

Mayhem 231

Chapter 231 – Desire (4)

On the way back to the inn,

The attitudes of Gan-yang and Ok-gi from the advance party changed.

Originally, they were already wary of the rear party, but after witnessing Mok Gyeong-un's true colors as he dealt with even Lady Seo, one of the absolute rulers of this nation, they treated him completely like a superior.

In fact, what was most deeply imprinted in their minds was the image of the traitorous Yoo-bong, who had been split in half and turned into a cold corpse.

'Let's not provoke him.'

'Who knows what might happen if we get on his bad side.'

Even Ok-gi, who had once vowed to take revenge, had long since abandoned such thoughts.

He just hoped to avoid irritating Mok Gyeong-un until the mission was completed.

As they were heading towards the inn, Mok Gyeong-un spoke to them at a fork in the road.

"I have a brief errand to run, so you all go ahead first."

"My lord, I will escort you," Seop Chun stepped forward to guard Mok Gyeong-un.

But Mok Gyeong-un shook his head.

“It’s nothing important, so please go ahead and wait inside.”

“Are you sure it’s alright?”

“Yes, I’m just going to take a look around.”

‘Ah! You must mean that place.’

At these words, Seop Chun realized where Mok Gyeong-un was heading.

He was likely going to the workshop of Miss Song-ah, the real master artisan of human skin masks.

Having confirmed his intentions, Seop Chun backed down.

After Mok Gyeong-un left, quite some time passed. As they were about to reach the inn, Gan-yang carefully spoke.

“Brother Seop.”

“What is it?”

“But, is it really okay to end it like this?”

“What do you mean by okay?”

“I’m talking about Lady Seo.”

“Lady Seo?”

“Yes. Although Lord Mok wrapped things up well, what if Lady Seo has a change of heart along the way...”

In fact, this had been Gan-yang’s concern all along.

Mok Gyeong-un may have imprinted fear in that arrogant Lady Seo, but from her perspective, she had been thoroughly humiliated.

She may have shown submission to Mok Gyeong-un now to survive, but once she returned to the palace, her attitude could change.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Mong Mu-yak interjected.

“What do you mean there’s no need to worry?”

-Swish!

Mong Mu-yak raised his arm to show them.

The iron chain bracelet that should have been there was missing.

The reason was simple.

Mok Gyeong-un had removed the Chain of Loyalty he had been wearing and put it on Lady Seo, receiving her oath of submission.

“As long as she wears that bracelet, Lady Seo absolutely cannot betray the lord.”

“...What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll find out soon. And don’t try to understand everything.”

Mong Mu-yak was the only one who had experienced the Chain of Loyalty.

Those who wore it could never harbor any ill intentions towards the one they had sworn allegiance to.

Doing so could even cost them their life.

‘Hehehe.’

Mong Mu-yak was extremely pleased to have the Chain of Loyalty removed thanks to Lady Seo.

It had been too painful, as it would tighten around his wrist and cause agony even if he harbored the slightest malicious thoughts towards Mok Gyeong-un.

[You’ll be able to behave well even without this, right?]

[...I will serve you with all my heart. Please trust me.]

Mong Mu-yak had once again sworn loyalty to Mok Gyeong-un.

Through his experiences with Mok Gyeong-un, he had come to believe that perhaps he could even surpass the Eldest Young Master Na Yul-ryang and become the successor, leading him to have a change of heart.

Because of this, he now genuinely viewed Mok Gyeong-un as his lord.

Seop Chun patted Gan-yang’s back and said,

“As Mu-yak said, don’t worry too much. Moreover, with this incident, Lady Seo is also in a difficult position, so she has no choice but to comply.”

A rock and a hard place.

It was the phrase that best described Lady Seo’s current situation.

Apart from swearing submission to Mok Gyeong-un, she now had to distance herself from the righteous faction voluntarily.

Peng Seok-im, the younger brother of Magistrate Peng Yi-mun, had attempted to violate her in front of everyone, and on top of that, he had even massacred the soldiers of the Imperial Army stationed in Kaifeng.

Because of this, she had no choice but to sever ties with the Hebei Peng Family, if only to handle the aftermath.

Thus, from Lady Seo’s perspective, no matter how unpleasant it was, she had to maintain her relationship with Mok Gyeong-un and the Heaven and Earth Society.

“Unintentionally, thanks to our lord, those bastards from the Righteous Alliance are about to get scared shitless. Hahaha!”

The Hebei Peng Family was one of the Seven Great Clans and a key pillar of the Righteous Alliance.

Thinking about the blow they would suffer, Seop Chun, as a member of the Heaven and Earth Society, felt delighted.

At the same time.

Leafy Wind Guest Inn, located in the western commercial district of Kaifeng.

Normally, it would be a time when the inn would still be bustling with customers drinking alcohol, but the interior was exceptionally quiet.

That was because the restaurant had been reserved by several groups who appeared to be martial artists.

On the first floor, there were martial artists from the Hebei Peng Family wearing military uniforms with “Peng Family” embroidered on their chests.

There was also a group from Mount Hua Sect, dressed in light blue robes with plum blossom patterns.

Lastly, there was a group from Mount Zhongnan Sect, wearing light gray robes with bright red belts, all quietly having a meal together.

The elders of the two sects and one clan leading these groups were engaged in conversation, seated at a round table on the second floor.

The middle-aged man with a mustache sitting on the left was Peng Il-hyeon, the clan head of the Hebei Peng Family, known as the Hegemon Saber of Hebei.

Peng Il-hyeon heartily laughed and poured a cup of alcohol for the person directly across from him.

“Hahaha! Sir Gu Yang-ja is truly magnanimous. Even if it’s a bet between elders, to actually teach the secret art of your sect, the Fourteen Plum Blossom Sword Technique, to a disciple of another sect, the Kongtong Sect...”

“Ahem.”

At his words, the old Taoist priest in a blue robe with sharp features, receiving the cup, coughed as if displeased.

He was Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect, one of the Nine Great Sects that could be considered the backbone of the Righteous Alliance.

“Hohoho. Clan Head Peng, don’t say that. If you keep going, how upset will Elder Gu Yang-ja be?”

The old man in a robe with a warm demeanor and graying hair, sitting to the right of Peng Il-hyeon, spoke.

He was True Person Geon Mun-ja of Mount Zhongnan Sect.

[True Person comes from the term or (zhenren). Let me know if you know better term to name this aside from True Person.]

At Geon Mun-ja’s words, Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect spoke in a nonchalant voice,

“If I was upset, how could I have taught the martial art? It’s all that child’s fortune. His talent was simply that outstanding.”

“Outstanding is an understatement. To completely grasp the essence of the Fourteen Plum Blossom Sword Technique in just the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, he can be called a genius without exaggeration.”

At True Person Geon Mun-ja’s words, the eyes of Peng Il-hyeon, the Peng Family’s clan head, widened.

“In just the time to drink a cup of tea?”

“That’s right. He truly has a brilliant mind.”

“My, if that’s true, it’s amazing.”

For a highly skilled swordsman, it wasn't impossible.

However, he had heard that the disciple of the Kongtong Sect had just become an official disciple after being a lay disciple.

If such a child had mastered a first-rate sword art of another sect in just the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, he could indeed be considered a great talent.

Curious, Peng Il-hyeon asked,

“What is the Taoist name of that disciple from the Kongtong Sect?”

“Although he was accepted as an official disciple, he wasn't registered with a Taoist name, so as far as I know, he doesn't have one.”

“Ah, is that so? Then his name...”

“Could it be that Clan Head Peng covets that child from the Kongtong Sect?”

Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect asked in a nonchalant voice.

At that question, Peng Il-hyeon waved his hands and politely replied,

“No, of course not. How could I covet an official disciple of the Kongtong Sect?”

While saying this, Peng Il-hyeon surreptitiously glanced at Elder Gu Yang-ja's face.

No matter how he looked at it, the old man seemed to be wary of him.

‘I see.’

He had already thought it was difficult to see Elder Gu Yang-ja's unhesitating transmission of the Mount Hua Sect's sword art to a disciple of another sect as mere magnanimity, even if it was called a bet. It seemed he also coveted that child.

For a True Person of a Taoist sect, he was unexpectedly greedy.

But it was understandable.

If the child possessed such talent, anyone would want him as a disciple.

‘If my second son receives a recommendation letter from Lady Seo to participate in the Imperial Guard's martial arts competition this time, I should instruct him to keep an eye on that child from the Kongtong Sect.’

One never knows what might happen.

Just then, Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect opened his mouth.

“But seeing Clan Head Peng come to Kaifeng in person, it seems the efforts of your younger brother, who serves as a Magistrate in the palace, have borne fruit.”

At his words, Peng Il-hyeon's eyes narrowed.

As expected of Mount Hua Sect, known as one of the pillars of the Nine Great Sects alongside Wudang Sect, their information network was no ordinary matter.

The Righteous Alliance had long supported the second prince, Prince Jong, who was considered the most likely candidate for Crown Prince.

However, contrary to that support and expectation, the young son of Lady Seo had ascended to the position of Crown Prince.

Since then, Peng Il-hyeon, the clan head of the Hebei Peng Family, had been in contact with Lady Seo through his younger brother Peng Yi-mun, who held an official position in the palace.

‘Before the old men of the Alliance interfere, I need to further solidify my relationship with Lady Seo.’

If today’s matter was resolved smoothly, it would be achieved.

Lady Seo had wanted to sever ties with the Heaven and Earth Society since becoming the mother of the Crown Prince.

If this matter was successfully resolved, not only would he gain the trust of Lady Seo, but he could also surpass the old fogies of the Alliance who were clinging to a rotten lifeline and even aim for the position of the next Alliance Leader.

Just thinking about it, he couldn’t contain his excitement.

However, he didn’t want to provoke the scrutiny of these old fogies yet, so he calmly said without revealing his thoughts.

“No, my younger brother has simply fulfilled his duties in his official position.”

“Hohoho. You’re so humble. Isn’t your clan’s matter also the Alliance’s matter? If the Peng Family’s affairs go well and you even obtain a recommendation letter from Lady Seo for the Imperial Guard’s martial arts competition, the influence of our Alliance will grow even greater. How can this not be a good thing?”

“.....”

Peng Il-hyeon clicked his tongue inwardly.

Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect had already seen through more than half of his plan.

He was truly an old man who couldn't be taken lightly.

He needed to quickly gain strength.

He couldn't let the Righteous Alliance continue to revolve solely around the Nine Great Sects and One Clan.

It was at that moment.

-Tap tap tap tap!

Someone hurriedly ran up to the second floor where they were.

Peng Il-hyeon, the Peng Family's clan head, Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua Sect, and True Person Geon Mun-ja of Mount Zhongnan Sect turned their heads to look at the person.

‘!?’

However, upon seeing the person, Peng Il-hyeon frowned with a look of bewilderment.

That was because the one who had come up was none other than the senior warrior of the Peng Family's outer hall.

The clan head Peng Il-hyeon couldn't help but be baffled by the sudden appearance of the person he had sent to assist his third younger brother Peng Seok-im for the mission, covered in blood.

“Huff huff... C-Clan Head! I have an urgent report.”

“What on earth happened?”

Something felt ominous.

By now, he thought the matter would have been wrapped up.

The senior warrior of the outer hall hurriedly approached Clan Head Peng Il-hyeon and whispered,

“Please change locations for a moment.”

At those words, Peng Il-hyeon looked puzzled, but soon excused himself to Elder Gu Yang-ja of Mount Hua and True Person Geon Mun-ja of Mount Zhongnan, and moved to the outer area of the second floor.

Nevertheless, the senior warrior of the outer hall whispered in his ear.

“Clan Head. You must leave Kaifeng immediately.”

“What are you talking about? Leave Kaifeng?”

“Something terrible has happened.”

“What? Don’t tell me our clan’s warriors were defeated?”

“…It’s even more serious than that. If we don’t hurry, you may face great trouble.”

“Face great trouble? What the hell are you saying?”

Clan Head Peng Il-hyeon's voice rose.

Could it be that they had been counter-attacked by the Heaven and Earth Society bastards?

But even if they had been counter-attacked and failed the mission, this was Kaifeng, the imperial capital, and he had the remaining forces of the Hebei Peng Family with him.

"If it's because of the Heaven and Earth Society bastards, right now..."

"Clan Head! It's not because of the Heaven and Earth Society."

"Then why are you acting like this?"

Pressed by Peng Il-hyeon, the senior warrior of the outer hall hesitated before finally speaking.

"...Outer Hall Master Peng Seok-im has caused a major incident."

"An incident? What the hell are you talking about?"

What kind of incident could he have caused in this mission?

The mission was simple.

At most, it was to suppress the late-stage disciples sent by the Heaven and Earth Society.

No matter how outstanding they were, they were just late-stage disciples, and the forces he had prepared were enough to engage in a battle with even a small to medium-sized sect.

But the senior warrior of the outer hall uttered words he never expected.

“Outer Hall Master Peng Seok-im has massacred most of the clan’s warriors and government soldiers who were on standby.”

‘!?’

At those words, Clan Head Peng Il-hyeon’s expression stiffened.

For a moment, he doubted his own ears.

“W-What are you saying? Why would Peng Seok-im do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. The young master suddenly became crazed like a madman and tried to force his way inside, so we tried to stop him, but...”

“...No. No. That can’t be.”

Peng Il-hyeon denied it.

No matter how much Peng Seok-im indulged in wine and women and had improper conduct, as a member of the righteous faction, he had never crossed that line.

Why would the guy do something so absurd?

But the problem didn’t end there.

“Clan Head. But it’s the truth. These wounds of mine were also inflicted by the Outer Hall Master. We shouldn’t be doing this. You must leave Kaifeng right now. Otherwise, you may truly face great trouble.”

“No. That can’t be. I’ll go directly and...”

“You absolutely must not go.”

“What do you mean I can’t? If that guy caused an incident, if we don’t handle it immediately, everything we’ve done so far will be for naught...”

Before he could even finish speaking, the senior warrior of the outer hall revealed the truth with difficulty.

“The Outer Hall Master tried to forcibly violate Her Majesty the Imperial Noble Consort.”

‘!!!!!!!’

The moment he heard those words, Clan Head Peng Il-hyeon became dazed like a mad man, and his legs seemed to lose strength as he staggered.

Chapter 232 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (1)

Early morning.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Barracks’ Head Instructor’s office.

A middle-aged man in his late forties with a stern face and a scar on his chin bid farewell to a man in a blue officer’s uniform who was leaving the office, his hands clasped together in a polite gesture.

As the man left, the middle-aged man plopped down into the chair behind the office desk.

Then, he let out a deep sigh.

‘Hoo. I can’t stomach this nonsense anymore.’

The middle-aged man's name was Seok Jeonwoong.

He was the Head Instructor in charge of educating the Embroidered Uniform Guard trainees and also served as the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

As Seok Jeonwoong recalled the officer who had just come and gone, he couldn't help but snort.

‘It's truly a predicament on how to handle this.’

The officer who had just visited was a man named Jang Chan, who held the 6th rank government post of Reader at the Hanlin Academy.

The reason for his visit was to make a request regarding the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

Of course, such occurrences were commonplace.

It had been a constant ever since he took on the role of Head Instructor.

‘His Highness, Prince Gyeongjin, must be growing impatient. Seeing as he even sent a close confidant of his faction to make a separate request.’

Among the eight individuals already set to be selected from the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination, four of them were preselected candidates.

The actual power in this nation was divided into four factions.

His Majesty the Emperor's younger brother, Prince Gyeongjin; the Grand Preceptor Hang Yoon, who also held the position of Admiral of the Central Commandery among the Three Excellencies; His Majesty's

second son, the Prince Jong; and the current Imperial Concubine from the Seo clan, who was the mother of the current Crown Prince.

The preselected candidates were divided among these four factions.

As the Emperor was still holding on, albeit barely, the balance was precariously maintained, but there would surely come a moment when that balance would shatter.

‘His Majesty’s illness has persisted for quite some time.’

If the Emperor were to collapse, it would mark the beginning of a catastrophe.

Since he did not attend the recent morning assembly, all the high-ranking officials sensed this ominous sign.

Hence, it was likely the reason Prince Gyeongjin had sent his man.

‘It’s unbearably troublesome.’

There was no way around the customary selection of half the preselected candidates.

However, starting from the previous occasion and now for this Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination, Prince Gyeongjin’s side had requested that the remaining four spots, which were not assigned to preselected candidates, be filled entirely with their own talents.

Moreover, it wasn’t simply a request.

[Instructor Seok, you are forty-nine years old, which means you are nearing the end of your term as the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. It is truly regrettable.]

Seok Jeonwoong’s age was 49.

The term for serving as the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard was until the age of 50.

After next year, he would have to complete his term and leave the palace.

[I heard that your son will be taking the civil service examination next spring. This year, he took the exam for the fourth time, so next year will be his fifth attempt. Isn't it about time for him to pass the exam and embark on an official career? As it happens, the Hanlin Academy is in need of talented scholars of the 8th rank.]

That shook him.

In other words, if he accepted the request, they would ensure his son's success in the examination.

This put Seok Jeonwoong in a considerable dilemma.

According to the assistant instructor at the National Academy, his son had the capability to pass the exam with flying colors.

However, despite being almost thirty years old, he had yet to pass due to the power struggles among the preselected candidates.

How could this be acceptable?

‘It's because his father lacks influence.’

All the official positions were being filled by the children of those in high-ranking posts.

Regardless of their aptitude and abilities.

Seok Jeonwoong was originally not a commoner, but thanks to his merits on the battlefield, he was able to enter the Embroidered Uniform Guard and rise to the position of Commander.

However, that was the extent of it.

No matter how outstanding he was or how many achievements he made, he could not climb any higher.

Thus, he was limited to being the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, unable to provide any assistance for his son's official career.

[Let's do it this way. If His Highness's five recommended individuals can be included, I will petition for your promotion to the position of Vice Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Along with your son's success in the civil service examination, I believe these are not bad terms.]

In a way, this proposal from Prince Gyeongjin's side was truly irresistible.

If possible, he wanted to accept it and receive the rewards.

However, the problem was that it wasn't easy to do so.

Seok Jeonwoong glanced at the list of recommended individuals.

‘Ha…….’

It was a spectacle to behold.

They were all individuals who were unqualified to be in the Embroidered Uniform Guard in the first place.

Only senior-grade trainees were eligible to take the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

Yet, the individuals on the recommendation list were all junior-grade trainees who barely managed to keep up with the training process.

There was only one person who was an exception.

‘Geum Jong-hyeon.’

From the beginning, Geum Jong-hyeon was a senior-grade trainee and the son of a 5th rank Lecturer at the Hanlin Academy.

Initially, Seok Jeonwoong thought he would be no different from other scholars’ disciples, but at some point, he had demonstrated exceptional qualities that placed him among the top three in the entire Embroidered Uniform Guard.

For someone like him, he would have a high probability of passing even without a recommendation.

However,

‘The rest are impossible.’

It would be unreasonable to forcibly promote junior-grade trainees to senior-grade and give them the opportunity to take the Warrior Examination.

If he were to do that, not only would there be backlash from the trainees, but he would also incur the wrath of the other factions.

For this reason, Seok Jeonwoong did not give a definite answer and sent Prince Gyeongjin’s envoy back.

‘What should I do?’

Although he had sent him back for now, tomorrow was the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination, so he had to provide a response by today.

It was truly a situation where he was caught between a rock and a hard place.

If he accepts Prince Gyeongjin's request, he will face opposition from the other factions, but if he refuses the proposal, it will have adverse consequences one way or another.

‘Aaaah.’

If only there was a suitable justification to refuse, but he couldn't find one.

Just then, a voice came from outside.

“Head Instructor. Assistant Commander Jang from the Eastern Depot seeks an audience with you.”

“Assistant Commander Jang?”

The Assistant Commander of the Eastern Depot was a close confidant of Imperial Concubine Seo.

He was already having a headache dealing with someone from Prince Gyeongjin's side, and now Assistant Commander Jang was here early in the morning. What could be the reason?

Puzzled, Seok Jeonwoong opened the door and greeted him.

‘Oh my. This is quite...’

Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong couldn't hide his troubled expression.

The reason being that Assistant Commander Jang from the Eastern Depot had conveyed a difficult request from Imperial Concubine Seo, similar to that of Prince Gyeongjin's side.

‘No. This one is even worse.’

Prince Gyeongjin's side at least recommended individuals who were already Embroidered Uniform Guard trainees.

The issue was that their abilities were somewhat lacking.

However, Imperial Concubine Seo's side requested that three outsiders, who weren't even trainees, be accepted as senior-grade trainees to take the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

No matter how much power she wielded, this was unacceptable.

“Is it really that difficult when it is a request from Her Majesty the Imperial Concubine?”

At Assistant Commander Jang's words, Seok Jeonwoong sighed and replied.

“I apologize. The young man from the Habuk Peng clan, whom you had recommended in advance, at least comes from a renowned martial arts family, so if he proves his skills, it will be sufficient to convince the trainees and examiners. However, it is already problematic to replace him with someone else suddenly, let alone accepting two additional unverified individuals as senior-grade trainees of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. It is simply absurd.”

In response to his words, Assistant Commander Jang rested his chin on the table and said,

“Let me ask you directly, Instructor Seok. Is it because of concerns about their abilities? Or are you worried about the backlash from other factions?”

“...It’s both.”

Seok Jeonwoong answered honestly.

It was already difficult to find a justification to reject Prince Gyeongjin’s request, but if he were to accede to Imperial Concubine Seo’s request as well, it would become even harder to find a reason.

Then, Assistant Commander Jang smiled and said,

“You need not worry about the verification of their abilities. They are the late-stage disciples sent by the Heaven and Earth Society.”

“The Heaven and Earth Society?”

At these words, Seok Jeonwoong’s eyes widened.

The Heaven and Earth Society was one of the three great powers in the current martial arts world.

Over the years, the palace had made countless requests to the Heaven and Earth Society to send talented individuals to foster friendly relations with the martial arts community.

However, each time, the Heaven and Earth Society had responded with silence.

Yet, they had sent their disciples through Imperial Concubine Seo?

This was quite a surprising development.

‘If this is true, there may be no issue in terms of their abilities.’

It’s not just any place, but the Heaven and Earth Society.

If they were sending late-stage disciples to the forefront for the first time, there was no way they would send weak individuals.

However, while he could understand and accept this, it would not be easy for the trainees and Prince Gyeongjin's side to readily...

‘Ah!’

Suddenly, an idea flashed through Seok Jeonwoong's mind.

A clever plan that could solve both issues at once.

‘Fight fire with fire!’

Using one group of barbarians to subdue another group of barbarians.

There was no need to agonize over how to handle these unreasonable demands from Imperial Concubine Seo's side and Prince Gyeongjin's side separately.

All he had to do was pit them against each other.

One hour later,

Near the Embroidered Uniform Guard trainee training grounds.

Jang Chan, who held the 6th rank government post of Reader at the Hanlin Academy, politely greeted an elderly eunuch dressed in a red official's robe with white face paint and a splint on one shoulder.

“I apologize for troubling you when you are still recovering from your injury. Eunuch Beom.”

The elderly eunuch’s name was Beom Jeung.

He held the position of Junior Supervisor Eunuch, So-gam in the Western Depot of the palace.

“Not at all. His Highness Prince Gyeongjin also asked me to oversee the matter, so it is only natural for me to assist.”

“Thank you. As a mere civil official, I am unfamiliar with the proper conduct of the promotion duel, so I had to ask for your help, Eunuch Beom, as you are a skilled martial artist.”

“Hohoho. This old man is still lacking. That is why I sustained this injury.”

“Please do not say such things. Did you not risk your life to protect His Majesty? His Highness also said he would never forget your actions.”

“Hearing such words from him, I am simply overwhelmed with gratitude.”

“Your humble demeanor always teaches me a valuable lesson. Shall we proceed then?”

Scholar Jang Chan gestured with his hand and took the lead.

Eunuch Beom followed behind him, limping.

In fact, due to his injury, he could have delegated the task to another eunuch from the Western Depot, but curiosity compelled him to take part.

‘The Heaven and Earth Society...’

He heard that the opponents in this promotion duel were from the Heaven and Earth Society.

Over the years, he had encountered many martial artists inside and outside the palace, but most of them were from orthodox sects.

Therefore, Eunuch Beom was curious about the prowess of those feared even by the unorthodox sects, so he expressed his intention to observe in person.

‘If the Heaven and Earth Society is in collusion with Imperial Concubine Seo, it won’t hurt to see their level of skills on this occasion.’

After all, they might soon become a threatening enemy to His Highness Prince Gyeongjin.

Just how formidable would the martial arts of the Heaven and Earth Society’s late-stage disciples be?

“Ah! They are waiting over there.”

Scholar Jang Chan pointed at the junior training grounds.

“Oh, I see... What?!”

Eunuch Beom, who had been limping along with anticipation, suddenly halted his steps upon seeing something, startled.

“Eunuch Beom?”

Scholar Jang Chan turned around, puzzled, and looked at Eunuch Beom.

His complexion had abruptly turned pale.

He was even trembling to the point of his body becoming stiff, but the reason was unknown.

‘H-How can that fellow be here?’

Even from a distance, a man with exceptionally striking features stood out.

As soon as Eunuch Beom saw him, he was so shocked that he nearly lost strength in his legs.

‘Am I seeing things?’

No.

That face was unforgettable, even in dreams.

He had narrowly survived that hellish place by sheer luck and prayed never to encounter that man again.

Yet, how could that fiendish fellow be here?

“Eunuch Beom?”

Scholar Jang Chan called out to him.

Finally regaining his senses, Eunuch Beom lowered his voice and spoke.

“...Are they the late-stage disciples from the Heaven and Earth Society?”

“Seeing as they are confronting our trainees, it appears so. But Eunuch Beom, do you recognize any of them? Why are you reacting like this?”

In response to his question, Eunuch Beom, his mouth parched as if his insides were burning, swallowed hard and said,

“Immediately... Tell them to immediately abandon the duel.”

“Pardon? What do you mean by that?”

“It is a fight that cannot be won.”

“Cannot be won? To make such a conclusion before even engaging in the duel...”

“It’s futile.”

Eunuch Beom firmly interrupted Scholar Jang Chan’s words.

Then, with a trembling voice, he said,

“Even I cannot handle that monstrous fellow, so how can those youngsters possibly win?”

‘!!!!!!!’

Chapter 233 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (2)

“Even I cannot handle that monstrous fellow, so how can those youngsters possibly win?”

“Pardon?”

Stunned by the shocking words uttered by Eunuch Beom Jeung from the Western Depot, Scholar Jang Chan from the Hanlin Academy wore an expression of disbelief.

Although he had not been assisting Prince Gyeongjin for very long, from what he had heard, Eunuch Beom Jeung was known to be an exceptional master, ranking among the top five of the eunuchs in the Eastern and Western Depots who had cultivated martial arts.

While he couldn't accurately understand their terminology, he had heard that Eunuch Beom's internal energy had reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm, and even among martial artists, there were not many masters who could rival him.

Yet, for someone with such outstanding martial prowess to say that he couldn't defeat that opponent, what on earth did he mean?

Moreover, the late-stage disciples were merely young individuals around their early twenties, weren't they?

"Eunuch Beom, could you perhaps be mistaken?"

"Mistaken?"

"Yes, the late-stage disciples are just young junior brothers. How could such individuals be a match for you, Eunuch Beom, who possesses years of experience?"

"Hoo."

Faced with his disbelieving attitude, Eunuch Beom let out a sigh.

Even he himself, who had personally experienced it, found it unbelievable, so it was only natural for someone who knew nothing about the situation to react that way.

However, now was not the time to provide explanations.

‘He hasn’t recognized me yet, so I need to hurry and leave this place.’

And he had to immediately report this matter to Prince Gyeongjin.

Although he had hoped never to encounter that man again, now that the fiendish fellow had appeared in the palace, he had to report it and find a way to deal with the situation.

His Majesty, who was already having sleepless nights due to the incident that day, might not be able to recover from the shock if he were to see that man again.

Therefore, Eunuch Beom quietly said,

“I will provide you with the details later. If you truly cannot bring yourself to believe this old man’s words, then let them proceed with the duel. However, with their abilities...”

As he was speaking, Eunuch Beom abruptly stopped.

“Why did you not finish your sentence?”

“Oh my...”

“Pardon?”

Puzzled by Eunuch Beom’s distorted expression, Scholar Jang Chan turned to look in the direction he was staring at.

‘!?’

Scholar Jang Chan furrowed his brows.

Among the individuals in the confrontation, a single person had turned his head and was looking in their direction.

They were about 30 jang apart, so it seemed quite coincidental.

However, for Eunuch Beom, this was no coincidence.

‘...That monstrous fellow.’

Even from this distance, he had detected his presence.

With so many people around and without the opponent actively drawing upon their energy, it was difficult to specifically identify someone from this distance without making a conscious effort.

Yet, that man was accurately looking at him.

Just how sensitive and extensive was his perception?

Was this the difference between someone who had crossed the wall and those who hadn't?

‘...But he shouldn't have recognized me.’

There was a considerable distance between them, and his appearance now was very different from when they had met at the inn during the heavy downpour.

Not only his attire but also the distinctive white face paint worn by eunuchs.

So, if he refrained from showing any reaction here, that fellow wouldn't be able to recognize him...

‘!!!!’

At that moment, Eunuch Beom’s pupils trembled like crazy.

Having served as a eunuch for a long time, he had learned the art of lip-reading and could understand what the other person was saying by observing the shape of their mouth.

Of course, it was difficult to accurately read from this distance, but he could clearly make out those words.

[So you survived.]

Eunuch Beom felt as if the strength had drained from his legs.

That man had accurately recognized him.

“So you survived.”

“My lord?”

When Mok Gyeong-un suddenly looked somewhere, Seop Chun, puzzled, followed his gaze.

Some distance away, two officials were visible, with the one whose back was turned limping away in a hurry as if fleeing.

Unable to understand what was going on,

“It seems he was a eunuch.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The official limping away over there.”

“Do you know him?”

“You should know him too, Seop Chun.”

“Are you referring to me?”

“The old master we encountered at the village inn when we were trying to borrow a boat.”

“Ah! Are you talking about the old master who was escorting that battered young lady? Oh? Then that old master was a palace eunuch?”

“The red official’s robe indicates the Western Depot, so it seems to be the case.”

Mok Gyeong-un replied nonchalantly.

Upon hearing this, Mong Mu-yak furrowed his brows and whispered,

“My lord... If what you say is true, that woman he was escorting may not be the daughter of a high-ranking official but a member of the imperial family.”

“A member of the imperial family?”

“Yes, eunuchs only serve the imperial family. Moreover, if a master of that caliber was escorting her, she must not be of ordinary status.”

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

“No way. Then, could that young lady possibly be a princess...”

“Shh!”

Mong Mu-yak gestured for him to keep quiet as his voice was about to rise.

They were not the only ones present here.

After silencing Seop Chun, Mong Mu-yak spoke with a concerned tone,

“My lord, if that woman indeed holds a high position in the imperial family, we should make some preparations for the future.”

Mong Mu-yak had assumed they must have surely died.

However, if they had survived that hellish situation, their animosity and desire for revenge towards Mok Gyeong-un and themselves might have reached its peak.

In that case, it could hinder their mission in the palace and even lead to troublesome situations.

“Preparations... Well, it wouldn’t hurt to do so. Then, Mong Mu-yak, can you handle those preparations?”

“Are you referring to me?”

“Yes, didn’t you say we need to make preparations?”

“...That’s right.”

“Then, I’ll leave it to you.”

“I shall follow your orders.”

Mong Mu-yak’s eyes gleamed with determination as he replied.

This was undoubtedly Mok Gyeong-un’s way of testing his abilities.

Unlike Seop Chun, he had pledged his loyalty later, so he needed to demonstrate his capabilities here to gain his lord’s trust.

As he made that resolution inwardly, a scarred Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had come as an examiner for verification, stepped into the center.

Then, he addressed both sides who were waiting at a distance,

“We can’t wait any longer. Due to the delay of the observers, we will begin the promotion duel for the senior-grade without further waiting.”

The duel didn’t take long.

It took less than half a quarter of an hour for all the duels to conclude.

The outcome was a one-sided victory for one side.

The name of the scarred Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard was Maek Ha-gyun, and he was the Commander of the Five Bureaus, responsible for the most secretive of the Six Offices.

Commander Maek Ha-gyun, who had taken on the role of examiner for verification, clicked his tongue inwardly.

‘...They deliberately sent them.’

He had volunteered to assess the level of the trainees who had entered through the influence of Imperial Concubine Seo, known to be the late-stage disciples sent by the Heaven and Earth Society for the first time.

However, assessing their level through the duel had become essentially meaningless.

That was because the difference in skill was too vast.

The four individuals recommended by Prince Gyeongjin were merely at the level of second-rate to first-rate at best, so they were no match from the start.

Their caliber was merely that of junior-grade trainees in the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

On the other hand, the martial arts prowess of the late-stage disciples from the Heaven and Earth Society was sufficient for them to become Embroidered Uniform Guards immediately without any shortcomings.

In fact, even Commander Maek Ha-gyun himself found it difficult to gauge their martial prowess.

Based on his perception, they seemed to be either on par with him or even surpassed him.

Therefore, Maek Ha-gyun believed that the Heaven and Earth Society had deliberately sent their late-stage disciples this time.

‘The Heaven and Earth Society... Indeed, they live up to their reputation as one of the three great powers in the martial arts world. Even the one with the relatively weakest martial prowess among them has reached the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm.’

Was his name Mok Gyeong-un?

Although his martial prowess seemed to be the lowest among the three, his exceptional beauty naturally left an impression on Maek Ha-gyun’s mind.

In any case, while the duel had ended anticlimactically, it only piqued his interest.

This Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination for the selection of the Embroidered Uniform Guard also included the participation of promising late-stage disciples from the orthodox martial arts world.

For example, there were individuals like Geum Jong-hyeon, a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect, and Namgoong Chunghyeon from the Namgoong Clan.

Therefore, he was curious about the outcome that would unfold.

Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Grounds.

A total of three hundred trainees were undergoing training.

However, it was difficult for such a large number of individuals to train simultaneously.

Therefore, they were divided into three grades, with a hundred trainees in each grade, and the training was conducted accordingly.

These grades were categorized into upper, middle, and lower, and naturally, those belonging to the upper grade were the most outstanding among the Embroidered Uniform Guard trainees.

Their martial prowess was mostly at the first-rate level or above, reflecting their exceptional aptitude.

The majority of the trainees in the upper grade of the Embroidered Uniform Guard aimed to become members of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

“Hoo. Hoo.”

Despite the late afternoon hour, the senior-grade trainees were diligently training, drenched in sweat.

It was due to the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination scheduled for the following day.

Out of the hundred, only a mere eight would be finally selected as Embroidered Uniform Guards, and knowing that some of them were preselected candidates, they had no choice but to prepare with their utmost effort.

That’s how fiercely competitive the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination was.

As the trainees were immersed in their rigorous training, their gazes simultaneously turned towards a certain direction.

-Tap, tap!

It was towards the platform in the training grounds.

The Head Instructor of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Seok Jeonwoong, was walking towards the front of the platform, and behind him followed unfamiliar individuals they had never seen before.

‘Ha! Look at that.’

‘What the hell are those?’

The reactions of the trainees were far from pleasant.

Their displeasure was evident.

The reason being, with the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination starting tomorrow, three unfamiliar faces suddenly appeared, dressed in the attire of senior-grade trainees.

The existing trainees, who had guessed the implications of this, naturally felt a sense of opposition.

-Tap!

Standing in front of the platform, Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong spoke up.

“Attention!”

Although he said those words, all the senior-grade trainees were already looking at him.

Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong raised his voice and pointed at the three individuals standing behind him, saying,

“These are the three who have been promoted today. From the left, they are Mok Gyeong-un, Seop Chun, and Mong Mu-yak.”

-Paat!

As soon as he finished speaking, someone raised their hand.

Seeing this, Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong let out a soft sigh, as if he had anticipated it.

A significant number of the senior-grade trainees were the children of high-ranking officials, so they tended to express their opinions assertively.

“Speak.”

“This is trainee Lee Chung. The last promotion was already completed five days ago. However, suddenly promoting individuals just a day before the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination seems too deliberate.”

Then, another trainee stood up and spoke loudly,

“Lee Chung is right. We don’t know who they are, but suddenly promoting unverified individuals like this is unheard of. Please reconsider.”

At those words, everyone seemed to agree, as murmurs of agreement arose from here and there.

Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong took a deep breath and spoke,

“Silence!”

With a short and loud shout, the training grounds that had been buzzing with murmurs became quiet again.

Then, Seok Jeonwoong addressed the trainees,

“They have already passed the promotion test under the verification of a Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Do you wish to deny this?”

‘A Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard tested them?’

‘Is that true?’

Once again, the trainees buzzed with murmurs.

Normally, the promotion test itself was conducted under the supervision of the Head Instructor of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

However, he had mentioned that a Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard had personally tested them, so requesting a reconsideration would be equivalent to denying the decision of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

At that moment, Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong added decisively,

“And they are the late-stage disciples of the Heaven and Earth Society. There is absolutely no room for doubt regarding their abilities.”

‘The Heaven and Earth Society?’

Upon hearing this, a few individuals who had not shown much interest until now turned their gazes towards the platform.

They were the late-stage disciples from the orthodox martial arts sects affiliated with the Righteous Alliance.

After introducing the newly promoted trainees, Head Instructor Seok Jeonwoong left as if he had completed his task.

Following his departure, the atmosphere took a peculiar turn.

This was because the Heaven and Earth Society was one of the three great powers in the martial arts world and had a hostile relationship with the Righteous Alliance, which could be considered the center of the orthodox martial arts world.

Moreover, among the senior-grade trainees, there was a notable presence of late-stage disciples from the orthodox sects.

Since they dominated the atmosphere in the senior grade, the trainees were naturally sending knowing or unknowing glances of vigilance towards Mok Gyeong-un and his companions.

‘I guess this is roughly the atmosphere.’

Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

Having only been within the Heaven and Earth Society, he couldn’t have known, but this seemed to be the perspective the orthodox martial artists held towards the Heaven and Earth Society.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un didn’t pay much heed to such gazes.

After all, these individuals were not important.

The truly important ones were those on the list he had received in advance through Assistant Commander Jang from the Eastern Depot.

Mok Gyeong-un naturally found them.

‘Is that guy Yeom Gyeong?’

He matched the memorized appearance perfectly.

Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect and the son of the Assistant Commander of the Left Commandery.

He belonged to the faction of Prince Jong, the second prince, and as expected from a disciple of the Nine Great Sects, his skills seemed to be better than the other mediocre individuals.

‘Hmm.’

The youth over there with his arms crossed and narrow eyes seemed to be Geum Jong-hyeon, the son of a 5th rank Lecturer at the Hanlin Academy and a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect.

He was part of Prince Gyeongjin’s faction.

‘Narrow eyes...’

It was difficult to tell whether his eyes were closed or open.

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head and noticed Mong Mu-yak engaged in an intense staring contest with someone.

The individual he was having the staring contest with was a tall and handsome youth with thick eyebrows.

‘Is that Namgoong Chunghyeon?’

He was the second son of the Namgoong Clan, one of the seven great clans that could be considered an orthodox martial arts family of great renown.

If he remembered correctly, the Namgoong Clan had a marital relationship with Hang Yoon, one of the Three Excellencies who held the position of Grand Preceptor and concurrently served as the Admiral of the Central Commandery.

‘The most hostile one.’

In the case of Namgoong Chunghyeon, unlike the others, he was a member of the Namgoong Clan, which could be considered the backbone of the Righteous Alliance, so he was openly glaring and displaying hostility.

At this rate, a fight might break out even before the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

However,

‘What’s been bothering me?’

From the moment he entered the senior-grade training grounds, Mok Gyeong-un had been feeling a peculiar sensation.

It was difficult to express in words, but for some unknown reason, something was subtly irritating his senses.

So, Mok Gyeong-un went to find the source of that irritating energy.

And in the corner of the training grounds, he discovered someone doing push-ups while standing on one hand in a handstand position.

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un furrowed his brows.

The reason was that he couldn’t read any energy from that person.

If one had cultivated internal energy, the form of their energy could be read in some way, but he couldn't see anything from that person.

It was as if he hadn't cultivated martial arts or internal energy at all.

‘Strange.’

He hadn't cultivated internal energy, so why was he in the senior-grade class?

Moreover, for some unknown reason, he kept feeling something irritating from that person.

It seemed he would have to open the power of his Third Eye to investigate.

At that moment, someone's voice was heard.

“Hey. Looks like that fellow bothers you too.”

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head.

Behind him, a youth with sharp features and torn eyes was visible.

‘Oho.’

Interest flickered in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

He didn't know who he was, but his energy was almost at the level of the top five among the senior-grade trainees.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been looking at him as if he was quite something, asked,

“You seem to know that person well, based on what you said?”

“I don’t know him.”

“You don’t know him?”

“Yeah. But there’s no one in the senior grade who doesn’t know that fellow.”

“He must be quite famous then?”

At that question, the youth with the torn eyes snorted and said,

“Ha! Of course he’s famous. A fellow who hasn’t even properly cultivated internal energy suddenly got promoted from the junior grade to the senior grade in just five days.”

Chapter 234 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (3)

The name of the youth with torn eyes and a hooked nose was Wi Bu-cheong.

He was part of Prince Gyeongjin’s faction, who is the younger brother of His Majesty the Emperor, and a preselected candidate confirmed for the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection.

As the son of the Left Assistant Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate, a 3rd rank government post, he had directly learned martial arts from Gui Sa-man, one of the nine Sect Masters of the Evil Alliance, which could be considered one of the three great powers in the martial arts world.

Being the only one who had cultivated the martial arts of the Evil Alliance, which was not part of the orthodox martial arts world but the unorthodox realm, he was an outsider among the trainees.

Of course, he didn't care about this either.

After all, he would ascend to higher places, and these individuals would become life's losers.

Amidst this, Wi Bu-cheong encountered individuals who piqued his interest for the first time.

They were none other than the late-stage disciples of the Heaven and Earth Society.

‘Are they from the Heaven and Earth Society?’

The Heaven and Earth Society was one of the three great powers in the martial arts world, an organization that proclaimed neutrality rather than adherence to the orthodox path and pursued the strong-eating-the-weak principle of martial arts.

However, in reality, they were treated as part of the unorthodox realm.

Perhaps because of this, Wi Bu-cheong, who was influenced by the Unorthodox Alliance, found them more familiar.

They were better than those hypocrites who spouted nonsense about righteousness.

Wi Bu-cheong snorted and said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“Ha! Of course he's famous. A fellow who hasn't even properly cultivated internal energy suddenly got promoted from the junior grade to the senior grade in just five days.”

“He hasn't properly cultivated internal energy?”

“That guy, I heard he can't cultivate internal energy due to his constitution. He was no different from trash. But then, suddenly, he got promoted right before the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection. Doesn't this raise your suspicions?”

“You’re saying it smells fishy?”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Wi Bu-cheong grinned and said,

“As expected, being from the great Heaven and Earth Society, we have some common ground. I’m Wi Bu-cheong.”

Wi Bu-cheong extended his hand to Mok Gyeong-un.

Interest flickered in Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes.

‘Ah, he’s also part of Prince Gyeongjin’s faction, right?’

If the information was correct, that would be the case.

Between Geum Jong-hyeon, a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect, and Wi Bu-cheong, one of them would be the preselected candidate confirmed for the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection.

Of course, he wasn’t particularly curious about who among them was the preselected candidate.

And he had no interest in Wi Bu-cheong himself.

However, there was no need to create friction here, so Mok Gyeong-un took his hand and showed a smile.

“I’m Mok Gyeong-un.”

“Mok Gyeong-un? Mok is a rare surname.”

“People often say that.”

‘He talks as if it’s someone else’s story.’

Although he found it strange, it wasn’t to an unusual degree, so Wi Bu-cheong didn’t show any particular reaction.

Rather, Wi Bu-cheong wanted to take this opportunity to build ties with the late-stage disciples of the Heaven and Earth Society, even though their factions differed, as he considered them to be similar to the unorthodox realm.

However, unlike him, Mok Gyeong-un’s interest was directed towards the person he found irritating.

“Do you know his name?”

At this, Wi Bu-cheong raised an eyebrow and said,

“Why bother learning the name of such a bug?”

It didn’t make sense to him.

Even Prince Gyeongjin, who led their faction, had shown considerable interest in that fellow.

It was quite annoying, but why were the people he wanted to associate with showing interest in that fellow instead of him?

“You don’t seem to know?”

“How could I not know? It’s just, why bother learning about such a bug...”

“I thought you were a kind person, but it turns out you’re quite jealous?”

“What?”

At those words, Wi Bu-cheong furrowed his brows.

Then, as if displeased, he said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“What nonsense are you spouting? Why would I be jealous of that bug? There’s no point in bothering to learn about someone like him...”

“I also got promoted today.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Wi Bu-cheong stammered,

“You’re different from that fellow. You’re from the Heaven and Earth Society, one of the three great powers in the martial arts world, and that fellow is...”

“What’s so important about that? I also got promoted in just a day. It seems there’s not much difference between me and that friend.”

“No, what on earth...”

“Don’t I also give off a bug-like stench?”

“...”

Wi Bu-cheong tightly shut his mouth.

He had thought he could build ties with the Heaven and Earth Society, but now his mind had changed.

This person didn't match well with him at all.

Somehow, he newly understood why the Evil Alliance had never formed an alliance with the Heaven and Earth Society, even though they were practically the same as the unorthodox realm.

‘Damn it.’

Wi Bu-cheong glared at Mok Gyeong-un with annoyance and then left.

-What an asshole.

Cheong-ryeong snorted and said.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

-Who knows?

It didn't seem to be simply a matter of personality.

Considering the level of hostility he displayed just for being promoted, it didn't seem like he disliked him merely because of the promotion.

‘What could be the reason?’

It probably wasn't for the same reason as himself.

As Mok Gyeong-un intently stared at the person who was engrossed in doing push-ups while standing on one hand, he eventually opened the power of the Third Eye in his right eye.

It was to find out what that subtly irritating feeling he sensed from that person was.

However,

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head.

That was because he truly lacked internal energy.

It wasn't that he had concealed it or hidden it through a special technique or forbidden method.

This was truly an unexpected result.

-Why are you acting like that? Mortal.

-It seems he really hasn't cultivated internal energy.

-Internal energy, you say? Then, does that mean he has only cultivated external techniques?

-...For now, that's what it looks like, but I don't understand why he's in the senior-grade class.

Only those at the first-rate level or above could be in the senior grade.

However, it was nearly impossible to face a first-rate expert with only external techniques.

At this, Cheong-ryeong spoke nonchalantly.

-As that mortal fellow said earlier, if there's someone backing him up, it might be possible. After all, the palace is ultimately a playground for political games.

-Hmm.

-If there's nothing, then don't bother. Your goal isn't to get involved in their factional strife anyway.

-That's true.

Mok Gyeong-un soon deactivated the power of the Third Eye.

If he truly hadn't cultivated internal energy, then as Cheong-ryeong said, there was no need to pay attention to him.

However, he couldn't understand why he felt something irritating from that person.

His original source of life force, which could be considered the source of life, seemed slightly larger compared to ordinary individuals, but that was about it.

And so, the next day of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination arrived.

The senior-grade trainees were waiting in the training grounds with tense expressions.

At that moment, a group of people gathered on the platform of the training grounds.

Everyone's gaze turned towards the front.

Wearing red and blue fish-scale armor and golden belts, they were the supervisory Embroidered Uniform Guards in charge of this Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

“Wow.”

Some of the trainees who were looking ahead let out exclamations of admiration.

That was because the Embroidered Uniform Guard in red fish-scale armor standing at the forefront was an exceptionally beautiful woman.

However, unlike these trainees, Mok Gyeong-un had a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Hmm.’

He had heard about the rank indicated by the golden belt on the red fish-scale armor.

They were the Six Commanders, who could be considered the heads of the Six Offices among the Embroidered Uniform Guards in charge of practical affairs.

Excluding the Southern Commander-in-Chief and Northern Commander-in-Chief, who were called the pinnacle of the Embroidered Uniform Guards, he had heard that the six Commanders possessed the most outstanding martial prowess among the Embroidered Uniform Guards in charge of practical affairs.

Two of those Commanders were on the platform.

The male Commander had reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm, which was exactly the level he had expected, but the energy he sensed from that beautiful female Commander was merely at the Peak Realm.

He wondered if she was concealing her energy, but that didn’t seem to be the case either.

‘What’s going on?’

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at her, then shifted his gaze to the person who had been diligently training yesterday by doing push-ups while standing on one hand.

-Why are you acting like that?

-...No, it might just be my imagination.

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

At that moment, the male Commander on the platform stepped forward and spoke,

“All training disciples, be quiet.”

With his resounding voice filled with internal energy, the hall instantly became silent.

Surprised expressions were evident here and there.

Everyone knew that the martial prowess of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Commanders had reached the Transcendent Realm, but directly experiencing the internal energy of such a Commander seemed to leave them in awe.

“Amazing.”

“So this is a Commander.”

For those who aimed to become Embroidered Uniform Guards, they were objects of admiration.

As if sensing the gazes of these individuals, the male Commander shrugged his shoulders with a satisfied expression and opened his mouth again,

“I am Chae Ho-seong, the supervisory Commander in charge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process this time...”

“I am Commander Seo Yerin.”

The trainees cheered at the introduction of the female Commander that followed.

Seeing this scene, Chae Ho-seong shook his head.

Indeed, there was no way to surpass the popularity of this beautiful, sole female presence.

“Quiet!”

At Chae Ho-seong’s reprimand, the hall became silent once again.

Then, he continued,

“As you have heard from the Head Instructor of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, through this Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination, we will select the second-round applicants for the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection.”

Up to this point, it was a fact that everyone already knew.

The main point was right after.

“Now, we will begin the first selection process, which is the test to measure internal energy. Those who fail to reach the minimum standard of first-rate internal energy level for the Embroidered Uniform Guards will be eliminated.”

‘Internal energy test?’

The training grounds instantly became chaotic at the selection process that was about to begin.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard Warriors moved busily, preparing for the internal energy measurement.

In the meantime, Commander Chae Ho-seong descended from the platform and looked at the six individuals in blue fish-scale armor.

They were the assistant supervisors dispatched from the Six Offices, collectively known as the Six Officers of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

The blue fish-scale armor symbolized the rank of Commander.

And the number embroidered in silver thread on their right arm indicated which office they belonged to.

The ranks of the Embroidered Uniform Guards in charge of practical affairs were 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); Six Offices Commander, Yukcheonho (Junior 4th rank); and Pacification Commissioner, Jinmusa (Senior 4th rank).

Above them were the Associate Military Commissioner, Deputy Military Commissioner, and Military Commissioner who controlled all the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

Since the Military Commissioners were essentially responsible for issuing orders, the actual power could be considered within the hands of the Thousand-men Commanders, which was why the latter were referred to as the pinnacle of the Embroidered Uniform Guards.

These Thousand-men Commanders were assigned to the six offices of the Six Officers, with a minimum of two to a maximum of four per office.

Therefore, it could be said that the second-in-commands of each office had come.

Through this examination, the Thousand-men Commanders had to carefully observe the training disciples to assess their aptitude and fill the personnel for each office.

“How is it? Are there any trainees that catch your eye for each office?”

The Thousand-men Commanders had already familiarized themselves with the personal information of the senior-grade trainees for each office.

In response to Commander Chae Ho-seong’s question, Thousand-men Commander Hwa Yeong-in from the First Office, which was in charge of the safety of the imperial family and the Inner Palace Bureau (including the Empress and concubines), let out a soft sigh and said,

“The First Office doesn’t have much choice in the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination anyway, so I didn’t take a close look.”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

Commander Chae Ho-seong cut off his words at an appropriate point.

It was because there were many eyes and ears watching.

As Thousand-men Commander Hwa Yeong-in from the First Office said, it was difficult to bring in truly capable individuals to the First Office in the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination because they were assigned preselected candidates.

However, if they openly discuss this, it would reach the ears of the preselected candidates.

“What about the Second Office?”

“Looking at the list, the fellow named Geum Jong-hyeon seems the most interesting.”

“Oho. Geum Jong-hyeon.”

At the words of Thousand-men Commander Si Wooryang from the Second Office, the other Thousand-men Commanders also showed interest.

They had also been interested in his unique background.

Not only was he the son of a 5th rank Lecturer at the Hanlin Academy from a scholarly family, but he had also become a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect and was among the top five in terms of performance among the trainees.

“He’s similar to us. Isn’t that right, Thousand-men Commander Oh?”

“That’s right, Commander.”

Thousand-men Commander Oh Moo-gi from the Third Office agreed with Commander Chae Ho-seong’s words.

They had also been keeping an eye on Geum Jong-hyeon.

With his outstanding martial prowess and excellent performance, as well as his sharp intellect coming from a scholarly family, he was a talent that the Third Office, which was an intelligence office, would covet.

“The Third Office already received the top scorer last time, so please yield a bit this time.”

“Hahahahaha.”

At Si Wooryang’s words, Chae Ho-seong laughed heartily.

And he firmly refused.

“No way.”

“You’re being too much.”

“Then hurry up and get promoted.”

“Ahem.”

In any case, the final decision on who passed the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination would be made by a gathering of all the heads of the Six Offices.

Therefore, there wasn’t much significance in chattering like this now.

Commander Chae Ho-seong, who had been enjoying teasing Thousand-men Commander Si Wooryang, now turned to Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo from the Fourth Office and asked,

“What about the Fourth Office?”

“Our Fourth Office has our eyes on Namgoong Chunghyeon from the Namgoong Clan. Given the nature of our Fourth Office, which is in charge of the armory, it would be best to have someone with the most outstanding martial arts join us.”

“Indeed. That’s true.”

Everyone had expected Namgoong Chunghyeon’s name to be mentioned at least once.

He was the grandson of Namgoong Jin, the wielder of the Heavenly Sword, from one of the seven great clans, a renowned martial arts family.

From the moment he entered, he had already reached the early stage of the Transcendent Realm and was a genius who could overwhelm all the trainees with his swordsmanship alone.

Thus, it was acknowledged by all the Thousand-men Commanders of the Six Offices.

“I don’t know about that.”

At that moment, someone spoke.

Everyone’s gaze turned towards him.

He was the man with the darkest impression among the six Thousand-men Commanders.

This Embroidered Uniform Guard, with numerous scars on his face, was Maek Ha-gyun, the Commander of the Fifth Office, which was responsible for the most secretive affairs.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The most outstanding individuals in this class might be the late-stage disciples from the Heaven and Earth Society. Especially the trainees named Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak, their martial prowess was difficult to gauge.”

“...Ah!”

At these words, Commander Mak Myeong-bo of the Fourth Office didn't deny it.

He had also belatedly received a report about the participation of the late-stage disciples from the Heaven and Earth Society, so as soon as he entered the training grounds, he had carefully observed them.

And the result was undeniable.

Just as Commander Maek Ha-gyun of the Fifth Office said, especially the individuals named Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak were difficult to gauge in terms of martial prowess, even for him, a Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

This couldn't be categorized as the level of late-stage disciples.

“It seems they deliberately sent them.”

Indeed, it was characteristic of the Heaven and Earth Society, which was said to pursue the most fundamental martial arts among the three great powers in the martial arts world.

In this Warrior Examination, an entirely unpredicted outcome might unfold.

“I think the person named Yeom Gyeong is also quite formidable.”

At that moment, Commander Tae Ho-in of the Sixth Office chimed in.

At his words, the others chuckled and laughed.

He was a lay disciple of the Huashan Sect, so he was highly evaluating Yeom Gyeong, the official disciple of his sect.

Of course, there was some bias, but the trainee named Yeom Gyeong was also a talented individual with one of the top five grades.

While preparations were being made to conduct the internal energy measurement, Commander Chae Ho-seong, who had listened to the opinions of all the Commanders of each office in the Six Offices Officials, now tried to summarize.

“Alright. I have heard the opinions of each Commander. Now, once we conduct the internal energy measurement, we will know who among them is outstanding.”

“That’s right. Now that it has come to this, Commander Chae, how about we make a bet?”

“A bet?”

“What do you think about betting on the dinner?”

At the suggestion of Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office, Commander Chae Ho-seong showed interest.

He had already planned to gather with the supervisors and have a light dinner after work today anyway.

Commander Chae Ho-seong looked at each Commander.

“I agree.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s do that.”

With everyone in agreement, Commander Chae Ho-seong grinned and said,

“If everyone bets on the same person, the bet won’t be valid and it won’t be fun, so if two or more people gather, choose a different trainee on your own.”

“Understood.”

And so, a bet was established on the internal energy measurement of the trainees.

Each person bet on the trainees they found interesting, just as when their opinions were first asked.

The only one who didn’t express an opinion was Commander Seo Yerin, who seemed uninterested in the bet.

She had such an expressionless face that it was difficult to tell what she was thinking.

At this, her fellow Commander Chae Ho-seong said,

“Commander Seo, aren’t you going to choose? Since we’re having a dinner anyway.”

Silently observing Chae Ho-seong and the Commanders, she carefully parted her lips.

“Hasn’t our Commander Tae Ho-in already chosen Yeom Gyeong?”

“Huh? Does that mean Commander Seo has someone else in mind?”

“...”

Her silence was closer to affirmation.

Everyone became curious about this.

“Who is it that you’re acting like this?”

“Is it Seop Chun or Mong Mu-yak from the Heaven and Earth Society after all?”

“Or Namgoong Chunghyeon?”

As if burdened by the Commanders’ questions, Commander Seo Yerin silently took a step back.

Finding this frustrating, Commander Chae Ho-seong said,

“Anyway, the bet isn’t by office but by individual, so just tell us.”

At that, she quietly parted her cherry-like lips.

“...I choose Joo Woonhyang.”

‘!?’

At her words, everyone’s jaws dropped in astonishment.

It was because she had mentioned a trainee that no one had expected.

It was so absurd that even Commander Hwa Yeong-in of the First Office, who had shown little interest in the bet next to her, asked in confusion,

“Commander Seo. Could you have mistaken him for Joo Sangjae, the second son of General Seung-sin?”

“Ah, I see. Then that makes sense. That trainee also has high grades.”

“So you’re betting on Joo Sangjae?”

At their words, Commander Seo Yerin shook her head and said,

“No, it’s definitely Joo Woonhyang, the third son of General Seung-sin.”

“Ha... My goodness.”

“Are you doing this just for fun?”

“Commander Seo Yerin, that fellow only recently became an official disciple of the Kongtong Sect, but he has a constitution that couldn’t cultivate internal energy until now.”

“Perhaps you’re doing this deliberately to buy dinner.”

Everyone couldn’t accept her opinion.

Nevertheless, she stubbornly insisted on the trainee Joo Woonhyang.

She had her own reasons for choosing him.

However, unlike this choice, there was one more person who strangely caught her attention.

Glancing sideways, she looked at a trainee with exceptional beauty who was staring intently at her among the trainees standing in five rows.

‘Was his name Mok Gyeong-un?’

Despite being from the Heaven and Earth Society, he was the only one who didn’t receive attention.

The reason was simple.

His martial prowess was particularly lacking compared to the other two.

However, in her eyes, this felt like a sense of incongruity.

‘…Strange.’

Why did she feel a brutal oppressive aura behind that smiling face?

Chapter 235 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (4)

The internal energy measurement, the start of the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process, began.

Six Commanders lined up in front of the platform in the training grounds, and dozens of thick stone slabs were placed in front of them.

Commander Chae Ho-seong addressed the trainees lined up in six rows,

“Do you see? What is placed in front of you are stone slabs made of Gyeokse Stone. Transcending Stone [1].”

-Murmur murmur!

At the mention of Gyeokse Stone, the trainees buzzed with excitement.

-Oho. So many Gyeokse Stones. The palace budget must be overflowing indeed.

At Cheong-ryeong’s words, Mok Gyeong-un asked curiously,

-What is Gyeokse Stone?

-You don’t know about Gyeokse Stone... Aah. Mortal, there’s no way you would know about such things. There are stones processed from specific materials to withstand internal energy.

-Withstand internal energy?

-Yes.

-There must be a purpose for creating them.

-Of course. If high-level internal energy masters train in an ordinary training room, do you think anything would remain intact? Most of the training rooms in renowned martial arts families or sects are made of Danse Stone, Severing Stone[2] or Gyeokse Stone.

-Danse Stone?

-Although its material and durability are inferior to Gyeokse Stone, it can easily withstand first-rate internal energy, and it requires at least a pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm of internal energy to shatter it.

-Oho. Then Gyeokse Stone must be even tougher.

-Obviously. Gyeokse Stone is tailored for internal energy masters who cultivate advanced martial arts. Its durability is incomparable to Danse Stone.

In other words, Gyeokse Stone could withstand internal energy from the peak to the transcendent realm.

Hearing this, it seemed understandable why Cheong-ryeong was surprised.

Without the financial resources of the palace, who would dare to use such a large quantity of Gyeokse Stones for examination purposes?

At that moment, Commander Chae Ho-seong continued,

“Silence! How can you become Embroidered Uniform Guards if you’re intimidated by just this much?”

“...”

“The test is simple. Whether you use swords or fists, it doesn’t matter. Create a mark with a minimum depth of one cun (approximately 3.33 cm) using your internal energy. Those who fail to do so will be eliminated. Understood?”

At those words, the trainees’ expressions darkened.

Gyeokse Stone was said to be first-rate, but it was impossible to leave a scratch unless one approached the pinnacle of that level.

Yet, they were asked to leave a mark of at least one cun deep, making the difficulty level of the test extremely high.

“Why is there no response?”

“Yes, sir!!!”

At his urging, the trainees responded vigorously.

The selection process began under the supervision of the Commanders of each office.

The trainees came out one by one and took turns attempting to leave marks on the Gyeongse Stone slabs, quickly separating the failures from the successes.

“Gwak In-myeong, fail!”

“Heo Juk-ye, fail!”

“Han Myeong-cho, pass!”

Whenever a result was announced, emotions varied.

Some of the failed trainees were disappointed, while others even wept.

There were even some who couldn’t accept the result and clamored for another chance.

However, the supervising Commanders handled them coldly.

“You entered with such a mediocre level of internal energy? Get lost.”

“Sob.”

“If you’ve just reached the first-rate level, it’s best to give up early.”

“I-I apologize.”

The difference between the early and late stages of the first-rate realm was clear.

Those with internal energy who had just entered the first-rate level could only leave a mark of about half a cun.

However, those who were close to the pinnacle or approaching the Peak Realm clearly left marks of more than one cun in an impressive manner.

At that moment, someone’s attempt went nearly one and a half cun deep.

“Joo Sangjae, pass!”

‘I did it.’

Joo Sangjae, who had created a sword mark more than one and a half cun deep on the Gyeongseong Stone slab, cheered in delight upon passing.

With this, he had taken a step closer to becoming an Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Joo Sangjae, who had joined the waiting line of successful candidates, looked at the trainees undergoing the measurement with a triumphant expression.

“The Embroidered Uniform Guard is indeed the elite force even within the palace. To think the standard for new recruits requires reaching the minimum stage of First-Rate.”

Seop Chun clicked his tongue in a low voice.

He had heard that in the past, the palace didn't have many martial arts experts.

As a result, several embarrassing incidents had occurred, which was why the palace was putting effort into cultivating martial arts experts.

Mong Mu-yak, who was standing behind Seop Chun as he expressed his admiration, spoke,

“Don't make a fuss over such things.”

“What fuss are you talking about?”

“Even if internal energy is important, the core of combat power is practical ability. Increasing the number of people who can't fight is meaningless.”

“My, aren't you quite something?”

He could have just acknowledged it appropriately without making a fuss.

Seop Chun provoked Mong Mu-yak,

“Since you're so great, how about we make a light bet?”

“A bet?”

“Yes. Let's see who can leave a deeper mark.”

“...The stakes?”

Seop Chun lifted the corners of his mouth.

He thought this fellow would definitely accept the bet.

Even while denying it, this guy considered him a rival, so he would easily fall for such provocation.

“Although I’m bound to lose, how about the loser calls the winner ‘big brother’?”

“Big brother?”

Seop Chun was originally older than Mong Mu-yak.

Of course, that didn’t mean Mong Mu-yak disliked being treated like a friend by him.

He just wanted to see this guy’s uncomfortable expression while calling him ‘big brother’.

“Are you scared?”

“…Who’s scared?”

In the end, Mong Mu-yak accepted the bet.

In the meantime, it was the turn of Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect and one of the trainees the senior-grade focused on.

Yeom Gyeong took a deep breath and thrust his sword toward the Gyeongse Stone slab.

-Thud!

The sword infused with internal energy soon penetrated the stone slab.

But at a glance, the depth was extraordinary.

Even at a glance, it had penetrated more than two cun deep.

“Ooh!”

Many couldn’t help but exclaim in admiration.

No one had exceeded two cun among those who had taken the test so far.

Commander Mak Myeong-bo of the Fourth Office, who was supervising in front of Yeom Gyeong, shouted with a satisfied expression,

“Trainee Yeom Gyeong. Two and a half cun. Currently first place.”

‘Huh?’

Up until now, they had only announced pass or fail, but this time, they announced the depth of the mark along with the rank.

Saying he was currently in first place meant he had the highest score so far.

With this, Yeom Gyeong walked to the line of successful candidates with a satisfied expression.

‘It’s nothing special.’

Joo Sangjae, who had left a mark of one and a half cun, gritted his teeth in frustration at Yeom Gyeong's triumphant demeanor as he walked over.

The Huashan Sect wasn't called one of the Nine Great Sects for nothing.

At that moment, a shout was heard.

“Trainee Namgoong Chunghyeon. Four cun. Currently first place.”

‘What?’

‘Four cun?’

Joo Sangjae and Yeom Gyeong were startled and looked at Namgoong Chunghyeon, who had taken the test in the third row.

It was a truly overwhelming result.

It was almost as if he had penetrated the stone slab.

The other trainees who had yet to take the test looked at him with awe-filled eyes as he calmly sheathed his sword and walked out.

‘As expected of one of the seven great clans of the martial arts world.’

He was the best trainee acknowledged by everyone in the senior grade.

The Commanders on the side also clicked their tongues inwardly at the result.

‘The Namgoong Clan is indeed...’

‘Namgoong Chunghyeon...’

Even Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak, who had shown no interest in others, reacted uniquely to the result Namgoong Chunghyeon had achieved.

He was the grandson of Namgoong Jin, one of the Eight Stars of the martial arts world, known as the Heavenly Sword.

Befitting the grandson of such a person, he was indeed true to his reputation.

Yeom Gyeong and Joo Sangjae, who considered Namgoong Chunghyeon as their rival, looked at him with envious eyes.

At that moment, another result was announced.

“Trainee Geum Jong-hyeon. Three cun. Second place!”

‘Damn it!’

‘No way. That bastard Geum Jong-hyeon got three cun?’

Geum Jong-hyeon walked out with a yawn, looking bored and indifferent.

Seeing his demeanor, Yeom Gyeong and Joo Sangjae gritted their teeth.

Especially for Yeom Gyeong, being instantly pushed out of the ranking was a huge blow to his pride.

‘...Tsk. The real competition starts now.’

What they had just done was merely an internal energy measurement.

The difference of one or two cun in internal energy couldn't be ignored, but it wasn't significant enough to determine the wheat from the chaff.

At that moment, it was Seop Chun's turn.

The trainees around focused their attention on him.

That was because it was an opportunity to gauge the level of the late-stage disciples from the Heaven and Earth Society, whom they had only heard about.

-Swish!

Seop Chun grabbed the hilt of his saber at his waist and released it.

This was because the Bright Dance Saber, a unique weapon, was a treasure saber, and using it might yield results beyond internal energy.

Although it was a bet, Seop Chun focused his aura on his hand blade to compete fairly.

And he slashed the Gyeokse Stone slab with his hand blade.

-Slash!

The result was soon revealed.

“Trainee Seop Chun. Three and a half cun. Second place!”

-Murmur murmur!

The trainees buzzed at the incredible result once again.

He seemed to be a swordsman who mainly used sabers, but he achieved three and a half cun with his bare hands.

Didn't that imply he could have achieved even better results if he had used his saber?

"He's in second place, but isn't he almost on par with Namgoong Chunghyeon?"

"...The three great powers aren't just in name."

"What a monstrous guy."

While those around him expressed admiration, Seop Chun himself was utterly indifferent.

He thought he should have just used the Bright Dance Saber.

Still, as a martial artist, he had his pride, and because he had scored lower than Namgoong Chunghyeon of the orthodox sect, he wasn't in a particularly good mood.

However, Namgoong Chunghyeon felt the same way.

'...Did he refrain from using his weapon out of consideration for me?'

Namgoong Chunghyeon's sword was just an ordinary one that could be obtained from a common blacksmith's shop.

However, the difference between using and not using a weapon couldn't be ignored.

Because of this, Namgoong Chunghyeon inwardly reprimanded himself, thinking he shouldn't have used a weapon either.

At that moment, another result was announced.

-Thud!

A heavy fist strike that resonated through the Gyeongse Stone.

The stone slab was deeply dented by that single fist strike.

‘Look at this guy. Was he at this level?’

Seeing this, Commander Oh Mu-gi of the Third Office lifted the corners of his mouth and announced the result,

“Trainee Wi Bu-cheong. Three cun. Tied for third place!”

Many couldn't help but be surprised by the result.

Especially Yeom Gyeong of the Huashan Sect, who had instantly been pushed out of the ranking, was gritting his teeth.

Although Wi Bu-cheong seemed dissatisfied with the result, he snorted at someone as if to show off.

‘Did you see that? This is the gap between you and me.’

That someone was none other than Joo Woonhyang.

Faced with Wi Bu-cheong's attitude, Joo Woonhyang let out a soft sigh without a word.

“Hoo.”

He knew well why Wi Bu-cheong was treating him this way.

Wi Bu-cheong seemed to believe that Joo Woonhyang had used connections to be promoted despite not being able to use internal energy.

Shaking his head at this, Joo Woonhyang stepped forward.

It was finally his turn.

At that moment, a shout was heard.

“Trainee Mong Mu-yak. Three and a half cun! Tied for second place!”

-Murmur murmur!

“Another three and a half cun.”

“This is crazy.”

“Are the Heaven and Earth Society guys just a bunch of monsters? What is this?”

The trainees clicked their tongues in admiration, going beyond surprise at Mong Mu-yak’s test result.

The vast majority of the hundred senior-grade trainees struggled to exceed one cun, so three and a half cun was an astonishing level.

It was no exaggeration to say that they were in a different class from the start.

‘Damn it!’

Even Wi Bu-cheong, who had been somewhat satisfied with his own result, couldn’t hide his frustration.

Seeing Seop Chun from the Heaven and Earth Society achieve the result with his bare hands, he too had used his fists, which he had learned as a subordinate technique, instead of his main martial art, the sword.

Thanks to that, he had achieved a result of three cun, but with another person from the Heaven and Earth Society achieving a high result, it seemed to give the impression that the Evil Alliance, one of the three great powers to which he belonged, was the most inferior.

“Tsk.”

Mong Mu-yak, who had heard the result, moved to the successful candidates with a dissatisfied expression.

For the sake of his pride, he too had refrained from using a sword.

Nevertheless, he had aimed to take first place, but the result was a tie with Seop Chun.

The bet ended in a draw.

“Phew.”

Seeing Mong Mu-yak like this, Seop Chun let out a sigh of relief and wiped his chest.

He had been inwardly anxious, wondering if the guy would use a sword or achieve a higher result with internal energy to win the bet, but fortunately, it was a tie.

At that moment, it was Joo Woonhyang's turn.

A significant number of trainees closely observed this.

It wasn't a gaze filled with anticipation.

'Tsk tsk. He got greedy for no reason.'

'Since he got promoted using connections, let him be properly humiliated.'

'Do you think a guy who can't use internal energy can even leave a mark?'

They hoped that Joo Woonhyang, who couldn't cultivate internal energy, would fail miserably and be humiliated.

Joo Woonhyang took a deep breath and stood in front of the Gyeokse Stone slab.

Commander Mak Myeong-bo of the Fourth Office, the assistant supervisor in front of him, looked at him with eyes that held no great expectations.

'I don't know why Commander Seo Yerin bet on a fellow like this.'

He had even used his perception to see if Joo Woonhyang was hiding his skills.

However, as expected, this fellow seemed to have not cultivated internal energy at all.

Gyeokse Stone, let alone Danse Stone, wasn't a material that someone who hadn't cultivated internal energy could leave a scratch on.

‘He will only feel the limitations of his connections and leave.’

-Swish!

Joo Woonhyang, who had not received much expectation, placed his palm on the stone slab.

He didn’t strike it or make any movement, just placing his hand on it. Seeing this, Commander Mak Myeong-bo of the Fourth Office frowned and warned,

“Trainee Joo Woonhyang. Properly respond to the internal energy measurement...”

Before he could even finish his words,

-Kwadududuk!

Wind pressure surged around Joo Woonhyang’s palm and began to fiercely rotate.

At that moment, cracks formed on the Gyeongse Stone slab in a whirlpool pattern, and unable to withstand the force, the slab shattered, sending fragments flying in all directions.

-Papapapak!

“Gasp!”

Startled by the sudden event right in front of him, Mak Myeong-bo hurriedly blocked the fragments and leaped backward.

The same went for those on either side of him.

They urgently shielded the trainees taking the test and blocked the flying fragments.

‘!!!’

In an instant, the hall was engulfed in silence.

‘This can’t be.’

‘The Gyeongseong Stone slab...’

‘He completely shattered it.’

Every trainee’s mouth was agape, unable to close it.

The Commanders of the Six Offices Officials were equally perplexed by this astonishing result.

It was a shock in itself.

The only one who showed a reaction of it being natural despite this tremendous result was Commander Seo Yerin, who quietly lifted the corners of her mouth.

Everyone in the hall couldn’t hide their astonishment.

Among them, no one had imagined that Woonhyang would shatter the Gyeongseong Stone slab.

‘Didn’t that guy lack internal energy?’

‘This is unbelievable.’

Beyond the result that had occurred, everyone questioned it.

They had thought that Joo Woonhyang, who couldn't cultivate internal energy, had been promoted to the senior grade due to his connections.

‘How can this be...’

Naturally, they had expected him to fail miserably in the internal energy measurement, but when he completely shattered the slab, Wi Bu-cheong was at a loss for words, finding it absurd.

How could such a thing happen?

‘Ha...’

‘My goodness...’

The Commanders of each office in the Six Offices Officials were equally dumbfounded.

They had examined the trainee records prepared in advance.

The record about Joo Woonhyang written there was an utter mess.

But now, he had demonstrated something incredible.

‘...This is not the level of a trainee.’

To shatter a Gyeokse Stone, one needed to have pure internal energy at the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm.

This was something that even the Commanders of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, who were the assistant supervisors of each office, could hardly do.

‘What on earth?’

‘Has he been hiding his skills all this time?’

The Commanders’ minds couldn’t help but become complicated.

Just like them, Commander Chae Ho-seong, one of the two overall supervisors of the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process, was also quite surprised and couldn’t take his eyes off Woonhyang.

Without looking at Commander Seo Yerin beside him, Chae Ho-seong casually asked,

“Did you know?”

At this, Seo Yerin only showed a faint smile.

Seeing her reaction, Chae Ho-seong’s eyes narrowed.

Even he hadn’t noticed that Joo Woonhyang had been concealing his martial prowess until now.

But the fact that she had noticed meant,

‘...Seo Yerin, are you saying you’re one step above me?’

Until now, he had estimated her martial prowess to be on par with or slightly below his own, so this was even more shocking to him.

As a Embroidered Uniform Guard aiming for the position of the next Southern Commander-in-Chief, he couldn't help but be wary.

“Commander Mak. Announce the result.”

Commander Chae Ho-seong shattered the silence and spoke.

At this, Commander Mak Myeong-bo of the Fourth Office, who had been brushing off the fragments of the shattered Gyeongseong Stone slab right in front of him, shouted loudly,

“Trainee Joo Woonhyang. Complete destruction of the Gyeongseong Stone. First place!”

At this result, the trainees who were waiting, those in the elimination group, and those in the successful group all looked at Joo Woonhyang with astonished eyes, still unable to shake off the lingering impact.

“Ha... There was a monster-like fellow in the palace too. Don't you think?”

“...”

Mong Mu-yak said nothing in response to Seop Chun's tongue-clicking remark.

He, too, was quite shocked.

He had thought that there would be almost no one who had reached such an incredible level at an age not even close to his lord, Mok Gyeong-un.

But the world was truly vast.

To think that such a monstrous fellow was here in the palace of all places.

Then, Seop Chun nodded his head and said,

“It’s our lord’s turn.”

“Ah.”

As he said, Mok Gyeong-un was walking towards the slab for his turn.

Some trainees watched with interest.

Because Mok Gyeong-un was also a late-stage disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society.

However, those who showed interest were the eliminated trainees with no skills or those with lower levels of internal energy. The reactions of the supervisors and the top-performing trainees were different.

‘This fellow is the most ordinary among the Heaven and Earth Society’s late-stage disciples.’

‘He’s weaker than those two.’

‘He’ll pass without issue, but he doesn’t seem to be at the level to stand out.’

That was the majority of the reactions.

That’s because the Mok Gyeong-un they sensed with their perception was merely at the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm at best.

Of course, even that was superior to most senior-grade trainees.

It's just that compared to the Heaven and Earth Society and the top-ranking trainees, he was considered inferior.

In that manner, Mok Gyeong-un stood in front of the Gyeongse Stone slab.

“Begin.”

Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office, who was assessing Mok Gyeong-un's group, spoke.

‘It will probably be around two cun to two and a half cun.’

That was his estimation.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un looked at the Gyeongse Stone slab and spoke,

“Is there any significant meaning in leaving a mark on a lifeless and unmoving stone?”

At these words, Commander Si Wooryang snorted and said,

“Save such words for after you properly leave a mark on the slab, trainee.”

It was extremely presumptuous for a fellow who couldn't even reach the level of the top-ranking martial prowess to say such things.

Such words would have been understandable if it had come from someone like Joo Woonhyang, who had completely shattered the slab.

‘Tsk tsk.’

But then, Mok Gyeong-un placed his hand on the upper part of the slab, not the slab itself.

Commander Si Wooryang warned,

“Do it properly. Not there, but on the front side of the slab...”

Before he could even finish his words,

Mok Gyeong-un, who had placed his hand on the slab, grabbed it from the top and slowly dragged his five fingers downward.

-Creak creak creak.

At that moment, something astonishing happened.

The Gyeongse Stone slab was being dug out as if it were made of compacted dirt.

‘!!!!!!’

Chapter 236 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (5)

Creak creak creak!

The Gyeongse Stone slab crumbled and dug down as if it were kneaded clay.

Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office, the assistant supervisor who hadn’t held any particular expectations, couldn’t hide his shock at the sight unfolding before his eyes.

‘W-What is this?’

Based on his perception, Mok Gyeong-un's martial prowess was at the pinnacle-stage of Peak Realm.

Therefore, even at his best, he had expected about two and a half cun.

However, the result completely deviated from that expectation.

‘!!!!!!’

He wasn't the only one surprised.

The Commanders of the other five offices also couldn't take their eyes off this sight, stopping the test midway.

-Creak creak creak!

How was this possible?

Mok Gyeong-un's five fingers, which had been relentlessly kneading and digging down the stone slab, eventually passed through it completely, dividing the Gyeongse Stone slab into six long pieces.

-Thud! Thud thud!

Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office, whose head had lowered following these Gyeongse Stone fragments rolling on the ground, was at a loss for words, dumbfounded.

The training grounds, which had been engulfed in silence for a moment, soon buzzed with murmurs here and there.

“...This is crazy.”

“D-Did he just do that to the Gyeongseong Stone slab with his bare hands?”

“How strong must his internal energy be to go beyond leaving a mark and do that?”

From the trainees’ perspective, it truly felt monstrous.

And this admiration naturally led to a comparison with someone.

It was none other than,

“Both Joo Woonhyang and that guy, what the hell are they?”

“Are they complete monsters?”

“Even the assistant supervisors are dumbfounded, can’t you see?”

“That’s true. But still, doesn’t Joo Woonhyang, who completely shattered the Gyeongseong Stone slab, have stronger internal energy than that guy?”

“You’re right. Joo Woonhyang completely destroyed it.”

“Then, does Joo Woonhyang remain in first place?”

It was utter chaos.

However, the reactions of the Commanders were even more serious than those of the trainees.

When Joo Woonhyang had shattered the Gyeongseong Stone slab, they were surprised that his internal energy had reached the level of an Embroidered Uniform Guard Commander or above, not a trainee.

But this was even more shocking.

‘What a monstrous fellow.’

All the Commanders of the six offices shared the same thought.

About half of the Commanders gathered here could shatter the Gyeokse Stone slab like Woonhyang did if they unleashed their ultimate techniques or pushed themselves to the limit.

However, to do it like Mok Gyeong-un, advanced techniques were required.

The internal energy had to be controlled to prevent it from dispersing in all directions, allowing it to dig down the Gyeokse Stone while maintaining the shape of the five fingers.

This was a high-level advanced technique.

While the Commanders recognized this, there were also trainees who couldn't help but be in awe of Mok Gyeong-un's advanced technique.

They were Namgoong Chunghyeon of the Namgoong Clan and Geum Jong-hyeon, a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect.

Unlike the trainees whose level was inferior, they were as dumbfounded as the Commanders by the advanced technique Mok Gyeong-un had displayed.

‘...It's definitely not the level of a late-stage disciple.’

‘I think only Taoist Priest Geon Mun-ja, the Grand Preceptor, or the Sect Leader could do this.’

Because they possessed outstanding martial arts and keen insight, they clearly realized the gap between Mok Gyeong-un and themselves just from this one advanced technique.

Of course, there weren't only those who were purely in awe like them.

Wi Bu-cheong, who had learned martial arts from Gwi Sa-man of the Evil Alliance's Evil Sword Sect, felt strong jealousy towards Mok Gyeong-un, who was receiving the focus of attention following Joo Woonhyang.

-Grr!

‘Why are these guys appearing one after another...’

His plan to receive high scores in the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process regardless of being preselected and gain the attention of everyone, including His Highness Prince Gyeongjin, was gradually falling apart.

As a result, his anger towards Joo Woonhyang and Mok Gyeong-un, whom he considered to have ruined it, naturally grew.

‘I'm amazed. To think they reached such a level at that young age.’

Commander Chae Ho-seong, one of the overall supervisors, clicked his tongue.

Even he, who had reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm, could forcefully display the advanced technique shown by that late-stage disciple from the Heaven and Earth Society if he tried.

However, it was questionable whether he could do it with all five fingers like that.

It was an advanced technique that required the ability to control internal energy as naturally as breathing.

‘To have cultivated such monsters...’

Indeed, it was characteristic of the Heaven and Earth Society, one of the three forces holding hegemony over the martial arts world.

No one present could assess the level of that fellow.

Perhaps even Commander Seo Yerin had a similar thought...

‘Huh?’

Looking beside him, he saw Seo Yerin frowning and staring at the disciple from the Heaven and Earth Society.

It was the first time he had seen her with such a serious expression.

At this, Commander Chae Ho-seong carefully called out to her.

“Commander Seo.”

“Ah... Yes.”

She replied, slightly startled and trembling.

To her, Commander Chae Ho-seong clicked his tongue and said,

“It’s truly absurd, isn’t it?”

“...It is.”

“It seems another monster has entered the Six Offices Officials. It’s as shocking as when you and the Commander of the Fifth Office joined.”

Commander Seo Yerin had also amazed everyone at the time.

At the mere age of her early twenties, as a woman, she had demonstrated such incredible capabilities to secure the position of Commander, the pinnacle of the Six Offices Officials.

However, that monster sent by the Heaven and Earth Society was even younger than them.

He hadn’t even reached his early twenties yet.

That meant his potential for development was boundless.

Half-listening to Commander Chae Ho-seong’s exclamations, Commander Seo Yerin shifted her gaze somewhere.

It was none other than Joo Woonhyang, who was in the successful group.

‘As expected, you felt it too.’

Just like her, Joo Woonhyang also had a serious expression.

Joo Woonhyang couldn’t take his eyes off the chilling sensation rising from his spine.

This sensation of his fingertips turning cold was a first for him.

‘What was that just now?’

The moment Mok Gyeong-un from the Heaven and Earth Society placed his fingers on the stone slab, the energy within his body reacted extremely sensitively and activated on its own.

As if it were being vigilant of something.

‘It’s like pitch black.’

It was difficult to explain this sensation.

Nothing came to mind except that it was sinister and dark.

While being engrossed in the unpleasant feeling, Mok Gyeong-un from the Heaven and Earth Society slowly turned his head, and before he knew it, he was looking at him.

As a result, their eyes met directly.

‘!?’

Joo Woonhyang immediately furrowed his brows.

That was because that fellow named Mok Gyeong-un was looking at him as if he found him interesting.

Why was he looking at him with such eyes?

It was a moment of puzzlement.

Then, Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office, who had been assessing him, shouted the result.

“Trainee Mok Gyeong-un. Five-point segmentation of the slab. First place!”

At the result that instantly replaced first place, the trainees buzzed with murmurs, unable to hide their confusion.

“Huh? What?”

“First place?”

“It’s incredible, but isn’t Joo Woonhyang even more amazing?”

“Why did this result come out?”

It was difficult for ordinary trainees who didn’t know how challenging this advanced technique was to understand the result.

Among the trainees, only a few top-ranked individuals could comprehend this outcome.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had passed, calmly walked towards the successful group.

And as he passed by Joo Woonhyang, he whispered as if muttering,

“You had it hidden tightly in your middle danjeon, not your lower danjeon.”

‘!?’

Hearing those words, Joo Woonhyang’s pupils trembled slightly.

He tried his best not to show any reaction, but Mok Gyeong-un didn’t miss this fleeting moment.

However, there was no time for a lengthy conversation now, so he just said that much and walked past him.

-Clench!

On the other hand, Joo Woonhyang clenched his fist tightly the moment Mok Gyeong-un passed by him.

Seop Chun, who had been in front of Mok Gyeong-un, who had stood in the last row of the successful candidates, quietly slipped back and whispered to him,

“Well done, my lord.”

“There was no hardship.”

He had merely crumbled a stone slab.

To such Mok Gyeong-un, Seop Chun asked in a low voice, as if puzzled,

“But my lord... Didn’t you showcase your skills too much?”

He had been curious about this anyway.

Of course, to pass the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process, one had to be among the top-ranked.

However, if Mok Gyeong-un had wanted to, he could have been among the top-ranked without necessarily displaying such an advanced technique, by adjusting his performance to a certain extent.

But because of this, he was worried that he had unnecessarily drawn great attention.

To his words, Mok Gyeong-un replied,

“A troublesome matter has arisen.”

“A troublesome matter?”

“Yes.”

Mok Gyeong-un recalled something that had happened a moment ago.

Just a moment ago,

As Mok Gyeong-un approached the Gyeongseong Stone slab to take the test, a voice reached his ears.

-So you're the one who fearlessly tried to harm that person.

‘!?’

It was none other than the Voice Transmission Technique.

Mok Gyeong-un moved his eyes with narrowed eyes without showing any reaction.

Were there people in the palace who could use the Voice Transmission Technique?

While he was puzzled, the voice continued,

-You're composed. Quite impressive for your young age.

‘...A man.’

The voice belonged to a man, but he was using a quite feminine way of speaking.

Usually, such a way of speaking was characteristic of eunuchs.

Mok Gyeong-un opened his perception and tried to trace where this sound was being transmitted from by moving only his eyes.

-Do you think you can find me by looking around?

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes narrowed even further.

The sound dispersed in all directions, and the energy that contained it also spread out as if bouncing around, making it impossible to trace.

It was different from the Voice Transmission Technique he knew, the general voice transmission.

At that moment, the voice was heard,

-It's useless to search. I'm speaking using the Six Directions Voice Transmission.

Six Directions Voice Transmission?

What was that?

Did it refer to a technique that manipulated energy and sound in this way?

-Rather, according to Elder Beom's words, you have crossed the wall, but the energy I sense from you is merely at the Peak Realm at best.

Elder Beom?

From these words, Mok Gyeong-un could make two inferences.

‘They moved quickly.’

The only elder with the surname Beom that Mok Gyeong-un knew was the one he had seen at the inn in the heavy downpour.

Since he had fully read that elder's energy, Mok Gyeong-un could discover that an elder named Beom was alive in the palace and that he was a eunuch from the Western Depot.

He had noticed him being startled upon seeing him yesterday and hurriedly heading somewhere, but it seemed he had moved faster than expected.

‘This person must also be a eunuch.’

He didn't know about other things, but eunuchs couldn't easily change the way of speaking ingrained in their mouths.

That meant this person was likely a colleague or superior of Elder Beom.

‘...Hmm.’

He had expected it to become troublesome, but they had moved faster than anticipated.

Even before Mong Mu-yak could resolve it.

At that moment, the voice transmission continued,

-If that's the case, it means you're hiding your true martial prowess, right? This is perfect. If you have truly crossed the wall, show the skills befitting of that.

Mok Gyeong-un slightly furrowed his brows.

Show his skills?

Here?

‘...’

Originally, Mok Gyeong-un had intended to leave marks on the Gyeongseong Stone slab at a level similar to Seop Chun or Mong Mu-yak.

There was no need to reveal his skills here.

However, the other party made this request, and it truly started to become troublesome.

‘What should I do?’

The other party's intention was clear.

It was literally to confirm his martial prowess.

Of course, nothing good would come from being dragged along by this.

However, the other party was also not someone to be taken lightly.

-If you ignore my words, you will immediately be disqualified from the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination for the crime of attempting to harm that person.

‘!?’

-If you don’t want that, show the skills befitting of your level.

At this voice transmission, Mok Gyeong-un’s lips twitched with an expressionless gaze.

It was no different from saying they would forcibly interfere with his affairs if he didn’t showcase his skills.

“Isn’t it the one sent by that old eunuch from the Western Depot and the woman he serves?”

“Most likely.”

“Ha...”

Seop Chun couldn’t hide his concern at Mok Gyeong-un’s words.

Although he had hoped it wasn’t the case, it seemed the woman that eunuch served held a high position.

Otherwise, how could she mobilize an expert skilled enough to conceal his location from his lord using the Voice Transmission Technique?

If that were the case, that expert might be one of the top masters in the palace.

If so,

“...My lord, if it’s an expert of that level, we might be able to identify who it is. I’ll have Mong Mu-yak investigate once the first round of the Warrior Examination is over...”

“Investigating is fine, but there’s no need to do anything.”

“Pardon? But if we just leave them be, they will surely interfere even more...”

“They’ll approach us on their own anyway.”

“Approach us?”

“If they had thought of retaliation first, they wouldn’t have come out asking to see my skills.”

“Ah!”

Two walls away from the senior training grounds where the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination was being held.

There, a middle-aged eunuch in a red official’s robe with elaborate patterns appeared, his hands clasped behind his back.

As soon as he saw him, Eunuch Beom Jeung, who had been waiting, clasped his hands together in a polite gesture.

“Chief Eunuch Ho.”

Chief Eunuch.

It was an honorific used to address high-ranking eunuchs.

There were only a few eunuchs who could be addressed as Chief Eunuch, and one of them was the Chief Eunuch of the Western Depot, the highest position.

Eunuch Beom Jeung, who held the position of Chief Eunuch just below that, asked,

“What do you think after seeing it in person? Although it was rude, his martial arts were so outstanding that it was difficult to approach.”

At those words, Chief Eunuch Ho frowned.

Did it upset him?

At this, Eunuch Beom hurriedly bowed his head and carefully said,

“Of course, I don’t mean to the extent of Chief Eunuch Ho, who is acknowledged as the best master in the Western Depot...”

“No. He was much more outstanding than I expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“He managed to find me.”

“Pardon?”

Chief Eunuch Ho of the Western Depot turned his head away from the questioning Eunuch Beom and looked towards the training grounds.

He still couldn't forget those eyes.

Before he withdrew after confirming the fellow's skills and expressing admiration, he sent just one message using the Six Directions Voice Transmission.

-Indeed.

At that moment, the fellow accurately looked at him, who was hiding under the tiled roof of the building.

‘!?’

The moment their eyes met, Chief Eunuch Ho couldn't hide his surprise.

When using the Six Directions Voice Transmission, the sound and energy resonated identically from front, back, left, right, up, and down, making it impossible to determine the location.

However, that fellow named Mok Gyeong-un had accurately discerned his location.

This was the first time he had experienced such a thing.

Chapter 237 – The Disregard for the Embroidered Uniform Guard (6)

Not long after, the internal energy measurement of all the trainees was completed.

“Hmm.”

Seeing the number of successful and failed candidates, Commander Chae Ho-seong raised an eyebrow and let out a faint groan.

Out of the total 103 trainees, the number of failures was 37.

The successful candidates numbered 66.

Far more had passed the internal energy measurement compared to last year's selection process.

‘This is unexpected.’

At that time, Chae Ho-seong had participated as an assistant.

Back then, there were 48 successful candidates, but this time, the number had significantly increased.

It meant that the current class had relatively higher skills.

“Interesting, isn't it?”

At his words, the six Commanders of the Six Offices Officials standing below the platform nodded in agreement.

Even before, outstanding trainees would occasionally appear.

However, this class was particularly different.

Two trainees with martial prowess at the level of a Embroidered Uniform Guard Commander or above had emerged.

‘Mok Gyeong-un, Joo Woonhyang.’

Two individuals with a distinctly different feel.

Neither of them was expected, but they had been hiding astonishing martial prowess.

Moreover, since neither of them were preselected candidates, they were virtually strong contenders for the top scorer (first place) and second place in the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.

While Chae Ho-seong and the Commanders were making similar assessments, only Commander Seo Yerin was observing someone.

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

‘...My senses is warning me.’

If she were in charge as the overall supervisor, she would have judged that he shouldn’t be allowed to pass, no matter the reason.

However, she quickly suppressed that thought.

After all, she hadn’t joined the Embroidered Uniform Guard to enjoy wealth and glory or out of loyalty to the country.

Unless he directly caused trouble, there was no need to pay attention.

Commander Chae Ho-seong looked at the successful candidates of the internal energy measurement and spoke,

“I extend my congratulations to the trainees who have passed the first stage of the selection process.”

“Woohoooooooo!!!”

At his congratulations, the successful candidates erupted in cheers.

Becoming a member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the Emperor’s special guard, was a great honor and glory for them.

Commander Chae Ho-seong gestured for the cheering individuals to quiet down.

As the hall became silent again, he said,

“However, this is just the beginning. From now on, we will officially conduct the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process for a month.”

The successful candidates focused on his words.

It was an explanation of how the process would proceed.

“Before the second selection stage, we will impart the basic Embroidered Uniform Guard techniques such as the Arrest Techniques, the Gold Silk Hand Methods, and the basic formation of the Embroidered Uniform Guard for five days. There will be no eliminations during this stage.”

At those words, the successful candidates let out sighs of relief.

It meant they would have a breather for at least five days.

Seeing their reaction, Commander Chae Ho-seong smiled and continued,

“Don’t be too happy. During the remaining month, you will undergo the Embroidered Uniform Guard apprenticeship period, and we will continuously assign scores to eliminate failures.”

“Gasp.”

“Continuous eliminations.”

At this, the trainees’ expressions darkened in various ways.

It meant they couldn’t let their guard down except for those five days.

One of the trainees who had been listening silently raised his hand and asked,

“You mentioned an apprenticeship period, so how will it proceed?”

At the trainee’s question, everyone buzzed with murmurs.

They were hearing about the apprenticeship period for the first time.

To this, Commander Chae Ho-seong said,

“This class can be considered lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“At least before being eliminated, you’ll have the opportunity to experience what the Embroidered Uniform Guard does by going around the palace interior.”

The trainees buzzed at those words.

They didn't know that the apprenticeship would actually provide an opportunity to experience being a Embroidered Uniform Guard.

Therefore, some trainees couldn't hide their excitement.

‘Of course. Such opportunities are rare.’

The Embroidered Uniform Guard apprenticeship this time was entirely based on the opinion of the Director-General.

It was a process approved with the consent of the Southern and Northern Commander-in-Chiefs.

Testing the trainees' practical abilities through an apprenticeship wasn't a bad idea.

While the trainees were filled with anticipation for the practical field, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes flickered with interest for a different reason.

‘It's as Ma Ra-hyeon said.’

It was as mentioned by Ma Ra-hyeon, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard Commander.

That meant he might have an opportunity to go to the underground prison sooner than expected, as promised.

This was the right opportunity.

Since the explanation wasn't finished yet, Commander Chae Ho-seong continued,

“Do you know why the Commanders of each office in the Six Offices Officials came as assistant supervisors? It’s to provide you with the opportunity to experience each office for five days over the course of a month.”

“Ooh!”

The trainees erupted in cheers at those words.

They were being given the opportunity to experience not just a specific office, but all the offices.

The First Office, which was in charge of the imperial family and the Inner Palace Bureau, was the most preferred office among the Six Offices Officials by everyone.

‘Enjoy it to your heart’s content.’

‘Pathetic bunch.’

‘They don’t know that hell is about to begin.’

At their reaction, the Commanders of each office inwardly sneered.

Although it was an opportunity to experience each office, it could also be a grueling process with the highest elimination rate in the history of the selection process.

Throughout the apprenticeship period, scores would be given as if under surveillance, so there would be a constant stream of eliminations.

“Before the five-day basic Embroidered Uniform Guard training, I will designate the groups for the first apprenticeship office in advance.”

“Already?”

“This is exciting.”

“Please, the First Office!”

“I-I want to go to the Sixth Office.”

Everyone was filled with anticipation at the announcement that the groups for each office of the Six Offices Officials would be determined already.

It was understandable to be curious about which office they would be assigned to first.

The most preferred offices were naturally the First Office, which was in charge of the imperial family, the Third Office, which could be considered another core of the Embroidered Uniform Guard as the intelligence department, and the Sixth Office, where the exceptionally beautiful Commander Seo Yerin, known as the Ice Flower of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, was assigned.

‘Even if they rotate according to a set order, they’ll eventually go through all the offices, so it’s just shuffling the cards.’

While the trainees had their hopes, Mok Gyeong-un thought inwardly.

It didn’t matter which office they were assigned to first, as there was nothing particularly good or bad about it.

In the end, they had no choice but to experience all the offices.

Ultimately, the second test was to assess how well they adapted to whichever office they were assigned to and how outstanding their work abilities as future Embroidered Uniform Guards could be.

‘The Fourth Office is in charge of the prisons, right?’

Of course, he hoped to be assigned to the Fourth Office first.

It would allow him to shorten the time even more.

And,

‘It would be nice if the groups were divided.’

The ones he hoped to be in separate groups were Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak.

Although they had pledged loyalty to him, they strictly belonged to the Heaven and Earth Society.

It was still questionable whether they would readily follow his orders even if they went against the Heaven and Earth Society.

At that moment, Commander Chae Ho-seong, the overall supervisor, continued,

“The groups have been assigned based on the internal energy measurement scores, and the assignment to each office has been randomly determined by the Commanders present here, so complaints will not be accepted. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!!!”

And so, the group assignment announcement began.

Commander Hwa Yeong-in of the First Office came forward first and announced the members of Group 1.

“Trainee Namgoong Chunghyeon.”

At the first announcement, the corners of Namgoong Chunghyeon's mouth, who had been calm until now, twitched.

It seemed he also preferred the First Office, which was in charge of the imperial family.

Mong Mu-yak, who had approached beside him like Seop Chun at some point, whispered,

"It might be because Namgoong Chunghyeon's sister, Nam Gung-hye, is a concubine of the Emperor."

"A concubine?"

"Yes. The Namgoong Clan has had ties with high-ranking officials for a long time, and it seems they had sent the eldest daughter of the clan head to the palace early on through these connections."

"I see."

Hearing this, Mok Gyeong-un guessed why Namgoong Chunghyeon showed such a reaction.

It seemed he was happy because the opportunity to meet his sister had come early.

Starting with Namgoong Chunghyeon, the members of Group 1 were announced one by one.

"Yahoo!"

"The First Office from the start!"

"I'm lucky."

Naturally, the trainees who were assigned to the First Office from the start cheered, unable to hide their joy.

The imperial family's Internal Palace Bureau was an office that everyone who aspired to become a Embroidered Uniform Guard wanted to be assigned to.

‘Fortunately, I avoided the First Office.’

Unlike these trainees, Mok Gyeong-un had no interest in the First Office.

He only wanted the Fourth Office, where the underground prison was located.

‘Since they said it was based on scores, and Namgoong Chunghyeon, who is in third place, was assigned to the First Office, I won't be assigned to the First Office.’

There were only five offices left, so there was a 20% chance.

However, there was an unexpected announcement here.

“Trainee Mok Gyeong-un.”

‘Huh?’

They called his name next.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un raised his hand without showing any reaction.

“With this, the group formation for the First Office is complete.”

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un furrowed his brows.

If they had considered the scores, the top six should never have overlapped.

However, the fact that Namgoong Chunghyeon, who was in third place, and himself, who was in first place, were in the same group, was something he couldn't accept.

That would be the case if he were in seventh place.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un stroked his chin.

‘...It doesn't seem like it just happened this way.’

Since raising an objection here wouldn't change the office assignment, Mok Gyeong-un quietly closed his mouth, although he was suspicious.

And so, the announcement for Group 1 ended.

Since there were 66 people, they called exactly 11 names.

“Next, I will announce Group 2.”

Commander Si Wooryang of the Second Office came forward and started the announcement.

The Second Office was responsible for the inspection and security of the internal and external palaces.

It could be said that they had the opportunity to interact with numerous officials in the palace.

“Trainee Seop Chun.”

The first one to be called was Seop Chun.

As the groups were divided, Seop Chun spoke to Mok Gyeong-un with regret,

“It’s unfortunate. If we were in the same group, we might have been able to visit ‘that place’ even faster if we did well.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un smiled silently.

It seemed Seop Chun had also realized that there was an opportunity to enter the underground prison more quickly after hearing about the Embroidered Uniform Guard apprenticeship.

However, if they entered together, he wouldn’t be able to carry out the secret mission from the Shadow Clan Master.

This was better.

“Trainee Geum Jong-hyeon.”

The next one to be called was Geum Jong-hyeon, who was in fourth place in the internal energy measurement.

When he was called, he had an unpleasant expression.

When Namgoong Chunghyeon was called, he had also frowned, probably because he was in the same group as Seop Chun, a late-stage disciple from the Heaven and Earth Society.

“Tsk tsk. Who knows if it’s good?”

Geum Jong-hyeon, a disciple of the Zhongnan Sect, belonged to the Righteous Alliance, so Seop Chun wasn't particularly pleased either.

In the meantime, the remaining trainees of Group 2 were announced.

Unlike the First Office's Group 1, the trainees didn't particularly cheer or show signs of being pleased during the announcement of Group 2.

"Next, I will announce Group 3."

Commander Oh Mu-gi of the Third Office came forward and started the announcement.

Many trainees preferred the intelligence department, so there were quite a few happy reactions here.

Group 3 included Mong Mu-yak and 9 other trainees.

"Next, I will announce Group 4."

Commander Mak Myeong-ho of the Fourth Office stepped forward.

As soon as they saw him, the trainees flinched.

Among the six offices of the Six Offices Officials, five offices had at least a few who preferred them to some extent, but the Fourth Office was different.

'The office in charge of the prisons.'

The Fourth Office managed all the prisons and criminals in the palace.

In particular, there was a notorious place, which was the underground prison of the palace.

It housed everyone from traitors to numerous heinous criminals from the Central Plains, and managing them was the responsibility of the Fourth Office of the Six Offices Officials, so everyone avoided it.

‘Please don’t be chosen.’

‘It’s not the prison from the start, right?’

Everyone prayed that they wouldn’t be assigned to the Fourth Office.

At that moment, Commander Mak Myeong-ho of the Fourth Office opened his mouth.

“Trainee Joo Woonhyang.”

‘Yes!’

‘Great!’

The moment his name was called, a few people cheered.

It was Yeom Gyeong from the Huashan Sect and Wi Bu-cheong.

It seemed Joo Woonhyang had more enemies than expected.

‘What a pity.’

Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue.

He had wanted to go to the Fourth Office first, but Joo Woonhyang was assigned there.

‘It can’t be helped.’

Now that it had come to this, he could only hope that the next assignment would be the Fourth Office.

“Heh.”

Yeom Gyeong from the Huashan Sect openly sneered at Joo Woonhyang.

Although others didn’t know, Yeom Gyeong had a reason for disliking Joo Woonhyang so much.

That was because, at a gathering of Taoist sects, he had been humiliated in front of the True Persons of the Huashan Sect, the Kongtong Sect, and the Zhongnan Sect because of Joo Woonhyang.

‘Damn that bet.’

Thanks to that bet, Joo Woonhyang was acknowledged as a genius, while he was treated as a mediocre talent.

Because of this, Yeom Gyeong greatly disliked him.

He just wished for Joo Woonhyang to not do well, and amidst that, when Joo Woonhyang was assigned to the Fourth Office, which everyone dreaded, he almost let out a cheer in joy.

‘I heard even the Embroidered Uniform Guards avoid the prison because it’s so difficult, so your assignment luck is bad from the start, Joo Woonhyang.’

Yeom Gyeong openly sneered at Joo Woonhyang.

Then, Commander Mak Myeong-ho announced the next trainee for the Fourth Office.

“Trainee Yeom Gyeong!”

‘!?’

As soon as those words were spoken, Yeom Gyeong’s expression twisted.

‘Damn it!’

He had been sneering at that bastard until just now, so what kind of bolt from the blue was this?

“W-Why is that?”

Yeom Gyeong, unable to accept this, finally raised his hand and spoke.

Then, Commander Mak Myeong-ho frowned and raised his voice,

“Didn’t I say that objections to the group assignments will not be accepted?”

“But...”

“Trainee Yeom Gyeong. You’re starting with a point deduction.”

“What?”

“Let me tell you in advance. During the apprenticeship period, if you receive three point deductions from us, the assistant supervisors, you will be immediately eliminated and demoted to a Embroidered Uniform Guard trainee. Understood?”

At those words, Yeom Gyeong's insides were boiling.

He raised an objection and immediately received a point deduction. Who would have ever imagined that?

“Any complaints?”

“N-No, sir.”

If he argued further here, he would be the one at a disadvantage.

Yeom Gyeong, who had received a point deduction and the worst group assignment, gritted his teeth and inwardly cursed Commander Mak Myeong-ho.

When the announcement for Group 4 ended, there was one person who was disappointed.

It was Wi Bu-cheong, the disciple of Gwi Sa-man, the Sixth Devil Sovereign of the Demonic Alliance.

‘Tsk.’

He had inwardly hoped to be in the same group as Joo Woonhyang.

That way, he would have the opportunity to interfere with Joo Woonhyang becoming a Embroidered Uniform Guard or do something to him.

However, Wi Bu-cheong soon shook his head.

‘No, it doesn't matter.’

There was no need to be in the same group.

For a moment, a faint killing intent flickered in his eyes as he looked at Joo Woonhyang.

That day, after the group assignments were completed, the basic Embroidered Uniform Guard training began in the afternoon.

The basic training was moved from the Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Barracks to the Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Grounds, and the 66 successful candidates of the selection process were arbitrarily assigned to the dormitories there.

Late in the evening, after the training ended,

The trainees dispersed throughout the Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Grounds.

After finishing dinner, the time after that was free.

They could go to the dormitories and rest, or they could use the individual training rooms in the Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Grounds.

However, most of the trainees chose to train in the training rooms rather than rest for the upcoming Warrior Examination.

In one of the empty dormitories.

-Swish!

The door to the dark dormitory room, where even the lanterns were extinguished, slowly opened.

Through the gap in the door that opened with barely any sound, someone carefully entered.

The face illuminated by the faint moonlight coming through the window.

It was none other than Wi Bu-cheong, the disciple of Gwi Sa-man, the Sixth Devil Sovereign of the Demonic Alliance.

‘As expected, no one is here.’

Wi Bu-cheong lifted the corners of his mouth.

He had guessed that the bastard and everyone else would be in the individual training rooms, and it turned out to be correct.

Wi Bu-cheong, who had entered like this, examined the four-person dormitory room.

Then, after checking the belongings placed on the table next to a bed, he grinned wickedly.

‘Found it.’

Wi Bu-cheong, who had found the place of the person he wanted, took something out of his bosom.

It was a very small and sharp needle.

Wi Bu-cheong took out a few needles that were not easily noticeable, approached the wooden pillow on the bed next to the table, and started inserting them.

‘Hehehe.’

Wi Bu-cheong covered his mouth and reveled in it.

Imagining the owner of this place returning to sleep on the bed, he couldn't hide his excitement.

If these needles penetrated the back of the neck or the head, everything would go smoothly.

Wi Bu-cheong, who was enjoying himself with such imagination, turned his body to leave and tried to take a step.

However,

“The person I was waiting for didn't come, but a rat showed up instead.”

-Startle!

Someone was leaning against the door with his back turned.

Wi Bu-cheong, who had been staring at him intently, opened his mouth with a surprised voice.

“You... Could it be Mok Gyeong-un?”

The person standing in front of the door was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

Wi Bu-cheong, who discovered him, couldn't hide his inner bewilderment.

That was because he had entered after confirming that no one was in the room, and he hadn't even felt any presence while inserting the needles into the wooden pillow.

But how was this bastard in the room?

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un sniffed his nose and opened his mouth.

“Forsythia fruit, Sambac herb, Goji berry root, centipede venom, and dried opium... You prepared something interesting.”

‘!?’

Wi Bu-cheong’s eyes widened.

He didn’t know exactly what kind of poison was on the needles.

All he knew was,

[Since the poisons that penetrate very slowly into the body and even opium that causes hallucinations are included, this will affect the brain and make him gradually go crazy.]

That was about it.

But he never expected opium to be mentioned from that bastard’s mouth.

However, the problem wasn’t that he had guessed the poison inside.

‘How did he do this?’

How could he distinguish the smell applied to those tiny needles from this distance?

It was impossible without directly putting his nose to it.

But that wasn't the important thing right now.

The fact that someone had caught him committing this act was a big problem.

At this, Wi Bu-cheong tried to calmly handle the situation.

“Hey. Calm down.”

“What should I calm down about?”

“This isn't a bad thing for you either. We may all be in a competitive relationship, but the most annoying existence for you would be this guy, Joo Woonhyang.”

The owner of the bed was none other than Joo Woonhyang.

Wi Bu-cheong thought Mok Gyeong-un would also be interested in what he was saying.

“Once we take care of this guy, there will be no one who can compete with you in the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warrior Examination.”

“Oh?”

The guy showed a reaction.

Unless he was an idiot, he would know how beneficial this was.

If things went well, it seemed like he could just let it slide.

“I've already laid the groundwork, so forget about the rest and just quietly turn a blind eye.”

“Pretend not to know and let it go. Is that it?”

At those words, Wi Bu-cheong grinned and said,

“Yeah. As expected, I thought there would be something that resonates between you and me. For now, it’s a bit awkward to keep staying here, so let’s go out and...”

-Swish!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un’s figure disappeared from the door.

Wi Bu-cheong, who was startled, looked around, and before he knew it, Mok Gyeong-un was standing next to Joo Woonhyang’s assigned bed.

‘When?’

He didn’t see it even though it was right in front of his eyes.

While he was perplexed, Mok Gyeong-un extended his palm towards the wooden pillow on the bed.

Then, the needles that had been inserted into the wooden pillow came out and floated in the air.

‘V-Void grasp?’

He knew that Mok Gyeong-un’s internal energy was extraordinary from the first test, but he hadn’t expected it to be profound enough to enable void grasp.

At this, Wi Bu-cheong, who sensed that something was wrong, tried to dash towards the door.

However, before he could even do that,

-Slap!

Mok Gyeong-un suddenly grabbed his hair and pulled him back.

“Ack!”

For a moment, he was about to scream in pain, but,

“Shh. You need to be quiet.”

Mok Gyeong-un warned him.

At this, the flustered Wi Bu-cheong hurriedly said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“W-Why are you doing this?”

“Who knows?”

“Who knows? This isn’t a bad thing for you either. You just need to turn a blind eye, so why...”

-Grip!

“Ugh!”

Before he could even finish his words, Mok Gyeong-un pulled Wi Bu-cheong’s hair even harder, brought his face close, and said with a smile,

“Actually, it doesn’t matter to me whether you do this or not.”

“I-It doesn’t matter, but why?”

“The problem is, a person who has enjoyed something once doesn’t stop after doing it just once.”

“No. That’s...”

“You don’t need to try hard to make excuses. I’m the same way.”

“What do you mean, you too?”

“Once I’ve tasted blood, I can’t control myself.”

‘!?’

Along with those words, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth stretched up to his ears.

Looking at that face filled with nothing but malice, Wi Bu-cheong’s pupils trembled like crazy.

Chapter 238 – Primordial True Qi (1)

It was a night with an unusually white and bright moon.

Joo Woonhyang, who was moving from the individual training room of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Training Grounds to the dormitory, stopped his steps near the rear gate of the dormitory.

‘What’s going on?’

Two Embroidered Uniform Guard Warriors were standing guard under the torchlight at each gate.

Since it was close to the morning, it was common for some of them to doze off occasionally, but it was strange that both of them had their heads lowered.

Joo Woonhyang approached them closely and examined them.

-Swish!

He lightly touched them.

However, they remained motionless with their heads lowered.

At this, Joo Woonhyang placed his fingers on the pulses on their necks,

‘...Acupuncture point sealing.’

Acupuncture point sealing was a technique that could put the opponent to sleep or immobilize them by pressing specific acupoints on the human body, and these guards had been subjected to it.

‘To do such a thing here...’

Although the martial arts of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warriors weren’t that strong, who could have been so bold to do this in the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s territory?

Joo Woonhyang slowly drew upon his energy with vigilance.

Something didn’t feel right.

-Snap!

At that moment, the sound of fingers snapping came from the corner of the wall.

Turning his head, he saw the figures of two individuals in the darkness where the torchlight didn't reach.

Focusing his energy to enhance his eyesight, their outlines became visible.

‘Mok Gyeong-un?’

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un, the late-stage disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society.

But who was the one kneeling in front of him?

The face was covered with something like a headscarf, so it was impossible to see who it was.

However, the appearance of being subdued was utterly unsightly.

‘What's going on?’

Already, his vigilance towards Mok Gyeong-un had heightened due to the incident during the day, and now he was perplexed about how to interpret this situation.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un gestured to Joo Woonhyang.

As if telling him to come closer.

‘He's bold enough to seal the acupoints of Embroidered Uniform Guard Warriors in the Embroidered Uniform Guard's territory. No matter what, he'll try to make contact in some way if I avoid him.’

Although he didn't know what purpose that fellow had, it seemed like a situation he couldn't avoid.

After all, they were staying in the same dormitory.

Joo Woonhyang slowly moved his steps towards that place.

As the distance narrowed, Mok Gyeong-un smiled affably and said,

“Finally, we have an opportunity to have a quiet conversation.”

“An opportunity for conversation?”

So, had he been waiting for him all this time?

Although he responded calmly and nonchalantly, Joo Woonhyang's vigilance heightened.

“How bold of you. Not only sealing the acupoints of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Warriors but also that fellow over there, what's going on?”

At Joo Woonhyang's words, Mok Gyeong-un still replied with a smiling face,

“There aren't many places where we can have a quiet conversation here. So, I prepared a modest setting, although it's not much.”

“Prepared a setting?”

“Yes, but someone tried to make an appointment first, so I had to make them yield like this.”

-Tap!

Mok Gyeong-un placed his hand on the head of a trainee wearing a headscarf and concealing his identity.

Then, the trainee who had been kneeling trembled.

Judging from the reaction, he seemed to be terrified.

‘Who on earth is it?’

It was difficult to tell who it was just by looking at the attire.

But he wasn’t particularly curious either.

If he tried to save that trainee from Mok Gyeong-un’s hands out of a misplaced sense of sympathy, it might lead to more troublesome matters.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un removed the headscarf from the trainee’s head.

‘Wi Bu-cheong?’

He was surprised inwardly at the unexpected face.

Why was that fellow, who could be considered a preselected candidate from Prince Gyeongjin’s faction, caught in the hands of that unsightly bastard?

While he was perplexed, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile,

“He had done something interesting to your wooden pillow.”

“Something interesting?”

Joo Woonhyang glared at Wi Bu-cheong with eyes filled with suspicion.

‘!?’

He seemed to be filled with fear, unable to even make proper eye contact.

He was a disciple of Gwi Sa-man, the Sixth Devil Sovereign of the Demonic Alliance, so he had acted more arrogantly than anyone else, as if there was nothing in the world to fear.

But to see such a fellow making that expression...

‘What did he do?’

Joo Woonhyang opened his mouth, puzzled.

“...It’s poison.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s affirmative answer, Joo Woonhyang clicked his tongue inwardly.

He had known it for a long time, but perhaps because he had received teachings from the Demonic Alliance, an unorthodox sect notorious for its wickedness, he had become even bolder.

To think that he would try to use poison on him in a place like this.

‘I guess I really got on his nerves.’

Although the bastard kept glaring at him with murderous eyes whenever he had the chance, he had expected some troublesome incident to occur in the near future, but to think it would be today was quite a spectacle.

Mok Gyeong-un asked with a puzzled expression,

“You don’t seem greatly surprised?”

“It’s not something to be particularly surprised about.”

At Joo Woonhyang’s words, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth slightly lifted.

As if he had found something interesting.

“I’m starting to want to have a deeper conversation with you.”

“I don’t.”

When he flatly refused, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

Then, he tapped Wi Bu-cheong’s head, who was trembling in fear, with his fingers and said,

“Don’t be like that. Let’s have a bit more conversation. Before that, what should we do with this fellow? It’s a gift of sorts, so do you want to take him graciously?”

Mok Gyeong-un was giving him the choice.

At this, Wi Bu-cheong looked at Joo Woonhyang pitifully and moved his eyes up and down.

As if pleading for help.

‘Please! Please!’

Although he had wanted to kill Joo Woonhyang so badly, at this moment, he was the only lifeline.

This bastard was truly a fiendish fellow.

Joo Woonhyang, who had been staring intently at this sight, spoke,

“I refuse. It’s a bit much to simply accept as a gift someone who tried to harm me. If you’re going to give it as a gift anyway, I’d appreciate it if you could cleanly deal with it yourself.”

“Proxy murder?”

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile.

He was even cunning enough to understand his intentions right away.

If he was going to give it as a gift, he should handle it thoroughly himself to avoid any future complications.

On the other hand, Wi Bu-cheong’s eyes widened as if they would burst out.

‘W-What the hell are these bastards?’

He was on the verge of going crazy, caught between the two who were casually bargaining over his life as if buying and selling goods.

If Mok Gyeong-un hadn't sealed his mute acupoint, he would have screamed or begged for his life, but there was nothing he could do.

He couldn't understand how he ended up caught between these crazy bastards.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed his head and neck with both hands.

"Proxy murder... You're quite calculating despite having someone who tried to take your life right in front of you. To refuse such pleasure."

He was licking his lips as he said that.

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un like that, Joo Woonhyang took a deep breath.

This fellow might be even more dangerous than he had thought.

Joo Woonhyang opened his mouth without showing any reaction, as if it was nothing.

"It's not like I have a big backing like someone else."

Behind that fellow were the Heaven and Earth Society and Imperial Concubine Seo.

On the other hand, from Joo Woonhyang's perspective, directly killing Wi Bu-cheong would lead to troublesome matters.

The guy was a disciple of Gwi Sa-man, the Sixth Devil Sovereign of the Demonic Alliance, and belonged to Prince Gyeongjin's faction.

He wasn't even an Embroidered Uniform Guard yet, merely a trainee, so if he hastily killed the bastard, there was a high probability that Prince Gyeongjin's faction would make a fuss.

Even if the bastard had tried to poison him.

“Backing... You’re quite the exaggerator. Alright. Then, let’s consider this my small gift.”

“What?”

It was at that very moment.

Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Wi Bu-cheong’s hair and tilted his head back.

Then, he whispered into the ear of Wi Bu-cheong, who couldn’t do anything due to the acupoint sealing,

“Do you know? When this type of poison enters through the skin, its effects appear very slowly. But there’s also a way to make it work quickly.”

‘!?’

Wi Bu-cheong’s pupils trembled.

Even the person who had provided him with this poison needle didn’t know about this, so how did this bastard know?

It was a moment of bewilderment.

-Stab!

The poison needle pierced Wi Bu-cheong’s right eyeball.

‘Arghhhh!’

Despite the mute acupoint being sealed, when the needle penetrated his eye, the pain was so severe that Wi Bu-cheong convulsed and even let out a groan.

‘!!!!!!’

Even Joo Woonhyang, who had been watching this scene, was at a loss for words for a moment.

He never expected him to stab the poison needle into the eyeball.

Wi Bu-cheong’s movements, who had been convulsing in pain, ceased not long after.

But before anyone knew it, he had a dazed expression and was in a trance.

‘Ha...’

Joo Woonhyang clicked his tongue at the sight.

Truly bold.

That fellow’s backing wasn’t ordinary either, yet there was not a shred of hesitation in his actions.

Mok Gyeong-un smiled brightly and said,

“Is it a satisfactory gift?”

He was smiling with a radiant face, but it was filled with nothing but malice.

‘...Dangerous. Really.’

Instinct was strongly warning him.

Telling him not to get involved with that bastard.

While his mind was somewhat complicated about what to do, Mok Gyeong-un took steps towards him.

“Now that I’ve given you a gift, shall we learn more about you?”

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un’s figure blurred in front of his eyes and instantly closed the distance between them.

‘Fast.’

His lightness skill was beyond imagination.

Joo Woonhyang hurriedly leaped backwards.

-Paat!

It was the Silent Shadow Step he had learned from his second teacher.

The Silent Shadow Step was a body movement technique of the Silent Killing Sect, one of the Four Great Assassin groups. Although it couldn’t be said to be significantly superior to the current body movement technique of the Kongtong Sect, it allowed for such mysterious movements.

-Swish!

Joo Woonhyang somersaulted in the air while leaping backwards, going over Mok Gyeong-un who was trying to grab him.

“Oh?”

‘Take this.’

Joo Woonhyang, who had been rotating his energy in reverse before somersaulting, struck Mok Gyeong-un’s back as soon as he landed behind him.

-Whoosh!

The palm strike infused with rotating wind pressure aimed at Mok Gyeong-un’s back.

However, Mok Gyeong-un bent his waist while simultaneously rotating his body sideways, and then struck Joo Woonhyang’s head and neck with his legs in succession.

-Bam! Thud!

Joo Woonhyang, who was hit on both the neck and head simultaneously, crashed to the ground.

It was so painful that he almost lost consciousness for a moment.

-Grit!

Joo Woonhyang, who gritted his teeth, launched another palm strike with reverse rotation towards Mok Gyeong-un’s ankle as he lightly landed after striking him.

-Whoosh!

This time, even Mok Gyeong-un couldn't avoid it.

The moment it touched his ankle, Mok Gyeong-un's body was flipped over by the fiercely rotating condensed wind pressure and was sent flying.

'It worked.'

Even Mok Gyeong-un, who seemed to have reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm according to his estimation, couldn't withstand this power.

But the moment of joy was short-lived.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been sent flying, maintained his balance with ease, let alone falling over.

-Tap!

"Interesting technique."

'What the? This bastard?'

Joo Woonhyang was dumbfounded.

It was the Reverse Rotating True Qi that possessed the power to almost turn the Gyeongse Stone slab into powder fragments.

It had struck his ankle directly, yet he was too unscathed.

No.

He wasn't completely unscathed.

The torn flesh near his ankle was slightly open, and blood was flowing down.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had regained his balance and stood upright, slightly frowned as he looked at the wound on his ankle.

‘I blocked it with Death Qi, but a wound still formed.’

Death Qi was the energy of death.

It could scatter most ordinary true energy, but Joo Woonhyang's technique not only didn't scatter but also penetrated his Death Qi and inflicted a wound.

‘Is it because of that energy after all?’

The energy in Joo Woonhyang's middle danjeon was different from ordinary internal energy.

It felt completely opposite to his own Death Qi or Demonic Qi.

The corners of Mok Gyeong-un's mouth slightly lifted.

“I'm starting to become more and more interested in that power.”

With those words, he took steps towards Joo Woonhyang again.

At this, Joo Woonhyang endured the pain and stood up.

‘It's a labyrinth.’

This was a complete monster.

To reach this realm at such a young age, unlike himself who had become strong due to various opportunities, he was a true genius.

There was no confidence in defeating him.

However, he couldn't just take it lying down.

-Paat!

Joo Woonhyang, who judged that he couldn't defeat Mok Gyeong-un with his current skills, leaped towards the main hall of the Six Offices Officials of the Embroidered Uniform Guard while simultaneously trying to shout.

At that very moment, Mok Gyeong-un's figure blurred and instantly reached in front of him.

'Crazy!'

He was even faster than before.

Mok Gyeong-un, who appeared right in front of him, struck his Adam's apple with the blade of his hand between his thumb and index finger.

"Ack!"

He couldn't shout as he was hit in the Adam's apple.

As he staggered backward for a moment, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Joo Woonhyang's wrist with lightning-fast Arrest Techniques and twisted it behind his back.

Then, he placed his left palm on the immobilized Joo Woonhyang's chest.

And he injected Death Qi into his activated middle danjeon.

-Whoosh!

The purpose was to find out what this unique energy in Joo Woonhyang's middle danjeon was.

It was at that very moment.

-Roar!

The middle danjeon in the heart area became heated as if a flame had ignited.

The surging hot energy began to strongly push out Mok Gyeong-un's Death Qi.

Mok Gyeong-un's eyebrows raised.

‘What is this?’

-Mortal, why are you doing that?

Cheong-ryeong asked, seemingly puzzled.

-The energy in his middle danjeon is completely pushing out the Death Qi.

It was a phenomenon he had never experienced before.

The energy of death scatters and weakens the energy possessed by living beings.

However, this energy in Joo Woonhyang's heart, the middle danjeon, strongly responded to the Death Qi and pushed it away, preventing it from approaching.

-It's the first time I've seen innate source energy with such deep purity and strength.

-Source energy? Did you just say source energy?

-Yes.

-Ha!

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Cheong-ryeong couldn't hide her astonishment.

She, too, had doubts when Mok Gyeong-un said that Joo Woonhyang had an exceptional energy in his middle danjeon, not the lower danjeon.

But upon learning that it was innate source energy with deep purity that opposed the energy of death, Death Qi, she could now be certain.

-Mortal. It seems this fellow... has learned the Breathing Technique of the Immortals.

Chapter 239 – Primordial True Qi (2)

Mortal. It seems this brat... has learned the Breathing Technique of the Immortals.

-The Breathing Technique of the Immortals?

Cheong-ryeong spoke to the puzzled Mok Gyeong-un.

-Do you remember when I told you that the techniques for circulating energy in cultivation methods or divine arts originated from the Breathing Technique of the ancient Taoists?

-Ah... Yes.

-In the distant past, Taoist priests or immortals who had achieved deep cultivation practiced a breathing method to boost their source energy for longevity and ascension.

-Boosting the source energy itself, not just internal energy? Isn't source energy the predetermined life itself from birth?

-Yes. The energy of life is originally a predetermined source energy. That's why, in the distant past, it was called primordial true qi.

Primordial true qi.

It was the true original true qi that humans possessed innately from birth.

In this regard, things like internal energy were called postnatal true qi, as they were cultivated postnatally.

-Amazing. I heard that the Breathing Technique of the Immortals, no, the method of cultivating primordial true qi, had already been lost even in Taoism a long time ago.

-Then this person has cultivated the primordial true qi that had been lost?

-The only energy that can completely oppose the energy of the dead, Death Qi, is that.

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes flickered with interest.

Primordial true qi, which was completely opposite to Death Qi.

Perhaps this was the reason why he had felt a strange aversion since the first time he saw him.

To this, Cheong-ryeong warned Mok Gyeong-un.

-Be careful. Even if it's a weak energy, if it's completely opposed, it could be very fatal to you, mortal...

Before the warning could even finish,

The hot energy surging from Joo Woonhyang's middle danjeon caused a great rebound.

As a result, Mok Gyeong-un's palm, which had been placed on his chest, was repelled.

Seizing that fleeting moment, Joo Woonhyang struck a palm strike infused with primordial true qi towards Mok Gyeong-un's danjeon.

-Bang!

Mok Gyeong-un's body bent like a shrimp as he was hit in the abdomen.

‘It worked...!’

It wasn't because he had been hit.

The moment the palm strike touched his abdomen, it was to disperse it using the technique of harmonizing and blending.

-Crackle!

The primordial true qi flowed out through the soles of Mok Gyeong-un's feet, and the stone on the ground cracked.

Seeing this, Joo Woonhyang clicked his tongue.

He never expected him to disperse the palm strike so easily from this distance when he was caught off guard.

However, the real strike wasn't this palm strike.

With his other hand, Joo Woonhyang unleashed the Reverse Rotating True Qi he had prepared and aimed at Mok Gyeong-un's heart.

"It's that technique again."

Perhaps it was the technique with the greatest power among the ones Joo Woonhyang had learned.

However, it was his mistake to show the same technique multiple times.

From Mok Gyeong-un's perspective, this was no different from kindly providing a lesson.

-Whoosh!

At that moment, Death Qi began to condense and rotate in reverse in Mok Gyeong-un's palm as well.

Sensing this, Joo Woonhyang's eyes widened.

‘No way?’

However, Mok Gyeong-un and Joo Woonhyang’s palm strikes collided.

-Bang!

Simultaneously, a strong wind pressure erupted, and cracks formed on the ground around the two.

The moment of collision was almost a balance of forces.

At this, Joo Woonhyang couldn’t hide his inner shock.

‘How did he do this?’

The Reverse Rotating True Qi was a very profound technique.

It wasn’t the type of technique that could be learned simply by observing; it required enlightenment of the true meaning contained within the technique.

Yet, seeing Mok Gyeong-un precisely imitating it, Joo Woonhyang was naturally astonished.

-Tremble tremble

The force rotating in reverse was in a stalemate for a moment.

It was even more so because the energies of the two were completely opposite.

However, no matter how opposite the energies were, there was bound to be a difference in strength.

‘I-I’m being pushed back.’

Joo Woonhyang’s pupils trembled.

As Mok Gyeong-un drew upon more Death Qi,

-Bang!

Joo Woonhyang’s body was repelled backward.

He flew several feet and rolled on the ground several times before coming to a stop.

“Ugh.”

Joo Woonhyang, who had suffered internal injuries, vomited a mouthful of black blood.

‘A monster... like fellow...’

He collapsed limply.

This was the first time encountering such a monster.

From the realm he had reached to his energy, everything was on a different level, so he wasn’t an opponent that could be dealt with through any means.

“Cough cough...”

Joo Woonhyang, who was coughing up blood, staggered and barely managed to stand up.

His legs were trembling.

With his current condition after suffering internal injuries, it was impossible to even escape.

Joo Woonhyang raised his head and looked at Mok Gyeong-un.

And then he was dumbfounded.

‘Just a scratch?’

He was in such a state that it was difficult to even move due to internal injuries, while Mok Gyeong-un only had a small scratch on his palm.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un, who had been staring intently at the wound on his palm, opened his mouth.

“That power you possess. It seems quite troublesome.”

“What?”

“I’m talking about primordial true qi.”

‘!?’

At these words, Joo Woonhyang’s eyes widened.

How did this person recognize primordial true qi?

Primordial true qi was different from ordinary internal energy that could be cultivated postnatally, so it wasn’t the type of energy that could be discerned through perception.

At this, Joo Woonhyang asked in a rather serious voice,

“You... What on earth are you?”

“Who knows? That’s not important, but I’m in a dilemma.”

“A dilemma?”

“I’m thinking it might be better to kill you now, considering the future.”

“What?”

As soon as those words were spoken, he took steps towards Joo Woonhyang.

It seemed he was going to put it into action immediately.

Even though he was approaching slowly, Joo Woonhyang couldn’t properly control his body due to his internal injuries.

-Step step!

The sound of Mok Gyeong-un’s footsteps, approaching with murderous intent in his fingers, sounded like the signal of the Underworld Guard opening the gates of hell.

And that signal quickened.

Mok Gyeong-un leaped forward, intending to behead Joo Woonhyang in an instant.

Unable to avoid it, Joo Woonhyang stared intently at Mok Gyeong-un, who was swinging his fingers with a desolate gaze.

At that moment,

-Smack!

Mok Gyeong-un's fingers, which had been about to behead him, stopped precariously on his skin.

-Drip!

However, due to the murderous intent condensed in his fingers, the skin was cut, and blood flowed out.

Joo Woonhyang asked, puzzled,

“Why did you stop?”

“You're quite peculiar.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You're the first person to make such an expression before getting beheaded.”

“What do you mean by such an expression?”

“Usually, people would either be overwhelmed with fear and lose their senses or glare at me with resentment. Of course, they would also tightly close their eyes before dying.”

“...”

“But you stare at me intently even at the moment when your neck is about to be cut. And with a very desolate expression at that.”

This was a first for Mok Gyeong-un.

He thought all humans would be the same in the face of death, but Joo Woonhyang was different.

There was not a shred of fear towards death itself, and there was no feeling of resentment towards him either.

There was only a gaze of regret.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un asked,

“I’m curious about why you had such an expression.”

“...”

Joo Woonhyang frowned at this question.

What on earth was this bastard?

He couldn’t read his thoughts at all.

He abruptly tried to kill him and then stopped for a strange reason.

“...It’s a meaningless question, isn’t it? The power of life and death is in your hands anyway.”

“Still, I don’t know, so I’m asking.”

“...I don’t know if you’re playing with me, but after encountering a person like you, I absolutely don’t want to make you an enemy. If I’m forced to do so, I’ll have to desperately try to kill you using any means necessary.”

“You’re honest.”

“There’s no need to deceive when I might die anyway.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un lifted the corners of his mouth.

“It’s a first.”

“What’s a first this time?”

“Although that troublesome energy is annoying, I don’t particularly want to kill you anymore.”

“You don’t want to kill me anymore?”

“Yes, it seems like a very inefficient decision, but I don’t dislike you that much.”

‘!?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Joo Woonhyang frowned and couldn’t hide his bewilderment.

Did this fellow really have a change of heart as he had said?

Anyway, if there was a change in his mindset, it was also an opportunity to save his life.

At this, Joo Woonhyang carefully gestured towards the fingers with his eyes and said,

“Then, can’t you take this away?”

“I haven’t received an answer yet.”

“What answer? Ah!”

Was he asking why he had such a desolate expression when he was on the verge of death?

He seemed like a really peculiar fellow.

Why did he want to know such a thing?

It was incomprehensible, but he wanted to end this situation, so he opened his mouth.

“I just regretted that moment.”

“You regretted it?”

“...I had resolved to change everything with my own hands, but I was about to become unable to do anything again.”

At Joo Woonhyang’s words, Mok Gyeong-un looked at him with peculiar eyes.

They were clearly around the same age.

But the way he spoke was as if he had gained enlightenment in life.

That aspect felt very peculiar to him.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un said to him,

“After hearing your answer, even more...”

Before he could even finish his words,

-Smack!

At that moment, Joo Woonhyang’s figure in front of his eyes disappeared.

‘!?’

Where did he go?

Mok Gyeong-un moved his eyes and surveyed his surroundings.

Then, he saw a blurry figure charging towards him with tremendous momentum from the right.

The speed was so immense that it was difficult to discern with the naked eye.

It was impossible to avoid.

-Swish! Bam bam bam bam!

In an instant, something swiftly brushed past him.

Along with it, the vital points of his entire body were struck, and his body was sent flying limply into the air.

-Crash!

“Ugh.”

Mok Gyeong-un’s expression stiffened as he fell to the ground.

Not only was it painful, but due to the energy penetrating the major vital points, his body couldn’t move.

That energy was suppressing the Death Qi within Mok Gyeong-un’s body with a fierce momentum.

Through this, Mok Gyeong-un could tell.

This was,

‘Primordial true qi...’

It was identical to the energy Joo Woonhyang possessed.

The difference was that it was primordial true qi that was incomparably vast and profound compared to Joo Woonhyang’s.

A chilling voice reached Mok Gyeong-un’s ears.

“Trainee Mok Gyeong-un. As expected, you are a dangerous existence.”

The owner of that voice was none other than Commander Seo Yerin, the deputy supervisor of the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process.

Thanks to that, Mok Gyeong-un realized that his judgment had been correct.

When he first saw Seo Yerin, he had felt an aversion similar to Joo Woonhyang, but only for a fleeting moment.

However, unlike Joo Woonhyang, she possessed internal energy, so he had received this aversion faintly, but as expected, she had also cultivated primordial true qi.

-Groan! Groan!

The primordial true qi that had penetrated his body suppressed the Death Qi and tried to penetrate his five viscera and six bowels.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un took a deep breath and transformed his energy.

-Roar!

At that moment, black energy surged from Mok Gyeong-un's body.

It was Demonic Qi, born from gathering all the energy he had obtained so far, including Death Qi, into one.

-Whoosh!

The moment the energy was transformed into Demonic Qi, the profound primordial true qi that had penetrated each vital point was pushed out and oxidized, rising like a haze.

‘What?’

At this strange sight, Commander Seo Yerin's pupils, who had thought she had completely subdued Mok Gyeong-un, trembled faintly.

Chapter 240 – Primordial True Qi (3)

Whoosh!

Mok Gyeong-un slowly stood up as a hazy smoke billowed out.

Commander Seo Yerin's pupils trembled as she looked at him.

‘He's pushing out the primordial true qi that had penetrated his vital points.’

Primordial true qi was the source energy itself, so once it penetrated the body, it was difficult to expel it externally unless one possessed stronger internal power.

However, the ferocious energy currently rising from Mok Gyeong-un was surprisingly pushing out the primordial true qi.

‘What on earth is this energy?’

The smoke was gradually turning into black haze.

The energy was difficult to describe, feeling both turbid and even evil.

At this, wariness filled her eyes.

‘Even after having his eight vital points struck and adjusting his power, to utilize such energy... This person. He has crossed the wall.’

Seo Yerin was convinced at once that Mok Gyeong-un had crossed the wall.

From the moment he had crumbled the Gyeongse Stone in the first test, she had estimated that he had reached the pinnacle-stage of Transcendent Realm or possibly even higher, which was quite astonishing.

How could someone not even in his early twenties have reached such a realm?

‘...I heard he was a disciple of the Shadow Clan Master of the Heaven and Earth Society.’

If the information she had heard in advance was correct, that was the case.

However, even the Shadow Clan Master of the Heaven and Earth Society hadn't reached this level of realm.

Explaining this as simply the student surpassing the teacher seemed insufficient; everything about this person, from his energy to all aspects, felt dangerous.

‘Let's subdue him for now.’

Anyway, the bastard had tried to kill Joo Woonhyang.

Then, there was no need to show mercy.

-Paat!

Commander Seo Yerin kicked off the ground and leaped towards Mok Gyeong-un.

Her figure blurred and disappeared in an instant.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un's right eye flashed.

Along with it, Mok Gyeong-un utilized Na Yul-rang, the Great Master of the Heaven and Earth Society's Bright Water Crossing Step, and moved his body with ultra-high-speed movement.

-Smack!

The moment Mok Gyeong-un moved, a hand abruptly emerged where he had been standing.

It was none other than Seo Yerin's hand.

‘He dodged it?’

Seo Yerin's delicate eyebrows raised upwards.

Considering that the opponent was an expert who had crossed the wall, she had increased her speed to match that level.

Yet, he had avoided it.

Moreover, his movement was extraordinary.

‘Ultra-high-speed movement?’

Her eyes shifted to the right.

There, Mok Gyeong-un, who had dodged her attack, was thrusting his fingers infused with black energy towards her to launch a counterattack.

‘Strong Energy?’

Judging from the momentum, it was definitely Strong Energy.

But how could Strong Energy contain such a ferocious energy?

She felt the primordial true qi within her body strongly rejecting it.

‘It’s not something to block with ordinary Strong Energy.’

At this,

-Whoong!

She concentrated her primordial true qi and created Strong Energy with a white light in her hand.

With the Strong Energy formed, Seo Yerin thrust her fingers towards Mok Gyeong-un’s wrist as he was stabbing towards her head.

‘Quick response.’

At this, Mok Gyeong-un hurriedly stopped his thrust and changed direction using his footwork.

-Bam!

And he kicked upwards with his leg towards her chin.

-Smack!

However, Mok Gyeong-un’s kick brushed through the air.

She had twisted her body to the side in an instant.

Not stopping there, Seo Yerin dug closer to Mok Gyeong-un and swiftly placed her palm on his abdomen.

-Bang!

At that moment, a rippling shockwave occurred from the point of impact.

It was the Issuing of Strength.

The energy infused with primordial true qi would penetrate his body and dig into his five viscera and six bowels.

Or so she thought,

-Bam!

At that moment, her palm, which had been Issuing the Strength, was repelled.

Puzzled about what this was, she soon couldn't hide her astonishment.

That was because she discovered that Mok Gyeong-un had placed his palm towards her back.

‘This fellow.’

He had blocked the Issuing of Strength with another Issuing of Strength.

It was an unbelievable level of judgment.

How could he use the Issuing of Strength towards her back in this fleeting moment?

This wasn't something that came from long experience; it could be said that his combat sense itself was very innate.

However,

‘An opening.’

-Thud!

She had more experience than she appeared.

Therefore, she didn't miss the opening that appeared in Mok Gyeong-un the moment he blocked the blow with a reverse Issuing of Strength, and she struck a palm strike at his chin.

Mok Gyeong-un's body, hit by this, floated in the air with a whoosh and flew eight feet back before falling.

Having been hit on the chin, the impact to his brain prevented Mok Gyeong-un from immediately standing up due to dizziness.

‘Strong.’

Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue inwardly.

Among those he had encountered so far, excluding that mysterious old man and the Heaven and Earth Sect Leader, she was undoubtedly the highest level.

Moreover, he couldn't even gauge the extent of her skills.

-Mortal. This wench is not using her full strength.

-I know.

Mok Gyeong-un agreed with Cheong-ryeong's words.

Unlike himself, who was using his full power by releasing even the Demonic Qi he had been hiding, she wasn't drawing upon all her energy.

In his right eye, which had unleashed the power of the Third Eye, he could see her striving to suppress her energy.

If all of that were to be released, he couldn't even estimate the level it would reach.

"Cough cough... Commander..."

At that moment, Joo Woonhyang called out to Commander Seo Yerin.

Due to being hit in the Adam's apple by Mok Gyeong-un and suffering internal injuries, his voice didn't come out loudly, but there was no way an expert of her caliber wouldn't hear it.

Seo Yerin turned her head and said,

"Joo Woonhyang. Your internal injuries are severe, so first focus on circulating your energy and breathing. Hurry."

At her words, Joo Woonhyang shook his head.

This was to dissuade her for the moment.

Regardless of the process, Mok Gyeong-un had ultimately given up on harming him.

Therefore, he wanted to explain the situation, but,

“Commander... First, stop...”

Before he could even finish his words,

Seo Yerin extended her hand and turned her head.

That was because Mok Gyeong-un had already stood up again.

“You’re strong, Commander.”

As Mok Gyeong-un spoke, Seo Yerin clicked her tongue.

Even though she had adjusted her strength, she thought the palm strike she had sent to his chin would eventually make him lose consciousness due to the impact on his brain.

However, Mok Gyeong-un looked unscathed.

Judging from this, his recovery ability seemed to be much faster than ordinary people.

‘As expected, he’s a dangerous person.’

It was a dilemma.

She had intended to stop at a moderate level of subduing him.

However, it might be better to handle it properly after all.

At that moment, Joo Woonhyang hurriedly took steps towards her and tried to shout.

“Commander. First, listen to me... Cough!”

At that instant, blood burst from Joo Woonhyang’s mouth.

After suffering internal injuries, he should have circulated his energy and expelled the Death Qi that had entered his body, but by continuously neglecting it, it had ravaged his five viscera and six bowels.

-Thud!

“Ugh!”

Seeing him collapse and vomit blood, Commander Seo Yerin’s eyes became fierce.

Along with it, killing intent rose.

Sensing this, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

‘The energy has risen.’

In his right eye, which had unleashed the power of the Third Eye, he could see her primordial true qi, which had become much larger than a moment ago.

The energy was rippling in all directions.

This woman might have reached the pinnacle of the Transformation Realm or possibly even higher.

-Swish!

It was at that very moment.

Commander Seo Yerin suddenly disappeared, and with a lightning-like trajectory drawn in his right eye, she appeared beside him.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un hurriedly concentrated his energy and raised his left arm.

-Thud! Crack!

The impact felt on his left arm.

Along with it, Mok Gyeong-un's body was pushed to the side by more than ten steps.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been pushed back like that, gritted his teeth and barely managed to avoid falling over.

‘My left wrist is broken.’

This alone highlighted the stark difference in their power.

It seemed to be at least twice as much.

Barely enduring the trembling of his left wrist, he clenched his fist, and Seo Yerin warned Mok Gyeong-un,

“It would be best for you to give it your all. I’ll make you pay the price for putting Trainee Joo Woonhyang in that state before I arrest you.”

With those words, Seo Yerin’s figure disappeared again.

She intended to subdue Mok Gyeong-un not half-heartedly but decisively.

Even if it meant breaking all the bones in his body.

In that manner, she appeared on Mok Gyeong-un’s right side in an instant and unleashed a leg technique towards his right ribs.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un blocked it with his right arm.

-Thud!

Naturally, she thought he would be repelled again this time,

-Whoosh!

However, Mok Gyeong-un’s body was pushed back by only about three steps.

‘!?’

-Crackle! Crackle!

At that moment, Seo Yerin’s eyes saw Mok Gyeong-un’s right hand bulging with blood vessels and turning black.

As if his hand was transforming into that of a ferocious demon, she frowned and muttered,

“You... What on earth...”

“Phew. Aesthetically, it’s not pleasing to the eye, so I didn’t want to show this, but I have no choice.”

It was the Evil Acupoint Demonic Technique.

It was a method to temporarily amplify energy through the Great Technique of Reversing Acupoints.

Ordinary martial artists would rapidly consume their true original energy or go out of control when using this, but Mok Gyeong-un could perfectly control it by utilizing it partially.

‘He amplified the energy in only one hand?’

Commander Seo Yerin was inwardly amazed.

Just how much was he hiding?

Soon, Mok Gyeong-un, who had amplified the energy in his right hand using the Evil Acupoint Demonic Technique, took a sword finger stance.

This sword finger stance was none other than,

‘Demonic Sword Art, 1st Stance.’

It was the first stance of the sword art he had created.

[Demonic Sword Art? Why did you name it that instead of just calling it a sword art?]

[I want to combine the cultivation method and sword art into one instead of troublesomely separating them.]

[Combining the cultivation method and sword art into one?]

[Yes.]

Mok Gyeong-un, who had come up with this strange idea, had named this sword art the Demonic Sword Art.

The 1st Stance of the Demonic Sword Art could be considered the best technique Mok Gyeong-un could currently unleash.

-Paat!

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un leaped forward.

Even though he could perfectly control the Evil Acupoint Demonic Technique, the time he could maintain it was short, so he did it to quickly decide the match.

-Whoosh!

The moment Mok Gyeong-un unleashed his sword technique, the amplified black Strong Energy created a massive trajectory, sweeping forward with a momentum like a raging wave, as if it would engulf everything in front of him.

Faced with the tremendous momentum of the sword technique, Seo Yerin's expression became noticeably serious, unlike before.

‘Moderation... won't work.’

The sword technique before her eyes was a matchless sword technique.

It seemed impossible to block it with an ordinary technique.

At this, Seo Yerin overlapped her index and middle fingers of her right hand to form sword fingers, and then she firmly stepped on the ground and pulled them back.

-Roar!

At that moment, her sword fingers condensed intense energy from the fingertips, as if they were the eye of a typhoon.

-Flinch!

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes sharpened.

‘This is...’

It felt dangerous.

He had never seen energy being raised to this extent before.

However, he was already in the midst of unleashing his sword technique, so he had no choice but to clash.

-Crash!

Seo Yerin thrust out the hand she had pulled back, as if piercing through the approaching Mok Gyeong-un.

At that moment, a sharp murderous intent arose, and it created a whirlwind of sword energy.

-Clang clang clang clang clang!

Surprisingly, the power of the two matchless techniques that collided was in a stalemate.

Joo Woonhyang, who had been circulating his energy and barely managing his internal injuries after vomiting a mouthful of blood, couldn't hide his shock at this sight.

He knew Mok Gyeong-un was strong from having faced him, but Commander Seo Yerin, who could be considered his teacher, was a hidden expert whose strength was unknown.

If she were to use her full power, he could confidently say that her martial prowess would be stronger than even the Eight Stars, who were called the top experts.

However,

‘A stalemate?’

The sight of these two techniques clashing was truly astonishing.

It was like a raging wave and a whirlwind colliding.

The sword energy unleashed by the two ceaselessly intertwined, neither side giving way even slightly.

-Clang clang clang clang clang!

Even the person involved, Seo Yerin, was surprised.

‘To have power on par with the True Condensed Spiral Sword?’

She, too, was greatly amazed by Mok Gyeong-un’s matchless sword technique.

She had thought it was extraordinary, but she never expected it to have power comparable to her best technique, which she was most confident in.

‘It feels like my whole body will be torn apart.’

On the other hand, Mok Gyeong-un was focusing all his senses on the sword technique.

If he made a single mistake, he would be caught in this whirlwind of sword energy and have his entire body torn to shreds.

He had already reached the 18th out of 24 stances.

Since Seo Yerin’s sword energy was also gradually losing its momentum, he just needed to endure a little longer.

Or so he thought, but at that moment,

“It’s been a long time since I’ve encountered such a matchless swordsman.”

With those words, she stepped on the ground with her other foot and firmly stepped down.

-Thud!

Along with it, she withdrew her right hand and pulled back her left hand’s sword fingers, then thrust them forward.

-Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh!

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un's pupils trembled.

‘Continuously?’

He never anticipated that the technique would continue in this manner, intertwined with the end of the sword technique's momentum.

Moreover, this time, the sword energy rotated in reverse, continuing with a momentum quite different from before.

Since the direction had changed, it became even more difficult to block it.

-Crackle! Crackle!

Even the Evil Acupoint Demonic Technique had reached its limit.

In the first place, it was a technique that rapidly amplified energy through the Great Technique of Reversing Acupoints, so maintaining it for a long time was unreasonable.

Would he be defeated like this?

In Mok Gyeong-un's eyes, the center of the massive whirlwind was visible.

All the momentum was surging from there.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un's eyes flashed.

‘I need to aim at the point where the momentum originates.’

To do that, he needed a force that could overwhelm that momentum, even for a moment.

Even if it was just for a single instant.

The moment he realized this, Mok Gyeong-un's thoughts began to converge into one.

And that converged thought reached a simple conclusion.

‘Gather into one.’

He would concentrate all the stances of his strongest sword technique, the Demonic Sword Art, into one.

It was no different from gathering all the sword energy and stances contained within the sword technique into one.

With Mok Gyeong-un's current realm, this was an almost impossible task.

However, driven to the edge of a cliff, Mok Gyeong-un's thoughts and will crossed the boundary that ordinary people could never surpass.

‘Has he given up?’

On the other hand, seeing Mok Gyeong-un's sword energy weakening, Seo Yerin sensed that he couldn't win and thought he had given up.

But it was at that very moment.

-Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh!

The twenty-four trajectories of black light that had been extending while scattering particles of dark light dispersed simultaneously and converged into a single point.

And a black line was drawn through the center of the whirlwind of sword energy.

‘!!!!!!!’

-Clang!

Along with it, an astonishing sight unfolded.

Before anyone knew it, Mok Gyeong-un had passed Seo Yerin and was standing behind her, grasping his sword fingers and exhaling roughly, while the whirlwind of sword energy she had created had vanished without a trace.

Moreover,

-Drip drip!

Blood droplets fell to the ground, flowing along her left hand’s sword fingers that had been lowered.