

## Mayhem 381

### Chapter 381 – Joining (3)

“..... Yes. Now I’m just someone who wants to see how far our Lord will go.”

“That’s a first. Our thoughts aligning, I mean.”

He felt the same way.

Seop Chun, who had no special connections, had thought it would be more than enough if Mok Gyeong-un just became the Society Leader’s fourth disciple.

But now things were different.

Having witnessed their Lord’s monstrous growth and extraordinary aspects up close, he wanted to stay by his side and see just how far he could go.

Perhaps they were now standing at the center of a new chapter in Central Plains history.

But they didn’t know.

They were unaware that someone was listening to their conversation from outside.

The one standing in front of the door was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

“.....”

-What? Feeling pressured?

At Cheong-ryeong's words, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

It wasn't exactly pressure.

He had simply gathered people he could use efficiently for his revenge, but he was puzzled that their expectations were higher than he thought.

-Simply using people is mere employment and commanding.

-I suppose so.

-But leading people is different. It's about bringing many along on the path you want to walk, towards the dreams you wish to fulfill.

-.....

Bringing them along?

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes, which had been smiling, became subtle at Cheong-ryeong's meaningful words.

These people were like chess pieces to him.

Most of them had submitted to him unwillingly, so he thought they would see themselves that way too, but he didn't expect them to harbor such thoughts.

'Chess pieces.....'

Pieces to be discarded when their usefulness ends.

Yet such pieces are pinning their hopes on his dreams.

It's a strange feeling.

Until recently, hearing such words wouldn't have stirred much emotion in him.

But at some point, new emotions began sprouting like seedlings in barren soil.

[Don't assume you were born this way. You've simply closed yourself off.]

That's what his grandfather always used to tell him.

Back then, he couldn't understand those words.

He didn't know specifically what emotions meant and only felt them abstractly.

But ever since he first felt the emotion of liking someone, it seems numerous emotions have been deriving and spreading from it.

'Living up to expectations.'

Emotions don't seem to stop at just one.

Endless might be the right expression.

Then Cheong-ryeong said,

-Don't feel burdened. Neither I nor anyone else is forcing you to lead others. But try to understand their hopes.

Cheong-ryeong understood both their expectations and Mok Gyeong-un.

Their path was actually different from those who were driven solely by revenge.

This was just an intersection.

Then Mok Gyeong-un spoke through mental transmission,

-Wasn't Cheong-ryeong's original wish to lead others?

-.....

At this sudden question, Cheong-ryeong showed a bitter expression.

This mortal had come to know too much about her.

Every word he says shakes and pierces through her.

-..... Even if that was the case, I no longer cling to dreams that have crumbled like sandcastles. A vengeful spirit's only wish is to resolve its resentment.

-Is that really all?

-..... What exactly are you trying to say?

-I've been thinking.

-Thinking what?

-Since we're doing this anyway, why not do it thoroughly? Of course we'll eliminate everything related to him, but I also want to reclaim everything he took from you, Cheong-ryeong.

-Mortal..... Are you perhaps.....

Before she could finish her words.

The sound of someone walking approached from behind.

-Step, step!

The one approaching, deliberately making footsteps loud enough to announce his presence, was a middle-aged man who looked to be in his mid-fifties, with black hair but graying beard and eyebrows.

The moment he saw him, Mok Gyeong-un immediately recalled,

‘Is that the man from the Sword Valley?’

He remembered.

The sword disciples had called him Ji-oe.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say he was the highest expert apart from Master Ou Cheon-mu and the Swordsman.

Mok Gyeong-un's eyes flickered as he looked at him.

The reason was,

“It seems you've gained some enlightenment.”

-Flinch!

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Ji-oe, who had been approaching, suddenly stopped and frowned.

This was because he had been staring intently at the 'sword' Mok Gyeong-un had carved on the cliff of the Sword Valley for over half a day, gaining enlightenment there.

Of course, not everyone had gained enlightenment like him.

Most of the other sword disciples were overwhelmed by the high level of swordsmanship, feeling discouraged, and some even left after planting their swords in the Sword Valley.

There were even those who broke their own swords, unable to bear the self-loathing.

"You're certainly different. To notice that I gained enlightenment without even crossing swords."

"You were the most eye-catching person besides the Master."

"Eye-catching..... It's an honor for a great master like you to say so."

"Is it really such an honor?"

Mok Gyeong-un shrugged his shoulders.

Just then, the door opened and Seop Chun spoke with surprised eyes.

"My Lord!"

He had many things he wanted to say.

He was curious if they had found the treasure bead, and most of all, he wanted to ask how they had subjugated Spiritual Sword Sanctuary and Ou Cheon-mu, one of the Six Heavens.

But as he was about to ask, he sensed a strange atmosphere.

‘What’s this? Who is that man?’

He exuded an extraordinary aura.

Was the reason my Lord was standing in front of the guest room door because of this man?

As he wondered, Mong Mu-yak, who had been waiting behind to pay his respects, pushed past him and couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Oh my?”

“Do you know him?”

“It’s Ji-oe.”

“Ji-oe?”

Mong Mu-yak, who was in the Society Leader’s direct intelligence department, had memorized the appearances of all famous figures in the martial arts world.

That’s why he recognized who Ji-oe was the moment he saw him.

When it comes to Spiritual Sword Sanctuary, of course Master Ou Cheon-mu, the craftsmen, and the holy land of swords are famous, but Ji-oe and Gok-o were also well-known.

Ji-oe was especially famous because he had been staying here as a guest for over twenty years.

Unlike other swordsmen who came to the Sword Valley for enlightenment and learning, he had stayed this long solely to surpass Master Ou Cheon-mu's swordsmanship, earning him the nickname 'Mad Swordsman' among martial artists.

A guest obsessed with swords.

It was a title that suited him perfectly.

Seop Chun clicked his tongue and muttered,

"What a coincidence. To see one of the rare Three Madmen here again."

The Three Madmen.

They are three individuals in the martial arts world called madmen.

Their martial prowess reached the level of top experts in major sects, but due to their inherently eccentric and unpredictable nature, people called them the Three Madmen.

Now two of these Three Madmen had gathered in one place.

This was why Seop Chun said it was a coincidence.

"What? Did someone say something about the Three Madmen?"

At that moment, Ja Geum-jeong, who had been sipping alcohol from a gourd bottle, came out thinking he heard someone calling the Three Madmen.

Seop Chun said to him,

“I wasn’t calling you.”

“Then why did you mention the Three Madmen?”

“Have you heard of Senior Ji-oe, the Mad Swordsman?”

“Mad Swordsman? Ah..... That old man who’s wasting his years obsessed with swords.”

“Wasting years obsessed with swords?”

The distance wasn’t far, so there was no way he couldn’t hear what was being said about him.

Ji-oe glared at Ja Geum-jeong with an unpleasant expression.

“What? You want to try me?”

At this, Ja Geum-jeong showed a competitive spirit.

He had seen one of the other Three Madmen by chance due to some connection, but this was his first time seeing Ji-oe, the Mad Swordsman.

Ji-oe, who had been staring at Ja Geum-jeong who seemed ready to fight at any moment, soon softened his expression and stepped back with a grin.

“Well, you’re not wrong. I did waste my youth obsessed with swords.”

“..... Old man, aren’t you accepting it too easily?”

“What can I do when it’s not wrong?”

“Tch.”

Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue at Ji-oe’s response.

He was the type who never avoided a fight, so his competitive spirit had risen and he wanted to fight with him at least once, being called one of the Three Madmen.

But when Ji-oe brushed it off so smoothly, he felt disappointed.

Watching this, Mong Mu-yak’s eyes flickered.

‘He’s certainly the most gentlemanly of the Three Madmen.’

Ji-oe was just obsessed with swords, but at least compared to the other two, he was closer to the righteous path.

He had never harmed anyone without reason.

Then Ji-oe turned his gaze back to Mok Gyeong-un and said,

“I thought you were alone, but you have quite a few companions.”

“Yes, do you have something to discuss with me privately?”

"What would I have to discuss privately? Since they're all your companions, they'll all know anyway, so I'll get straight to the point."

"Please do."

There's nothing they can't hear.

Listening wouldn't be difficult at all.

Then,

-Clap!

Ji-oe respectfully cupped his hands and bowed to Mok Gyeong-un, saying,

"Forgive my rudeness at this late hour, but I have a request. Please cross swords with me."

'!?'

At those words, the eyes of his subordinates, Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak, sharpened.

Suddenly coming and bluntly requesting a duel with their Lord, there was no way they could view this favorably.

Seop Chun stepped forward and said,

"Senior, what kind of courtesy is this, suddenly coming and asking our Lord for a duel?"

"Lord? I thought I misheard earlier, but all these people serve you."

“No, now.....”

-Swish!

Seop Chun, feeling displeased by the attitude of ignoring his words and only conversing with their Lord Mok Gyeong-un, tried to protest, but Mok Gyeong-un restrained him with a single hand gesture.

As Seop Chun closed his mouth, Mok Gyeong-un asked with an expressionless face,

“Is there any reason I should cross swords with you?”

“There isn’t. But as a sword disciple pursuing the way of the sword, how could I pass up the chance to face a Sword Saint who has surpassed the wall of walls and reached the realm of Invinsible Sword, the essence of sword mastery?”

‘!!!!!!’

As soon as those words ended, Mok Gyeong-un’s subordinates were dumbfounded.

What did they just hear?

Commonly, surpassing the wall is called the Transformation Realm.

The realm of great masters who surpass the wall of the Transformation Realm is called the Profound Realm.

Among the countless martial artists, those who surpass the wall are extremely rare even within a generation.

There aren't many even in the entire martial arts world.

Among those exceptional few with outstanding martial talent, the realm reached by surpassing the wall of the Transformation Realm is called the Profound Realm, referred to as heaven.

But what is this?

'Surpassed the wall of walls?'

Everyone had assumed that only the Six Heavens, called the pinnacle of the current martial arts world, had reached the Profound Realm, but what realm is above that?

Someone of Ji-oe's caliber wouldn't say such things carelessly.

Then someone spoke in an amazed voice.

"This can't be."

The owner of that voice was none other than Guyang Sa-oh, wearing the human skin mask and wielding the Eight Poison Snake Staff.

"Senior Gu Yang?"

At Mong Mu-yak's call, Guyang Sa-oh spoke in a trembling voice.

"..... I've heard of it before."

"Heard of what?"

"In the days of the Old Murim, there was a being called the World's Greatest by all. That being said there is a realm beyond surpassing the wall of walls."

"A realm beyond surpassing the wall of walls? Then does that mean what he said is true?"

"I heard it was called the Life and Death Realm because it can only be achieved by transcending the boundary between life and death."

'Life and Death Realm?'

At these words, everyone looked at Mok Gyeong-un with wide eyes.

They had already been greatly surprised just by hearing that he had subjugated Ou Cheon-mu, one of the Six Heavens and the master of Spiritual Sword Sanctuary, on their way here.

But now they're saying Mok Gyeong-un had surpassed even the Profound Realm, which is called the realm of great masters and superhumans?

What on earth is going on?

While everyone was surprised, Mok Gyeong-un spoke in a nonchalant voice,

"Is that all the reason you have for wanting to cross swords with me?"

"It's not just that. For me, the sword is my entire life."

Ji-oe stared intently at Mok Gyeong-un as he answered, as if he were sincere.

Sensing his sincerity, Mok Gyeong-un opened his mouth with a somewhat annoyed expression.

"Well, if that's the case, I can't help it, but the sword isn't my entire life, so I don't feel any particular need to cross swords with you."

'!?'

Ji-oe's expression hardened at the outright rejection without a moment's hesitation.

He had inwardly thought that a swordsman who had reached such a realm as Mok Gyeong-un would naturally be sincere about the sword, and such a person would understand his sincerity.

But he didn't expect to be rejected outright.

Moreover,

'The sword isn't his entire life?'

How could someone like that reach a realm surpassing Ou Cheon-mu's sword techniques?

Chapter 382 – Joining (4)

The Mad Swordsman Ji-oe was dumbfounded.

'The sword isn't his entire life?'

How could someone like that reach a realm surpassing Ou Cheon-mu's sword techniques?

He couldn't believe it.

There's a saying: "A hundred days for the saber, a thousand days for the spear, ten thousand days for the sword."

This means the sword is the most difficult among weapons.

Even dedicating one's entire life to the sword, it's hard to achieve even small accomplishments. To reach its peak, one's mind should be entirely filled with nothing but the sword.

'Haa.'

Is he doing this on purpose?

Just to avoid a duel with him.

At this, Ji-oe fell into momentary contemplation.

To retreat now when the most tempting fruit imaginable is right before his eyes is unthinkable.

To walk away without tasting it is unacceptable for a sword disciple.

After all, the essence of a martial artist lies in their fighting spirit.

'My opponent is someone who has reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, capable of receiving all I have. Even if it's discourteous, if I give up this chance, such a day may never come again.'

-Swish!

With that, Ji-oe slowly moved his hand towards his sword hilt.

At that very moment.

-Shing! Shing!

A sharp sword touched the back of his hand reaching for the hilt, and the head of a snake-shaped staff was aimed at his neck.

The owner of the sword was Ma Ra-hyeon with the mask, and the snake staff belonged to Guyang Sa-oh of the Eight Poison Snake Staff.

Guyang Sa-oh spoke to him in a low voice.

“Our Lord has refused. Remove that hand, Ji-oe.”

At his warning, Ji-oe’s eyes sharpened.

He had been skeptical due to the aura that couldn’t be sensed through qi.

But these two were both peerless experts who had surpassed the wall.

Ji-oe, who had scanned both of them with his eyes simultaneously, opened his mouth.

“..... You surprise me greatly. To command masters of the Transformation Realm as subordinates. No, it’s not surprising considering you’ve even subjugated Master Ou, one of the Six Heavens.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un looked at him indifferently and said,

“Is that all you have to say?”

It was an order to leave.

Ji-oe was inwardly disappointed in himself at Mok Gyeong-un's indifference, showing not even a bit of interest in him.

Even if he didn't measure up, to not even spark a bit of interest in this person made him feel that his life dedicated solely to the sword had been in vain.

"Please see him out."

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, waving his hand, Guyang Sa-oh of the Eight Poison Snake Staff and Ma Ra-hyeon with the mask simultaneously withdrew their staff and sword.

"I understand your martial artist's fighting spirit and competitive nature, but that's enough. Please leave now, Ji-oe."

"You....."

Ji-oe frowned.

This man clearly has a young face, but why does he seem strangely old in his manner of speech?

Ji-oe, who had been staring intently at Guyang Sa-oh, turned his head.

Then he said to Mok Gyeong-un.

"Are you truly not willing to give me a chance?"

"No."

"Then I have no choice but to create an opportunity myself."

No sooner had those words ended.

-Swoosh!

Ji-oe's figure shot towards Mok Gyeong-un, kicking off the floor.

"Where do you think you're going!"

-Bam bam bam!

Guyang Sa-oh and Ma Ra-hyeon simultaneously tried to stop him, but at that moment, his figure slipped past them as if sliding, reaching right in front.

'What kind of movement technique?'

'What?'

The two experts' eyes flickered at Ji-oe's strange movement technique.

Especially Ma Ra-hyeon, who prided himself on being faster than anyone except his Lord Mok Gyeong-un and his master Six Thousand Commander So Yerin when it came to movement techniques, was surprised.

In the meantime, the sharp sword energy rising from Ji-oe's sword intent was already rushing towards the space between Mok Gyeong-un's eyebrows.

However,

-Clang!

'Huh?'

His sword energy was deflected by an enormous fist force.

-Whoosh!

Ji-oe, pushed back about five steps, frowned and looked at the one who had deflected him.

It was none other than Ja Geum-jeong, the fallen monk and Subduing Demon Fist Master from Shaolin.

'Oh?'

The reason Ji-oe reacted this way was because Ja Geum-jeong's inner force exceeded his expectations.

Judging by his qi sense, he had clearly seemed to be at the Transcendent Realm.

But just now, for an instant, he felt an endless power in his fist force.

As if he had drawn in the energy from his surroundings.

"Keukeukeu, I was hoping to fight you anyway. Come at me."

"Could it be you....."

Before he could finish his words.

Someone grabbed his shoulder and tried to push him forward.

It was Ma Ra-hyeon.

-Smack!

At this, Ji-oe turned his shoulder in the direction Ma Ra-hyeon was pushing, while lifting his back foot to kick at Ma Ra-hyeon's head.

-Thud!

Thanks to this, Ma Ra-hyeon's figure was pushed forward and nearly fell.

Ma Ra-hyeon, who instantly regained his balance, narrowed his eyes sharply.

He was very flexible for his age.

His movements were unpredictable and full of surprises.

Perhaps because of this, Ma Ra-hyeon actually wanted to fight him properly now.

-Bam!

Ma Ra-hyeon took a kicking stance.

Ji-oe, widening the distance, said,

“You’re quite good, but you’re not the one I want to fight.”

“If you want to fight so badly, you’ll have to defeat all of us first.”

“Oh my.”

-Swoosh!

As Ji-oe sighed, Ma Ra-hyeon unleashed a storm-like barrage of kicks.

His consecutive kicks created dozens of afterimages as they pressed forward, their speed so fast it was dizzying to watch.

-Cha cha cha cha cha chang!

Ji-oe, who had already drawn his sword, blocked only the real attacks among Ma Ra-hyeon's kicks.

He focused only on the vital points, as the false attacks were merely shadows anyway.

But at that moment,

-Ta tak!

Ma Ra-hyeon's figure split into three.

As his figure suddenly divided, Ji-oe hurriedly switched from defense to offense.

He judged that defensive techniques alone wouldn't be enough to block, as all three split bodies possessed equal strength.

As Ji-oe's hand sped up, the trajectory created by his sword gradually increased.

-Cha cha cha cha cha chang!

Blue sparks flew in all directions as the leg energy from Ma Ra-hyeon's feet clashed with Ji-oe's sword energy, creating a clamorous metallic sound.

The floor of the guest room cracked, and the impact spread in all directions.

-Pa pa pa pak!

Flicking away the flying stone fragments with his hand, the fallen monk Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue with a displeased expression.

"Damn it. This damn monk was about to fight, but that cursed blue-eyed bastard stole the lead."

He was itching to jump in right away, but what fun would it be if two people attacked at once?

He had no choice but to watch for now.

Meanwhile, Ji-oe seemed to have found an opening and launched a sword strike to create distance from Ma Ra-hyeon.

-Cha-aang!

As Ma Ra-hyeon, who had narrowly avoided the sword strike, tried to close in on him again,

-Swoosh!

At that moment, Ja Geum-jeong, who had been waiting for an opportunity, suddenly launched his body and unleashed a fist technique towards Ji-oe.

It was his unique skill, the Demon Subduing Attack Fist.

Ja Geum-jeong, who had instantly reached Ji-oe's chest, launched his fist technique with enough force to break Ji-oe's sword, using the third form of the Demon Subduing Attack Fist, the Continuous Strike Attack.

-Cha cha cha cha chang!

Due to Ja Geum-jeong's overwhelming aggressive momentum, Ji-oe had no choice but to focus entirely on defense.

He had just started to get used to Ma Ra-hyeon's offensive, but it was difficult to immediately adapt to a completely different style of attack.

As a result, Ji-oe's figure kept being pushed back.

"Kuahahahat! Good! Try blocking this too!"

Ja Geum-jeong, whose momentum had risen, unleashed another form of the Demon Subduing Attack Fist.

It was the seventh form of the Demon Subduing Attack Fist, the Heavy Pressure Breaking Fist.

Gathering energy all at once to launch a single punch, its power was so strong that it created shockwaves, causing even the sword blade protected by sword energy to bend.

'What kind of inner force?'

Ji-oe was dumbfounded for a moment, then let go of his sword hilt and employed a strange technique.

It was spinning his sword like a windmill.

-Pa-aeng aeng aeng aeng!

As the sword rotated, it weakened the shockwave of fist pressure created by Ja Geum-jeong.

In that instant, Ji-oe unleashed an energy release towards that shockwave.

The released energy, passing through the rotating sword, flowed along Ja Geum-jeong's fist and flung his figure backward.

-Pa-aang! Whoosh!

Ja Geum-jeong, pushed back about four steps, dispersed the inner force that had penetrated his fist through his two feet.

-Crack crack crack!

The floor cracked due to the inner force flowing out from his two feet.

White steam flowed from Ja Geum-jeong's mouth as he dispersed the energy.

Despite suffering internal injuries from the turmoil inside, his fighting spirit seemed to rise even more as the corners of his mouth stretched almost to his ears.

“Huu.”

Ji-oe sighed.

Although they were both called part of the Three Madmen, he had thought Ja Geum-jeong would be the weakest in martial prowess, being just a fallen monk from Shaolin.

But that wasn't the case at all.

‘He’s not someone I can defeat in one breath.’

It seemed it would take at least dozens of exchanges before a winner could be determined.

As he clicked his tongue, his gaze turned to Mok Gyeong-un’s other subordinates who were quietly surrounding him.

Each of them was formidable.

He had thought if he could just shake these people off, he might be able to exchange a few moves with Mok Gyeong-un, but it seemed impossible now.

‘To not even be able to handle the subordinates.....’

If he kept fighting them, he would eventually tire out and in the end, wouldn’t even be able to touch a hair on Mok Gyeong-un’s head.

Finally realizing that burning his fighting spirit was futile, Ji-oe withdrew his energy and raised both hands.

“What? Why are you raising both hands?”

Just as his fighting spirit was rising high, Ja Geum-jeong raised his voice when Ji-oe showed this attitude.

Regardless, Ji-oe clearly showed he had no intention to fight with both hands raised.

Then he said to Mok Gyeong-un,

“I apologize. I tried to be greedy and exchange even a few moves with you, but I can’t even handle your subordinates.”

“Hey. Put those hands down.”

“I have no more intention to fight.”

“Shut up and put your hands down. You think we’ll just let you go after you attacked our master? You must pay the price.”

“I agree with that.”

Ma Ra-hyeon with the mask also agreed with Ja Geum-jeong’s opinion.

The other subordinates felt the same way.

Guyang Sa-oh also snorted and said,

“Our Lord clearly gave you a chance to withdraw. We have our pride as subordinates too, and you must pay for what you’ve done.”

“.....”

Surrounded by them, Ji-oe finally had to lower his hands.

There was nothing more to say in his defense, as he had clearly been discourteous, so their reaction was natural.

‘I have no choice.’

Since he had brought this upon himself, he couldn't avoid fighting them.

Just as he was about to take a fighting stance, it happened.

"I hear you've been in the Sword Valley for twenty years trying to defeat Master Ou."

At Mok Gyeong-un's voice, Ji-oe answered with a faint breath.

"..... That's right."

"Then what were you planning to do if you lost to me?"

At this question, Ji-oe paused for a moment, then answered as if he had put on a mask of shamelessness.

"The purpose of my life was to defeat Master Ou, who opened my eyes to the sword. But when you subdued Master Ou, my purpose changed."

"Did I become that purpose?"

"That's right."

"Do you think you can win?"

"Not yet."

"Then what do you intend to do?"

"I intended to follow you until I could defeat you."

As soon as his words ended, Ja Geum-jeong snorted and shouted.

"You're not obsessed with the sword, you're just shameless. I've never seen someone more useless than this very own damn monk."

To Ja Geum-jeong's criticism, Ji-oe replied nonchalantly.

"I don't mind if you insult me. As long as I've dedicated my life solely to the sword, I intend to focus only on the sword as long as it doesn't deviate from the right path."

"So devoted to the sword....."

-Swish!

As Mok Gyeong-un raised his hand, Ja Geum-jeong immediately closed his mouth.

As he fell silent, Mok Gyeong-un smiled and said,

"Your shamelessness is amusing."

"....."

"But I'm the type who likes to receive a hefty price."

"Price?"

"Yes, unlike Master Ou, I don't feed and take care of those trying to defeat me for free."

“..... Then what do you want?”

Ji-oe asked, showing a slightly uneasy look.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un replied nonchalantly.

“Let’s take one year of your life as the price for fighting you.”

“One year? Surely you don’t mean.....”

“Yes, your loyalty.”

‘!?’

Chapter 383 – Joining (5)

“Let’s take one year of your life as the price for fighting you.”

“One year? Surely you don’t mean.....”

“Yes, your loyalty.”

“.....”

The Mad Swordsman Ji-oe couldn’t hide his bewilderment at Mok Gyeong-un’s straightforward demand.

This was because he had requested a price completely opposite to the Sword Valley, which was freely open to all those pursuing the way of the sword.

‘Loyalty?’

Ji-oe stared at Mok Gyeong-un’s face, which held a hint of a smile.

To swear loyalty as the price for a duel.

Even if it was a chance that might never come again, it felt like too much of a losing deal.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged and said,

“Seeing you hesitate, it doesn’t seem that urgent after all.”

“That’s.....”

“I said I’d only take a year, is that so difficult?”

“.....”

“I don’t understand how someone who wasted twenty years here solely cultivating the sword is hesitating over this.”

“It wasn’t a waste.”

“If it wasn’t a waste, then what was it?”

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un lightly extended his sword intent towards him.

-Flinch!

At that moment, all the energy around seemed to rise sharply and aim at him.

It was almost as if everything around had become a sword.

As he marveled at this, Mok Gyeong-un spoke with a mocking voice,

“If your twenty years don’t even match my half year, it’s definitely a waste of time.”

“Half a year? What do you mean?”

“The period I’ve properly learned martial arts.”

‘!!!!!!’

At those words, Ji-oe’s eyes widened as if they would tear.

What did he just say?

That he’s only been properly learning martial arts for half a year?

Ji-oe wasn’t the only one surprised by Mok Gyeong-un’s words.

Mok Gyeong-un’s subordinates also looked at each other with surprised eyes.

They all thought Mok Gyeong-un’s rate of progress was monstrous, but none of them knew exactly when he had started learning martial arts.

But hearing it was just half a year, they were all shocked.

‘Half a year?’

‘..... Impossible.’

‘He’s crazy. Is he joking on purpose?’

‘To subjugate one of the Six Heavens after learning martial arts for just half a year.....’

Even they found this hard to believe.

Even Cheong-ryeong, who had witnessed this from the beginning, thought Mok Gyeong-un’s talent was monstrous.

‘He must have been born with heavenly luck or might not even be human.’

Has there ever been such a genius in the history of the Central Plains martial arts world?

This should only be possible for figures like Bodhidharma, who could be considered the origin of Shaolin martial arts, the birthplace of the Central Plains orthodox martial arts; Zhang Sanfeng, who founded Wudang; the Sword Immortal who was said to have beheaded the Fire Dragon; or the legendary Nine Swords of Huashan.

No, even they might not have been capable of this.

Then Ji-oe, whose eyes had widened in surprise, opened his mouth.

“..... Are you mocking me now?”

“About what?”

“No matter how talented one is in martial arts, how could it be possible in just half a year.....”

“Is something impossible for others just because you can’t do it?”

At this question, Ji-oe was momentarily at a loss for words.

There’s nothing wrong with someone else doing something he can’t do.

However, even starting from childhood, only a tiny fraction ever reached the highest realm, and the majority of martial artists couldn’t even reach the Transcendent Realm, let alone break through the wall in their lifetime.

But to say that one reached a level capable of subjugating one of the Six Heavens after learning martial arts for just half a year was almost unprecedented.

‘This is maddening.’

Looking at Mok Gyeong-un’s unwavering gaze and expression, Ji-oe’s mind became confused.

In fact, he had thought that although Mok Gyeong-un looked young, he might actually be an old master who had undergone rebirth.

But if this was true, wasn’t this beyond the category of genius and into the realm of monsters?

-Shudder!

Goosebumps rose from his spine to his whole body.

To think a monster who reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship in half a year existed in this world.

Ji-oe, who had been trembling as if convulsing from the goosebumps all over his body, finally opened his mouth.

“..... Does asking for one year for a single duel mean victory or defeat?”

“Yes, have you made your decision?”

“Can I add one condition?”

“Condition?”

“Yes. Even if I pledge loyalty, as a branch of the renowned orthodox Sword Sect, I have never deviated from the righteous path in my life.”

“Never deviated from the righteous path..... What are you trying to say?”

“Even if I swear loyalty to you, give me the right to refuse if it’s something that deviates from the righteous path.”

“Huh?”

At his proposal, Mok Gyeong-un’s subordinates all snorted.

Isn’t it laughable for someone swearing loyalty to put forward such a condition?

“Crazy bastard. If you only do what suits you, that’s being a wanderer, not showing loyalty. You don’t know your place.”

Even the fallen monk Ja Geum-jeong clicked his tongue.

However, Ji-oe didn't care about their reactions at all.

The Mok Gyeong-un he had seen in the Sword Valley was far from being related to the righteous path.

He was clearly closer to the demonic faction.

If he followed such a person's orders blindly, he would deviate from the righteous path he had kept until now.

He didn't want that.

"If you accept just this, for one year....."

"Interesting."

"..... Did you say interesting?"

"Yes. Conditions on loyalty..... Have you ever thought that I might ignore all your proposals and just kill you?"

Despite the brutal words, there was no killing intent in his voice.

So Ji-oe considered this just a simple warning.

Therefore, he carefully said,

"I am not your enemy. You're a reasonable person, so I think you won't go that far."

“I wonder. It’s not because I’m reasonable that I closed off the Tang family for sixty years.”

“Tang family? ..... Do you mean the Sichuan Tang family?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, what do you mean.....”

Before he could finish his words.

Seop Chun spoke in a triumphant voice.

“Ah! Senior Ji-oe, you don’t know. Our Lord single-handedly subdued the Sichuan Tang family and made them close their doors for sixty years.”

‘!?’

Ji-oe’s expression hardened.

The Sichuan Tang family closed their doors?

One of the pillars of the Righteous Alliance and one of the Seven Great Families, renowned for poisons, with potential power comparable to major sects like the Nine Schools and One Faction, closed their doors?

Ji-oe was truly dumbfounded.

Whether this was true or not, if it was fact, it would be enough to shake the entire martial arts world that had been quiet for a while.

Moreover,

‘Is he walking the path of evil?’

He made the Sichuan Tang family close their doors and subjugated Spiritual Sword Sanctuary, called the holy land of swords.

Just these two actions alone made it seem like he was walking the path of evil.

Ji-oe, whose lips had gone dry, swallowed hard before finally speaking.

“..... What exactly is your goal?”

“If you want to know that, you’ll have to join my ranks.”

“Your path is one that I.....”

“I think I understand why you’ve stagnated.”

“What... do you mean?”

“You set limits by considering this and that about the righteous path. How can someone who starts by drawing lines in their mind ever cross those lines?”

‘!?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, Ji-oe’s pupils shook.

Mok Gyeong-un's rebuke was like throwing a stone into a calm lake, creating ripples.

'Drawing lines in my mind?'

He had never thought of it that way before.

While learning the sword, he had also devoted himself to scholarship, deeply engraving Confucius's words in his heart.

(At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right)

In the "Wei Zheng" chapter of the Analects, Confucius said that only at the age of seventy could he follow his heart's desires without overstepping the bounds.

He believed that the righteous path was the same.

He had lived believing that if he deeply engraved this in his heart, he would eventually be able to do as he wished without deviating from it.

But was this mindset actually setting limits for himself?

'Ah...'

He had spent over twenty years in the Sword Valley, taking pride in not deviating from the righteous path while not caring about the world's gaze or anything else.

But was all of this just a limit blocking himself?

It was truly meaningless.

Momentarily speechless from the shock, he soon opened his mouth with eyes that seemed to have broken free from some restraint.

“..... You’re right. The righteous path, the orthodox sect, in the end, all of it was just drawing limits for myself.”

“I’m glad you’ve realized it, even if it’s now.”

“I’ve realized that to reach a higher place than now, I need to embrace everything, not just stop at the orthodox path.”

“Just saying it doesn’t mean anything.”

“..... Since righteousness and evil have leaned too much to one side, I too, like you, should walk a new path.”

“A new path?”

“The path of evil.”

At his words, Mok Gyeong-un chuckled.

He told him not to draw limits, and now he says he’ll walk the path of evil.

Should this be called a simple idea?

Well, it wasn’t bad.

He seemed like the type of person who needs to hit a wall and break his nose before realizing what to do.

-Shing!

Then Ji-oe drew his sword again and said,

“I’ll do as you propose. If I lose, I’ll serve you loyally for a year without complaint.”

“Should I take it that you’re prepared to do anything?”

To this question, Ji-oe, having made up his mind, answered readily.

“The year I swear loyalty to you will be a time to embrace evil, so I’ll become a demon of the sword, not a swordsman walking the righteous path.”

“A demon of the sword..... Good. Then I’ll call you Sword Demon from now on.”

“Sword Demon. Not bad.”

-Swish!

With those words, Ji-oe took a sword stance.

Looking at him, Mok Gyeong-un half-drew his demonic sword Evil Commandment Sword from his waist and said,

“Then shall we start by taking that year?”

“No matter how insufficient, one must compare to know long and short.....”

-Swish!

'!?'

Suddenly, Ji-oe was at a loss for words.

The tip of Mok Gyeong-un's unique weapon, the demonic sword Evil Commandment Sword, was already touching his neck.

He had clearly been watching, but why hadn't he perceived him approaching until he was right in front?

To the bewildered Ji-oe, Mok Gyeong-un raised the corner of his mouth and said,

"One year. Shall we continue?"

"..... This is just the beginning!"

-Clang!

With a shout, Ji-oe knocked Mok Gyeong-un's sword upward and immediately launched into a sword technique.

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Had about half an hour passed?

Seop Chun, leaning against the wall of the guest room, asked Mong Mu-yak beside him in a low voice.

"What number is this now?"

“Twenty-six.”

“Oh my. That’s already twenty-five years.”

“..... He’s so stubborn.”

Seop Chun nodded, seeming to agree with Mong Mu-yak’s sigh-filled words.

If he had realized he was no match after the first exchange, he should have stopped right away.

But when Mok Gyeong-un started receiving his sword for more than a few moves after that, his fighting spirit ignited, and he kept charging in.

It was clearly intentional to anyone watching.

However, right now, Ji-oe’s mind probably had no such calculations.

With an expression that seemed ecstatic just to be crossing swords with Mok Gyeong-un, whom he believed to have reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, how could he make any calculations?

Seop Chun shook his head.

“He’ll be with us for a very long time.”

“Indeed.”

-Clang!

Once again, Ji-oe's sword flew out of his hand and stuck into the floor five zhang away.

With this, the accumulated period reached 26 years.

-Grind!

Ji-oe gritted his teeth and stretched out his hand, calling his sword back from the floor using the Empty Hand Grasping technique.

As he was about to continue the duel again,

-Swish!

Suddenly, Mok Gyeong-un frowned and held out his hand, indicating him to stop.

As Ji-oe wondered why, one of Mok Gyeong-un's eyebrows raised.

Cheong-ryeong, also puzzled by this reaction, asked.

-Why are you doing that?

-Just now, one of my connections was severed.

-A connection was severed? Surely not.....

-..... It seems one of my spirit servants has been destroyed.

Chapter 384 – Sudden Change (1)

In a training ground within the inner court of Heaven and Earth Society.

Yeop Wi-seon, the second disciple of Son Yun, the Bright Blade King of the Five Kings and a high-ranking official of Heaven and Earth Society, wore an expression of disbelief.

“Huff..... Huff.....”

A man in his mid-thirties with short facial hair was exhaling rough breaths.

He was Woo Ho-rang, Yeop Wi-seon’s senior brother, the Grand Chief of the Gyeogwol Clan, and one of the Five Tigers, considered the top expert of the younger generation within Heaven and Earth Society.

-Drip!

Blood dripped from Woo Ho-rang’s right hand holding a saber.

‘..... Impossible.’

Senior brother had lost.

What seemed unthinkable had become reality.

“Excellent.”

A middle-aged man covered in scars opened his mouth.

He was none other than Son Yun, the Bright Blade King.

Son Yun also wore a quite surprised expression, and for good reason. The newly accepted youngest disciple had defeated his senior brother Woo Ho-rang, overturning expectations for the duel.

That new disciple was none other than Mok Yu-cheon.

‘..... I’ve been putting in a lot of effort lately, but to this extent?’

Mok Yu-cheon was the one he had brought in as a ‘card’ to forcibly restrain that guy in place of Mok Gyeong-un from Corpse Blood Valley.

Of course, he had chosen him because he possessed talent and spirit no less than that guy, and that choice had not been wrong.

This guy was also a genius whose talent had not yet fully blossomed.

He never imagined he would be able to defeat even Woo Ho-rang, whom he had designated as his successor, in just a few months.

‘Interesting.’

It was truly a curious thing.

To think that both of the guys from Yeon Mok Sword Manor he had brought as hostages would end up defeating his disciples.

If they weren’t from the righteous faction, he would want to designate them as successors.

It was regrettable, but he would have to be satisfied with taking them as disciples.

-Crunch crunch!

Mok Yu-cheon’s right arm, which had swollen black, returned to its original state.

Since he became able to somewhat control the great technique of reversed blood through his teachings, he had improved rapidly, and Son Yun became curious about where his limits might be.

-Clench!

As the master looked at Mok Yu-cheon with a satisfied expression, Woo Ho-rang bit his lip hard.

How had it come to this?

He had been putting even more effort into cultivating his martial arts to get revenge on that guy.

But he never thought he would end up losing even to that guy's younger brother.

That expression on his master's face only appeared when he was truly pleased.

'Ah. This is the worst.'

It felt like the Mok family had taken everything from him.

That guy's brother had taken his master's favor, and that guy had taken the heart of the woman he loved.

Since he had said he would establish a hierarchy, Young Lady Wi So-yeon had been keeping her distance and not meeting subordinates privately.

She had relied on him before that guy appeared.

-Grind!

Woo Ho-rang, who had been biting his lip so hard that blood flowed, finally cupped his hands in salute to his master, Bright Blade King Son Yun, and left the training ground with large strides.

Son Yun watched him go with a faint sigh.

Although he understood his defeated disciple's feelings, he had no comfort to offer in his teachings.

For someone who would become his successor, he only hoped they would overcome it themselves.

And,

'A close rival will make you grow even more.'

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-Ta ta ta tak!

Yeop Wi-seon hurriedly ran to catch up with his senior brother Woo Ho-rang.

"Senior Brother!"

Despite Yeop Wi-seon's call, Woo Ho-rang kept walking, but he had to stop when Yeop Wi-seon blocked his path.

Woo Ho-rang opened his mouth with an unpleasant voice.

"What are you doing?"

"Senior Brother. No matter how I think about it, this isn't right."

“What do you mean?”

“How could Master do this to you unless he’s lost his mind?”

“.....”

So this is what he wanted to say.

Although Woo Ho-rang had lost to that guy today, Yeop Wi-seon had already lost to Mok Yu-cheon before.

He seemed to have been holding back his complaints out of pride since then.

But now that even he had lost to that guy, was he using this as a pretext to voice his complaints?

“..... If that’s what you want to talk about, step aside.”

“Senior Brother!”

“A duel is just a duel.”

With those words, Woo Ho-rang tried to walk past Yeop Wi-seon.

Then Yeop Wi-seon raised his voice.

“Are you some kind of saint to keep enduring every time, Senior Brother?”

“What?”

“We’re about to lose everything we have to those damn Mok bastards, and you’re trying to endure it? This isn’t patience, it’s foolishness.”

-Grab!

No sooner had those words ended than Woo Ho-rang grabbed his collar.

“Do you really want to die.....”

“Why are you trying to take out your anger on me? Isn’t there someone else you should really be angry at?”

“What?”

“I mean those Mok bastards.”

“..... You’re really being insufferable.”

“It’s not about being insufferable. If we don’t deal with them, we senior and junior brothers will really lose everything. Do you intend to regret it when that time comes?”

At Yeop Wi-seon’s words, Woo Ho-rang’s pupils shook slightly.

He had ignored it, thinking it was just the outburst of an immature junior brother, but he too was human.

Of course, his discontent had reached its limit.

How could he not have the urge to strike down the two Mok brothers right now?

But,

‘No.’

His pride wouldn’t allow it.

Overwhelming someone with skill is one thing, but using underhanded tactics or scheming is what lesser people do.

And if he did that, would his master or Young Lady Wi So-yeon, whom he serves as his lord, truly acknowledge him?

They wouldn’t.

Rather, they would be deeply disappointed.

That’s why he needs to use this bitterness as nourishment to become stronger.

He can only achieve what he wants by overwhelming the Mok brothers with skill.

-Smack!

Woo Ho-rang let go of the collar he was holding and roughly pushed Yeop Wi-seon away, saying,

“Stop talking nonsense and put more effort into cultivating your martial arts.”

“Senior Brother!”

“I can listen to your complaints all you want, but give up on thinking of doing anything beyond that. If you can’t do it with your own strength, it’s all meaningless. That’s all the advice I can give you.”

“How.....”

“I’m leaving.”

With those words, Woo Ho-rang left without even pretending to listen.

Yeop Wi-seon glared at him with resentful eyes.

He thought his senior brother would understand his feelings since they were in similar situations, but being pushed away like this made him incredibly resentful.

-Bang!

Yeop Wi-seon, angry, kicked the wall and then went somewhere.

Someone was watching him from behind.

It was Mok Yu-cheon.

“Huu.”

Mok Yu-cheon shook his head.

He had followed, thinking Yeop Wi-seon might try something when he saw him following his senior brother.

But fortunately, Senior Brother Woo Ho-rang’s pride was too strong to fall for his tricks.

If he had joined hands with Yeop Wi-seon, it would have become quite uncomfortable.

‘I need to get stronger, I can’t be hindered now.’

His goal wasn’t these two senior and junior brothers.

Although they were half-brothers, he had believed they shared the same blood, but his goal was to take revenge on Mok Gyeong-un, who had stabbed him in the back, and to set justice right again.

‘It won’t be long. I’ll take you down with my own hands.’

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-Ta ta ta tak!

Yeop Wi-seon, who had been using his lightness skill to head somewhere for a while, stopped and surveyed his surroundings.

Then he headed towards what looked like a warehouse building with few people around.

Once inside, Yeop Wi-seon,

-Clap clap! Clap! Clap clap!

Clapped his hands in a regular pattern.

Then the dark warehouse lit up, and someone revealed themselves.

That person was,

“Brother Mo.”

It was Mo Yak, who could be called the right-hand man of Na Yul-ryang, the First Disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Head.

How was he waiting for Yeop Wi-seon in such a secretive place?

The reason was soon revealed.

Mo Yak, holding a lantern, smiled and asked,

“So, did you succeed in persuading Brother Woo?”

“.....”

At this question, Yeop Wi-seon shook his head with a sigh.

As if he had expected this response, Mo Yak shrugged his shoulders.

From the start, he had predicted that Yeop Wi-seon would fail.

Having contacted Woo Ho-rang several times before to persuade him to serve the First Disciple Na Yul-ryang, he knew well how stubborn he was.

He had somewhat guessed that someone with such strong pride would never join them.

But with the variable of Mok Yu-cheon, he thought there might be a possibility, but even that didn't seem to be of much use.

‘Well, it doesn’t matter.’

Woo Ho-rang was dispensable anyway.

“Brother Mo..... If you give me a little more time.....”

-Pat pat!

Mo Yak patted his shoulder as if comforting him and said,

“It’s alright. You can persuade Brother Wu slowly. More importantly, the First Disciple has high expectations for you.”

“..... Is that true?”

“Of course it is.”

Mo Yak’s mouth corners twitched upwards at Yeop Wi-seon’s face full of expectation.

In truth, Woo Ho-rang was a troublesome piece due to his stubbornness.

On the other hand, there was no better piece to use than someone overflowing with greed and jealousy.

You could paint any picture you wanted with such a person.

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Late at night.

Someone was pouring alcohol on a tombstone.

It was Ho Jong-hyeok, the Grand Chief of the Destruction Clan.

He was the child of Ho Tae-gang, the Axe-Destroying King, one of the Five Kings and the true First Peak of the Five Peaks Society led by Jang Neung-ak, the Second Disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Head.

Of course, this was the case a few months ago.

What was inside that body now was not Ho Jong-hyeok himself, but Wi Maeng-cheon, the Second Peak who had become a vengeful spirit.

“Huu.....”

Wi Maeng-cheon, who had taken over Ho Jong-hyeok’s body, let out a long sigh.

He always felt uneasy whenever he came here.

This was because the name engraved on the tombstone was Wi Maeng-cheon.

‘To think I’d be looking at my own dead body’s grave with these two eyes I’ve longed for all my life.....’

-Gulp gulp!

Wi Maeng-cheon drank from the bottle he had been pouring on the tombstone.

His wish as a blind person had been to see.

But who could have imagined he would end up seeing like this?

'Should I be satisfied with living like this, even though I've lost my body?'

He always felt complicated whenever he saw the tombstone.

Even so, he had no choice.

Having become Mok Gyeong-un's spirit servant and formed a connection, he had to follow his orders.

As he was drinking the remaining alcohol, it happened.

-Clink!

Wi Maeng-cheon put down the bottle and tilted his head back.

-Swish!

A sharp blade energy brushed past over his tilted head.

It was saber energy.

Wi Maeng-cheon, who had avoided the saber energy, hurriedly used his movement technique to create distance behind him.

His eyes flickered as he created distance.

'!?'

The one who had sent the saber energy towards him was none other than,

“First Disciple?”

It was First Disciple Na Yul-ryang.

Na Yul-ryang smiled and said,

“No matter how much you miss your dead old comrade, it’s dangerous to wander alone in times like these.”

Despite his smiling face, his words were utterly brutal.

Wi Maeng-cheon’s gaze sharpened as he glared at Na Yul-ryang.

‘As bold as ever.’

He had been inwardly worried about his recent movements to properly establish a succession structure, but he didn’t expect him to target him so openly.

At this, Wi Maeng-cheon gripped the handle of the axe on his back and said,

“If I die, you’ll have to face the alliance of your two junior brothers head-on. Are you sufficiently prepared?”

“Well. That’s not for you to worry about.”

No sooner had those words ended than Na Yul-ryang’s figure scattered like smoke.

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“Isn’t this convincing enough?”

-Pat!

First Disciple Na Yul-ryang put his arm around someone’s shoulder as he spoke.

That someone was looking at the corpse of the dead Ho Jong-hyeok (Wi Maeng-cheon) with bewildered eyes.

It was none other than Yeop Wi-seon, the second disciple of Bright Blade King Son Yun.

‘He, he really killed him.’

Yeop Wi-seon was inwardly at a loss.

Just this evening at the dinner, he had been in such a good mood.

This was because First Disciple Na Yul-ryang had said he would accept him into his ranks and even held a drinking party.

But now, by his hand, a subordinate of the Second Disciple Jang Neung-ak had died.

This alone was a huge matter, but the problem was that behind Ho Jong-hyeok was not only the Second Disciple but also his father, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang.

‘..... To kill the child of one of the Eight Stars.’

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang.

He was one of the Eight Stars, who could be called the highest experts in the current martial arts world.

He never thought he would kill the child of such a person so recklessly.

What was even more bewildering was,

‘Was this why he asked me to show him my saber technique?’

Na Yul-ryang had killed Ho Jong-hyeok by imitating part of the saber technique he had shown.

To anyone watching, it would look like it was done by someone from his sect.

Yeop Wi-seon now realized his true purpose.

‘..... It’s to break up the alliance between Master and the Axe-Destroying King, no, between Disciple Jang Neung-ak and Young Lady Wi So-yeon.’

-Clench!

Strength entered Yeop Wi-seon’s hand.

He regretted it, thinking ‘Oh no,’ but it was already too late.

What had happened couldn’t be undone, and if he tried to reveal the truth now, his life would be as good as forfeit.

-Swish!

While he was in this bewildered state, the vengeful spirit that had been possessing the dead Ho Jong-hyeok’s body slipped out.

This vengeful spirit was Wi Maeng-cheon.

Wi Maeng-cheon, forced to come out due to the death of the physical body, clicked his tongue.

This was because he understood First Disciple Na Yul-ryang's purpose.

'He's made it look like the Axe-Destroying King's child died at the hands of the Bright Blade King's disciples, so the two Kings will surely clash. If that happens, the power of the alliance will be dispersed.'

He had thought it strange that he was using saber techniques instead of sword techniques.

Although he had thought Na Yul-ryang wasn't the type to sit back and watch, he truly was a formidable person.

But even he had failed to predict one thing.

It was his own possession.

If he informed Go Chan, who was possessing Second Disciple Jang Neung-ak's body, he could reveal the truth.

If that happened, First Disciple Na Yul-ryang would have to face the anger of the two Kings instead.

'All his carefully laid schemes will have been in vain.....'

It was at that very moment.

-Swish!

‘Huh?’

Something sliced through Wi Maeng-cheon’s body.

Panicking, he turned his head, and there he saw First Disciple Na Yul-ryang, who had removed the eye patch on his right eye.

An eye with a golden hue and a pupil as small as a dot.

It exuded the ferocity of a savage beast rather than a human, and that small focal point of the eye was directed at him.

‘He can see me?’

He was perceiving him accurately.

#### Chapter 385 – Sudden Change (2)

The vengeful spirit Wi Maeng-cheon couldn’t hide his bewilderment as he faced the golden eyes staring directly at him.

Then, Young Master Na Yul-ryang raised the corner of his mouth and said, “Well, this is interesting. So vengeful spirits actually exist.”

‘...How?’

He was definitely aware of Wi Maeng-cheon’s presence.

Wi Maeng-cheon didn’t know what to do.

He needed to escape this place, but he couldn't move since Young Master Na Yul-ryang had sliced his spiritual body in half.

Though he didn't understand why this was happening, he had to flee quickly to alert others about Na Yul-ryang's schemes and his ability to see spiritual bodies.

Just then—

-Grab!

Na Yul-ryang's hand seized Wi Maeng-cheon's neck.

Wi Maeng-cheon's eyes widened in shock.

Not only could Na Yul-ryang see him, but he could also grasp a spiritual body as if it were solid?

How was this possible?

As Wi Maeng-cheon marveled at this, Na Yul-ryang raised the corner of his mouth and said, "But you know what? Why does the vengeful spirit that came out of Ho Jong-hyeok's body resemble Wi Maeng-cheon?"

At these words, Wi Maeng-cheon immediately froze.

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Young Master Na Yul-ryang's residence.

Na Yul-ryang, who had returned after finishing his business, snorted and spoke to someone.

“You come and go as if this were your own home now.”

At his words, someone emerged from the shadows beside a pillar in the courtyard.

It was an envoy from the Elder Council, his face covered with a veil due to horrible burn scars.

“Even if it’s the Elder Council, you should show some restraint. There’s no place within the inner city that escapes Master’s eyes.”

“I’ve been as discreet as possible, Young Master.”

Na Yul-ryang shook his head at the envoy’s words.

While he had hoped for active support from the Elder Council, their overzealous involvement was proving to be quite troublesome in a different sense.

If these retired members kept interfering, they were bound to draw attention.

As long as he hadn’t surpassed the Society Leader in martial arts, caution was necessary.

Just then, the envoy from the Elder Council spoke with sudden interest.

“By the way, Young Master. You seem to be holding something interesting in your hand.”

‘!?’

Na Yul-ryang raised an eyebrow at this comment.

It was understandable, given that he was currently holding a vengeful spirit in his hand, its limbs severed and writhing in agony.

“You can see this?”

Na Yul-ryang’s bewilderment was simple to understand.

The envoy from the Elder Council was blind, having lost both eyes to burns.

While heightened other senses could be attributed to losing sight, this was an entirely different matter.

The envoy approached and said, “Have you already forgotten who brought you those eyes, Young Master?”

“...Are you saying I can see this because of these eyes?”

“Of course. Those eyes are from a spirit beast-level evil spirit, completely different in caliber from the eyes you had before. That’s why you can even see vengeful spirits.”

“That may explain me, but how can you see it? Are you just pretending to be blind?”

“How could that be? I truly cannot see with my eyes. However, I have achieved spiritual enlightenment, so I can perceive such things.”

Na Yul-ryang snorted at these words.

He really was an unpleasant fellow.

Even though Na Yul-ryang’s martial arts had been progressing rapidly since obtaining these demonic eyes after his seclusion, he still couldn’t clearly see the limits of his power.

Could this mere envoy from the Elder Council really be a match for him?

As his doubts grew, he had tried to investigate the envoy's background several times, but each time the man vanished like a ghost, leaving no trail to follow.

'...For now, think that you're playing me like a puppet in your hands.'

He wasn't someone to be trifled with so easily.

It wasn't them using him, but the other way around.

Once he achieved his goals and their usefulness diminished, he would show them the true meaning of being discarded like worn-out shoes.

But not now.

"Yul-myeong, was it? Whether you've achieved spiritual enlightenment or not is none of my business. Get lost."

"Already dismissing me?"

"A guest from the Primal Killing Pavilion will be arriving soon."

"Primal Killing Pavilion? My, what a coincidence."

"What?"

"As it happens, I was waiting to inform you about something, and seeing that you're looking for the Primal Killing Pavilion, this is perfect timing."

"...What do you mean?"

“You won’t need to wait for the guest from the Primal Killing Pavilion. Please follow me.”

‘!?’

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The office of the Primal Killing Pavilion’s main branch leader.

As Na Yul-ryang entered with his hands behind his back, his eyes caught sight of something strange.

There, In Seo-ok, the leader of Primal Killing Pavilion, was visible, his skin pallid and his appearance grotesque.

With black smoke emanating from his mouth, In Seo-ok’s face was contorted in agony, yearning for something, but his arms and legs were restrained, preventing him from moving.

Na Yul-ryang asked Yul-myeong, the envoy from the Elder Council, “What’s wrong with him? Has he been poisoned?”

“Why don’t you look with those eyes of yours, Young Master?”

“Look with my eyes?”

Puzzled, Na Yul-ryang lowered the eye patch covering his right eye.

As he did so and gazed at In Seo-ok with his small, golden-focused pupil, Na Yul-ryang furrowed his brow.

This was because he couldn’t sense even a trace of life force from In Seo-ok.

He was no different from a corpse.

“This is... What is this?”

“It’s a living corpse spirit.”

“What?”

“Using the forbidden secret art of Six People Spirit Summoning Technique, Pavilion Leader In Seo-ok has become a living corpse spirit.”

“A corpse spirit?”

“Yes.”

Na Yul-ryang asked, unable to comprehend, “I heard this man was a highly skilled diviner personally recruited by Master, I mean, the Society Leader. How did he end up like this?”

This was the inner city of the Heaven and Earth Society.

How could something like this happen in a place so thoroughly protected from outside threats?

As Na Yul-ryang wondered, the envoy Yul-myeong answered.

“It seems another diviner was involved.”

“Another diviner?”

“Yes, normally someone of Pavilion Leader In Seo-ok’s caliber, being a high-level diviner, wouldn’t be easily overcome. But if the opponent is even more powerful, the situation changes.”

“Are you saying an even stronger diviner was involved?”

“Yes.”

“Have you found out who it was?”

“We have a suspicion.”

“Who might that be?”

“The branch leader of Harmonious Immortal Pavilion.”

“The branch leader of Harmonious Immortal Pavilion?”

“Just as martial artists have a hierarchy of martial prowess, diviners have their own ranking system. Those who have reached the pinnacle are called Divine-level diviners.”

The titles given to diviners are divided into Conveying, Profound, Technique, Moon, Sun and Divine.

Among these, the highest is referred to as Divine-level diviner.

“So this branch leader of Harmonious Immortal Pavilion is a Divine-level diviner?”

“Yes, quite renowned too. And quite troublesome due to their unique technique.”

“Unique technique? Do you mean what was done to Pavilion Leader In Seo-ok?”

“No, this is a forbidden technique with rather low utility that anyone could learn if they practiced. Though it’s prohibited.”

“Then what are you referring to?”

“A technique that folds space.”

“Folding space?”

Young Master Na Yul-ryang showed interest in this.

Doesn’t folding space mean being able to move freely to any location?

In some ways, it was a convenient yet potentially very dangerous technique depending on how it’s used.

“Yes, you can think of it as a type of space compression. It’s a unique technique that only they can use, having mastered mystical arts close to immortal techniques.”

“Only they can do it?”

“Yes, I believe even within Harmonious Immortal Pavilion, only they are capable of it.”

At this response, Na Yul-ryang raised an eyebrow as he looked at Yul-myeong and said, “For an envoy of the Elder Council, you seem to know quite a lot about occult arts. Including bringing me these eyes.”

“Hehehe. I’m just interested in various odd things.”

“Can this really be called mere interest?”

“I’m simply trying to help with the great work you’re going to accomplish, Young Master. Please don’t be so wary.”

“.....”

Na Yul-ryang snorted at these words.

The more he learned about this man, the more his wariness increased.

But one question arose.

“How can you be so certain that Harmonious Immortal Pavilion is behind this?”

To this question, Yul-myeong bowed his head and answered, “Regrettably, I narrowly missed capturing the woman controlling Pavilion Leader In Seo-ok. It was my oversight.”

“Woman?”

“Yes, quite an audacious wench.”

Though he couldn’t see her appearance due to his lost eyesight, he remembered her voice and the scent from her body.

He couldn’t catch her because she escaped by opening space, but as far as he knew, even that technique had weaknesses.

She probably couldn’t have gone too far.

Judging that she was still within the inner city, he had the surrounding areas blocked off.

“We’ll catch her soon, so don’t worry. But before that, I think we can teach that audacious wench a bit of a lesson.”

“What do you mean?”

“That vengeful spirit you captured, Young Master. May I borrow it for a moment?”

“I haven’t yet extracted the exact information about who’s behind this from it.”

Na Yul-ryang had been planning to seek help from Primal Killing Pavilion, a group of diviners, because no matter how much he injured the spirit body, it kept its mouth shut.

“Vengeful spirits are different from humans. You can’t extract information by simply inflicting pain on the spirit body.”

“...Are you saying there’s another way?”

“Yes. Through this method, we can even track down who’s behind the vengeful spirit.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Will you entrust it to me?”

At this, Na Yul-ryang handed over the vengeful spirit of Wi Maeng-cheon, whom he had been holding by the nape of the neck.

Like Na Yul-ryang, Yul-myeong could also directly grasp the vengeful spirit with his hand.

Holding the vengeful spirit, Yul-myeong immediately formed a simple hand seal with his left hand.

-Tchk!

Lim

Byeong

Gae

Soon, a thick smoke began to seep out of Yul-myeong's palm.

-Hiss hiss hiss hiss!

It was a strange occurrence, as there was no fire lit.

As the smoke thickened, the corners of Yul-myeong's mouth turned up in a sinister smile.

When Na Yul-ryang looked puzzled,

“As I thought, it's definitely a spirit servant.”

“Spirit servant?”

“Yes. It's a type of technique where one forcibly creates a subordinate by forming a spiritual connection. However, it's quite unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

“Yes. For someone of Divine-level diviner level like the Harmonious Immortal Pavilion Leader or their disciples, it should be quite easy to control a lower-level vengeful spirit as a spirit servant... But this seems uncharacteristic for someone who practices mystical arts, wouldn't you say?”

“What are you talking about?”

Na Yul-ryang asked, clearly not understanding.

Yul-myeong shook his head and replied, “Never mind. In any case, they must pay the price for interfering.”

“How do you mean?”

“As I mentioned earlier, spirit servants have a spiritual connection. This connection is essentially a link between souls.”

“Linking souls?”

“Yes. Therefore, if we forcibly sever this connection, the spirit servant will be annihilated, and its master will receive a strong spiritual impact.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“By adding a bit more to this process, we should be able to quickly locate where that audacious wench is.”

“You sound quite confident.”

“Hehehe. It’s not particularly difficult.”

Na Yul-ryang’s eyes narrowed at this response.

He knew this man was extraordinary, but seeing his proficiency in such dark arts made him even more curious about his true identity.

Just then, Yul-myeong formed a hand seal with his left hand and stroked the vengeful spirit's head with his right.

Then, suddenly,

‘What’s this?’

Na Yul-ryang’s right eye saw something like a red thread.

But the moment it touched Yul-myeong’s hand,

-Crack!

With a bright spark, the red thread was severed.

Along with this, Yul-myeong grasped the severed red thread and formed the Immovable Mind Seal with both hands, beginning to chant something that sounded like an incantation.

“Heaven’s essence, earth’s essence, sun and moon’s essence, heaven and earth’s combined essence, sun and moon’s combined light, spirit and ghost’s combined form, twenty combined with my heart, my heart combined with this heart, heaven’s heart, ten thousand hearts, ten thousand ten thousand hearts, all combined with my heart, Supreme Elder Lord, urgent as the law commands!”

The method he was chanting was a type of Summoning Harmony Method, which usually requires a talisman, but he was forming the technique using only the incantation.

It was a level of skill that would astound other diviners if they saw it.

However,

-Crack crack crack crack!

Suddenly, Yul-myeong, who had his hands clasped together, staggered backward.

Then,

“Puh!”

He spat out a mouthful of black blood like a fountain.

Seeing this, Na Yul-ryang frowned and asked, “What are you doing?”

Wondering if this was also part of the technique,

-Grind!

Yul-myeong gritted his teeth and spoke with a somewhat angry voice.

“…The technique was deflected.”

“What?”

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-Crunch!

“Phew.”

Mok Gyeong-un lightly stretched his body and let out a long breath.

He didn't know who it was, but someone had tried to track him while severing the spiritual connection.

However, Mok Gyeong-un, who had reached the Realm of Life and Death and gained extremely heightened sensitivity to all energies, had reversed and repelled the attempt.

Along with that, he saw a terrifying face full of burn scars, and,

‘…Na Yul-ryang.’

He could also see that man's face beside him.

Mok Gyeong-un looked at his subordinates around him and spoke.

“It seems it's time for us to return.”

### Chapter 386 – Sudden Change (3)

There was a seductive woman wearing provocative clothes that revealed her cleavage, massaging someone's legs.

Her name was Ha Chae-rin.

She was the heir to the Flying Killing Sect and destined to inherit the title of Flying Killing Yama's Guest, one of the Four Great Assassins of the current era.

Why was someone like her in this situation?

‘Damn it all.’

Ha Chae-rin had cursed inwardly dozens, no, hundreds of times.

If she had just chosen a different final target for her Hundred Days, Hundred Kills, she would have already ascended to become the sect leader.

However, she had failed the Hundred Days, Hundred Kills.

Moreover, her memories were incomplete ever since she visited the Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

She still couldn’t understand why she was here in the Heaven and Earth Society.

‘…Can I escape from here?’

Honestly, there was no hope.

Even though she was the heir destined to inherit the title of one of the Four Great Assassins, this was the Heaven and Earth Society, one of the three major powers dividing the current martial arts world.

And the person whose legs she was massaging was a disciple of the Society Leader who ruled this massive organization.

‘Should I be satisfied just to have prolonged my life?’

For someone as hot-tempered and proud as her, this was an utterly unacceptable situation.

If this damn bastard wasn’t a disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society’s Society Leader, she would have attempted to escape by any means, whether through poisoning or assassination.

However,

“Ahem. Can’t you massage properly?”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

‘Ugh...’

Honestly, she was terrified.

She had tried to escape and rebel several times, only to have her facial bones nearly caved in from the slaps she received from this man.

After repeating this a few times, she became so scared that she would flinch reflexively just from him raising his hand.

Seeing her become so docile, Go Chan, who had possessed the body of Jang Neung-ak, the second young master of the Heaven and Earth Society, snickered.

It was truly a sight to behold.

When he saw her again at the Yeon Mok Sword Manor after his retirement, he thought everything had gone awry.

But now, the tables had completely turned.

The heir destined to inherit the title of one of the world’s Four Great Assassins was now reduced to massaging the legs of a retired assassin from the Flying Killing Sect while constantly watching his mood.

‘Hehehe. The fortunes of war are unpredictable indeed.’

The ways of the world were truly unpredictable.

It had been worth enduring all sorts of hardships while possessing that wench's body, thanks to his master, Mok Gyeong-un.

Just as he was feeling satisfied with controlling her, suddenly—

-Woong!

At that moment, the space rippled, and a door made of smoke opened. Someone hurriedly rushed in.

It was a cute-looking girl with short hair, dressed as a diviner.

Go Chan recognized her immediately.

“Yeo Su-rin?”

Yeo Su-rin.

She was a diviner dispatched under the orders of her master, the Harmonious Immortal Pavilion Leader.

She had formed a contract with Mok Gyeong-un and was controlling In Seo-ok, the leader of Primal Killing Pavilion who had become a living corpse spirit through the Six People Spirit Summoning Technique technique, managing the Primal Killing Pavilion.

Why had she suddenly appeared here using her technique?

“You... Are you hurt?”

Go Chan jumped up in surprise and asked.

Judging by her pale face and the blood spreading on her shoulder and abdomen, she seemed to be injured.

Then she urged,

“Step back!”

“What?”

Along with this, Yeo Su-rin hurriedly rotated in a circle with her hand holding a protective charm.

The door made of smoke quickly closed and disappeared.

As it vanished completely, she exhaled roughly and slumped to the floor.

“Haa... Haa...”

“No, what on earth happened for you to be in this state...”

“We’re in big trouble.”

“Big trouble? What do you mean?”

“They found out that the Primal Killing Pavilion leader has become a living corpse spirit.”

“What? Is that true? More importantly, who discovered it?”

Wasn't it said that unless it was a diviner skilled enough to be called a high-level diviner or whatever, it wouldn't be discovered?

As he wondered, Yeo Su-rin answered in a serious voice.

"I don't know. It was an incredible monster who could break my technique with just spiritual power in an instant."

"...I'm not sure exactly, but you're saying they're formidable?"

"It's not just formidable. Maybe..."

"Maybe?"

"They might be a Divine-level diviner or close to that level. How could such a diviner be here... Ugh."

Go Chan quickly supported Yeo Su-rin as she was about to collapse.

She asked him,

"Young Master Mok... Where is Young Master Mok?"

"Not back yet."

Go Chan shook his head as he answered.

He also didn't know exactly where Mok Gyeong-un was or when he would return.

Cheong-ryeong had informed him of the purpose for suddenly leaving, but that was all.

“Is there no way to find the young master?”

“…How could we find someone who’s gone all the way to Kaifeng?”

Of course, being a spirit servant with a spiritual connection, he could find Mok Gyeong-un if he really tried, but the distance was too great now to pinpoint an exact location.

However, one thing was certain: the fact that he, as a spirit servant, was fine meant that Mok Gyeong-un was also unharmed.

“Oh no, this is terrible. Someone with that level of skill in the mystic arts will surely try to track us in reverse.”

At her concern, Go Chan asked,

“In reverse? Are you saying my master might be in danger?”

To Go Chan’s question, Yeo Su-rin answered with a meaningful voice.

“…If the opponent is truly a diviner who has reached the realm of Divine-level diviner, not just Young Master Mok, but all of us might be in danger.”

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Two weeks later,

During this time, the interior of the Heaven and Earth Society was facing a period of rapid change.

The biggest incident was the rumor that spread about the Society Leader, who had been bedridden for three days, being in such poor condition that he had even lost consciousness.

Normally, if there were signs of such rumors spreading, the Society Leader's direct squad and intelligence unit would move swiftly to cut them off in advance.

But this time was different.

Too many people had witnessed doctors frequently entering and exiting the inner sanctum where the Society Leader resided.

The Society Leader was someone who didn't even allow doctors in when he was bedridden.

For doctors to be coming and going like this, the Society Leader's condition must have deteriorated to the worst.

This rumor spread rapidly throughout the entire organization, causing the internal atmosphere to become increasingly unstable.

Even those who had firmly maintained neutrality until now were beginning to move.

In a situation where a successor had not been clearly determined, such internal movements might have been a natural progression.

Amidst this situation, there was another incident that caused an uproar within the organization, both openly and secretly, similar to the Society Leader's illness.

It was the fury of Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang.

This was because his son, Ho Jong-hyeok, the Great Commander of the Indestructible Unit and known as the Five Steel Axe Slayer, had been murdered.

The child of Axe-Destroying King, one of the Five Kings who could be considered the highest-ranking officials of the organization and one of the Eight Stars regarded as the supreme masters of the current martial world, had been killed.

Naturally, the organization was thrown into chaos.

But here, another problem arose.

The prime suspect in this already major incident was none other than Woo Ho-rang, the chief disciple of Bright Blade King Son Yun.

The cause of death left on Ho Jong-hyeok's body was traces of the Transcendent Realm Swordsmanship.

And those sword traces were none other than the Bright Sun Swordsmanship, the unique skill of Bright Blade King Son Yun.

Upon confirming this, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang, without a moment's hesitation, pointed to Woo Ho-rang, the disciple of Bright Blade King Son Yun, as the culprit.

[It wasn't Bright Blade King himself. If it had been him, he would have cut down this child in three moves. Then, the only one who could have killed this child is that guy.]

He believed it was Woo Ho-rang, one of the Five Tigers.

It wasn't someone like Yeop Wi-seon.

His level of martial arts wasn't enough to kill Ho Tae-gang's son.

Convinced that Woo Ho-rang was the culprit, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang immediately went to find Bright Blade King Son Yun to kill Woo Ho-rang, which led to a fierce clash between the two.

If Jang Neung-ak and Wi So-yeon, the two disciples of the Society Leader, hadn't intervened, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang would have seen it through to the end.

[Please believe me. I am truly innocent.]

Of course, it also helped that Woo Ho-rang, who had been accused as the culprit, came forward to explain himself.

Ho Tae-gang, who had come mindlessly to kill him out of anger, regained his composure and also found his son Ho Jong-hyeok's death suspicious.

Certainly, those sword traces were undoubtedly from the Bright Sun Swordsmanship, but Woo Ho-rang clearly had no motive or reason to kill him.

It might have been understandable before the second son Jang Neung-ak and the youngest Wi So-yeon formed an alliance, but not now.

Moreover,

‘…This is clearly intentional.’

Leaving the sword traces itself was full of malicious intent.

Since it happened within the organization, it should have been concealed so that the culprit's identity couldn't be known.

Because of this, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang backed down peacefully.

Or more precisely,

[As compensation, I'll take your right index finger.]

In the end, he cut off and took one of Woo Ho-rang's fingers.

Although Bright Blade King Son Yun raged and tried to stop this, even he couldn't do anything when Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang, one of the Eight Stars, was determined.

Or rather, since Woo Ho-rang himself cut off his finger, the fight had no choice but to subside.

However, this caused Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang and Bright Blade King Son Yun to completely turn their backs on each other, and the repercussions eventually led to the dissolution of the alliance between Jang Neung-ak and Wi So-yeon.

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Gi Ok-ryeon, the first daughter of Gi Hae, the Sun Rock Valley Master who could be considered Wi So-yeon's close associate, spoke to her with a somewhat disappointed tone.

“…Deception is fine, but Lady, was it really necessary to cut off Woo… I mean, Great Commander Woo's right index finger? For a swordsman, the index finger is…”

“We should be satisfied with this much, Ok-ryeon.”

“But…”

“Originally, at least an arm should have been cut off. But Axe-Destroying King held back his anger and compromised.”

“He held back his anger?”

“Yes. If it had gone according to the enemy's intentions, at least that much should have been done. That way…”

“The one who orchestrated this situation would be fooled, right?”

“Exactly. But Axe-Destroying King also didn’t like falling for the enemy’s ploy, and he felt it was excessive to cut off Commander Woo’s arm when he wasn’t the real culprit, so he ended it at this level.”

“…I see.”

Gi Ok-ryeon sighed.

Though she understood, as someone who admired Woo Ho-rang, it was just heartbreaking.

They were acting out breaking the alliance and cutting off Brother Wu’s finger to make the enemy reveal themselves.

“Do you think the culprit will move according to our intentions?”

“I’m not sure. As I said earlier, unless we had shown Bright Blade King and Axe-Destroying King fighting fiercely to the point where someone got hurt after cutting off at least an arm, I’m not confident that Elder Brother will be fooled by this much.”

The person they all considered to be the real culprit was Young Master Na Yul-ryang’s faction.

He was the only one who would gain the greatest benefit from the fight between Axe-Destroying King and Bright Blade King.

That’s why they had resolved it through dialogue, but they cut off Woo Ho-rang’s finger and officially broke the alliance for the sake of appearances.

“Young Master Na Yul-ryang will surely approach Axe-Destroying King, right?”

“Probably so.”

It was Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang who was in the position of having to be satisfied with just a finger despite losing his son and being unable to avenge him even in his anger.

Naturally, Na Yul-ryang had to approach him.

That would make it easier to draw him into his own faction.

If the Young Master approached in this way, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang planned to join his faction and implement a strategy of suffering a flesh wound.

However,

‘…Master’s worsening illness is a variable.’

After the sudden rumors of Master’s critical condition spread, the Young Master’s active movements had ceased.

For almost three days, at that.

It was unlike the Young Master.

They had anticipated that someone as cunning as him might notice their scheme, but his silence was making them uneasy.

If Master were to really pass away at a time like this, the situation would become uncontrollable.

“Haa...”

Wi So-yeon let out a deep sigh.

It was frustrating.

What would he have done if he were here?

If he were here at a time like this, it would have been reassuring and comforting no matter what happened, but now it was just bitter.

Where on earth had he disappeared to?

According to what she had heard from the Vice Society Leader before, it seemed he was absent for a confidential mission, but it was taking too long.

What kind of mission could he be on?

She worried that he might have gone outside the organization and something might have happened to him.

‘Gyeong-un...’

Just as she was inwardly longing for Mok Gyeong-un,

Someone urgently knocked on the door.

-Thump thump!

“My Lady!”

It was the voice of Yang Il, the small branch leader of the Transient Sword Group.

Hearing his urgent voice, Wi So-yeon frowned with anxiety and said,

“Come in.”

At this, Yang Il opened the door and entered, catching his breath after rushing here.

However, for someone who had come in such a hurry, his expression wasn't that bad.

As she was wondering about this, Yang Il said,

“My Lady. Mok Gyeong... I mean, Young Master Mok has appeared.”

‘!!!!!!’

She, who had been sitting elegantly holding a teacup, forgot her composure and unconsciously jumped to her feet.

Chapter 387 – Return (1)

In the office of the Vice Society Leader at the main branch of Heaven and Earth Society's inner sanctum.

Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon stared intently at someone for a long time with a fearsome expression.

It was Mong Mu-yak, his son and the deputy leader of the Society Leader's direct squad who also commanded the intelligence department.

The look in Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon's eyes as he gazed at Mong Mu-yak was peculiar.

This was because he had initially called him in to reprimand him out of anger, but upon facing him, the atmosphere had changed, and he regained his composure.

‘…This kid?’

He had changed.

Originally, he always held a hint of fear when facing his father.

But now, he was looking straight into his eyes without the slightest tremor.

Rather than defiance, it was clear confidence.

Could it be that his martial prowess had increased?

Before he left, he could gauge his level to some extent through his qi sense.

But now, he couldn't accurately determine his level.

To be able to conceal one's qi from an opponent, one must be at least equal to or superior to them.

‘That can't be…’

He had expected that this mission, being confidential and extremely difficult, would provide great experience and lead to some growth.

But it seems to have far exceeded those expectations.

Could it be that this child has reached a level nearly equal to his own or even approaching the wall?

If that were the case, he should be happy as this was his son who would become the successor, but the current situation didn't allow for unrestrained joy.

After staring at his son for a long while, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon finally spoke in a low voice.

“I need to hear three explanations from you.”

“Please ask.”

The one who answered was his son, Mong Mu-yak, the deputy leader of the Society Leader's direct squad and commander of the intelligence department.

He was facing his father, the Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon, immediately after returning to the organization.

“Even if not maintaining periodic contact during your return was due to continuous pursuit, you should have known this was a confidential mission. Why did you enter through the main gate instead of the secret passage?”

Their mission was, as stated, confidential.

Yet they had acted in a way that defied expectations.

Because of this, by now, various sects might have discovered the existence of the Holy Fire Priestess.

Even if they had concealed her identity in a carriage, they couldn't be at ease.

He was curious about the intention behind such an action.

“Speak.”

“I’ll be frank, sir.”

“Frank?”

“Yes.”

“…What on earth are you saying?”

“It was to show that we had returned.”

“What?”

At these words from his son Mong Mu-yak, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon raised an eyebrow.

For a moment, he was dumbfounded.

Is this child serious?

With this answer alone, this child had already disobeyed the orders of the Society Leader and himself.

He had hoped there was some special reason, like interference near the organization, but the worst possible answer came out.

“Have you forgotten what a confidential mission means?”

“I know. But if we hadn’t done this, you would have tried to kill Young Master Mok Gyeong-un upon his return from completing the mission, Father.”

“You!”

Mong Seo-cheon’s voice rose.

This was related to his second question.

His order had been to kill Mok Gyeong-un if he made any contact with the righteous sects or showed even the slightest suspicious behavior.

All those involved in the confidential mission were prepared to sacrifice Mok Gyeong-un if necessary; he was essentially a disposable pawn.

Thus, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon was quite displeased that the man he had hoped would be dealt with before returning had come back safely.

And,

“Now... Did you just call that guy Young Master Mok Gyeong-un?”

“Yes.”

“You... Don’t tell me you and he...”

“It’s not ‘don’t tell me.’ Mok Gyeong-un succeeded in his mission, so from that point, he’s the Society Leader’s fourth disciple. Naturally, he should be called Young Master, shouldn’t he?”

“.....”

At his son’s response, Mong Seo-cheon was speechless with disbelief.

Could it be that this child truly believes the Society Leader will accept that Mok Gyeong-un fellow as a disciple?

Even he didn't understand why the Society Leader had shown such a whim, but the Society Leader was not in a state to take on any disciples right now.

“So you called him Young Master and disobeyed the organization's order because of that?”

“Didn't I tell you?”

“Are you trying to claim you disobeyed orders for fear of being discarded like a used tool?”

“It's not a claim, it's a fact.”

“…You're disappointing this father for the first time.”

“…I only did what I had to do.”

-Bang!

As soon as those words ended, Mong Seo-cheon slammed down on the round table in front of him.

As the table shattered and collapsed weakly, Mong Seo-cheon spoke with an angry voice.

“You don't realize what you've done. The last question seems meaningless now, so I'll replace it with an order.”

“An order?”

“Bring Mok Gyeong-un... No.”

That guy isn't necessary right now.

Anyway, that guy would have many enemies even if left alone, so it didn't matter.

“Forget about Mok Gyeong-un for now. Bring the Holy Fire Priestess here immediately.”

The priority was to put out the immediate fire.

When he ordered them to bring the Holy Fire Priestess, not only did they not use the secret passage, but they appeared boldly through the front gate, and even took a carriage to the Shadow Clan.

This was clearly disobeying orders.

However, since it was a secret order and the situation was unfavorable, he couldn't openly mobilize the Society Leader's direct squad, so he had no choice but to give this order to Mong Mu-yak.

But,

“I cannot do that.”

What came out of Mong Mu-yak's mouth was a clear refusal.

At this, the greatly angered Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon stood up abruptly and raised his voice.

“Are you really going to disobey the order?”

“Disobeying the order was merely a matter of the method of return. More importantly, the Young Master requests that the Society Leader fulfill his promise and grant him a private audience.”

“What?”

Fulfill the promise and grant a private audience?

Did he just relay Mok Gyeong-un’s wishes to him, his direct superior and father?

These youngsters were truly crossing the line.

At this, Mong Seo-cheon’s hand moved.

-Pat!

The table was already broken, and since he was standing and only one and a half steps away, he was within immediate reach.

As he tried to subdue him at once with the Golden Silk Palm technique,

-Pa pa pak!

Not only did Mong Mu-yak lightly block his technique, but he also pushed Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon back.

Pushed back about three steps, Mong Seo-cheon’s eyes widened.

He had suspected it due to the qi sense, but this child’s martial prowess had truly approached the wall.

Even if he had survived a life-threatening crisis and returned safely, how could his capabilities have increased this much in just a few months?

As he wondered, Mong Mu-yak spoke.

“Vice Society Leader, no, Father.”

“You...”

“Just as you chose to serve the Society Leader, I have chosen Young Master Mok Gyeong-un.”

“Now you’re saying that...”

“You may reprimand me now, Father, but soon your thoughts will change.”

‘!?’

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Around the same time.

At the Shadow Clan’s estate in the inner sanctum.

Hwan Ya-seon, the leader of the Shadow Clan and one of the Three Clan Leaders who were high-ranking officials of the Heaven and Earth Society, had a look of bewilderment in his eyes after receiving an urgent message.

This was because, according to the Shadow Clan warrior who brought him the message, Mok Gyeong-un had not returned through the organization’s secret passage but had entered through the main gate.

Moreover, according to the warriors guarding the city gate, there was an old woman riding in the carriage.

‘The Holy Fire Priestess!’

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon was certain that the old woman was the Holy Fire Priestess as soon as he heard this.

But what kind of bolt from the blue was this?

It was good news that she, who could be considered the spiritual pillar of the Fire Faith Order, had escaped alive from the underground prison of the imperial palace, but bringing her here? What kind of act was this?

‘I clearly gave the order.’

The order he had given to Mok Gyeong-un was to divert the Holy Fire Priestess before returning to the Heaven and Earth Society.

He had thought that with the guy’s wit and skills, he would succeed even in this dangerous mission.

But a completely unexpected variable had occurred.

‘What on earth have you done?’

He had trusted Mok Gyeong-un because he was a fellow Fire Faith Order member and his disciple.

However, from the moment he brought the Holy Fire Priestess here, he couldn’t understand why the guy had done such a thing.

If he had offered the Holy Fire Priestess to the Society Leader, it could have been dismissed as betrayal out of greed to become the fourth disciple, but he brought her to the Shadow Clan.

Because of this, he found himself in an extremely difficult situation.

‘Why?’

By bringing the Holy Fire Priestess to the Shadow Clan, all eyes from the Society Leader’s direct squad and the intelligence department were now focused here.

No, this was a situation worthy of suspicion.

It meant he had brought someone to the Shadow Clan who was ordered to be brought in defiance of the Society Leader’s orders.

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon’s mind became complicated.

What should he do about this?

The one fortunate thing was that although the Vice Society Leader and the Society Leader’s direct squad had somehow managed to block and hide the information, the Society Leader’s condition seemed to have reached a critical point.

If so,

‘…Should I attempt to escape with the Holy Fire Priestess, even if it means abandoning the foundation here?’

She held a very important position in the order.

As someone in the position of the order’s leader, he had a duty to protect her.

If she falls into the Society Leader's hands, her safety would be in danger.

He must make a decision one way or another.

With that, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon arrived at the rear garden of the estate where the carriage was said to have arrived.

'!?'

Upon arrival, Hwan Ya-seon immediately frowned.

This was because Hwan Ya-seon had ordered to detain Mok Gyeong-un and the carriage as soon as they arrived.

It was to avoid suspicion since the Society Leader's direct intelligence department was watching.

But all the Shadow Clan warriors in the rear garden were collapsed, and several masked individuals could be seen unconscious near the walls as well.

What was going on here?

Why were all of them in such a state?

As Hwan Ya-seon wondered, his gaze turned towards the carriage.

'That is?'

In front of the carriage, he saw a horse with an enormous build incomparable to ordinary horses.

Just looking at its fierce mane that seemed about to burst into flames, it was clearly an extraordinary steed.

Someone was standing in front of it with their hands behind their back, and,

“Gyeong-un?”

At his call, the person standing with their hands behind their back lowered their arms and turned around.

It was Mok Gyeong-un.

Mok Gyeong-un smiled faintly and then, as if paying respects to his master, he put his hands together in a fist-palm salute and greeted him.

“It’s been a long time, Master.”

At this greeting, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon, with eyes full of wariness, immediately moved his hand to the sword at his waist and said,

“What is the meaning of this?”

Hwan Ya-seon gestured towards the collapsed Shadow Clan warriors around them as he asked.

To this question, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged and answered,

“They’re not dead.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, is it?”

The true intent of his question was not that.

Not only had he brought the Holy Fire Priestess here, but he had also taken down all the Shadow Clan warriors who were ordered to surround them to avoid outside surveillance.

This could only be seen as intentional in any way.

To Hwan Ya-seon, whose hand was touching his sword, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“I’ve dealt with those watching as well, so you can speak freely.”

Mok Gyeong-un pointed to two locations with his hand.

Those were the western and southeastern walls, where the collapsed masked individuals were not people of the Shadow Clan.

Hwan Ya-seon couldn’t have been unaware of this.

“You know very well that’s not what I’m asking...”

-Swish!

At that moment, Hwan Ya-seon frowned.

This was because someone had placed the sharp tip of a sword against his back while he was holding his sword.

“Please take your hand off your sword, Elder Clan Leader.”

‘No way?’

To his disbelief, it was none other than Byeok, his bodyguard and confidant.

### Chapter 388 – Return (2)

At the same time,

In Young Master Na Yul-ryang's estate within the inner sanctum of Heaven and Earth Society.

Young Master Na Yul-ryang, sitting comfortably leaning against the head seat, downed a cup of alcohol in one gulp and then tossed it to the floor.

-Crash!

As the cup shattered, the corners of Na Yul-ryang's mouth curled up.

Seeing this, his confidant Mo Yak chuckled and said,

“Are you that pleased?”

“Of course I am.”

After his seclusion, he had searched for that guy, but when he suddenly disappeared, his enthusiasm had cooled for a while.

Born with innate killing intent and devoid of emotions, he had lived a life without obstacles due to his natural martial talent.

Because of this, no one except his master, the Heaven and Earth Society Society Leader, and the two Five Kings who held the title of Eight Stars, could arouse his interest.

Even the disciples vying for the position of successor were mere youngsters to him, failing to evoke any response.

But then, that guy appeared.

‘Mok Gyeong-un.’

A monster he encountered for the first time in his life.

He grew during their fight and surpassed the wall before even coming of age.

Not only that, although he received help from Seomdokwang later, he even managed to defeat Na Yul-ryang.

Since then, Na Yul-ryang found interest in life for the first time.

Because he developed a genuine desire to kill someone.

This was clearly an emotion.

-Clench!

Na Yul-ryang clenched his fist and then relaxed it.

How long had he been waiting for that guy to appear?

[It’s a confidential mission, so I cannot disclose it.]

[Is it inside or outside?]

[I cannot disclose that either.]

The only thing he learned through the Vice Society Leader was one fact.

That the guy was carrying out a confidential mission for the Society Leader.

Meanwhile, the Society Leader's condition had rapidly deteriorated, and he was momentarily caught up in contemplation due to a proposal brought to him by the Elder Council.

And now, finally, that Mok Gyeong-un had appeared.

-Thud!

Young Master Na Yul-ryang stood up.

Mo Yak frowned and said,

“Young Master. Surely you’re not planning to go kill him right now?”

“Is there any reason to wait longer?”

“Not now.”

At those words, Na Yul-ryang looked at Mo Yak with cold eyes and said,

“What do you mean, not now?”

How long had he been waiting for the day to fight that guy again?

And now, was he trying to hold him back?

As he revealed his displeasure, Mo Yak, seeming to have read his mood, carefully said,

“He has returned after completing a confidential mission given by the Society Leader. But isn’t there something strange?”

At these words, Na Yul-ryang raised an eyebrow and then answered,

“…He headed to the Shadow Clan without going to see Master, you say?”

“Yes. And unlike when he disappeared, he appeared through the organization’s main gate.”

At Mo Yak’s words, Na Yul-ryang’s eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth lifted.

“He feared being discarded like a used tool, it seems.”

“That’s the only way to think of it for now. He probably doesn’t know the Society Leader’s condition yet, but seeing how he headed straight to the Shadow Clan, which could be considered an ally, instead of the main branch...”

At this assessment, Na Yul-ryang clicked his tongue.

He had thought that despite being originally a hostage from the righteous faction, the guy had caught Master’s eye and received a confidential mission due to his tremendous martial talent, but was he just a disposable pawn after all?

To be held back by mere origins.

“Luck doesn’t seem to be on his side.”

“That’s not for us to worry about. But we don’t know yet. It could be that he feared being discarded, but there’s also a slight chance he headed straight to the Shadow Clan on the Society Leader’s orders.”

“…Was that it?”

“Yes.”

What Mo Yak was saying they should be wary of was the latter possibility.

If it was just the former, there wouldn’t be any problem in dealing with him.

However, if it was the latter, it would mean interfering with someone carrying out the Society Leader’s confidential mission.

“So what do you suggest we do?”

“There’s no need for you to move directly or for us to reveal our hand, Young Master.”

“Are you saying we should leave him be?”

“No. We have the most suitable piece, don’t we?”

“Suitable piece? …Oh. You mean him?”

At Young Master Na Yul-ryang’s words, Mo Yak nodded and answered with a faint smile.

“Yes. Weren’t you planning to test him anyway? To see if he has truly turned his back on Miss Wi So-yeon’s faction and Bright Blade King’s side.”

“Your cunning mind is indeed...”

“I don’t understand why you keep calling it cunning when there are better words like strategy or tactics.”

“It’s all the same.”

At Young Master Na Yul-ryang’s words, Mo Yak smacked his lips.

Then he stood up and said,

“Then I’ll take your permission and set him in motion.”

Young Master Na Yul-ryang stared at Mo Yak.

Although it would be easier to move directly than this method, it was certainly not a good situation to act rashly now.

Therefore, there was no harm in testing through that person.

“Do as you wish.”

Na Yul-ryang shrugged and sat down.

As his permission was given, Mo Yak raised the corner of his mouth slyly and said,

“Hehehe. Even if he employs a strategy of suffering a flesh wound, unlike with Wi So-yeon’s faction he allied with or Woo Ho-rang, Bright Blade King’s chief disciple, he’ll properly take action this time, even if just for show. If he’s unlucky, he might end up half-crippled.”

At these words, Na Yul-ryang snorted.

Although the opponent was the worst, if he became half-crippled from this, then he wasn’t qualified to compete with himself now.

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Meanwhile,

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon’s expression hardened.

Byeok, his bodyguard and confidant, was no different from his right arm.

For such a person to suddenly aim a sword at his back, he couldn’t help but be bewildered.

He had personally selected Byeok when he was an orphan, taught him martial arts, and raised him, so he never had the slightest doubt about his loyalty.

But now this person had betrayed him?

Although he was the leader of the Shadow Clan, which dealt with the intelligence department and spies, this was somewhat unbelievable.

“…Byeok. Have you really betrayed me?”

“I only follow Master Mok Gyeong-un.”

“How dare you!”

Hwan Ya-seon’s voice rose slightly as his composure broke.

The part of his neck not covered by the human skin mask reddened with disappointment.

It might have been a natural reaction, believing he had been betrayed by someone he trusted.

However, the reality was not betrayal.

Byeok had merely been possessed by Demonic Monk, Mok Gyeong-un’s loyal spirit servant.

For Hwan Ya-seon, who was unaware of the principles of mystic arts, vengeful spirits, or evil spirits, this relationship was incomprehensible, but one thing was certain,

‘…This has gone wrong.’

He judged that everything was going awry.

Hwan Ya-seon carefully pressed the Laogong acupoint in his left palm with his middle finger.

Along with this, he opened his mouth while letting out his characteristic laugh.

“Ohoho. They say one shouldn’t raise a black-haired beast, indeed.”

“.....”

As befitting the leader of a faction that dealt with spies, he was skilled at controlling his emotions.

After all, if it was certain that his disciple Mok Gyeong-un and his confidant Byeok had betrayed him, he couldn't remain caught up in feelings of disappointment forever.

Right now, he needed to devise a way to break through this unfavorable situation.

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon, continuously racking his brain, glared at Mok Gyeong-un and continued speaking.

“It’s unfortunate.”

“What is?”

“Your grandfather, Guardian Zhang, might lament in the afterlife if he learns of your degeneration in abandoning the cult.”

At these words, a strange light flickered in Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes.

When he first learned that Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon was a member of the Fire Faith Order, he had fabricated a situation to deceive him, calling his grandfather an unknown old master and pretending to be a member of the Fire Faith Order.

Yet coincidentally, his grandfather was indeed a member of the Fire Faith Order.

At the time, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon had spoken as if he might know who Mok Gyeong-un’s grandfather was.

[Since he kept it from you until the end, it’s difficult to tell you right away. But it’s certain that he was quite a high-ranking figure in our cult.]

Surprisingly, those words were true.

He had unexpectedly come close to the truth.

“How interesting.”

“Interesting? Are you saying this about the current situation?”

“Yes, I never thought the person you had in mind would actually be him, Master.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s response, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon frowned.

Although he was quick-witted enough to infer many things from small clues, he found it difficult to understand the intention behind Mok Gyeong-un’s current words.

However, right now, his mind was more focused on escaping this place than conversing with Mok Gyeong-un.

Hwan Ya-seon, who had been pressing the Laogong acupoint in his left palm, relaxed the muscles in his arm.

At that moment,

-Pa pa pa pak!

Something fell to the floor from the flesh of his left arm.

As it touched the ground,

-Pu pu pu pu pu peng!

Gray smoke began to flow out.

Seeing this, Demonic Monk, who was possessing Byeok and aiming a sword at Hwan Ya-seon's back, hurriedly tried to subdue him with the Golden Silk Palm technique.

However,

-Pa pak!

In that instant, Hwan Ya-seon dodged Demonic Monk's hand in the blink of an eye with a body technique that swayed like a willow tree, then grabbed his wrist and twisted it,

-Crack!

-Thud!

He kicked him in the chest.

Even though he was caught from behind, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon was also a supreme master.

He was not an opponent who could be easily subdued with Byeok's body, which had reached the peak of supremacy.

And,

-Whoosh!

By now, the smoke had spread in all directions.

Byeok, who inhaled it, frowned.

The moment he breathed in the smoke, he felt his body go limp and start to stiffen.

It seemed to be a poisonous mist.

Looking at him convulsing as his body stiffened, Hwan Ya-seon clicked his tongue and said,

“You brought this upon yourself. The Clan Leader cared for you so much.”

This poisonous mist was Hwan Ya-seon’s trump card.

It was a mixture of paralyzing poison and various other poisons, which he always kept hidden in his left arm through surgery.

Created for use in the worst situations, it was a strong mist that could spread up to about twenty jang.

Of course, an inner force master could block it with qi circulation, but they would have to waste time to do so momentarily.

‘I’m not sure if it would work on a master who has surpassed the wall, though.’

The only concern was that Mok Gyeong-un was a master of the Transformation Realm.

Having already seen him contend with the Society Leader, he knew that his skills had surpassed his own, which was why he had resorted to using his trump card.

Whether this would work on Mok Gyeong-un or not was uncertain, but he had to attempt to escape with the Holy Fire Priestess in this moment.

-Flinch!

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon, who was about to swiftly move towards the carriage, unconsciously hesitated.

This was due to the vast true qi filling the surroundings.

‘What kind of true qi is this?’

The energy was so strong that it made his whole body break out in goosebumps.

It was at that very moment.

-Whoosh!

The gray mist, which had been so thick it obscured the surrounding view, suddenly began to move rapidly.

It was creating a single flow.

That flow,

‘Could it be?’

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon lifted his head.

The mist that had spread widely and was moving was gradually narrowing upwards, forming a vortex.

Seeing this, Hwan Ya-seon was dumbfounded.

The vast true qi filling the surroundings was trapping the mist, making it swirl and sending it upwards.

Eventually, the gray mist that had been swirling and surging upwards completely disappeared.

‘This can’t be...’

To be able to dispel the poisonous mist with true qi alone.

This was something he had never anticipated.

Who on earth could it be?

Only those at the level of the Eight Stars or above among the Five Kings could handle true qi to this extent, right?

No, this should only be possible for someone like the Society Leader.

In his field of vision, he saw Mok Gyeong-un extending his hand and slightly raising his index finger.

The true qi flowing from the tip of his finger was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

‘!?’

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon’s eyes widened.

Was it that child Mok Gyeong-un who did this?

He unconsciously swallowed, his mouth having gone dry without him realizing.

He knew that the speed of his martial arts development was incredibly fast, surpassing his expectations.

But this was beyond the realm of expectations.

What on earth had happened during the few months he was away on the confidential mission?

-Crack! Crack!

Hwan Ya-seon, who had been too shocked to speak, turned his head at the sound coming from beside him.

There, his confidant and bodyguard Byeok was not only moving his stiffened body, but,

-Hiss!

A black liquid, presumed to be poison, could be seen flowing from the tips of his ten fingers.

‘What? Is he... expelling the poison from his body?’

And in such a short moment?

Although Byeok’s martial arts were excellent, having been personally trained by him, he couldn’t have responded this quickly after being suddenly exposed to the poisonous mist.

What on earth was happening?

As he was bewildered,

-Creeeeeak!

The carriage door opened.

Someone came down, leaning on a cane, and the moment Hwan Ya-seon saw this person, various complex emotions clouded his eyes.

‘The Holy Fire Priestess.’

He had wondered if the day would ever come when he would see her again after she was imprisoned in the underground prison of the imperial palace.

Yet here he was, seeing her again like this.

Even in the midst of crisis, he couldn’t help but feel a surge of emotion.

-Grind!

What should he do?

No matter how joyous this reunion was, he couldn’t hand her over to the Heaven and Earth Society here.

Even at the cost of his own life, he had to take her outside the organization, but...

It was then.

“Clan Leader Ya-seon.”

She called out to him.

He wanted to immediately call out to the Holy Fire Priestess and pay his respects, but fearing there might be eyes and ears from the intelligence department sent by the Society Leader's side, he couldn't hastily respond.

As Hwan Ya-seon was about to gesture to her not to speak, the Holy Fire Priestess uttered words he never expected.

“Immediately lower your body and pay respects to that person.”

“What are you saying...”

“The person before your eyes is the true master of the Holy Fire.”

‘!!!!!!’

Chapter 389 – Return (3)

A dark space filled only with shadows.

A man with a terribly scarred face from burns sat cross-legged.

He was the envoy from the Elder Council who had called himself Yul-myeong to Young Master Na Yul-ryang.

This Yul-myeong opened his mouth.

“It was beyond expectations. All our preparations after discovering the secret passage have been thwarted. I never thought they would enter through the front.”

In response to his words, a gruff old man's voice was heard from the darkness.

“Cunning bastard. Did he notice in advance?”

“It doesn't seem so. He might have just been worried about being discarded like a used tool.”

“Discarded?”

“Yes, being of hostage origin, he'd be an easy pawn to discard. But he's as cautious as he is cunning. Thanks to that, that old woman has finally entered the organization.”

“So did he head to the Society Leader?”

“No, that's not the case.”

“No?”

“Yes, contrary to expectations, he took the carriage to the Shadow Clan.”

“Shadow Clan? He went to his master?”

“Yes.”

“Then he's not just a chess piece moving according to the Society Leader's will.”

“That's how it seems so far.”

“That means...”

“He might be connected to a third force. For instance, the group of diviners skilled enough in mystic arts to control vengeful spirits as spirit servants.”

“You mean those who controlled the Primal Killing Pavilion leader as a living corpse?”

“Yes.”

“You said they were on par with you?”

“There aren’t many diviners who can reverse and deflect my spiritual power.”

“Hmm.”

“What should we do? For now, with the Society Leader’s situation and not knowing how far this third force has infiltrated, we’ve left it alone. But now that the old woman has come here, we can’t just leave it be.”

The presence in the darkness seemed to agree with Yul-myeong’s concerns, letting out a faint groan.

Then he said,

“The immediate priority would be that old woman. Then, we should immediately...”

“Let’s hold off on the Shadow Clan for now.”

“Hold off?”

“Though the probability is low, it could be a trap set by the Society Leader.”

“The Society Leader? Right now, he’s...”

“The elders know well, don’t they? If by any chance this is a trap aimed at making us act, we could face a backlash.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“How about making them hand her over voluntarily?”

“Voluntarily?”

“As it happens, that younger brother who was captured as a hostage with him at the Yeon Mok Sword Manor is in Bright Blade King’s hands.”

“Oh?”

Yul-myeong spoke in a meaningful voice.

“Whether he’s a chess piece or not, it’s hard to overcome the weight of blood ties.”

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“The person before your eyes is the true master of the Holy Fire.”

‘!!!!’

At these words from the Holy Fire Priestess, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon was beyond surprised and couldn’t take his eyes off Mok Gyeong-un’s face.

What on earth did this mean?

Mok Gyeong-un, whom he thought had betrayed the cult, was the master of the Holy Fire?

The master of the Holy Fire.

Wasn't that being the incarnation of fire they had been waiting for all this time?

“What exactly...”

“Ahem!”

Until just a moment ago, Hwan Ya-seon had thought he should be cautious in case of outside surveillance, but the shock must have been great as he called out to her and said,

“Holy Fire Priestess... Is this truly real?”

“Pay your respects.”

At the Holy Fire Priestess's stern voice, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon's eyes wavered.

There was no way she, who received revelations from the Holy Fire, would speak nonsense.

Suddenly, many thoughts flashed through his mind.

‘Ah...’

So the monstrous speed of martial arts development and this extraordinary intelligence were all because he was born as the incarnation?

After staring intently for a while, Hwan Ya-seon finally knelt down.

Then he crossed his arms over his chest, placing his hands on both shoulders, taking the Fire Faith Order's salute.

-Thud!

Always hiding his identity and dealing with spies and information, he was more suspicious than anyone, but paradoxically, he was also more deeply loyal and faithful to the cult than anyone.

That's why complex emotions were evident in his eyes as he knelt, and even his eyelids reddened.

'Clan Leader Ya-seon...'

Watching him like this, the Holy Fire Priestess's eyes became rather complicated.

She recalled what had happened just two weeks ago.

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Everyone had gathered in the guest hall of Spiritual Sword Sanctuary Mountain Villa.

[H-How can this be?]

The Holy Fire Priestess and her granddaughter Ye Song-ah couldn't hide their bewilderment as they looked at the broken pieces of the jewel, which could be considered the embodiment of the Holy Fire Spirit that delivered revelations.

They had already been wondering why there was no mention of the jewel.

But who would have thought the jewel would end up like this?

‘W-What are we to do about this?’

The Holy Fire Priestess's mind became complicated.

The ability to read revelations had brought many threats from enemies, but at the same time, it had also served to protect them.

But if the jewel was broken, their role had essentially become meaningless.

The Holy Fire Priestess had hoped that even if she lost her ability, it would protect her granddaughter Ye Song-ah, who had inherited that power.

She wasn't the only one surprised by this.

Seop Chun opened his mouth, seeming worried as he looked at it.

[My Lord... If the jewel that was said to deliver prophetic revelations is broken, then our mission...]

[It's not exactly a failure.]

[What? What do you mean?]

[What was our mission?]

[Our mission? That was...]

Their confidential mission was to break the Holy Fire Priestess out of the underground prison in the imperial palace.

If they took the mission at face value, they certainly hadn't failed.

However, the purpose of capturing the Holy Fire Priestess clearly stemmed from her mysterious ability to predict the future.

Would the Society Leader accept this?

His going to such lengths to break out the Holy Fire Priestess seemed clearly related to his condition.

To this, Seop Chun carefully said,

[Even if it's not pushed to the point of failure, he might not keep his promise, saying we didn't fully accomplish the mission. If that happens, the position of fourth disciple will be just a bubble...]

Before he could finish, Mong Mu-yak spoke up.

[Is there any need to be fixated on the position?]

[What?]

[My Lord has already reached a realm where he can contend with the Six Heavens, who are called the pinnacle of the current martial world.]

[Wait, Mu-yak, are you saying...]

[The Heaven and Earth Society originally followed the law of the strong. But at some point, the Heavenly Vein began to reign over the organization like an emperor. But now that a being surpassing even the Heavenly Vein has been born, is there any need for that?]

Being in charge of the intelligence department, he always made rational judgments.

But at his changed attitude, Seop Chun clicked his tongue.

It seemed he was that captivated by Mok Gyeong-un's existence and strength.

However,

[Your words have a point. But even if the organization originally aspired to the rule of the strong, that's too hasty a judgment. At least...]

[You want to say we need justification, don't you?]

[...Yes. You know this and still say such things?]

No matter how strong Mok Gyeong-un had become, to become a figure who could lead this massive organization called the Heaven and Earth Society, he needed a justification for people to follow him.

Even if he had become the Shadow Clan Leader's disciple, his roots were in the righteous faction, and he had been brought here as a hostage.

Moreover, if he, who had sworn loyalty to the organization, tried to solve everything with just strength, who would follow him?

It would only increase internal enemies.

But then,

-Thud!

Mong Mu-yak knelt on one knee right there and put his hands together in respect.

Everyone's attention focused on his sudden behavior.

Then Mong Mu-yak spoke to Mok Gyeong-un in a reverent voice.

[It's not only the Heaven and Earth Veins that have the right to be the master of the organization.]

[Mu-yak, what are you...]

[It's no coincidence that the successor of the Moon Vein has returned to the organization. If my Lord wishes to reign over the organization, I, Mong Mu-yak, will devote my life to following you with the loyalty of a dog and horse.]

[Moon Vein?]

At these words, Seop Chun's eyes widened.

Did he just say Moon Vein?

If he's talking about the Moon Vein, isn't that one of the foundations of the Heaven Earth Moon Society, which could be considered the predecessor of the Heaven and Earth Society?

He had thought that due to some incident, even its secret techniques had disappeared and its lineage had been completely cut off.

But what was this about?

As he wondered, Mong Mu-yak said,

[You, no, most of the organization might not know, but my Lord is the successor of the Moon Vein who has appeared after a hundred years. That's why Bright Blade King brought him.]

Mong Mu-yak was the deputy leader of the Society Leader's direct squad.

He knew well from his father, Vice Society Leader Mong Seo-cheon, by what route the two hostages from the righteous faction had been captured.

However, he had kept silent about Mok Gyeong-un being the successor of the Moon Vein due to the Society Leader's orders.

After all, even if a successor of the Moon Vein had appeared, there wasn't much that could be done about it now.

But now the situation had changed.

Mok Gyeong-un's marvelous martial prowess could re-establish the principles of the Three Veins...

It was then.

-Thud!

[This must not be!]

'!?'

Mong Mu-yak frowned and looked at the person who had interrupted.

It was the Holy Fire Priestess.

Not only had she suddenly interrupted, but why was she prostrating herself on the floor?

As he wondered, she said,

[With even the jewel that delivers revelations destroyed, the symbolism of the Holy Fire Priestess is as good as gone. In a situation where the cult leader is dead and even our existence has become meaningless, the only one who can lead the remaining cult members is the Young Master, who can be called the incarnation. Please...]

[Close your mouth. How dare you discuss whether or not to lead a heretical group with my Lord?]

Mong Mu-yak cut off her words and raised his voice.

Though he had broken her out of prison due to the mission, like other Central Plains people, he did not have a favorable view of the Fire Faith Order.

Despite his rebuke, the Holy Fire Priestess did not back down.

[The Young Master is the true master of the Holy Fire and its incarnation. The predetermined fate cannot be changed by your...]

[I am neither an incarnation nor the master of the Holy Fire. And fate is not predetermined. Don't arbitrarily define such things.]

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un, who had been listening quietly, opened his mouth.

The Holy Fire Priestess looked at him with bewildered eyes.

Mong Mu-yak snickered and looked triumphant, thinking he was rebuking her nonsensical words.

However,

[As it happens, I was about to tell you all what my goal is. This is perfect.]

[Goal? My Lord... What do you mean?]

To his puzzled question, Mok Gyeong-un answered with a faint smile.

[To erase the Heaven and Earth Society.]

‘!!!!!!’

At these words, everyone's faces turned to shock.

Especially Seop Chun and Mong Mu-yak, who were from the Heaven and Earth Society.

They had hoped that Mok Gyeong-un, whose martial arts had developed dramatically, would take control of the Heaven and Earth Society and rule it.

But a completely unexpected ambition came out of his mouth.

They couldn't help but be bewildered.

[My Lord... What do you mean by erasing the Heaven and Earth Society? Surely you don't mean to fight against the organization itself instead of reigning over it...]

[I just don't like it very much.]

[Pardon?]

[The name Heaven and Earth Society, that is. Don't worry. I'm not saying I'll erase those who say they'll follow me.]

‘…This can't be.’

They wondered if they had misunderstood.

But he was truly serious about erasing the Heaven and Earth Society.

Although his martial prowess had increased dramatically, the Heaven and Earth Society was a massive power that divided the current martial world into three.

They were at a loss for words that this was serious.

‘There's a completely different meaning between standing tall within the Heaven and Earth Society and expressing the intention to erase the Heaven and Earth Society itself.’

Then the Holy Fire Priestess spoke in a trembling voice.

[Young Master. If that is truly your will, please take in the poor cult members. If you do, they will...]

[If they come of their own accord, I'll accept them. But if they're coming under me, it won't be the Heaven and Earth Society, nor will it be the Fire Faith Order. They just need to follow me, that's all.]

At these words from Mok Gyeong-un, everyone's whole bodies trembled.

The meaning of these words was clear.

It was no different from declaring that he would walk the path of hegemony himself.

Not the Heaven and Earth Society, not the Fire Faith Order, but an independent path.

‘Is he trying to open a new world?’

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[Your job is one thing. Turn those order members into pieces I can use, not the Fire Faith Order.]

This was the task he had given her.

[Prove your usefulness on your own.]

The task came with a grim warning.

For two weeks, the Holy Fire Priestess had been lost in countless worries.

Mok Gyeong-un had spoken casually, but his decision was no different from ending the very existence of the Fire Faith Order.

It was too sad to end the existence of the Fire Faith Order, which had persisted for so long, like this.

But suddenly, a thought occurred to her.

Was the name “Fire Faith Order” really that important?

What mattered was the spirit and doctrines contained within it, and the mindset of its members.

Abandoning the name and following Mok Gyeong-un didn’t mean abandoning those things.

After all, the existence of Mok Gyeong-un was the incarnation of fire and the value of their continued existence.

‘Let’s not cling to the name. The Young Master is the cult itself.’

What she had to do with her remaining life was decided.

It was to revive the existence of the cult, which everyone had shunned, anew under Mok Gyeong-un as the incarnation.

Clan Leader Ya-seon was the beginning.

‘Clan Leader Ya-seon... Everything is for the cult. Please understand.’

If she were to tell him to follow the incarnation rather than the cult right away, he might not understand or might rebel, so her job was to gradually influence him.

“Young Master. Please accept Clan Leader Ya-seon, a faithful order member.”

The Holy Fire Priestess put her hands together in a cross and paid respects, requesting this of Mok Gyeong-un.

It was then.

-Ta ta ta ta tak!

The sound of someone running urgently was heard.

Soon, a Shadow Clan warrior came running breathlessly through the pavilion in the rear garden and then stopped abruptly.

“W-What is this?”

The warrior had come to deliver something, but he couldn't help but be bewildered by the sight of Shadow Clan warriors collapsed all around the rear garden.

Then Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon hurriedly stood up and said,

“What's the matter?”

“Clan Leader... This is...”

“Don't worry about this place, just tell me what's going on first.”

“B-But...”

“We have guests.”

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un said, looking towards the pavilion.

“Guests?”

-Rumble rumble!

Then, a group of people could be seen rushing over from beyond the pavilion.

The one standing at the front particularly stood out – a muscular middle-aged man with a much larger build than Bright Blade King, carrying a massive axe on one shoulder.

Seeing this, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon furrowed his brow and muttered,

“Axe-Destroying King?”

It was Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang, one of the Five Kings who were high-ranking officials of the Heaven and Earth Society, and a supreme master who held the title of one of the Eight Stars.

Chapter 390 – Axe-Destroying King (1)

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang.

He is one of the Five Kings, high-ranking officials of the Heaven and Earth Society, and a supreme master who holds the title of one of the Eight Stars in the martial arts world.

He gained fame and notoriety in Shaanxi province during the war against the Righteous Alliance, single-handedly breaking through the combined attack of Huashan and Zhongnan Sect masters and dismembering them all.

Not stopping there, he beheaded the previous Huashan Sect Leader, Purple-Eyed Sword Cheong Wi-su, who was known to have surpassed the wall, in just over forty moves, earning him the title of one of the Eight Stars.

Those who faced him all felt as if they were confronting a beast rather than a human, such was his savage martial prowess.

-Grooooowl!

An incredibly tall man, seeming to be at least two heads taller than an average adult male.

Muscles so thick that his arm sleeves were about to tear at the shoulders.

He was truly a man with a beastly aura.

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon couldn't hide his bewilderment at the appearance of Ho Tae-gang, who approached exuding tremendous pressure.

‘Why is Axe-Destroying King here?’

He couldn't understand why he had come here.

However, judging from the massive axe slung over his shoulder and the armed subordinates he was leading, it certainly didn't seem to be with peaceful intentions.

The Shadow Clan warrior who had hurriedly come earlier pointed at him and said,

“H-He knocked down all the gatekeepers of our faction and barged in forcefully...”

“Forcefully... It's certainly like him, known for his aggressiveness, but to come to the Shadow Clan at a time like this...”

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon's gaze naturally turned towards Mok Gyeong-un.

It seemed his return was the cause.

‘It can't be the Society Leader's order. Then why?’

Hwan Ya-seon couldn't help but worry.

Recently, Axe-Destroying King had clashed with Bright Blade King after losing his son.

This was because Bright Blade King's chief disciple, Woo Ho-rang, was the most likely suspect in his son's murder.

However, for some unknown reason, he had apparently been unable to fully vent his anger and had only taken one of Woo Ho-rang's fingers.

He didn't know why this Axe-Destroying King had come here, but he couldn't let the situation escalate.

And,

'I can't let him see this.'

Dozens of Shadow Clan warriors were collapsed all around the rear garden.

So,

"Please wait. I'll go and see him first."

-Ta ta ta tak!

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon hurriedly ran beyond the pavilion, made a fist-palm salute towards Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang, and said,

"Have you been well, Elder Ho? What brings you to the Shadow Clan's estate?"

"Shadow Clan Leader. It's been a while."

"Yes, thank you for remembering me. But..."

"I don't have business with you. However, I'll have to make something clear."

“Pardon? What do you mean?”

-Swish!

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang nodded his head, pointing to someone barely visible beyond the pavilion.

That someone was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

As expected, but Hwan Ya-seon pretended not to know and spoke carefully.

“May I ask why you’re looking for my disciple, Elder?”

“Since he’s originally a hostage from the righteous faction, I don’t think you’ll have much attachment to him. I’m sorry, but hand that fellow over. If you do, I’ll quietly withdraw.”

At his direct demand, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon frowned.

He knew the man wasn’t the type to beat around the bush, but this was truly blunt.

To this, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon tried his best not to show his emotions and said,

“Elder Ho... I’m sorry, but whether he’s of righteous faction hostage origin or not, that child is my precious disciple. How can you, even as an elder, demand a faction leader to hand over his disciple like this? This can’t be excused with just an apology...”

“Sigh.”

Before he could finish speaking.

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang let out a long sigh and closed his eyes.

-Grooooowl!

As Ho Tae-gang opened his eyes again, an intense aura flowed out along with a powerful gaze.

Befitting a supreme master who had not only surpassed the wall but also held the title of one of the Eight Stars, when he released his aura, the surrounding area was swept by wind from the impact.

“Then I won’t apologize. I’ll take him by force.”

“…Are you really going to do this?”

“I’m warning you in advance. If you don’t want to get hurt, it’s best not to interfere. And understand that I can’t explain everything to you right now.”

-Pat!

As soon as he finished speaking, Ho Tae-gang’s fist shot out like lightning.

It was so fast that even though Hwan Ya-seon tried to dodge it with his unique body technique,

-Pa pak!

‘What?’

-Puk! Kwang!

In an instant, the distance was closed, and he was hit in the chest, crashing into the wall.

The single punch, powerful enough to crumble the wall, made Hwan Ya-seon cough up blood.

‘He truly lives up to his reputation.’

It was power that drew involuntary admiration.

Even though he had managed to deflect some of the impact with the Petal Connecting Wood technique, he still suffered internal injuries.

Ho Tae-gang was known as a being of a different caliber even among the Five Kings.

Befitting a supreme master with the title of one of the Eight Stars, just receiving a single punch made his legs tremble.

-Drip drip!

As blood trickled down Hwan Ya-seon’s mouth, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang warned,

“Don’t interfere any further. I’ll show restraint only once.”

“Huu... Huu... Why are you after my disciple? He should have no connection to you...”

Approaching him, Ho Tae-gang spoke in a whisper,

“It’s for my son, who must be wandering in the afterlife. I have nothing more to say beyond this.”

“Elder...”

Hwan Ya-seon caught his breath and then straightened his posture.

Seeing this, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang shook his head and said,

“When I went to Bright Blade King, there was mediation from Miss Wi So-yeon midway, so I had no choice. But now it’s different. If you interfere any further, I won’t be able to end this moderately.”

“Elder... I can’t back down either.”

“It seems words are useless. Further warnings would be meaningless, right?”

-Grip!

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang then tightly gripped the handle of the massive axe slung over his shoulder.

He judged that he couldn’t be moderate about this.

To deceive someone who wouldn’t be fooled by just taking a finger, he had to show something more substantial this time.

It seemed he would have to inflict some injuries on the Shadow Clan Leader.

‘I’ll surely repay this debt.’

-Pa ang!

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang swung his axe towards the Shadow Clan Leader.

He displayed tremendous strength, easily swinging the massive axe with one hand.

However,

-Pa a a ak!

He suddenly stopped mid-swing.

This was because someone had appeared in front of the Shadow Clan Leader, blocking the axe's path.

That someone was,

“…So you’re the child called Mok Gyeong-un.”

Ho Tae-gang clicked his tongue as he spoke, looking at the face that was not just handsome but beautiful.

He had heard that his appearance was extraordinary, but it was indeed a face more beautiful than most women.

However, what surprised him more was Mok Gyeong-un’s boldness.

If he had stopped the axe even a moment later, Mok Gyeong-un, who had intervened, would have had his head split in half.

‘Look at this guy?’

Ho Tae-gang’s eyes flickered as he looked into Mok Gyeong-un’s eyes.

Despite the axe stopping right in front of his face, there wasn’t the slightest tremor in his eyes.

He was incredibly daring, beyond mere courage.

“…Indeed, beyond being a hostage from the righteous faction, you’re a talent that many officials, including Bright Blade King, would covet.”

“Are you Axe-Destroying King?”

‘You?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s question, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang raised an eyebrow.

He had thought the guy was quite gutsy for interfering in adults’ fights, but seeing him look straight at him and call him by his title, he was taken aback by such impudence.

Ho Tae-gang’s lips twitched, and then he opened his mouth.

“That’s fortunate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Although it was for show, I was reluctant inside, but now it seems a bit better.”

“For show…”

“Let’s just take one arm cleanly and go.”

-Swish!

With those words, Ho Tae-gang raised his axe high.

-Whoosh!

Then he brought it down towards Mok Gyeong-un's shoulder with tremendous force.

It seemed powerful enough to split not just an arm, but the entire body in two.

However,

-Pa kak!

'!?'

Ho Tae-gang's expression froze as he swung the axe.

This was because the blade of his axe, which he thought would surely have cut off Mok Gyeong-un's right shoulder, was caught in Mok Gyeong-un's bare hand.

'This guy?'

Although he had controlled his strength to a moderate level, thinking him a mere youngster, there weren't many in the Heaven and Earth Society who could catch his swinging axe with bare hands.

Ho Tae-gang's eyes sharpened.

Based on the aura he was emitting, he had thought him to be at most one of the Five Tigers among the late-stage Earth Masters.

But it seemed that wasn't the case.

“You...”

“Didn’t you hear anything from Ho Jong-hyeok?”

“What?”

“Ah. If I had known it would be like this, I should have told him to say something.”

“…What are you talking about?”

To his question, Mok Gyeong-un answered with a faint smile.

“I should have told him to at least mention that your son is serving me.”

At these words, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang’s face twisted terribly.

He himself didn’t care much about who became the successor, but he had respected his son’s decision to follow Jang Neung-ak, the Society Leader’s second disciple.

But who’s serving whom?

How dare this bastard spout such nonsense?

-Grooooowl!

As anger surged, an enormous amount of true qi flowed out from Ho Tae-gang’s entire body, spreading in all directions, hot enough to sting the skin.

He had intended to put on a moderate show.

But not anymore.

If this was an attempt to mock him using his dead son, he could never forgive it.

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang spoke, not hiding his boiling anger and even letting out killing intent.

“It could have ended with just an arm for show, but foolishly, you’re risking your life. All of this is your own doing...”

“By ‘for show,’ do you mean Young Master Na Yul-ryang?”

At these words, Ho Tae-gang frowned.

What on earth is this guy?

Even his master, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon, had only fragmentary information and couldn’t accurately grasp his true intentions, so how did he know?

As he wondered, Mok Gyeong-un casually said,

“Why don’t you honor your son’s last wishes instead of being swayed by the Young Master’s machinations?”

His son’s last wishes?

This bastard truly has a death wish.

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang, furious to the extreme, could no longer hold back and swung his qi-infused axe towards Mok Gyeong-un...

-Puk!

“Kueok!”

Before he could swing, a fist was buried in his abdomen.

Ho Tae-gang's eyes bulged as if they were about to pop out, feeling the power that made his rock-hard abdominal muscles, which seemed impervious even to hammer blows, feel insignificant.

Despite being blinded by rage, he hadn't even perceived the hand movement.

To him, Mok Gyeong-un spoke in a low voice.

“Ah. I made a mistake.”

“.....”

“I got bored waiting for the axe to come, and my fist shot out before I knew it.”

“...You... bastard...”

“You look like you're in a lot of pain. Do you want to continue?”

-Grind!

“Uuuuuuu... Huaaaaap!”

-Pa a a a ak!

Then Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang finally swung his axe with a roar close to a beast's cry.

-Swish!

Mok Gyeong-un tilted his head back, narrowly avoiding it.

‘Oh.’

His endurance was impressive, bearing the pain.

As if he had completely overcome the pain, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang swung his axe fiercely, as though he had regained momentum.

His appearance was like a violent tidal wave in a storm.

-Chwa chwa chwa chwa chwak!

“Khahahahap!”

Seeing this, Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon couldn't help but feel tense.

Although he knew Mok Gyeong-un had become stronger and was the incarnation the cult had been waiting for, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang hadn't received the title of one of the Eight Stars for nothing.

He was a monster who, even when severely injured on the battlefield, would roar like a beast and slaughter numerous enemies.

Even though he had taken a single blow, once he properly gained momentum, he had the capacity to reverse the situation in an instant...

-Puk!

At that moment, Ho Tae-gang's chin shot upward as he was swinging his axe wildly, and he staggered backward.

‘What!?’

Hwan Ya-seon's eyes widened.

He hadn't even seen Mok Gyeong-un move his hand, yet Ho Tae-gang's head was tilted upward.

“W-What?”

“Why is the Elder...?”

Even Ho Tae-gang's subordinates, who had been silently watching, couldn't hide their bewilderment at this scene.

They had naturally thought Ho Tae-gang would one-sidedly beat up Mok Gyeong-un, who was merely a late-stage Earth Master.

But the exact opposite was happening.

‘What on earth is this?’

The bewilderment was the same for Ho Tae-gang himself, the person involved.

He couldn't prevent his head from tilting back from the impact on his chin, which was protected by full-body protective qi and thick muscles acting like armor.

‘How can this be...’

How could something like this happen?

He had prided himself on being unmatched by anyone in the Heaven and Earth Society except the Society Leader and that person who also held the title of one of the Eight Stars like himself.

But how could such a young man, not even of age...

-Grind!

Ho Tae-gang gritted his teeth and strained the muscles in his tilted neck.

No.

He didn't know what was happening, but the guy in front of him was not someone to be dismissed as a mere late-stage Earth Master.

He had to face him as a formidable opponent...

“Being tall seems to make it annoying to look up at you.”

“What?”

-Puk! Thud!

At that moment, his shins buckled, and both his knees were forcibly brought down.

As he was forced to kneel, fingers dug into his right shoulder, seemingly paralyzing the nerves, causing Ho Tae-gang to drop the massive axe he was holding.

Simultaneously, Mok Gyeong-un grabbed his neck.

-Grip!

“Kek!”

Unable to bear the humiliation of being caught by the neck in front of his subordinates, Ho Tae-gang raised strong qi in his left hand, attempting to cut off Mok Gyeong-un’s right arm.

However, before his left hand could even reach, Mok Gyeong-un caught it,

-Crack!

“Keuuup.”

And it was bent backwards.

It was even bent in the opposite direction, causing the elbow bone to protrude.

Though he couldn’t scream due to his throat being gripped, his entire body turned red with blood vessels bulging, showing how much pain he was in.

‘…Ha!’

Shadow Clan Leader Hwan Ya-seon’s eyes filled with ecstasy as he watched this scene.

He had been curious about the extent of Mok Gyeong-un's strength, finding it difficult to gauge accurately, but this was beyond imagination.

To overwhelm a superhuman who held the title of one of the Eight Stars like this.