Embroidered Uniform Guard?”

The Embroidered Uniform Guard frowned at Mok Gyeong-un's tone, as if he was pretending not to know.

Was he doing this on purpose?

It made no sense for him to not know they were from the Embroidered Uniform Guard after seeing their golden belts and flying fish robes.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard then spoke.

“If you truly didn't know, stop right here and back off. Then we won't question your circumstances or accuse you of any crimes...”

Before he could finish his sentence...

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un instantly closed the distance, appearing right in front of him.

“Gasp!”

Startled, he swung his sword behind him, trying to propel his body backward, but Mok Gyeong-un struck the acupuncture points of the Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows at lightning speed.

-Tatatatak!

The Embroidered Uniform Guard, whose acupuncture points had been struck, closed his eyes and immediately fell unconscious.

-Thud!

Witnessing this, the other Embroidered Uniform Guards, who had dismounted from their horses to help the Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows and were stealthily approaching, couldn't hide their bewilderment.

One of them hurriedly tried to shout towards the carriage.

“Comman—...”

-Pak!

Mok Gyeong-un then grabbed the neck of the Embroidered Uniform Guard with droopy eyebrows as if he would break it and wiggled his index finger from side to side at the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

It was clear to anyone that if they shouted, he would snap their comrade's neck.

‘H-He’s taking a hostage?’

The Embroidered Uniform Guards, whose comrade had been taken hostage, stopped shouting and hesitated, unsure of what to do.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un’s figure dispersed like smoke.

-Swish!

‘B-Body Displacement Technique?’

Body Displacement Technique.

It is a phenomenon where one moves so fast that their figure appears as an afterimage.

The startled Embroidered Uniform Guards tried to turn their backs to each other and assume a defensive stance.

However, before they could even turn around, one of them, the Embroidered Uniform Guard with a beard, was struck on the chin.

-Bam!

“Ugh!”

His head jerked upward, and then his eyes rolled back as he collapsed to the ground.

-Thud!

‘N-No way!’

With another comrade taken down in an instant, the remaining two Embroidered Uniform Guards, startled, pressed their backs tightly against each other and frantically darted their eyes in all directions with extreme tension.

However, not even Mok Gyeong-un’s shadow entered their sight.

Their complexions gradually darkened under the suffocating tension.

The name of the woman with thick eyebrows, freckles, and braided hair was Song-ah.

She was the daughter of Hong Bong Meat’s master and also the head maid in charge of the slaughterhouse’s inner workings.

Song-ah, whose mouth was gagged with a thick cloth, glared at the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard sitting with his arms crossed in front of her.

She had desperately chased after the Embroidered Uniform Guards to demand her father’s severed hands, but now she found herself bound and confined inside the carriage.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard spoke to her.

“Have you calmed down a bit?”

It was a heavy, baritone voice.

Judging by his voice, he seemed like someone who wouldn’t speak much.

Song-ah stared intently at the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard for a moment, then finally nodded.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard then removed the cloth that had been gagging her mouth.

“Puhaa... haa... haa...”

She let out rough breaths, as if she had been suffocating.

After catching her breath, she glared at the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard again and spoke.

“Is the great Embroidered Uniform Guard not only taking my father’s hands but now kidnapping me as well?”

“...”

“Where are you trying to take me?”

While most women would have been frightened after being arrested by the Embroidered Uniform Guard, she boldly confronted him.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had been staring at her, opened his mouth.

“Watch your words. You were the one who followed the procession and caused a commotion.”

“A commotion? Is it a commotion to try and stop you from taking my father’s hands like some trophy after severing them, even though he accepted the request from your esteemed superior?”

“Be quiet and lower your voice.”

“I won’t lower it!”

“Do you want to be gagged again?”

“Go ahead and do it. I’ll continue causing that so-called commotion until you return my father’s hands! Kyaaaaa...”

-Tatatap!

As Song-ah tried to scream, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pressed her mute acupuncture point.

He then sighed and shook his head.

She was not just bold but incredibly foolish.

“Mmph!”

Even with her mute acupuncture point pressed, she struggled with all her might to make a sound.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, watching her, spoke.

“You’re persistent.”

“Mmph!”

“But don’t overdo it.”

“Mmph!”

“You came to retrieve your father’s severed hands? Your filial piety seems admirable, but it’s excessive.”

“...”

At his words, Song-ah, who had been putting in effort to make a sound, stopped and glared at the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard then picked up a leather pouch from the floor and held it up to Song-ah.

He then pushed it towards her and said.

“If you had made a reasonable commotion and left, it would have looked plausible, but why did you go to such lengths to retrieve this?”

“...”

“Strictly speaking, these aren’t even your master’s hands, are they?”

At those words, Song-ah’s eyes trembled slightly.

Seeing her somewhat subdued attitude, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard released the mute acupuncture point that had been blocked.

-Tatatatak!

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard then said to Song-ah.

“I’ve enclosed this space with true qi, blocking the sound between the inside and outside of the carriage. Shouting won’t do any good, so confess the truth.”

At his words, Song-ah tightly shut her mouth.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard shook his head and spoke.

“I see. It would be troublesome for you to reveal the truth here. But you’ve already been caught.”

“...What have you caught?”

In response to her question, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard set the leather pouch on the floor and replied.

“These aren’t the real master’s hands, are they?”

“What are you talking about? You severed my father’s hands and now claim they’re not the real master’s hands...”

“For the hands of someone who creates human skin masks, the distribution of calluses seemed consistent.”

“What does that mean?”

“From what I know, the process of creating human skin masks is more difficult than one might think, and the craftsman’s hands are unlikely to remain intact due to the glue and various chemicals used. However, the owner of these hands is no different from someone who has only done slaughter work their entire life.”

“...”

At these words, Song-ah's expression hardened even more.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, further convinced by her reaction, continued.

“Perhaps the master whose hands were severed is a fake. I didn't think you would easily expose the real craftsman to others.”

Speechless at the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard's piercing speculation, Song-ah, who had been keeping her mouth shut, finally swallowed her saliva and spoke.

“No. That person is really...”

“If I were to turn the carriage around right now, go back to Hong Bong Meat, and raid the place, would you confess the truth?”

“...”

-Grip!

At his threat, which wasn't really a threat, she bit her lip tightly.

She wanted to deceive him, but he was not someone she could deceive.

In the end, she confessed the truth.

“...You're right. That person is not the real master.”

“Finally, we're getting somewhere.”

At those words, Song-ah snorted and spoke with a sneer.

“Then, of course, you must have also figured out that I’m not his real daughter...”

“Of course, you’re not his daughter, but you’re not a fake either.”

“What?”

“Your hands.”

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pointed to her hands with a nod.

The skin on her palms was peeled, and calluses were so prevalent that it was difficult to find a properly intact area.

Because of this, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard was convinced that she was the real craftsman’s daughter.

‘Damn it.’

Realizing that she could no longer deceive him, Song-ah could only grit her teeth and glare at him, unable to do anything else.

“So what are you going to do with me? Will you use me as a hostage to find the real one?”

“Is that what you wish for?”

“Then I’ll bite my tongue and die right here.”

“Willing to give up your life for your father...”

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pondered her words, then chuckled and spoke.

“If I truly intended to use you as a hostage, do you think there would be a reason for us to have this conversation?”

“...What do you mean by that?”

She asked, puzzled.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard lowered his voice cautiously, even though he had said he blocked the sound between the inside and outside of the carriage, and spoke.

“I had no choice but to sever the fake master’s wrists due to orders, but I wouldn’t have done so if he were the real one.”

“What?”

“I’m saying I had no intention of making an enemy of your father, the real craftsman.”

At the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard’s words, she frowned.

Was he testing her?

She couldn’t adapt to his suddenly changed attitude.

“Do you think I’ll believe your words?”

“Of course, you won’t believe me. But I have my circumstances where I have no choice but to obey someone’s orders. Of course, I won’t ask you to understand this.”

“...Even if you have such circumstances, I can't trust you.”

“I know. But if it were a lie, having this conversation would be meaningless, as I said before.”

At these words, Song-ah became increasingly confused.

Was this man's true intention what he was showing now?

To her, who couldn't escape her doubts, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard said.

“I will release you soon

“What? You're releasing me?”

“That's right.”

“Why?”

“Didn't I say I have no intention of making an enemy of you or your father, the craftsman?”

“...”

“I won't force you to trust me. Once I release you, take your real father and leave Gaebong within four days. It may not be immediate, but if someone has a keen eye, they will eventually notice these hands. However, I will buy you time for four days.”

“Why... why are you trying to help us?”

Song-ah asked, not understanding his intention to show her goodwill.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard replied in a low voice.

“It’s not for nothing. I also need help.”

“Help?”

“Yes.”

“Help, could it be...”

“Bring me a human skin mask.”

“A human skin mask?”

“That’s right.”

“What kind of...”

“It’s simple. Just recreate the same human skin mask that was requested before.”

At his request, Song-ah asked, puzzled.

“Why are you asking me to make the human skin mask again?”

“I have no obligation to tell you that. It’s a mutually beneficial condition, so just make the same human skin mask. Can you...”

-Flinch!

At that moment, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard stopped mid-sentence.

“What’s wrong?”

“...The carriage has stopped.”

He had blocked the sound between the inside and outside of the carriage with true qi, so he couldn’t hear the outside.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t feel the vibrations of the carriage.

He hadn’t paid attention while conversing, but the carriage seemed to have been stopped for quite a while.

Thus...

-Swish!

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard released his true qi, opened the carriage door, and stepped outside.

However...

‘!?’

All the officials and four Embroidered Uniform Guards outside were lying unconscious.

‘When?’

Although he had blocked the sound, it hadn't been that long.

Yet this had happened in such a short time?

Sensing that something was amiss, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard unhesitatingly tried to press the acupuncture points below his ears with his thumbs.

But then, a voice came from behind him.

“I was bored waiting. So, have you finished your secret conversation?”

‘An expert...’

Even though he had sealed his qi points, the fact that someone had approached him from behind without any presence meant they were at least at the transcendent realm.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had his thumbs on the acupuncture points, spoke without losing his composure.

“Who are you?”

In response to his question, a completely irrelevant answer flowed from behind.

“Which one would be better?”

“What?”

“Would it be better to have the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s Thousand-men Commander kill all his subordinates and officials and run away? Or would it be better to skin your faces and make use of them?”

‘!!!!!!’

Chapter 220 – Mixed-blooded (1)

“Would it be better to have the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s Thousand-men Commander kill all his subordinates and officials and run away? Or would it be better to skin your faces and make use of them?”

-Flinch!

The blue eyes behind the mask trembled at the casually spoken, spine-chilling suggestion full of malice.

Just who was this person?

Who was he to attack them and make such threatening remarks?

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, his mind in turmoil, hesitated, unsure of what to do.

Since his back had been taken, there was a high chance he would be struck before he could press the pressure points.

Right at that moment...

-Creak!

“Is something happening outside?”

As the carriage door opened, Song-ah, the craftsman's real daughter, appeared.

Song-ah, seeing Mok Gyeong-un standing behind the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard with his face covered, spoke in confusion.

“Who-who are you?”

“Hmm. I was wondering who he was talking to, but it turns out to be a young lady. Judging by your attire and scent, you seem to be related to Hong Bong Meat slaughterhouse, not the Embroidered Uniform Guard... Ah! There it is.”

Mok Gyeong-un noticed the leather pouch inside the open carriage.

At that very moment, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard quickly pressed his pressure points.

-Tatatap!

Mok Gyeong-un, instantly recognizing from the sound that he had taken advantage of the moment his head was turned, tried to strike the back of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's neck.

Right then...

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un's hand grazed through the air.

The faint wind felt at his fingertips.

‘!?’

Along with it, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard disappeared.

Then, a presence was felt behind him.

-Swish!

A sharp killing intent was felt at his neck.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un spoke.

“...Your lightness skill is remarkably fast.”

He meant it sincerely.

Since Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang, this was the first time someone had surpassed his movement with a lightness skill.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had somehow appeared behind him, pressed the blade harder against Mok Gyeong-un's neck and spoke.

“You bastard. What is your identity?”

“I don't really have an identity to speak of.”

“It seems you want to play word games, but do you wish to die like this?”

-Press!

The Embroidered Uniform Guard pressed Mok Gyeong-un's neck with the blade.

No matter how sharp a blade was, it needed to be pressed and dragged to cut.

Thus, the blade only pressed against the flesh.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard spoke to Mok Gyeong-un in a menacing voice.

“If I slice like this, your body and head will be separated. So it's best for you to speak truthfully.”

“You're scaring me by saying that.”

Mok Gyeong-un spoke nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard frowned at Mok Gyeong-un's composed attitude.

Even in a life-threatening situation, he showed no fear at all.

Just who the hell was this guy?

‘Even with the qi points sealed, the qi sensed from him is at the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm.’

Naturally, with this level of skill, it was more than enough to subdue the four Embroidered Uniform Guards of the One Hundred-men Commander rank and the officials.

However, the overwhelming presence he had felt from behind earlier surpassed this.

Was he mistaken?

‘Did I do something unnecessary?’

He had unsealed the qi points he had kept sealed due to that discomfort.

But if he was simply at the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm, there was no need to unseal the hidden martial prowess.

Just then, Song-ah’s voice was heard.

“Is he someone sent by the master?”

“The master?”

At her words, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard suddenly recalled what Mok Gyeong-un had said.

[Judging by your attire and scent, you seem to be related to Hong Bong Meat slaughterhouse, not the Embroidered Uniform Guard... Ah! There it is.]

He had said those words after seeing the leather pouch inside the carriage.

That meant, as she said, he might have been sent by the master of Hong Bong Meat.

If he was the renowned craftsman known for creating hidden human skin masks, he would certainly have connections with skilled martial artists.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pressed the blade harder and spoke.

-Press!

“Is it true that you were sent by Hong Bong Meat?”

To his question, Mok Gyeong-un replied.

“Since we’ve also found the leather pouch, going with the latter option doesn’t seem bad.”

“What?”

“I thought skinning faces and making use of them wouldn’t be bad either.”

“What are you saying...”

-Swish!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un moved his neck in the opposite direction of where the blade was touching.

At the same time, he quickly grabbed the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s blade.

-Pak!

‘This guy!’

The Embroidered Uniform Guard tried to pull the blade out of Mok Gyeong-un’s hand.

However...

-Clang!

Before he could pull the blade out, the sword body held in Mok Gyeong-un's hand broke.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard couldn't help but be inwardly surprised.

It wasn't reinforced with strong qi, but his sword was called a precious sword, and with the killing intent infused, it couldn't be broken by ordinary strength.

Yet, if he possessed the martial power to break it...

‘Indeed, that discomfort was...’

-Swish!

Just then, Mok Gyeong-un's figure blurred, and a kick from him came towards the Embroidered Uniform Guard's chin.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard focused strength on the Yongcheon acupoints on both his feet and stomped the ground.

-Pabak!

Mok Gyeong-un's kick sliced through the air.

Once again, the wind was felt where it grazed, and the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard's figure disappeared.

He possessed an astonishingly fast lightness skill.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes moved swiftly left and right.

Then...

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un's figure also disappeared.

He had utilized the high-speed movement lightness skill, Myeonghyeon Suweolbo.

The moment he used Myeonghyeon Suweolbo, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had disappeared, was seen moving left and right, trying to take his back.

However, it wasn't only Mok Gyeong-un who noticed this.

‘This guy?’

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard had never seen anyone enter the same realm as him when using lightness skills, except for his master.

It was a phenomenon where the axis became misaligned with others during high-speed movement.

It was similar to the phenomenon of everything appearing to stop when looking to the side while riding a horse.

Yet, someone other than himself had entered that realm.

‘How?’

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard couldn't hide his surprise.

At that instant, Mok Gyeong-un followed him closely and thrust his sword finger towards his chest.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard tilted his body to the side and executed a fist technique towards Mok Gyeong-un's face.

‘Terrain Fist Technique, 6th Stance, Rock-Shattering Explosive Fist.’

A fist aura erupted from the Embroidered Uniform Guard's fist.

Since they were both moving at high speed and he had thrust his sword finger, there was no way to dodge.

Mok Gyeong-un blocked the fist aura targeting his face with his left hand.

-Bang!

However...

‘Rock-Shattering Explosive Fist doesn't end here.’

Five consecutive fist auras followed, capable of shattering even rocks.

Pushed back by the fist auras that seemed to penetrate his palm, Mok Gyeong-un's figure was pushed backward.

-Bang! Bang! Bang!

-Slide!

-Bang!

At the fourth fist aura, Mok Gyeong-un's hand was forced upward.

As if seizing the opportunity, the Embroidered Uniform Guard launched the final fist aura towards Mok Gyeong-un's chin.

-Bam!

Mok Gyeong-un's head jerked upward as his chin was struck.

At that instant, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pulled both his hands back to his waist and then sent them flying towards Mok Gyeong-un's chest with lightning speed.

‘Cloud-Sending Palm Technique, 4th Stance, Double Cloud Palms!’

-Bang!

Ripples appeared on the fabric covering Mok Gyeong-un's chest area as he was hit by the double palms, and his figure was sent flying backward.

However, the place he was sent flying towards was...

‘Oh no!’

The carriage.

Song-ah, the real daughter of the Hong Bong Meat craftsman, was standing there.

Realizing this, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard concentrated all his qi to the Yongcheon acupoints and stomped the ground twice.

-Papak!

At that moment, his figure became even faster than before.

It seemed as if an afterimage was created with each movement, making it appear as if there were two of him.

-Swoooosh!

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, moving at a speed similar to Mok Gyeong-un who was sent flying after being hit by the double palms, scooped up Song-ah with one arm at the last moment.

-Pak!

“Ahh!”

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, having scooped up Song-ah, propelled his body backward.

At the same time, Mok Gyeong-un's body collided with the carriage.

-Crash!

The carriage that Mok Gyeong-un collided with shattered into pieces.

Seeing the carriage crumble and break into fragments, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard couldn't hide his troubled expression.

He had prioritized saving Song-ah since she was important, but the leather pouch containing the severed hands of the fake master was inside the carriage.

‘Will it be alright?’

As he was worrying, Song-ah spoke in a startled voice.

“W-What on earth is going on?”

To her, who had not cultivated martial arts, the two of them suddenly disappeared from her sight, then the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard abruptly appeared and pulled her, and the carriage suddenly shattered into pieces.

She was trembling, so shocked by the situation, and the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard spoke to her.

“It’s nothing. But is that person really the one sent by your father?”

“I-I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. How would I know someone who even has their face covered?”

“...That’s true.”

“But if he’s really the one sent by my father, why were you fighting? You said you would let me go.”

To her question, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard let out a faint sigh and spoke.

“He was a dangerous individual.”

“Dangerous? If my father sent him, he would have sent him to save me.”

“It didn’t seem like he was simply trying to save you.”

“What do you mean by that? Not just trying to save me?”

“I’m not sure if he was trying to provoke me or if he was sincere, but it seemed like he was targeting everyone here.”

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard had felt endless malice in Mok Gyeong-un’s every word.

At that, Song-ah spoke.

“If my father really sent him, that can’t be. What you’re saying is that he was trying to kill all of you while saving me to eliminate the evidence, but if that were the case, it would only make matters...”

“Bigger if left unchecked.”

‘!?’

At the voice coming from the direction of the carriage, Song-ah and the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard simultaneously turned their gazes there.

Mok Gyeong-un was standing in front of the carriage, casually holding something.

It was the leather pouch containing the severed hands of the fake master.

‘What in the world?’

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard's eyes trembled.

That was because Mok Gyeong-un's appearance was too unscathed.

He was certain he had struck Mok Gyeong-un's chin with the Rock-Shattering Explosive Fist and consecutively landed the Double Cloud Palms on his chest, which should have damaged his heart.

If he had been hit in the brain and heart, he couldn't possibly be this unharmed.

As he was bewildered, Song-ah stepped forward and spoke.

"Are you really the one sent by the master, no, my father?"

"Father?"

"Yes. I'm Song-ah, the daughter of Hong Bong Meat's master."

"Ah. Is that so?"

"If you're really the one sent by my father, please stop fighting. This person was trying to let me go."

At her words, Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head and spoke.

"Trying to let you go?"

"Yes. We made a deal. So you can stop fighting now."

"Oh? Is that so?"

“Yes.”

This time, Song-ah turned her head and spoke to the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard.

“I think he really is the one sent by my father. So I’ll keep my promise, so please, esteemed Embroidered Uniform Guard, cover up this incident. He didn’t know anything.”

At her words, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard looked around.

The officials and the One Hundred-men Commander were all lying unconscious, but no one was dead.

After contemplating for a moment, he spoke.

“Alright. I’ll handle this matter on my end. But hand over the leather pouch. It will be difficult to cover up this incident without it.”

At his words, Song-ah frowned but then spoke to Mok Gyeong-un.

“It seems you’ll have to return the leather pouch.”

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled at her words.

Puzzled by his attitude, Song-ah spoke.

“If you don’t return it, he won’t be able to cover up the incident. So...”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

‘!?’

At his words, Song-ah spoke as if it were absurd.

“What are you saying? He’s saying the incident could escalate if you don’t return it...”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t come here on your father’s request. I came here of my own accord.”

“What?”

“I need to take this to reattach your father’s severed hands.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, she furrowed her brows.

What on earth was he talking about?

She couldn’t understand what he meant by reattaching severed hands.

Just then...

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un’s figure disappeared from sight.

At that moment, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard hurriedly pulled Song-ah.

“Ah!”

Although invisible to her eyes, Mok Gyeong-un had used high-speed movement to try and strike her pressure points to make her fall asleep.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard, having pulled Song-ah to avoid this, stomped his feet twice.

-Papak! Swish!

Then, his figure dispersed like an afterimage and split into two.

One of the split figures was pulling Song-ah further back, while the other launched a fist technique towards Mok Gyeong-un.

-Papapapapak!

‘Terrain Fist Technique, 3rd Stance, Shadowless Shattering Fist.’

His fists created numerous fist shadows, overwhelming Mok Gyeong-un.

Right at that moment.

Mok Gyeong-un stomped the ground twice.

-Papak!

Then, an unbelievable event occurred.

Mok Gyeong-un’s figure created afterimages and split into two.

One figure easily blocked the Shadowless Shattering Fist with one hand, while the other figure reached out towards the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard who was pulling Song-ah.

Seeing this, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard couldn't hide his shock.

‘!?’

This wasn't the lightness skill that fellow had been using, but his own unique lightness skill.

How could something like this happen?

As he was startled, Mok Gyeong-un, who had somehow closed the distance right in front of him, tried to snatch Song-ah away using the Golden Silk Hand technique.

Left with no choice, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard pushed her to the side.

-Pak!

He then tried to block Mok Gyeong-un's Golden Silk Hand with the Cloud-Sending Palm Technique's palm strike, but...

-Papak!

Before he could even execute the palm strike, Mok Gyeong-un lightly struck down his hand with a bizarre technique, and simultaneously thrust his sword finger towards his face with the other hand.

‘Different stances with both hands?’

As he executed different techniques simultaneously, even the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard had no way to deal with it.

Tilting his head back, he propelled his body backward.

-Pak!

Having propelled his body and instantly retreated about ten steps, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard came to a stop.

At the moment he thought he had narrowly dodged the sword finger...

-Crack!

Cracks appeared on his mask, and it began to split apart.

He had failed to evade the sharp killing intent that flowed from the sword finger.

‘No!’

The startled masked Embroidered Uniform Guard hurriedly grabbed it.

More than anything else, he didn’t want anyone to see his face behind the mask.

However, as the mask split apart left and right, he couldn’t hold it all together.

-Clatter!

The cracked parts of the mask fell off here and there, revealing the left side of his face.

Along with his blue eyes, he had a high nose bridge and a rather exotic-looking face.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard’s Thousand-men Commander, believing that he had exposed this to others, distorted his expression as if feeling ashamed and covered his face with his hand.