

Mayhem 431

Chapter 431 – Political Situation (4)

“Chief Commander! Chief Commander!”

In the esteemed guest house of the Righteous Alliance.

Zhuge Do-yang, the First Commander who oversaw both the military and intelligence departments of the Righteous Alliance, opened his eyes and came to his senses.

What he saw was the Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun, covered in wounds, trying to stop the bleeding from his severed leg.

“L-Leader.....”

“Are you alright? Are you conscious?”

“I’m... I’m fine. How... How... Kuk.”

Zhuge Do-yang touched the back of his aching head.

His head might have been cracked, as he felt blood on his hand.

As he touched it, Zhuge Do-yang remembered what had happened.

-Swoosh!

[V-Vice Leader? What are you doing?]

[Well. What am I doing?]

They had been escorting the envoy from the Kaifeng Imperial Palace to the guest house.

The moment the door closed, the Vice Leader Sword of Fulfilled Ambition and Defiance Wi Takhyeon suddenly beheaded the envoy.

Then, he overwhelmed Zhuge Do-yang, who was right next to him, with his superior martial arts, cut off his leg, and struck the back of his head.

That's why he had lost consciousness.

Recalling the memory, Zhuge Do-yang spoke with an agitated voice.

"The Vice Leader! The Vice Leader killed the envoy....."

"Calm down. I tried to hurry as much as I could, but it took time to subdue him, so you've lost a lot of blood. You need to circulate your qi now."

At the Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun's words, Zhuge Do-yang realized that his condition wasn't good either.

Indeed, he had lost a lot of blood, feeling dizzy and finding it difficult to breathe.

However, right now, the Vice Leader's sudden killing of the envoy was a bigger issue than his own condition.

"Leader. Now is not the time to worry about me. The Vice Leader....."

"I know. I'll go straight to the grand conference hall after moving you to a safe place."

“You can call someone else to do that. This situation could.....”

“Potentially cause a conflict between the Imperial Palace and our Alliance. It seems that the Vice Leader, or rather Wi Takhyeon, was aiming for that.”

The Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun seemed to have anticipated this to some extent.

Zhuge Do-yang’s face turned serious as he spoke.

“How could the Vice Leader do such a thing.....”

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

Vice Leader Wi Takhyeon had been a chivalrous hero who had run the Righteous Alliance together for a long time.

Zhuge Do-yang found it utterly incomprehensible that he, of all people, would do such a thing.

The Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun showed him something soaked in blood.

“Is that?”

Zhuge Do-yang’s eyes widened.

It was a wooden tag used by the spies of the Heaven and Earth Society.

This tag, designed to be easily destroyed at any time, was something they had learned about while capturing the Heaven and Earth Society’s spies infiltrated into the Righteous Alliance.

“..... Wi Takhyeon tried to put this in his mouth and chew it to swallow before he died.”

“Then the Vice Leader.....”

“It seems he had some connection to the Heaven and Earth Society.”

“Haa..... How could this happen..... The V-Vice Leader was a spy for the Heaven and Earth Society.....”

“We’ll need to investigate further, but for now, the probability that the Vice Leader was acting under the Heaven and Earth Society’s instructions is very high.”

At the Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun’s words, Zhuge Do-yang’s expression darkened.

Although there had been occasional cases of high-ranking officials in the Alliance being connected to the Heaven and Earth Society, this was too shocking.

That the Vice Leader of the Righteous Alliance, of all people, was a spy for the Heaven and Earth Society.....

‘Wait a moment.’

Unable to accept it, Zhuge Do-yang suddenly recalled how Vice Leader Wi Takhyeon had consistently opposed confrontation whenever the Alliance came into contact with the Heaven and Earth Society.

While taking a hard line against the Evil Alliance, he had advocated for friendly relations with the Heaven and Earth Society.

At the time, they had thought it was because Vice Leader Wi Takhyeon harbored more resentment towards the Evil Alliance for losing his bloodline in the war against them.

Highlighting this, it became difficult to assert that he had no close connection to the Heaven and Earth Society.

So, Zhuge Do-yang said,

“Leader. Even if it’s not certain, if there’s physical evidence, we have no choice for now.”

“No choice?”

“..... We’re not in a situation where we can determine whether the Vice Leader definitely had connections with the Heaven and Earth Society or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“The only way to avoid an immediate conflict with the Imperial Palace is to send the Vice Leader’s head and that tag to the Imperial Palace, proving that this incident was caused by the divisive tactics of a Heaven and Earth Society spy.”

“..... Are you saying we should use the dead Vice Leader to put out the urgent fire rather than uncovering the truth?”

“That’s not enough. The Imperial Court won’t withdraw their anger with just that. To show our sincerity, you should be prepared to confront the Heaven and Earth Society.”

“Confront the Heaven and Earth Society?”

“Yes.”

“But if we clash with the Heaven and Earth Society now, it won’t end as a small conflict.”

Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun was worried.

If they were to clash under the pretext that the Heaven and Earth Society had planted a spy as high-ranking as the Vice Leader to instigate a war with the Imperial Palace, war would be inevitable.

To these concerns, Chief Commander Zhuge Do-yang shook his head and spoke as if there was no other choice.

“Clashing with the Imperial Palace would negate all the friendly relations our Alliance has built with the government until now.”

“..... Is that the only way to prevent this? If we clash with the Heaven and Earth Society, it might provoke the Evil Alliance to move as well, potentially leading to a war between the righteous and evil factions.”

“Then the only option is to first persuade the Imperial Palace with the Vice Leader’s corpse. If that doesn’t appease their anger, we have no other choice.”

At these words, Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun closed his eyes and let out a groan.

It had come down to choosing between the Imperial Palace or the Heaven and Earth Society.

How did the situation come to this?

After a moment of silent contemplation, he opened his eyes and stood up.

“I understand. You’re right. If our Alliance clashes with the Imperial Palace, the ones who would benefit the most are the groups of evil path practitioners like the Heaven and Earth Society and the Evil Alliance. We must prevent that.”

“That’s right. What they’re aiming for is to profit from the conflict between others. We must stop that at all costs. Leader, please hurry.”

“First, I need to get you...”

“Please call someone. I’ll take care of things here, so you need to preside over the meeting as soon as possible to deal with the situation.”

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

“I’ll be fine. Please go quickly.”

“..... Alright. I’ll send someone, so you focus on circulating your qi.”

“Understood.”

As Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun was about to leave the guest house, he suddenly stopped.

Then, he pulled out a sword with elaborate patterns engraved on it that was stuck in the floor.

“Is that?”

“It’s the demonic sword Howl-hacking Blade[1]. It’s now a sword that has lost its master.”

“Ah...”

Zhuge Do-yang let out a sigh, as if feeling sorry.

As he did so, Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun spoke while sheathing Howl-hacking Blade.

“I should retrieve this demonic sword for now. Leaving it here could cause trouble.”

“I suppose so. But... Are you alright?”

“What do you mean?”

“..... The sword.”

Zhuge Do-yang had been wondering how Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun could casually hold the demonic sword.

That demonic sword was known to exact a great price from anyone who wielded it other than its master.

Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun shrugged and replied.

“I’m suppressing the sword’s spirit with my true qi. Don’t worry.”

At these words, Zhuge Do-yang nodded in understanding.

While an ordinary swordsman might have trouble, Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun was one of the Seven Heavens, called the peak of the current martial arts world, and an unparalleled master known as a Great Master.

He believed that with his profound true qi, he could suppress even a demonic sword.

“Then I’ll hurry off now.”

“Please do.”

With that, Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun left the guest house.

After he left, Chief Commander Zhuge Do-yang tried to adjust his posture to circulate his qi.

As he did so, his eyes fell on the corpse of Vice Leader Sword of Fulfilled Ambition and Defiance Wi Takhyeon, who had breathed his last.

His corpse was also covered in blood and in a mess, suggesting a fierce battle.

Perhaps because he had the tag he tried to chew and swallow taken away by the leader, his jaw was dislocated, and one eye...

‘Did he gouge out the eye?’

Zhuge Do-yang frowned.

Alliance Leader Jeong Hyeon-mun was known as a Righteous Sword Chivalrous Hero[2], embodying the righteous path.

He had never crossed the line or shown excessive brutality, even to enemies. Yet, he had gouged out the eye of a comrade who had shared the same sense of righteousness until just recently.

Was he that enraged by the betrayal?

Even so... This doesn't seem like his usual way of doing things.

A cliff so high that looking down made one feel as if they were staring into an endless abyss.

On top of this cliff lay a large middle-aged man in a comfortable position, supporting his head with one arm.

Though covered by clothes, the middle-aged man's entire body was full of muscles.

The middle-aged man, who had been trying to sleep with his eyes closed, opened them at a faint tremor.

-Swoosh!

The middle-aged man who opened his eyes slightly moved his head to look down the cliff.

In the abyss filled only with darkness, a blue light flickered.

Then,

-Rumble!

At that moment, the cliff where he was lying began to shake as if an earthquake had struck.

One might have been inclined to get up due to the unease caused by the shaking ground, but the man simply continued to stare at the abyss without the slightest movement.

Then, from within that abyss, the blue light began to shine even more strongly.

At that moment,

-Rumble rumble rumble rumble!

The ground began to shake with an intensity incomparable to the previous vibration.

At this, the middle-aged man who had been staring down without movement pushed himself up with one hand, then walked over to a place where something was piled up.

There, about twenty pointed wooden pillars were stacked, each engraved with what looked like scriptures in red letters.

-Tap!

The middle-aged man reached for one of these wooden pillars.

The wood was literally a log, looking so heavy that four or five adult men together would struggle to lift it, but,

-Crunch!

The middle-aged man's fingers distorted the wooden pillar, then lifted it with ease.

It was an incredibly astonishing sight.

Grasping the wooden pillar like this, the middle-aged man strode towards the shaking cliff and looked down into the abyss.

Then,

"Hoo."

As he took a deep breath, his body began to glow red, and steam-like vapors started to rise from his entire body.

As the middle-aged man exhaled and inhaled again, this time his skin turned not just red but black with heat.

Then, the middle-aged man,

-Whoosh!

Threw the wooden pillar engraved with red scriptures down into the abyss.

As the man threw it, strong wave-like ripples appeared wherever the wooden pillar passed, as if it was piercing through layers of air.

-Bang! Bang! Bang!

The middle-aged man watched the wooden pillar as it became smaller and smaller.

It was around the time when the wooden pillar became invisible to the eye.

At that moment,

-Boom!

A red flash spread out from below with a thunderous sound.

Along with it,

-Roar!!!!

An immense gust of wind surged upwards, accompanied by an ear-splitting roar from the bottom of the abyss.

The middle-aged man's eyes narrowed and his gaze sharpened as he watched this.

'It's getting stronger.'

It was becoming increasingly difficult to suppress.

There weren't many blue wood pillars engraved with red scriptures left, but the power of that being trapped down there was growing stronger and stronger.

It used to wake up maybe once every ten years, but this was already the second time in a month.

The intervals were getting shorter.

'Was it since then?'

The middle-aged man recalled that ominous three-eyed being who had first invaded this place besides his family.

These phenomena had been occurring since that one entered this place.

It wasn't a good sign.

It could potentially lead to the worst-case scenario.

Just then, he heard someone rushing towards him.

It was a young man with a large build comparable to the middle-aged man's, none other than the monster Yoo Moo-jin who had competed with Mok Gyeong-un at the Sichuan Tang Family.

"Father!"

Frowning at his appearance, the middle-aged man, or rather Yoo Moo-jeok, who was called father, said,

“Didn’t I tell you to stay put until that ominous energy in your heart was completely resolved?”

“That’s true, but right now, at the entrance of the valley.....”

“What’s the matter?”

“I think you need to see for yourself.”

At this, Yoo Moo-jeok ran towards the entrance of the valley with his son, Yoo Moo-jin.

Upon arriving at the entrance, Yoo Moo-jeok’s expression hardened.

This was because at the entrance of the valley, which should have been inaccessible due to a formation, countless strange beings, or rather Imaemangyang, were lined up.

Yoo Moo-jin spoke with a grave voice,

“What on earth is happening?”

A phenomenon that had never occurred since their family began guarding this place was unfolding.

Chapter 432 – Political Situation (5)

Seop Chun spoke with a concerned tone.

“My Lord. I find it difficult to trust that woman Chunchu. Wouldn’t it be better to interrogate her further?”

Most of those in the main hall nodded in agreement with his words.

This was because Chunchu, the highest-ranking executive of the Secret Society who claimed to be blood-related to Ghost Blade, hadn’t said anything since then.

[How do you plan to persuade someone who would rather die than submit to force? Do you have some sort of secret method?]

[The best secret method. Because Ghost Blade and I are connected by blood.]

[Connected by blood? You mean you’re siblings?]

[Well... You could say that.]

[Then instead of going to find him, couldn’t we summon Ghost Blade here?]

[If that were possible, I would have done it long ago.]

[... What do you mean?]

[For some reason, all communication channels with Ghost Blade have been cut off. No matter how I try to connect, I can’t reach him.]

[... And you expect me to believe that?]

[Strictly speaking, I participated in this operation to meet the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.]

[Why?]

[Because Ghost Blade started to align his intentions with the Heaven and Earth Society Leader instead of Mok Gan.]

[Are you saying he betrayed them?]

[I don't know about that. It's not like I've been inside his head. But complete betrayal is impossible. As far as I know, at least.]

[What is it that you know?]

[That's all I can tell you. From here on, it's a matter of decision.]

[What?]

She claimed that she was the only one who could persuade Ghost Blade, and demanded to accompany whoever was assigned to this task.

Mok Gyeong-un tried to force her to speak by applying pressure, but she maintained her silence even under bone-breaking pain.

She had much more endurance than Kang Yeom, another highest-ranking executive of the Secret Society.

Because of this, most of the executives, including Seop Chun, judged that she couldn't be trusted.

Of course, Mok Gyeong-un wasn't much different from them.

Normally, he would have found a way to make her talk, but now he didn't have much time.

Although he had stayed briefly to handle important matters after winning the war, he needed to quickly seize Wi So-yeon's body and follow Cheong-ryeong.

'... Should I take her?'

At this point, he had only two options.

Either kill her right here to eliminate future trouble, or use her as a card to persuade Ghost Blade as she claimed.

However, if her words were lies and this was just an act to find Ghost Blade, she would pay the price.

After a moment of contemplation, Mok Gyeong-un made his decision.

"... We'll take her."

"What?"

"My Lord!"

"Please reconsider! My Lord!"

"What do you mean you'll take her? Are you planning to go yourself, My Lord?"

"My Lord, surely you're not planning to go in person? It can't be!"

As soon as Mok Gyeong-un's words fell, nearly half of the executives spoke up, causing an uproar in the main hall.

Mok Gyeong-un raised his hand, gesturing for them to be quiet.

Only then did the main hall become silent again.

-Tap!

Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon stepped forward, clasped his hands in respect, and said,

“May I say a word?”

“Speak.”

“As this is an official setting, I’ll speak with due respect to you as our lord, setting aside our master-disciple relationship. My Lord, you are now becoming the leader of this massive organization that will replace the Heaven and Earth Society, unlike before. It is unthinkable for someone in such a crucial position to move lightly. Please reconsider. And...”

-Swoosh!

As Mok Gyeong-un raised his hand, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon had to stop speaking.

Then Mok Gyeong-un said,

“As you’ve seen in this war, there’s a third force. No one but me can deal with their leader.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang stepped forward.

“Even if that’s the case, the Shadow Clan Master’s words have merit. Your personal involvement means taking on that much risk. Just as we’re about to lay the foundation for a new era...”

“It won’t take long.”

“Pardon?”

“Once I secure Ghost Blade... No, once I secure Ghost Blade, I’ll return.”

Axe-Destroying King Ho Tae-gang couldn’t hide his embarrassment at Mok Gyeong-un’s stubbornness.

If he were someone who could be persuaded, it might have been different, but Mok Gyeong-un had an even stronger will than the Society Leader.

Sensing that he couldn’t dissuade him, Ho Tae-gang hesitated on what to say next, when,

“Then let this old body go instead.”

Poison King Baek Sa-ha stepped forward.

Although he considered Mok Gyeong-un his disciple, he maintained formality due to the official setting.

“I’m acquainted with Ghost Blade and have some connection from our previous encounter.”

Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon nodded in agreement.

“Let’s do that. Send Baek Sa-ha and other trusted executives. Even if they’re not as capable as you, My Lord, some of our executives are on par with or even surpass the Eight Stars. They can meet your expectations...”

-Rumble!

At that very moment.

Everyone froze as an incredibly fierce energy filled the entire main hall.

The only one who moved in this situation was Ou Cheon-mu, the sect leader of Spiritual Sword Sanctuary and one of the Seven Heavens, who had already placed his hand on his sword hilt.

It became clear that only one person could somewhat resist the overwhelming pressure that enveloped the entire main hall.

“If I were determined to kill you all here, who could stop me?”

-Swoosh! Woong!

As Mok Gyeong-un raised his sword-formed fingers, three massive formless swords materialized, targeting those in the main hall.

Even though they had merely formed, most of the standing executives broke out in cold sweat from the sharp energy of the formless swords.

‘Was he this powerful?’

‘It’s hard to even breathe.’

Although they didn’t really believe he would attack, just the pressure from Mok Gyeong-un forming the formless swords heightened their alertness to the extreme.

“You alone cannot survive.”

Then, Ou Cheon-mu, the sect leader of Spiritual Sword Sanctuary, spoke up.

“But their words have merit. If something were to happen to you, My Lord, this massive organization that’s just starting to stand would be shaken. In that case, I’ll go instead. Don’t you trust even this?”

Sect Leader Ou Cheon-mu was one of the Seven Heavens, the peak of the current martial arts world, and a Great Master.

Apart from the other Seven Heavens, there was no one in the entire martial arts world who could match him.

However,

“Let me make this clear.”

“What do you...”

“I trust you all.”

‘!?’

At Mok Gyeong-un’s sudden words, the executives, who had been suppressed by the pressure of the formless swords, couldn’t hide their bewilderment.

-Swoosh!

As Mok Gyeong-un waved his hand, the three formless swords in the air disappeared.

The fierce energy that had filled the entire main hall also dissipated.

As it became much easier to breathe, Mok Gyeong-un continued speaking.

“It’s not that I can’t entrust this to you because I don’t trust you. I’m doing this because I’m the only one who can and should do this.”

“.....”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s words, everyone’s expressions became complex.

They had all formed connections with Mok Gyeong-un through various circumstances and events.

Therefore, most of them knew Mok Gyeong-un’s personality well.

But as they heard his words, delivered more solemnly and weightily than a long persuasion, they all instinctively realized something.

‘... He’s changing.’

The qualities of a leader.

They were gradually blossoming.

The weight of his words and every single utterance from Mok Gyeong-un was moving and resonating with them.

He was truly growing into a vessel befitting a lord.

At this, Poison King Baek Sa-ha spoke with a satisfied expression.

“When you put it that way, it’s hard for us as subordinates to dissuade you from doing what you must. Then please take those who will assist you. If you refuse even this, we cannot let you go.”

“The Poison King is right. Please take an escort with you.”

The Axe-Destroying King also suggested this.

In response to their words, Mok Gyeong-un shrugged and replied.

“Given the urgency, I can’t take many people, so I’ll bring a small group.”

As soon as Mok Gyeong-un finished speaking, Mong Mu-yak stepped forward, knelt on one knee, clasped his hands in respect, and said,

“This humble one will serve as your escort, My Lord.”

“This humble one will also serve you.”

Seop Chun also stepped forward, not to be outdone.

As they came forward, the rogue monk Ja Geum-jeong also stepped up and said,

“It seems this monk won’t have much to do here without the master, so take me along.”

As he joined, Seop Chun scratched his nose bridge and grinned.

All those who had stepped forward were individuals who had shared joys and sorrows with Mok Gyeong-un since their time at the Imperial Palace.

Seop Chun glanced slightly at the masked Ma Ra-hyeon.

Ma Ra-hyeon sighed and stepped forward.

“I will also serve as your escort, My Lord.”

As they came forward, this time Lee Ji-yeom, the Corpse Blood Valley Master, stepped up and said,

“Please allow this humble one to accompany you as well.”

He was the one who regarded Cheong-ryeong as his true master in his heart.

Thus, he had a strong desire to accompany them.

However, Mok Gyeong-un shook his head.

“No. You, Corpse Blood Valley Master, will remain here.”

Faced with this firm rejection, Corpse Blood Valley Master Lee Ji-yeom showed a bewildered expression and said,

“Why only this humble one...”

“You have much to do here.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s point, Lee Ji-yeom was at a loss for words.

This was because the recent war had resulted in numerous casualties within the society, and many hands were needed to reorganize.

In particular, there were many roles that the executives had to take on and matters to settle.

Since the internal war had been so large-scale, it would soon become known to the outside world, and they needed to prepare for that as well.

Therefore, executives who were well-versed in the society's affairs were not in a position to easily move externally.

This was why other executives couldn't readily step forward.

At that moment, a voice was heard from the entrance of the main hall.

"Hohoho, then may this humble one serve as your escort, My Lord?"

Everyone's gaze naturally turned towards the entrance.

There, two figures leaning on walking sticks could be seen.

One was the elderly Holy Fire Priestess, and the other was Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh, the head of the Guyang family, wearing a human skin mask despite his young face.

As they entered the main hall, everyone couldn't hide their bewilderment.

At this, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon said,

"The Lord has summoned them. That person over there is..."

Hwan Ya-seon glanced slightly at Mok Gyeong-un.

He had already been puzzled when Mok Gyeong-un said he would introduce the Holy Fire Priestess to everyone in the main hall as a new member of the Heaven and Earth Society.

Given that the perception of the Fire Faith Order was not very positive among the righteous factions, he thought it could be done slowly, but Mok Gyeong-un's opinion was different.

[There is no longer a Heaven and Earth Society or a Fire Faith Order.]

The meaning was clear.

It meant that he would subjugate the Fire Faith Order just like the Heaven and Earth Society into the newly created organization.

After briefly observing Mok Gyeong-un's expression, Shadow Clan Master Hwan Ya-seon then said,

"This is the Holy Fire Priestess of the Fire Faith Order."

'!?'

At these words, the executives who belonged to the Heaven and Earth Society stirred.

They had been wondering who that old woman was, and now they're told she's the Holy Fire Priestess of the Fire Faith Order?

This was quite surprising.

Then, is the person next to her also from the Fire Faith Order?

'That snake staff... It looks familiar.'

Poison King Baek Sa-ha's eyes narrowed as he saw the snake-head shaped staff.

He had definitely seen that staff somewhere before.

As he was pondering this, Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh grasped the head of his staff, clasped his hands in respect, and greeted the executives in the main hall.

-Pak!

“As the Lord has allowed me to reveal myself to the executives here, I greet you thus. Due to certain circumstances, I wear this face, but I am Xiao of the Western Guyang family.”

“G-Guyang Sa-oh?”

“Eight Poison Snake Staff?”

The executives couldn't hide their surprise upon learning his identity.

Along with Poison King Baek Sa-ha and Thousand Poison Hand Tang In-hae of the Sichuan Tang family, Guyang Sa-oh was considered one of the top masters of poison.

And even he had sworn loyalty to Mok Gyeong-un?

‘What mission could he have been assigned outside? Huh.’

Baek Sa-ha inwardly clicked his tongue.

From Ou Cheon-mu, the sect leader of Spiritual Sword Sanctuary and one of the Seven Heavens, to the Mad Swordsman Ji-oe, the Subduing-Demon Ja Geum-jeong, and Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh, they were all renowned and formidable masters.

Chapter 433 – The Ruins of an Old Castle (1)

-Whoosh!

High above the clouds.

The Demonic Beast Heumwon, transformed into its true form, was flying at high speed.

In Heumwon's massive claws was a large carriage, carrying Mok Gyeong-un, Seop Chun (the First Escort Commander serving as the temporary Head Escort Commander), Mong Mu-yak (the Second Escort Commander), the masked Ma Ra-hyeon, the Subduing-Demon and rogue monk Ja Geum-jeong, and Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh.

They were heading towards the ruins of an old castle in the northern part of Shaanxi Province.

The distance was too far to travel by carriage or horse, and even using qinggong would result in differences in speed between them, so they were riding the Demonic Beast Heumwon, the fastest mode of transportation.

Mong Mu-yak addressed Seop Chun, who had a somewhat sullen expression.

"Don't tell me you're scared?"

"Of course not. It's not like this is my first or second time riding. Why would I be scared?"

"Then... Is it because you couldn't become a guardian, even if it's temporary?"

At Mong Mu-yak's words, Seop Chun coughed.

"Ahem."

Before coming here, they had been assigned temporary positions for the sake of organization.

Although the official structure of this new massive organization hadn't been fully established yet, these individuals had been recognized for their meritorious service in assisting Mok Gyeong-un and were given temporary positions as Head Escort Commanders.

However,

[Since the three of you have outstanding martial arts, please take on the roles of guardians directly under the lord until the official structure is established.]

The most experienced Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh was appointed as the Great Guardian, the masked Ma Ra-hyeon as the Right Guardian, and the rogue monk Ja Geum-jeong as the Left Guardian.

This had secretly upset Seop Chun.

He had been the first to recognize Mok Gyeong-un and wanted to become his right-hand man.

But in reality, he was outmatched in martial arts and had to give up the guardian position to outsiders, which made him uncomfortable.

At that moment, the rogue monk Ja Geum-jeong took a swig from his gourd bottle and said,

"This monk has no interest in positions or titles, so if you want to be a guardian or whatever, you can have it. Hehehe."

At Ja Geum-jeong's tone, which seemed like he was doing him a favor, Seop Chun's lips protruded in a pout.

He had his pride, and having been outmatched in martial arts to become an Escort Commander instead of a guardian, if he were to accept this offer, what would become of his face?

"No need. Ahem."

“Hey now. Don’t tell me you’re upset over something like this?”

“Not at all. I’ll take that position by my own power soon enough, so no need for your charity.”

“Keuheuheu. Do as you please.”

“Stop picking unnecessary fights and just pass me the alcohol.”

“As much as you want.”

Ja Geum-jeong tossed the gourd bottle to Seop Chun.

-Tap!

Catching it, Seop Chun, seemingly annoyed, started gulping down the alcohol.

“Hey! Are you planning to drink it all?”

While Ja Geum-jeong had no interest or desire for positions, he absolutely wouldn’t yield when it came to alcohol.

As if knowing this, Seop Chun continued drinking, looking like he might empty the entire gourd bottle.

Watching them, Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh chuckled and said,

“Hohoho. Ah, to be young.”

Right now, they were heading towards a mission that might be even more dangerous than their escape from the Kaifeng Imperial Capital or the internal war of the Heaven and Earth Society.

The Secret Society still hadn't revealed its full strength.

They had only shown a part of it and used the opponent's power.

If they were to reveal their full strength with determination, trials incomparable to anything before would follow.

Yet, these people seemed not worried at all.

Which meant,

'Are they trusting him? This man.'

Guyang Sa-oh's gaze turned to Mok Gyeong-un.

The sight of Mok Gyeong-un with his hair fluttering in the wind was indescribably beautiful.

He too, in the past, would have felt anxious at the thought of potentially clashing with the full force of the Secret Society.

However, at some point, he had developed expectations for this man.

A belief had blossomed that no matter what, this man could overcome anything.

'Well, if even this old man feels this way, how could the young brothers be any different?'

Reflecting on himself through their appearance, Guyang Sa-oh straightened his posture.

It might be better to focus on circulating his qi and preparing his mind and body to build fighting spirit rather than worrying unnecessarily.

But just then,

-Flinch!

Mok Gyeong-un, who had been looking into the distance, suddenly stood up in the carriage.

As they wondered what was happening, the Demonic Beast Heumwon, which had been flying forward, suddenly stopped mid-air, flapping its wings roughly.

“Oh no...”

At that moment, the rogue monk Ja Geum-jeong, who had been trying to snatch the gourd bottle from Seop Chun, also frowned and surveyed the surroundings.

They wondered what was wrong, when,

-Rumble!

‘This is?’

They could now understand why the Demonic Beast Heumwon had stopped mid-flight.

This was because in the path where the Demonic Beast Heumwon had been flying, there was a snake-shaped monster with wings as large as the dark clouds accompanying it.

But the monster wasn’t alone.

-Whoosh!

As the wind gusted, other monsters appeared behind and on both sides.

They were all bird-shaped Imaemangyang.

Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh clicked his tongue while holding his staff.

“To think we’d be caught here.”

They had thought that by moving at an altitude higher than the clouds, they wouldn’t encounter any enemies.

However, their opponents weren’t simply humans.

It was the Secret Society, which also controlled Imaemangyang.

“Keukeukeu. It seems we can’t let our guard down even for a moment.”

Ja Geum-jeong then took out a vajra he had received from his old master, the Venerable Gong-jeon, at Shaolin Temple.

[Take these dharma instruments with you just in case. It seems there’s a demon mixed in with your group that you should be wary of.]

‘Master’s foresight was correct.’

Following this master, he found himself frequently clashing with non-human entities.

Thanks to that, things were never boring.

After all, they were constantly risking their lives.

-Rumble!

At that moment, six hands started to sprout from the body of the winged snake-shaped monster blocking their path.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un recalled something he had seen in the “Classic of Mountain and Seas”.

That was the Demonic Beast Bi Yu of Mount Taihua in the Western Mountains.

The “Classic of Mountain and Seas” said that when this Demonic Beast Bi Yu[1] appears in the sky, a great drought occurs.

This was because Bi Yu would take away the dark clouds.

-Crackle!

Lightning formed from the dark clouds was drawn into Bi Yu’s hands.

Seeing this, Mok Gyeong-un gripped his sword-formed fingers and said,

“Here it comes.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Bi Yu, like a divine beast from mythology, hurled the lightning it was holding, and the Imaemangyang surrounding them all rushed in at once.

A dark main hall.

A long-haired man wearing a pure white uniform was kneeling on one knee in front of the stone throne, showing respect.

The long-haired man with red lips, as if he had applied rouge, said,

“We’ve found them. As expected, they were moving through the air.”

In response to the man’s report, the shadowy figure sitting on the stone throne finally spoke.

“If I had eyes, it would have been an interesting spectacle. What a pity.”

While monitoring the Heaven and Earth Society, he had lost the Imaemangyang that had been serving as his eyes.

Because of this, he could no longer observe directly.

However, the being who had grasped Mok Gyeong-un’s side’s strength through the internal war of the Heaven and Earth Society predicted that they would definitely go there by air.

That’s why he sent forces that could fly in the sky.

What would happen if they made even a single mistake in the sky higher than the clouds?

He had missed an interesting spectacle.

The long-haired man with red lips spoke with a voice full of confidence.

“There will be good news soon.”

“Good news?”

“Yes.”

“Surely you don’t think you can kill him with just that?”

“Pardon? But...”

“Enough. This won’t kill him.”

“... Even if he’s an unparalleled master, if he falls from that height, he won’t be able to overcome the force of the fall...”

“If he could die from something like that, there would be no need to worry about him.”

At the assertive words of the being on the stone throne, the red-lipped man showed an expression of incomprehension.

The being on the stone throne snorted and said,

“It’s enough to have tied his ankles.”

The original purpose was not to kill them.

It was to kill or damage the wings of the Demonic Beast Heumwon, which could be considered their means of transportation.

If that happens, they will no longer be able to move through the air.

Even if he is an unparalleled master surpassing the Seven Heavens, considered the peak of the Central Plains martial arts world, it's impossible to move from where the Heaven and Earth Society is to the northern part of Shaanxi Province in a short time using qinggong.

"Huhuhu."

By the time he arrives, everything will be over.

Both Ryu So-wol's spirit and the forbidden technique to unite the soul and body will be in his hands.

When that happens, he will taste despair.

And that's not the end.

When he returns to the Heaven and Earth Society, an even worse hell will unfold.

The corners of the shadowy being's mouth lifted.

Just then, someone entered the main hall.

It was a middle-aged man with disheveled hair and covered in scars.

-Thud!

The middle-aged man knelt before him, paying respects, and said,

"My lord. I have finally brought what you desired."

At his report, the red-lipped man smiled brightly and said,

“It seems it has finally arrived. Mok Gan. Bring it in quickly.”

-Swoosh!

At the man’s words, the middle-aged man gestured behind him.

Then, two masked individuals who had been waiting outside carried in a coffin and placed it in front of the stone throne.

“Open it.”

At this, the masked individuals tore off the talismans attached to the gaps and opened the coffin lid.

Inside, an incredibly beautiful woman was revealed, lying straight as if her acupoints had been sealed.

She was Wi So-yeon, the youngest disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.

Even with her eyes closed, her beauty was not diminished at all, causing a small gasp to escape from the red-lipped man’s mouth.

The man finally clasped his hands together and congratulated the being on the stone throne.

“Congratulations, Mok Gan. Finally...”

-Swoosh!

But before he could finish speaking, the being on the stone throne raised his hand, stopping the congratulations.

Then, the left armrest he had placed on the stone throne crumbled.

-Crack!

At his sudden action, those in the main hall couldn't hide their bewilderment.

They couldn't understand why the being was displeased when what he wanted had arrived.

Then, the being on the stone throne stretched out his hand.

Wi So-yeon's body in the coffin floated up.

In that state, as the being on the stone throne lightly waved his hand,

-Stretch!

Wi So-yeon's facial skin began to stretch.

They wondered what was happening, but as the stretched skin tore off, another face was revealed underneath.

-Rip!

"What?"

"Th-This is..."

The scarred, middle-aged man with disheveled hair couldn't hide his bewilderment.

This woman was not Wi So-yeon.

‘Could it be?’

The middle-aged man suddenly recalled that when they had opened the coffin lid midway, Wi So-yeon had briefly attempted to escape, having somehow released her sealed acupoints.

They had recaptured her in less than a moment, so he didn’t think it was worth reporting.

But in that short time, when had she been switched with someone else?

Just as he was feeling perplexed,

-Snap!

The being on the stone throne snapped his fingers.

At that moment, the bewildered middle-aged man’s head exploded.

-Boom!

The body of the middle-aged man with his head blown off staggered and then collapsed.

Seeing this, the face of the long-haired man with red lips turned pale, unable to utter a word.

This was because the middle-aged man was his subordinate, and he was the one who had promoted this operation.

As he didn't know what to do, the being on the stone throne spoke in a heavy voice.

"Move the residence immediately."

The third eye on the forehead of the being on the stone throne could see it.

The red connection linked to the spirit body of the fake Wi So-yeon, whose human skin mask had been removed.

Chapter 434 – The Ruins of an Old Castle (2)

"Huff... huff..."

A beautiful woman was wandering through the dark mountains.

Her true identity was Go Chan, who had possessed the body of Wi So-yeon, the youngest disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.

With clothes stained with blood, covered in wounds, and drenched in sweat from exhaustion, he looked around as if searching for something.

'No. Damn it, they said it would be on the mountain opposite the highest peak after going southwest for about ten li without stopping, but where the hell is it?'

Despite being injured, Go Chan had used internal energy all the way here without rest and was now in no condition to move, his stamina completely depleted.

Even though it was a possessed body, it still needed recovery to keep moving.

Finally, after looking around, Go Chan entered a densely vegetated area that was inconspicuous and began to circulate his qi.

-Whoosh!

As the cold energy coursed through his entire body, Go Chan inwardly clicked his tongue.

‘How strange.’

He had heard of masters who could handle cold energy among the experts in the North Sea, a place outside the world where it was cold and snow-covered all four seasons.

But how could a human body possess this level of cold energy?

He had heard that his master, Mok Gyeong-un, had helped dissipate the cold energy to prevent it from rampaging, but even without actively circulating qi, the cold energy was gradually increasing.

‘... How peculiar.’

This didn’t seem like an issue with the physical body.

It appeared to be related to the original spirit body that had fallen into a coma-like state when he possessed it.

Just as he was pondering this oddity,

-Rustle!

Go Chan tensed up and stopped his qi circulation and breathing at the sound of footsteps.

He was on edge, wondering if it was an ally or an enemy.

At that moment, someone suddenly burst through the foliage in front of him.

“Wah!”

“Ack!”

Even though his current body was exceptional, Go Chan had spent more time as a weakling in his past. Startled, he unconsciously fell on his backside while throwing a punch.

-Thud!

White frost rose from Go Chan’s punch, but the figure who had jumped out in front of him quickly twisted to the side, avoiding it.

The energy from the punch froze the vegetation it touched.

-Crack!

The figure looked at the frozen vegetation with disbelief, then touched it.

The vegetation cracked and broke.

At this, the figure clicked their tongue and said,

“What’s this? That body is quite powerful, isn’t it?”

“Shit. I thought my heart was going to stop.”

Recognizing the figure, Go Chan let out a sigh of relief and lowered his hand, still tinged with cold energy.

The one who had suddenly appeared and startled him was none other than Seo Hye-in, the leader of the Four Peaks, a member of the Five Peaks under Jang Neung-ak, the second disciple of the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.

More precisely, it was Gyu So-ha, one of Mok Gyeong-un's ghost servants who had possessed Seo Hye-in's body.

Gyu So-ha grinned and said,

"Were you scared? Were you scared?"

"C-Companion So-ha, isn't your joke going too far?"

"Ah, sorry. It was just funny seeing you all scared and hiding."

At Gyu So-ha's response, Go Chan clicked his tongue.

Every time he saw this one, he felt that despite being a wandering ghost for a long time, their mental age didn't seem very high.

"So you scared me in the middle of all this? What if I had accidentally hit you with my energy..."

"Hey."

'!?'

At that moment, Gyu So-ha approached Go Chan.

Wondering what was going on, Go Chan found Gyu So-ha pinching his cheeks and saying,

“Want to switch bodies?”

At these words, Go Chan sighed.

Gyu So-ha was always desperate to switch to any pretty body they saw.

As Cheong-ryeong had said, this one was definitely not a man.

If by any chance they were a man, then they must be per...

“You look like you really hate the idea. If you don’t like it, forget it. Tch.”

“It’s a body we’ll have to return anyway. If we aimed for this, the master would be very angry.”

“... Hmm. That would be troublesome.”

“Then let’s hurry. If they notice that the one they recaptured is a fake with a human skin mask, they’ll track us down to get the real one back.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Are you too tired to sense the qi?”

“Qi?”

Puzzled by Gyu So-ha’s words, Go Chan released his suppressed aura and focused on sensing qi.

He could feel the energy of hundreds of people not far away.

They were all masters.

It was enough force to engage in battle if necessary.

‘T-To send such a force just to rescue someone like me, a mere former assassin...’

Go Chan was deeply moved.

What had started with the ill fate at the Yeon Mok Sword Manor had led to this—being cared for like a right-hand man. It truly touched his heart.

Because of this, Go Chan felt he should be even more loyal to Mok Gyeong-un.

Seeing Go Chan’s reaction, Gyu So-ha scratched their head.

[Make sure to protect that body at all costs.]

It seemed like Go Chan was misunderstanding something.

But since it didn’t seem to be a negative misunderstanding, it might be better to leave it be.

No need to break his sense of gratitude, after all.

-Rumble.

-Whoosh!

The Demonic Beast Heumwon, flapping its torn wings, crashed to the ground.

It tried to reduce its falling speed by fluttering its one remaining wing, but due to its massive size, the speed didn't decrease easily.

"D-Damn it!"

"Amitabha!"

Mok Gyeong-un's subordinates, tightly gripping Heumwon's wing feathers and claws, couldn't do anything in this situation either.

Falling from a height higher than the clouds, it seemed the only option was to jump off at some point.

As Heumwon was nearing the ground,

-Whoosh!

"Huh?"

At that moment, they felt Heumwon's falling speed gradually slowing down.

As the falling speed decreased rather than accelerating, everyone was puzzled. Looking down, they saw Mok Gyeong-un, who had somehow already landed on the ground, raising both hands.

"Ah!"

"My Lord!"

The expressions of those who had been pale with fear brightened.

Meanwhile, the Great guardian Eight Poison Snake Staff Guyang Sa-oh and the Right guardian Ma Ra-hyeon couldn't help but marvel at Mok Gyeong-un's profound inner energy.

"Hoho. What impossible internal energy. To still have energy left..."

Unlike themselves, who had been barely able to fend off the attacks of the Imaemangyang due to the restricted movement at an altitude higher than the clouds, Mok Gyeong-un had single-handedly killed all the Imaemangyang with his formless swords.

Yet, he still had energy to spare in his true qi, seeming even more powerful than during the internal war of the Heaven and Earth Society.

'... It's utterly impossible to catch up.'

Ma Ra-hyeon, who had inwardly aimed to match Mok Gyeong-un's martial prowess, felt that this was so inhuman that he couldn't even think of catching up.

Thanks to Mok Gyeong-un reducing their falling speed with his profound true qi, they were able to safely land on the ground.

However, they couldn't be entirely happy.

This was because the wings of the Demonic Beast Heumwon, their means of transportation, had been torn, making it difficult to move through the air again.

It would take some time for this to heal.

"Tsk, this reminds me of the Shaolin Temple incident."

At Seop Chun's words, everyone nodded in agreement.

Back then, Heumwon's wings had been injured by the attack of the Shaolin Demon-Subduing Monks, and they had to move on the ground until it healed.

The situation was the same this time.

The only difference was that during the Shaolin incident, they were in a position to avoid pursuit, while this time, they were in the opposite situation of having to pursue and catch up.

Therefore, having a problem with their fastest mode of transportation meant a significant setback in their pursuit.

Moreover,

"My Lord. I don't think this will end with just one attempt."

The Great guardian Guyang Sa-oh spoke with a voice of concern.

Having worked closely with the Secret Society for a long time, he knew their habits well.

They moved secretly, but once they were determined, they would pressure their target until they achieved their goal.

Therefore, they would continue to try to prevent Mok Gyeong-un from heading to the northern part of Shaanxi Province.

"The Great guardian's words are correct. They'll probably try to tie us down. My Lord, let us be the bait instead."

At that moment, Mong Mu-yak offered an opinion.

Seop Chun asked with puzzlement,

“Becoming bait? You don’t mean...”

“Exactly what I said. We should split into two groups to draw the enemy’s attention.”

“.....”

At Mong Mu-yak’s words, Seop Chun swallowed dryly, unable to speak.

It was certainly a good strategy.

The only problem was that those who split up to draw the enemy’s attention would have to take on a greater risk, but still.

“... So who’s going to be the bait?”

After a moment of hesitation, Seop Chun asked directly.

Mong Mu-yak looked at Seop Chun intently.

“You want me to be the bait alone? Why don’t you just perform a ritual to send me to my death?”

“Not alone, but you and me... And it would be good if one of the guardians here could join us.”

“What?”

“Anyway, we two are the weakest among us. It’s better to have the guardians stay by the Lord’s side.”

“Ugh.”

It made strategic sense, so he couldn't refute it.

The guardians also seemed to agree with Mong Mu-yak's opinion, nodding their heads in agreement to some extent.

Since they were bound from moving through the air anyway, they had no choice but to respond strategically if they wanted to hurry.

'Hmm.'

However, Mok Gyeong-un's thoughts were different.

The strategy of using them as bait wasn't bad, but if they did that, those who became bait would essentially have to be prepared to die.

In the past, these people would have been mere chess pieces to Mok Gyeong-un.

Literally, if they had no use value, they were cards he could discard at any time.

But now, things had to be different.

As Cheong-ryeong had advised, to become a great master leading numerous people, he had to abandon the mindset of considering someone as a card that could be discarded at any time.

Unless it was truly the worst situation with no way out, sacrificing allies would be a bad move for the future.

So Mok Gyeong-un decided.

“No. All of you return as you are.”

“What?”

Everyone couldn't hide their bewilderment at this unexpected decision.

They were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their lord, even if it meant losing their lives as bait.

“My Lord. How can you say that?”

“My Lord, you're no longer alone. How can you try to bear everything by yourself...”

“Return.”

However, Mok Gyeong-un's will was firm.

He judged that moving alone would be more efficient and result in no sacrifices than using them as bait.

But right at that moment,

“Ah. There's no need to go to such lengths when there's a very safe and comfortable way to go.”

Everyone's gaze turned towards the source of the voice they heard from somewhere.

The owner of the voice was none other than Chunchu, the highest-ranking executive of the Secret Society.

Unlike the others who had been traveling in a spacious carriage, she was tied to one of the Demonic Beast Heumwon's ankle claws.

A woman as alluring and beautiful as her might have been tempting, but Mok Gyeong-un considered no one as a romantic interest except for one person, so he had treated her properly as a prisoner.

“What do you mean by that?”

When Seop Chun asked her, Chunchu snorted and said,

“Step aside, youngster.”

“Again!”

As Seop Chun was about to draw his Jeop Mu Sword in anger, Mong Mu-yak hurriedly stopped him.

Then Mok Gyeong-un spoke in a disinterested voice.

“What do you want?”

At his question, Chunchu smiled sweetly and said,

“You know what I want.”

She stared intently at Mok Gyeong-un and stuck out her tongue, licking her upper lip in a seductive manner.

Seeing this, Seop Chun clicked his tongue.

‘... Crazy woman.’

They had wrapped her entire body in ropes except for her head to tie her to the Demonic Beast Heumwon's claw pillar, and it was rather impressive that she was trying to seduce in such a state.

Six days later,

In a bamboo forest not far from the ruins of an old castle in the northern part of Shaanxi Province.

In the middle of a bamboo forest covering dozens of jang,

A man wearing a bamboo hat was wiping blood off his sword blade while breathing heavily.

-Wipe wipe!

Dozens of corpses were scattered around the man.

Each one had lost their life to a single sword strike.

One man who hadn't yet breathed his last opened his mouth with difficulty.

"Huff... huff... Be-betrayal... Is that what you're doing?"

"....."

"So... So it is... betrayal... after all... Huff huff... That person... That person will... never..."

-Thud!

Before he could finish speaking, the man in the bamboo hat thrust his sword into the man's head.

The man couldn't finish his words and breathed his last.

Looking down at the man, the bamboo-hatted figure shook his head slightly and muttered.

"... No. It's for that person."

Just as the man was about to sheathe his sword after shaking off the blood from its tip,

The man stopped and scanned his surroundings.

Then,

-Drip drip drip!

Suddenly, blood from the dead bodies began to flow rapidly and start pooling.

Even though dozens of people had died, this was a bamboo field, so the blood should have seeped into the ground, but it was a truly strange phenomenon.

The bamboo-hatted man hurriedly tried to leave the area.

Then, blood began to flow even from the surrounding bamboo, staining the area red.

As an ominous spiritual energy, chilling to the extreme, filled the surroundings, the bamboo-hatted man could be certain of what this was.

'Ghost Intent Domain...'

This was a domain created by the spiritual energy of a high-ranking spirit with strong resentment.

Chapter 435 – The Ruins of an Old Castle (3)

[The ruins of an old castle... You know where that is, Ryu So-wol.]

-A place where those who revered martial arts gathered to form a high castle. The foundation where the legends of the old martial arts world lived and breathed.

[Cough cough... Indeed, you know it better.]

-So where is he? Don't think about deceiving me. If you do, you'll accompany this seat to the depths of hell.

At Cheong-ryeong's threat, the Heaven and Earth Society Leader coughed up blood, then gave a bitter smile and said,

[Hell... If that's what you want, as a member of the Heaven Vein, I have no reason to refuse. Cough cough. But have you ever thought that the world we're living in now might be more hellish?]

-.....

[I seem to have said something unnecessary. Ghost Blade... Haa... Ghost Blade reported that he's waiting in a bamboo forest not far from the ruins of the old castle.]

-Bamboo forest? You mean a bamboo grove?

[That's right. If you take this... this on my belt... he'll know I sent you.]

Being unable to move due to being restrained by Cheong-ryeong's spiritual energy, he gestured with his eyes towards the belt at his waist.

The Society Leader's token was attached to the belt.

Seeing this, Cheong-ryeong suddenly recalled what Poison King Baek Sa-ha had told Mok Gyeong-un when she was inside the wooden doll.

He had said that while competing with him, he had asked to deliver that token to the Society Leader.

Is that the medium through which the Society Leader can move Ghost Blade?

As Cheong-ryeong had reached the extreme of her rank and could directly affect matter with her spirit body, she easily collected his token.

After collecting it, she asked,

-But there's something I don't understand.

[Cough cough... What is it?]

-About Ghost Blade.

[.....]

-He obtained the forbidden technique, so why is he staying there instead of sending it to you?

At her question striking the core of the matter, the Heaven and Earth Society Leader remained silent with a strange expression for a moment before speaking.

[That's.....]

Seven days later.

'Found it.'

As a spirit body, she could freely traverse the sky and didn't need to eat or sleep, so she was able to reach the northern part of Shaanxi Province in just seven days.

If she could have fully exerted her spiritual power during the day as well, she would have arrived even faster.

Even though she had reached the extreme of her rank, prolonged exposure to the sun, the peak of yang energy, would inevitably weaken her spirit body composed purely of yin energy, no matter how powerful she was.

'What are those?'

Unexpectedly, the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade was fighting with dozens of martial artists.

However, seeing him, Cheong-ryeong couldn't help but be inwardly surprised.

She knew he was one of the Eight Stars, the highest masters in the current martial arts world, and that he belonged to the highest rank of the Secret Society, but this was unexpected.

-Swoosh! Swoosh!

He was killing enemies with a single strike, aiming only for their vital points with minimal movement.

There wasn't a single unnecessary or wasted motion.

As long as no variables arose from the enemies' combined attacks, he efficiently killed most of them with a single sword strike.

But what impressed Cheong-ryeong was that this sword technique had not a shred of defense.

It consisted only of offense.

It was a sword technique that risked one's own life to ensure the enemy's death, or rather, annihilation.

'A sword technique that disregards one's own safety...'

In a sense, he had mastered a truly dangerous sword technique.

However, he was overcoming this single weakness in one way.

'... He's a monster.'

He deflected all the enemies' fatal attacks with his sword.

This was the first time she had seen such a perfect and extreme level of the Pear Blossom Grafting technique.

Now she understood why this person was called Ghost Blade (Ghost Blade).

But that wasn't what was important.

-Swoosh!

As the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade killed the last enemy, Cheong-ryeong spread her Ghost Intent Domain, the Blood Boundary.

The conditions were favorable.

Thanks to the tall bamboo forest, the surroundings were dark, and the area was overflowing with death energy from dozens of people meeting their end.

Therefore, by properly utilizing these conditions,

-Creep!

She could construct an even more powerful Ghost Intent Domain.

Her spiritual power, interlocked with the death energy of the surroundings, stained everything with blood, and soon the entire area was filled with nothing but a blood-red color.

The reason she was binding him like this, despite having brought the Society Leader's token that could move Ghost Blade, was due to what the Society Leader had said.

[... Haa... Haa... It seems some problem occurred with him in the process of approaching the forbidden technique.]

-A problem occurred?

[I don't know why... but I received periodic letters from him with the same content.]

-The same content?

[That's right.]

-What was it?

[Just this: I've gotten closer to the source of the forbidden technique.]

-What?

[Exactly as I said. There were repeated reports stating that he had gotten closer to the source of the forbidden technique.]

-How many times?

[Twelve times.]

-!?

The Heaven and Earth Society Leader said that Ghost Blade had sent secret messages with the same content a total of twelve times, almost every five days.

Because there were eyes from the Secret Society monitoring, retrieving secret messages usually happened once a month, but as the Elder Council began to move in earnest, they were forced to retrieve them in the second month.

When the two months' worth of secret messages retrieved in this way contained the same report at five-day intervals, the Heaven and Earth Society Leader couldn't help but find it strange.

[... Originally, I planned to go there myself once internal matters of the society were settled, but now it seems you, Ryu So-wol, must uncover the secret of these repetitive messages.]

Recalling those words of the Society Leader, Cheong-ryeong came to one conclusion.

Although she didn't know what the secret was, if Ghost Blade had betrayed the Society Leader or if some problem had occurred with him personally that would cause them to lose him, they wouldn't be able to find out anything. So, the priority was to subdue him somehow.

With this in mind, she opened the Blood Boundary and moved the blood.

-Creep!

Countless blood thorns sprouted from within the bloodied area.

These sprouted blood thorns all rushed towards the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade.

-Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh!

The bamboo-hatted man drew the sword he had half-sheathed against the incoming thorns.

A flash of sword light flowed out like lightning, and in an instant, the red blood thorns covering the bamboo-hatted man split and melted back into blood.

'Yes, you should at least manage that much.'

Her rank was incomparable to before.

While coming here without rest, her anger that had been burning like fire had somewhat calmed down, so her spiritual power wasn't maximized to the extent she had shown at the Heaven and Earth Society. But in her normal state, she had become powerful enough to face at least one of the Seven Heavens.

-Splash!

In an instant, two hands emerged from the blood and grabbed the bamboo-hatted man's ankles, pulling him.

This caused the bamboo-hatted man to lose his balance and start falling backward.

At that moment, spears made of blood shot out towards the bamboo-hatted man's hands and thighs.

However,

-Thud!

-Pat!

The bamboo-hatted man, who was about to fall, arched his back, thrust his sword into the ground, and using it as a support, flipped his body while pushing off with his sword-holding hand to lift himself up.

As the bamboo-hatted man swung his sword-formed fingers in that state,

-Swoosh swoosh swoosh!

Sharp sword energy flowed out, cutting through the spears she had created from blood.

The bamboo-hatted man made a gesture of pulling with his hand, and the sword stuck in the ground flew out and was drawn into his hand.

-Tap!

Gripping the sword, the bamboo-hatted man immediately unleashed sword energy in all directions.

-Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh!

The blue sword energy that flew out split the blood staining the surroundings, threatening to destroy the Blood Boundary.

As it split, for a moment, part of the real world—the bamboo forest—was briefly revealed instead of the Blood Boundary, but soon the blood covered it again.

‘Is this not enough?’

However, having confirmed that the world created by spiritual power could be dispelled by strong true qi, the bamboo-hatted man flew towards one area covered in blood.

-Rumble!

The size of the sword energy emanating from his sword grew to nearly five jang.

But it didn’t end there; the sword energy that had grown so large began to condense, becoming an even deeper blue.

‘That won’t do.’

Realizing that he was trying to forcibly cut through the Blood Boundary by concentrating his energy to the maximum, Cheong-ryeong then,

-Swoosh!

Emerged from the blood and manifested.

Blood clung to the long pipe in Cheong-ryeong’s hand, forming the shape of a sword.

She gathered spiritual power infused with resentment into the blood-formed sword, and that energy was comparable to the condensed sword energy of the bamboo-hatted man.

Just as the sword made of spiritual power and the condensed sword energy were about to clash,

“Hup.”

Suddenly, the bamboo-hatted man forcibly stopped swinging his sword.

If one simply tries to forcibly stop while moving their body vigorously, the residual force of that action would directly impact oneself, causing strain on the body.

Let alone in this situation, where he had raised his energy to the point of condensing sword energy, forcibly stopping it would,

-Crack! Crack!

Along with the sound of muscles twisting in the bamboo-hatted man’s body, the hand holding the sword began to shake violently.

The palm gripping the sword hilt was torn, causing blood to flow.

Cheong-ryeong couldn’t understand his behavior.

What on earth was his intention?

So,

-Swoosh!

Cheong-ryeong likewise stopped swinging the blood sword made of spiritual power.

Unlike him who had a physical body, she, being a spirit body, didn't experience strain from stopping the force she had exerted.

Cheong-ryeong, who had stopped the blood sword right in front of the bamboo-hatted man's neck, asked with puzzlement,

-Why did you stop your sword?

At her question, the bamboo-hatted man, who had been silent for a moment, finally spoke.

"So you really were freed."

-What?

"For your rank as a vengeful spirit to be this high in just a mere hundred years, was it your own will that freed you rather than contact with an avatar?"

'!?'

At the bamboo-hatted man's words, Cheong-ryeong's expression hardened.

The Ghost Blade she knew was supposed to be a highest-ranking executive of the Secret Society, but for some reason, he had aligned his intentions with the Heaven and Earth Society Leader.

But judging from the way this person was speaking to her now, it seemed as if he knew something.

-Who are you? What exactly do you know about this seat?

“... Having just been freed from the seal, the fact that you, who should be burning with resentment, came all the way here means you must have known that person is still alive and well, and that there’s been a setback in the Society Leader’s plans.”

At his words, Cheong-ryeong’s eyes sharpened.

She had thought that even if she went a bit further, it would only be related to the death of Jang Munno, Mok Gyeong-un’s grandfather and the society leader, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

To show this level of insight, being able to grasp the situation to this extent with just simple information, one would need to know a lot.

Eventually, the corners of Cheong-ryeong’s mouth lifted.

-It seems I’ll learn a lot if I make you open your mouth.

“.....”

-Choose whether it would be better for me to force it open or for you to open it yourself.

-Swoosh!

Cheong-ryeong showed him the token she had received from the Society Leader.

Seeing this, the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade maintained silence for a moment.

Then, letting out a faint sigh, he said,

“The fact that you brought that means you either received it willingly from him or forcibly took it.”

-If it were the latter, how do you think I would have known your location?

“Even that person, now that he’s close to the traces of the forbidden technique, finding this place is no longer difficult.”

The bamboo-hatted man gestured with his chin towards the corpses scattered on the ground.

The fact that these people had come here meant that even the Secret Society had finally discovered traces of the forbidden technique.

-Hmph, then if I say I know about you repeatedly sending the same secret message, would you think it’s the former?

“Repeatedly... sending the same secret message? What do you mean?”

The bamboo-hatted man frowned, asking in a tone of incomprehension.

At this, Cheong-ryeong said,

-They say you kept sending secret messages repeatedly saying you’ve gotten closer to the traces of the forbidden technique. This should be enough... You... Why are you acting like this?

‘!?’

As the bamboo-hatted man showed signs of bewilderment, Cheong-ryeong couldn’t hide her puzzlement.

The man was quietly repeating something, and it sounded like he was saying “It can’t be.”

Why on earth is he acting like this?

At that moment,

-Woong woong woong!

Cheong-ryeong looked around with surprised eyes.

This was because she was still maintaining the Ghost Intent Domain, the Blood Boundary, but she could see the surrounding spaces suddenly bending.

Wondering what this phenomenon was, eventually,

-Crack crack crack crack!

Surprisingly, beyond the space distorting, her Blood Boundary was forcibly shattered.

She had prided herself on how difficult it would be to break easily due to her strengthened spiritual power, but what on earth was happening?

Even the bamboo forest revealed after the Blood Boundary broke was bending.

‘What is this?’

As she was puzzled, the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade spoke.

“Though it looks like a simple bamboo forest, this entire bamboo grove is one big formation.”

-... You’re saying this is a formation?

“Not just a simple formation. If you look at the positions where the bamboo is planted, it’s composed of highly advanced formation patterns, not just one but hundreds concentrated together. It’s a formation that you can neither enter nor exit unless certain conditions are met.”

-Don’t tell me this is...

“Yes, this formation made up of the bamboo forest is the entrance leading to the traces of the forbidden technique.”

At that very moment,

-Crack crack crack!

The space of the bamboo forest that had been bending completely twisted into a vortex shape, and then Cheong-ryeong and the bamboo-hatted man were sucked into it.

-Swoosh!

And the moment the vortex’s distortion ended and the space returned to normal,

The bamboo-hatted man was suddenly standing alone in the middle of the bamboo forest.

As a gentle breeze blew, causing the bamboo to sway and its leaves to flutter and fall, the bamboo-hatted man, hit by this, quickly scanned the arrangement of the surrounding bamboo and muttered softly,

“I’ve finally found it. I should send a secret message.”

Chapter 436 – The Ruins of an Old Castle (4)

-Squeak!

It's too dizzying.

And the pain feels like her spirit body is being burned.

Where on earth is this place?

As Cheong-ryeong looked around, she noticed something strange.

She was trapped in a jade window made of rare silver wood.

Because of this, due to the silver wood's power to suppress resentment, she couldn't move properly and the pain persisted.

-Ugh.

Even while suffering, Cheong-ryeong looked around to determine exactly where she was.

But she realized a new fact that she hadn't noticed before, being too focused on the silver wood jade window.

'Could it be?'

Everything around her was enormous.

From a huge inkstone to brushes, numerous medicine jars, and large books.

All of these were larger than herself.

It might have been confusing, but due to the giant surroundings, she could recognize one fact.

That is,

‘... Have I shrunk?’

It seemed similar to when she was sealed in the wooden doll of mortals.

The difference was that while the wooden doll just confined her, this was almost like torture.

The purifying power of silver wood not only weakened resentment but could ultimately extinguish it.

This could be considered the worst crisis for her.

‘No.’

Judging that she couldn’t stay trapped here, Cheong-ryeong, though in pain, tried to raise her spiritual power to break the silver wood.

Even if her body had shrunk, there was no way that she, a vengeful spirit who had reached the extreme of her rank, couldn’t destroy this level of silver wood.

-Rumble... Crack crack crack!

-Aaaaagh!

Cheong-ryeong, who had been raising her spiritual power, had to stop due to pain that felt like her entire spirit body was being torn apart.

Staggering in agony, Cheong-ryeong couldn't understand.

It might be understandable for a low-ranking vengeful spirit, but she had already reached a rank no different from high-level Imaemangyang.

So why couldn't she release her spiritual power?

As she wondered about this, she suddenly discovered something and her eyes widened.

It was because talismans forming a formation were attached to the bottom of the silver wood jade window, that is, on the desk, centered around her.

'This is...'

But there was something strange about these talismans.

She had seen many talismans while being with Mok Gyeong-un.

However, these talismans had even more complex phrases and patterns engraved on them than those.

Perhaps because of this, even the spiritual power emanating from the talismans themselves was extraordinary.

All of this seemed to be organically connected with the silver wood, preventing her from recklessly releasing her spiritual power.

'... Damn it.'

Cheong-ryeong held her throbbing head and recalled what had happened earlier.

The space of the bamboo forest had twisted like a vortex, and she had been sucked into it.

-Crack!

Eventually, her vision brightened and her surroundings changed to a wide grassland covered in green.

Faced with this sudden miraculous event, Cheong-ryeong was momentarily at a loss for words.

Where on earth is this place?

No matter how advanced the formation techniques have become, how could such a wide grassland be hidden inside a bamboo forest?

As Cheong-ryeong was puzzled, something caught her eye.

It was a thatched cottage in the middle of the grassland.

[... Oh my.]

At that moment, the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade showed a somewhat bewildered expression.

So she asked,

-Why? Is this not the place?

[This is certainly it.]

-Then why are you reacting like that?

[... This déjà vu is a first.]

-Déjà vu?

Déjà vu.

It's a phenomenon where a situation or environment that one has never experienced before feels familiar, as if it's something one has gone through before.

At the bamboo-hatted man's words, she too felt something strange.

Come to think of it, this mortal was said to have sent the same secret message twelve times.

As if each time was the first time sending it.

'Could it be?'

Cheong-ryeong looked at the bamboo-hatted man with widened eyes and opened her mouth.

-You, perhaps...

[This is quite interesting.]

'!?'

Cheong-ryeong turned her head in surprise at the voice coming from somewhere.

How could she, with her extremely heightened spiritual sense, not have noticed someone approaching this close?

Ten steps behind her was someone leaning on a silver cane with a jade ring.

That someone was none other than a beautiful woman.

She had long blue-black hair, distinct eyebrows, round eyes with slightly upturned corners that reminded one of a cat.

‘What is this?’

Cheong-ryeong’s eyes filled with wariness.

How could she not have noticed such a being approaching?

The energy emanating from the woman was so vast it was impossible to measure.

In terms of energy alone, she even surpassed the sentient beings.

How could such a bein...

-Swoosh!

At that moment, the blue-black haired woman muttered something and extended her cane.

In that instant, Cheong-ryeong couldn’t hide her bewilderment.

She felt her spirit body stiffening like stone.

Then,

-Whoosh!

At that moment, the bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade moved his body so quickly it caused spatial distortion.

In an instant, he closed the distance to the woman and tried to cut off the wrist of the hand holding the cane.

However,

-Clang!

‘!?’

The bamboo-hatted man’s pupils shook.

This was because the woman, without moving a single step, caught his sword bare-handed, even though he had swung it with the power of one of the Eight Stars, considering the opponent strong even if she hadn’t raised her energy.

Feeling that this wouldn’t do, the bamboo-hatted man hurriedly tried to raise his strong energy, but,

-Tremble tremble! Crack!

“Kuk.”

The tip of the sword blade caught by the woman trembled, then the trembling spread to the entire sword, and then, as if the wound on his already torn palm had widened further, blood burst out.

This wasn't the end.

Along with the blood bursting, the bamboo-hatted man's body was pushed back, for as much as ten steps.

-Rustle rustle rustle rustle!

If he hadn't applied true qi to his Yongcheon point, he would have been pushed back even further.

Centered on the soles of the bamboo-hatted man's feet where he had stopped, the surrounding grass on the ground rotted and then crumbled.

'... What is this?'

The bamboo-hatted man's eyes narrowed.

The moment he felt energy climbing up his palm, he thought he should let go of the sword hilt.

Not stopping there, he felt he should unconditionally release the energy that had penetrated his body, so he sent it out through his Yongcheon point.

If he hadn't done so, he would have been injured internally by this strange energy.

The bamboo-hatted man raised his head and looked at the blue-black haired woman holding his sword blade.

'Again.'

As déjà vu struck, the bamboo-hatted man frowned.

Then, the blue-black haired woman raised the corner of her mouth and spoke.

[Isn't it fascinating how your body remembers?]

[What? What are you talking about...?]

[Why are you denying it? Even if your mind doesn't, it's natural for your body to remember if you've experienced this.]

[Remember... with the body? Then indeed...]

The bamboo-hatted man's gaze sharpened.

He had felt something strange due to the words he heard from Cheong-ryeong and the peculiar déjà vu.

But that strangeness became certain because of what this woman was saying.

It seemed that his memory was not intact.

Convinced of this, the bamboo-hatted man spoke.

[... Is this the thirteenth time?]

At his question, a glint appeared in the blue-black haired woman's eyes.

[You... Have you perhaps regained your memory?]

[... What have you done to me?]

[Hmm.]

One of the woman's eyebrows raised.

Then,

-Swoosh!

The woman's figure blurred and suddenly appeared behind the bamboo-hatted man who had been pushed back.

The woman who appeared behind the bamboo-hatted man instantly used the Grappling Hand Technique with her left hand, twisting his arm behind his back and pushing him forward.

-Thud!

The bamboo-hatted man's expression contorted.

What on earth is happening?

No matter how swift the woman's movements were and how impressive the Grappling Hand Technique was, it was impossible for him to be overpowered so helplessly.

Just who is this woman?

-Pak!

The blue-black haired woman's hand touched the back of the bamboo-hatted man's head.

Sensing a cold energy penetrating the moment her hand touched, the bamboo-hatted man hurriedly tried to raise his internal energy.

However,

'My internal energy isn't gathering.'

Strangely, strength doesn't easily come.

Come to think of it, he had felt something was off earlier, but the internal energy in his body wasn't circulating properly according to his will and was moving on its own.

[Hmm... It's not undone.]

[What?]

[You still don't remember, so how did you know the number of times you've been here?]

At her question, the bamboo-hatted man kept his mouth shut.

He thought it was more important to focus his mind on correcting his inner energy that was running wild rather than answering something.

Then the blue-black haired woman sneered.

[Kekeke. You're doing unnecessary things. No one can exert their own power here, child. Of course, even if you could exert your power, it wouldn't make much difference.]

[What... What have you done to me?]

[Well. What did I do? You're already guessing, aren't you?]

[... Did you make me lose my memory of coming here?]

[Huhuhu.]

The woman laughed softly at this question.

It meant affirmation.

At this, the bamboo-hatted man became quiet.

After learning the answer to his question, he seemed to become even more calm, considering how to break through this situation.

Then the bamboo-hatted man spoke in a cool voice.

[I didn't enter this place to threaten you. I just...]

[You came to obtain the forbidden technique that can unite the soul and spirit.]

[.....]

The bamboo-hatted man was at a loss for words.

He had tried to take the approach of persuading her, but with this answer, it became certain.

Although he couldn't remember, he had clearly taken this approach before.

And he must have failed.

[Why are you silent?]

[If you know that, and I have no memory of it, it means persuasion is meaningless, right?]

[You understand well.]

At her answer, the bamboo-hatted man inwardly became confused.

Based on the situation so far, a few things had become clear.

That he couldn't obtain what he wanted through persuasion, and fortunately or unfortunately, for some unknown intention, she could kill him but only made him lose his memory and sent him out of the formation.

'Why?'

For her too, the continued repetition would lead to annoyance.

So why does she keep repeating this?

As he wondered, he heard the woman muttering.

[If it weren't for the promise with that person, it would be easier to just kill you and be done with it. Tsk tsk.]

[What are you saying...]

-Grip!

[Hup.]

At that moment, the woman strongly gripped the back of the bamboo-hatted man's head.

Then she said,

[I don't know why all your memories aren't erased, you mutant. Thanks to you, I'm not bored. Come again.]

'!?'

-Pak!

At that moment, the bamboo-hatted man's head fell forward and he lost consciousness.

The woman, gripping the back of his collar, lifted the bamboo-hatted man up, then repeatedly struck the ground with her cane while softly chanting what seemed to be a spell.

Then,

-Crack!

Part of the space began to distort as if swirling.

The woman then pushed the bamboo-hatted man, whom she was holding by the collar, into the distorted space.

As the bamboo-hatted man's figure disappeared, the distorted space returned to normal.

'Move. Move.'

Seeing this, Cheong-ryeong tried to somehow raise her spiritual power to move her body.

However, her spirit body, once stiffened like stone, didn't budge at all.

She couldn't understand what was happening.

Then, the blue-black haired woman who had made the bamboo-hatted man disappear approached, raising the corner of her mouth in a sinister smile, and said,

[It's truly a good day. I promised not to kill, but there was no mention of not touching dead resentment to begin with.]

-... You... What exactly are you?

She's a monster with immeasurable martial prowess and even strange techniques at her disposal.

She had never heard of or seen such a being, either in life or after death.

As she was at a loss for what to do, the woman who had approached right in front of her spoke in an excited voice.

[Even in the old days when I was outside, I had never seen such strong resentment. I didn't expect such luck to come my way.]

-Rumble!

Cheong-ryeong tried to somehow ignite the resentment within her to raise her spiritual power.

The blue-black haired woman approached her and casually lifted the chin of her spirit body, saying,

[It's useless, child.]

Although she was in a threatened position, Cheong-ryeong, not one to be intimidated, retorted with a voice full of killing intent.

-The child would be you, wouldn't it? You mortal.

[Kekeke. Indeed, as expected of a high-ranking resentment, you're not easily intimidated. Given your rank, you must have been a vengeful spirit for quite a long time, so you might know of my prestige.]

-Prestige? Ha!

It's laughable that she's spouting such nonsense, overconfident in having restrained her, when she's just a mortal who won't even live a hundred years.

[If you know this prestige, you could say you've lived in a similar era to me.]

-Hmph. Well then, let's hear how great this prestige of yours is.

[Wicked Granny[1]]

'!?'

Chapter 437 – Ghost Blade (1)

Wicked Granny.

It was a title completely forgotten by the current martial arts world.

For those who knew even a little about the old martial arts world, it was closer to a name of terror than one of greatness, and it could even be called an evil reputation.

‘The evil among evils...’

Even for Cheong-ryeong, who had lived during the founding of the Heaven and Earth Society, the era before the day of great calamity was shrouded in mystery.

Most things related to that era had been almost completely lost.

However, despite this, she was from an older time than now, so she had heard some stories of the old martial arts world through oral tradition.

One of these was about the Wicked Granny.

She was known as an evil among evils who had already lived for hundreds of years even in the old martial arts world and had committed many evil deeds.

‘Impossible.’

At first, she denied this.

Could that young woman really be the Wicked Granny?

Although her not being aged could be explained by cases like Dam Baek-ha of the Nine Blood Sect, Cheong-ryeong had heard that the Wicked Granny, an old monster who had lived for hundreds of years, was dead.

-... Nonsense. The Wicked Granny is dead.

[Oh? I thought it might be, but you really do know me?]

-What exactly are you?

[I told you. I'm the Wicked Granny.]

-Then the oral tradition must be wrong...

[Oral tradition? Didn't you experience that era yourself?]

-... If you're talking about the old martial arts world, let me tell you I didn't. But this much I'm sure of.

[What's that?]

-The Wicked Granny died at the hands of the world's greatest martial artist.

[... Is that how it was known?]

-Yes.

[Well, that's not wrong.]

-What?

[Huhuhu. This is good. You seem to know quite a lot, so I won't be bored if I keep you around to do various experiments.]

‘!?’

And with the Wicked Granny’s outstretched hand, she lost consciousness.

When she regained consciousness, she was trapped in this jade window made of silver wood.

Cheong-ryeong bit her lip hard.

She needed to obtain the forbidden technique that could unite the soul and spirit to lure him and complete her revenge, but she couldn’t believe the situation she was in.

‘... Is she really the Wicked Granny?’

If the identity of that woman who had captured her was truly the Wicked Granny, it meant she had been alive all this time, contrary to the oral tradition.

It meant she had lived even longer than Dam Baek-ha of the Nine Blood Sect.

-Squeak!

Even in the midst of pain that felt like her spirit body was burning within the formation made of silver wood and talismans, she was dumbfounded.

What kind of coincidence is this?

To be entangled like this again, as if she had some connection to the old martial arts world.

-Grip!

Cheong-ryeong clenched her fist and gritted her teeth.

There was no time to waste like this.

Time would continue to pass, and if she remained here, she would eventually end up as that Bi Yong-heon wanted.

Before that happens, she needs to either persuade that woman who calls herself the Wicked Granny or somehow escape from here.

No matter how well-made the formation of talismans on silver wood is, like all formations, it can't be perfect.

She needs to find the living gate.

She stood up and looked around.

First, she needed to memorize the talismans, then break the silver wood, and then pass through the living gate of the spell formation immediately.

As she stood up, she couldn't help but wonder at the strange form inside this thatched cottage.

In the middle of the cottage stood something like a thick pillar, with numerous joints on it, and countless phrases were engraved on them.

As she stared at this, her eyes sparkled.

'Could that be the center of this place?'

It might be the medium connecting this hidden space within the bamboo forest.

Come to think of it, since entering this place, it had been difficult to properly exert her spiritual power.

It seemed there were many secrets to this formation.

As she was carefully examining this, she suddenly discovered something attached to one of the walls.

A scroll with a painting was hanging there.

The scroll depicted what looked like the Peach Blossom Spring, and it was the only thing that didn't fit with the other things in this thatched cottage.

She soon turned her attention away from it and looked around for other potential clues.

But then,

-Thud!

The door of the thatched cottage opened, and the Wicked Granny came in.

In the Wicked Granny's hands were what appeared to be medicinal herbs.

Placing them on the table, she spoke with gleaming eyes.

"Oh? You've regained consciousness already?"

-... What do you intend to do with me?

"Well. What do you think I'll do? Should I use you to experiment with new techniques, or since I've obtained a rare po, should I try embedding it in an object like those demonic swords?"

She seemed excited, like a child who had just gotten a new toy.

Seeing her like this, Cheong-ryeong became more wary and, after some consideration, spoke.

-... You'll regret it if you keep this seat confined here.

"Regret?"

-Yes. If you don't release me right now, troublesome things will happen.

At Cheong-ryeong's words, the Wicked Granny sneered.

"Even if it's troublesome, what could be so troublesome? Kekeke."

-People like that bamboo-hatted man from earlier will keep coming. Can you handle that?

"You mean people like that guy from earlier will come?"

-Yes. Even that guy kept stubbornly coming back inside even after you erased his memory. What will you do if someone even more persistent appears?

Cheong-ryeong tried to persuade her somehow.

For some unknown reason, she seemed to avoid killing living people.

Judging by how she merely erased memories and sent them out instead of killing them.

However, considering that she sent them out and had been living alone in such a place for hundreds of years, she probably wouldn't welcome someone visiting or bothering her.

But,

"Kekeke. It's the first time I've seen a vengeful spirit full of resentment use their head like this. Indeed, a high rank does strengthen one's sense of self."

-What?

"But you know what? It doesn't matter whether they come or not. The period of the promise is almost over."

-The period of the promise?

"It means this wearisome solitude is finally ending."

Cheong-ryeong frowned.

What on earth is she talking about?

She had thought the Wicked Granny was here because she had voluntarily cut off her ties with the outside world.

That's why she thought she erased the memories of those who entered here and sent them out, but is that not all there is to it?

As she wondered, the Wicked Granny brought her face close and said with a grin,

“It’s regrettable that not everything went according to that person’s arrangements, but I’ve kept my promise and paid enough for my karma, so I’ll be going to that place soon. You, vengeful spirit, just need to alleviate this body’s boredom until then.”

‘!?’

Meanwhile, outside the bamboo forest.

The bamboo-hatted man presumed to be Ghost Blade, who had come out of the bamboo forest, looked at his palm with an incomprehensible gaze.

His palm was torn.

What on earth is this mark?

It wasn’t in his memory, but he couldn’t understand why there was a wound.

‘For a wound like this to occur...’

It could only happen if one forcibly endured a power they couldn’t handle while gripping a sword hilt.

But he had no memory of anyone pushing him to this extent recently.

In fact, he hadn’t fought anyone on his way here.

‘What is this?’

Come to think of it, when he thought about sending a secret message to the Society Leader, he had been gripped by a strange sense of déjà vu.

As if this wasn't unfamiliar.

Because of this, the bamboo-hatted man couldn't help but fall into deep thought while looking at his palm.

His instincts were telling him.

When he entered that bamboo forest made of highly advanced formation patterns, something he couldn't remember had happened.

For some reason, that memory had disappeared.

'Is it the effect of the formation?'

For whatever reason, it seemed he should refrain from hastily entering the bamboo forest until he figured this out.

First, let's send the secret message.

Just as the bamboo-hatted man was about to take a step,

-Flinch!

The bamboo-hatted man slowly turned his head at the oppressive feeling surrounding the area.

There, a young man with white hair and white eyebrows, despite his unwrinkled young face, was walking towards him with his hands behind his back.

Despite walking slowly, the moment the bamboo-hatted man saw him, his gaze changed.

‘This is the worst.’

Has he finally found this place?

The moment he saw the white-haired and white-browed young man, the bamboo-hatted man instantly recognized who he was.

Even within the Secret Society, there were beings who had served by the Society Leader’s side for the longest time.

Among them, there was a highest-ranking executive who was considered almost the best when it came to destroying something, and that was Destruction Emperor.

-Step! Step!

With each of his steps, the ground cracked and split.

The aura flowing from him was extraordinary, like the majesty of an emperor encompassing everything.

“Destruction Emperor.”

As he opened his mouth, the white-haired and white-browed young man, or rather Destruction Emperor, also spoke.

“How strange. This command was given to me, yet why are you here?”

“... I can’t say.”

“You can’t say?”

“That’s right.”

At the bamboo-hatted man’s words, Destruction Emperor stopped ten steps in front of him with an expressionless face.

Then he spoke again.

“This is my leniency as a colleague who has served that person together for a long time. I’ll ask again. Why are you here?”

“I said I can’t...”

Before he could finish speaking.

Destruction Emperor had already extended his index finger towards him.

Along with this, in the blink of an eye, an intense finger force flew accurately towards the bamboo-hatted man’s face.

The bamboo-hatted man hurriedly tilted his head back.

-Swoosh!

The finger force pierced through the front of the bamboo hat and passed by.

But that wasn’t the end.

-Shing!

The bamboo-hatted man, who had drawn his sword, flew his body backward and swung his sword with lightning speed, imbuing it with sword energy.

-Clang clang clang clang!

Blue sparks flew as the finger forces that touched the sword blade were split or deflected by the strong energy.

Having blocked all of this, the bamboo-hatted man hurriedly tried to send a rebounding sword force towards where Destruction Emperor was.

However,

-Clang!

Suddenly closing in, Destruction Emperor blocked the sword blade that was about to release the rebounding sword force with the side of his hand and extended his fingers, imbued with strong energy, towards the bamboo-hatted man's face.

Sensing he couldn't avoid it, the bamboo-hatted man aimed for Destruction Emperor's chin with his leg technique.

At this, just as the bamboo-hatted man's foot was about to touch,

-Pak!

Destruction Emperor retreated about two steps.

The same was true for the bamboo-hatted man.

However, as he couldn't completely avoid the finger technique imbued with strong energy, the bamboo hat he was wearing started to split.

Looking at him, Destruction Emperor said,

"Mok Gan no longer desires the Society Leader's body. Stop acting against that person's will..."

-Crack!

Before he could finish speaking, the split bamboo hat fell to the ground.

The expressionless face of Destruction Emperor, upon seeing the face revealed by the fallen bamboo hat, showed ripples of emotion.

Destruction Emperor looked at the bamboo-hatted man, or rather Ghost Blade, and said,

"You... What is that?"

The place Destruction Emperor pointed to with his hand was Ghost Blade's forehead.

His forehead area was sunken inwards, as if something had been there and then healed.

Destruction Emperor's voice rose slightly.

"You... What happened to your eyes?"

"Who knows."

As soon as Ghost Blade's half-hearted answer fell, each of Destruction Emperor's fingers began to be enveloped in blue strong energy.

-Rumble!

"I faintly sense demonic energy, and I wondered why you weren't faithful to the command, so it was because of that..."

Before he could finish speaking.

Believing in striking first for victory, Ghost Blade suddenly thrust his sword towards Destruction Emperor's neck.

Despite it being a lightning-fast sword strike, Destruction Emperor easily avoided the thrust by simply tilting his neck to the side, then instantly closed the distance and tried to drive his five fingers, dyed with strong energy, into Ghost Blade's abdomen.

At that very moment.

-Clang!

Destruction Emperor's fingers, dyed with strong energy, were blocked by something.

It was the form of an extremely transparent sword.

'This is?'

-Flinch!

Destruction Emperor hurriedly flew his body backward.

Along with this,

-Boom!

Something fell from the sky onto where he had been standing, shattering the ground and causing dust to rise in all directions from the impact.

At this, Destruction Emperor, who had created some distance, lightly waved his hand.

As the dust instantly cleared with the wind pressure, the being that had almost crushed him in an instant revealed itself.

It was someone carrying two swords at their waist.

‘Who on earth is this?’

Destruction Emperor’s eyes filled with wariness at the extraordinary and fierce aura flowing from him.

Then, that person half-turned his head and spoke.

“This one is mine.”

It was none other than Mok Gyeong-un.

Chapter 438 – Ghost Blade (2)

“This one is mine.”

‘!?’

Ghost Blade couldn’t help but be puzzled as he looked at Mok Gyeong-un, who had suddenly fallen from the sky and helped him at the perfect moment.

‘This one?’

Who on earth is he?

His face is so beautiful that even a man would consider it handsome.

But this face seems familiar somehow.

It’s strangely recognizable.

As he was thinking this, Destruction Emperor, who had created some distance, formed the finger force on his five fingers into a round shape of strong energy and rotated it within his palm.

-Whirl whirl!

In that state, Destruction Emperor opened his mouth.

“I don’t know who you are, but this is not your business. If you leave now, I’ll let it slide, but if you try to interfere with me, I won’t forgive...”

-Swoosh!

Before he could finish speaking.

A sharp sword energy aimed for his neck like lightning.

Destruction Emperor flicked his palm, and one of the five rotating balls of strong energy bounced up and deflected the sword energy perfectly.

-Boom!

Seeing this, a glint appeared in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

If such a small ball of strong energy containing finger force could deflect sword energy, how much energy must be condensed in it?

Then Destruction Emperor spoke with an angry voice.

"How foolish to waste your chance."

-Pat!

As Destruction Emperor swung his palm towards Mok Gyeong-un, the remaining four balls of strong energy rushed towards him.

At this,

-Clang!

Mok Gyeong-un drew the demonic sword Evil Commandment Sword to block them directly, but,

'!?'

The moment he blocked one ball, he felt an enormous weight, and his body was pushed back.

As he blocked the three incoming balls in succession,

-Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sword blade, protected by death energy, bent as if it would break at any moment and shook violently, and he was pushed back half a step, then another half step due to the heavy force behind them.

-Rustle!

‘Was it not just condensed energy?’

Mok Gyeong-un realized that this was no ordinary strong energy.

-Swoosh!

At that moment, Ghost Blade suddenly appeared at his side with ultra-high-speed movement comparable to form-changing teleportation and shouted towards Mok Gyeong-un.

“His Curved Line Flicking Finger Divine Technique is as versatile as sword control!”

-Pak pak pak pak!

-Clang clang clang clang!

Five balls of strong energy suddenly flew towards Mok Gyeong-un’s side, but Ghost Blade elegantly deflected all of them by drawing a circular motion with his sword.

It was a Pear Blossom Grafting technique that had reached such an extraordinary level that it could be performed with a sword.

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

Regardless, Ghost Blade said to Mok Gyeong-un.

"I don't know who you are, but you'll be in trouble the moment he exerts his full power, so help me!"

-Pat!

With that, Ghost Blade sent a rebounding sword force towards Destruction Emperor.

Destruction Emperor avoided the incoming rebounding sword force, snorted, then jumped up with his arms spread wide.

Then, small ball-shaped strong energies began to shoot out endlessly from his hands, quickly filling the surrounding area.

At that moment,

-Thud!

Mok Gyeong-un stepped forward with a true step and pulled his sword towards Destruction Emperor, then extended it.

Then, starting from the sword tip, sword energy began to swirl, and it spread out like a storm, enveloping the balls of strong energy that were trying to fill the area.

This was the Pursuing Asia Returning Sword technique.

'This is?'

Ghost Blade frowned as if he recognized something while looking at Mok Gyeong-un's sword sheath.

Meanwhile, the balls of strong energy were swept up by the swirling sword energy, colliding with each other and exploding.

-Bang bang bang bang bang bang!

"Kuk."

As explosions of strong energy occurred within the swirling sword energy, Destruction Emperor hurriedly tried to escape from this aftermath.

Not missing this moment, Ghost Blade moved.

-Swoosh!

He used his lightness technique for ultra-high-speed movement and approached behind Destruction Emperor, trying to cut his neck.

But at that moment, Destruction Emperor struck down Ghost Blade's incoming sword with his fingertip.

Then,

-Woong!

Something strange happened to Ghost Blade's sword.

As soon as the fingertip touched it, Ghost Blade was forced to let go of the sword he was swinging.

The fallen sword,

-Boom!

Even though it hadn't fallen vertically with the blade down, it pierced into the ground.

This seemed to be not because of the force applied to the sword, but rather as if the sword itself had become heavier.

It would have been surprising, but as if he had somewhat predicted this, Ghost Blade, who had let go of his sword, rotated his body and kicked Destruction Emperor's neck with a spinning kick.

-Thud!

Hit by the kick, Destruction Emperor was flung sideways, unable to properly control his body, and ended up kneeling on one knee.

-Thud!

As his knee touched the ground, Destruction Emperor's expression turned fierce.

"How dare you to me..."

His pupils began to flicker with a yellow-brown color, and his shoulders bulged.

But at that very moment.

As Mok Gyeong-un extended his sword-formed fingers towards him, Destruction Emperor's body pierced through the ground due to the sharp energy that alerted all his senses.

-Boom boom boom!

In that instant, an extremely transparent sword appeared and swept through the empty space where he had been.

It was the Invisible Sword.

Mok Gyeong-un pointed his sword-formed fingers towards the ground where Destruction Emperor had pierced through.

Then, the Invisible Sword turned direction like a swimming fish and dove into the hole Destruction Emperor had made.

He thought nothing could be faster than the Invisible Sword, but the problem was,

‘The energy that was spreading out has disappeared.’

From the moment Destruction Emperor entered the ground, his energy could no longer be sensed.

It was as if he had deliberately concealed his energy.

At this, Mok Gyeong-un, not wanting to lose him,

-Woong!

Raised another Invisible Sword, gripped it directly, and plunged it into the ground.

As soon as he did so, the ground shook from the sword energy of the Invisible Sword, then eight cracks appeared and started to split.

-Crack crack crack!

This was the 'The Eight Immortals' Sword Contest'[1], a sword technique he had learned from an unknown swordsman who pursued the Ultimate Sword at the Sword Valley, the holy land of swordsmanship.

-Rumble!

Even if he had just imbued it with strong energy, its power would have been tremendous, but with the sword energy of the Invisible Sword added, the ground shook as if an earthquake had occurred, and even the layers of the split ground were exposed.

'Ha!'

Seeing this, Ghost Blade inwardly clicked his tongue.

He had guessed that this was no ordinary strong person, but he didn't expect him to be a monster who had surpassed even the Profound Realm, called the wall of walls, the highest realm.

But when he saw that the sword energy of the Invisible Sword was spreading towards the bamboo forest,

"Stop!"

Ghost Blade hurriedly shouted.

Even at this, Mok Gyeong-un didn't seem to intend to stop.

So Ghost Blade flew his body and urgently raised sword energy with his sword-formed fingers to block the sword energy of the Invisible Sword that was trying to spread to the bamboo forest, drawing a line of strong energy towards the ground.

-Swoosh!

The momentum of the sword energy created by Ghost Blade was also tremendous, but it was no match for the sword energy of the Invisible Sword, which was called the Sword Extreme.

The energy of the sword force was completely oxidized by the sword energy of the Invisible Sword.

Along with this, Ghost Blade's body was also pushed back.

-Rustle!

Seeing this, a glint appeared in Mok Gyeong-un's eyes.

He didn't know what was there, but seeing Ghost Blade trying to block the sword energy of the Invisible Sword, it seemed there was something.

In the end, Mok Gyeong-un stopped the sword energy of the Invisible Sword.

-Drip! Thud!

Then Ghost Blade, who had been continuously pushed back while resisting the sword energy of the Invisible Sword, seemed to have suffered internal injuries as blood flowed from the corner of his mouth.

If Mok Gyeong-un hadn't stopped, he would have been in danger from even more severe internal injuries.

Ghost Blade regulated his breathing and expelled the energy that had penetrated his body.

-Crack crack!

The sword energy that flowed out through the soles of his feet split the ground.

Ghost Blade inwardly clicked his tongue.

It wasn't even a direct hit from the Invisible Sword, just the penetration of its sword energy, yet the pain was like fine, sharp fragments tearing through his blood vessels.

At that moment, Mok Gyeong-un approached with large strides and said,

"Was protecting that bamboo forest more important than catching him?"

"... This forest is made up of very intricate formation patterns. If it's damaged even slightly, those patterns might change."

"Formation patterns?"

At this, Mok Gyeong-un looked at the bamboo forest.

At first glance from the outside, it looked like just an ordinary bamboo forest, but,

-Sss!

When he fully opened his third eye, he could see certain energies circulating in a very complex pattern around the bamboo forest.

Although he had some knowledge of formation patterns from the numerous books and methods at the Heaven and Earth Society, this was the first time he had seen a formation so complex and organically structured.

What on earth is this?

As he was wondering, Ghost Blade, having apparently resolved the energy in his body, stood up and said,

“And he didn’t fight properly, and if he’s determined to hide underground, it’s difficult for anyone to catch him.”

-Swoosh!

Turning his head from the bamboo forest, Mok Gyeong-un said,

“I thought you were comrades, but have you completely turned against each other?”

‘!?’

At this question, one of Ghost Blade’s eyebrows raised.

Although he had received help, he had been curious about the identity of this strangely unfamiliar person.

So Ghost Blade spoke first.

“Who are you that knows me? Why did you help me?”

“Help?”

“Yes. You must have some purpose...”

-Boom!

Ghost Blade couldn't continue speaking.

Mok Gyeong-un, who had suddenly approached right in front of him, grabbed his collar and threw him backward, and was now aiming a Invisible Sword at his throat.

It would have been bewildering, but Ghost Blade tried his best not to show it and opened his mouth.

"... Are you an enemy?"

At his question, Mok Gyeong-un answered with a chilling smile.

"Let's say so for now."

"For now? What does that mean?"

"I've been looking forward to this moment very much. There's a lot I want to ask you, Ghost Blade."

"... I don't know you exactly. You should at least tell me who you are..."

"I have a grandfather who raised me."

'!!!!'

At that moment, Ghost Blade's expression, which had been maintaining composure, hardened.

The strangely familiar face, and the mention of a grandfather who raised him, made him instantly realize who the person before him was.

"Avatar."

As he called him Avatar, Mok Gyeong-un spoke in an even colder voice.

“Indeed, there’s quite a lot I need to ask you...”

-Boom!

It was in the middle of speaking.

At that moment, someone appeared and threw a finger strike imbued with vast energy towards Mok Gyeong-un.

However, the finger strike was blocked by the blade of the Invisible Sword before it could even reach Mok Gyeong-un, and,

-Boom!

Even though it caused a strong explosion, it couldn’t inflict any damage.

The one who threw the finger strike was none other than Chunchu, the highest-ranking executive of the Secret Society.

Chunchu, with a somewhat agitated expression and trembling eyes, aimed her claw force at Mok Gyeong-un again and said,

“Get away from Father.”

‘Father?’

Chapter 439 – Ghost Blade (3)

“Get away from my father!”

At the fierce cry of Chunchu, the first-rank member of the Secret Society, Mok Gyeong-un half-turned his head and spoke.

“Father?”

“That’s right. He’s my father.”

“This seems a bit different from what I’ve heard.”

Mok Gyeong-un had thought Chunchu and the Ghost Blade were siblings who shared blood.

However,

“I thought you said it was a similar relationship.”

“...Well, I suppose. But weren’t you supposed to persuade him when you stepped in?”

“You’re the one whose story is different.”

“What do you mean?”

“I said I’d persuade him to get the information you want. Why are you threatening my father?”

At her question, the Ghost Blade’s expression darkened slightly as he spoke.

“Chunchu. Why exactly did you come here?”

To this, Chunchu snorted in disappointment and replied.

“Is that what you say to a child trying to save you?”

“This is not your place to interfere.”

“Are you really going to do this?”

Chunchu’s voice rose significantly, seeming genuinely angry.

But the Ghost Blade was utterly resolute.

“Don’t get involved. This is a problem I must resolve.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why are you going this far, even abandoning your child, for that person who’s all but abandoned you?”

“Abandoning...”

-Swish!

Before the Ghost Blade could finish speaking, Mok Gyeong-un released his grip on the collar and grasped his sword.

-Woong!

One of the formless swords that had been protecting Mok Gyeong-un flew towards Chunchu.

Having personally experienced the power of the formless swords, she hurriedly employed her lightness technique to create distance.

Fortunately, the formless sword didn't fully pursue her.

At this, Chunchu shouted.

"Are you really going to do this?"

"Let me ask you something."

"What?"

"What exactly do you mean by father? Is he your adoptive father?"

"Adoptive father? What are you talking about..."

"Unlike the strong demonic energy I sense from you, the Ghost Blade doesn't have anything like that. On what basis do you claim to share blood?"

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, Chunchu furrowed her brow and then looked at the Ghost Blade's forehead.

Then, with a somewhat surprised look in her eyes, she asked.

"Don't tell me you removed the eye?"

At her question, Mok Gyeong-un, also curious, looked at the Ghost Blade's forehead.

There was a sunken area, as if something had been there.

Given its size and location, one couldn't help but think of the third eye of a Three-Eyes.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un asked.

"Were you also a Three-Eyes?"

After a moment of silence at the question, the Ghost Blade finally spoke.

"...I had a third eye."

"You had a third eye? So you mean an eye was parasitic, like Mok Gan?"

"Yes. That's right. Originally, I should have died along with the eye, but now I am purely human."

What on earth could this mean?

A fragment of past memories flashed through the Ghost Blade's mind.

On the day the Heaven-Earth Moon Society collapsed,

Gwak Dong-ha, the Divine Guardian who served the young master of the Heaven Vein, lost his complete free will and life as a human from that day forward.

[Rejoice. Dong-ha, you have been chosen.]

[Y-Young Master... W-Why are you doing this? How...]

-Grip!

[Gah!]

Divine Guardian Dong-ha was at a loss for words as he saw the young master Bi Yong-heon, gripped by madness, clutching his neck.

How on earth did he change like this?

Was it since then?

From the day he was first defeated by the being he admired, he gradually changed.

But because his nature was bright and kind, Dong-ha thought he would soon return to his original self. However, the madness, darkness, and jealousy in the young master's heart only grew.

Unlike the society leader who harbored madness, Dong-ha had thought the young master would become a wise ruler, but he grew more and more fearful as he saw him becoming increasingly like his father.

But now, he had the same eyes as the clan leader.

[Young... Master... Please...]

-Crack! Rip!

At that moment, Dong-ha's pupils shook violently.

It was because of the grotesque eyeball that appeared as his forehead split open.

He was at a loss for words at the eerie and bizarre sight.

That's when someone approached.

But that person, like the young master Bi Yong-heon, also had a third eye on his forehead.

The eye on that person's forehead examined Divine Guardian Dong-ha as if appraising him.

Then, with a satisfied expression, he said.

[Indeed, it's an excellent body. It seems much better than before, Master.]

[Excluding the aging body I switched from and this current one, it could be said to be the most useful.]

Bewildered by their conversation, Divine Guardian Dong-ha's gaze sharpened.

[You bastards... What exactly are you?]

[Well, what could we be?]

-Plop!

With those words, the person plucked out the eye from his own forehead.

'!!!!'

Then he brought it towards Dong-ha's forehead.

Tentacle-like things sprouted wildly from the eyeball, breaking through Dong-ha's skin and bone on his forehead and burrowing in.

Dong-ha shook his forehead violently, trying to avoid it, but from the moment the tentacles burrowed in, there was no way to resist or prevent it.

Eventually, the third eyeball fully settled on his forehead.

Bi Yong-heon, who had been gripping his neck, let go and asked with a smile.

[Do you like it?]

[The ego is stronger than I expected.]

[Oh? Is that so? It seems his mind didn't completely collapse just from the death of his family?]

[It appears so. But it won't be long now.]

The third eye was confident.

He had changed bodies for a long time, like Bi Yong-heon, to serve the being within him.

Humans who barely lived a hundred years eventually succumbed to his will, and he thought this one would be the same.

However, Divine Guardian Dong-ha's will and consciousness were stronger than he had anticipated.

Even though he hadn't deliberately separated the consciousness and tried to absorb it, it didn't easily disappear.

To plunge him further into despair,

[Can you see?]

‘W-What are you trying to do now?’

[I’m going to give a gift to your only blood relative.]

‘What?’

[The probability is extremely low, but if this succeeds, your daughter, no, our daughter will be reborn as a being that transcends humanity, just like us.]

‘No! Stop! Please! Please stop!’

It was completely different from having a third eye parasitize.

It was an experiment to implant the blood and flesh of a spiritual beast into a human.

They had been forcing this for hundreds of years, but only two had succeeded, and most humans couldn’t withstand it and died.

From the beginning, spiritual beasts and humans were opposing existences, so coexistence in one body was nearly impossible except in a parasitic form.

But,

[Oh?]

Breaking through that incredible probability, his daughter survived.

That little blood lump, barely five years old, endured the pain.

Although he had lost control of his physical body, he shared memories with this thing parasitizing his forehead, so he knew well how close to a miracle this was.

Seeing this, he made a strong resolution.

Even though it had come to this, he decided to endure to the end somehow for the sake of the young master whose body had been taken and the daughter who had survived.

And about eighty years later, an unintended opportunity arrived.

-Whoosh!

A being like chaos itself, with its entire body burning black.

Everything changed after contact with that being.

He was able to control his body with his own will again.

The opportunity had finally come.

“Human? How is that possible?”

While Chunchu was denying this in disbelief, the Ghost Blade spoke with a somewhat bitter expression.

“I had hoped you wouldn’t know until everything was resolved, but indeed, not everything flows as intended.”

“No way... You’re not going to say such nonsense about becoming human for the sake of that body he abandoned, are you?”

At Chunchu’s words, the Ghost Blade sighed.

Because he shared memories with that eye that had controlled him for a full eighty years, the Ghost Blade knew how dangerous and extraordinary the being that had taken over the young master’s body was.

That’s why he wanted to be extremely cautious.

He had intended to tell her the truth once the foundation for counterattack was prepared, but everything had gone wrong.

To this, the Ghost Blade spoke with difficulty.

“It’s not just that. I can’t tell you everything now. So...”

-Thud!

“Urgh!”

At that moment, the tip of a formless sword pierced above the Ghost Blade’s collarbone, and its energy surged into his body.

At this, Chunchu shouted with murderous eyes, trying to restrain Mok Gyeong-un.

“Stop!”

-Swoosh!

However, the formless sword in front blocked her approach, and Chunchu tried to overcome this by exploding her unique invisible demonic energy, but.

-Bang! Bang! Bang!

Even with her power, she couldn't easily break through the formless sword.

"Damn it!"

Meanwhile, Mok Gyeong-un stared down at the Ghost Blade and then asked.

"Whether you've become human or not, whatever you're plotting with the Society Leader, it's none of my business."

At Mok Gyeong-un's words, the Ghost Blade spoke with difficulty, enduring the pain.

"Huu... Huu... That... Everything is related to the Incarnation... You're involved too."

"Incarnation?"

At those words, Mok Gyeong-un pointed to himself and said.

"What exactly is inside me that made you target and try to harm my grandfather?"

At Mok Gyeong-un's question, the Ghost Blade furrowed his brow and answered.

“You... Don’t tell me you haven’t fully realized your own existence yet?”

“Realize?”

“Haa... But how did you acquire such power?”

The Ghost Blade looked at Mok Gyeong-un with an expression of incomprehension.

He had naturally assumed that Mok Gyeong-un had realized himself and awakened as an Incarnation due to his tremendous martial prowess.

But that’s not the case?

Then are you saying he became this strong in a human body without any self-awareness?

It was hard to believe.

‘Jang Munno... What on earth have you done? Didn’t you abandon your duty as one who serves the Incarnation and try to raise him completely as a human?’

He had clearly said so while dying from the Sichuan Tang family’s formless poison.

Thus, the Ghost Blade thought that his plan to confront him with the Incarnation’s power had come close to failure.

That’s why he was trying to find another way with the Society Leader.

But how could someone who grew up as an ordinary human, without properly awakening as an Incarnation, possess such power?

The Ghost Blade recalled that moment.

[Gah!]

Having subdued Mok In-dan, the leader of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor who stood in his way, with just one move, the Ghost Blade looked down coldly at him as he clutched his trouser leg and pleaded.

[Still... Still just a baby. Please... Please... show mercy.]

-Thud! Thump!

After knocking him unconscious, the Ghost Blade approached the wrecked carriage.

This was definitely the place.

The Incarnation was here.

-Waa! Waa!

But why were only crying sounds coming from inside?

With this, the Ghost Blade opened the door of the wrecked carriage with a doubtful look.

But there,

‘What on earth?’

Two babies who looked like twins were lying next to their unconscious, bleeding mother.

Chapter 440 – Ghost Blade (4)

-Crack!

“Urgh.”

As the formless sword twisting into his collarbone was twisted, a groan burst from the Ghost Blade’s mouth.

He thought he was accustomed to and could endure considerable pain, but this, true to the essence of a sword, inflicted indescribable agony.

To him in this state, Mok Gyeong-un spoke with a voice filled with killing intent.

“I know at least that the prophecy, the Incarnation, all of that is being guarded against by the head of the Secret Society, a man called Mok Gan. That’s why you targeted my grandfather, who supposedly spirited away the Incarnation, right?”

To these words, the Ghost Blade furrowed his brow and replied.

“Haa... Haa... You’ve found out quite a bit, even though you haven’t realized or awakened as the Incarnation.”

“You keep talking about realization and awakening. Are you referring to the thing inside me?”

“If you’re aware of yourself to that extent, why haven’t you awakened yet?”

The Ghost Blade asked in return.

To this, Mok Gyeong-un snorted and said.

“I don’t know what’s inside me, but it and I are separate entities.”

“Separate entities?”

“That’s right.”

At Mok Gyeong-un’s answer, the Ghost Blade also snorted.

“If it were a completely unrelated entity, do you think your grandfather, no, Jang Munno, would have staked everything to protect you until now?”

“.....”

At those words, as cutting as a sword, Mok Gyeong-un closed his mouth with a cold gaze.

As he got closer to the truth, that was one of the questions he had.

Was it because of that prophecy from the Fire Faith Order’s sacred fire that his grandfather raised him?

If not for that, would his grandfather have died so miserably?

Did all of that originate from him?

Was that why?

“...What exactly am I?”

“Haa... Haa... A meaningless question. If you had realized and awakened yourself as the Incarnation, wouldn't you naturally know the truth?”

-Grip!

“I... I am just myself.”

Mok Gyeong-un strongly denied the existence within himself.

At Mok Gyeong-un's reaction, the Ghost Blade clicked his tongue and muttered.

“He really kept his word to the end. Jang Munno.”

“What did you just mutter?”

Mok Gyeong-un drove the formless sword deeper and twisted the blade.

-Crack!

“Urgh. Take it... easy... Even without... this... I... was planning... to continue our conversation.”

“Oh? Then speak. What did he keep?”

“Don't you... already... know?”

“You're saying the same thing again. I am just myself, and the Incarnation...”

“No. You are the Incarnation. But Jang Munno tried to make you a complete human.”

“What?”

Mok Gyeong-un couldn't hide his bewilderment.

What does this mean?

Tried to raise him as a complete human?

“The truth... If you've gotten quite close to the truth, you probably know that he was a master of exceptional martial arts, right?”

“...Yes.”

Jang Munno.

Though not well-known to those in the Central Plains, he was a supreme master who had received teachings from Tang Yeon-jong, the previous generation clan leader of the Sichuan Tang family branch known as the Thousand Poison Hands.

Even Mok Gyeong-un didn't know this truth until after he died.

He was able to get closer to the truth about his grandfather through the Heaven and Earth Society, the Imperial Palace, and the Sichuan Tang family.

However, despite knowing so much, there were still gaps in the truth about his grandfather, the Incarnation, and himself.

“What does hiding his martial arts have to do with that?”

“You don’t think there’s a connection? In the Fire Faith Order, they revere you, the Incarnation, as a divine being, exalting you as both Spenta (good god) and Ahriman, that is, Angra (evil god) because you possess both sides of the coin, but your essence is Ma (demon).”

“Ma (demon)?”

“Yes. Ma (demon). A being that everyone should fear and revere... That’s what you are.”

At these words from the Ghost Blade, Mok Gyeong-un’s expression became strange.

[Cough, cough... Promise me.]

[What do you mean?]

[That you will never... reveal... your true nature...]

True nature.

Grandfather said there was a dark side within me.

He said that while all humans have such a side, because I hadn’t interacted with people, I would be even less able to control it.

That’s why he always taught me to suppress that true nature.

While his grandfather was alive, he tried to keep this promise, but after his death, he realized that his true nature was definitely not purely good.

Mok Gyeong-un thought of this as simply suppressing himself from committing evil acts even if he couldn’t do good.

But now he's saying that wasn't the reason?

To the silent Mok Gyeong-un, the Ghost Blade steadied his breathing and said.

"In your hiding place, there were only books about herbal medicine, propriety, righteousness, and correct thinking. Jang Munno made you stay away from everything so that you could never awaken as the Incarnation."

"....."

"At first, I thought it was just to protect you secretly. I thought it was to keep you hidden until conditions were right for you to regain your power."

"Regain power?"

"Yes... According to the sacred fire's prophecy, you, the Incarnation, lost all your previous power. So I thought Jang Munno's judgment was because of that. But that wasn't it. he really intended to raise you as a human."

"Then shouldn't I be grateful?"

"Grateful?"

"Yes. Didn't the Secret Society change even that prophecy because they feared the Incarnation? Then wouldn't that have eased their worries?"

"Worries... That would ease their worries. What I need is your existence as an awakened Incarnation."

"An awakened me?"

“Didn’t you say it yourself? That they fear the Incarnation. Mok Gan fears your very existence.”

“So are you saying that because of my grandfather, things didn’t go according to your plan?”

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

“Whether trying to raise you as a human until the end was entirely Jang Munno’s will, or if your will was imbued in it, is unknowable.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

To Mok Gyeong-un’s incomprehensive reaction, the Ghost Blade sighed deeply and answered.

“Although Jang Munno possessed exceptional medical skills, he didn’t have the power to implant your existence into a human or create such an existence.”

“.....”

“Whether it was to protect yourself from mortal enemies or due to some other will, I don’t know, but the choice to degenerate yourself and become human was entirely your decision. Incarnation.”

‘!?’

I chose this?

No, doesn’t this mean that the being inside me chose to become myself?

Mok Gyeong-un denied this, as if unable to believe it.

“How can you be so sure that this Incarnation being became human, that is, me?”

To this question, the Ghost Blade answered with a meaningful voice.

“Your appearance is the proof.”

“This appearance?”

“Yes. You may not have met him yet, but there is someone who has exactly the same face as you. If it’s hard to believe, go to a place called Yeon Mok Sword Manor. There you can see that being you took as a model for being human...”

-Grip!

Before he could finish speaking, Mok Gyeong-un, with eyes wide open, firmly pressed down on his collar.

Someone at the Yeon Mok Sword Manor with the same face?

Mok Gyeong-un couldn’t help but show an emotional reaction for the first time.

He had thought it was just a coincidence, a convergence of chances.

He thought that because there are so many people in the world, by some extraordinary coincidence, someone had an almost identical face.

But with the Ghost Blade’s words, his mind became complicated.

This wasn’t a coincidence?

Mok Gyeong-un, while pressing down on his collar, asked.

“Seventeen years ago... No, eighteen years ago, how do you know about that?”

“...Because I saw it with these two eyes.”

‘!?’

Longmen, Guangdong Province.

[Gah!]

Having subdued Mok In-dan, the leader of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor who stood in his way, with just one move, the Ghost Blade looked down coldly at him as he clutched his trouser leg and pleaded.

[Still... Still just a baby. Please... Please... spare us.]

-Thud!

After knocking him unconscious, the Ghost Blade approached the wrecked carriage.

This was definitely the place.

He had followed the Incarnation’s traces, and that being was here.

-Tremble!

The Ghost Blade touched the eyelid covering his forehead with a trembling hand.

That thing was still asleep, and he had control.

He needed to hurry before that.

-Waa! Waa!

But why were only crying sounds coming from inside?

With this, the Ghost Blade opened the door of the wrecked carriage with a doubtful look.

But there,

‘What on earth?’

Two babies who looked like twins were lying next to their unconscious, bleeding mother.

The Ghost Blade couldn’t hide his bewilderment.

Clearly, the chaotic energy he had felt from the Incarnation was emanating from inside.

But why was there no Incarnation, only a mother and twin babies...

‘!?’

Then the Ghost Blade looked at the twins and examined the floor where they were lying.

On the floor were sticky, black fragments.

The residual energy was felt from these.

‘Could it be?’

The Ghost Blade stared intently at the two babies.

Then he placed a finger on the chest of one of the crying babies.

[The Incarnation has something called a core. It’s like a heart for humans and can be said to be the source of power.]

He had clearly said that.

If his guess was correct, one of these might be the Incarnation.

Being extremely weakened, it might have transformed to hide its existence.

-Thump! Thump!

The faint beating of a heart.

It wasn’t this child.

Then this child next to it must be the Incarnation.

The Ghost Blade placed his palm on its chest, trying to sense its energy.

But,

‘This can’t be?’

This baby too only had a faintly beating heart, without the core that could be called the Incarnation’s source.

What on earth was going on?

Clearly, it was hidden here, but he couldn’t understand what was happening.

Neither had a core, and both were ordinary humans.

‘Damn it.’

It was incredibly perplexing.

Although he still had control, it wouldn’t be long before that thing woke up again.

He needed to figure out which was real before then, but how?

‘.....’

Would it be better to take them both and examine them?

But if he took them recklessly, he didn’t know where to hide these babies.

Time was running out, but how could he figure it out?

After pondering for a moment, the Ghost Blade took something out from his bosom.

It was a wooden box covered with talismans.

[Take this with you.]

It was what the current Heaven and Earth Society Leader Bi Jung-seon had given him.

[What's this?]

[It's the secret manual of the Moon Vein.]

[The Moon Vein's secret manual? Then that...]

[That's right.]

[But how did you get this?]

[If what we know is certain, we might be able to persuade the Incarnation with this.]

Inside this wooden box was the secret manual of the Moon Vein.

If kept close, the Incarnation might reveal its true form on its own.

But,

-Throb!

A headache came along with pain in his forehead.

It was a sign that thing was about to wake up.

Why did it have to wake up now of all times?

The Ghost Blade, looking at the two babies who looked like twins, then clutched his forehead and painfully went out of the carriage.

There, he saw the leader of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor, Mok In-dan, staggering to his feet.

He hadn't hit him too hard, but it seems his internal energy cultivation was quite thick.

[Haa... Haa... The... The baby and she... What... What have you done to them?]

Staring at him, the Ghost Blade asked.

[Is there one baby? Or two?]

[Wh-What are you saying? Two babies?]

At these words, the Ghost Blade closed his mouth.

Indeed, his judgment was correct.

The real Incarnation's existence was among those babies.

But now that thing was about to wake up, he had no time.

So,

-Thud!

The Ghost Blade threw the talisman-covered wooden box at him.

Mok In-dan, who caught it reflexively, wore an expression of incomprehension.

To him, the Ghost Blade said.

[There was someone I was chasing, but it seems I made a mistake. I'll give you that instead.]

[This is?]

[One of the secret books of the Heaven and Earth Society.]

[What? A secret book of the Heaven and Earth Society? How did you...]

-Swoosh!

As Mok In-dan was bewildered by the mention of a secret book from the Heaven and Earth Society, one of the three great organizations dividing the martial arts world, the Ghost Blade appeared behind him and swept his ankle.

-Thud!

[Ugh!]

Looking at him fallen to the side, the Ghost Blade then drew his sword and,

-Shing!

-Slash slash slash!

He made a wound on the side of the fallen man with his sword.

But the wound mark looked like a symbol.

After leaving this, the Ghost Blade warned Mok In-dan, the leader of the Yeon Mok Sword Manor.

[Remember the symbol of this wound.]

[Symbol?]

[If someone who knows about this symbol or who made it approaches you in the near future, you must say you know nothing.]