

## Mayhem 261

Chapter 261 – Clue (1)

-Stab!

“Uuugh!”

Gyeom-chang let out a pained groan as the needle pierced through the center of his toenail.

He wanted to scream in agony, but he couldn't even do that because of the ball of cloth stuffed in his mouth.

He had tried to steel himself, but he couldn't endure the relentless pain.

He prided himself on having a strong willpower that could cross the threshold, but it took less than a quarter of an hour for it to crumble.

“Mmph... mmm... mm...”

“What was that?”

-Yank!

Mok Gyeong-un pulled the ball of cloth out of his mouth.

Gyeong-chang barely managed to speak, exhaling rough breaths.

“Haa... haa... plea... please... kill... kill me...”

“That’s the fifth time now. It’s still too early.”

-Stuff!

“Mmph.”

Mok Gyeong-un shoved the ball of cloth back into his mouth.

Then he slowly pushed another needle next to his toenail.

-Stab!

“Uuugh.”

Gyeom-chang writhed in pain, appealing for mercy.

However, Mok Gyeong-un, without even a change in his expression, shook and tilted his toenail with the inserted needle.

Unable to bear the suffering, Gyeom-chang eventually lost consciousness.

-Slump!

Just as his head was about to droop down...

-Slap!

Mok Gyeong-un slapped his forehead with his palm, forcing it back up.

With this, Gyeom-chang, who had been about to faint, regained his senses.

Upon waking up, Gyeom-chang's heart nearly stopped at the sight of Mok Gyeong-un's face through his hazy vision.

For a fleeting moment, he wished he wouldn't wake up again, but that was a futile hope.

'This... this guy is truly a demon.'

He had never seen someone so vicious before.

He himself had interrogated others many times, but he had never gone this far.

This guy was torturing him to the brink of death, not giving him any chance to rest or reprieve.

It was as if he was venting his anger.

So he had no choice but to desperately wish for death.

After all, with both arms severed and his body so ruined, he realized that death was the only rest.

“Mmm...”

He mumbled in a feeble voice.

Then, without a word, Mok Gyeong-un ripped off one of the toenails he had stabbed with needles.

-Rip!

“Uuugh.”

The human body was truly amazing.

Even though the pain continued, one would think he would get used to it, but that wasn't the case at all.

Each new pain only compounded the existing pain, multiplying the suffering.

Mok Gyeong-un sweetly whispered into his ear.

“You want to die, don't you?”

“ ... ”

“Don’t you want to close your eyes peacefully like this?”

“ ... ”

It was indescribably strange.

Never had the words about letting him die sounded so sweet.

If only he could escape this pain right now, he felt like he could do anything...

-Clench!

At that moment, Gyeom-chang bit down on the ball of cloth filling his mouth.

For a moment, he had weakened and almost succumbed to the guy’s temptation.

No matter how painful it was, he couldn't do anything for the one torturing him and driving him to death.

Then, through his hazy vision, he saw Mok Gyeong-un's face.

The corners of his mouth were stretched to his ears.

-Shudder!

The moment he saw this, a chill ran down Gyeong-chang's spine.

Even as he was struggling to muster his resolve, Mok Gyeong-un wasn't showing disappointment but rather joy.

Why the hell was he so happy?

Why was he smiling with such a demonic face?

As he was filled with questions...

-Shwip!

Mok Gyeong-un placed his hand on his shoulder and gently whispered.

“I’m glad. I was worried you might weaken and give up.”

‘What?’

“Please endure a little longer. I want to see you suffer and be in agony. The night is still very long, after all.”

‘!!!!!!’

The moment he heard those words, Gyeom-chang felt like his heart would shatter from pain.

It seemed that what this guy wanted wasn’t simply to extract the desired information from him.

He was enjoying his pain and suffering itself.

‘Demon... This guy is a demon who crawled up from the depths of hell, the embodiment of evil.’

He couldn't think of it any other way.

As fear engulfed his entire body and mind, the resolve he had built up crumbled in an instant.

Even if he endured, who would acknowledge it?

In the end, wouldn't everything end with his death?

At that moment, he choked up.

Why did he alone have to suffer like this?

Even if he maintained his loyalty and righteousness here and died in agony until the very end, would they even know?

In the end, even if he died, wouldn't they be the only ones enjoying the glory and benefits?

As his thoughts reached this point, Gyeom-chang's body went limp as if he had given up.

“Hmm. It would be troublesome if you gave up already.”

“ ... ”

Seeing Gyeom-chang's limp and unresponsive state, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue as if disappointed.

He had hoped for him to endure a little longer, but it seemed meaningless now.

So he removed the ball of cloth stuffed in his mouth.

-Yank!

“Haa... haa...”

As the ball of cloth was removed, Gyeom-chang feebly opened his mouth, catching his breath.

“Whaa... yoo waa... juss... tell me... I won... endoo... anymore...”

-Grab!

“Ugh?”

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un gripped his jaw.

Then, with one hand, he fixed his head in place and pushed his jaw inward and upward.

With that...

-Crack!

Along with the sound of bones creaking, Gyeong-chang's dislocated jaw joint was realigned.

Not only were all his teeth broken when his face was torn, but his jaw joint was also dislocated.

That's why he couldn't pronounce properly.

But now that his jaw joint was realigned...

“Let’s talk now.”

“Haa... haa... juss... how much...”

Although his pronunciation was still slurred due to his missing teeth, it was at a level that could be understood better than before.

However, he wasn’t happy at all.

In the end, whether this way or that, he had to tell the guy what he wanted to hear in order to meet his death comfortably.

But before that, there was one question he wanted to resolve.

“...Before answering... I want to ask... one thing.”

“It seems you’re not ready yet.”

At that question, Mok Gyeong-un tried to shove the ball of cloth back into his mouth.

Gyeom-chang was startled and hurriedly spoke.

“I, I was just curious about how the Sichuan Dang Family managed to uncover our existence.”

“Sichuan Dang Family?”

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

What was this about now?

Why was this guy suddenly associating him with the Sichuan Dang Family?

As he was puzzled, Gyeom-chang cautiously said:

“In the current martial world, the only ones who have reached the level of Poison Master are Guyang Sa-oh, the Eight Poison Snake Staff, and Dang Inhae, the Head of the Sichuan Dang Family, the Thousand Poison Hands.”

“So?”

“Among them, Guyang Sa-oh... couldn’t possibly be here, so naturally, the only one left is the Thousand Poison Hands.”

“Why do you assert that Guyang Sa-oh wouldn’t be here?”

“That’s...”

Seeing him hesitate, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

Thanks to his attitude, he could easily figure out one thing.

“Ah. You seem to know Guyang Sa-oh very well. Or perhaps he’s on your side.”

“...”

‘Damn it. I did something stupid.’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Gyeom-chang blamed his own foolishness.

He didn't need to mention Guyang Sa-oh of the Eight Poison Snake Staff, but in trying to confirm that his guess was correct, he ended up revealing unnecessary information.

"Don't worry. I'm not particularly interested in this. Rather, there's something else I'd like you to tell me."

"Something else?"

"The mark on your scabbard, what is it?"

At this question, Gyeom-chang furrowed his brows.

He thought the guy was asking because he knew something about the mark, but did he not know anything?

But then Mok Gyeong-un pressed down hard on his shoulder and said:

-Squeeze!

"Ugh."

“I’d like you to answer immediately when asked. Don’t try to be clever.”

“It, it’s a mark symbolizing the organization.”

“Organization?”

“Ye... yes.”

‘As I thought, it is a group.’

This aligned almost perfectly with his expectations.

So Mok Gyeong-un asked another question.

“I understand it symbolizes an organization, but what does this mark actually mean?”

“...That’s...”

“This won’t do. It seems you’re not ready yet.”

As he said that, Mok Gyeong-un tried to shove the ball of cloth back into his mouth.

Gyeom-chang was startled and hurriedly spoke.

“I, I don’t know the exact meaning either. I only know that it adds one to two.”

“Adds one to two?”

What did that mean?

Mok Gyeong-un ruminated on those words.

Since he said it adds one to two, the part that was originally [二] with the lower part of the stroke being longer indeed meant two (二).

But what did it mean to add one vertically penetrating the line?

‘Why not just add one horizontally?’

That way, it would become the character three (≡), and the meaning would make sense.

But why did they say it had that meaning when the line penetrated vertically?

Was there a hidden meaning?

“There’s also the character three (≡), so do you really think that makes sense?”

“...I really don’t know. I was just told that something that couldn’t exist was added.”

“Something that couldn’t exist was added?”

“Hmm.”

Mok Gyeong-un stroked his chin.

It was too vague, so it was difficult to understand the meaning just from this.

But it didn’t matter.

If he found out what they were doing, the answer would naturally come out.

So Mok Gyeong-un tried to ask what he was most curious about.

This was the most urgent matter above all else.

“Is the one called Ghost Blade also on your side?”

‘!?’

At those words, Gyeom-chang’s expression slightly distorted.

“It seems so.”

‘Who the hell is this guy?’

The reason Gyeom-chang reacted this way was that until now, no one had ever figured out that Ghost Blade was related to them.

To the flustered Gyeom-chang, Mok Gyeong-un said what he wanted to ask the most.

“When Ghost Blade kills someone or something, does he leave your organization’s mark?”

“When he kills someone or something?”

“Yes.”

If this was confirmed, the culprit would undoubtedly be Ghost Blade.

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at Gyeom-chang.

However, to Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Gyeom-chang gave a completely unexpected answer.

“Do you think that makes sense?”

“What?”

“Why would he leave a mark if he deliberately killed someone?”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“The dead can’t speak. And a dead corpse is meant to rot and disappear. But our organization doesn’t leave traces. So why would we leave a mark on someone we killed?”

‘!?’

At those words, one of Mok Gyeong-un’s eyebrows raised.

That was because what this guy said wasn’t wrong, even if he was lying.

There was no reason for a secretive organization to leave traces as if boasting.

So Mok Gyeong-un asked:

“Then why did they leave such a mark on those they killed or someone?”

“...I think there’s some misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“We don’t leave our organization’s mark on those we have already killed. And the one who leaves such a mark as a scar is...”

“The one who leaves it is?”

“Only the one you know as Ghost Blade.”

-Pak!

As soon as he finished speaking, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Gyeom-chang by the collar, pulled him close, and said in a menacing voice:

“Are you messing with me right now? You’re saying Ghost Blade left a mark on someone who was already dead, and you want me to believe that?”

“It, it’s not a lie. Ghost Blade leaving that mark is a kind of warning.”

“Warning? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know exactly either. I just heard that Ghost Blade leaves such scars as a warning to those involved in our affairs. If they ignore the warning, he makes them pay with their lives and erases the scar...”

-Bam!

“Ugh.”

Before he could even finish speaking, Mok Gyeong-un pushed him to the floor.

Startled, Gyeom-chang said:

“It’s true.”

“I’ve already confirmed that he left the scar and then killed someone, yet you keep trying to deceive me.”

“Left the scar and then killed? How could that be?”

“How could that be? I saw it with my own eyes.”

“That’s impossible. Didn’t I tell you? Why would Ghost Blade leave a trace that could be tracked or used as a clue in such a place? This is... aaaagh.”

A scream of pain burst out from Gyeom-chang’s mouth.

Mok Gyeong-un’s fingers had dug into his collarbone.

As he was suffering like this, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed to the point of sharpness.

‘...He doesn’t leave traces on the dead?’

Mok Gyeong-un’s mind became complicated.

Based on the clues he had pursued so far, Ghost Blade should be the one who killed him.

But Ghost Blade said he doesn’t leave traces on the dead.

Yet there was a scar-like mark left on his dead grandfather’s body.

‘It wasn’t left a long time ago.’

The blood on the scar was clear evidence that the wound was inflicted at the moment of death.

But this guy was strongly denying it.

That meant one of two things.

Either this guy was lying to deceive him, or...

‘...Could it be?’

The focus of Mok Gyeong-un’s pupils shrank.

Eventually, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Gyeom-chang’s collarbone with his fingers and pulled him close.

Directly grabbing the bone and pulling, it couldn’t be anything but painful.

“Aaaargh!”

Regardless, Mok Gyeong-un asked:

“If Ghost Blade is from your organization, you should at least know well whether he killed someone or not, right?”

At this question, the suffering Gyeong-chang shook his head vigorously.

“Aaagh. I, I don’t know.”

“Shall I make you know?”

“It’s true. We are a cell organization to begin with, so we can only move according to the orders given and can’t know exactly what each of us is doing.”

“...You can’t know? Are you certain?”

“Ye, yes. If it’s not information we absolutely need to know, it’s not even shared.”

“Hmm.”

It was too desperate to be a lie.

So Mok Gyeong-un stared at him and said:

“Then you must have never heard the name Mun-no.”

“Mun-no? Did you just say Mun-no?”

“Didn’t you just say that information isn’t shared?”

At those words, Gyeom-chang trembled.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un found it strange and asked:

“You know something?”

At that question, Gyeom-chang hesitated for a moment with a frown before opening his mouth.

“...If the Mun-no you’re talking about is the same name we know, it’s the old name of Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.” immortal

‘!?’

Chapter 262 – Clue (2)

Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.

Along with Crying Doctor Hoe Ta, he was known as the greatest physician of the era, and his knowledge of medicine was unrivaled.

Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong had saved countless lives with his exceptional medical skills and knowledge of medicine.

There was an event that made him renowned throughout the entire Central Plains.

It was during the rebellion of the Red Turban Bandits over thirty years ago, which resulted in numerous casualties.

As a result, corpses piled up like mountains everywhere and began to rot, causing a terrible plague of unknown origin to spread.

This plague quickly spread, engulfing the entire Seomseoseong region within just half a month, and chaos overflowed in all directions.

Fortunately, however, the plague ended without leaving Seomseoseong.

It was because Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong had created a cure for the plague.

With this opportunity, Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong, who had been virtually unknown, was able to rise to become the greatest physician of the era alongside Crying Doctor Hoe Ta.

However, despite this fame, not much was known about him.

There were few who even knew where he lived or what his real name was.

“...If the Mun-no you’re talking about is the same name we know, it’s the old name of Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.”

‘!?’

At Gyeom-chang’s words, Mok Gyeong-un furrowed his brows.

That was because Mun-no was none other than the name of his grandfather who had raised him.

He had asked thinking that this organization might know about him since his grandfather had been killed by Ghost Blade.

But he received a completely unexpected answer.

“What... does that mean?”

“It means exactly that. The only Mun-no I, no, we know is the name Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong used in the past.”

“The name Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong used in the past?”

“...Are you certain?”

“If it’s not a case of people having the same name, the only Mun-no we know is him.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

What the hell did this mean?

He had come out into the world to find the enemy who killed his grandfather and had learned many things.

Among them, naturally, was the fame of Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.

Upon learning of his existence, Mok Gyeong-un had simply thought that he was a famous physician who knew more about medicinal herbs than his grandfather.

In fact, he hadn’t paid much attention, thinking it had nothing to do with his revenge.

But this was completely unexpected information.

‘My grandfather is Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong?’

Mok Gyeong-un’s mind became complicated.

Although there was a commonality in his knowledge of medicinal herbs and his ability to handle them well, could he really say that Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong was the same person as his grandfather just based on that?

So Mok Gyeong-un pressed his knee against Gyeong-chang’s chest and said:

“Mun-no had been living in seclusion deep in the mountains for over seventeen years. How could such a person be Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong...”

“Did you just say seventeen years?”

“Yes.”

It was the time he had lived with his grandfather.

However...

“If it’s seventeen years, it’s even more certain that it’s Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.”

“What?”

“Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong had disappeared and his whereabouts had been unknown since nearly eighteen years ago. If the Mun-no you know had been living in seclusion for that long, it’s definitely Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.”

“...”

Seeing him becoming even more convinced, Mok Gyeong-un’s mind became more twisted.

‘Is my grandfather really Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong?’

His exceptional knowledge of medicine, to the extent that there was no medicinal herb he didn’t know, was thought to be simply because his grandfather was an herbalist who had lived in the mountains for a long time.

But now that he thought about it, among those outside, there were few who knew medicinal herbs as well as his grandfather.

‘Sigh...’

He had only thought about finding his enemy, not about learning more about his grandfather himself.

It was also because he had never seen anyone who knew the name Mun-no.

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un at a loss for words after learning the unknown truth, Gyeong-chang inwardly clicked his tongue.

‘Mun-no...’

They had long searched for Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong’s whereabouts.

But to unexpectedly meet someone who knew Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong’s whereabouts in this situation was truly ironic.

‘What a pity.’

If it weren’t for this situation, it would have been a great achievement.

But now, all of this was meaningless.

‘Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong...’

The conversation he had with the Poison King Baek Sa-ha flashed through Mok Gyeong-un’s mind.

[Then you really don’t know who that Ghost Blade is.]

[That’s right. What I learned from fighting him is...]

[That he had been severely injured by someone called Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong, known as the greatest herbalist of the era. Is that all you know?]

[...At first, I didn't believe it. Until now, no one knew that Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong had learned martial arts. He was an herbalist, after all.]

[Well, he could have hidden it.]

[Yes. That could be the case. But one thing is certain: if Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong is truly the one who severely injured Ghost Blade, his poison arts far surpass mine.]

Recalling this, Mok Gyeong-un organized his thoughts step by step.

It seemed he really didn't know much about his grandfather until now.

And yet, he had stubbornly clung to a single mark, thinking only of revenge, which felt quite foolish.

'Fame... martial arts...'

Why had his grandfather hidden all of these things?

The grandfather he knew was a person who was detached from such things.

But was there a reason he had to hide it even from him?

No, it was highly likely that he had hidden all these facts because he knew this would happen.

'...It's strange.'

But if his grandfather was indeed Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong, there was something that didn't add up.

'Master Baek Sa-ha clearly said that Ghost Blade was defeated by Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong.'

That meant his grandfather's martial arts skills were stronger than even one of the Eight Stars, known as the best in the current martial arts world.

Could such a grandfather be easily killed by Ghost Blade?

Of course, this wasn't completely impossible.

Because Ghost Blade could have advanced his martial arts by relentlessly training for 17 years, surpassing his grandfather.

'This is also a possibility.'

Although he had lived with him for 17 years, he had never seen his grandfather cultivating martial arts.

Of course, for a master who had reached a high level, meditation or mental cultivation could be more effective, but he hadn't seen him doing that much either.

If one side was training and the other remained the same or regressed, it was possible.

However, there was one more thing to confirm here.

'The fact that he left a scar on my grandfather means it's certain that Ghost Blade and my grandfather fought. But this guy clearly said that Ghost Blade doesn't leave a mark on those he kills.'

Several speculations became possible from here.

One was that this guy was lying, and Ghost Blade killed his grandfather and left the scar.

However, there was no point in leaving a mark on a dead person because it would become a trace.

So that likely wasn't the case.

Another speculation was that his grandfather was old, so he lost his life after exhausting his energy fighting Ghost Blade.

But could a master of Ghost Blade's level make such a mistake?

This was also somewhat unlikely.

Then...

'...A third party appeared and killed my grandfather who had been weakened from fighting Ghost Blade.'

-Clench!

Mok Gyeong-un's fist tightened.

It was the most likely possibility.

That way, it made sense that the trace left by Ghost Blade remained on his grandfather even in death.

Once his mind was organized up to this point, Mok Gyeong-un stared at Gyeom-chang and asked:

"What is the relationship between your organization and Mun-no, no, Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong?"

“...What does that...”

“Stop playing dumb. You know Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong’s real name, which is not known to the public, and Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong died at the hands of Ghost Blade.”

“What?”

“I said Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong died at the hands of Ghost Blade.”

“That’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible? Your organization’s mark left by Ghost Blade was there.”

At these words, Gyeom-chang frowned and said:

“Didn’t I tell you? Why would Ghost Blade leave such a mark? Besides, Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong is someone the organization must capture alive...”

Suddenly, Gyeom-chang closed his mouth.

He had intended to give the information the guy wanted, but to minimize the information related to the organization as much as possible.

But he had misspoken.

“Capture alive... So there was a third party after all.”

“What?”

Gyeom-chang questioned Mok Gyeong-un's incomprehensible words.

What did he mean by there being a third party?

To the puzzled Gyeom-chang, Mok Gyeong-un said:

"Nevermind that. Why are you trying to capture Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong alive?"

At that question, Gyeom-chang answered immediately without even thinking.

"I don't know."

"...There's nothing good about not answering."

"I, I really don't know. I was just told that we must secure his whereabouts."

"Do you know what?"

"What...?"

-Crack!

"Aaaaargh!"

With the sound of a collarbone breaking, Gyeom-chang screamed.

No matter which part it was, it was bound to hurt when a bone broke, but he didn't know the collarbone could hurt this much.

To the suffering Gyeom-chang, Mok Gyeong-un whispered in his ear:

"I can now tell whether you're hiding something or not. I wouldn't want to make you say 'please kill me' ten times."

"Uuugh."

"No answer. Should I break your left collarbone this time? No, that wouldn't be enough. It would be nice to shatter it into pieces. Let's start with the right side..."

"St- stop!"

"That's not the answer I want."

-Crack!

"Aaaaargh! I, I heard that Medicine Immortal Hae Yeong is hiding something important."

In the end, words spilled out of Gyeom-chang's mouth.

"Something? What is it?"

"Aaaaargh. I really don't know that. I only know that he deceived that person and ran away with it, nothing more..."

"Ran away with it?"

Was it something important to this organization?

But was there anything important that his grandfather could have hidden?

He remembered everything that was in the house, but there was nothing particularly important.

“Do you really not know?”

“It’s true. Please believe me.”

Gyeom-chang sincerely pleaded.

“Hmm. What’s not believable? I feel like I could squeeze it out of you.”

Mok Gyeong-un’s fingers, which were digging into his flesh, were about to move sideways.

Startled by this, Gyeom-chang hurriedly said:

“I, I’m just a mid-level executive in the Second Division. But Ghost Blade, a high-level executive in the First Division, might know.”

“First Division?”

For a moment, Gyeom-chang’s expression stiffened and distorted.

‘Ah...’

Having revealed even the organizational hierarchy, Gyeom-chang now truly gave up.

Since he had disclosed this much, there was no point in trying to withhold information anymore.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un asked:

“Is the First Division the highest rank in your organization?”

“...Yes.”

“The organizational structure goes First Division, Second Division, Third Division... like that, right?”

“...Yes.”

“How many divisions are there?”

“There are a total of five divisions.”

“Oho.”

If he was a mid-level executive in the second division out of five, it was a high position.

After all, it was unlikely for someone with this level of martial arts to hold a low position.

But if even he had such limited information, this organization was definitely operating as a cell structure.

“If you’re a mid-level executive in the Second Division, that’s quite high. Is information restricted to that extent?”

“Haa... haa... being a mid-level executive is nothing special.”

“I see. Then do the high-level executives in the First Division know many things?”

“They definitely know more than me.”

“In the end, you’re telling me to ask a high-level executive.”

“...”

“Alright. Then where can I meet that high-level executive named Ghost Blade? I’d appreciate it if you could tell me his identity.”

“I really don’t know that. Do you think someone like me in the Second Division would know the revealed identity or whereabouts of a high-level executive in the First Division?”

“I don’t understand. Then who do you report to regarding your missions?”

At that question, Gyeom-chang was momentarily at a loss for words.

It seemed he had asked the right question.

No matter how much of a cell structure it was, there had to be someone to report to and a connection to operate.

Saying there wasn’t any didn’t make sense.

“Tell me. Who do you report to? Is it the one you mentioned earlier as ‘that person’?”

“Th- that’s absurd. How could someone like me directly report to that person? That person is a noble being that even we in the Second Division cannot meet.”

“A noble being?”

Tilting his head, Mok Gyeong-un asked:

“What is the identity of that noble being? No. If you don’t even know Ghost Blade, who is directly above you, you probably won’t know this. Then how do you refer to that being you call ‘that person’? You don’t just call him ‘that person’, right?”

“That’s...”

Gyeom-chang hesitated for a moment.

He had pretty much told this guy everything already.

Even if he told him how they referred to that person, it wasn’t like this guy could find that person.

To the hesitating Gyeom-chang, Mok Gyeong-un said:

“If you’re thinking of testing my patience...”

“I, I was going to tell you. We call that person this. I don’t know exactly why we call him that, but the third... Ugh!”

It was at that very moment.

Before he could even finish speaking, the blood vessels in his neck and face swelled up.

‘!?’

Realizing something was wrong, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed his head and face to calm the swollen blood vessels.

However...

‘What?’

He tried to control the energy, but something was strange.

It was different from the usual case of energy flowing backward or blood vessels going out of control due to a sudden swelling.

This was...

-Splat!

“...”

In an instant, Gyeom-chang’s head exploded.

There was no time to do anything.

As a result, Mok Gyeong-un’s hands, face, and even clothes were covered in blood.

-Thud! Plop!

Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes sharpened as he pushed away the dead Gyeom-chang’s body.

The fact that he died while trying to say something meant he had been subjected to a taboo.

But this wasn’t a taboo caused by martial arts.

The unpleasant and ominous energy rising from the corpse of the dead Gyeom-chang was none other than the curse power containing a cursing technique.

The implication of this was simple.

‘A taboo by sorcery.’

Chapter 263 – Clue (3)

‘A taboo by sorcery...’

Mok Gyeong-un was convinced as he looked at the corpse of the dead Gyeom-chang.

An unpleasant and ominous curse power was escaping from the body.

-Sizzle sizzle!

Of course, few could see this.

Unless they had awakened the Ghost Eye like Mok Gyeong-un.

‘...This level of curse power is a first.’

Although weakened and exhausted due to his torture, to be able to imprint a curse in the mind of a master who had crossed the threshold and impose a taboo, the curse power was unimaginable.

Diviners were divided into six grades: Divine, Sun, Moon, Technique, Profound, and Conveying.

Mok Gyeong-un had experienced In Seo-ok, the Primal Killing Pavilion Master, and Jo Tae-cheong of the Three Eyes, both of whom had received the highest title of Sun-level Diviner.

'Twice... no, three times.'

They also possessed tremendous curse power.

But just from the remnant traces, he could estimate that the curse power of the one who had imposed this curse taboo was several times greater.

'A Divine-level Diviner?'

Divine-level Diviner.

It was a title bestowed upon only six among diviners.

They were called the Six Divine-level Diviners.

Those who had received the title of Divine-level Diviner had reached the pinnacle of sorcery, and there were even stories that their curse power and techniques had reached the realm of half-immortality.

Perhaps the one who had placed the curse taboo on the dead Gyeom-chang was one of the Six Divine-level Diviners.

'A Divine-level Diviner...'

If someone who had truly reached the level of a Divine-level Diviner was closely involved with this organization, it could become even more difficult to carry out his revenge.

Mok Gyeong-un looked at the corpse with an annoyed gaze.

As he approached the truth to avenge his grandfather, unexpected obstacles kept emerging.

Anyway, although there were many ambiguous parts, he had obtained a lot of information unlike before.

The key point remained unchanged: it was Ghost Blade.

Even if a third party had killed him instead, according to Gyeom-chang, he was a high-level executive in the First Division of the organization with the mark.

By contacting him, he could get closer to the real truth about his grandfather's death.

-Shwip!

Mok Gyeong-un got up and approached someone.

It was Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, who had fainted after his acupuncture points were struck.

Approaching Sang Ik-seo, Mok Gyeong-un...

-Tap tap tap!

Released the acupuncture points he had struck.

Soon after, Sang Ik-seo immediately regained consciousness.

Upon regaining consciousness and seeing the Embroidered Uniform Guard Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang dead with his head exploded, Sang Ik-seo was inwardly terrified.

'Eek!'

From his perspective, having just woken up, it could only be seen as Mok Gyeong-un's doing.

Feeling his life threatened, Sang Ik-seo prostrated himself flat in front of Mok Gyeong-un.

"Sp- spare my life... ugh."

But the moment he prostrated, his abdomen felt extremely painful.

Puzzled, he instinctively looked at the painful area.

There was a wound on his abdomen, though he didn't know when it had appeared.

'What is this?'

If what he knew was correct, the female Gu Poison Command Gu was located in that area of his abdomen.

But why was there a wound in that spot?

Moreover, the wounded area was extremely painful.

He felt a searing pain in his organs as if something was tearing them apart, and it was hard to endure even if he tried to forcibly bear it.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed his hair and lifted his head.

-Yank!

“Huh?”

Seeing Mok Gyeong-un’s face, or more precisely, the face of Chief Eunuch Ho, the supervisor of the Western Depot, covered in blood as if he had washed it, Sang Ik-seo couldn’t make eye contact due to his bewilderment.

Regardless, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and said:

“I removed the Command Gu from your abdomen and gave you another gift, but I’m not sure if you’ll like it.”

“An- another gift, what do you mean?”

“I gave you a poison that could replace it.”

“Poison?”

Hearing those words, Sang Ik-seo’s expression stiffened.

“While removing the Command Gu, the poison penetrated your organs, so by now, it should have spread throughout your entire viscera.”

“...”

Mok Gyeong-un grinned and whispered in his ear:

“How is it? Does it feel like your stomach is burning?”

“Ugh...”

It was undeniable as the burning pain in his abdomen intensified.

‘I need to expel the poison quickly.’

Startled, Sang Ik-seo tried to gather his true energy to push the poison out of his body.

But he couldn’t do it.

As Mok Gyeong-un said, since he had fainted after his acupuncture points were struck, the poison had already spread throughout his entire viscera.

Because of that, it was difficult even to gather his true energy.

Rather, when he tried to circulate his energy...

“Aargh!”

The pain intensified several times, bringing tears to his eyes.

The poison had spread not only to his viscera but also to his blood vessels.

Unable to endure this pain, Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo pleaded with Mok Gyeong-un as if begging:

“Pl- please spare my life. Please...”

“Spare your life... that depends on how you respond.”

“What do you mean by how I respond?”

“How did you come to know that person over there?”

Mok Gyeong-un pointed with his chin to the corpse of Gyeong-chang, who had died with his head exploded.

At this question, Sang Ik-seo, with a strong will to live, hastily replied:

“Th- that person approached us first and offered to help us.”

“Help with what?”

“Th- that’s...”

“It seems you don’t have much desire to live. Then I’ll just leave you like this...”

“No, that’s not it. He said he would help our faction.”

“What faction is that?”

“...The faction led by His Excellency, the Grand Preceptor Hang Yoon.”

“Hang Yoon? Ah.”

In the Imperial Palace, there were four powerful figures who controlled the country.

There was Prince Gyeongjin, the younger brother of His Majesty the Emperor, and Prince Jong, the Emperor’s second son who was the most likely candidate for the throne. Then there was Consort Seo, the mother of the current Crown Prince. Lastly, there was the Grand Preceptor Hang Yoon, who held the positions of one of the Three Dukes and the Admiral of the Central Military Commission.

Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo of the Embroidered Uniform Guard belonged to this Hang Yoon.

“Interesting.”

“What is?”

“It’s full of people from the four factions, all entangled and intertwined, desperate to devour each other. Not a single person is loyal to the Emperor who actually rules the country.”

“...”

At those words, Sang Ik-seo’s expression subtly distorted.

Was it because he felt a bit of shame?

Of course not.

If he had felt ashamed by such words, he wouldn’t have joined with Hang Yoon in the first place.

‘...Instead of an old and sickly Emperor who indulges in women, if you don’t belong to one of the four factions, you can’t survive in the palace. What do you expect me to do?’

That was Sang Ik-seo’s true thoughts.

However, in a situation where he could die from the poison in his stomach, he couldn’t reveal his true feelings.

Sang Ik-seo, not caring about being servile, kowtowed on the floor and pleaded with Mok Gyeong-un.

“Please spare my life. I’ll do anything.”

He believed that being alive, even in a pile of dog sh\*t, was definitely better than being dead.

So he didn’t care about his pride.

Seeing him like this, Mok Gyeong-un snorted and said:

“He wouldn’t have approached you to help without any compensation, so what condition did he offer?”

“That’s...”

“It won’t do you any good to delay like that. If the poison spreads further, it’ll be useless even if you want to live.”

“He, he asked us to find and capture the remnants of the Fire Faith Order and give him the right to dispose of them!”

‘!?’

Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes flickered with surprise at his urgent words.

The right to dispose of the Fire Faith Order believers?

He had only focused on his grandfather and hadn’t shown interest in what they were doing.

But suddenly being told that they had asked for the right to dispose of the Fire Faith Order believers raised questions.

‘Why the Fire Faith Order?’

Did their organization have a grudge against the Fire Faith Order?

Otherwise, there would be no reason to mobilize the military power of the Imperial Palace, which encompassed the entire Central Plains, to capture the Fire Faith Order believers.

No, in the first place, the Fire Faith Order was not only rejected by the Imperial Palace but also by the Taoist and Buddhist sects, and even the martial artists had contributed to their persecution.

So Mok Gyeong-un changed his thinking.

‘The right to dispose doesn’t necessarily mean to eliminate them.’

It could be because they had some close connection with them or wanted something from them.

So Mok Gyeong-un asked him:

“If you received the right to dispose, what did you do with them? Did you kill them?”

“...We used various methods to get them out of the prison and take them away.”

“Take them away?”

“Yes.”

The speculation from his changed thinking was correct.

Judging by the fact that they didn’t kill them but took them away, it was certain that the organization with the mark had some connection or purpose with the Fire Faith Order, as expected.

Huh?

But if they used various methods to take out the Fire Faith Order believers, did that mean there was a natural way to get them out of the underground prison?

That's good.

"Then you can get someone out of the prison anytime, right?"

"It's not that easy to take them out as I please. It requires some prior arrangements, and even if it's a regular prison, once they're imprisoned in the underground prison, they can't be taken out."

"..."

At these words, Mok Gyeong-un clicked his tongue as if disappointed.

If it had been possible, he had intended to use this person to get them out without needing to go in himself, but it seemed difficult.

However, since this person was an Associate Military Commissioner, wouldn't he have the necessary authority?

He had to successfully complete the secret mission given by the Society Leader to steal the Holy Fire Spirit Orb in order to contact him and obtain clues about Ghost Blade.

"But since the Embroidered Uniform Guard manages the underground prison, wouldn't it be possible if we devise a way?"

"The prisoners confined in the underground prison are special management targets of high treason, so unless the Emperor, the Three Dukes, the Minister of Justice, and others all give their approval, it is impossible to release or pardon them."

“...”

What were the chances of the Emperor, the Three Dukes, the officials in charge of executing and managing criminal law, and all of them reaching a consensus?

It was no exaggeration to say that once imprisoned in the underground prison, one could never come out until their sentence was completed or until death.

As expected of the Imperial Palace, the procedures were not only complicated but also convoluted.

‘No choice.’

In the end, to steal the Holy Fire Spirit Orb of the Fire Faith Order, it seemed he had no choice but to directly enter the underground prison.

It was the same for the organization with the mark.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes narrowed.

‘Ah!’

Come to think of it, the one who had ordered him to steal the Holy Fire Spirit Orb of the Fire Faith Order imprisoned in the Imperial Palace’s underground prison was the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.

But Ghost Blade definitely had some connection with the Sect Leader.

Recalling this, Mok Gyeong-un suddenly came up with a speculation.

‘...Could it be that the Heaven and Earth Society Leader is also closely connected to or even a member of this organization?’

Otherwise, it would be too much of a coincidence.

The underground prison had complicated procedures, so even a high-ranking Associate Military Commissioner of the Embroidered Uniform Guard couldn’t get someone out in any way.

But they were dispatched to risk danger and steal the Holy Fire Spirit Orb from such a place.

It fit together almost too perfectly.

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo, who was prostrating and observing his reaction.

There was a way to check how accurate his speculation was.

So Mok Gyeong-un asked him:

“Then has that organization given up on getting the Fire Faith Order believer imprisoned in the underground prison out?”

At that question, Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo furrowed his brows.

“How did you know there’s a Fire Faith Order believer in the underground prison...”

“Just answer the question.”

“...I’m not sure if they’ve given up.”

“Your answer is ambiguous.”

“I- I’m not trying to deceive you. That person seems to have tried to go in and attempt it a few times himself, but since the believer is imprisoned in the Eternal Hell Prison, I think he has given up on getting them out.”

“Eternal Hell Prison? What’s that?”

He asked because it was the first time he had heard of it.

“The Eternal Hell Prison is the prison located on the lowest level of the underground prison.”

“The lowest level?”

“Yes. It’s where they confine the prisoners deemed the worst of the worst.”

“Worst of the worst... if they used the term ‘eternal’[1], the security must be extremely tight to make it absolutely impossible to escape.”

“...There was actually one person who escaped from there since the underground prison was built. So I heard that the Eternal Hell Prison was created as a reinforced version based on that incident. Since it was built, no one imprisoned there has ever escaped.”

‘If the security is tight enough that even a master who has crossed the threshold can’t easily get someone out, how stringent is it?’

It seemed it would be even more difficult than entering the prison.

Clicking his tongue inwardly, Mok Gyeong-un changed his question.

“If they’ve given up, I guess they just left that Fire Faith Order believer alone until they could find a way.”

“No, that’s not the case. Rather than getting them out, Gyeom-chang seemed to be trying to find out something from the Fire Faith Order believer through interrogation, as if it was urgent for some reason.”

“Trying to find out something?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

In fact, Sang Ik-seo shouldn’t have been able to answer this question.

However, although they had joined hands out of mutual necessity, he also couldn’t fully trust Gyeom-chang, so he had been secretly monitoring him.

But since he was such an exceptional master, he couldn’t find out much, and he had only learned the name of what he was trying to find out from that Fire Faith Order believer imprisoned in the underground prison.

“I’m not sure exactly what it’s used for, but it seemed like he was trying to find out where something called the ‘Treasure Orb’[2] is.”

“Treasure Orb? You don’t know what that is?”

“I don’t know exactly. But there is one thing I speculate.”

“Speculation?”

“Yes... I think it might be related to the serious reason why that Fire Faith Order believer was the only one imprisoned in the Eternal Hell Prison, unlike the other believers.”

‘Serious reason?’

Was it because the Holy Fire Spiritual Master held a high position and was an important item for the Fire Faith Order?

Or was there another reason?

“What is it?”

Puzzled, Sang Ik-seo said in a meaningful voice:

“I heard that Fire Faith Order believer could foresee the future by receiving revelations from something called the Holy Fire or something.”

Chapter 264 – Clue (4)

“I heard that Fire Faith Order believer could foresee the future by receiving revelations from something called the Holy Fire or something.”

‘!?’

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un raised one eyebrow and tilted his head.

“Foresee the future?”

In response to Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo replied:

“Yes... I don’t know if it’s true or not, but there was quite a lot of talk about it among the higher-ups, enough to make a fuss.”

“Foresee...”

Foresee the future.

Was such a thing really possible?

Beyond being interesting or fascinating, Mok Gyeong-un believed it was completely impossible.

In the first place, if it was truly possible, there was no way the Fire Faith Order believers couldn’t have prevented being persecuted and ending up like this.

‘However... if we assume it’s possible, it would be an ability that everyone would covet.’

Being able to know what would happen in the future was a tremendous ability.

It meant having the advantage of being able to prepare for future events.

‘It’s becoming confusing.’

It became ambiguous whether the Society Leader was targeting the Holy Fire Spirit Orb because he was in league with the organization with the mark, or because of this foresight ability.

Because if it was the foresight ability, it would be a rare ability that anyone would covet.

However, there was something to point out here.

“But didn’t you just say that this person could foresee the future?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds as if that believer can’t foresee it now.”

“...”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Sang Ik-seo inwardly clicked his tongue.

He didn’t miss even the smallest detail.

“Am I wrong?”

“...You’re right. I don’t know if that believer was able to do it before and lost the ability, or if the believer couldn’t do it from the beginning and was just lying, but currently, that person can’t foresee the future.”

“How do you know that?”

“At first, we thought the believer might be deceiving us with lies, so we tested them several times. For example, we presented a cup with poison and one without and had the believer distinguish between them, and even with tests that could endanger their life, the believer really couldn’t foresee anything.”

“It turned out to be a meaningless act.”

“Yes. However, thanks to that, the higher-ups who had judged that the Fire Faith Order believer had nothing special lost interest. No, it almost disappeared.”

“Hmm. But keeping that person imprisoned is just in case?”

“I think that’s probably the case. If, by a slim chance, they find that Treasure Orb that the Fire Faith Order believer is desperately trying to hide, it might become possible to foresee... ugh.”

At that moment, Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo stopped mid-sentence, clutched his abdomen, and groaned.

His face was pale and had a purplish tint, indicating his condition was not good.

It was a symptom of the poison spreading beyond his viscera to his entire body.

It seemed he couldn’t endure it any longer.

“Ugh.”

Perhaps due to that influence.

Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo vomited black blood along with his retching.

A foul smell rose from the black blood that fell to the floor.

“I- I’m going to... die... pl- please save...”

“Hmm.”

Sang Ik-seo, who had vomited blood, looked at Mok Gyeong-un with pleading eyes while crawling on the floor.

Mok Gyeong-un, who was looking down at him with a dry gaze, shook his head and then made a cut on his finger, opening Sang Ik-seo’s jaw.

“Eat it.”

-Drip drip!

Mok Gyeong-un’s blood entered Sang Ik-seo’s mouth.

Although he was puzzled by suddenly being told to drink blood, Sang Ik-seo, with a strong desire to live, swallowed it down his throat as instructed.

Then, the pain that felt like it was burning his viscera and his entire body began to subside.

“Huh?”

“You’ll be fine for a while.”

“For a while?”

“If you don’t do this periodically, you’ll have seizures like now and your breath will stop.”

Strictly speaking, this wasn’t detoxification.

It was the principle of suppressing poison with poison based on the principle of fighting poison with poison.

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo’s expression stiffened.

“We- weren’t you going to detoxify me?”

“I never said that.”

“What do you mean!”

-Squeeze!

“Ugh!”

Mok Gyeong-un grabbed Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo’s cheeks with his hand and smiled, saying:

“There’s a strict difference between saying I’ll save your life and that.”

‘Th- this!’

Did he never intend to detoxify him from the beginning?

Mok Gyeong-un whispered in the ear of the bewildered Sang Ik-seo, who realized he had been deceived.

“Since you’ve tried controlling someone with poison, being controlled in reverse wouldn’t be so bad.”

At those words, Thousand-men Commander Ma Ra-hyeon of the Embroidered Uniform Guard flashed through Sang Ik-seo’s mind.

Sang Ik-seo had used Ma Ra-hyeon with the Gu Poison.

But now, he was about to be controlled by this person, addicted to the poison.

This was literally the consequence of one’s actions.

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Mok Gyeong-un, who was moving secretly after finishing his business, was lost in thought.

Although he had obtained much more information than before, many things were still ambiguous.

Especially since many parts he didn't know about his grandfather's death had been revealed, he was becoming more and more curious.

'What kind of relationship did my grandfather have with them?'

Why had the organization with the mark targeted his grandfather?

And who had really killed his grandfather?

The key figure who could solve all these questions was none other than Ghost Blade.

'Ghost Blade...'

Coincidentally, everything was leading to him.

To contact him, the urgent task was to contact the Society Leader.

Another coincidence here was the Holy Fire Spirit Orb.

That was because, like his grandfather, the organization with the mark was targeting this Holy Fire Spirit Orb.

No, to be precise, they seemed to want the Holy Fire Spirit Orb's ability.

'Foresight ability.'

He still didn't believe it, but if it was possible, it would be a rare ability that everyone would target, not just the organization with the mark.

The Holy Fire Spirit Orb, who possessed this ability, could also be a clue to solving part of the mystery.

At least, regardless of the truth of that ability, the person himself would clearly know why the organization with the mark was targeting him.

'If we find out that reason, it will be useful.'

The Sect Leader, the organization with the mark, the Fire Faith Order.

All of them were targeting the Holy Fire Spirit Orb.

If he secured this person's whereabouts before them, he could use it as leverage to obtain everything he wanted.

He would also be able to find out their hidden relationship.

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Embroidered Uniform Guard Sixth Office of Selection.

The masked Embroidered Uniform Guard Thousand-men Commander Ma Ra-hyeon was pacing back and forth in the office with an anxious gaze.

What the hell was that Mok Gyeong-un doing?

He had gone saying he would talk, but what he was doing was questionable.

‘Should I have followed him?’

If things went wrong, it was he who would lose his life due to the Gu Poison.

He didn’t know that entrusting his life to someone else would make him so anxious.

But if he thought about it, if he had moved with Mok Gyeong-un and got caught, it might have backfired and he would have been caught instead.

Either way, there was nothing he could do.

As Ma Ra-hyeon was anxiously circling around the guest table, his eyes with the Wall Eye technique trembled.

-Throb!

A sudden intense pain felt in his abdomen.

This wasn’t just a simple pain.

Startled by the intense pain as if something was gnawing at his abdomen, Ma Ra-hyeon clutched his stomach and knelt on one knee.

-Thud!

“Ugh.”

Along with the pain transmitted to his danjeon, he even felt his intestines twisting.

Ma Ra-hyeon instinctively believed that this was due to the Gu Poison.

‘Di- did something go wrong?’

Otherwise, there was no way he would feel this kind of pain.

Had trusting that Mok Gyeong-un become a mistake?

Ma Ra-hyeon gritted his teeth.

If that guy had failed and Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo had triggered the Gu Poison, he was as good as dead.

If he was going to die anyway, he had to do everything he could.

The pain was so severe that he wanted to curl up and roll around while clutching his stomach, but Ma Ra-hyeon endured it with superhuman patience and sat cross-legged.

‘Let’s try to expel the Gu Poison with true energy.’

That was the only thing he could do right now.

Fortunately, unlike the threat he had heard from Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo, the Gu Poison was rampaging without touching his danjeon, so it seemed he could draw out his true energy.

“Phew.”

Ma Ra-hyeon drew out his true energy and sent it to where the Gu Poison was rampaging.

He moved his energy as delicately as possible to control the Gu Poison, but...

-Throb!

The moment he sent his energy near it, the Gu Poison became even more violent and injured his internal organs.

It would be painful enough to just be injured, but the Gu Poison was literally a poison.

The moment the Gu Poison bit, a deadly poison spread to his organs.

“Uuugh.”

Ma Ra-hyeon, who had tried to endure it with superhuman patience, eventually broke his cross-legged position and writhed in pain.

He was in no condition to move delicately, let alone use true energy.

-Clatter!

In the midst of that, his mask fell off, but Ma Ra-hyeon was in too much pain to even be aware of it.

His eyes with the Wall Eye technique rolled back, and he convulsed all over his body.

Purple blood vessels were rising on his face, and his condition was rapidly deteriorating.

‘Is- is this how I die?’

Ma Ra-hyeon, whose consciousness was gradually fading, sensed his own death.

As the final moment approached, everything flashed before his eyes like a montage.

[Your father... came from a very far place in the west with a mission... Don't resent him too much.]

The last words his mother had said about that damned man before her passing also came to mind.

Why was this suddenly coming to mind?

Thinking that he would die without having accomplished anything, everything felt futile.

The only consolation was that he hadn't caused trouble for his mentor, Soyerin, the Thousand-men Commander.

With the evidence like this, she, being clever, would be able to catch Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo.

"Ugh..."

His consciousness was gradually fading away.

It was at that moment.

-Shwip!

Someone placed their hands on Ma Ra-hyeon's abdomen and the Baihui acupoint on the top of his head.

Then something surged into his body.

‘!?’

Ma Ra-hyeon’s eyes, which had been closing, opened wide.

Ma Ra-hyeon’s eyes trembled.

The energy surging into his body was different from the internal energy that exhibited the usual nourishing energy.

This wasn’t the true energy he knew.

It was like an endless darkness entering, reminiscent of an abyss.

And within that darkness...

-Wooooosh!

There was something brutal to the point of despair.

‘Wh- what the hell is this...’

Ma Ra-hyeon was gripped by a strange feeling at this unknown brutal energy he had never experienced before.

He should have rejected this dangerous energy, but instead, he gradually became accustomed to it along with a thrill.

No, it was more accurate to say that he was being rapidly eroded.

-Sizzle!

At some point, black haze began to flow out from Ma Ra-hyeon's entire body.

It was none other than demonic energy.

Chapter 265 – The Fourth Office (1)

“Oho?”

Surprise flickered in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

It was due to the phenomenon occurring with Ma Ra-hyeon, the half-breed Westerner and Thousand-men Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

The energy flowing from his entire body was none other than demonic energy.

This was a phenomenon that even Mok Gyeong-un hadn't anticipated.

‘Is he assimilating with the demonic energy?’

A very rare occurrence was taking place.

No, in the first place, he had never directly infused demonic energy into someone like true energy.

Demonic energy was formed by gathering all the yin energies derived from death energy, which could be called the energy of death.

Therefore, he thought it would be a poison to ordinary people.

For example, he expected it to devour true energy like death energy.

However, surpassing that expectation, Ma Ra-hyeon was accepting his demonic energy and internalizing it as his own.

‘There’s no rejection.’

He thought the existing nourishing energy would push it out.

But Ma Ra-hyeon’s true energy was becoming one with the demonic energy, transforming into a new form of demonic energy.

Although its purity was lower than Mok Gyeong-un’s, it was undoubtedly demonic energy.

‘This has become interesting.’

He had simply intended to send his demonic energy to the rampaging parasitic Gu Poison that had lost its original Command Gu and had its spell and energy-based command severed, in order to imprint it.

He thought demonic energy was difficult for anyone to interfere with since death energy transcended the realm of consciousness in the first place.

But it had produced a completely different result.

‘Hmm.’

Was this a coincidence?

Or was it a phenomenon only possible for the half-breed Ma Ra-hyeon, not a pure Central Plains person? He couldn't tell.

Of course, he could check with someone else later.

After infusing more demonic energy into Ma Ra-hyeon's Baihui acupoint and abdomen, Mok Gyeong-un stopped.

The rampaging Gu Poison in his abdomen had also been imprinted with demonic energy and accepted him as its new Command Gu, its new master, and the poison energy in his body had subsided.

At that moment, Ma Ra-hyeon, who had regained his senses, spoke.

"What the hell is this..."

He seemed to have a strange expression, unable to adapt to his changed energy.

That was understandable since the nature of his true energy itself had changed.

Moreover, it had taken on an extremely brutal and dark energy.

Perhaps that's why he felt it.

"Ah..."

Ma Ra-hyeon looked at Mok Gyeong-un with trembling eyes.

Upon experiencing the vast and highly pure demonic energy emanating from Mok Gyeong-un, he felt a thrill and a sense of awe.

'Wh- what?'

Ma Ra-hyeon was confused.

He couldn't tell if this was truly his own will.

His mind was denying it, but his instincts felt a strong sense of reverence towards Mok Gyeong-un.

It was similar to how ants instinctively develop loyalty to serve the queen ant.

"Wh- what have you done to me?"

"Who knows? I only tried to deal with the Gu Poison, but you took the liberty of internalizing my demonic energy."

"Demonic energy?"

"My energy is quite different from ordinary people. Now that you've internalized it, you should be able to feel it. That it's destructive and brutal."

-Tremble tremble!

Ma Ra-hyeon looked at his own hands.

It was an incomprehensible phenomenon.

After his energy became one with what Mok Gyeong-un called demonic energy, his energy had become stronger and increased.

No, it seemed to have doubled in strength.

He felt like he could win against anyone right now.

It was truly a belligerent energy.

“How did I get this kind of energy...”

“Since you internalized it, I’d be disappointed if you blamed me. Moreover, after I went through the trouble of saving your life.”

“Life? Ah...”

Come to think of it, the rampaging poison energy and the Gu Poison had stopped moving.

However...

‘!?’

Ma Ra-hyeon’s expression distorted.

The reason was...

“...The Gu Poison is still there.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“That’s...”

“I never said I would eliminate the Gu Poison. I said I would ensure it wouldn’t be a problem for your life.”

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon was at a loss for words.

It was undeniable that Mok Gyeong-un had clearly drawn the line that he wouldn’t remove the Gu Poison until his work was finished.

And he had kept that promise.

Although he didn’t know what this energy was, the Gu Poison was no longer rampaging.

So Ma Ra-hyeon asked:

“The Gu Poison won’t rampage anymore. But what exactly did you talk about with Sang Ik-seo?”

Given Mok Gyeong-un’s personality, there was no way he had only talked.

At his question, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and replied:

“Should I say I took over the Gu Poison?”

“What?”

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon’s eyes widened.

What did he mean by taking over the Gu Poison?

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s literal. Just know that I now possess the Command Gu that Associate Military Commissioner had.”

‘!?’

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon’s expression stiffened again.

If he meant it literally, did he really take the female Gu Poison Command Gu from Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo?

That meant the one holding the weakness had changed.

But how did he take it?

Come to think of it, there was a tremendous master by his side who had subdued him in just a few moves.

Even if it was Mok Gyeong-un, that person’s martial arts...

‘...What?’

Ma Ra-hyeon swallowed dry saliva for a moment.

He hadn’t realized it until he could comprehend the demonic energy.

But now that he could feel Mok Gyeong-un’s demonic energy, he couldn’t fathom how far that energy extended.

With this level of energy, perhaps...

“Did you subdue the one guarding Sang Ik-seo?”

“The guard? Ah. You mean that Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang?”

“Yes. I was going to tell you that he wasn’t an ordinary skilled person...”

“He’s dead.”

“What?”

“I said he’s dead.”

‘!!!!’

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon was flabbergasted.

That Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang was an Embroidered Uniform Guard Hundred-men Commander in name, but it was no exaggeration to say that he possessed martial arts skills equivalent to a Pacification Commissioner.

He thought only Gu Seong-baek, the Southern Pacification Commissioner, and his mentor Soyerin, the Thousand-men Commander, could match him, but to hear that such a top master was killed left him speechless.

‘Wait.’

Then, if he had killed the guard Gyeom-chang, could it be...

“Did you kill the Associate Military Commissioner too?”

“How could I? Do you think I would just kill him without reason?”

“...”

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon remained silent.

When someone who could go off in any direction said not to worry, he was simply dumbfounded.

However, that wasn't the problem now.

“Then what did you do with him?”

That person shouldn't have been killed.

Although he couldn't touch him until now because of the Gu Poison in his body, there was conclusive evidence of what he had tried to do, so based on that, he could aim for his superiors as well.

“He's alive and well.”

“Ah...”

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon felt relieved.

If he had simply killed him, it would have only caused a disturbance and alerted his superiors.

But as long as he was alive, there was still room for investigation.

Ma Ra-hyeon got up from his seat.

And he tried to take the evidence that was placed on the office desk.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un said:

“I see what you’re trying to do with that, but don’t do it yet.”

“What?”

“Right now, I don’t want any notable incidents to occur within the Imperial Palace. You should know why, right?”

At those words, Ma Ra-hyeon hesitated.

He immediately understood what Mok Gyeong-un meant by those words.

He was trying to enter the underground prison of the Imperial Palace to kidnap a prisoner, so he didn’t want any incidents to happen internally within the Embroidered Uniform Guard beforehand.

However, if he left that person alone, he would definitely report to his superiors and might cut off the tail.

If that happened, the evidence and everything else would become meaningless.

“...Wouldn’t it be fine as long as it doesn’t harm you?”

“I told you not to.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Ma Ra-hyeon put down the human skin mask case.

And he unconsciously replied:

“Understood.”

After answering like that, Ma Ra-hyeon furrowed his brows.

What was this phenomenon?

That was because he accepted Mok Gyeong-un’s words as if it was natural.

As if he was his master.

‘Why?’

Seeing his baffled reaction, Mok Gyeong-un raised the corners of his mouth and said:

“It seems it’s not just me.”

“What the hell did you do to me... to me?”

“Who knows? It’s just as I told you earlier. But perhaps because you assimilated with my energy, I also feel more familiar with Thousand-men Commander Ma Ra-hyeon.”

“I... I...”

“In this state, it seems you’ll be able to assist me even better.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Ma Ra-hyeon felt strange.

He should have felt repulsed, thinking that he had done something to him, but instead, whenever Mok Gyeong-un said something, a paradoxical emotion arose that he should accept it.

It felt like he had to do whatever he wanted.

He wanted to deny and suppress this incomprehensible change in his emotions with a strong will, but he couldn't.

To the confused Ma Ra-hyeon, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile:

"I was just thinking that it's about time, and I need Thousand-men Commander Ma Ra-hyeon's help even more. If that task is finished, I'll let you do as you wish."

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Ma Ra-hyeon nodded without hesitation and replied:

"Understood."

"I'm glad you're willing. Then please do this for me."

Mok Gyeong-un told him the plan he had in mind.

As he listened, Ma Ra-hyeon's expression gradually became subtle.

That was because his role was quite important in this underground prison heist plan.

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Trainee Bae Ji-seok.

He was a trainee participating in this Imperial Guard training.

Having passed with an average score and been assigned to the Snake Guard, he was finally looking forward to the Embroidered Uniform Guard apprenticeship tomorrow with anticipation.

Although his first apprenticeship was in the Fourth Office that managed the prison, so what?

He was determined to do his best and obtain good results.

But as he was making his resolution and trying to fall asleep, he was summoned to the Embroidered Uniform Guard Six Offices Department not long after.

They said they had called a reference witness as they were investigating the death of Trainee Mok Gyeong-un.

‘Why are they calling me as a reference witness?’

He didn’t know much about Mok Gyeong-un.

No, none of the trainees here knew anything about those from the Heaven and Earth Society.

But he didn’t understand why they were calling him.

He felt puzzled, but since they said it was a simple investigation, he went to the interrogation room of the Six Offices Department.

-Knock knock!

Bae Ji-seok knocked on the door and said:

“This is Trainee Bae Ji-seok. I’m here for the reference investigation.”

“Come in.”

At the voice coming from inside, Bae Ji-seok opened the door.

In the dark interrogation room.

When he opened the door, he saw a lantern, a table, and two chairs arranged to face each other.

Inside, a masked Embroidered Uniform Guard Thousand-men Commander was standing.

Bae Ji-seok closed the door, entered, and greeted him with his hands clasped.

“Did you call for me?”

“...”

At that question, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard Thousand-men Commander said nothing.

When the Thousand-men Commander of the Six Offices Department, which he heard was an investigative department, didn't speak like that, Trainee Bae Ji-seok, who became somewhat uneasy, cautiously asked:

“Is... is there a problem? Is that why you called me?”

At that question, the masked Embroidered Uniform Guard Thousand-men Commander opened his mouth.

“I'm sorry.”

“What?”

“I didn’t call you.”

“What does that mean?”

At that moment, a voice came from right behind him.

“I called you.”

-Flinch!

There was no presence felt at all, but startled by the voice coming from behind, Trainee Bae Ji-seok hurriedly turned around.

‘Huh!?’

Bae Ji-seok’s eyes widened as he turned around.

That was because Mok Gyeong-un, who was said to have been killed in the Embroidered Uniform Guard infirmary a few days ago, was there.

“You... you were definitely dead...”

“Yes. It’s nice to see me alive, isn’t it?”

Why was the guy he knew was dead before is here?

Rather than being happy, he was extremely perplexed.

So...

“What do you mean you called me? Th- Thousand-men Commander?”

Bae Ji-seok called out to the masked Thousand-men Commander while slowly taking steps back.

However, the masked Thousand-men Commander remained silent with his arms crossed.

Instead, Mok Gyeong-un approached closer, raised the corners of his mouth eerily, and said:

“The Thousand-men Commander didn’t call you.”

“What the hell...”

“I heard you’re an orphan and have no close friends, right?”

“Wh- why are you asking that?”

Trainee Bae Ji-seok raised his voice, feeling uneasy.

Then, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth, shadowed by the lantern light, curled up gruesomely.

Startled even more by that sight, he tried to take steps back to distance himself, but Mok Gyeong-un slowly closed the distance and said:

“Nothing much. I was just thinking of borrowing your face for a bit.”

‘!?’

## Chapter 266 – The Fourth Office (2)

Thousand-men Commander Ma Ra-hyeon frowned and slightly turned his head.

That was because Mok Gyeong-un, although he said Trainee Bae Ji-seok had fainted, was peeling off the living face skin of the alive Bae Ji-seok.

Seeing someone peel off an intact face skin, even if one had a strong stomach, it was naturally difficult to watch.

-Scrape scrape!

As Mok Gyeong-un was carving out the facial skin, he nonchalantly said to him:

“It seems difficult to watch.”

“...What’s there to be pleasant about?”

“I guess your stomach is weaker than I thought.”

“...”

It’s not just about having a strong stomach, but it’s unsettling to peel it off like that when the person is alive and well, not already dead.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un had explained the reason.

[The skin quickly necrotizes upon death. It’s much better to do it while it’s still elastic and fresh.]

It was a rather valid reason, but it was still burdensome.

Ma Ra-hyeon clicked his tongue inwardly and eventually left the interrogation room to avoid the scene.

Once outside, he let out a long sigh.

“Sigh.”

Normally, it would be something he could never accept, but he couldn’t refuse what Mok Gyeong-un wanted.

Even when he was doing such a horrific act.

He did say that he had selected someone who wouldn’t cause problems if touched, but this was truly a cruel act.

[Trainee Bae Ji-seok?]

[Yes.]

[Is this person someone who won’t cause any issues?]

[He’s an orphan, and before entering as an Imperial Guard trainee, he was a street thug who threatened and extorted elderly merchants in the marketplace and bullied the weak. He was taken in by a faction of the Grand Preceptor Hang Yoon, one of the four powers, under the pretense of finding talented individuals, and if it weren’t for their recommendation, he would have been weeded out beforehand.]

[So he’s not of particularly good character?]

[...Among them, yes.]

[Good. Then let's go with this person.]

In any case, he wasn't someone the Hang Yoon was actively promoting, so there wouldn't be any problems, and in the first place, he wasn't qualified to join the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

However, it was a bit pitiful.

Of all people, he had to be caught by such a demon-like guy and meet a miserable end.

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Early the next morning.

After the period of basic training in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the trainees moved to their respective departments under the guidance of the Thousand-men Commanders they were assigned to for their apprenticeship.

Among them, the number of team members assigned to the Fourth Office was a total of 11.

The one who received the highest score among them was Trainee Joo Woonhyang, who had placed second in the first test.

Someone was closely observing this Joo Woonhyang from behind.

It was none other than Trainee Bae Ji-seok, or rather, Mok Gyeong-un wearing his face skin.

A glimmer of surprise appeared in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

'His energy has grown quite a bit.'

Joo Woonhyang's innate true energy had increased compared to before.

Either he had worked tirelessly after competing with him, or perhaps he had a small opportunity.

However, Mok Gyeong-un's demonic energy had advanced to a level incomparable to when he had fought Joo Woonhyang or Thousand-men Commander So Yerin a few nights ago.

Because of that, Joo Woonhyang's current level of energy didn't bother him much.

Mok Gyeong-un slightly licked his lips.

'I thought he might notice a little.'

Like the other trainees, Joo Woonhyang also failed to notice his presence.

Of course, it could be because the gap in their skills had widened even further, but it was somewhat disappointing compared to his expectations.

Eventually, they arrived at the main hall of the Fourth Office in the Six Offices Building.

The Fourth Office was the department that managed all the prisons within the Imperial Palace.

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo, who was walking ahead, pointed to a building and said:

"Here. This is where you will stay for the next five days."

It was somewhat smaller and shabbier than the dormitory of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's main building, the Six Offices Building, where they had been temporarily assigned.

They had to stay in such a place for five days?

Most of the trainees seemed to have similar thoughts, as their expressions were not very pleased.

At that moment, someone walked out of the main building of the Fourth Office with their hands behind their back.

The moment they saw the red ceremonial robes, everyone clasped their hands together, lowered their heads, and paid their respects.

-Tap!

The person who came out of the main building of the Fourth Office was none other than Im Gyu-wol, the head of the Fourth Office and the Thousand-men Commander in charge.

He was a man with torn eyes and a pale face.

The overall impression was as if looking at a white snake.

At that moment, Im Gyu-wol abruptly spoke.

“Who here is the one named Joo Woonhyang?”

“That would be me.”

Joo Woonhyang politely replied with his head lowered.

Then, Im Gyu-wol smiled and approached Joo Woonhyang, saying:

“I heard you placed second in the internal energy measurement during the selection process. You can be considered an excellent talent.”

At his praise, Trainee Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect, bit his lip.

He was jealous of Joo Woonhyang receiving attention from the start of the apprenticeship.

However, unlike his jealousy, these words did not come from good intentions.

-Shwip!

Im Gyu-wol, who had approached right in front of her, placed his hand on Joo Woonhyang's shoulder.

At that moment, Joo Woonhyang, who had his head lowered, flinched.

Mok Gyeong-un, who was watching this from right behind, narrowed his eyes.

‘Hmm.’

It seemed that Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol wasn't simply grabbing his shoulder but applying pressure with his internal energy.

That guess was accurate.

The internal energy flowing from Im Gyu-wol's hand was entering through Joo Woonhyang's shoulder and inflicting pain.

-Squeeze!

As he sent his internal energy, Im Gyu-wol smiled nonchalantly and said:

“I have great expectations for you.”

At this, Joo Woonhyang was inwardly flabbergasted.

He was an absurd person.

Saying he had great expectations while trying to suppress him with true energy.

He didn't know the reason, but unless he looked down on him, there was no way he would press down on him with such vast internal energy.

So he slightly raised his head to glance at his face, and contrary to his smiling face, he was looking at him with a condescending gaze.

‘Why is he doing this?’

Joo Woonhyang didn't hide his puzzlement.

For some unknown reason, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol was clearly acting emotionally towards him.

His guess was correct.

‘I heard you're receiving attention from So Yerin?’

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol had fallen for So Yerin's beautiful appearance the moment he first saw her, another Thousand-men Commander, and had been yearning for her for a long time.

However, she, known as the Ice Flower of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, had always been cold towards him.

Whenever he showed interest, she always rejected him bluntly.

‘But why is she, of all people, showing interest in a mere trainee like you?’

It was something he absolutely could not tolerate.

‘I don’t know how great of a talent you are, but I’ll make you regret being assigned to me.’

He couldn’t let anyone who received even the slightest attention from her go unscathed.

He would make them realize their place.

He was going to start by suppressing him with true energy to inflict internal injuries and show him hell during the five days he would be here in the Fourth Office.

‘I’ll directly eliminate you within my jurisdiction.’

In any case, this was his domain.

Even if he tormented him and made him drop out, there was no one who would blame or criticize him.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol raised his internal energy even more.

Even if he had placed second in the internal energy measurement, this guy was just a trainee.

‘You’ll feel your insides being shaken.’

But something was strange.

By now, Joo Woonhyang should have collapsed or at least screamed, unable to endure the true energy pressing on his insides.

However, there was no reaction at all.

-Crack!

At that moment, cracks appeared on the floor where Joo Woonhyang was standing.

Seeing this, one of Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol's eyebrows raised.

This was a phenomenon that was only possible if he sent the true energy he had injected through his Yongcheon acupoint.

'Look at this guy?'

He was a young man who hadn't even reached adulthood yet.

Such a guy had deflected his energy?

Yes. That's right.

-Woooosh!

At that moment, Im Gyu-wol's cultivation level rose.

-Flinch!

“Thousand-men Commander!”

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo, who noticed this, called out to Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol.

He had been quietly observing what he was doing while continuously holding Joo Woonhyang’s shoulder, but he didn’t expect him to be applying such internal energy pressure on a trainee.

However, Im Gyu-wol had no intention of ending it here.

‘Try enduring this too.’

Im Gyu-wol raised his cultivation level even more.

Then, Joo Woonhyang’s body gradually began to tremble as well.

‘Tsk.’

He tried to protect his shoulder with his own innate true energy and deflect the incoming internal energy, but as the cultivation level increased further, it became increasingly difficult.

-Crack crack!

The cracks on the floor had somehow spread to the other trainees nearby.

Startled, they stepped back.

Before they knew it, everyone’s attention was focused on them.

‘What the hell is he doing?’

‘Why is the Thousand-men Commander doing this?’

Anyone could see that Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol was pressuring Joo Woonhyang with his internal energy.

Seeing Joo Woonhyang’s complexion gradually worsening, it might turn into a problem.

At that moment, Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho approached to dissuade him.

“Thousand-men Commander. That’s enough...”

“Don’t interfere.”

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol rebuked him in a low voice and waved his hand.

It meant not to intervene.

At this, Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho couldn’t hide his difficulty.

Having served Im Gyu-wol for a long time, he knew his personality better than anyone else.

If he tried to stop him here, his anger might turn towards him.

-Crack crack!

“Ugh.”

For the first time, a small groan escaped from Joo Woonhyang's mouth.

It seemed he had finally reached his limit due to Im Gyu-wol's continuous internal energy pressure.

As an apprentice going through the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process, he couldn't rebel against the examiner, so he had no choice but to endure it one-sidedly.

'Hehehe. You've reached your limit now.'

The corners of Im Gyu-wol's mouth curled up eerily.

Although it was admirable that the brat had endured his internal energy despite his young age, it was now over.

Im Gyu-wol tried to raise his cultivation level to finish it off decisively.

-Crack crack!

As he raised his cultivation level further, the cracks on the floor spread even farther.

Joo Woonhyang's complexion worsened, indicating he had reached his limit.

It was at that very moment.

-Grab!

Someone grabbed his right wrist.

‘Huh?’

Im Gyu-wol, who had raised his cultivation level to nearly the 7th stage, frowned fiercely.

Among the trainees, there was no one at a level capable of stopping him.

Naturally, he thought it was Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho who had intervened.

So...

“I told you not to interfere... You?”

It was none other than Trainee Bae Ji-seok, or rather, Mok Gyeong-un wearing his face skin as a human skin mask.

Seeing this, one of Im Gyu-wol’s eyebrows raised.

Not even Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho, but an apprentice trainee who hadn’t even ranked in the top positions in the first test was now grabbing his wrist?

At this, Im Gyu-wol was flabbergasted and tried to shake him off.

However...

-Grip!

‘What?’

Im Gyu-wol’s eyes trembled.

That was because he couldn't shake off the guy's hand.

He had even raised his cultivation level to the 8th stage, yet it remained immovable.

To the perplexed Im Gyu-wol, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and said in a polite voice:

"Thousand-men Commander. It seems you have sufficiently tested the trainee, so how about stopping here?"

"You..."

Who the hell was this guy?

His cultivation level was much stronger than Joo Woonhyang, who had placed second in the internal energy test.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol's eyes quickly scanned the surroundings.

All the apprentice trainees were looking at him, and he thought that if he continued this power struggle here, he might end up embarrassing himself.

Chapter 267 – The Fourth Office (3)

Murmur murmur!

The trainees who were watching from the side stirred.

When Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol was pressuring Joo Woonhyang with his internal energy, the atmosphere was heavy and chilling beyond words.

However, the situation changed when one of the trainees intervened midway.

Even Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho, who could be considered the second-in-command of the Fourth Office, was afraid of Im Gyu-wol, the head, and couldn't touch him, so no one expected that an apprentice trainee undergoing the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection would step up in this situation.

'What's with that guy?'

'Is he in his right mind to grab the Thousand-men Commander's arm?'

'Is he crazy and wants to fail the selection test?'

Those who thought this way were the trainees who ranked lower in the first selection.

'What's this? Did he just endure Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol's cultivation level?'

'...I don't think this guy's internal energy was that deep?'

Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect, and the trainees who ranked higher couldn't hide their surprise at the sight of Trainee Bae Ji-seok, who was only in the middle rank, enduring Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol's cultivation level.

Of course, if it were the real Bae Ji-seok, he wouldn't have been able to do that.

Inside that face skin was a completely different person.

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

‘!?’

Thanks to that, Joo Woonhyang, who had been freed from Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol’s internal energy pressure, frowned and raised his head to look at Mok Gyeong-un, who had Trainee Bae Ji-seok’s face.

He didn’t have a chance to meet or talk to Bae Ji-seok because their Imperial Guard trainee ranks were different.

Even during the training right before the apprenticeship, it was the same.

However...

‘...It’s strange.’

Joo Woonhyang was gripped by a strange feeling.

Somehow, it felt familiar.

Even though the face and voice were different, this familiarity...

‘Could it be?’

Joo Woonhyang looked at Mok Gyeong-un’s face with suspicious eyes.

It was at that very moment.

-Squeeze!

The grip of Mok Gyeong-un's hand holding Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol's wrist tightened even more.

'Ugh... This bastard?'

Im Gyu-wol's expression stiffened at the strengthened grip.

It was no exaggeration to say that this guy's cultivation level was surpassing his own 8th stage cultivation level.

-Tremble tremble!

His wrist was trembling.

If they were alone, he might have raised his cultivation level to settle it.

However, there were too many eyes watching right now.

If he showed a moment of being overwhelmed in cultivation level, his authority as the examiner of the apprentice trainees would crumble.

'Damn it.'

But it was also a dilemma to figure out what to say and stop here.

He was the one who started it.

It was at that moment.

-Thud!

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been gripping his wrist, suddenly let go and clasped his hands together, lowering his head, and politely said:

“As expected, I can’t withstand the Thousand-men Commander’s cultivation level. I apologize for intervening midway while you were testing another trainee. I intervened out of concern that the trainee being tested might get hurt, so please understand with a generous heart.”

-Flinch!

At Mok Gyeong-un’s actions, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol’s eyes sharpened.

‘This damn bastard...’

He was truly a cunning fellow.

He could have embarrassed him, but not only did he back off at an appropriate point midway, but he also deliberately chose a path to save face for him.

-Clench!

Im Gyu-wol clenched his fists tightly and barely suppressed his anger.

If he showed an emotional reaction here, it would not only ruin his reputation but also remove any justification.

Alternating his sharp gaze between Mok Gyeong-un and Joo Woonhyang, who were standing side by side, Im Gyu-wol smiled nonchalantly and said:

“Indeed, I heard the trainees participating in this Embroidered Uniform Guard selection have outstanding skills, and it’s true to the word. Not only did you endure my sudden internal energy test well, but seeing how you flexibly responded for the sake of your competitor and comrade, I’m pleased.”

“Not at all.”

“I apologize.”

Joo Woonhyang and Mok Gyeong-un replied simultaneously.

Then, Im Gyu-wol patted the shoulders of the two with a generous voice and said:

“I will specially give bonus points to both of you.”

-Murmur murmur!

‘Bonus points?’

‘Was it really a test?’

At those words, the trainees couldn’t hide their envy.

The atmosphere was so hostile that they were worried about what trouble might occur, but seeing Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol even giving bonus points, it seemed he had really tested them unexpectedly.

On the other hand, Joo Woonhyang inwardly clicked his tongue at Im Gyu-wol’s handling ability.

‘He didn’t reach this position for nothing.’

If he had acted emotionally, he could have lost face, but he was quite skilled in dealing with the situation.

Of course, he thought his insides must be boiling with rage.

So Joo Woonhyang thought he should be careful for a while.

As he expected, Im Gyu-wol spoke in a magnanimous manner but was grinding his teeth inwardly.

‘I’ll remember this, you bastards.’

“Then I hope you obtain good results during the next five days and join the Embroidered Uniform Guard.”

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol withdrew, inwardly vowing revenge.

As he entered the main building of the Fourth Office, Joo Woonhyang suppressed his boiling internal energy.

Even though he had deflected it as much as possible, Im Gyu-wol’s internal energy was a step above his, so he almost suffered internal injuries.

‘It would have been troublesome if it had lasted longer.’

It was a fortunate situation.

If he hadn’t properly internalized the innate true energy Thousand-men Commander So Yerin had injected, it could have been a big problem.

While calming his true energy like that, Joo Woonhyang looked at Mok Gyeong-un, who had Trainee Bae Ji-seok’s face, and spoke:

“Are you by any chance...”

“By any chance what?”

Joo Woonhyang, who was about to ask something, eventually gave up on it.

And he simply expressed her gratitude.

“Thank you. Thanks to you stepping up, I avoided internal injuries.”

“That’s fortunate.”

At those words, Joo Woonhyang’s eyes narrowed.

Although his voice was deep, this way of speaking and tone were definitely...

At that moment, Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-ho approached Joo Woonhyang and Mok Gyeong-un and spoke in a low voice so that only the two could hear:

“I don’t know the reason, but both of you have essentially been marked by the Thousand-men Commander. Thanks to that, you’ll have a tiring five days. I’ll keep an eye on you, but both of you should avoid trouble as much as possible.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

At this, Mok Gyeong-un and Joo Woonhyang politely clasped their hands together, lowered their heads, and replied.

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That night.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol personally prepared two maps.

These maps, labeled as the Prison Battlefield Map, depicted the paths of the underground prison.

The underground prison of the Imperial Palace had been continuously expanded for hundreds of years, so it was formed like a cave and was quite vast and dark, making it easy to get lost if one wasn't careful.

Therefore, the Embroidered Uniform Guards of the Fourth Office carried these Prison Battlefield Maps to avoid losing their way.

However, these Prison Battlefield Maps were different from the existing ones.

'Heh.'

If one blindly trusted these maps and carelessly tried to find their way, they would end up in the wrong place.

Specifically, in a trap with a mechanical device installed.

'They will now understand why, except for one person, no one has ever escaped from the Imperial Palace's underground prison unharmed for so long.'

There was no need to even use his own hands.

If they died while wandering in the underground prison, no explanation would be necessary.

'Joo Woonhyang, Bae Ji-seok.'

Those damn bastards almost made him lose face.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol curled the corners of his mouth eerily.

Thinking about them wandering in the underground prison and meeting their end, he couldn't contain his excitement.

Im Gyu-wol then rolled up the two maps, tied them with red threads, and placed them among the nine maps.

He used red threads only for the ones he would give to them.

Feeling satisfied, he left the office and headed to his personal quarters.

When one became a commander of a thousand or above, they were given personal quarters, and when they reached the level of a Thousand-men Commander, they could have a separate nice room like this.

-Thud!

Im Gyu-wol hung his outer robe on the coat hanger and lay down on the bed in a good mood.

It was at that very moment.

-Stab! Stab!

'Ugh!'

His back arched upward like a bow.

Something had simultaneously pierced two spots on his spine, and the pain was indescribable.

However, for some unknown reason, he couldn't make a sound.

'Wh- what the hell is this?'

As he was bewildered, he heard a rattling sound from under the bed.

Then, someone crawled out from under the bed.

Seeing the face of that unidentified someone, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol couldn't help but be shocked.

'Bae Ji-seok?'

It was none other than Trainee Bae Ji-seok, or rather, Mok Gyeong-un wearing his face.

Mok Gyeong-un brought his lips close to his ear and whispered softly:

"I was bored waiting for you, Thousand-men Commander."

-Flinch!

'Wh- who the hell is this bastard? How did he get in here?'

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol couldn't help but be perplexed.

The area around the main building of the Fourth Office was guarded by Imperial Guards, and the dormitory building had the Lesser Banners, the lowest rank in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, taking turns on duty.

Yet he infiltrated while avoiding them?

'Putting aside the infiltration, how did he evade my senses? Did a mere trainee really surpass my martial arts?'

Seeing his reaction, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

"What a nice expression."

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un lightly touched his waist, which was arched like a bow.

-Press!

'Uuugh!'

Im Gyu-wol was in so much pain that his face turned bright red from his originally pale complexion.

Even the veins on his forehead bulged.

'This son of a b\*tch!'

He sincerely wanted to tear Mok Gyeong-un apart and kill him.

However, when Mok Gyeong-un pressed the area around his spinal vertebrae once more...

'Aaaargh!'

A pain like being struck by lightning spread throughout his body through his spine.

It was the first time he had experienced such pain in his life.

It was difficult to even breathe properly.

“Hah! Hah! Hah!”

Beads of cold sweat formed on Im Gyu-wol’s face.

Seeing him like this, Mok Gyeong-un curled the corners of his mouth eerily and whispered in his ear:

“I once read a book on acupuncture, and there was a dangerous acupuncture technique that shouldn’t be done recklessly. Do you know what it is?”

‘Ho- how would I know that?’

Unable to speak, Im Gyu-wol glared at Mok Gyeong-un as if he wanted to kill him.

Then, Mok Gyeong-un smiled brightly and said:

“Ah, I forgot it’s difficult for you to answer. It’s nothing much, just that there’s a technique called spinal acupuncture, and unless you’re a truly skilled physician, you shouldn’t carelessly insert needles near the spine. If you’re not careful, the needles can penetrate into the spine and be dangerous, or something like that.”

‘What?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Im Gyu-wol’s eyes trembled.

But this was just the beginning.

“But what’s even more interesting is that it was written that as the pain intensifies like that, you become paralyzed and unable to walk ever again.”

‘Pa- paralyzed?’

At those words, Im Gyu-wol felt like he was going crazy.

The pain in his waist was too severe to just let it go.

Im Gyu-wol’s complexion, filled with fear, gradually turned pale.

Mok Gyeong-un whispered in his ear:

“I’m quite cautious, so when someone harbors ill feelings towards me, I don’t just let it slide.”

-Press!

‘Uuuugh.’

As the needles penetrated even deeper, Im Gyu-wol writhed in pain, unable to come to his senses.

Mok Gyeong-un, who was watching him suffer with a gleeful expression, brought something to his eyes when he had barely gotten used to the pain.

-Shwip!

‘!?’

It was none other than a sharp needle.

Bringing such a needle right in front of his eyes, Im Gyu-wol couldn't help but be perplexed.

What was he trying to do with this now?

As he was puzzled, Mok Gyeong-un resolved his question.

"This needle is something a certain person had, and it's coated with poison. You're curious about what kind of poison, right?"

'Poison?'

Im Gyu-wol's pupils trembled at the mention of poison on the needle.

Just having the sharp point flickering in front of his eyes was agonizing, but hearing that it was also coated with poison made him feel like he was going crazy.

To the frightened Im Gyu-wol, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and nonchalantly said:

"This is nothing much either, but if the needle is inserted into the eyeball, the poison quickly spreads to the brain, causing a state of mental disability, should I say?"

'!!!!!!!'

This was nothing much?

Chapter 268 – The Fourth Office (4)

"Mmph."

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol groaned and tried to twist his body.

The moment that poisonous needle flickering in front of his eyes pierced his eyeball, he could even become mentally disabled, so he wanted to avoid it at all costs.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled and slightly pulled out one of the needles embedded in his spine.

As the needle was pulled out, Im Gyu-wol's waist, which had been arched like a bow, straightened.

"Gasp... gasp... Y- you bastard!"

"Bastard? You better be careful with your attitude."

-Grind!

At Mok Gyeong-un's low warning, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol gritted his teeth.

He wanted to subdue the guy and make him pull out the needles right away, but if he made a mistake and ended up paralyzed, his life in the Imperial Palace would be over.

"...What the hell are you doing this for? Aren't you afraid of the consequences?"

"Consequences? Did you just say consequences?"

"No, that's not what I meant..."

"I'm curious about how you'll repay the consequences if you become mentally disabled."

"..."

Im Gyu-wol couldn't say anything to Mok Gyeong-un's mocking words.

As the guy said, if he became unable to even recognize anything, he couldn't do anything about consequences or whatnot.

Im Gyu-wol glared at Mok Gyeong-un as if he was resentful and opened his mouth.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I'm glad you're someone who can be reasoned with."

"..."

What did he mean by being reasoned with after sticking needles in his spine and holding a poisonous needle to his eye?

His insides were boiling, but Im Gyu-wol tried hard to suppress it.

If he could escape this crisis, there would always be an opportunity for revenge.

"Before I tell you what I want, let's hear what Thousand-men Commander Im was trying to do first."

At that question, Im Gyu-wol flinched for a moment.

That was because, before coming here, he had plotted with the fake Prison Battlefield Maps to trap Mok Gyeong-un, who had Trainee Bae Ji-seok's face, and Trainee Joo Woonhyang.

Naturally, he couldn't help but be perplexed when asked about it.

So he played dumb.

“...What are you talking about?”

“You surely know what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean? I’m the examiner testing you apprentice trainees. Are you saying that I, as the examiner, was trying to do something to you guys?”

“Hmm.”

“If you think it’s because of what happened earlier, I’ve already forgotten about it. So...”

-Squeeze!

“Ugh.”

Mok Gyeong-un grabbed his cheeks with his hand.

And he slowly applied force to his hand.

Then...

“Uuugh!”

Due to the force applied to his cheeks, his cheekbones and teeth hurt as if they would break.

To the suffering Im Gyu-wol, Mok Gyeong-un whispered in his ear:

“For someone who has forgotten, your eyes have been bad the whole time, so it’s been bothering me. Someone with such eyes wouldn’t just let it go without doing anything.”

“Nnoo... I... didn’t.”

“I can’t trust you. It seems too much to make you paralyzed, so if I end it by making you mentally disabled, I won’t have to worry about the Thousand-men Commander either.”

-Shwip!

Mok Gyeong-un brought the poisonous needle to his eye.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol, who thought it was a threat to make him speak, vowed to endure it no matter what.

However, that didn’t last long.

It was because of Mok Gyeong-un’s expression as he smiled at him.

He was smiling as if he was enjoying it, and that smile was filled with nothing but malice.

‘He’ll do it. This bastard will definitely do it.’

Normally, one would think it was a simple threat.

Because anyone who wanted to become an Embroidered Uniform Guard would know that they shouldn’t make enemies with the examiner testing them.

But this bastard’s expression and eyes showed that he didn’t care about that at all.

So Im Gyu-wol hurriedly spoke:

“Gi- gib me bonus... points... to fail... selection...”

“You tried to give bonus points to fail us in the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection?”

“Ye- yes.”

Im Gyu-wol lied as plausibly as possible.

If he told the truth according to his real plan, not only would this bastard not leave him alone, but his revenge for what he had done now would also fly away.

Still, he thought he had spoken plausibly, so he might be deceived, but he couldn't help but feel nervous.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un nodded and said:

“Well, you used your brain to some extent. Such a way of revenge...”

-Shwip!

Mok Gyeong-un let go of the hand he was gripping.

“Phew... phew...”

Then, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol inwardly felt relieved.

He was worried that this bastard might not believe him and probe further, but fortunately, he seemed to have been deceived.

But at that very moment...

-Flick!

Mok Gyeong-un was seen curling his middle finger towards his forehead and fixing it with his thumb.

Seeing this, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol furrowed his brows.

‘A flick?’

-Smack!

The flicked middle finger struck his forehead with great force.

At the tremendous impact that seemed to pierce through his forehead and penetrate his brain, Im Gyu-wol’s eyes widened as if they would tear, and a scream was about to burst out of his mouth.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un covered his mouth, so he couldn’t scream.

“Uuugh.”

To the suffering Im Gyu-wol, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile:

“Did you think I would believe that? If you had planned to take revenge in such a childish way, you would have given me penalty points instead of bonus points earlier.”

“Uuugh.”

“I can’t believe it. Tell me what you originally had in mind, step by step. I’ll only let it slide once.”

With those words, Mok Gyeong-un held up the poisonous needle and waved it.

Im Gyu-wol, who had lost his senses from a single flick, drooled and blankly stared at it.

The force behind the flick was so strong that he even had the illusion that his forehead bone was cracked, no, shattered.

“Your answer is late.”

“Un- underground prison... give wrong Prison Battlefield Map... to get lost.”

“Wrong Prison Battlefield Map?”

“Yes.”

Come to think of it, he had heard that the underground prison was so vast that it was like a maze.

Without the Prison Battlefield Map, one could even lose their life by wandering and falling into the prison’s mechanical trap.

At this, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth slightly rose.

“Now it sounds more plausible.”

“...”

“Where is that wrong Prison Battlefield Map?”

“In... Fourth Office... office.”

“If it’s not there, I might as well stab this needle into your eyeball without wasting time. It’s bothersome to talk more.”

“It’s not a lie. There are two maps marked with red thread, different from the other Prison Battlefield Maps. Those are the ones.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un was convinced that it was true this time.

Words alone certainly couldn’t be trusted.

But if there was something prepared like this, it was definite.

Moreover, not one, but two maps.

The targets were also clear.

‘Me and Joo Woonhyang.’

So Mok Gyeong-un placed his hand on Im Gyu-wol’s shoulder and said:

“If you had told me this from the beginning, we wouldn’t have had to go through this trouble.”

“...I absolutely won’t do anything reckless. So please end it here. I won’t give you penalty points or do anything like that either.”

“Of course you shouldn’t. But I haven’t even gotten to the main point yet.”

“Main point?”

“Yes. Actually, I have no interest in the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection or whatnot.”

“What?”

What the hell did this mean?

The Imperial Guard training was the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process.

If he participated in it, what did he mean by having no interest?

To the puzzled Im Gyu-wol, Mok Gyeong-un nonchalantly said:

“Rather than that, I’d like to quietly take out the person I want from the underground prison. It would be much easier if Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol, the head of the Fourth Office who manages it, helped me.”

‘!!!!!!’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s completely unexpected words, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol’s eyes widened.

Wasn’t this saying to help a convicted criminal imprisoned in the underground prison escape?

And he was asking him, the one who managed the prison, to help with that?

So Im Gyu-wol spoke in a flabbergasted tone:

“Are you crazy? Even though I’m suffering like this because I made an enemy out of you, I’m the head of the Fourth Office. Do you think I would help a prisoner escape from the underground prison?”

Im Gyu-wol showed his pride and spirit as an Embroidered Uniform Guard for the first time.

He even showed a strong determination, as if this was something he absolutely couldn’t help with.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un said with a smile:

“I told you there wouldn’t be a second warning.”

“Th- this is something I can’t do. Even if you threaten me.”

“Oho. You want to show me your will? Then shall we change that method of threat a little?”

“What?”

“You’ve been embezzling funds all this time whenever you moved departments to help the Grand Preceptor Hang Yoon’s faction, right?”

‘!?’

At those words, the eyes of Im Gyu-wol, who had shown his will, trembled.

He had been collecting funds by manipulating the ledgers as much as possible to avoid detection.

No one had noticed until now, so how did this bastard know?

“Wh- what are you talking about?”

Im Gyu-wol strongly denied it.

Then, Mok Gyeong-un took out a book from his bosom.

Seeing this, Im Gyu-wol's expression stiffened.

It was none other than the secret ledger he had hidden in his office.

'Wh- why is that?'

In that bastard's hand?

Of course, this was...

[This is a part of the secret ledgers hidden in a secret place in the Fourth Office. I took it because I thought it would be useful.]

It was something Mok Gyeong-un's subordinate, Mong Mu-yak, had secretly entered the Fourth Office's office and took.

They thought the embezzlement ledger could be used to pressure him as the head of the Fourth Office.

And now it was being used usefully like this.

"If the higher-ups of Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol find out about this, it doesn't seem like it would be good for you. If you're unlucky, you might end up imprisoned in the Imperial Palace's prison. It would be interesting. The prison manager being imprisoned in the prison he managed."

These words from Mok Gyeong-un eventually became the deciding factor.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol finally surrendered and lowered his head deeply.

After agreeing to everything Mok Gyeong-un wanted, he wrote a document and stamped it with the Fourth Office's official seal and his own seal.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un didn't stop there and also made him addicted to poison, just like he had done to Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo.

At this level of thoroughness, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol clicked his tongue.

As Mok Gyeong-un was about to leave his quarters, he asked out of curiosity:

"But why are you targeting Trainee Joo Woonhyang?"

He was already curious about this.

He knew that Joo Woonhyang had quite a few enemies, but he suddenly wondered why he was targeting her.

At Mok Gyeong-un's question, Im Gyu-wol didn't want to answer, but he had already been caught by his weakness, so he reluctantly replied:

"...Because of Thousand-men Commander So Yerin."

'!?'

Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head and asked again:

"Thousand-men Commander So Yerin?"

“Yes.”

“Did you have a problem with her?”

“...I have no problem with her. I was just annoyed that Thousand-men Commander So Yerin, who is strict in public and private matters, was paying attention to that bastard Joo Woonhyang.”

“Ha!”

Mok Gyeong-un burst into laughter at the unexpected answer, thinking there might be another reason.

The reason he had suddenly acted emotionally turned out to be stemming from emotions.

‘Jealousy.’

Humans seem inefficient because of their emotions.

Mok Gyeong-un shook his head and left his quarters.

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Not long after Mok Gyeong-un left, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol, who judged that he had completely disappeared, couldn’t contain his anger and vented his frustration by breaking everything in his quarters.

-Bang bang!

This was the first time in his life that he had experienced such humiliation.

Not only was he threatened and had his weakness caught, but he was even addicted to poison.

If he didn't vent this anger somewhere, he felt like he wouldn't be able to endure it.

-Bang!

He even smashed his own bed.

Only after breaking almost everything inside did he seem to calm down a bit. Im Gyu-wol, who sat on the floor, gritted his teeth and muttered in a small voice:

-Grind!

"Don't think this is over. I will definitely pay you back somehow."

He made a vow for the future.

Even if it took ten years, it wasn't too late for a man's revenge.

To the bastard who had given him such humiliation, he would definitely repay it equally, no, twice, three times...

"What will you repay?"

'!?'

At that moment, Im Gyu-wol's expression stiffened at the voice coming from behind.

There was no presence felt behind him at all.

Had he heard an illusion?

As he turned his head with a tense expression, Mok Gyeong-un was standing at the door of his quarters, holding two scrolls of the fake Prison Battlefield Maps.

‘Ah...’

## Chapter 269 – Underground Prison (1)

The next morning, on a chilly day.

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo visited the office of Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol, the head of the Fourth Office.

Entering the office, Mak Myeong-bo’s eyes flickered with surprise.

Im Gyu-wol had a swollen face, as if injured, and was shirtless while the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s dedicated physician was applying needles and moxibustion to his right shoulder.

Judging by his expression, the injury did not seem light.

Mak Myeong-bo asked in surprise:

“Thousand-men Commander, where did you get injured?”

At his question, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol replied in an irritated voice:

“Can’t you tell by looking?”

Last night, thinking the guy had left, he had vowed for the future, but was caught off guard.

Who would have thought the guy would come back?

Of course, he thought he would return to the trainee dormitory.

Anyway, as a result, he had paid a severe price.

[Uuugh.]

[Let's end it here. Still, you're lucky. If you were even slightly useless, it would have been better to just dispose of you.]

Lucky?

Damn bastard.

Not only did he make him a wreck like this, but his right shoulder was completely broken.

According to the physician, it would take over a month of recuperation for the broken bone to fully heal.

But the worst part was that he said he wouldn't be able to move his shoulder freely like before.

It was practically devastating news for him, as his right hand was his dominant hand.

'Bae Ji-seok!'

He was so angry that he wanted to tear the guy apart and kill him, but not only was his weakness caught, but he was also addicted to poison, so he had no choice but to cater to the guy's whims.

This made him even more miserable.

‘Damn bastard. I will definitely repay this grudge someday.’

Even though he had suffered like that yesterday, he still hadn’t given up.

It was said to lie on sticks and taste gall.

Although he had to grovel for now, if he endured this misery, he believed an opportunity would surely come someday.

“But what’s the matter?”

At Im Gyu-wol’s question, Mak Myeong-bo clasped his hands together and said with a bow:

“I’ve come to borrow the Prison Battlefield Maps necessary for the apprentice trainees’ prison infiltration today.”

“Prison Battlefield Maps?”

The Prison Battlefield Maps were very important items.

Since they contained the locations of mechanical traps and all the internal geography of the prison, the number of maps was limited, and because they couldn’t be carelessly leaked, they were kept by Im Gyu-wol, the head of the Fourth Office, who was in charge of the prisons.

“If it’s that, in that case...”

Im Gyu-wol, who was about to speak, stopped as if realizing something.

'Tsk.'

There were still two Prison Battlefield Maps tied with red thread on top of the maps.

If he had his way, he wanted to hand over those Prison Battlefield Maps as they were.

But since that Bae Ji-seok bastard had already confirmed those incorrect Prison Battlefield Maps, he couldn't deceive him.

So he had to replace them with the correct Prison Battlefield Maps.

"...Go prepare the apprentice trainees, and I'll personally give them to you."

"But your body is not well..."

"Haha. Didn't I say I would personally bring them to you?"

"Understood."

Although puzzled, how could he disobey his superior's order?

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo withdrew.

After he left, Im Gyu-wol was about to ask the Embroidered Uniform Guard physician to finish the treatment.

At that moment, someone knocked on the office door.

“I, Thousand-men Commander...”

It was the voice of Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo.

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol shouted irritably:

“Didn’t I clearly say I would personally bring them to you...”

At that moment, the office door opened.

As the door opened, Im Gyu-wol, startled by the sight of a middle-aged man in a silver ceremonial robe entering, hastily rose from his seat while wrapping his bandages and paid his respects.

“I- I greet the Defender-in-Chief.”

4th rank Embroidered Uniform Guard Defender-in-Chief.

Although the Embroidered Uniform Guard was attached to the title, the Defender-in-Chief was not a position incorporated into the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

In a way, it could be considered a special rank.

The Defender-in-Chief was the escort warrior for the princes who received the throne, and since they could mobilize the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s Chief Banners in special situations or emergencies, the affiliation name “Embroidered Uniform Guard” was attached to the front.

‘Why is the Defender-in-Chief here?’

The Defender-in-Chief was equivalent in rank to the Embroidered Uniform Guard’s Pacification Commissioner, who could be considered the chief executive officer.

In conclusion, he was a higher-ranking official and a person of power.

“It’s been a while, Thousand-men Commander Im.”

“I- I’m extremely grateful that you remember me.”

He was sincerely grateful that he remembered him from when he was just a Lesser Banner.

The Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom in front of him was someone who was close to the position he desired the most.

Although he had been pushed out of the position of Crown Prince now, wasn’t he closely serving as an escort to this prince who was once the most likely candidate for the throne succession?

Moreover, his martial arts were said to be no inferior to those of the Northern Pacification Commissioner or the Chief Eunuchs of the Eastern and Western Depots.

Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom said to him:

“Could we have a private conversation for a moment?”

“Of course.”

At his words, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol hurriedly sent out the Imperial Palace physician.

And he personally locked the office door.

However, the eyes of Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom, who was looking at his back as he walked shirtless, sharpened fiercely.

Unaware of this, Im Gyu-wol prepared seats.

After examining the surroundings with his senses, Muk Seom, who sat at the table, lightly waved his hand.

‘!?’

Im Gyu-wol couldn’t hide his bewilderment.

The reason was that Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom had used true energy to block the sound inside and outside the room.

It seemed he wanted to have a confidential conversation.

“I’ll get straight to the point without beating around the bush.”

“Yes? About what?”

“You were cooperating with Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang under the command of the Associate Military Commissioner, right?”

‘What?’

At that question, Im Gyu-wol’s expression stiffened.

This was a matter that required attention and confidentiality.

Im Gyu-wol belonged to the faction of the Grand Preceptor Hangyun, who held the positions of Grand Preceptor and Admiral of the Central Military Commission, so he also received orders from Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo.

Originally, even if they were both from the Embroidered Uniform Guard, only the Fourth Office could be deployed for prison duties.

However, with the order from Associate Military Commissioner Sang Ik-seo, Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang was temporarily incorporated into the Fourth Office under the pretext of cooperating for the interrogation of the Fire Faith Order believers.

This was a confidential matter that was carried out only when trusted individuals belonging to the faction were on duty, so how did this person know about it?

So Im Gyu-wol tried his best not to show any signs and opened his mouth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“No need to deceive me. I’m also a person of His Excellency Hangyun.”

‘!?’

At those words, Im Gyu-wol furrowed his brows.

A person of His Excellency Hangyun?

He had heard that there were quite a few people in the faction that he didn’t know, but Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom was even more known as a person of this prince, Prince Jong.

Therefore, there was no way he could trust him.

At that moment, Im Gyu-wol took something out of his bosom and showed it.

It was none other than...

‘Huh?’

The military tally of the Central Military Commission, with Grand Preceptor as the Admiral.

Seeing the military tally that could mobilize the Central Military Commission, not anything else, Im Gyu-wol could sense that his words were true.

This was evidence that couldn’t be entrusted unless there was considerable trust.

“I borrowed this military tally from His Excellency in case you couldn’t believe me.”

-Thud!

At this, Im Gyu-wol knelt on one knee and clasped his hands together, paying his respects to him.

“I was unaware.”

“Get up. It’s natural for you not to know. There are only a few people who know this fact, including His Excellency.”

At his words, Im Gyu-wol inwardly felt excited.

Did the fact that Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom was saying this mean that His Excellency Hangyun had decided to make great use of him?

Otherwise, there was no way someone in such a high position would reveal his true faction.

Feeling excited, Im Gyu-wol stood up, and Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom lowered his voice and abruptly said something unexpected.

“By the way, did Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang finish the interrogation?”

“Are you talking about the interrogation?”

“Yes.”

“Not yet.”

At his answer, Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom stroked his beard and let out a groan.

“Hmm. Can’t be helped.”

“...But how do you know about that?”

“No. You don’t need to know that much.”

“Pardon?”

“Rather, a slight problem has arisen, and Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang can no longer continue the interrogation.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Until just a few days ago, Hundred-men Commander Gyeom-chang was determined to continue the interrogation in order to find that so-called Treasure Orb.

He was doing so because there was an order from the Associate Military Commissioner not to ask why, but suddenly saying he couldn't continue the interrogation made him curious.

So...

"It's just as I said. Rather, there's something I need you to do. Since it's a direct order from His Excellency, you can do it, right?"

"What kind of order?"

"It's something that only you, as the head of the Fourth Office, can do. If you help me accomplish this safely, the Grand Preceptor will acknowledge your merit."

"Th- the Grand Preceptor, you say?"

At these words, Im Gyu-wol swallowed dry saliva and spoke with an enthusiastic voice, clasping his hands together:

"Please tell me anything. I, Im, will definitely carry out His Excellency's order."

"I'm glad to hear that. Then, the late-stage disciples sent by the Heaven and Earth Society will soon try to break out the Fire Faith Order believer imprisoned in the Eternal Hell Prison. I'd like you to assist them."

'!?'

As soon as he finished speaking, Im Gyu-wol couldn't hide his perplexity.

What the hell was going on?

Why did His Excellency the Grand Preceptor give such an order, just like that Bae Ji-seok bastard last night?

Unlike regular prisons where prisoners could be taken out through various methods, the underground prison was a place where it was absolutely impossible to take out prisoners.

That's why, unlike before, he knew that people were sent in to interrogate the Fire Faith Order believers.

But why were they suddenly trying to kidnap them? He didn't know, but it was extremely difficult.

'What should I do about this?'

He didn't know exactly who they were trying to kidnap, but he was also in a position where he had to forcibly help that Bae Ji-seok bastard.

That bastard also said he would break someone out of the Eternal Hell Prison...

'Wait... something is strange.'

Something coincidentally overlapped in terms of timing.

It was strange that the higher-ups were suddenly trying to forcibly take out the Fire Faith Order believer they had given up on, and it was too much of a coincidence that the Bae Ji-seok bastard was also trying to kidnap someone from the Eternal Hell Prison.

'Could it be... that the person that Bae Ji-seok bastard is trying to kidnap is also a Fire Faith Order believer?'

So in order to prevent that, were they trying to take out the Fire Faith Order believer in advance?

If this was the case, it made sense for the higher-ups to suddenly give such an order.

But this was just his guess.

And that wasn't the problem.

'Damn it.'

Right now, not only was his weakness caught, but he was also addicted to poison.

So he had no choice but to forcibly follow Bae Ji-seok.

But if this guess turned out to be correct, he wouldn't be able to carry out the order from the higher-ups and would end up betraying them.

Im Gyu-wol's eyes trembled severely, confused by the situation where he was caught between a rock and a hard place.

At that moment, Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom raised one eyebrow.

Then...

-Thud! Shwip!

He suddenly lifted Im Gyu-wol's chin and stared intently into his eyes.

"Y- Your Excellency?"

Why was he suddenly doing this?

As he was puzzled, Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom said something unexpected:

“Ha... look at this.”

“Pardon? What...”

“You’ve also been addicted to poison.”

‘!?’

At those words, Im Gyu-wol’s eyes widened.

How did Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom know about this?

But then he asked:

“Am I right? Or not? Just answer that.”

“...”

At his question, Im Gyu-wol was at a loss for what to do.

Because his weaknesses, including the embezzlement ledger, had been caught by Bae Ji-seok, it was extremely cautious to even say something.

Seeing his reaction, Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom shook his head and said:

“It seems you’ve been caught by other weaknesses besides poison.”

‘How does he know that?’

Im Gyu-wol couldn’t hide his surprise at Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom’s insight.

Even though he couldn’t answer anything, it was amazing how he deduced his situation to this extent.

But on the other hand, he became afraid.

His weaknesses caught by that bastard, that is, the embezzlement ledger, were connected to the higher-ups, Grand Preceptor Hangyun, and could cause damage, so he was scared of being cast out if they found out.

Not knowing what to do, Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom placed his hand on his shoulder and spoke in a chilling voice:

“I don’t know what weaknesses have made you tight-lipped, but let me make it clear. Confessing the truth right now is the only chance for you to live.”

-Squeeze!

With those words, the hand of Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom on his shoulder tightened its grip.

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The 12 trainees of the Snake Guard were waiting.

They had finished preparing to infiltrate the prison, but they were still waiting because they hadn’t received the Prison Battlefield Maps yet.

At that moment, a Deputy Thousand-men Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard was seen coming from the other side of the pavilion.

In the case the Deputy Thousand-men Commander was carrying, there were twelve scrolls.

“Looks like he’s here.”

It was Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo, who had been waiting for a long time like the trainees and was feeling frustrated. What the hell was he talking about with Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom that it took so long?

‘He should have just given them then.’

In any case, he didn’t come in person and sent the Deputy Thousand-men Commander instead. Anyway, because of that, the infiltration was delayed, and the prisoners’ meal distribution was also delayed.

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo shouted irritably:

“Why are you so late?”

“My apologies. Phew... But Thousand-men Commander, don’t you know?”

At the Embroidered Uniform Guard Deputy Thousand-men Commander’s words, Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo shook his head. Then he extended his hand.

“Give them to me. I need to distribute them to the trainees and inform them of their infiltration locations.”

“I guess it’s because the meal distribution was delayed. Then I’ll distribute them directly to the trainees right away.”

“Alright.”

Thousand-men Commander Mak Myeong-bo, whose mind had become impatient, told him to do so.

In that way, the twelve apprentice trainees received the Prison Battlefield Maps and were assigned their respective infiltration locations. Most of the trainees were evenly deployed from the first to the third floor of the prison.

‘Hmm.’

At this moment, the eyes of Mok Gyeong-un, who had the face of Trainee Bae Ji-seok, narrowed. The place he was assigned to was none other than the third floor of the prison.

‘...What’s going on, Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol?’

It was different from the original plan. They had clearly agreed to assign him to the Eternal Hell Prison, the lowest level of the prison. But assigning him to the third floor of the prison was tantamount to breaking that agreement.

“What? The E- Eternal Hell Prison?”

At that moment, someone asked in a perplexed voice. It was Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect.

The Eternal Hell Prison, the lowest level of the prison. The ones assigned there were none other than Joo Woonhyang and Yeom Gyeong, a disciple of the Huashan Sect.

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The trainees who entered the Imperial Palace prison felt uneasy due to the dark internal atmosphere. Unlike the prisons in other counties, this place was created by digging underground, so it was full of moisture, and the internal air was extremely thick.

What made them feel even more eerie were the bloodstains and smells that permeated everywhere. This became worse with each floor they descended.

The first underground floor showed signs of being made with care, but as they went down to the lower floors, the ground was dug and the supports were fixed, so the dirt and dust falling from here and there further heightened the feeling of unease.

In that way, the trainees were deployed one by one to their assigned areas.

-Creak!

On the way to the third underground floor, Mok Gyeong-un unfolded the Prison Battlefield Map he had received.

‘Ah.’

Mok Gyeong-un snorted inwardly. This Prison Battlefield Map wasn’t the fake one tied with red thread. If he only looked this far, it seemed like nothing had been done to the map, but this was a normal map with some parts redrawn as inconspicuously as possible to mislead the path.

It seemed to have been intentionally made to get caught in the mechanical trap. In the end, this was also an incorrect map.

‘...As I thought.’

The corners of Mok Gyeong-un’s mouth twitched. At first, he had a feeling of disbelief, but it seemed that someone else had intervened.

It would have been difficult for him, who was addicted to poison and had his weaknesses caught, to do such a bold act of betrayal in just a few quarters of an hour.

-Creak!

Mok Gyeong-un eventually rolled up the incorrect Prison Battlefield Map. Whoever had intervened, there was one thing they didn't know.

Just in case, he had scanned all the normal maps, so this kind of prank was meaningless to him.

## Chapter 270 – Underground Prison (2)

-Creak!

Mok Gyeong-un unfolded the Prison Battlefield Map scroll and then rolled it back into the bamboo case.

Someone was closely observing Mok Gyeong-un, or more precisely, the one with Trainee Bae Ji-seok's face.

It was none other than Joo Woonhyang, who had been assigned to the Eternal Hell Prison.

They hadn't reached the third underground floor yet, and he found it odd that he was unfolding the Prison Battlefield Map.

But Mok Gyeong-un's expression bothered him.

'What is it?'

After looking at the map, his expression seemed somewhat unsettled.

So Joo Woonhyang looked at the scroll case of the Prison Battlefield Map hanging from his waist with a doubtful gaze.

Was there something wrong with the map?

He had doubts, but there was no way to confirm anything right away.

The trainees were deployed one by one to their assigned areas, and the only ones left were Joo Woonhyang and Yeom Gyeong, who were being deployed to the Eternal Hell Prison.

When they reached the lowest level, the remaining personnel were the two of them and two Lesser Banners of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

However, unlike their expectation of being assigned to the area closest to the exit since they were apprentices, even after descending to the lowest level, that area was taken by the two Lesser Banners who had accompanied them.

Yeom Gyeong, who had been holding back for fear of getting penalty points again, finally protested.

“We’re assigned to the inner area?”

“That’s right.”

“But even if we look at the Prison Battlefield Map, it’s difficult to know these winding cave paths.”

“So because you’re scared, you want me to change the deployment since we need to distribute the meals as soon as possible?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“You punk, if you get penalty points one more time, you’ll be eliminated from the Embroidered Uniform Guard selection process.”

At the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banner's words, Yeom Gyeong had no choice but to shut his mouth.

He glared at Joo Woonhyang as if telling him to say something too, but he didn't express any particular dissatisfaction.

In the end, they had no choice but to part ways with the only remaining Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banner and head deeper into the Eternal Hell Prison.

Yeom Gyeong, who was pulling the meal distribution cart along the corridor, stopped.

The area marked with 丁 (ding) was where he would be deployed.

‘At least that's a relief. It's not the very end.’

He had to be relieved about this.

As he was about to enter the cave engraved with 丁 on the wall, Joo Woonhyang suddenly called out to him.

“Hey.”

Wondering why he was calling him, he turned his head, and Joo Woonhyang had already approached him.

“Wh- what is it? You?”

Although Yeom Gyeong disliked Joo Woonhyang, he had judged that he couldn't recklessly confront him after seeing his skills during the internal energy measurement.

So he couldn't help but feel intimidated without realizing it.

To him, Woonhyang extended his hand and said:

“Let me see your Prison Battlefield Map.”

“What?”

“I said let me see yours.”

He didn't understand why he was doing this, but Joo Woonhyang's gaze was fixed on the scroll of the Prison Battlefield Map hanging from Yeom Gyeong's waist.

Already feeling intimidated by being alone with him in the Eternal Hell Prison, Yeom Gyeong reluctantly handed over the map.

After receiving Yeom Gyeong's Prison Battlefield Map, Joo Woonhyang simultaneously unfolded his own map and Yeom Gyeong's scroll.

However...

‘...They're the same?’

The maps were not different at all.

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Mok Gyeong-un pulled the meal distribution cart and moved along the corridor.

As he moved, Mok Gyeong-un's mind was calculating the route to the Eternal Hell Prison.

He had to consider the various mechanical devices and the prison guards deployed in the middle of the corridors since he was assigned to the opposite side of the passage leading underground.

As he was pondering like that for a while, the prison where his first assigned prisoner was located came into view.

A thick iron gate blocked the cave-like dug-out area.

‘The smell is strong.’

He thought the stench would get worse as he went down to the lower floors, but the prisoners on the third floor of the prison were not being treated well as humans.

They were defecating and urinating in that narrow prison and leaving it as it was.

‘Ah.’

Mok Gyeong-un covered his nose with his sleeve.

It was nauseating because his sense of smell was more developed.

It seemed they were changed from time to time, but judging by the accumulated amount and the dizzying stench, the interval seemed quite long.

‘It’s inefficient.’

This method of confinement seemed suitable for causing long-term suffering, but it didn’t particularly suit his taste.

Rather than simply neglecting them to get used to it, wouldn’t it be more efficient to clearly imprint the pain, even if for a short time, and cleanly kill them?

Instead of wasting unnecessary manpower and space.

Mok Gyeong-un opened the meal distribution box.

-Clang!

As soon as he did that, a prisoner with disheveled hair clung to the bars, extended his hand, and wailed.

“Food! Food!”

The eyes visible through the tangled hair were far from human.

They were eyes that had become solely devoted to basic desires.

Well, if one was locked up alone in such a dark and damp prison for a long time, it would be stranger not to go crazy.

‘Oho.’

The prisoner grabbed the iron bars with his emaciated arms and extended his hand.

Mok Gyeong-un stared intently at the prisoner and eventually handed over the rice ball from the distribution box.

The prisoner snatched the rice ball and went inside, crouching in the corner and gobbling it up.

He seemed to be afraid of it being taken away.

Seeing this, the corners of Mok Gyeong-un's mouth twitched.

‘He's close to a beast.’

This was quite interesting.

It seemed that when humans were stripped of a layer, they became closer to their most primitive instincts.

Eventually, Mok Gyeong-un scooped water with a square bucket and poured it into the trumpet-shaped hole next to the prison's iron bars.

-Glug glug!

The water that flowed in was collected in a small hole dug inside the prison.

They provide rice and water only once a day through meal distribution.

They only supply enough to barely sustain their lives.

‘I can see why the Embroidered Uniform Guards of the Fourth Office are desperate to transfer to another department.’

It was an interesting sight that made humans closer to their essence, but for ordinary people, working in such a place itself could be quite unpleasant.

Mok Gyeong-un then moved to the next prison.

After completing the second and third distributions, he pulled the cart for the fourth distribution deeper inside.

The corridors were truly complex beyond words.

‘It’s a maze itself.’

If the shape were neat, it would be understandable, but when it was so winding, it was difficult to remember.

The distance from one prison to another was quite far, and the corridors were designed like a maze to prevent any possible escape.

Moreover, the intersections were made to look almost the same, so it was bound to be confusing.

‘Well, I’ve memorized the entire map, so it doesn’t matter.’

In Mok Gyeong-un’s mind, these paths weren’t seen as simple flat surfaces but as three-dimensional.

Therefore, there was no way he would get lost.

As he was naturally pulling the cart towards the next prison, which was close to the passage leading underground, it happened.

-Thud!

-Clank! Thud!

-Argh!

From a nearby place not far away, a strange sound was heard, followed by a scream.

Mok Gyeong-un turned his head and looked in the direction where the sound came from.

‘...That place?’

The direction the sound came from was where the mechanical trap was triggered.

Why was there a scream from there?

-Aaaah.

But for some reason, the screams continued as if in great pain.

If it continued, it seemed that the prison guards, that is, the guards on standby, and the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners might come.

So...

‘No choice.’

-Shwip! Woosh!

Mok Gyeong-un blocked the spreading sound with his true energy and moved there.

After going a short distance, he found a place with numerous arrows stuck in the floor, indicating that a mechanical trap had been triggered.

In front of it was someone with arrows piercing their entire body.

That someone was none other than Trainee Ahn Jong-hu, who had been assigned to the third floor of the prison along with him.

“Uugh.”

It was clear why he had screamed.

Mok Gyeong-un approached him.

Then, the suffering Trainee Ahn Jong-hu saw Mok Gyeong-un and desperately pleaded for help.

“Uugh... s- save me.”

He had desperate eyes, not wanting to die.

Mok Gyeong-un approached him, bent down, and said:

“It seems it’s already too late for that.”

“Cough... ugh... pl- please...”

Mok Gyeong-un looked at his condition with dry eyes.

Arrows had already pierced his abdomen and chest in several places, and the bleeding was too severe, so there was no hope.

The only unharmed parts were his face above the collarbone and his left arm.

“I... I...”

“I don’t know why you went into a place with a mechanical trap and caused trouble.”

“Wh- what are you... talking... about... I just... followed the map...”

“You didn’t misread the map?”

“That can’t be... cough cough... ack! Gasp! Gasp!”

Trainee Ahn Jong-hu coughed up blood and then couldn’t breathe properly as if his airway was blocked.

Mok Gyeong-un stared at him as he suffered and eventually...

-Tap tap tap!

He struck his acupuncture points.

As he pressed the acupuncture points, Ahn Jong-hu closed his eyes and dropped his head to the side.

It was just an acupuncture point that made him fall asleep, but it could allow him to pass away without further pain.

Of course, it wasn’t done out of pity or mercy.

Mok Gyeong-un stared blankly at his dead face for a while and then looked at the case held in his right hand.

Although there was an arrow pierced in his wrist, the case containing the Prison Battlefield Map was relatively intact.

Mok Gyeong-un opened the case, took out the Prison Battlefield Map, and looked at it.

And as he unfolded it...

‘!?’

One of Mok Gyeong-un’s eyebrows raised.

That was because the map that Trainee Ahn Jong-hu had was exactly the same as the incorrect map he had been given.

‘They used their brain a bit.’

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Just half a quarter of an hour ago,

Thousand-men Commander Im Gyu-wol asked Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom with a puzzled look:

“What? You want me to replace all the Prison Battlefield Maps for the third floor and the Eternal Hell Prison with fake ones?”

“That’s right.”

Im Gyu-wol frowned at Muk Seom’s order.

If he did that, there would be other accidents besides Bae Ji-seok (Mok Gyeong-un) and Joo Woonhyang.

Was there a need to sacrifice innocent guys for something that could be handled by dealing with just one bastard?

To the puzzled Im Gyu-wol, Muk Seom held the scroll tied with red thread that Im Gyu-wol had tried to discard and said:

“If someone has even a little discernment, there’s no way they wouldn’t notice such an obvious trap. Don’t you think?”

“Th- that wasn’t intentional, but it was to mark it so that I wouldn’t get confused later and give it to that bastard. I was going to change it back.”

“It doesn’t matter either way. Since you said the guy already knew about it, it’s better to use it this time.”

“What do you mean by using it?”

“Give the same map to all the apprentice trainees who are supposed to be with him.”

-Tap tap!

Defender-in-Chief Muk Seom tapped his own head with his fingers and said:

“Use your brain more. When dealing with clever guys, you can’t be simple-minded and need to think in multiple layers.”

“Ah...”

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-Clank!

‘!?’

Joo Woonhyang's expression stiffened.

He had just stepped on something, and it slightly sank inward.

Swallowing dry saliva, he was about to lower his gaze downward with a feeling of disbelief...

-Swish swish swish swish!

At that moment, arrow-like objects rained down from the ceiling.

‘Tsk!’

Joo Woonhyang, without even having time to think, rolled forward in a hurry while holding the torch.

A rain of arrows covered the meal distribution cart where he had been standing.

If he had been a little late, he would have been riddled with arrows like a porcupine.

‘What?’

He had moved according to the map, so why was the mechanical trap here triggered?

Something was strange.

Yeom Gyeong's Prison Battlefield Map and his own were identical.

That meant there was no way they could have played a trick with the map, so why...

‘Ah!’

Suddenly, Joo Woonhyang furrowed his brows.

Since the maps were the same, he had thought there was no way they could deceive him with the map.

But if they had given the same map to other trainees with the intention of sacrificing them to target him...

-Creak! Clang!

“Huh?”

Joo Woonhyang suddenly bent his waist backward at the huge blade flying from the side of the wall.

-Clunk!

It was at that very moment.

The cave floor supporting him collapsed.

Almost a 4-jang length opened up, so there was no way to do anything about it.

‘Damn it!’

Joo Woonhyang fell straight down the collapsed floor.

-Screech!

After Joo Woonhyang fell, the mechanical trap operated in reverse again, and the opened floor was raised back up as if nothing had happened.

-Thud thud!

After a while, two people walked there.

Those two were the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners who had come to the Eternal Hell Prison with Joo Woonhyang and Yeom Gyeong.

One of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners looked at the place where only the meal distribution cart was left and said with a creepy smile:

“One has been dealt with.”

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Around the same time.

Third floor of the underground prison.

The two assigned Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners arrived at the place where the mechanical trap had been triggered.

There was a trainee lying there with arrows piercing his entire body.

Judging by the absence of breathing or movement, he was definitely dead.

One of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners approached, turned the corpse's face to the side, and confirmed the identity.

-Shwip!

The Lesser Banner who confirmed this smiled and said:

“Things went better than expected.”

“No way?”

“Yes. It’s Bae Ji-seok.”

“That’s good. I was worried that the guy assigned with him would die first and feel sorry for him... He’s really lucky. I’ll go up and report to that person, so you find that Ahn Jong-hu guy before he enters the mechanical trap.”

“Got it.”

As one of the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banners left, the other one also tried to lay the corpse straight before finding Trainee Ahn Jong-hu.

Then, the Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banner hesitated and stared intently at the dead Trainee Bae Ji-seok.

Since he was dead anyway, he grabbed the face without being careful and turned it, but it felt like the skin was slightly shifting.

But it wasn’t just a feeling.

-Slither!

The skin shifted.

No, not just the part he touched, but the entire skin shifted to the side, and the face skin became a bizarre shape.

‘What the hell is this...’

-Shwip!

At that moment, someone placed a hand on his shoulder.

The startled Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banner tried to shake it off and launch his body forward to gain some distance.

However, the force pressing down on his shoulder was so strong that...

-Thud!

He fell flat on the ground.

As he lay there, perplexed, a voice reached his ear.

“I didn’t expect you to come and check before the adhesive had even set properly.”

‘Adhesive?’

As he wondered what that meant, Trainee Bae Ji-seok’s face skin shifted and slid down, revealing a grotesque and eerie appearance underneath.

‘N- no way?’

The Embroidered Uniform Guard Lesser Banner turned pale at the sight.

The voice whispered to him:

“If you had just passed by, it would have been fine, but you’re really unlucky.”

“Wh- who the hell are you...”

-Grab!

Before he could even finish his words, the owner of the voice grabbed the back of his neck, and...

-Thud!

Threw him straight towards the trap with the mechanical device.

‘!!!!!!!’

Without any time to react, thrown into the trap, the last thing he saw was Trainee Ahn Jong-hu waving at him with a smile, as if bidding farewell.