

# **My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader**

## **#Chapter 15 : Eunru Valley (3) - Read My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader Chapter 15 : Eunru Valley (3)**

Chapter 15: Eunru Valley (3)

The Murim Alliance's Special Operations Unit was one of the counterintelligence teams active along the frontlines against the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Among them, the Seventeenth Subdivision, which Gwan Sang belonged to, was the most forward-positioned group of the Hidden Spy Unit spread across all of Gansu Province, situated closest to the territory of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

'I—I have to report this immediately!'

Although murders occurred almost daily in Eunru Valley, it was exceedingly rare for over ten people to be beheaded in one go.

Especially if the perpetrator was a beautiful woman, the likes of whom one wouldn't expect to see in a place like Eunru Valley!

Seeing the elegant woman standing proudly among the corpses he had just cut down, Gwan Sang was convinced.

'No doubt about it. It's the Young Cult Leader! The Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura!'

The Heavenly Demon Cult certainly had skilled female swordsmen, but there was only one who looked this young—almost childlike.

'She's not some witch who's reversed her aging. The portrait mostly matches too. So what about her guards?'

The only visible escort nearby was a masked man in black standing beside her, seemingly trying to stop her.

Of course, with Gwan Sang's insight, he couldn't be sure whether there were other hidden escorts, but he didn't care.

'Even if they used stealth techniques in broad daylight, they couldn't hide many people!'

Confident in this assessment, Gwan Sang didn't hesitate and went straight to his superior.

“Huuuaaahm... What is it, Gwan Sang? In the middle of the day?”

A fat man lying lazily on a mat under the shade of a tree greeted Gwan Sang.

His filthy, tattered clothes were ripped in multiple places, and he scratched his belly in slothful delight.

Gwan Sang’s superior looked like a beggar.

With a solemn expression, Gwan Sang made his report.

“The Young Cult Leader has appeared.”

“...Did you start drinking in the middle of the day?”

At his superior’s sour reaction, Gwan Sang exploded in frustration.

“No, Squad Leader! You think I’m that kind of person?!”

“Hmm, now that I think about it, you’ve never caused any trouble while drunk.”

Gyeon Myeonggae, one of the Four Beggars of the Beggars’ Sect and captain of the Seventeenth Subdivision, adjusted his reclining posture and looked at Gwan Sang.

“So? Why would the Young Cult Leader show up in a place like this?”

“That... I wouldn’t know.”

“.....”

As Gyeon Myeonggae slowly reached for his club—

Gwan Sang flailed his hands in panic.

“No! There’s no way I’d know that, right?! It’s not like I’m stationed at the main cult! You should be praising me just for identifying her, shouldn’t you?!”

Gyeon Myeonggae had no counter to Gwan Sang’s words and slowly withdrew his outstretched hand.

“Ahem.”

“Haah... Haah... Seriously...”

Gwan Sang exhaled heavily, looking like he had just come back from the dead.

His damn superior, being from the Beggars' Sect, had monstrous martial prowess.

Gwan Sang had seen many captains during his time in the Hidden Spy Unit, but none were as powerful as Gyeon Myeonggae.

Gyeon Myeonggae asked seriously.

“Tell me everything in detail.”

“Alright, so—”

Gwan Sang explained everything he had seen in detail. First, he described the events without exaggeration, then followed with his own reasoning behind his conclusions.

“She cut down ten men who picked a fight with her in an instant? And they were from the Poison Frog Sect?”

“Yes. Doesn't that mean she must be at least a first-rate master?”

“Well, yes...”

Gyeon Myeonggae trailed off.

‘As trashy as the Poison Frog Sect bastards are, each of them is still far stronger than the average adult man.’

In truth, someone experienced with the sword could possibly cut down ten opponents, but only if they had sufficient strength to back it up—and that didn't apply to a girl who hadn't even reached adulthood.

‘To take them out in a single strike... that wouldn't be possible unless she was at least second-rate. No, not even then.’

Only someone who had circulated qi throughout their entire body to strengthen themselves could achieve that.

That level—one that inspired fear in the wider world—was the hallmark of a first-rate martial artist.

“If what you say is true, even if she's not the Young Cult Leader, she must be an important figure within the Six Great Demonic Clans.”

“Exactly, right?!”

“You did good work, brat. Well done.”

“What will you do now? I feel like this intel could fetch a high price.”

Although the Hidden Spy Unit was under the Righteous Alliance, selling information to raise funds in this way wasn't unheard of.

“I'll handle the rest. You take the others and fall back.”

“What?!”

“I'm not planning to take all the credit, so wipe that look off your face, brat. You'll get a hefty reward.”

“Understood, Squad Leader.”

Gwan Sang retreated, somewhat sulky. Still, Gyeon Myeonggae wasn't the type to break a promise, so Gwan Sang didn't look too disappointed.

Once Gwan Sang had completely vanished—

“What do you mean, ‘what to do’—what a fool.”

Gyeon Myeonggae's gaze turned icy.

“Obviously, I'll capture her.”

An intimidating aura far more chilling than before poured from his eyes.

“Let's see. Aside from the Young Cult Leader, which other members of the Six Great Demonic Clans possess that level of martial prowess?”

Though he appeared casual on the outside, he was still the captain of a counterintelligence unit that had infiltrated the Heavenly Demon Cult.

In an instant, several candidates flashed through his mind.

“So Soryu of the So Clan, Sa Biyeon of the Sa Clan, maybe one of the twins from the Pa Clan? Surely it's not ‘her’—the one we've been targeting, right?”

Since it was a single person, it wasn't the twins from the Pa Clan.

That left three possibilities, including the Young Cult Leader.

“Keh keh... Whoever it is doesn't matter. The more cracks that form in their ranks, the bigger our cut will be.”

Having made his decision, Gyeon Myeonggae summoned others who had been waiting nearby.

These were not members of the Seventeenth Subdivision under his command.

They were executioners directly dispatched from the higher-ups to deal with any anomalies in the Black Spot Blood supply.

An elite unit known as the Death Command Squad—composed entirely of top-class assassins.

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Deep within the heart of Eunru Valley, a place devoid of all human presence—

Masked figures appeared near the quarters of the Three Old Lords.

“This is a jackpot. To think that brat’s words were actually true.”

Heh!

With a twisted smile, Gyeon Myeonggae stepped forward.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to become our prisoner, Young Cult Leader.”

“Who are you bastards?”

“No need to know. All you have to do is surrender quietly.”

The power gap between the two sides was obvious—or at least, Gyeon Myeonggae thought so.

When the Young Cult Leader saw Gyeon Myeonggae had no interest in conversation, she turned and looked at their side.

“Jin Yeomyung, what do you think?”

“Hmm.....”

I looked over the masked men with sunken eyes and said,

“Never thought I’d catch your tail this early.”

“Tail, you say?”

“Surely you don’t think they’re some kind of righteous sect’s special task force, do you?”

“Hmph!”

Cheon Yura let out a small chuckle, perhaps taking my comment as a joke.

Indeed, with the murderous aura those bastards were emitting, no one in their right mind would mistake them for righteous warriors.

“That one over there definitely looks like a Beggars’ Sect dog.”

“That’s why we should keep him alive. He looks like he has a lot to spill.”

“Ugh, u-urgh!”

The Three Old Lords began to sweat coldly and slowly retreated.

Each of the enemies they faced were at least equal in strength, if not greater than them.

I casually shrugged my shoulders.

“At this rate, it’s not about capturing anyone. We should be worrying about staying alive.”

The Young Cult Leader surely had escorts, and a few of the Black Guards were present too—so she probably wouldn’t die.

But if we engaged them head-on, the casualties would be severe.

‘Especially the axe-wielding one standing beside that beggar. He’s a true Master Level expert. That one’s dangerous.’

It hadn’t even been two \*shichen\* since they arrived at Eunrugok.

If someone could mobilize this level of force in that short time, the hidden power within the cult must be truly terrifying.

“Don’t worry about that.”

Shrrrng!

Cheon Yura finally drew her sword in earnest.

Then she turned slightly to her side and spoke,

“Biyeon, assist me.”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

The Seventh Black Guard responded politely and stepped forward.

“...Huh?”

Wait, what?

“What did you just say?”

I blinked as I stared at the Seventh Guard, who threw off her mask.

Gone was the goofy air she had shown until now, replaced by Sa Biyeon, who radiated the same cold aura as her mistress.

She bowed her head slightly toward me.

“I’m sorry, Young Master.”

“N-no way... what the—?”

I had realized she was a woman, but to think she was actually Sa Biyeon?!

Before I could even react, Sa Biyeon turned and shouted toward the back.

“Black Guards, protect Young Master Jin!”

“Yes, my lady!”

Swish! Swish!

Over ten Black Guards from the Sa Clan encircled me.

Seeing this, Cheon Yura turned and shouted,

“Amyeong, Hoyeong, Gwonyoung. Assist me!”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader!”

Three figures appeared at her side.

They were likely the elite protectors of the Cult Leader—guardians assigned to her at all times.

In an instant, the numbers had shifted: twenty against five.

Even with four more added to our side, Gyeon Myeonggae showed no signs of backing down.

“What a cute little act of defiance.”

He sneered at Cheon Yura.

“So what if they’re from the Guardians? Without the Cult Leader, the best they can do is slightly below Master Level. But on our side, we have someone who’s reached Master Level.”

Cheon Yura replied calmly,

“You seem to know quite a bit about our cult’s inner workings.”

“Hehehe, I couldn’t help but know. Especially when it comes to the affairs of the Cheon Clan.”

Flinch!

At the words ‘affairs of the Cheon Clan’, her expression shifted ever so slightly.

“Seems like cockroaches have been crawling under the foundation of the main family. Looks like we’ll need a thorough extermination.”

“You’re still clinging to false hope, Young Cult Leader.”

“Ha... Ahaha! False hope, you say?”

Cheon Yura began to laugh.

There was a flicker of madness in her expression, and I instinctively shuddered.

That was not a look someone her age should be capable of.

“Listen well, you vermin.”

Whoosh!

And then, her blade was enveloped in a brilliant aura of pitch-black light.

“W-what is that?!”

Too radiant to be mere Sword Qi. Far too intense to be just Internal Energy.

At that moment, the leader standing beside Gyeon Myeonggae shouted urgently.

“Attack!”

At the leader's command, the assassins charged at Cheon Yura without hesitation.

Cheon Yura looked at them with a cold smile.

"Not a single one of you will leave Ten Thousand Mountain alive."

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Roughly one quarter-hour later

'D-Damn, that was brutal.'

I gulped as I looked around at the corpses of the enemies lying in heaps.

Twenty against five.

The outcome of that clash was, shockingly, a complete victory for Cheon Yura's side.

"T-This can't be..."

The leader of the enemy forces knelt down, clutching his severed arm.

Then he screamed in disbelief.

"I-I've never heard of the Young Cult Leader possessing such martial prowess!"

"Of course not."

She looked down at him as if he were a bug.

"I've never revealed my true strength to anyone in the Cheon Clan."

"...!!"

"Except for Father, Biyeon... and that guy over there."

She briefly cast a sidelong glance at me when she said 'that guy'.

Gulp!

'So when she fought me before, she was holding back that much...'

I thought she had gotten annoyed and started fighting seriously toward the end—but honestly, if the Cult Leader hadn't stepped in back then, I'd be dead for sure.

Well, leaving that aside—

'She's incredible.'

I couldn't help but marvel at the aftermath of the battle before me.

Even among First-rate martial artists, not all are created equal.

Those who served as Cheon Yura's escorts were specially selected young talents—future elites chosen to match the next Cult Leader in spirit and skill.

Not only had they mastered powerful demonic martial arts and inner cultivation methods, but they'd also trained rigorously under senior Guardians and proven themselves thoroughly.

Even within the same tier, the difference between them and other First-rates was enormous.

But what was even more remarkable was Cheon Yura herself—her performance didn't pale in comparison to those elite Guardians at all.

She had taken down five First-rate warriors and one Master Level leader, without so much as a scratch on her body.

A true genius of battle!

"T-This isn't over..."

Twitch!

'Hmm?'

For some reason, that enemy leader was staring at me now.

"I won't let it end like this—!"

Fwoosh!

The bastard sprang forward, charging straight at me.

A faint crimson glow—axe qi—flared on his axe.

"If I can't take you all down, I'll at least kill you, Jin Yeomyung!"

I let out a sigh and muttered,

"So you did hear my name earlier."

It was obvious.

Cheon Yura had openly mentioned my name when asking for my opinion.

‘Tch, foolish guy. Do you even know how many guards are around me right now?’

I had no doubt the Black Guards would intercept him before he could even touch me.

But then—

Even as he rushed in close, not a single one of the nearby Black Guards moved to stop him?!

‘What the—?!’

“Die, Jin Yeomyung!”

The arc of his axe swung in a powerful curve straight toward my crown.

Chapter 16: Clue in the Flower Garden (1)

Huh? Why aren’t you guys stopping him?

The moment the leader bastard passed by the Black Guards, I blinked a couple of times.

0.1 seconds. My gaze turned to the Black Guards in protest. I brought you guys here for this exact situation, didn’t I? You’re not statues—why are you just standing there?

0.5 seconds. I figured out the reason soon enough.

‘You sons of bitches!’

Every one of the Black Guards avoided my gaze!

Given Sa Biyeon’s usual personality, she wouldn’t act this way on her own. This was definitely the doing of the Young Cult Leader!

‘That damned woman!’

What the hell did I do to deserve this kind of treatment?!

1 second. Regardless, my rationality screamed that my life was in danger.

‘Damn it, it’s too late to dodge!’

The opponent was a Master Level, even if he was past his prime. You can't just avoid a self-sacrificing strike like that.

So, I only had one choice.

Cheng!

Kwaang!

The blade I quickly drew clashed with the bastard's axe aura.

"Guh!"

I even pressed my palm against the flat of the blade to block the impact, but it was hopelessly overpowered.

My body couldn't withstand the recoil of the axe and was hurled backward.

Thunk! Thud!

While I was rolling pathetically backward, I sighed inwardly.

'At a time when I should be looking cool, I end up in a dismount like this...'

Setting aside how shitty the situation was, this was clearly some kind of test from the Young Cult Leader.

After showing a disgraceful sight like that, how hard would the Young Cult Leader and the others laugh at me?

"I—I can't believe it!"

"He actually blocked it!"

But surprisingly, not a single person here laughed at me.

Instead, the leader bastard who had swung the axe looked stunned, his shoulders slumping as if he couldn't believe what had just happened.

"Why... why didn't you die?"

Twitch!

Unable to control the rage surging within me, I sprang up and pointed my finger at him.

"Hey, you crazy bastard! How dare you say something like that to a person?!"

Even as I shouted, the leader bastard yelled back, almost as if wailing.

“You should’ve had your head split open and died right there!”

From his point of view, that made perfect sense.

Even if it wasn’t the full-strength Axe Might he could only use at peak condition, that strike had gathered every last ounce of his remaining qi.

Leaving aside freaks like that Young Cult Leader, there was no way a mere late-stage First-rate Martial Artist, especially one so young, could block it without so much as a scratch!

“Was there really a monster like that growing up in the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan? If we let him live—”

He never finished his sentence.

Slash!

Before I knew it, Cheon Yura had cleanly severed his neck, then nodded slightly.

“As expected.”

Our eyes met.

“I figured as much, but it seems your skill is enough to withstand this level of attack.”

Sa Biyeon, who had followed behind her, looked at me with a somewhat surprised expression.

“What’s even more amazing is that he blocked a Master Level’s sword qi with only a basic Sword Form.”

Cheon Yura shook her head.

“It wasn’t just blocked. He redirected the trajectory properly at the last moment. If he hadn’t, his head really would’ve been split open.”

As she said, I hadn’t been able to unleash any sword qi.

With my still fledgling level, I wasn’t yet capable of drawing out sword qi in the blink of an eye.

Listening to their conversation, I sighed deeply inside.

“So then, are you satisfied? Now that you’ve seen my skills.”

“Very.”

A slight smile tugged at her lips as she answered.

‘Damn Heavenly Demon Cult!’

Supremacy of the strong. Survival of the fittest.

In the Heavenly Demon Cult, where those two concepts were paramount, these kinds of tests from higher-ups weren’t uncommon. It wasn’t even unusual for such tests to lead to actual assassination attempts.

Maybe I should feel relieved that this test wasn’t on hellfire difficulty?

“Next time, I’d appreciate at least a bit of warning beforehand.”

“Fufu, I’ll be generous.”

With that, she turned and walked away from me.

After all, she was an unexpected guest in this affair. I was the one who took the lead.

And as if passing a baton, Sa Biyeon, who had followed while hiding her identity, now approached me.

“Ahem! Young Master Jin.”

I responded with a sullen tone.

“What do you want, Number Seven of the Black Guards?”

My voice was full of annoyance.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down Sa Biyeon’s forehead as she tried to force a smile.

In the end, she bowed her head.

“Um, I’m sorry. I was simply too curious about how you would handle things, so I had no choice but to hide my identity.”

If Sa Biyeon had proposed to come along from the start, I wouldn’t have come here personally. I would’ve found another way, not wanting to expose her to danger.

“It’s fine. Curiosity is only natural. I’m not particularly angry or upset.”

I waved my hand and smiled back at her.

“Oh... I’m relieved, then...”

“However, I do have a bit of a complaint about the Black Guards’ handling of the situation.”

“...!”

Sa Biyeon’s expression stiffened.

Even if the Black Guards had held back under the Young Cult Leader’s orders, strictly speaking, they had abandoned their duty to protect me.

If I were to make an issue of this with the family, the heads of every Black Guard involved in this operation would roll.

And at the peak of that responsibility stood Sa Biyeon.

“T-that is...”

Her expression, which had just been frozen like ice, instantly crumbled.

Did she really think I would take this that far?

Seeing her flustered reaction, I spoke with satisfaction.

“Especially that one you called the Number Seven of the Black Guards? That girl’s got some serious issues.”

“...What?”

Sa Biyeon stood frozen, her expression completely collapsed.

“Despite being sent on your orders, she seemed to have no actual field experience. Watching her snoop around fulfilling her curiosity instead of following orders made her look completely unreliable.”

I enunciated each word clearly to the flustered woman.

“At the very least, I request that she be thoroughly re-trained. Especially—what kind of flower-filled head touches a poppy like it’s no big deal...”

“Y-yes... o-okay...”

Before I knew it, Sa Biyeon’s cheeks were trembling faintly.

Embarrassment and anger.

The two conflicting emotions created quite the spectacle on her face—it was a rather enjoyable sight.

Compared to her usual cold demeanor, always wearing a forced smile at best, this expression was a refreshing change.

“And why are you clenching your fists like that?”

“It’s... nothing.”

She abruptly turned her body away, her face now stiff and icy cold.

Seeing that chill, I awkwardly scratched my cheek.

‘Hm, did I tease her too much? No, definitely not.’

I nearly got killed, after all.

Compared to an attempted political assassination by the Black Guards, this level of teasing didn’t even count as payback. Sa Biyeon probably realized that too, which is why she didn’t argue back and was just swallowing her anger.

And so, the situation more or less settled.

‘I didn’t expect to be attacked by Master Level warriors out of nowhere, but I did get quite a lot out of it.’

Dusting myself off, I walked toward the only surviving attacker.

The Beggars’ Sect man who had failed even to bite his tongue—Gyeon Myeonggae.

‘Whether this guy is really a beggar or not, I’ll find out now.’

Dragging him into a more secluded corner, I crouched down in front of him.

“No matter how I look at it, you seem to know way more than that so-called leader did.”

“D-damn it. J-just kill me!”

“Why would I kill you? You’re about to give some very valuable testimony.”

I raised a finger with a bright smile.

“The guys you brought with you... they were way too bloodthirsty to be part of any orthodox sect. Not the Beggars’ Sect, not even the Murim Alliance.”

The moment our eyes met, a word slipped out of my mouth.

“Black-Spotted Blood.”

Flinch!

For the briefest instant, Gyeon Myeonggae’s pupils trembled.

I didn’t miss it.

“As I thought, you people are connected to them.”

“W-what are you talking about? Black-Spotted Blood, what’s that?”

He was a terrible actor for someone from the Beggars’ Sect. Or maybe he wasn’t a real spy to begin with?

I gave a slight smile and patted his shoulder.

“Come on now. Regardless of your true identity, you must’ve worked here for a few years, right? And someone like that doesn’t know what Black-Spotted Blood is?”

Despite the smile on my lips, my eyes were cold as ice.

“Ghk!”

Only then did he realize his mistake and shut his mouth again, but I continued speaking while channeling my Internal Energy into my fingertips.

“Even though I’ve neglected martial arts a bit, I’ve picked up a few side skills out of interest.”

“...?”

“One of them is torture. I learned Tendon Splitting and Bone Shattering quite diligently and thoroughly.”

The moment his eyes widened—

“If you really are from the Murim Alliance’s Special Operations Unit, then you should be able to endure a little torture. So no need to talk just yet. I want to have a little fun with this—it’ll be my first time trying it in practice.”

One way or another, I guess I really am from the Demonic Cult.

“W-wait!”

Gyeon Myeonggae tried to say something in a hurry, but my finger had already pressed against one of his pressure points.

“Mm! Mmph!”

With a cheerful mood, I tapped a few more of his acupoints.

“Well then, shall we start lightly? We can talk about where you’re from and what your goals are afterward.”

“Mmph! Mmph! Kuuuuugh!!”

And thus, in the innermost part of Eunru Valley, the muffled screams of one beggar quietly began to echo.

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The Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, spoke with rare hesitation, as if gauging the other person’s mood.

“Are you alright, Biyeon?”

Sa Biyeon’s face was filled with anger.

“I... No, I’m fine, Young Cult Leader. You don’t need to worry about me.”

She forced herself to shake off the emotion and maintain a composed expression.

To Cheon Yura, that side of her felt rather unfamiliar.

In truth, it was the first time she’d ever seen Sa Biyeon this shaken.

Due to her various duties and position, she almost never showed her emotions outwardly.

And yet now, just a few encounters with Jin Yeomyung had been enough to stir her feelings like this?

‘Fufu.’

Cheon Yura found her current expression rather amusing.

Of course, she didn't show it outright.

"My apologies. I ended up troubling you."

"It's really alright. Young Master Jin didn't seem to have any intention of escalating things."

"Mm."

In truth, what she meant by 'troubling' wasn't just about the earlier command. There was more.

While she was briefly debating whether or not to say it, Sa Biyeon posed a question.

"I do wonder, though—why did you give such an order?"

Jin Yeomyung's abilities had already been confirmed during the exchange match at the Lesser Demon Hall.

Among the Six Demonic Dragons—the top talents of the Demonic Faction—he had already proven himself to be among the upper ranks.

Cheon Yura answered her question calmly.

"I wanted to see his reaction."

"His reaction?"

"To see whether he really has feelings for me... or whether he's simply using me as a pawn of the Jin Clan."

"Ah..."

"Even if it looked a little unsightly, it was something I needed to do."

Previously, Jin Yeomyung had even used the word 'dear' when referring to Cheon Yura, showing clear signs of affection.

And she, who wasn't used to receiving that kind of attention from others, felt a need to confirm the sincerity of that expression.

But even aside from that—

'...Good heavens.'

Sa Biyeon barely resisted the urge to facepalm.

Wasn't this an extreme method of confirmation that would make anyone lose their feelings on the spot?

She desperately kept her expression in check, but couldn't quite stop her voice from trembling.

"S-so... what's the verdict?"

Whether or not she noticed Sa Biyeon's inner turmoil, Cheon Yura tilted her head and replied.

"Well, I guess I'm convinced that he didn't act like that just because of a courtesan's request?"

It was predictable that Jin Yeomyung would block an ambush from a wounded Master Level.

The real test was what came afterward.

If he had approached her purely for the sake of the clan, then at that point...

'He would've completely masked his emotions and put on a perfectly positive act.'

One of Cheon Yura's innate talents was the ability to discern subtle emotional shifts in people.

That perceptiveness was sharp enough to rival the sense Jin Yeomyung had awakened using his power from a previous life.

'What he showed me back then were traces of resentment and dissatisfaction. But beyond that, there were no particular changes.'

And—

'If he had approached me only for my background, he should have hidden even that resentment.'

At least, that's what everyone else who had approached her until now had done.

No matter what she did, they would smile, nod, and flatter her. Then, the moment they fell into a trap, they'd reveal their true colors and disappear one by one.

'Does he... really have feelings for me?'

Or was there some other motive?

If so, what reason could he possibly have to go this far?

As Cheon Yura wavered in confusion, Sa Biyeon opened her mouth.

“Young Cult Leader.”

“What is it?”

Sa Biyeon understood Cheon Yura’s inner turmoil.

She had watched over Cheon Yura for years and had witnessed firsthand everything she had gone through.

But even so—

“What will you do... if he ends up hating you?”

What if Jin Yeomyung truly did have genuine feelings for Cheon Yura?

Then the method she used earlier might have been a serious misstep.

“Then there’s nothing I can do.”

Cheon Yura let out a quiet laugh.

“I’m in a position where I have no other choice.”

A reply filled with countless layers of meaning.

A position where she had to constantly test and doubt everyone who approached her. If a potential relationship broke because of that, then so be it.

That was simply the kind of position she held.

That was what it meant to be someone who stood above all others.

Sa Biyeon, almost unconsciously, opened her mouth.

“If...”

Chapter 17: Clue in the Flower Garden (2)

“If...”

Swallowing slightly, she finally voiced the question she had long held back.

“If Young Master Jin were to pass the Young Cult Leader’s test, what would you do?”

“.....”

Truthfully, this was a question that crossed the line for someone in her position. But when she saw that faintly bitter smile, she couldn’t hold herself back.

And more than anything, she had a gut feeling—this might be the only moment she'd ever have the chance to ask this question.

“Who knows.”

Cheon Yura let out a soft scoff with an ambiguous expression.

“If that happens, it would mean that a small dream from my childhood, one I’ve long since given up on, has come true.”

“...A dream?”

“Yes, a dream.”

Clap!

After answering that far, Cheon Yura suddenly extended her palm toward Sa Biyeon.

“That’s enough, Biyeon.”

Before she knew it, her expression had returned to its usual cold and composed self.

“My debt to you ends here. Don’t try to understand me any further.”

“I apologize, Young Cult Leader.”

Only then did Sa Biyeon compose her expression and bow her head.

“Let’s focus on what lies ahead. I’m fully aware that this incident concerns me as well.”

“...Yes.”

There was no doubt that this was one of the reasons she had secretly followed Jin Yeomyung.

Cheon Yura, who had now tucked away her inner emotions, continued speaking.

“This matter revolves around that ‘Black-Spotted Blood’. Are you certain it’s connected to someone in the Cheon Clan?”

“We haven’t secured any definitive evidence yet. However, based on a few clues, that seems likely.”

“What kind of clues?”

“The first appearance of Black-Spotted Blood in circulation was two years ago. At that time, it was very cautiously distributed among the lower classes. Coincidentally, there’s evidence that the Black Ant Unit was active around that period.”

Cheon Yura tilted her head.

“Black Ants...? I’ve never heard of them before.”

“It’s one of the Cheon Clan’s subordinate groups that isn’t part of the Thirty-Four Squads. They’re usually tasked with handling the dirty work of the branch family members.”

“Hm, I see.”

The Heavenly Demon Cult’s main combat force was divided into thirty-four squads. But beyond that, there were countless miscellaneous groups not officially listed.

From the sound of it, these were mere errand runners—nothing more, nothing less.

Even as the Young Cult Leader, she didn’t know all these trivial inner workings.

“And you’re saying that the ones who brought in that monstrous drug are tied to none other than the Beggars’ Sect?”

“To be precise, it’s highly likely a third party disguised as members of the Beggars’ Sect.”

“Same difference. Whether righteous or demonic, the point is, there’s a traitor in the Cheon Clan who’s joined hands with an outsider.”

Cheon Yura’s expression twisted in fury.

Even if the drug had been distributed within the cult, as long as it remained internal, it could be forgiven with just a warning.

Such was the privilege of the Cheon Clan’s current position.

But if the source came from an outsider?

That wasn’t just a momentary lapse—it could be seen as an act of rebellion against the entire cult, even against the Cult Leader herself.

“Whoever it is, I hope we can catch at least a trace. For someone who should be protecting the cultists above all else to be the one poisoning them... I won't let them go. No matter who it is.”

“.....”

Sa Biyeon thought to herself.

If such a person existed, this wouldn't remain a problem confined to the Cheon Clan.

Blood would rain across all Six Great Demonic Clans.

But there was something that continued to bother her.

‘It seems like Young Master Jin is more concerned about forces from the outside than the traitor within the Cheon Clan... Is that just my imagination?’

Logically, the Cheon Clan should be the higher priority, yet watching his behavior, she felt an odd sense of inconsistency.

‘Especially going so far as to pay a huge sum to get them investigated...’

At that moment—

“The noise is dying down.”

“It is. Has the interrogation ended?”

It had been about half an incense stick's time since Jin Yeomyung dragged Gyeon Myeonggae to a secluded corner for interrogation.

Cheon Yura frowned slightly, seeming a little doubtful.

“I left it to him since he was leading this incident, but can that guy really extract proper information?”

While he may have had potential in martial arts, interrogation was an entirely different skill set.

Though the cries of anguish from Gyeon Myeonggae had been audible to the experts since earlier, that didn't necessarily mean the interrogation was going well.

“Young Master Jin may act frivolously, but he's not one to boast pointlessly. Please, try trusting him.”

“Hmph!”

Cheon Yura scoffed.

She didn't know why, but it bothered her that Sa Biyeon was defending Jin Yeomyung.

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“So, what's the result?”

To Cheon Yura's curt question, I gave a shrug.

“A bust. I expected more since he's a Four-Knot Beggar, but turns out he's a complete nobody—bottom of the barrel.”

“That's disappointing.”

There was a hint of contempt in Cheon Yura's expression.

But it wasn't without reason.

“No matter how remote this place may be, it's still within the cult's territory. There's no way someone that low-ranked could've brought in multiple experts.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And yet, you still say there's nothing to gain? Did I overestimate you?”

Why was she suddenly acting all cold again?

I blinked a few times.

“I said it was a bust, not that we got nothing at all.”

“Isn't that the same thing? Are you mocking me?”

Cheon Yura was just about to explode—

“What I meant by a bust was that I couldn't identify exactly who was behind him.”

“Behind him?”

“Well, it turns out Gyeon Myeonggae really is a genuine member of the Beggars' Sect.”

The staff he carried wasn't just for show.

The oral chants of the Beggars' Sect secret Staff Technique, which he spilled under torture, matched almost perfectly with the ones I had read for fun from the Heavenly Demon Martial Arts Repository back when I was the Inner Administrator.

“Specifically, someone higher up in the Beggars' Sect has made a deal with someone in the Cheon Clan. But Gyeon Myeonggae has no idea who that person is.”

In the end, the real mastermind behind this case could only be found by going after that superior in the Beggars' Sect.

Sa Biyeon let out a soft sigh.

“So it's virtually impossible to identify the culprit.”

“Well, this might just serve as a useful card to pressure the Beggars' Sect later on.”

“Then does that mean all leads have been cut off?”

“No, not at all. The mastermind is one thing—this incident is another.”

Separate from the mastermind, I had actually learned quite a bit from Gyeon Myeonggae.

“The ones Gyeon Myeonggae brought weren't from outside the Cult.”

“What? Is that true?”

Cheon Yura's eyes widened—along with everyone else's.

Indeed, if high-level experts had entered en masse from outside, there's no way the Four Demon Squads, who managed the Cult's outer region, would have missed it.

“Where are they from?”

“He said they came from a place called Red Root Village in Nine Streams City.”

“Red Root Village?”

Cheon Yura turned her gaze toward Sa Biyeon.

After a brief moment of thought, she answered mechanically.

“Approximately 150 household members. A mid-sized family with a 50-year history. It was established by Eun Goomyeong, a retired assassin from the former Ghost Slayer Unit. According to reports from the Lord of Nine Streams City, there's nothing particularly notable about them.”

At that moment, Cheon Yura's expression stiffened slightly.

"Ghost Slayer Unit, you said?"

"Yes, the now-defunct direct assassination squad under the Cheon Clan, the Demon Emperor Ghost Slayer Unit."

Was it just coincidence or fate that a group with ties to the Cheon Clan had appeared in this situation?

"Then... could the ones who came after me be..."

She hesitated for a moment, but soon her expression turned even more vicious.

"If we break them, we might find out the true mastermind behind all this."

"There's a problem, though."

"A problem? What now?"

"Despite appearances, they're capable of dispatching twenty First-rate Martial Artists, some of them even Master Level. It's clear the ones who came here weren't all of them."

No matter how powerful Cheon Yura and her guards were, there was no guarantee what might be awaiting them there.

"We can summon the Guardian Lions from the Lesser Demon Hall. If needed, we can even mobilize Grand Protector. That should be enough to crush most enemies."

Certainly, if Grand Protector, one of the top experts of the main Cult, stepped in, they could flatten almost anything.

But there was one issue.

"That would be too late."

This time, I interrupted instead of Sa Biyeon.

"They move beneath the surface in tightly compartmentalized cells. Red Root Village is likely just a temporary base. If those dispatched don't return by nightfall, the rest will vanish without a trace."

This wasn't the Cult's heartland.

It was the outer zone. Just gathering the experts from the Lesser Demon Hall, including Grand Protector, would take at least half a day.

In other words, by the time the full force was ready to attack, it'd be too late.

“Young Cult Leader, unfortunately, what Master Jin says is correct.”

With even Sa Biyeon agreeing, Cheon Yura's shoulders sagged slightly.

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

What else? It was already too late.

“Young Cult Leader, you should return now.”

“.....”

“We've passed the point where we can handle this ourselves. Besides, if someone of your standing keeps moving around, it'll draw attention from other cult members.”

The only reason she had some leeway was because this was the outer region. If she kept going like this, every eye from the main Cult would turn on her.

Cheon Yura didn't respond.

She simply bit her lip and lowered her gaze.

In her stead, Sa Biyeon asked,

“That's understandable, but Master Jin, what will you do from here?”

“I never needed brute force to resolve this in the first place.”

Originally, I planned to work my way up through the lower layers of the organization.

It was only because those bastards interrupted by trying to kidnap Cheon Yura that several steps had to be skipped.

“Things have gotten a little messy, but I doubt they've managed to erase all traces. I'll begin again from what remains.”

“Ah...”

“A promise is a promise, so I may have to borrow some power from my clan.”

I had promised to resolve this cleanly and even said I'd use my clan's strength if it came to that.

Since I made that promise, I needed to show at least some sincerity.

"W-Wait."

Just then, Cheon Yura raised her head and shouted.

"There's a way."

A way? What kind of way?

"The problem is, we don't have time to mobilize experts like the Guardian Lions or anyone else, right?"

"Well, that's true."

"Then I'll go to them myself."

What?

Before I could even digest her words, she placed her hand over her chest and declared,

"I, Young Cult Leader Cheon Yura, will make an official visit to Red Root Village, which was once under the Cheon Clan's banner."

Was she out of her mind?

She looked serious.

"If I make it a formal, public visit, they won't be able to pull anything openly."

It made a certain amount of sense on the surface, but—

"Young Cult Leader! No matter how you look at it, that's far too dangerous!"

Just as Sa Biyeon said, this was no different than sticking your neck out and asking to be killed.

I sighed and added in agreement.

"She's right. There's no way we can risk your life on something like this."

"Risk? You're calling this 'something like this'?"

“Yes. Compared to the weight of your life, Young Cult Leader, it is ‘something like this.’ I’m sure you know that better than anyone.”

Chapter 18: Clue in the Flower Garden (3)

One thing I knew for certain.

Right now, Cheon Yura was throwing a tantrum.

“You are not merely a direct descendant of the Cheon Clan, but the Young Cult Leader. For someone like you, self-sacrifice may be a virtue, but survival is a duty.”

Beside me, Sa Biyeon nodded earnestly.

You’re neglecting that duty right now—though I didn’t say it aloud, someone like her would understand the implication well enough.

“That’s...”

A faint wrinkle formed on her forehead.

Eventually, she snapped at me—but her eyes had clearly lost their earlier force.

“Aren’t you also the First Young Master of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, risking danger yourself?”

“It wasn’t to the point of gambling my life. More importantly, while I may be the First Young Master, I am not the Young Clan Head. You know this, don’t you?”

“...”

Her head dropped low, and her expression turned somber.

She looked like a sulky cat—cute, almost... but no, I couldn’t let that distract me.

In any case, if we compared this to a game of chess, Cheon Yura was the king. If she were captured, the game would end instantly.

We couldn’t afford to risk the king just to capture a pawn. That would only expose her to the threat lurking behind—cannons, knights, and other powerful pieces waiting in ambush.

After hesitating for a while, her lips moving silently, she suddenly spoke.

“I want to make up for my mistake.”

Mistake?

“Jin Yeomyung, your plan was disrupted because of me. I want to clean up the mess myself.”

It was true.

The assailant had come because she had recklessly revealed that existence.

Thanks to that, my plan—meant to unfold slowly in the shadows—had gone awry from the very start.

And Cheon Yura was aware of that.

Our gazes locked.

Normally, her face was hard to read, but now, her emotions were plainly visible.

‘Guilt, perhaps?’

No—what stood out more was...

‘Pride.’

The pride of someone who had acknowledged she’d caused trouble and wanted to fix it with her own hands.

Not the arrogance of vanity, but a pride close to responsibility.

With those emotions filling her eyes, she pleaded with me earnestly.

“I know I’m being unreasonable. But still, give me a chance.”

“Hmph.”

I crossed my arms and sank into thought.

Everyone around me held their breath as they watched.

Amid their silent gazes, I chuckled inwardly.

‘Not bad.’

She could’ve tried to handle it forcibly without asking for my permission.

In fact, I had expected her to deny any fault, or even be unaware of her own mistakes.

She was still in her stormy, impulsive years.

In my mind, I had long considered the Cheon Yura of twenty years later to be a different person altogether.

The Heartless Demonic Empress I knew had become a complete individual after enduring twenty years of hardship, polished and crushed by responsibilities.

The one standing before me now hadn't even experienced sitting in the Cult Leader's seat. Her thoughts, values—everything was different.

'Ha!'

And yet, the way she was acting now overlapped with the image of her I saw in my final moments.

'No wonder I fell for her.'

At last, I made my decision.

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Back in the day, Eun Goomyeong, the former chief of the Red Root Village, had been a legendary figure in the assassin world.

An assassin's fate usually fell into one of three categories.

Dying in the middle of a mission.

Climbing to a high rank, overcoming their lowly origins.

Or, failing that, retiring because their body could no longer endure the strain.

Eun Goomyeong belonged to the third type, which made up barely two or three percent.

He had only lost an eye—not even a limb—and yet he'd managed to retire. That alone earned him the title of legend in the field.

When he first established the Red Root Village, many who had known him came to offer congratulations.

Unsurprisingly, most of those "many" were assassins or former assassins.

Still, public interest in the Red Root Village barely lasted half a year.

Which was understandable.

A retired assassin couldn't be expected to have some grand martial art. And there were hundreds, even thousands, of places with similar manpower as the Red Root Village.

However, the place had been large enough to earn the title of "Hall."

Its outer wall alone was over a jang in length, and its inner compound could easily accommodate several hundred people.

Even so, the hall had faded from public attention because of its location—Nine Streams City.

A backwater area even within the vast Ten Thousand Mountains.

Plenty of land, but little population—a rural nowhere.

That was how Nine Streams City was viewed, and the Red Root Village was no different.

And so, it was completely forgotten by the world.

Even as ownership passed from Eun Goomyeong to his grandson Eun Cheoljung, and the place began to transform from the inside out.

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Boom!

A loud crash echoed as something shattered with explosive force.

And through the dust and wreckage emerged a young woman, not yet rid of her youthful air.

"Y-Young Cult Leader?!"

Eun Cheoljung, the current head of the Red Root Village, flinched in shock at the identity of the sudden intruder.

Cheon Yura had stormed through the front gate, practically smashing it to pieces. Sensing the chaotic atmosphere, she let out a faint smile.

"Looks like you're busy. Planning to move, perhaps?"

All around, one could sense movement—servants, retainers, and more rushing about frantically.

"W-Welcome, Young Cult Leader."

Eun Cheoljung bowed his head first.

Whatever her intentions, he had no idea—so for now, he could only pretend ignorance and treat her with the utmost courtesy.

“What brings you to our hall?”

“Ah, nothing special.”

Cheon Yura stepped confidently into the courtyard, heading straight for Eun Cheoljung.

As the distance closed, the hands of Eun Cheoljung and his retainers slowly inched toward their waists.

Cheon Yura ignored it and smiled brightly.

“I recently realized that I’ve been far too indifferent to those who’ve served the Cheon Clan with such devotion.”

“Devotion... you say?”

A strange twist appeared on Eun Cheoljung’s face.

“I heard the former head of your household was from the Demonic Emperor’s Ghost-Slaying Unit.”

Flinch!

“Even after decades of service to the Cheon Clan, I hear the best reward he received was barely enough to build a single estate.”

“I-Is that so?”

Just looking around was enough to know how enormous that ‘barely built’ estate actually was.

But Cheon Yura ignored that fact entirely.

“Are you not even going to offer your guest a cup of tea?”

“Ah! My apologies!”

Finally snapping back to his senses, Eun Cheoljung respectfully gestured toward the interior.

“In all of Ten Thousand Mountain, the Young Cult Leader can never be considered a guest. Please, come inside. I shall escort you.”

“Haha, very well.”

Without a trace of suspicion, Cheon Yura followed Eun Cheoljung’s lead.

His eyes turned cold as he walked ahead.

‘What is she planning?’

They had lost contact with the agents dispatched to Eunru Valley.

According to organizational policy, those dispatched were required to check in every two shichen without fail.

The last message they sent stated they were going to capture Cheon Yura, who had appeared in Eunru Valley.

No further reports came after that, and Eun Cheoljung had immediately begun wiping out traces of the Red Root Village.

But before they could finish the cleanup, the very target of the kidnapping had shown up here, completely unharmed.

‘She came here deliberately. That must mean she encountered the Kill Order Unit.’

He didn’t understand why she was talking about tea, but it worked out better this way.

Regardless of her intent, there could be no witnesses left behind.

Eun Cheoljung guided Cheon Yura to the innermost pavilion of the estate.

“Hm, while it’s been altered quite a bit, the upkeep is impressive. Looks like a place that gets plenty of visitors, doesn’t it?”

“Ha... hahaha...”

Her blatant sarcasm made his fists clench.

Still, he had to play along until she was completely inside.

–Kill Master, what are your orders?

A subordinate’s voice reached him via sound transmission.

–Proceed with the Golden Cicada Shedding plan.

Eun Cheoljung gave a swift order.

–Activate the formation the moment ‘he’ arrives. We’ve been given another chance, so this time, we must capture her without fail.

–Understood!

The subordinate’s presence vanished, and shortly after, Eun Cheoljung and Cheon Yura entered the pavilion.

And the moment he felt confident that she could no longer escape, Eun Cheoljung revealed his true colors.

“Well then, Young Cult Leader.”

“Address me properly, you insolent wretch.”

Cheon Yura’s brow twisted instantly.

But having come this far, Eun Cheoljung felt there was no more need to maintain formalities.

In an instant, a dozen masked individuals appeared behind him.

“Keh keh keh... We both knew what this was from the start—what’s the point of pretending? If you submit quietly, I won’t treat you too harshly.”

“Ha.”

Cheon Yura let out a soft chuckle.

“I expected you to exchange at least a few words before showing your fangs...”

This was unexpected for Cheon Yura, who had intended to buy time.

String!

She drew her sword.

In response, the masked figures surrounded her in an instant.

With just a quick glance, she assessed their level.

“I see now, your level of skill.”

“What did you say?”

“You’re so pitifully weak, it makes me want to die of boredom.”

Eun Cheoljung and the warriors immediately grimaced.

“You must think yourself untouchable just because you defeated the Kill Order Unit.”

“Naturally. You lot look no different from those who ambushed me before—and even your numbers are only half as many.”

“Don’t think this is all we’ve got!”

Zzzzzt!

Suddenly, the entire space around Cheon Yura began to distort.

The spacious interior began twisting into a maze-like structure, and eerie mechanical devices emerged as if defying space itself.

“...Mechanized Formation?”

“It’s called the Labyrinth Pursuit and Execution Formation. You think I brought you here without a plan?”

Formations were classified as either energy-based or mechanism-based.

Many thought a mechanized formation could be made by just tossing a few rocks and wooden blocks in the right place. But a proper mechanized formation required enormous amounts of manpower and money.

This alone was proof that the Red Root Village had not been established solely on the abilities of a retired assassin.

“There’s much I’d like to ask you.”

“You think I’ll answer so easily?”

“Of course not. At least, not until you’re in my grasp.”

Cheon Yura, staring at the so-called Labyrinth Pursuit and Execution Formation, looked at Eun Cheoljung with completely calmed eyes and spoke.

“Let me ask just one thing before we fight.”

“...?”

“Are you still part of the Cheon Clan?”

For a brief moment, Eun Cheoljung’s eyes flickered.

“Or have you turned traitor and joined hands with an outside force?”

“Kill her.”

With that single command, the directive changed from capture to kill.

The masked men lunged at Cheon Yura without hesitation.

“So that’s your answer.”

A sharp sword qi gathered at the tip of Cheon Yura’s blade.

There was no need to go as far as using Qi Projection. Even for a genius like her, that was still a burdensome technique.

“Keh keh keh... Sword Qi? Impressive, I’ll admit—but we expected as much!”

The masked attackers unleashed their own sword qi all at once.

They were all skilled enough to manifest sword qi—a level that would earn them elite status even in Salmak, the foremost assassination group in the Central Plains.

However—

As they rushed in, Cheon Yura’s sword danced sharply through the air.

She wielded six threads of sword qi at will—this was the Six-Form Mastery of the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

Cheon Yura’s movements, like a sword-wielding dancer, swept through the space in a deadly performance.

Chapter 19: Clue in the Flower Garden (4)

“This, this can’t be!”

What Eun Cheoljung felt now was not much different from what the leader who had just fallen to Cheon Yura experienced.

“She took down experts who can wield sword qi this easily?!”

All the ones who had just been defeated were experts capable of emitting sword qi.

And yet, they had been helplessly taken down.

In truth, Eun Cheoljung had believed the failure of the Young Cult Leader capture operation was due to the interference of the Law Enforcement Division.

The Six Demonic Dragons—known as the greatest late-stage talents in the cult—even the twins of the Pa Clan, said to be the strongest among them, had only barely reached Master Level.

‘My expectations were completely off. She’s not just someone who barely reached Master Level.’

Among the four stages of Master Level, she was at least at the Ascending stage. Perhaps, she had even reached the Expanding stage.

Tap.

Cheon Yura flicked the blood off her sword.

“Still far to go. To get blood on myself dealing with trash like this.”

“Ugh... Monster!”

Her smiling face exuded both seductive charm and a trace of eerie energy.

Unconsciously, Eun Cheoljung took a step back.

Cheon Yura’s expression slightly darkened at his display of cowardice.

“To think I had to be scolded so much by him just to catch someone like you. All it does is make me feel worthless.”

“H-Him? Who are you talking about?”

“Hmph, just a passing complaint. It’s nothing someone like you needs to know.”

A faint aura gathered at the tip of Cheon Yura’s sword.

Sword Qi Point-Strike—a top-level technique that even skilled experts couldn’t imitate.

“If you can’t become a dog of the Cheon Clan, then at least show your loyalty with your words.”

“Don’t talk nonsense! Do you even know who it was that massacred the Ghost-Slaying Unit, who had sworn loyalty to the Cheon Clan, and turned them into the Ghost Saint Legion?!”

Realizing that she intended to capture him alive, Eun Cheoljung immediately tried to escape.

But just then, his eyes flicked to something behind Cheon Yura—and a sudden gleam of hope lit up in his face.

The guards sent a warning at the same moment.

Thwack!

“Gwaaah!”

“S-Successor! Be careful!”

“...!”

Even Cheon Yura’s senses were fooled—someone had intervened.

By the time she turned her head, one of her guards had already lost an arm, and the others were disabled, spurting blood.

‘A top expert!’

Even if they weren’t fully matured, breaking through the Law Enforcers meant the intruder was no ordinary master.

Instinctively, Cheon Yura swung her sword at the charging assailant.

A sharp line of sword qi sliced through the air.

But the masked intruder smoothly deflected the strike and brushed past Cheon Yura.

‘What?’

She was briefly thrown off by the unexpected move, but it at least bought her time to gather the guards.

“Oho! You’ve arrived, sir!”

Eun Cheoljung spread his arms wide to welcome the masked figure.

“It’s her! The Young Cult Leader herself!”

Just moments ago, he had looked ready to run away. Now, bloodshot eyes gleamed as he welcomed the masked man with joy.

That was how much faith he placed in the masked man's skill.

However—

“We can't miss this chance, now that she's caught in the killing formation—urk!”

Eun Cheoljung couldn't finish his sentence.

After all, how could someone whose head was no longer attached to their body speak?

Thud!

The sound of Eun Cheoljung's severed head hitting the ground echoed loudly in the enclosed space.

For a brief moment, silence reigned.

Then Cheon Yura, having regained her composure, glared at the masked intruder.

“You left me here and took care of the evidence first. You must've been in a real hurry.”

“It's only right to discard a dog that failed the hunt.”

“Calling it a failure seems premature. But sure, I agree—dogs that bite their master should be abandoned.”

Hoo...

Cheon Yura exhaled softly and assumed a qi circulation stance.

“Oh?”

A flicker of intrigue passed through the masked figure's eyes.

“You're not planning to run?”

“Why should I run from a righteous sect dog?”

“R-Righteous sect?!”

The guards who had been tending to their internal injuries were stunned by her thunderous declaration.

There was another flicker of surprise in the masked man's eyes.

“Interesting. Why do you think I'm from a righteous sect?”

“The technique you used to deflect my sword qi. That wasn’t from our cult’s sword style.”

“Haha. What if I just brushed it aside because your skill was that lacking?”

Even the masked man’s mocking laughter couldn’t shake Cheon Yura.

Her voice rang out clearly.

“That solid yet flowing style. And a place capable of producing a master of your caliber is rare. Qingcheng, Zhongnan? Or maybe Wudang. Which is it?”

The masked man fell silent, seemingly struck by the accuracy of her guess.

Cheon Yura pressed on without pause.

“So the noble and upright old sects are spreading poison in our cult, huh? I’m very curious now—which sect are you from?”

“...”

“If you reveal it now, I’ll even use my private funds to announce your identity across the central plains. I could hire the Beggars’ Sect for it.”

Hearing that, the guards blinked, momentarily forgetting their injuries.

‘Yeah right. Like he’d reveal anything after that.’

Or so the guards were thinking when—

Crack!

“My affiliation? Ask King Yama in hell!”

A murderous aura exploded from the enraged masked man.

The pressure alone was enough to overwhelm everyone present.

“Young Cult Leader, it’s dangerous! That man is—!”

“I know.”

Cheon Yura cut off her guards.

“He’s definitely someone who’s reached the Sword Force Realm.”

Sword Force Realm.

A stage where one could use qi force independently of sword forms or internal cultivation techniques.

Often called the peak of Master Level, even its earliest stage was enough to rank within the top 500 of the cult's hierarchy, and such experts were rare enough to become famous across an entire province.

"I'm curious."

A crooked smile curled on Cheon Yura's lips.

"To see how close I've come to reaching the level of a Sword Force Realm master."

"Heh heh!"

The masked man staring at Cheon Yura was past being dumbfounded—he felt almost hollow.

Even if she were the best late-stage prodigy in the world, comparing her to himself was absurd.

Let alone someone who didn't even look to have reached her twenties—it was laughable, even pitiful.

"The information that the Young Cult Leader of the Demonic Cult is flaunting her guts will fetch a high price."

"It's not arrogance, it's confidence."

"That's exactly what arrogance is, you naive little brat!"

Unable to restrain himself, the masked man charged at Cheon Yura first.

A surge of blue sword qi erupted from his sword, violently sweeping toward her.

"Young Cult Leader!"

"Stand down, all of you."

Her guards were already severely injured from the masked man's first strike—it was a miracle they had survived at all.

They were now a burden, not a help.

Cheon Yura's sword met the oncoming blade of the masked man.

Boom!

At the result, the masked man couldn't hide his shock.

"Huh? She held out?"

Though both used sword qi, the difference in their level was obvious. In terms of output and cutting power, her sword shouldn't have been able to match his.

Even if she somehow overcame all that, with her thin arms and slight frame, she should've been sent flying from the difference in raw strength.

And yet, she stood firm, like an immovable mountain.

"Surprised?"

Cheon Yura responded calmly, as if she'd anticipated his reaction.

"The Heavenly Demon Cult's Divine Art doesn't lose in 'power' to any other qi Cultivation under heaven. Not even when there's a gap in level."

"It seems so. I'll admit—I'm slightly surprised."

Shhkh—

"But don't mistake that for winning."

The masked man's sword curved like a serpent and aimed straight for Cheon Yura's heart.

This opponent was a seasoned veteran.

A moment of emotional disturbance was swiftly suppressed as he struck to exploit her opening.

A sudden blow ignoring all sense of cautious engagement.

She hastily swung her sword to deflect it, but couldn't avoid having her shoulder slightly grazed.

"Kh!"

"Talent aside, inexperience leads to this result."

The masked man relentlessly pursued the opening in her staggered form.

Cheon Yura countered with fierce strikes from the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art, but at each clash of swords, she kept losing ground.

There was only one reason why.

“As expected, without overturning the fundamentals, you’ve no way to beat me.”

Power, speed, technique, control of distance—everything.

Just as the masked man said, Cheon Yura couldn’t match him in the foundational aspects of martial arts.

The longer the fight dragged on, the more sweat gathered on Cheon Yura’s brow.

Thirty seconds passed.

Clang! Crack!

Finally, she couldn’t withstand the shockwave from his sword and her body was flung far back.

“Huff... Huff...”

She knelt on one knee, supporting herself with her sword.

Seeing her like that, the masked man’s gaze grew sharper with wariness.

“So, the Heavenly Demon Cult has been nurturing a Little Demon after all.”

For him, this was the highest form of praise.

“Among the core disciples of our main sect who’ve reached their thirties, none have ever lasted thirty seconds against me. But you, barely out of your teens, lasted that long.”

Of course, he had held back a little.

Capturing the Young Cult Leader would be an achievement far beyond anything else.

But even with that level of restraint, most experts would’ve already been subdued.

“He gave me the order to bring you in alive, but judging by your skill, if I don’t kill you now, you’ll return as a calamity.”

The Law Enforcement guards surrounded Cheon Yura, but the fight was already decided.

'He said "he"?'

Cheon Yura's eyes narrowed as she caught her breath.

That meant someone higher up than this man was infiltrating the cult?

"In ten years, there might not be more than ten masters in all of Murim who can handle you. In twenty, unless someone feeds you a deadly poison, there'll be no stopping you."

"Hahaha... at least your eyes work properly."

"It's because they work properly... that you must die today."

The masked man began walking slowly toward her to finish the job.

"I'll praise you for having the courage to face me without fleeing. Not that you could have run in the first place."

"...I knew."

"What?"

His steps faltered slightly at her words, spoken through ragged breath.

"I knew there'd be an expert I couldn't handle... and that a trap formation had likely been set here. I expected it all."

"You're lying."

His voice turned fierce.

"You knew all that and still walked into the jaws of death? Are you trying to prove you're an idiot?"

"If you want to say I was wrong, then maybe it's just a difference in opinion with 'him'."

"Him'?"

"Isn't that right... Jin Yeomyung?"

Twitch!

The masked man's head jerked backward.

And at that moment, a young man appeared at the grand entrance of the hall, pushing the doors open.

“You’re late.”

At Cheon Yura’s reproach, I answered with a gentle smile.

“I told you, didn’t I? They’re not wary of you because you’re the Young Cult Leader. It’s because of your worth as a person.”

“I’m still not dead.”

“If I’d been even a little later, you definitely would’ve been.”

“Well, I’m alive, so that means I win.”

At her stubborn logic, my lips twitched slightly.

When someone was stronger and outranked you, there was no arguing with that kind of brute reasoning.

I let out a soft sigh, and the masked man turned to glance at me, then spoke.

“Who are you?”

I gave a simple answer.

“Death.”

Chapter 20: Hwa Jeokun (1)

“I absolutely cannot die.”

That was what Cheon Yura told us before the operation began.

I looked at her with a sympathetic gaze.

“Come on, a prideful clown like you should know your limits.”

“Biyeon, go ahead and gut that bastard.”

“As you command, Young Cult Leader.”

Sa Biyeon really did pull out her dagger and started approaching me.

“Can’t I even joke around?”

“For a joke, your eyes were awfully sincere.”

If I couldn't talk Cheon Yura down right now, Sa Biyeon's dagger would really end up stabbing into my stomach.

“I'm always sincere with the Young Cult Leader. That's the truth.”

Up to now, whenever I'd come at her directly, Cheon Yura had unexpectedly shown signs of weakness.

But this time, her reaction was different.

With a sulky expression, she said,

“You say you're always sincere, yet you can't even keep your own words, can you?”

The words I said?

While I hesitated and stumbled, unable to answer, Cheon Yura's expression turned even more sullen.

“Hmph, you can't even remember. Fine then. Try to grasp the meaning of what I just said.”

This much I could answer confidently.

“You mean that your value as a hostage is too high, so you can't die even if you want to.”

“Yes, that answer comes out so easily.”

I seemed to have guessed right, but for some reason, she looked even angrier.

Why?

“I am the only direct descendant of the Cheon Clan. It's far more beneficial to capture me alive than to kill me.”

I shook my head and countered.

“If someone aiming for the position of Cult Leader is behind all this, then you're finished.”

“Hmph, that's impossible. Are you just probing me even though you know better?”

Cheon Yura was far wiser than I had expected.

“There’s definitely someone within the Cheon Clan colluding with an outside force. But no matter how distant the branch, the Cheon Clan is the dominant family in these Ten Thousand Mountains. There’s no way someone of the lower ranks would directly handle something like this.”

She was right.

“At the end of this incident lies the bottom of the bottom. Just a tail that can be severed at any time. But if some ‘outside power’ is involved in this, there’s actually a chance we’ll meet a real heavyweight.”

And from that force’s perspective, if they found Cheon Yura, capturing her would be a top priority.

“Judging by what they’re doing, it’s clear that their long-term goal is to weaken the cult’s power.”

“If they want to weaken the cult’s power, then all the more reason it’s bad if you die. The moment you die, the Cheon Clan will fall into a civil war among the branch families.”

“As long as the Cult Leader is healthy, that won’t happen.”

Cheon Yura said firmly.

“The Cult Leader will, even if it takes more time, quietly and surely prepare someone to replace me. Unless something unusual happens, he’s someone who can remain vigorous for decades to come.”

That was true.

The current Cult Leader wasn’t on the brink of death or anything. He could easily hold onto his position for another twenty years.

In my past life too, he hadn’t died of old age—he simply handed over the position to Cheon Yura and then vanished without a trace.

More than anything, the current Cult Leader bore the name of the Heavenly Demon, and was considered one of the three supreme beings of the Central Plains.

“Anyone with a shred of sense would know it’s far more profitable to keep you alive and captured rather than kill you.”

“But there’s just one thing you’ve overlooked.”

Cheon Yura’s expression twisted.

“What is it? After all I’ve said, can’t you at least agree with me?”

“I understand that I can’t stop you anymore, but I still want to say this.”

I took a deep breath and continued.

“You’re underestimating your own inherent worth, Young Cult Leader.”

“Inherent worth?”

“Talent.”

Overwhelming talent, at that.

“What if they fear the consequences of your talent more than they value you as a hostage? What if they think your future threat outweighs your present usefulness? What will you do then?”

Due to her being a female Cult Leader and her tendency to focus on internal affairs, Cheon Yura was often underestimated in terms of martial strength, both inside and outside the cult.

But I knew her true nature.

Despite being poisoned by numerous deadly toxins that left her unable to exert even a quarter of her full strength, she had faced off directly against the Murim Alliance Leader, the Sword Supreme, and the elite forces under his command—the Golden Dragon Heavenly Sword Squad.

Though she ended up gravely wounded, she had killed dozens of members of the Golden Dragon Heavenly Sword Squad, and in the end, the Murim Alliance Leader had to retreat without taking her head.

I was certain.

In twenty years, her martial strength would be on par with the current Cult Leader.

If an enemy, currently incapable of dealing with that potential, were to realize it now?

Cheon Yura would truly be a dead woman.

“Ahem! Ahem!”

But for some reason, instead of replying, she began coughing loudly and awkwardly, avoiding my gaze.

“...?”

Sa Biyeon gave me an admiring look.

“Lord Jin, you’re quite good at flattery too, I see.”

“Flattery? I was being sincere.”

“S-stop talking!”

Cheon Yura waved her hand, trying to shut me up.

She looked genuinely embarrassed, her fingers fidgeting constantly.

‘What the—was what I said really that embarrassing?’

As I thought that—

“A-anyway, I’ve heard your... insightful opinion well.”

“...”

“But as you said, if the enemy decides to kill me out of fear of my potential, that would only be after quite some time has passed.”

“Well, that’s true.”

To discern the danger posed by the Young Cult Leader, the enemy would have to be at least on the level of a Justice Faction Leader.

And you usually had to exchange a few blows to really gauge someone’s talent.

The problem was, her talent would inevitably be exposed before the Law Enforcement Division arrived.

Even knowing that, Cheon Yura looked at me with trusting eyes.

“You won’t let me die, will you?”

Ah, when she put it that way, I had nothing left to say.

I laughed bitterly to myself.

If she asked like that, how could I not give in to her stubbornness?

“Just give me a bit of time to come up with a plan.”

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And now, the present—

“How was he, now that you’ve faced him?”

Cheon Yura asked while catching her breath.

“He’s certainly tricky. No wonder the Nine Great Sects are called prestigious.”

“You’re certain he’s from one of the Nine Great Sects?”

“All the Heavenly Demon Cult’s sword techniques stored in the Heavenly Demon Pavilion’s Martial Arts Repository, I’ve mastered them. But his swordplay contains a logic that is the exact opposite of those.”

The cult’s sword techniques mostly pursued tyrannical force and extreme destructive power.

But the swordsmanship of the orthodox sects adhered to the fundamentals, incorporating the profound principles of flow, speed, adaptability, and strength.

A swordsman who had cultivated those fundamentals to the pinnacle of mastery.

He was, in a sense, her natural enemy.

“Well, now that I’m here, you don’t have to worry.”

“Not worry?”

The masked man gave me a sideways glare.

“You call yourself a Harbinger of Death? How naive.”

“Is that how I seem?”

“I admit I misjudged the Young Cult Leader’s capability. But you—you’re different. At best, you’re just a late-stage post-realm, not even at the Master Level.”

As expected, I couldn’t fool someone of supreme-level cultivation.

“Tell me your name, brat. I’ll at least acknowledge the confidence it takes to call yourself a Harbinger.”

“I am Jin Yeomyung of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

“Jin Yeomyung... Jin... The Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan!?”

The masked man’s eyes lit up like a fisherman who had landed a giant catch.

I could see the grin forming even under his mask, that’s how delighted he was.

“This is quite the unexpected gain. I’ll have no choice but to kill the Young Cult Leader, but your situation is different.”

In short, he intended to take me hostage.

“If you stay quiet, I won’t inflict any unnecessary pain.”

His overwhelming presence started to weigh on my throat.

At that moment, a smug snort sounded from the side.

“Hmph!”

It came from Cheon Yura.

She wore an expression that practically said, you and I are simply on different levels.

To be flaunting that even in this situation—it really twisted my gut.

“This is kind of irritating.”

“It can’t be helped. It’s the difference in class we were born into.”

“I’ll admit I’m a bit lacking in martial talent, but still, it’s annoying.”

“So? You came alone, which means you must’ve had a plan, yes?”

“Of course.”

“Now that is intriguing. What method do you have in mind to deal with me?”

Just as the masked man took a step forward—

The sound echoed like a trigger pulling: the sharp twang of a bowstring coming from the wall.

“What?!”

With superhuman reflexes, the masked man barely avoided the hidden weapon aimed at his temple.

But even so, the sudden ambush made his hair stand on end.

“No way, you—”

There was only one thing this situation could mean.

“The Maze-Killing Array, was it? That’s mine now. I can do whatever I want with it.”

“...”

“Why do you think I came alone?”

I smirked with satisfaction.

“Obviously, because all our other forces were invested elsewhere.”

The moment I saw the large pavilion within the estate, I was certain that there had to be a mechanical formation installed inside.

I’d wondered whether I could disable or seize control of that formation—and thanks to the help of the Black Guards, I ultimately succeeded.

“For this kind of mechanism-based formation, I figured the control room would be either in the underground level or the top floor. Fortunately, it wasn’t on the top floor—it was underground.”

“Then Biyeon must be there.”

“Yes. With Lady Sa’s eyes, she’ll be more than enough to assist.”

Everyone who had originally managed the mechanism was slaughtered by Sa Biyeon.

Thus, the killing formation meant to trap Cheon Yura was now turned into a sharp spear aimed at the masked man.

“If there’s one unfortunate thing—”

I said, drawing my sword.

“Neither we nor you have the luxury of dragging this out.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Cheon Yura narrowed her eyes.

Right now, their objective was to hold out until reinforcements from the Law Enforcement Division arrived.

So why couldn't we stall?

"They're almost done severing the tail. Maybe you haven't noticed since we're inside the formation, but the outside is a sea of fire."

"...Damn it."

"If we delay any longer, we'll all burn to death together."

The Black Guards were darting about collecting evidence, but the enemy's preparations were more thorough than expected.

The masked man let out a hollow laugh as he looked at us bracing ourselves for battle.

"You're not planning to run, I take it?"

"If we retreat now, we gain nothing."

As I said—if we let this bastard in front of us slip away, we'd be left with no results whatsoever.

"Very well. If you want to die that badly, then I suppose I don't need to hide my identity anymore."

The masked man tore off his mask roughly.

Beneath it was the refined face of a middle-aged man with neatly trimmed facial hair.

If he were in Taoist robes, you could easily mistake him for a dignified priest.

But there was only one reason he'd reveal his face now.

'He fully intends to kill Cheon Yura.'

He extended his sword and placed two fingers from his other hand on the back edge of the blade.

There were countless sword arts in the martial world, but only one famous technique began with such a distinctive posture.

Cheon Yura let out a soft sigh.

"Azure Cloud Crimson Slash Sword!"

One of the signature sword arts of the Azure Star Sect, among the Nine Great Sects.

“I am Jeokun of Azure Star Sect.”

The name Jeok denoted the Crimson generation.

Which meant—he was an elder of Azure Star Sect.