

My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader

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“Jeokun, huh.”

The identity of the opponent who revealed himself was quite astonishing.

An elder of the Azure Star Sect.

Given the fully matured skills that had reached the pinnacle, this elder surely ranked among the strongest of his peers.

‘They call this place Hidden Trace Manor—such an annoyingly fitting name.’

Hidden Trace Manor—and here indeed was someone named Jeokun, literally 'hidden cloud.'

Cheon Yura quietly sighed.

“So, the Azure Star Sect was behind all of this?”

“Huhu, I won’t bother answering that.”

Though he didn’t confirm it directly, Jeokun had effectively laid all his cards on the table.

But I knew there was another side hidden within the truth.

I gave a twisted smile as I stared at Jeokun.

“You sure laid your pieces out well, considering the possibility of us surviving.”

“What did you say?”

“If the Young Cult Leader and I make it out of here alive, we’ll have no choice but to point our swords at Azure Star Sect. This is practically a full-on righteous-vs-demonic war.”

Cheon Yura frowned.

“What are you talking about, Jin Yeomyung?”

“That guy might be pretending to be an upright man from an orthodox sect, bravely revealing his identity and seeking a life-or-death duel, but that’s nothing more than a disguise.”

“A disguise? His swordsmanship is of the orthodox style. What exactly is he faking?”

“Obviously, he’s faking being part of the Azure Star Sect Sect.”

Jeokun scowled, as if he couldn’t bear to listen anymore.

“Are you trying to insult me? I am an elder proudly listed in the Azure Star Sect Elders’ Registry.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Of course. I’m sure you have ties to Azure Star Sect.”

But just because someone has a foothold in Azure Star Sect doesn’t mean their core allegiance lies there.

“But what if you—yes, you—are deceiving even Azure Star Sect?”

“.....?!”

To be honest, I wasn’t completely certain when I said that.

But even if I was wrong, if I could just gauge his reaction, it would still be worth it.

A group whose true identity not even Cult Leader Cheon Yura fully grasped, only knew by name.

“Are you the ones who seek to defy the heavens—Heaven-Defying Society?”

“.....!!!”

Jeokun’s eyes widened to the point of tearing apart.

And at the very same moment, his sword, Azure Cloud Crimson Sunset Sword, came flying at my neck.

‘Shit!’

The killing intent surging from Jeokun’s sword clearly showed that this was no attack meant to subdue.

It was unmistakably a killing strike aimed to sever life!

Swish, swish, swish!

Immediately, traps all around sprang into action as countless hidden weapons rained down on Jeokun.

But Jeokun ignored every single attack and charged straight at me.

He brushed aside the minor threats with defensive Qi and evaded the fatal ones by avoiding vital points, doing whatever he could to drive his sword into my heart.

'I figured he'd react somehow, but I didn't expect this much!'

The formation, notorious enough to be called a Killing Array, was still insufficient to stop a peak Master-Level expert.

Just before Jeokun's sword pierced my heart, Cheon Yura grabbed the back of my collar and hurled me backward.

"Guh!"

And then, she took the full brunt of Jeokun's strike.

BOOOOM!

With a thunderous crash that rattled my eardrums, Cheon Yura was flung backward toward where I was.

Barely steadying her staggering form, she spoke.

"That was close."

"Are you alright?"

"Hmph, this is nothing."

Nothing, she said, but blood was trickling from the corner of her lips.

Clear evidence of internal injuries.

'This... might actually be dangerous.'

I hadn't unleashed the full force of the Maze-Killing Array, but if I poured everything out in a sealed space like this, we wouldn't make it out unscathed either.

Sharpening my senses, I drew my sword.

I obviously couldn't match him in a one-on-one, but I could at least support Cheon Yura.

"By the way, what did you say just now that made him change like that?"

I replied casually.

"Hm, who knows? Survival seems to be the priority right now, doesn't it?"

".....Hmph, true. Survival comes first."

Cheon Yura seemed to have more she wanted to ask, but she let my feeble dodge slide.

"Can you match my rhythm?"

"I'll manage somehow."

"Good."

The Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword I had learned shared some resonance with Cheon Yura's Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword.

Not a perfect match, but I could at least keep pace behind her.

"Stay sharp. He doesn't seem interested in playing games anymore."

Jeokun was no longer sneering or taunting us.

With his Azure Cloud Crimson Sunset Sword raised once more in its Qi-infused stance, he honed his momentum like a single blade.

"He's coming!"

Jeokun's sword, infused with decades of martial experience, descended upon us.

Power, speed, and adaptability—his Azure Cloud Crimson Sunset Sword overwhelmed us in all aspects.

But when it came to strength and adaptability, our combined effort could balance the scale.

"Right!"

Even before Cheon Yura finished speaking, I leapt out to intercept the strike that was protruding from the right.

My sword, wrapped in dark sword qi, met the curved blue trajectory of his blade and deflected some of its force.

I didn't need to block it head-on. I couldn't anyway.

Just moving appropriately at the right moment drastically reduced the pressure on Cheon Yura.

"You bastard!"

Even as Jeokun glared at me, he didn't lower his guard against Cheon Yura.

It was clear that I was his top kill priority, but he knew that he couldn't get to me without going through her.

"Huuuup! Haaah!"

Even blocking a fraction of his assault sent a numb ache through my hand.

But it was alright. I wasn't the only one supporting this fight.

Papapapat!

Just as Jeokun shook me off and lunged his sword at Cheon Yura, sharp fragments of metal flew at him from all directions.

"Tch, how annoying!"

Earlier, he had ignored everything to deliver a single decisive blow, but because of that, Jeokun had ended up with several minor injuries.

"Damn that Eun Cheoljung bastard! How could he have managed things so sloppily?!"

Jeokun muttered a low curse as he quickly pulled back.

At that bitter complaint, I inwardly scoffed.

He wasn't exactly the right person to be saying that, considering he was the one who had killed Eun Cheoljung.

Jeokun kept pressing us with attacks.

But with Sa Biyeon and me providing proper support, and especially with her rapidly adapting to Jeokun's swordplay, the situation gradually began to settle.

"Huff, huff..."

Cheon Yura, now breathing evenly again, glanced at me sideways and smirked.

“Not bad at all, Jin Yeomyung. I didn’t think we’d be able to sync this well.”

I, already feeling the strain of my limits, answered weakly.

“That’s a relief. Everything’s going as planned.”

Despite the long battle, Jeokun hadn’t been able to break through us.

If it had been a one-on-one, I wouldn’t have lasted ten seconds. Even Cheon Yura likely wouldn’t have survived a hundred seconds.

But this particular environment had kept us alive up until now.

“The sword style you use... it somehow feels similar to the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword. I’ll have to check it out if the exchange sessions open up again.”

“Are exchange sessions some kind of martial arts tournament to you?”

I shook my head in disbelief.

“And besides, it’s not over yet. Focus, please.”

Just as I said, Jeokun was still standing solidly in front of us.

However, his expression was distinctly different from before.

“You crazy monstrous bitch...”

I unintentionally agreed with Jeokun’s insult.

Despite taking the brunt of his assault, Cheon Yura had avoided any fatal injuries and only allowed minor damage to her clothing.

Even that damage had lessened noticeably over time.

“I can see it now. His sword.”

Cheon Yura’s talent had caught the flow of Azure Star Sect’s secret sword technique.

Once you could read the flow, no matter how fast the technique was, you could respond somehow.

Jeokun, realizing this, let out a subtle sigh.

“Seems I’ll have to put my life on the line if I want to kill you two.”

If speed and technique didn’t work, only one option remained.

Crack!

A radiant light, completely different from before, began gathering on Jeokun’s sword.

Our expressions hardened.

‘Sword Aura!’

Cheon Yura had once unleashed strong Qi against me before.

But back then, due to her lack of control, the energy had scattered in tendrils and branches—an incomplete sword aura.

What Jeokun was showing now was a perfect, linear sword aura with no wasted energy.

Its power and precision were on a completely different level.

“I tried to avoid using major techniques because of the trap formation, but there’s no helping it. I’ll have to overexert myself and kill you both.”

Cheon Yura spoke with a tense expression.

“This is truly dangerous, Jin Yeomyung.”

“Indeed it is.”

Support or not, this one was coming straight at us with raw power.

There was no way around it.

If we even tried to redirect it, our bodies would be sliced in two.

Knowing this, Cheon Yura stepped forward and said,

“Run.”

“...?!”

“There’s nothing you can do anymore. Better to retreat. We’ve stalled long enough—surely the Law Enforcement Hall should’ve arrived by now. What a shame.”

It was true.

From the moment Cheon Yura charged in recklessly until now, we had bought at least an entire two-hour period.

Under normal circumstances, the Law Enforcement Hall thugs who received the message should've stormed in long ago.

"I'm giving up on capturing him. I'll stall him a bit more and run. You should go ahead."

"That's not happening."

"What?"

"You didn't intend to run in the first place, did you?"

I knew Cheon Yura too well.

With her immense pride, she'd never abandon her duty.

She wasn't the kind of person who could retreat when the enemy was right in front of her.

"Don't go throwing your life away for nothing. If we live, we live together."

"....."

Cheon Yura looked at me like she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Did she never expect I'd say something like this?

After a moment of stunned silence, she seemed to steel herself and turned her gaze to Jeokun.

"We're using Harmonizing Energy. Sync up with me, no matter what."

"Understood."

Harmonizing Energy was a technique where two people who could wield sword qi fused their energies into one and released it—a type of joint qi attack.

Strictly speaking, Harmonizing Energy wasn't actually a formation.

Formations, by definition, had to create a "plane" or "surface" to qualify as such. But Harmonizing Energy only fused energies into a single "line," making it a simple convergence rather than a formal formation.

Because of its simplicity, it was ideal when a direct clash of force was needed.

But that same simplicity also meant it posed tremendous danger if the energies were incompatible.

As Cheon Yura extended her sword forward, I also raised mine in sync.

At the sight of us, Jeokun couldn't suppress a mocking sneer.

"Harmonizing Energy? What are you two, husband and wife?"

Twitch!

For a moment, I nearly let out a dry laugh.

It was common belief that only twins trained in the same internal energy, or couples who had practiced together for years, could properly execute *Harmonizing Energy*.

"Jin Yeomyung, don't fall for his provocation."

"Of course."

Although... was that even meant to be provocation?

"Die!"

"Haaaah!"

As Jeokun's azure sword aura surged forth, our black Harmonizing Energy burst out to meet it.

KWA-KWAAANG!

The two attacks of sword aura-level power collided, and the shockwave triggered the surrounding Maze-Killing Array mechanisms to begin exploding outward.

Chapter 22: Hwa Jeokun (3)

"Keurgh!"

Cheon Yura's knees hit the floor.

Though she had succeeded in synchronizing perfectly with my flow of Qi, the cost of facing off against the Sword Aura of a Peak Master Level opponent was steep.

"Hehe, hehehe!"

Jeokun's figure was drenched in blood.

He had taken a direct hit from the attack that exploded out from the mechanism formation just before it was destroyed by the shockwave. The wound he received looked nearly fatal.

And yet—

“What a shame.”

Despite suffering what appeared to be a fatal injury, Jeokun was still alive.

And he still had enough energy left to finish us off.

As if in one last desperate struggle, the remaining mechanism formation activated and targeted Jeokun. But most of it had already been destroyed, and couldn't stop him.

Jeokun swatted away the incoming hidden weapons as he walked toward us.

“Looks like you can't move anymore.”

“.....”

Cheon Yura hung her head, utterly exhausted, looking like she was dead. I held her protectively and glared at Jeokun.

'Is this the end?'

I had poured everything into our joint Qi fusion, so my condition wasn't much better than hers.

“You two have truly surprised me. If we were to fight again next time, the outcome might be completely different.”

Jeokun smiled darkly as he aimed his sword at my throat.

“To think that my life could serve the greater cause... how moving.”

With eyes wide open, Jeokun swung his sword down at me and Cheon Yura.

“Die.”

Or rather, he tried to.

KWAAANG!

“Yooouuuu insolent foooooo! How dare you lay a hand on them?!”

A thunderous voice erupted from behind Jeokun, and the entrance to the hall shattered in an instant.

A massive middle-aged man leapt in from outside and struck Jeokun on the head.

“Kuh!”

A lightning-fast ambush.

Under normal circumstances, Jeokun’s skills would have allowed him to defend himself, but with his energy nearly depleted and his body injured, he had no chance.

And even if he had managed to block it, the result would’ve been the same.

“Young Cult Leader! Are you alright?!”

The one who sent Jeokun flying in a single blow was a tall middle-aged man, nearly eight feet in height.

Shhhk!

At the same time, the true elites of the Guardian Corps appeared like shadows and surrounded us.

Perhaps finally coming to her senses, Cheon Yura murmured weakly,

“U... Hobup.”

“Yes! Your faithful servant, I, Grand Protector, have arrived!”

Grand Protector, the Red-Faced Demon Fighter, Wang Cheongeol.

A supreme top-tier expert of the Heavenly Demon Cult, often said to resemble Guan Yu from Romance of the Three Kingdoms—if only he grew his beard longer.

“You're late.”

“M-My deepest apologies! I only received the call when I briefly stepped away from my post!”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Grand Protector threw himself to the ground and slammed his head down in apology, looking genuinely remorseful.

I shot a suspicious glance his way.

'You left your post? Grand Protector did?'

The sole purpose of the Guardian Corps was to protect the Cult Leader and his family.

Failing to respond to a summon in a situation like this was serious enough to warrant being stripped of his position.

".....It's fine. I was the one who initially refused your protection anyway."

Cheon Yura sighed and shook her head. She pointed at Jeokun, who had been flung far across the hall.

"That one's an Elder of the Azure Star Sect. He said it himself, so there's no mistake. Make sure he stays alive and spills everything."

"Y-Yes, Young Cult Leader. But... the thing is..."

"What?"

"That man... I believe..."

"....."

Sweat streamed down Grand Protector's face.

For someone of his power, nearly a Grandmaster, to lose control of his body like that, there could be only one reason.

Seeing his reaction, Cheon Yura immediately understood.

"Damn it."

The blow he had struck while shattering the door—

That very blow had killed Jeokun on the spot.

"M-My apologies. My deepest apologies!"

THUD THUD THUD THUD!

Grand Protector continued to bang his head on the floor.

I stared at him in disbelief.

'Did he do that on purpose?'

In twenty years, the Guardian Corps would end up betraying us—but by then, Grand Protector would no longer be around.

He had already retired and was living leisurely as an Elder by that time.

When I was the Inner Administrator, the evaluations about him were all the same: the most loyal of the loyal, willing to do anything for the Cheon Clan.

There was no way he would be a traitor now, given the timing and circumstances.

Cheon Yura let out a sigh and slumped her shoulders.

“All that effort, for nothing.”

“Y-Young Cult Leader!”

“We're going back.”

Before long, Sa Biyeon and the Black Guards who had been underground rejoined us.

As Cheon Yura stared at the burning manor, she turned her head toward me.

Her expression made me flinch slightly.

“Jin Yeomyung, I will definitely repay the debt I owe you today. And next time, I will definitely...”

She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

This mission had been nothing more than her way to redeem her pride, launched with sheer stubbornness.

But in the end, they had gained nothing, and instead, committed the grave error of stirring the grass and scaring the snake.

“I... have no excuse.”

Her eyes were filled with frustration, resentment, and self-loathing.

Beside her, Sa Biyeon fidgeted nervously, trying to say something, but in the end, she stayed silent.

She probably realized that any clumsy words of comfort would only wound Cheon Yura's pride even more.

In the end, Cheon Yura returned to the Lesser Demon Hall under the pretext of receiving treatment.

Sa Biyeon, who stayed behind to handle the aftermath, let out a heavy sigh.

“Haah, this... this wasn’t the ending we wanted.”

“There was no helping it. Things don’t always go the way we want them to in life.”

She gave me a surprised look upon hearing that.

“You’re more composed than I expected, Master Jin.”

“I’m not the type to linger on things that have already passed.”

In truth, what I just said was a lie.

If I truly held no regrets over what had already happened, I wouldn’t have done something like reincarnation.

“What do you think will happen next?”

“We probably won’t be able to make any moves for a while. Neither side.”

Just the revelation that the Azure Star Sect had a spy within the Cult would stir up a storm for some time.

The enemy would become even more cautious, and our Cult would turn its attention to the Orthodox sects, which meant it would become harder to catch their tail.

“Especially the Young Cult Leader—she’ll be under something close to house arrest for a while. It was really dangerous this time.”

“I suppose so.”

If there were anyone from the Cheon Clan involved in this incident, even the Cult Leader himself would move to restrict the Young Cult Leader’s actions.

“Still, once the Cult Leader learns the full truth of what happened, at the very least, Black-Spotted Blood won’t be allowed to spread within the Cult anymore.”

The surface-level goal I had agreed on with Sa Biyeon in the first place was to resolve the matter of Black-Spotted Blood.

Now that it would be dealt with, she no longer had any justification to get involved.

And yet, Sa Biyeon didn't look convinced.

"Master Jin, did you... perhaps anticipate this outcome?"

I shrugged.

"Of course not."

"But the way you're speaking now... it's as if you knew things would turn out like this."

"It's just the logical conclusion, based on the facts. Are you saying I orchestrated this whole situation?"

"Of course not..."

Now that I had taken it this far, Sa Biyeon couldn't press the issue any further.

In the end, she achieved her stated objective but left without any real gains.

There would soon be a large-scale investigation into the Cult's underworld operations concerning Black-Spotted Blood.

How she responded to that would determine her standing within the Sa Clan.

In other words, Sa Biyeon wouldn't be able to act freely for some time either.

"Whew, if all of you keep clinging to me like this, I'm the one who's going to get tired."

Though I denied it when Sa Biyeon asked, I had predicted that the situation might develop like this to some extent.

"Gu Chil."

"Yes, Young Master."

Almost as if he emerged from the shadows, Gu Chil appeared behind me in a kneeling posture.

There was a reason my bodyguard hadn't shown up until now.

"Did you find anything?"

Gu Chil and the guards from the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan who accompanied me had been searching for evidence inside the Hidden Trace Manor, separate from the Black Guards.

“Most of the documents had already been burned, so there wasn’t much. But we did find this in the dead manor lord’s belongings.”

The Hidden Trace Manor Lord, Eun Cheoljung, had his head taken off by Jeokun in the very first exchange.

The Guardian Corps had taken his corpse, but Gu Chil had apparently managed to retrieve something beforehand.

I took the note from Gu Chil’s hand and let out a quiet chuckle.

“So in the end, Grand Protector’s blunder ended up helping me.”

“Excuse me? A blun—what?”

“Ah, just talking to myself. Don’t worry about it.”

I waved a hand at the confused Gu Chil and turned my eyes to the note.

> [Thousand-Day Pass (千日關) Sang (相), Certain Kill (必殺), Smoke (煙) – Deliver immediately]

‘What is this?’

The fact that it was found on Eun Cheoljung’s body meant it must be important.

The "Thousand-Day Pass" referred to none other than one of the Heavenly Demon Cult’s two major educational institutions.

I didn’t know what "Sang" or "Smoke" meant, but one thing was clear.

‘It’s an order to assassinate someone inside the Thousand-Day Pass.’

Considering the Hidden Trace Manor secretly operated the Killing Squad, it wasn’t strange that Eun Cheoljung would receive an assassination order.

“What does it say?”

“It seems... they’re trying to help me.”

“...Sorry, what?”

“Thousand-Day Pass, huh...”

A smile formed on my lips without me even realizing it.

“This works out nicely. It’s the perfect place to replace the Pavilion.”

As I muttered to myself, Gu Chil pouted and grumbled.

“Young Master, could you maybe explain things in a way I can understand?”

Well, if it’s Gu Chil, he deserves to know my plan.

So, flashing my brightest smile, I said:

“Looks like we’ll be parting ways for a while.”

“Whaaat?!”

Just as I expected, the Heavenly Demon Cult was thrown into turmoil upon discovering that Black-Spotted Blood was circulating in its lower ranks, and that a member of the Azure Star Sect was involved.

“Those Orthodox bastards dared to pull a trick like this on our Cult, the kind of thing only lowly factions would attempt?!”

“Heavenly Demon! You must annihilate the Azure Star Sect this instant!”

Some of the war-hungry Elders and members of the Six Great Demonic Clans were already calling for an all-out war with the Orthodox faction.

But the Cult Leader, Cheon Taejong, was wise.

“We must be certain whether they truly are from the Orthodox sect... or if someone else is impersonating them.”

“H-Heavenly Demon!”

“If we swing our blades wildly at the wrong target, we’ll only bring disaster upon ourselves. The wrath of the Cult must be thorough—but directed precisely.”

The Cult Leader forcibly quelled all complaints.

He formally sent letters of protest to the Murim Alliance and the Azure Star Sect, demanding the truth behind the incident be revealed.

In truth, Cheon Taejong had wanted to declare war immediately and wipe out all those involved.

But the one thing that stopped him—

Was the report from his daughter, the one who caused this incident: the Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura.

She reported the possibility that a traitor within the Cheon Clan and an unknown third party were involved, and urged him to proceed with caution.

And in addition to that—

For the first time in her life, she came to him with personal concerns, just like a teenager going through adolescence... but that's a private matter, so let's skip over it.

'Azure Star Sect, huh...'

Azure Star Sect.

Among the Nine Great Orthodox Sects, it was known for its bold and masculine style. It actively fought to eradicate the demonic path alongside Shaolin.

Still, thanks to its status as a prestigious sect of Daoist lineage, its methods were usually quite gentlemanly.

'Yura said that man Jeokun didn't seem like someone from the Orthodox side at all.'

Even if the Nine Great Sects secretly looked after their own interests, they were fundamentally obsessed with honor and reputation.

Would people like that pull something like this against our Cult?

"Left Guardian."

"Yes, Cult Leader."

At Cheon Taejong's call, the Left Guardian—One-Thousand Kills a Day, Mujeong—appeared.

He lightly tapped the armrest of the grand chair, gathered his thoughts, then spoke.

"There's something I want you to investigate."

"I accept your command."

The Left Guardian's answers were always short and firm.

Chapter 23: Thousand-Day Pass (1)

The person credited with uncovering the recent incident was none other than the Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura.

As a member of the Cheon Clan and the Young Cult Leader, she had taken the lead and was praised by many of the cult's followers for her initiative.

And I, Jin Yeomyung, also gained recognition as the one who supported her efforts...

"What did you just say?"

Jin Gun-ak, the Patriarch of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan, who should have been the happiest about this, was now glaring at me with a fearsome expression.

"I said I want to join the Thousand-Day Pass."

"You crazy bastard!"

Bang!

Jin Gun-ak slammed the desk in front of him so hard it shattered.

"Are you seriously out of your mind? Do you even know what the Thousand-Day Pass is?!"

Despite his fury, I answered with confidence.

"Isn't it the cult's training institution? A place where one can devote themselves entirely to training and education for three years to become a warrior of the cult."

"You should be entering the Demon Dragon Hall!"

This was exactly why Jin Gun-ak was enraged.

"Why would the eldest son of the Jin Clan go to a place where only lowly people end up?!"

"....."

The Thousand-Day Pass.

As the name implied, it was a training institute where one received education for a thousand days, meant to nurture the cult's talents.

But in contrast to its recognition as one of the cult's two main training institutions, its actual reputation was far from stellar.

Compared to the Demon Dragon Hall, the perception of the Thousand-Day Pass was much like how Jin Gun-ak had just described it.

“The merit you achieved this time is enormous. That alone could elevate the Six Demonic Dragons into the Seven!”

Being the head of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, Jin Gun-ak had a fair understanding of what had happened at Hidden Trace Manor.

Namely, that I assisted Cheon Yura and confronted a peak-level master, if only briefly.

I figured the elders of the other six clans probably knew this as well.

“If you enter the Demon Dragon Hall, you’ll immediately become the center of attention. Depending on your actions, many will naturally follow you!”

That was Jin Gun-ak’s real motive.

The Demon Dragon Hall was the ‘true’ elite institution where the children of the cult’s upper echelons gathered. In other words, it trained the next generation of leaders for the cult.

If I could build relationships with those people and draw them into our faction, it would be of immense benefit in the future.

On the other hand, the Thousand-Day Pass was a place that trained ‘field personnel’ and ‘practical workers’—those who would eventually support the talents graduating from the Demon Dragon Hall.

In essence, it was a place that raised the grunts and gofers, to put it crudely.

From both a practical and a prideful standpoint, Jin Gun-ak couldn’t accept my decision.

But I had made up my mind about the Thousand-Day Pass long ago.

“Patriarch, communicating with the elites of the Demon Dragon Hall is something Yewoon is more than capable of. There’s no need for me to step in.”

My younger brother, Jin Yewoon, had already entered the Demon Dragon Hall.

He earned a place among the Six Demonic Dragons by proving himself as the unrivaled top student of his current cohort.

With that level of influence, there was no need for me to get involved in recruiting talent.

“That alone doesn’t justify your choice to go to the Thousand-Day Pass.”

Jin Gun-ak scoffed.

“Besides, you’re currently undergoing an engagement process with the Young Cult Leader. The Thousand-Day Pass is notoriously hard to leave once you enter. The Cheon Clan may take issue with that.”

Hmm, this wasn’t going to be easy.

I had a feeling convincing Jin Gun-ak would be harder than expected.

“That wouldn’t be an issue as long as you lend me a little support, Patriarch.”

“Hmph, and why should I?”

“Because with your support, I’ll be able to extract the talents from the Thousand-Day Pass far more easily.”

“You’re seriously going there just to snatch up those nobodies?”

“They’re not nobodies.”

No matter how dense he may act, he was still the head of one of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

There was no way he was saying this out of ignorance.

“With the Jin Clan’s standing, we could probably bring in above-average talent from the Thousand-Day Pass. But if we want the truly exceptional ones, even a major clan like ours needs to get involved directly.”

“Hmm.”

Jin Gun-ak didn’t refute that.

Because it was true!

I pressed forward with a persuasive tone.

“I’ll scoop up every one of them before they can fall into the hands of the Ma Clan or the Pa Clan. Please trust me.”

For Jin Gun-ak, the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan and the Pa Clan were not just sore spots but also highly effective pressure points.

“If the Jin Clan wants to become the foremost among the Six Great Demonic Clans, then strengthening our internal manpower is the most crucial step. Let’s be honest—those top students in the Demon Dragon Hall aren’t likely to come to us, are they?”

“Kuh-hum! Well, that’s true.”

Everyone entering the Demon Dragon Hall had their own clans. Even if they didn’t, the best of the best almost always ended up going to the Cheon Clan—not the Jin Clan.

“As I said, Yeowoon alone is enough to build connections in the Demon Dragon Hall. I’ll bring in the ones who’ll carry the next generation of the Jin Clan from the Thousand-Day Pass.”

“Are you confident?”

Jin Gun-ak’s expression slowly began to ease.

“I heard Ma Chulsoo from the Ma Clan graduated from the Thousand-Day Pass just last year. He may be of a different mold, but surely his goal was the same.”

Ma Chulsoo was the second son of the Ma Clan, but he was seriously aiming for dominance within the clan.

Yet blocked by the eldest son’s interference, he found it difficult to expand his power internally, so he turned his gaze outward—to the Thousand-Day Pass for external talent recruitment.

And by all accounts, it had been a relative success.

“You don’t seriously think I’d fall short compared to Ma Chulsoo, do you?”

“Kuahaha! Of course not!”

At last, Jin Gun-ak laughed heartily and nodded.

“But are you really sure? The Demon Dragon Hall isn’t just a place for networking. The quality of education is definitely higher.”

I gave a small inward laugh.

This was his way of saying, “I tried to stop you until the end, but you insisted on going.”

Despite his appearance, Jin Gun-ak was an extremely political man.

Even if it was between father and son.

“I don’t believe the Demon Dragon Hall teaches better martial arts than our clan.”

“Of course not.”

“In the end, it all comes down to actual combat. Since the Thousand-Day Pass includes real-life missions, I believe its environment is even better suited for improving practical skills.”

Of course, there was also a higher chance of dying or getting crippled during those ‘missions.’

But it wasn’t like Jin Gun-ak would be genuinely worried about that.

“Fine. If you’re that determined, I won’t object any further.”

“I thank you for your gracious approval, Patriarch.”

Regardless of his true feelings, I offered a respectful thanks.

As soon as Jin Gun-ak gave his approval, I submitted my application to the Thousand-Day Pass.

The Thousand-Day Pass typically operated on a quarterly enrollment system, with a maximum of around one hundred trainees per batch.

It had been a couple of months since they accepted the first-quarter cohort, so the announcement for the second-quarter trainees would be posted soon.

Naturally, the news that I was entering the Thousand-Day Pass shocked a lot of people.

“The Thousand-Day Pass? Are you out of your mind, brother?”

“...You too?”

“What do you mean, ‘you too’?”

I replied with a tired expression.

“More than ten people asked me today if I’ve gone insane—or said something to that effect.”

“Well, of course. A direct descendant of the Six Great Demonic Clans going there? Even branch families get labeled as fallen if they enter that place.”

From the senior members of the Jin Clan to my peers from other clans I had some acquaintance with—even those connected to our clan sent people to confirm the rumor.

“Most people think you’ve been exiled. Honestly, if the Patriarch hadn’t told me himself, I’d have thought the same.”

Jin Yewoon glared at me, arms crossed, clearly displeased.

“Frankly, I don’t mind if you’re stepping away from the heir position. That’s a win for me. But the Thousand-Day Pass? That’s just too lowly, even for that.”

His frustration was valid.

From the viewpoint of someone who was practically the next Patriarch of the Jin Clan, seeing someone like me—his only real competition—appear to be falling from grace must’ve been a bit unsettling.

But there was one thing Jin Yewoon misunderstood.

“Little brother, listen closely.”

“...?”

“The Thousand-Day Pass wasn’t always a place to be looked down upon like this. You know that its founder was the First Heavenly Demon, don’t you?”

“Yeah... I do.”

In terms of history, the Thousand-Day Pass predates the Demon Dragon Hall by at least a few hundred years.

“In fact, the Demon Dragon Hall was established as an alternative after the harsh real-world training at the Thousand-Day Pass resulted in mass deaths among upper-class descendants.”

And after that incident, the Thousand-Day Pass began to reduce the intensity of its training.

In exchange, it added practical education beyond martial arts, cultivating individuals who could contribute in a wider range of fields.

“What I’m aiming for... is the Thousand-Day Pass of the past.”

“Of the past?”

“The one that produced battle-hardened warriors obsessed with martial arts. If I can survive that kind of curriculum, my martial prowess will advance considerably. At the very least, it’ll be better than wasting time awkwardly in the Demon Dragon Hall.”

Honestly, there were just too many complications in the Demon Dragon Hall.

With so many high-ranking family members attending, countless factions formed both directly and indirectly.

The moment I stepped into that place, I’d be entangled in that web—willingly or not.

Jin Yewoon looked at me with suspicion.

“Why are you so obsessed with martial arts? It’s not like you’re aiming to become the Patriarch, right?”

“It’s for my goal.”

“What kind of goal?”

“At the very least... it’s not to become the head of the Jin Clan.”

Tap.

I lightly tapped Jin Yewoon on the shoulder.

“Little brother.”

“Why are you looking at me with those creepy eyes?”

He looked as if he couldn’t breathe.

“I need to get stronger.”

“Well, obviously.”

“There’s a massive storm coming. Don’t ignore what I’ve taught you—make sure you put it into practice.”

Jin Yewoon had already achieved impressive results befitting his talent, but that didn’t mean he had no weaknesses.

One of the biggest problems was his reduced flexibility due to neglecting the Demonic Body Techniques.

In the short time I had, I taught him several things he needed to fix.

Surprisingly, he accepted my teachings more readily than expected—perhaps he held me in higher regard than I thought.

At least when it came to theory, I was confident I could hold my own even in a debate with a peak-level master.

And perhaps something I said resonated with him, because he asked:

“Brother... what are you aiming for?”

“There’s no need for you to know that yet.”

“...”

“But if you keep improving, eventually you’ll understand what I meant.”

I did plan to stop what was coming—if I could.

But no matter how much of the future I knew, could I really control the world?

Endless butterfly effects and variables would eventually come back to bite me.

All I could do was prepare to block those variables when the time came.

Thousand-Day Pass, Hundred-Refinement Peak.

“Ugh! Haaaargh!”

Baek Sang-ah, the first trainee of the Thousand-Day Pass’s 1080th cohort—and the first cohort of the year—was going through hell right now.

“You’re too slow! You damn slugs!”

From far below, a one-eyed instructor wearing an eyepatch bellowed at the trainees climbing the cliff.

“Don’t let your thighs or waist go slack! Either you conquer this peak or fall to your deaths—those are your only two futures!”

Every trainee in the cohort cursed the instructor below.

In truth, for a first-rate martial artist, something like climbing a cliff wasn’t impossible—it just required some stamina.

The real problem was that one slip meant death.

At the base of the cliff, right where the trainees had started, countless iron spikes and blades were densely embedded in the ground.

If it were just solid ground, one might protect themselves with internal energy and escape with only shattered bones, but this... this meant certain death.

She let out a very faint scream.

"You crazy, demonic cult bastaaaaards!"

Chapter 24: Thousand-Day Pass (2)

To be honest, uttering the word "Demonic Cult" in the heart of the Heavenly Demon Cult was no different from asking to be killed.

Fortunately, however, no one heard Baek Sang-ah's small outcry.

Everyone was too busy trying to survive!

"Aaaargh...!"

"Huff! Huff!"

The other members of the same cohort, who clung to the cliff like cicadas, weren't in any state to pay attention to anyone else right now.

"Seriously, I'm going to curse you, Grandpa! How could you throw me into a place like this!"

In truth, when Baek Sang-ah first came here, she didn't think much of it.

She was the precious child of a prestigious family and had never been involved in politics or anything of the sort.

So she accepted her grandfather's words that it would be 'a little' tough without giving it too much thought.

The problem was that her definition of 'a little' and her grandfather's were vastly different.

"I'll make sure to survive and get back at you for this, Grandpa...!"

It was right as she was about to reach the summit of the Hundred-Refinement Peak.

Tap!

The final thing she grabbed was a conveniently protruding rock.

The moment she gripped the stone without hesitation—

It came loose as if it were a lie.

"Ah."

Her right arm, still clutching the rock, slashed through the air helplessly. Her legs soon lost their footing as well.

As her entire balance collapsed, her body started falling away from the cliff's edge.

At that moment, she thought:

I'm going to die now.

Right before reaching the peak, her life nearly ended in vain.

Thud!

A thick hand suddenly reached out from ahead and caught Baek Sang-ah's arm just before she fell.

That hand easily pulled her back to solid ground.

"Are you alright, Lady?"

A deep, booming voice struck her ears, as thick as the hand that had grabbed her.

"Huff! Huff!"

But Baek Sang-ah couldn't respond immediately.

The sudden terror of death had paralyzed her mind and reason.

She only came to her senses much later.

"Th-thank you."

She bowed her head to the large man who had saved her.

The giant waved a hand with a chuckle.

“No worries. We have to help each other to survive.”

A resonant voice that clearly didn't belong to someone of the same age. A physique that stood out even among this cohort.

Baek Sang-ah smiled faintly and said to him,

“You're quite an unusual fellow, Master San.”

The giant, referred to as Master San, flinched and waved his hand again in surprise.

“I'm no master. I'm not someone worthy of being called that.”

She tilted her head.

“Why not? If someone who acts with chivalry isn't a hero, what should we call them?”

“Ahem! I appreciate your kind words, Lady, but around here, the title of 'master' isn't exactly...”

“Ah.”

Now that she thought about it, this was the Demonic Cult.

In fact, the very fact that someone had reached out to help her was nothing short of a miracle.

This place was cold and ruthless. The death of a person was treated as nothing more than the loss of a competitor.

“Be careful. There were a few guys watching you as you were trying to climb up.”

“Huh?! R-really?”

Of course, outright murder was forbidden, but pushing someone off in secret? That kind of thing happened here all the time.

“Thank you, Master. I owe you one.”

She bowed her head deeply.

The giant waved it off as if it were nothing, but Baek Sang-ah clearly saw the corners of his lips twitch.

That Master San tried to act modest, but it was obvious he secretly liked being called a hero.

If the rumors were true, he used to be a mountain bandit or something. Whatever the case...

'Seriously, can I really survive a thousand days in this place?'

Well, technically it had already been about two months, so nine hundred forty days were left. But a thousand days, nine hundred forty, who cares?

That's like telling a soldier who got drafted, "You've made it sixty days! Keep it up for the rest!"

Yeah right.

You'd be lucky not to get stabbed in your sleep.

She suddenly felt a wave of despair wash over her.

Maybe noticing the mood shift, the giant tried to comfort her.

"Hmm, these kinds of physical drills will ease up soon."

"Huh?! How do you know that?"

"A senior I serve told me. Once the next cohort comes in, we'll switch over to theory classes."

"Ahhh!"

Those words brought her to the verge of tears.

This damn training that risked her life had made her sick to her bones, so what the giant said sounded like salvation itself.

And that senior he spoke of—wasn't he the one currently leading the largest faction in the Thousand-Day Pass and already slated to be promoted to a high-level martial artist?

His word held near-absolute credibility.

"Still, on a separate note, things might get a little troublesome from now on."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well... I heard that an incredible figure is coming in with the next cohort."

"A-an incredible figure?"

“Yes. From the Six Great Demonic Clans. Apparently, someone named Jin Yeomyung from the direct line of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

For a moment, Baek Sang-ah’s eyes sparkled sharply.

The Six Great Demonic Clans.

Alongside the Cheon Clan, they were the true rulers of the current Heavenly Demon Cult.

A direct descendant from there would essentially be treated as a god in a place like this.

“But... why would that be troublesome?”

“W-well...”

“.....”

The giant scratched his head, looking dumbfounded.

In truth, he had simply repeated what that senior of his had said.

His own brain wasn’t sharp enough to grasp what that meant.

But Baek Sang-ah, with her keen mind, roughly understood the implication.

‘A powerful figure capable of instantly toppling that senior’s influence. Even if not that, they’d hardly be in a good mood being sent to a place like this.’

That guy named Jin Yeomyung was probably feeling like he’d been exiled.

She knew, because she was feeling the exact same way.

Baek Sang-ah made up her mind.

‘Yeah, I’d better make sure not to run into him.’

Who knew what kind of disaster might happen if I did.

Getting accepted into the Thousand-Day Pass went smoothly... no, to be honest, it was an incredibly turbulent process.

Despite Ma Chulsoo having set a precedent, the uproar this time was all because I was the one currently in the middle of a formal engagement process with the Young Cult Leader.

Sa Biyeon had even come all the way to the Jin Clan personally to confirm the truth of the matter.

“The Young Cult Leader asked me to deliver a message to Young Master Jin.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, and I quote: ‘Are you out of your damn mind?’”

Uh... hmm.

That blunt remark left me momentarily speechless.

Sa Biyeon was a highly political figure.

She usually spoke in roundabout ways, requiring interpretation rather than direct understanding.

So for someone like her to say something so outright—

‘She must be really pissed off, huh?’

Well, I could understand. It was like the groom running off to the army in the middle of a wedding meeting. Of course she’d be mad.

“She also told me not to return without a clear explanation of what you were thinking when you pulled this stunt.”

“Hmm.”

“If you try to weasel out with vague excuses, she said the Cheon Clan may officially send a letter of protest.”

The word officially sent a chill down my spine.

If the Cheon Clan really did send a formal protest, it would be the same as publicly declaring a rift between the Cheon and Jin Clans.

Naturally, Clan Leader Jin Gun-ak would fly into a rage.

He might even cancel everything related to this matter altogether.

“Even if I enter the Thousand-Day Pass, the engagement won’t be called off. The rules there may be strict, but they don’t apply to someone from the Six Great Demonic Clans.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“There’s also this—because I was forced to confront just how powerless I really am.”

Flinch.

Sa Biyeon, of all people, would know exactly what I meant by that.

Clenching my fists, I spoke in the most solemn tone I could muster.

“Even if I was at the entry-level stage of Master Level, if I had reached that realm, I wouldn’t have been defeated so easily back then.”

“Though... it’s not like you were really defeated...?”

“That was a defeat, no matter how you look at it.”

I cut Sa Biyeon off before she could try to sugarcoat it.

Once someone reaches Master Level, they can manifest Qi Projection—even if poorly.

Even if I couldn’t fully manifest it like Jeokun had, if I could’ve brought out even a weaker version and combined it with Cheon Yura’s, we might’ve turned that fight around.

Facing the speechless Sa Biyeon, I delivered the finishing blow.

“In this cult, no matter what position one holds, power is what ultimately proves your worth. If I want to stand at the Young Cult Leader’s side, I need to prove I’m qualified.”

Whether or not my resolve reached her, Sa Biyeon looked genuinely impressed.

Of course, what followed was the expected question: why had I chosen the Thousand-Day Pass over Demon Dragon Hall?

I managed to brush that off using a similar excuse as I had with Jin Gun-ak.

“Actually, the Young Cult Leader already has some idea of your intentions.”

Uh... what?

“She blamed herself, thinking you chose to enter the Thousand-Day Pass because of her.”

Cheon Yura really thought that?

Given her pride and strong sense of responsibility, it wasn't strange she'd believe it was her burden to bear.

No—before that.

“Then... what about that ‘Are you crazy?’ remark?”

Sa Biyeon smiled serenely.

“Oh, she did say that. She was furious at first but retracted it not long after.”

Wouldn't it have been better for both of us if she'd just started with the retraction?

I wanted to show Sa Biyeon that it's possible to curse someone with just your eyes.

But alas, my silent protest didn't reach her.

“You and the Young Cult Leader... seem to share certain similarities.”

“...Excuse me?”

What kind of nonsense was that?

“She too blamed herself for her shortcomings. She said she'll be entering closed cultivation for a while.”

As a result of this incident, she wouldn't be leaving the Lesser Demon Hall anytime soon.

Regardless of the merit she earned, the fact was she came close to death.

Well, if she's going to be out of commission for a while because of this incident, that honestly works in my favor...

“And when she comes out of closed cultivation, she said the two of you should compare your achievements.”

“.....”

Gulp.

I instinctively swallowed hard.

Compare... achievements?

Is she trying to kill me?

She's already capable of handling Qi Projection despite not even reaching adulthood. If she goes into secluded training after gaining something from this experience, how much more of a monster will she become?

At that point, she might even be able to beat someone like Jeokun—an Elder of the Azure Star Sect—one-on-one.

"I, too, felt a great sense of helplessness from this incident. I won't lose to you either, Young Master Jin. Let's both work hard."

At that point, I couldn't hear a single word Sa Biyeon was saying anymore.

All I could do was curse my own fate for becoming someone with a ticking clock on his life.

Chapter 25: Thousand-Day Pass (3)

Jo Jin-sang, also known as the Mist Prison Wolf, was a veteran martial artist who had stepped down from the frontlines and held the position of Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass for the past ten years.

He was a man who prioritized rules and principles above all else and never allowed exceptions in his handling of matters.

That personality had reflected itself in his martial arts as well, earning him the nickname Iron-Blooded Demon General in the Central Plains due to his ruthless skill.

However, even for someone like him, this matter couldn't be taken lightly.

"Phew..."

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass let out a deep sigh, arms crossed.

Before him stood a crowd of instructors who had already gathered, all quietly gauging his reaction.

"Pavilion Master, how do you intend to handle this matter?"

The Vice Pavilion Master mustered up the courage to ask, but the Pavilion Master gave no reply.

Instead, he tapped the blank document in front of him with his finger and trailed off in a murmur.

“A special privilege, huh.”

The reason for the Pavilion Master’s displeased expression was clear.

It was due to a certain giant figure who had been sitting in front of him just earlier.

“Damn that Asura King bastard.”

Flinch!

That one line caused the shoulders of every instructor present to twitch.

“Even though he’s in exile, is it because it’s his son? That he dares offer me such a position?”

“P-Pavilion Master...”

“And if I refuse, he surely won’t let me off easy.”

Over the past ten years, the Pavilion Master had received countless requests and bribes.

Among them were even high-ranking officials of the Heavenly Demon Cult who couldn’t easily be ignored, but those requests were almost never granted.

There was only one reason for that.

‘Because they weren’t talents I cherished enough to risk turning into enemies.’

If they had truly been precious talents, he would’ve sent them to the Demon Dragon Hall instead of the Thousand-Day Pass—or kept them by his side and taught them personally.

But this time was different.

This was someone from the direct line of the Six Great Demonic Clans—so much so that even the Asura King himself had come to personally ask for a favor. The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass couldn’t simply ignore such a request.

Even more so when the position of “Pavilion Master of the Demon Dragon Hall” loomed right in front of him.

—“How long do you plan to rot away in the Thousand-Day Pass? Shouldn’t you get a taste of the real waters before retiring?”

—“Real waters?”

—“The Demon Dragon Pavilion Master is retiring the year after next. I’m ready to submit your name to the Elder Council for that seat.”

—“...!”

Unlike the virtually dead-end position of the Thousand-Day Pavilion Master, the seat of the Demon Dragon Pavilion Master was a prime position—one of the most powerful posts.

It was a position in charge of the future leadership of the cult. Its influence went without saying.

Above all, the title of Pavilion Master of the Demon Dragon Hall was one of the fastest tracks to join the Elder Council.

‘Elder Council... Elder Council, huh.’

Even someone like the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass, who had lived his life without greed, couldn’t help but be tempted by the sheer weight of that title.

Elder Council.

The effective pinnacle of power in the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Though it was said the Six Great Demonic Clans held the true power, even their authority ultimately came from the Elder Council’s decisions.

While the high-numbered Elder seats were occupied by the heads of the Six Great Clans, the lower-numbered seats were essentially the final destination for any layperson, along with the Guardians.

To think that simply granting a bit of convenience to the son of such a man could open a path to that seat.

It was essentially the opportunity of a lifetime—one that would never come again.

‘Someone like the Asura King wouldn’t come to deceive me. Then why would he send his son here of all places?’

That alone was something the Pavilion Master couldn’t wrap his head around, no matter how hard he thought.

After mulling it over for a while, he made his decision.

“There will be no exceptions. Treat him exactly the same as we did with the second son of the Ma Clan.”

“P-Pavilion Master!”

“Are you serious?”

The instructors cried out in disbelief, but the Pavilion Master was resolute.

“What good would chasing power do me at my age? I’ve already passed seventy.”

“The Asura King won’t take this lightly!”

“This is different from when we handled Ma Cheolsoo! The Blood Dragon Demonic Clan didn’t raise a fuss back then!”

“Silence.”

Bang!

When the Pavilion Master slammed the table, the room immediately fell silent.

“I’ll take full responsibility. It’s not your concern.”

“S-Still...”

The Pavilion Master’s gaze turned ice-cold.

“You all fear the Asura King, but not me?”

The instructors’ expressions changed in an instant.

“N-No, sir!”

The Pavilion Master was a supreme-level martial artist acknowledged by the cult—someone who had earned the title of Lord.

Even if the Asura King wielded tremendous influence, the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass was no political amateur either.

Giving the instructors a look of disdain, he let out a sigh and waved his hand.

“Only the Vice Pavilion Master stays. The rest of you return to your duties and continue preparations for receiving the next cohort without delay.”

“Y-Yes, Pavilion Master!”

As the instructors filed out en masse—

“What do you think?”

asked the Pavilion Master.

The Vice Pavilion Master shook his head.

“What’s certain is that this isn’t the Asura King’s own will.”

The Asura King’s ambition to surpass both the Ma Clan and the Pa Clan was something well-known within the cult.

He wouldn’t be so foolish as to bury his best card—his eldest son—here in the Thousand-Day Pass.

“It must be one of two things.”

The Pavilion Master let out a breath.

“Either it’s the will of the Cult Leader... or that greenhorn Jin Yeomyung.”

“If the Asura King cares this much, we can’t rule out the former.”

“Indeed. Their recent interaction with the Young Cult Leader was widely talked about.”

Despite being the firstborn son, he had fallen behind early and lost his position as heir to his younger brother—a failure.

And yet, during the recent event with the Young Cult Leader, he had survived alongside the fourth son of the Ma Clan. That alone was unexpected.

“Could it be due to the incident they caused together? Wasn’t the Young Cult Leader disciplined for that?”

“If it’s collective punishment, that would make sense. The problem is—why send him to the Thousand-Day Pass instead of the Demon Dragon Hall?”

The Pavilion Master shook his head.

“No matter how I look at it, this isn’t a punishment. The Asura King’s request... feels completely different from any of the other favors I’ve received.”

“Different, sir?”

“It wasn’t about exempting him from training, or inflating his scores, or keeping him away from danger.”

Rather, it was more like... making minor arrangements so he could focus purely on cultivating martial arts without other distractions.

“At the very least, it seems he’s serious about learning...”

At that moment, a possibility flashed across the Pavilion Master’s mind.

‘Could it be... he’s aiming for the Main Flow?’

The Main Flow system—different from the current modified curriculum—was created to foster powerful demonic warriors.

Although barely anyone remembered it now, and the rule had long rusted and nearly weathered into oblivion, the Thousand-Day Pass still retained a clause stating that the curriculum should be offered if requested.

It was outdated, yes, but a direct descendant of the Six Great Demonic Clans could easily acquire that information.

‘I’ll have to meet him personally and figure out his true intentions.’

Regardless of any deal with the Asura King, if this newcomer had entered with a half-hearted mindset, it was better to drive him out immediately to avoid future trouble.

Whether he was a rare lunatic truly pursuing the pinnacle of martial arts—or a stray mutt crawling into his territory with some other motive...

He’d find out soon enough.

The deep hours before dawn.

Somewhere inside the Thousand-Day Pass.

In a place like this—where curfew was strictly enforced—it was virtually impossible for an ordinary trainee to leave the dormitory unnoticed.

Only two types of people could manage such a feat:

Someone who had built an overwhelming presence among the trainees.

Or someone backed by one of the instructors.

The figure who had just slipped out of the dormitory fit both categories.

The trainee spoke toward the darkness beyond.

“I really wish you wouldn’t summon me like this. Even I get a little wary sometimes, you know.”

Despite his words sounding like a complaint, his tone was light and cheerful.

From within the darkness, a black silhouette lowered their head.

“Forgive me, Second Order. This was a top-priority directive from above.”

“Top priority, huh? So important that it’s worth disrupting a mission I’ve been working on for years?”

The black figure swallowed hard at the trainee’s cold shift in demeanor.

He didn’t stand a chance against him in martial arts. And this Second Order was a favored candidate for promotion, personally favored by one of the highest-ranking executives in the Organization.

There was nothing to be gained by offending him.

The figure’s tone grew even more cautious.

“My apologies. Originally, the kill order had been passed to the Hidden Trace Manor’s Soul Reapers...”

“But?”

“But after they were all wiped out in a run-in with the Young Cult Leader, the order was redirected to the person closest to the target—you.”

“Ahh, those idiots. I heard about that.”

The trainee called Second Order immediately reverted to his usual confident demeanor.

“So, who’s this assassination target that they’re bothering someone as busy as me with?”

“...It’s...”

The black-clad figure transmitted the target’s identity via sound transmission.

“Hah!”

The moment he heard it—

“Ha! Hahaha! Hahahahaha!”

Second Order burst into wild, uncontrollable laughter.

“S-Second Order!”

The strange figure fidgeted, glancing around nervously, afraid that someone might overhear their clandestine conversation. But the laughter didn't stop anytime soon.

“Pfft... How ridiculous. Forget why that person's even here in the first place...”

Second Order's eyes curled into a delighted sneer.

“Wasn't he supposed to be under the jurisdiction of First Order? How the hell did this end up in my hands?”

“That part is currently under investigation. However, the upper echelon has determined that appeasement is no longer an option.”

“Fine by me. Nothing better than cleaning up First Order's mess.”

Second Order genuinely seemed to be enjoying the situation.

If he could resolve this incident cleanly—

Then perhaps, the positions of First and Second Order could be reversed.

As his ambition burned brightly, the dark figure hastily warned him.

“Just be careful. As you know, there are rumors spreading that the eldest son of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan is entering the Thousand-Day Pass. If you drag this out, unforeseen variables could appear.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Second Order waved his hand dismissively.

“But actually, that's great news for me. Everyone's attention will be focused on that guy. It'll make moving in the shadows even easier.”

“Well... yes, technically.”

“As long as that Jin Yeomyung guy isn't sleeping in the same bed as our target, I don't see any complications. Different cohort, different status.”

As far as Second Order knew, the assassination target had no real connections within the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Which was probably why he'd ended up buried in a place like the Thousand-Day Pass in the first place.

"Don't worry. As you instructors know, this place is perfect for burying someone without ever getting your hands dirty."

The Thousand-Day Pass was a closed-off society, completely detached from the main sect's typical environment.

"Tell the higher-ups this: I'll handle it cleanly, without a trace."

"...Understood. Then..."

The black figure vanished without a sound.

"Heh heh heh... What a wonderful opportunity."

Second Order could barely contain his excitement.

"First Order... Don't think I'll stay in your shadow forever."

First Order and Second Order had both been taken in by the Organization from a young age, raised with a singular purpose.

They had learned the same martial arts, produced the same results, and yet First Order had always stood ahead.

The reason was simple.

The one who had adopted First Order held a higher rank than the one who had adopted him.

And that fact was something Second Order could never accept.

Chapter 26: Thousand-Day Pass (4)

It had been about a month since I applied for admission to the Thousand-Day Pass.

There had been a few minor hiccups, but the application had gone through smoothly, and it was finally decided that I would enter the Thousand-Day Pass as part of this year's second cohort.

"Heuheuheung! Young Master, must you really go?!"

“How long has it been since the decision was made, and you're still whining?”

“Well, that’s because you and I are like one body!”

“Cut the creepy nonsense. Just do what I told you. We’ll still have plenty of chances to see each other inside.”

“But still—!”

I smacked Gu Chil on the head as he clung to me in tears, throwing a tantrum about not wanting to part, and stepped through the entrance of the Thousand-Day Pass with the other new recruits.

‘I’d heard, but this really is a damn remote place.’

Strictly speaking, the Thousand-Day Pass wasn’t even within the domain of the Ten Thousand Mountains.

It was located in a chunk of land cleverly hidden among massive peaks, and even that was concealed by a formation. You couldn’t enter the Thousand-Day Pass by ordinary means.

I looked around at the other recruits who were passing through the entrance one by one.

‘Hmm, I don’t know about their skill levels, but none of their eyes look bad.’

Even if it was considered a step down from the Demon Dragon Hall, the Thousand-Day Pass was still an official training institution of the Cult.

Without at least a letter of recommendation, an ordinary believer wouldn’t even be allowed to step foot in here.

Each of them must have entered carrying someone’s expectations, someone’s envy, or a sense of duty on their shoulders.

‘It’d be nice if one or two of them stood out.’

I wandered forward toward the place where the entrance ceremony was to be held.

“Welcome to the Thousand-Day Pass, all of you.”

Over a hundred new recruits and just as many instructors were gathered.

At the seat of highest honor in the assembly stood the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass, wearing a mask, gazing down at us with authority.

‘Mist Prison Wolf, Jo Jin-sang! One of the less than twenty Supreme Masters in the Cult, huh?’

Back when I served as Inner Administrator, he’d already been long retired and supposedly buried in the ground from old age.

“Hehehe, your eyes all look sharp. Very good.”

Facing over a hundred people, the Pavilion Master let out a sinister chuckle.

‘...What the hell?’

A manner far too casual for someone said to be a top-level expert representing the Cult.

Most of the new recruits were thinking the same thing—

“Listen up, you brats.”

Fwack!

In an instant, the atmosphere flipped one-hundred-eighty degrees.

Zzt! Zzt!

A terrifying bloodlust and fighting spirit radiated from the Pavilion Master, instantly gripping all the recruits.

‘That’s some overwhelming killing intent!’

If I were just a little weaker, I would’ve frozen up like a wooden doll, completely paralyzed.

“All of you must have entered the Thousand-Day Pass with some kind of ambition in mind.”

Naturally.

Otherwise, no one would willingly step into a place with such a low graduation rate.

“But understand this—while the Thousand-Day Pass is a training ground, it is also a place where the Cult’s iron law of the strong devouring the weak is applied more brutally than anywhere else.”

Clack!

As soon as he finished speaking, dozens of individuals in black uniforms lined up below the Pavilion Master in neat formation.

“Your seniors. Some are just one cohort ahead of you, others up to four.”

There were about fifty of them.

The Pavilion Master asked in a slightly amused tone.

“They only joined at most a year before you. Do you notice any differences?”

Differences?

My sharpened senses swept over the seniors.

And without realizing it, I murmured the answer aloud.

“Scars.”

And one more.

“Their eyes.”

“Ohooo?”

The Pavilion Master’s eyes gleamed with interest as he turned toward me, having caught my quiet remark.

“Correct. I don’t know where you’re from, but you’ve got quite the sharp eye.”

Apparently, he didn’t know I was Jin Yeomyung, and he nodded with approval.

“Indeed. It’s only been half a year to a year, but these ones have already faced life-and-death combat more than twice.”

Those battles hadn’t taken place within the Thousand-Day Pass, but out in the wider world of Murim.

“And they survived, achieving great progress.”

As if to say—this is your future.

“Based on their accomplishments, some of them are already guaranteed to enter the Seventeen Halls.”

“...!”

The Seventeen Halls referred to the core organizations of the Cult that handled both internal and external affairs.

In other words, if the ones in front of us survived to the end, they could aim even higher.

“Survive. If you manage to survive to the end, no matter what, you will obtain what you desire.”

With that, the Pavilion Master turned and disappeared.

The entrance ceremony had ended simply with just a few words.

I looked at the senior cohort trailing after the Pavilion Master.

‘They do seem like people who’ve shed their skin by walking through the jaws of death.’

But even that wasn’t nearly enough to cross the threshold of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

‘Isn’t there anyone who gives off a more impressive vibe?’

As I scanned the seniors one by one—

‘Huh?’

Among them was one especially huge figure, towering over the rest.

And that face—looked oddly familiar.

‘That guy... No way!’

In a group where the average age hovered around the early twenties, there was one with clearly older features, possibly even in his thirties.

And that beard—he looked just like a mountain bandit, like something out of a story.

He seemed a bit younger than I remembered, but the overall impression was unmistakable!

‘Captain San Dojeon! Why is he here?!’

One of the Four Demon Squads stationed in the Cult’s outer regions.

Commander of the Wind Demon Unit—Bloodless Thunderstorm, the Slaughter Blade, San Dojeon!

‘So San Dojeon was at the Thousand-Day Pass during this period!’

I had known that San Dojeon had trained here, but I hadn’t known exactly when.

‘This is huge!’

There was no doubt about San Dojeon’s talent.

He wasn’t from the Demon Dragon Hall but from the Thousand-Day Pass, and still shattered its limits to rise all the way to command one of the Cult’s elite units—the Wind Demon Unit.

Even though the Thousand-Day Pass provided faster real-combat experience, it couldn't match the innate advantages of Demon Dragon Hall disciples.

But San Dojeon was one of the rare few who broke through that ceiling and became a unit commander.

In other words, he was like a guaranteed winning lottery ticket!

My eyes burned intensely as I stared at San Dojeon.

‘Forget the rest—you, at the very least, I’m taking you back with me!’

Shiver!

Unaware that one of the new recruits was gazing at him with such greedy eyes, San Dojeon suddenly shuddered at the cold chill that crept over him.

“Is it a sudden cold?”

And so, the entrance ceremony for the Thousand-Day Pass ended.

While the others were being assigned dormitories, I was naturally summoned to stand before the Pavilion Master.

“Oh? So you're Jin Yeomyung?”

“I greet the Pavilion Master.”

The Pavilion Master looked somewhat surprised to realize that the kid he'd praised earlier was me.

"I figured you had a decent eye, but I never imagined you were that Jin Yeomyung."

He gave an awkward smile, muttering something like, "Well, I suppose the Jin Clan always did have big frames..."

"So, what do you think of the Thousand-Day Pass so far?"

"It's majestic. Like a fortress built within a natural stronghold."

The Thousand-Day Pass was situated far from the core region of the Heavenly Demon Cult—over several hundred li away from the Eight Great Demonic Peaks, considered the very heart of the Cult.

Geographically, it lay at the northernmost edge of Gansu Province, hidden deep near the borders of Xinjiang and Outer Mongolia.

"That's right. This place is meant to raise the core talent of the Cult, so its security rivals that of the Five Great Strongholds."

The Pavilion Master's gaze sharpened.

"Because of that, there are no exceptions here. Once admitted, every disciple faces one of three outcomes. Either you complete all thousand days... or you're expelled as a dropout."

He paused briefly, then smirked.

"Or you leave in a coffin."

I fully understood what the Pavilion Master was saying.

"I have no intention of asking for any special treatment in training."

"Really? Your father will be quite disappointed."

"He was... fairly angry, yes."

I shrugged.

Even I hadn't expected Jin Gun-ak to go as far as offering me a seat in the Demon Dragon Hall to get me special privileges.

I'd thought, at most, he'd write a letter or two on my behalf.

And even more unexpected was that the Pavilion Master here had flatly rejected that offer.

“You don’t need to worry too much about my father. As long as I stay quiet, he won’t have a valid excuse to make a move.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, Pavilion Master. I’ll make sure I don’t bring you any trouble.”

The Pavilion Master narrowed his eyes slightly, surprised by my response.

“You’re more polite than I expected. That second son of the Ma Clan was downright arrogant.”

“I don’t have the guts to disrespect the great Iron-Blooded Demonic Warlord.”

Though his official title was Mist Prison Wolf, the Pavilion Master preferred the nickname “Iron-Blooded Demonic Warlord,” which had been coined by the orthodox sects.

That single line of flattery made the corner of his mouth twitch.

“You’re an amusing one. I like your way with words.”

Then came a question that caught me off guard.

“Is there anything you want?”

“...!”

“Obviously, you can’t leave the Thousand-Day Pass without permission. But within that boundary, I can grant you certain privileges.”

I grinned.

I wasn’t foolish enough to turn down an offer like that.

“If you’re offering, I won’t refuse. However—”

“However?”

“There’s one exception I’d like you to allow. Regarding the Exchange Ceremony. That event is directly related to the Cheon Clan.”

“Hmm!”

The Pavilion Master let out a low grunt.

Even he couldn't interfere with events tied to the Cheon Clan. Doing so would amount to treason.

"That... can't be helped. So, aside from that?"

There could only be one reason he kept probing like this.

The true purpose behind my coming here.

I decided to lay it out clearly.

"Please grant me access to the Main Flow."

"...Heh!"

"I want to experience firsthand the greatness of the Main Flow—created by the First Heavenly Demon himself to train his closest retainers."

The Pavilion Master's eyes grew cold.

"You're bold. Do you even understand how dangerous that is?"

"Of course."

He held up a finger in front of my face.

"Right now, the graduation rate at the Thousand-Day Pass is about twenty percent. The death rate is also around twenty. The remaining sixty percent are expelled for not meeting the standards."

"....."

"But up until about a hundred and twenty years ago, back when the Main Flow curriculum was in place, the graduation rate was a mere five percent. Do you know the death rate?"

I nodded without hesitation.

"Yes, I do. The remaining ninety-five percent—all of them. My family's intelligence network confirmed it."

Back then, expulsion didn't even exist in the Thousand-Day Pass.

You either survived to the end and graduated... or left as a corpse.

“And knowing that, you still want to challenge it?”

“Yes. I must grow stronger. The Main Flow is just one of the means to achieve that.”

“...Is your goal to become Patriarch of the Jin Clan?”

It was a blunt question, but I shook my head.

Now was not the time to be vague and invite misunderstanding.

“No, it’s not that. I simply have a personal objective.”

“Hmm!”

The Pavilion Master stared at me for a long moment before letting out a soft laugh.

“Whatever it is, you seem quite desperate.”

I gave a bitter smile in return.

‘Well, my life is on the line, after all.’

If I wanted to survive the upcoming Exchange Ceremony with the Young Cult Leader, I had no choice but to get stronger.

Sounds like a joke? It’s not.

At least when it came to martial arts, Cheon Yura—the Young Cult Leader—was not someone who believed in mercy or compromise.

‘If she feels even slightly annoyed, she might just start hurling Qi Projections. There’s no way she’s going to go easy on me.’

If I didn’t want to drop dead, I had to get as strong as possible.

‘Though honestly, that’s only part of the reason.’

I had caught the scent of the Heaven-Defying Society much earlier than expected.

And to think, even just catching their tail had already drawn out an Absolute Master.

In a situation where anything could happen, I’d realized all too well—I desperately needed more power.

The Pavilion Master slowly nodded.

“Fine. If you insist on challenging it, I won’t stop you.”

“Thank you—”

“But.”

He cut me off sharply.

“You’re not doing it alone.”

Chapter 27: Thousand-Day Pass (5)

I couldn’t do it alone?

“The Main Flow was originally designed for groups,” said the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass as he extended the fingers of his right hand.

“Five. To be exact, including you, gather six people.”

Six people, huh.

I understood what that meant.

“Training in the Main Flow is fundamentally done in units of six. I don’t need to explain why six, do I?”

I nodded.

“The Six Great Demonic Clans.”

“Exactly. The Thousand-Day Pass was originally created by the First Heavenly Demon himself, to train his close aides—the founders of the Six Great Demonic Clans, the Six Demonic Deities. That tradition has continued in the Main Flow of the Thousand-Day Pass.”

However, unfortunately, the original formation techniques and training methods used to train those Six Demonic Deities hadn’t been passed down to the present day.

The so-called Main Flow was merely a shallow imitation of that ancient system.

Yet, even then, the pass rate was said to be less than one percent—meaning it was extremely dangerous and grueling.

“The time limit is half a year. Gather five others within six months. Well, since it’s in multiples of six, it doesn’t matter if it’s more than that.”

More than that.

The meaning behind those words was clear.

“If I gather more than that, does that mean you wouldn’t mind if I took the talents of the Thousand-Day Pass for myself?”

The Pavilion Master’s lips twitched ever so slightly.

“Wasn’t that part of your purpose in the first place?”

“I didn’t expect you to allow it so openly.”

“There’s already a precedent—Ma Chulsoo, the second son of the Ma Clan. Nothing says it can’t happen again.”

So, Ma Chulsoo must have taken a large number of talents with him after graduating from this place.

“Besides, if it’s the Six Great Demonic Clans, I don’t particularly care. That’s practically an open path to advancement.”

That was true.

Being affiliated with the Six Great Demonic Clans right from the start—even as a mere gatekeeper—meant skipping several levels compared to other competitors.

“However, all of that is contingent on you passing the test of the Thousand-Day Pass.”

The Pavilion Master’s eyes looked at me as if he were watching an amusing toy.

“The training in the Thousand-Day Pass is harsh. Even that child of the Ma Clan spent the first year here looking practically dead.”

I let out a dry chuckle inside.

Saying all that and only giving me half a year—it was practically a taunt.

“You needn’t worry about that.”

My eyes met the Pavilion Master’s.

“You’ve given me the authority to scout talent. I’ll make sure you regret it.”

By then, people throughout the Cult would be wailing at the Pavilion Master, asking where all the people had gone.

“Kuahaha! I’m looking forward to it!”

The Pavilion Master laughed heartily.

* * *

By the time I was assigned a dormitory, all the other placements had already been decided.

As I followed the instructor through the dormitory buildings, the scenery around me caught my eye.

‘There really are a lot of female martial artists.’

Given the Heavenly Demon Cult’s nature of valuing strength over gender, it wasn’t surprising that there was a high proportion of strong women.

In fact, among the top-tier families rivaling the Six Clans, there were even some that were entirely matriarchal.

I suddenly chuckled, recalling a memory from the past.

‘There were so many idiots who flirted with female experts only to lose a limb.’

During my time as Inner Administrator, these types of incidents popped up constantly in reports whenever things got boring.

There was even one instance where a male warrior took a Qi strike to the groin, which not only destroyed his “seeds” but also shattered the Dantian in his lower abdomen.

I heard he later regained his martial arts by cultivating the Virgin cultivation Technique. Or so the story goes.

‘Well, I guess even those are memories, huh?’

After I lost actual authority to the Heavenly Thunder Corps, these kinds of trivial matters were all I handled.

‘Maybe I should look around and see if any of them have potential?’

This cohort had a total of ninety-eight people. Of those, sixty-six were male recruits, and thirty-two were female.

‘I’m not aiming for talent like the Pa Clan twins or Sa Biyeon. If I can secure just a few truly promising ones, that’s a success.’

Still, among the Thousand-Day Pass recruits, quite a few were from clans other than the Jin Clan, even if they had the Six Clan's support.

Even with the Jin Clan's influence, realistically, there wouldn't be too many worth recruiting.

Clack!

The moment I opened the door to my assigned dorm—Dormitory One—I felt several gazes turn to me all at once.

Then, the sounds of conversation abruptly died down.

“Ji, Jin Yeomyung.”

“The Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan...”

Only a few who recognized me whispered among themselves, while the rest were clearly watching me with caution.

The moment I reached my designated spot, those nearby instinctively stepped away, widening the space around me.

‘Well, I guess this'll be convenient.’

But it didn't feel good—like being an animal on display in a zoo.

At that moment—

“Jin Yeomyung of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan.”

A shadow fell over my eyes as I sat on the bedding.

‘Oh?’

Someone was standing in front of me, radiating hostility.

But despite the animosity, the presence wasn't very intimidating.

‘Who is this kid?’

He looked about fifteen. Still clearly in the middle of growing.

If he was showing such overt hostility, then he either had a grudge against the Six Clans or was affiliated with them.

“My name is Ma Jinseong.”

“Blood Dragon Demonic Clan?”

He wasn't wearing the traditional long robe of the Ma Clan but ordinary martial garments, so I was slow to recognize him.

“That's right! The one you cowardly injured with tricks—Ma Chulsoo—is my sixth cousin!”

“Oh?”

I examined the boy who introduced himself as Ma Jinseong carefully.

Being a sixth cousin to the direct line Ma Chulsoo would mean he had at least some standing in the clan.

And yet he had come to the Thousand-Day Pass?

‘Either there's something wrong with him, or like me, he volunteered to come here.’

Maybe both.

“So, what business do you have with me?”

“Nothing in particular. I just wanted to make sure you recognized my presence!”

Ma Jinseong thumped his chest with his fist and made a bold declaration.

If someone like Jin Yewoon—big and burly—had done that, it might've been intimidating, but coming from such a small guy, it was just... cute.

“Well, I'll look forward to it.”

“Wh-what?! That's all you have to say?”

“That's it.”

“.....”

Disheartened by my anticlimactic response, the kid had nothing more to say and slinked away.

He was still just a child full of youthful recklessness, lacking the skill to sustain a long conversation.

'Maybe I can use that kid to get some insight into the current state of the Ma Clan?'

* * *

Heavenly Demon Pavilion, Lesser Demon Hall.

One of the cult's subordinate halls, the Lesser Demon Hall, was already engulfed in a violent black storm from early morning.

A rough and savage force that was hard to believe had been unleashed by a single sword.

The one who had unleashed that power, the Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, ended her final sword move and slowly returned to her stance.

"Phew...!"

Cheon Yura exhaled after finishing her sword dance.

The floor of the training ground had long since been reduced to tatters.

That this much destruction had been caused by residual force alone was clear proof that Cheon Yura's skills had matured to the Master Level.

And watching her closely from the side, the Cult Leader, Cheon Taejong, murmured coldly.

"Still far from enough."

His evaluation was merciless.

"Not only is the transition between movements unrefined, but even the internal circulation of your Qi is lacking. Especially in the segment where it flows from the Middle Heavenly Point to the Sacred Convergence Point—your control falters."

Sa Biyeon, who was watching nearby, couldn't help but be impressed.

A true expert could certainly pick out flaws in movement.

But to observe the internal flow of Qi and diagnose it precisely? That wasn't something any human should be capable of.

Cheon Taejong's words to the silently standing Cheon Yura continued.

"It's only natural that your body, which hasn't fully matured, cannot yet absorb the domineering energy of the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art. However, had you at least

fully wielded the Heaven-Slaying Qi, you wouldn't have been overpowered by a mere elder of the Azure Star Sect.”

“T-that's because...”

“You're still afraid of falling into demonic nature?”

“.....”

“You think you might kill Biyeon or that child from the Jin Clan with your own hands?”

Cheon Yura's shoulders flinched slightly.

Ordinarily, “falling into demonic nature” would refer to Qi Deviation, but for practitioners of the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art, it carried a slightly different meaning.

“Yura.”

“Yes, Cult Leader.”

“It's been a thousand years since the First Heavenly Demon founded our cult.”

With his hands behind his back, Cheon Taejong continued.

“The Six Demonic Deities who served him established the Six Great Demonic Clans. A thousand years later, they now wield influence over the entire cult.”

“And do you know why that was possible?”

Cheon Yura answered immediately.

“Because of the strength of the countless bloodlines they've produced over the past thousand years.”

“Exactly. You see clearly.”

Cheon Taejong nodded.

“In the current era, each of the Six Clans has at least a hundred individuals considered direct lineage. Inheritance rights aside, that's the scale of their core bloodlines.”

Most of them held important positions within or outside the clan, forming the backbone of the cult.

“But in the Cheon Clan, only you and I are considered direct lineage—even though our numbers are not inferior to the other Six Clans. Do you know why that is?”

Cheon Yura lowered her head, cautiously gauging his reaction.

Because she already understood where he was going with this.

“Because only you and I are compatible with the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art.”

“Precisely.”

Being born into the Cheon Clan didn’t automatically mean one could cultivate the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art.

Only a rare few, acknowledged for their compatibility, could learn it.

And mastering that art meant—

“Yura, you possess the qualities to become a Heavenly Demon.”

Heavenly Demon.

A title not granted once per generation, but perhaps once in several generations. Since the founding of the cult, only three people—excluding the First Heavenly Demon—had ever reached that status.

But now, in this generation—

For the first time in cult history, a Heavenly Demon might be born in succession from the same bloodline.

“So do not doubt your potential.”

Cheon Yura lowered her head in shame. Though his tone was gentle, she knew all too well that it was, in essence, a rebuke.

“I’m sorry, Cult Leader.”

“Being swayed by demonic nature is for the ordinary. Those like us must instead learn to master our demonic nature. Even if it means losing something precious in the process.”

This was the burden borne by all cultivators of the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art, whether they became Heavenly Demons or not.

“I will remember your words.”

“Good. You must never forget them.”

Having finished his rebuke, Cheon Taejong changed the subject to lighten the mood.

“By the way, Biyeon. That young son of the Jin Clan really did enter the Thousand-Day Pass, didn’t he?”

“Yes, Cult Leader.”

Though phrased as a question, it was really just a confirmation.

There were hardly any secrets within the Ten Thousand Mountains that the Cult Leader wasn’t aware of.

“Tsk, tsk. I can more or less guess what’s going through his head.”

“.....”

“He’s probably trying to avoid you.”

Cheon Yura’s face immediately contorted.

Just moments ago, she had seemed downcast, but now a hint of killing intent flickered across her expression.

Seeing that, Sa Biyeon was taken aback.

‘The Young Cult Leader reacting so sensitively to someone else’s affairs?’

She had always been someone who focused solely on martial arts, advancing with singular focus.

Even the exchange ceremony had only happened because the Cult Leader urged her into it.

It had been surprising that the Jin and Ma Clans had survived, but she assumed Cheon Yura would soon lose interest.

“It was just a joke.”

Cheon Taejong, perhaps sensing this, stroked his beard and added with a smirk.

“Jin Yeomyung, was it? Do you like him that much?”

“Not particularly.”

“But your words and actions suggest otherwise.”

Cheon Taejong's expression, as he looked at the speechless Cheon Yura, had turned icy cold.

"Of course, one day you'll have to marry and continue the Cheon Clan's lineage. But at least for now, don't let your attention stray. Focus solely on achieving mastery."

That expression—it was more alien than any either Cheon Yura or Sa Biyeon had ever seen on him before.

"The day you master the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art, no one will be able to stand against you."

"Y-yes, Cult Leader."

Both Cheon Yura and Sa Biyeon instinctively lowered their gazes.

'What...? Didn't the Cult Leader seem fond of Jin Yeomyung?'

Sa Biyeon was confused by the contradiction in Cheon Taejong's attitude.

'No... more than that...'

It felt more like he valued Cheon Yura's martial completion above any personal attachment or sentiment.

'What is the Cult Leader really thinking...?'

As both Sa Biyeon and Cheon Yura wrestled with their confusion—

"They are not to be taken lightly."

".....!!"

Cheon Taejong dropped a bombshell over their heads.

Chapter 28: Thousand-Day Pass (6)

The first day dawned after entering the Thousand-Day Pass.

"Everyone, take one of these."

A bald middle-aged man appeared on the training grounds, introducing himself as Jang Deuk-soo, a senior instructor of the Thousand-Day Pass.

Through him, all ninety-eight trainees, including myself, received a book without exception.

The title on the cover read: 'Smoldering Demon Art'.

'What is this?'

Everyone tilted their heads in confusion.

Jang Deuk-soo grinned as he added, "It's a basic demonic art from the Yang Strength lineage. Every single one of you must learn it."

"We're supposed to learn this?"

Naturally, objections burst forth immediately.

"Instructor, all the trainees here have already been learning their own martial arts from their respective clans or sects."

"Oh really? Then you don't have to learn it."

"...What?"

A sneer formed on Jang Deuk-soo's face.

"If you want to freeze to death in a few months, I don't care whether you learn it or not. Go ahead, it's your choice."

"....."

The trainee who had raised the objection quickly shut his mouth.

Jang Deuk-soo glared at the other trainees who had rebellious looks in their eyes.

"The weather might still be warm enough to endure for now. But have you forgotten where you are, you little brats?"

The murmuring atmosphere around us instantly fell silent at those words.

"The Thousand-Day Pass is a world ruled by the law of the jungle. The only uniform you'll be issued is the martial robe you're wearing now. When winter comes, you'll have to take care of all your clothing needs by yourselves!"

".....!"

Many of the trainees widened their eyes in shock.

Ten Thousand Mountain was one of the most Yin-rich lands in the central plains.

It was filled with snowy peaks that hadn't melted even now.

"In other words..."

While many were still opening and closing their mouths, I raised my hand.

"You're saying it's fine for us to walk around in fur clothes during the winter?"

"Of course, if you have the ability."

Jang Deuk-soo nodded.

"But that ability does not include your family's help, Jin Yeomyung."

He issued a warning.

"Even just outside the Thousand-Day Pass, there are wild beasts that even seasoned First-rate Martial Artists struggle with. A few years ago, a spirit beast even appeared."

"A sp-spirit beast?!"

Though spirit beasts were considered a delicacy among martial artists, unless it was a newborn, even groups of skilled fighters would struggle to hunt one.

It wasn't just their physical prowess—spirit beasts dominated their territory like their own backyard, and commanded nearby animals as their subordinates. They were adept at both escaping and pack hunting.

'Ah, I heard about that one. Was it a giant silver tiger? The Demon-Soaking Unit tried to capture it, but over ten of them died, and they failed, right?'

The incident had such a ripple effect that the head of the Demon-Soaking Unit had been replaced due to that failure.

Was that around here?

"Needless to say, if it's discovered that you used your clan's power for anything training-related, you'll be expelled immediately. Understood?"

"Of course. Understood."

I met Jang Deuk-soo's gaze and smiled back.

"Good. In the afternoon, the training room will be open. Those who want to use it must apply directly to me after the daily schedule."

“So, learning this demonic art isn’t part of today’s schedule?”

At a trainee’s question, Jang Deuk-soo frowned.

“Of course not. That’s the most basic of basics. Did you think we’d set aside time to help you learn a mere foundational technique, not even an advanced demonic art?”

As soon as he finished speaking, over a dozen instructors appeared around us.

On their backs were massive round boulders stacked like mountains.

Gulp.

Some of the trainees, realizing what those rocks were for, swallowed hard.

“This cohort seems full of weaklings.”

Thud! Thud!

The instructors carefully stacked the boulders on the training grounds.

Then they handed ropes to the trainees and said:

“Alright, pick one each.”

W-What?

Just as the trainees tried to mentally escape from reality—

“For the next two months, your sole focus will be basic physical training.”

And the tools for that basic physical training were right before our eyes.

“Welcome to the Thousand-Day Pass, you little brats.”

The trainees’ faces turned pale yellow.

* * *

“G-Graaah!”

“Ugh! P-Please, I’m dying...”

“You won’t die from that. Don’t be a baby.”

The physical training that began on the first day of the Thousand-Day Pass didn't end until noon.

Though the training only lasted around four hours, not a single trainee remained standing afterward.

Cluck, cluck.

Some of the instructors clicked their tongues disapprovingly, but no one dared to protest.

We had been hauling boulders the size of adult torsos for nearly half a day—if anyone had energy left after that, that would be strange!

'D-Damn, I'm gonna die.'

I too felt my consciousness fading as I gasped for air.

Though I'd started working on my stamina after coming to this life, just a few months of training was nowhere near enough.

'If it were that muscle pig Yeowoon, he'd probably be laughing as he carried even more.'

If it were Jin Yeowoon, that muscle freak, he would've probably laughed while asking the instructors if they had heavier rocks.

Just imagining it made my eyes crinkle in irritation.

'Damn it. I'm the older brother—I can't be outdone by my little brother in anything!'

Still, perhaps thanks to being from the Jin Clan, my stamina was recovering quickly.

'No doubt about it. This is a blessed body.'

In about three more minutes, I'd have the strength to lift the rock again.

"Listen while you rest."

At that moment, Jang Deuk-soo addressed the exhausted trainees.

"Some of you might already know, but the Thousand-Day Pass training program is divided into five stages."

He raised one finger.

“The first is the physical training and basic demonic art practice you’re doing now.”

This was an essential component to endure the harsh environment of the Thousand-Day Pass and its surrounding area.

“After about two months, you’ll be grouped into teams of eleven to learn the basics of team combat.”

In the Heavenly Demon Cult, being a martial artist meant you were always part of a group.

All battles in the cult were assumed to be group battles, and learning this was the most fundamental of basics.

“And before moving on to the third stage, you’ll be given a choice.”

That choice was a career path—one that would determine the course of your entire life.

“Will you take the mid-level martial officer exam for the cult, or will you give up martial arts and head down the path of an administrative role?”

Mid-level martial officer.

To me, it wasn’t anything significant. But passing that exam granted you a basic salary from the cult.

And more importantly, it gave you eligibility to apply for the Thirty-Four Demon Squads—the official combat divisions of the cult.

In the Heavenly Demon Cult, this eligibility itself was essentially what separated the haves and the have-nots. Heirs from lesser clans or sects would go all out trying to pass that mid-level officer exam to gain status.

Of course, merely passing the exam wasn’t nearly enough to get accepted into the Thirty-Four Demon Squads, but still—

Jang Deuk-soo looked at the trainees with a flicker of envy in his eyes.

“You lot are lucky. Especially those aiming for administrative roles.”

“Why’s that, sir?”

“You all know that the Four Great Halls were recently reorganized into the Five Great Halls, right?”

Many nodded.

Not knowing that would be the same as openly admitting you were a spy.

“The Heavenly Thunder Corps has been actively recruiting administrative staff. As part of that, the Thousand-Day Pass has been allowed to recommend up to three candidates from each cohort until next year.”

“.....!!”

“In other words, three of you here could enter the Heavenly Thunder Corps.”

“O-Ohhhh!”

Cheers erupted from many of the trainees.

The Heavenly Thunder Corps was one of the Five Great Halls that sat atop the Heavenly Demon Cult's organizational hierarchy, alongside the Nine Demon Halls and Seventeen Parties.

Though it had been founded relatively recently and hadn't yet amassed the prestige of the older divisions, it was nonetheless one of the Five Great Halls—and a direct path to power and success.

Even someone like me, who started from a very different position than the others, felt intrigued.

‘Tempting.’

Though, the kind of intrigue I felt was of a very different nature from the others.

‘Wouldn't this be the perfect chance to infiltrate the Heavenly Thunder Corps without raising suspicion?’

The Heavenly Thunder Corps had been one of the main culprits in ruining the cult after the current Cult Leader's death.

They hadn't been directly tied to the traitors—but from what I'd seen, the only thing missing was proof.

‘Even if they hadn't betrayed the cult, the Heavenly Thunder Corps is a cancer that needs to be excised.’

Near the end of Cheon Yura's reign, the power of the Heavenly Thunder Corps had even eclipsed the Elder Council.

Even the Six Great Demonic Clans had to tread carefully around them—need I say more?

Balance had collapsed.

The cult began to rot from the inside, and ultimately, it was Demonic Faction Lord Han Mubaek who struck the final blow, toppling the cult.

‘Well... that’s something to think about later.’

I had just entered the Thousand-Day Pass—far too early to decide on a path.

What I needed to focus on now were two things.

First, increasing my own combat ability.

And second, identifying the culprit behind the upcoming assassination incident that would occur within the Thousand-Day Pass.

‘The characters “Sang (相)” and “Yeon (煙)”... they must be the clue.’

If there was any possible inference from those characters, the most likely was a person’s name.

I had to find someone within the Thousand-Day Pass with “Sang” or “Yeon” in their name.

“After your paths are decided, things get simpler. From the third stage onward, it’s endless real combat and practical assignments. From this point on, you must prove your worth.”

Jang Deuk-soo continued.

“Except for the special case of the Heavenly Thunder Corps, all of you will eventually take the senior martial officer exam and the Outer Hall admission test. That’s the final stage. Only those who pass can be considered true graduates of the Thousand-Day Pass.”

After all that filtering, only about one-tenth of trainees would go on to become the true core of the cult.

“Well, the reason you lot are lucky isn’t just because of the Heavenly Thunder Corps.”

Shhk!

“There’s an even greater opportunity standing right in front of you. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Before anyone could react, Jang Deuk-soo’s finger was suddenly pointing straight at me.

Countless gazes followed, landing squarely on me.

'This bastard?'

I let out a quiet sigh of disbelief.

I had no idea what gave him the gall, but it was obvious he was picking a fight.

I casually shrugged my shoulders.

"You're not wrong."

I locked eyes with Jang Deuk-soo.

"If you want, Instructor, I could even save you a spot at the front gate—as a doorman."

"...What?"

Jang Deuk-soo's face twisted in an instant.

A wave of killing intent burst from him, crashing down on my entire body.

But I'd already withstood the killing intent of the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass.

There was no way I'd be intimidated by someone like Jang Deuk-soo.

'Still, he's no slouch. I'd say he's right on the verge of reaching the Master Level—just short of breaking through.'

The "Unfolding (展)" or "Sealing (結)" stages of Master Level.

He had every right to be called a senior instructor here.

Of course, that didn't mean he had the right to start throwing shade at someone from the direct line of the Jin Clan.

"You little punk, what did you just say?"

Jang Deuk-soo stormed up to me, eyes blazing.

But I simply laughed in his face.

"You think being a gatekeeper for the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan is something to scoff at? That position pays at least three times your salary, you know."

Flinch!

The moment I said “three times your salary,” not only Jang Deuk-soo but all the other instructors opened their eyes wide.

“Do you even know how much we make...?”

“A regular instructor gets fifteen nyang of silver. Senior instructors get twenty, right?”

“How do you—?!”

How else?

There’s no way there aren’t instructors here with ties to the Jin Clan.

Gulp.

A few instructors standing around Jang Deuk-soo swallowed nervously.

“Opportunities aren’t just for the trainees, you know. You instructors have doors open to you as well.”

I gave my widest grin as I mocked him.

Chapter 29: Provocation

I saw Jang Deuk-soo's hand trembling slightly.

“Y-You bastard.”

For a place like the Thousand-Day Pass to function properly, strict adherence to hierarchy and obedience to orders was essential.

No matter if the instructor had provoked me first, a mere trainee ramming into him like that should’ve been met with harsh punishment.

But his reaction defied my expectations.

At a distance close enough for our faces to almost touch, Jang Deuk-soo whispered softly.

“Were you serious?”

I blinked for a moment, then replied with a question of my own.

“Weren’t you trying to provoke me?”

“Well, I was, but... it was too much money to just ignore.”

“.....”

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

Right.

Pride or whatever—money was king.

Sixty silver nyang was an amount equivalent not to a monthly but to an annual salary for most mid-level martial officers.

Even someone like Jang Deuk-soo, a high-ranking instructor, couldn't help but be tempted.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Well, we can talk more about that after I leave the Thousand-Day Pass.”

“Kh-Khem! Yes, let's do that.”

The surrounding instructors and trainees gave Jang Deuk-soo sour looks.

But Jang Deuk-soo simply scowled back as if to say, “What? What are you looking at?”

I clicked my tongue inwardly at the sight.

‘I have no interest in pointless power struggles.’

What I was curious about now was how the Pavilion Master, who must have triggered this situation from behind the scenes, would respond.

A little while after the incident in the training ground—

“So, what was his reaction?”

“He's a bold one. I didn't expect him to counter with a proposal of his own on the spot.”

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass gave a bitter smile after hearing Jang Deuk-soo's report.

“So in the end, can we assume his goal is the same as the Jin Clan's second son?”

Recruiting talent to shift the power dynamics within a household.

But Jang Deuk-soo shook his head.

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“It’s not?”

“He figured out my intentions. Yet, despite knowing that, he responded in such a way that would only spark backlash from those around him. He wouldn’t have done that unless he had a different agenda. If he really wanted to recruit talent, he’d have taken the time to gauge the situation more carefully.”

“Hm!”

If it were just about gathering nobodies to follow him around, that’d be one thing, but if he truly wanted the real deal, that sort of reckless behavior wouldn’t help.

“Still, aside from that...”

“Aside from that?”

“The kid’s the real deal. Now I understand why the Six Great Demonic Clans sit atop the Heavenly Demonic Cult.”

Jang Deuk-soo had guided countless individuals up to this point.

And by his judgment, Jin Yeomyung possessed one of the rarest talents he had ever seen.

“There’s definitely another purpose behind his actions. If it were just self-aggrandizement, he would’ve tried to stand out during training.”

“Then in the end, there’s only one thing we can be sure of.”

The Pavilion Master’s eyes gleamed sharply.

“That something is unfolding behind the scenes—something we don’t yet understand.”

“Pardon? A c-conspiracy?”

“Who knows. But one thing is clear—this involves both the Cult Leader and the Asura King.”

Jang Deuk-soo was taken aback.

From his perspective, the Pavilion Master was making a huge leap in logic.

'Is there really a need to blow this out of proportion over one brat's reaction?'

But the Pavilion Master's expression was dead serious, and he didn't seem the least bit uncertain.

"Just recently, it was confirmed that the personnel records of the Thousand-Day Pass were leaked to the Jin Clan of the Demonic Heaven."

"The personnel records?!"

"To be exact—records of all current instructors and enrolled trainees. Interestingly, graduates were not included."

There wasn't a place within the Heavenly Demonic Cult untouched by the influence of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Given that some of the instructors were already connected to the Jin Clan, it wouldn't have been too difficult for them to acquire the personnel records if they truly wanted them.

However—

"Why bother?"

The problem was, what use would the Jin Clan have for such records in the first place?

"That's something we'll have to figure out over time."

Assuming this incident would resolve without causing harm to the Thousand-Day Pass was wishful thinking at best.

The Pavilion Master stared out the window and spoke.

"Instructor Jang."

"Yes, Pavilion Master."

"I, you see... don't believe in the word 'coincidence'."

The reason Jin Yeomyung had entered the Thousand-Day Pass mentioning the Main Flow. The reason the personnel records had been leaked to the Jin Clan.

The Pavilion Master was convinced that somewhere beyond his grasp, all of these threads were connected.

“From this moment on, increase surveillance on all trainees and instructors. I authorize the deployment of the Gatekeeping Unit.”

“U-Understood.”

“There’s a chance the Shadow Division is already in motion. If they’ve hidden it even from me, it means they’re taking it seriously. Be thorough.”

“I’ll contact the commander of the Gatekeeping Unit immediately. Leave it to me.”

Jang Deuk-soo formed a fist and bowed with determination.

Though there were some errors in the Pavilion Master’s deductions, his instincts were getting dangerously close to the truth.

“I’m counting on you, Instructor Jang.”

The Pavilion Master nodded with satisfaction.

Just as Jang Deuk-soo turned to leave the office—

“Oh, by the way.”

“Yes?”

The Pavilion Master, resting his chin on his hand, asked with a pout.

“So, are you going to switch over to the Jin Clan?”

“N-No, that’s...”

“I heard the Jin Clan’s gatekeepers make three times what a Senior instructor earns in a month. You seemed pretty tempted when you heard that.”

“.....”

“Am I wrong?”

All Jang Deuk-soo could do was break out in a cold sweat.

Once my day was over, I rented out a separate training room and settled in.

On the surface, it was to learn the Smoldering Demon Art provided by the Thousand-Day Pass, but in truth, I needed time to train in martial arts unrelated to the daily curriculum.

‘There’s no real need for me to learn Smoldering Demon Art.’

The Smoldering Demon Art recommended by the Thousand-Day Pass could easily be substituted with the Heaven-Flying Boundless Divine Art.

‘According to Master, once the Heaven-Flying Boundless Divine Art reaches a certain level, it produces a similar effect to the concept of “fire cannot wet water.”’

In my previous life, I had been at such a pitifully low level that I couldn’t experience that effect, but I certainly didn’t intend for that to happen again in this life.

Besides, even if I didn’t use the Heaven-Flying Boundless Divine Art, the martial arts of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan were all supreme-level demonic techniques based on strength and yang energy. There was no need for me to cling to the Smoldering Demon Art.

‘The training program at the Thousand-Day Pass has no major flaws. It’ll sufficiently fill the gaps in my current abilities.’

But that didn’t mean I had to follow only that path.

An ordinary person would struggle just to keep up with this curriculum, but as someone of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan bloodline, I still had much to fill in.

Shhk!

I drew my sword and unfolded the sword technique.

Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

A sword art centered on transformation, illusion, and speed. To be honest, it felt far too foreign to be considered a traditional demonic sword technique.

‘Most demonic sword arts focus heavily on speed and power. The Blood Stream Demonic Spirit Sword Art of the Jin Clan at least emphasizes transformation, but even that shifts toward raw power at higher levels.’

The true secret technique of the Jin Clan, the Blood Dragon Heaven-Slaying Sword Art, was a textbook example of a power-based sword style.

'If I look only at the characteristics of the sword forms, this sword art is more like those from the orthodox factions... perhaps even similar to ones from Mount Hua or the Shaolin.'

Then suddenly, something struck me.

'No, wait—'

There was something even more similar than orthodox sword arts.

I had only encountered it a few times, but not long ago, I had even coordinated strikes with it.

Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

Ultimate strength. Ultimate speed. Ultimate transformation.

Aside from its immense internal energy consumption, it was an overwhelmingly perfect sword technique—one of the strongest of the Heavenly Demonic Cult.

At its peak, it was said to allow free control of twelve strands of Sword Qi. No matter how I looked at it, it had clear connections with the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

'What is this feeling?'

The more I unfolded the forms, the more a strange sense of dissonance surged through my body.

'Come to think of it, we had no trouble syncing or coordinating our attacks.'

In joint attacks, using sword arts with differing natures usually does more harm than good.

If the flow doesn't match, the power collapses entirely.

Yet Cheon Yura and I had launched a seamless assault, as if wielding the same sword art. That was the only reason we had survived an encounter with Jeokun, a master of the highest level.

'Let me take a closer look.'

I knew the flow of the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art well.

In my previous life, Cult Leader Cheon Yura had often performed the sword forms during ceremonial rites as the High Priestess.

Even outside those rituals, I had observed the flow closely while coordinating strikes with her.

As I swung my sword like a madman for a while, I finally realized something.

The Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword shares the same origin as the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

But how?

The Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art was a secret technique passed down alongside the Heavenly Demonic Divine Art, an inherited sword form from the First Heavenly Demon of the Cheon Clan.

Even if someone could mimic the flow of the forms, without knowing the mantras of the sword, they would never be able to reproduce the hidden essence.

Yet, the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword aligned even in its inner secrets with the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

And that raised a new question.

‘Master... just who are you?’

There’s no way Master didn’t know this.

He introduced himself as a retired elder from a past generation.

But he never once told me what faction he had served, or what his nickname had been—not even his real name.

He just said to call him “Old Han.”

But how could he know the true nature of this sword art?

No—before that, how did this sword art even end up inside the Martial Arts Repository of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan?

In my previous life, when I didn’t value life all that much, I had brushed it aside without care. But right now, I could feel clearly that the “karma” tied to this sword art was no small matter.

‘No! This isn’t the time to be thinking about that.’

Hoo!

I slashed the sword downward while taking a deep breath to drive out all distractions.

‘Whatever the case, I need to see this sword art through to the end.’

The reason I had learned martial arts from Master in the first place was because the martial arts of the Jin Clan didn’t suit me.

On the other hand, this Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword fit my hand so perfectly, just as Master had confidently said.

‘Incomplete mantras. Incomplete forms. A flimsy resolve. That was me back then. But now, everything is complete.’

The sword dance began.

Complete mantras. Complete forms. A resolve that longs for the highest peaks.

These elements resonated with me—Jin Yeomyung, the bloodline of the Jin Clan—and sparked a synergy.

And on top of that—

The “sense” awakened by dragging forth the realm of my past life now supported that synergy and began to ruthlessly break through the walls ahead.

This sense extended far beyond ordinary human perception, blending a martial artist’s sixth sense with the realm of synesthesia—where senses overlap.

Before I knew it, a phantom of Cheon Yura appeared before me.

The sword forms she had unleashed violently during the Exchange Ceremony.

Those forms reappeared now as illusions, pressing down on me once again.

‘This time—I can withstand it!’

Unlike before, when I barely parried and got wounded, this time was different.

Though it was only a phantom, my sword path lightly began to deflect Cheon Yura’s Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

‘I’m breaking through.’

Not my defense.

The flow of Qi throughout my body was unlocking—my meridians, once blocked, were now opening one after another.

And over time, energy surged from my Dantian.

Crackle!

This growing power meant my sword strikes carried increasing weight.

'I won't be pushed back anymore.'

Normally, I would've been overwhelmed by Cheon Yura's powerful sword—but now, my sword held power equal to, if not greater than, what she wielded at that time.

Fwoosh!

Was it because her strikes kept getting blocked?

The illusion of Cheon Yura began to unleash her full power, as if in frustration.

The Six-Spirit Demonic Path—six strands of Sword Qi that had once cornered me.

Back then, I had barely survived by flailing without form—but now, my sword, at its peak flow, softly redirected that Sword Qi with ease.

'It's coming.'

Then—

A chained strike from Cheon Yura that I couldn't even respond to before.

A powerful burst of Qi shot toward my throat.

'I can see it!'

I captured the strike with my eyes and focused all of my internal energy into my sword.

With desperate precision, I activated a single sword form to counter it.

Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

Sixth Record.

Boundless Realm Demon.

Beyond thrusts. Beyond Sword Qi.

I entered the realm of Sword Threads.

If only for a moment, I glimpsed the path that lay beyond the wall.

CRAAAAACK!

“Uwaaagh!”

“Wh-What happened?!”

A storm of Qi erupted from my sword, and a portion of the training chamber collapsed under the pressure.

Chapter 30: Like a Cow Stepping Backward

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

An emergency bell rang out across the entire Thousand-Day Pass in the middle of the night.

“What the hell?!”

“Is it an attack?!”

“It’s from the new recruits’ Qi training room! Hurry!”

Not only the instructors on night duty, but even the secret units tasked with guarding the Thousand-Day Pass rushed toward the Qi training hall.

Just moments ago, an explosion had rocked the entire facility.

An explosion of that magnitude was nearly unheard of within the Thousand-Day Pass.

Not long after, the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass himself appeared, flanked by instructors as his escort, having awakened from sleep.

“Greetings to the Pavilion Master!”

Baek Gyu, the commander of the Gatekeeping Unit, who was investigating the scene, bowed deeply and respectfully to the Pavilion Master.

“Spare me the chatter. Just the report.”

Startled by the irritation and killing intent in his superior’s demeanor, Baek Gyu quickly answered.

“We believe someone destroyed half of the Qi training room and then escaped.”

“Injuries?”

“Other than two trainees who were lightly injured while training, there were no major casualties.”

“That’s a relief, at least.”

“However, the identities of the injured trainees are quite significant, so we are investigating whether this might have been an assassination attempt.”

“An assassination attempt?”

The Pavilion Master's expression stiffened.

“Who are they?”

“Trainees Jin Yeomyung of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan and Ma Jinseong of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan.”

Twitch.

Not just the Pavilion Master, but even the expression of Senior Instructor Jang Deuk-soo, who accompanied him, twisted upon hearing those names.

“Where are they now?”

“I sent them to a physician dispatched from the Medicine Hall, just in case.”

“Good.”

If it were just Ma Jinseong, a branch family member, it wouldn’t matter as much—but if Jin Yeomyung had suffered serious injuries?

He didn’t even want to imagine what might come next.

The Pavilion Master knew well that, despite appearances, the Asura King Jin Gun-ak deeply cherished his eldest son.

Should something truly happen to him, it wasn’t hard to envision the Asura King storming in with the Jin Clan elites in tow like a vengeful demon.

“Take me to the scene.”

“Yes, sir!”

Though the training room for new recruits wasn't particularly large, it boasted impressive durability.

"Whoa! The wall made of Azure Steel stone is shattered like tofu."

"It's a blessing that there were so few trainees using the hall at the time."

Only three new trainees had been using the hall.

And even then, they had been training far apart from one another, which helped keep the damage to a minimum.

"So Jin Yeomyung was training near here?"

"Yes. According to him, the wall suddenly collapsed and a powerful burst of Qi struck him."

"Hm..."

Something felt off about that to the Pavilion Master.

'An assassin made such a flashy entrance?'

And despite all that, the targets only ended up with minor injuries?

'It sounds more plausible that he wrecked it himself while training... no, that still doesn't add up.'

Azure Steel stone was tough enough that even most sword qi couldn't leave a scratch, let alone slice through it.

To cause this level of destruction, the attacker would have to at least be capable of manifesting Qi Projection.

Which meant—

'Is he already at Master Level at that age?'

And that was being conservative.

If it were the Jin Clan's peak-level demonic arts, then maybe such power could be achieved at Master Level—but generally, you'd need to be beyond Master Level to pull off something like this.

'That can't be right.'

The Pavilion Master chuckled and dismissed the wild thought.

If someone had reached Master Level at that age, they'd already surpass the Six Demonic Dragons and be hailed as the top young martial artist in all of Murim.

In all his seventy years, the Pavilion Master had only ever seen two people reach Master Level at such a young age:

The current Cult Leader, Cheon Taejong, who had earned the title of Heavenly Demon,
And his daughter, the Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura.

Just those two.

It was more reasonable to assume that a Master Level assassin had to flee for some unknown reason after attempting an assassination.

"What about tracking?"

"We've deployed our forces along the suspected entry paths and are performing a reverse sweep. We did manage to find one trace, however..."

The Pavilion Master clicked his tongue at the look on Baek Gyu's face.

"Not going well, is it?"

"My apologies. He must be an extraordinary individual."

"If he came in from the outside, that could explain it. This is partially my mistake."

Lately, the Pavilion Master had allocated more personnel to monitor every trainee and instructor within the Pass, which had left them more vulnerable to outside infiltration.

"Still, do your best. There's a chance a spy has infiltrated the cult."

"Understood! I swear on my honor, I'll uncover them!"

Baek Gyu's eyes blazed with determination.

"There's no internal damage, and the wounds should be fine as long as you apply some Golden Wound Ointment properly."

"Thank you, physician."

“No need to thank me. If you folks didn’t get injured, I wouldn’t have any work! Hahaha!”

The elderly man before me was a physician dispatched from the Medicine Hall, one of the Seventeen Parties.

“If I send you back right away, it’ll make me look bad to the Pavilion Master. Rest up and return tomorrow.”

“Thank you for the consideration.”

With the physician gone, I was left alone in the spacious patient ward.

‘He didn’t notice, did he?’

Wrecking the training hall during a mock battle with the illusion was clearly my mistake.

‘It’s best that no one finds out I can wield Sword Aura yet.’

Normally, I would have been exposed right away, no matter how suspicious things looked—but thankfully, I’d prepared a little insurance.

“Young Master.”

That “insurance” had just finished its job and came looking for me.

As I lifted my upper body off the bed, a bald young man with a now-familiar face was kneeling before me.

“So, Gu Chil.”

I grinned and asked him,

“Did you leave any traces?”

If I’d just thrown a fit and that was the end of it, nothing could be done. But if there were signs left outside, we could pin it on an assassination attempt.

That’s why, before everyone arrived, I ordered Gu Chil to leave subtle but detectable traces leading toward the outside of the Thousand-Day Pass.

But—

“Uh, about that...”

Gu Chil scratched the back of his head, his expression awkward.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

“I did as you ordered and left some traces leading outside the Thousand-Day Pass, but...”

He had carried out the mission successfully—so why did he look like that?

“And?”

“Well... I think there might be someone else.”

“...What?”

Gu Chil’s words hit me like a club to the back of the head.

“I really think an outsider has infiltrated.”

According to him, he had gone to several exterior routes he had secretly scouted in advance to leave some signs of activity.

And at one of those places, there were already traces—faint but clear—of someone passing through there regularly.

“Any chance it’s not a spy?”

“Highly unlikely. That path goes through a gap in the formation net surrounding the area. Who else would bother going through all that unless they were a spy?”

Given that Gu Chil was once a top-class assassin—a true First-rate Martial Artist—his words carried weight.

I let out a hollow laugh.

“Ha... like a cow stepping backward and catching a rat.”

“Not just any rat. You just caught the king rat.”

“Can you track them?”

Gu Chil grinned.

“Do you even need to ask?”

He was once Byeok Cheon-un, commander of the Ghost Command Unit under the direct control of the Cheon Clan—codename Doom-Wielding Ghost Commander, Nine Hidden Ghost.

That was Gu Chil's former identity.

At the same time.

Somewhere within the Thousand-Day Pass.

"Second Order, it's been a month since the directive was issued."

"..."

"Those above want this resolved quickly. Why haven't you taken action yet?"

The shadow in black was clearly displeased with the Second Order's recent inactivity.

Just months ago, he had acted so confidently, claiming he'd handle everything perfectly—yet no news since then?

But the Second Order had his reasons.

"I'm under surveillance."

"Surveillance...?"

The shadow visibly wavered at the reply.

"It's not just me. Ever since the directive was issued, at least dozens of people have been monitoring movements day and night. From what I've found, it's not just me—it's the entire trainee force."

"Did we get exposed somehow?"

"Of course not!"

The Second Order snapped, his voice rough and angry.

"I haven't even done anything yet, and there hasn't been any sign that anything's been discovered. If someone had been exposed, there'd be no reason to cast the net over the entire group!"

He clenched his teeth in frustration.

"You should be cautious too. The surveillance isn't just on the trainees."

"Well, I'm an internal staff member after all."

The shadow held a position as an instructor, though not one that involved directly teaching trainees.

“And if anyone got exposed, shouldn’t it be your side, not mine?”

The only reason the two of them were even able to have this conversation despite the surveillance was thanks to the recent strange incident at the Thousand-Day Pass.

With the guards dispatched to investigate that incident, the usual monitoring had temporarily loosened, giving them a rare opportunity to talk.

“Rumors are spreading among the trainees that an assassin infiltrated the Thousand-Day Pass. Isn’t that more likely to have come from your side?”

The shadow trembled visibly at those words.

“H-Hem. I thought it might be related, so I ran some checks internally...”

“And?”

“No one acted on their own. I’m sure of it.”

“Absolutely sure?”

“I swear on the name of the Dark King Squad I lead.”

Only when he invoked the name of his unit did the Second Order’s expression soften slightly.

“Then who the hell is it?”

“We’re looking into that as well. Looks like some reckless brat popped up from another line.”

The “organization” was strictly compartmentalized into a cell structure.

It had to be, because the surveillance net cast by the Heavenly Demonic Cult was far too wide and meticulous for any centralized body to operate freely.

That was why even when someone acted rashly, it was hard to trace.

“Still, Second Order, if you continue to stall despite the situation, expect repercussions.”

“I know. I’ve been working to draw him into my faction. Even if I fail...”

The Second Order’s eyes turned cold.

“I can just kill him outside. The ‘field training’ is coming up.”

The shadow nodded.

Field training for the Thousand-Day Pass didn’t take place inside, but outside the institution.

It was the perfect time to make a move.

“The Eighth Lord places great importance on this matter. Do not fail and ruin the grand design.”

At the mention of the Eighth Lord, the Second Order’s expression hardened immediately.

The Eighth Lord was a high-ranking executive even within the organization—a man who had proven himself and earned recognition for achieving tangible results under the nose of the vigilant Heavenly Demon Cult.

But what made him most fearsome wasn’t his ability—it was his temperament.

He didn’t interfere much with his subordinates, but he was infamous for discarding failures without hesitation.

“I’ll handle it as quickly as possible.”

“Very well. I shouldn’t be away from my post too long either, so I’ll take my leave.”

Not long after, the shadow opposite the Second Order disappeared.

“Damn it...”

The Second Order cursed quietly as he noticed sweat dripping from his clenched palms.

The assassination should’ve been done long ago, but this unexpected commotion in the Thousand-Day Pass had completely derailed the plan.

“Where the hell is that mountain bandit?”

If he wanted to take care of it quietly, he needed to keep the target close.

But the mountain bandit he’d sent to win over the target had, a few months ago, not only saved the assassination target—he now stuck to him like glue as if they were best friends.

The Second Order’s headache only deepened.

