

My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader #Chapter 31 : Fire Formation Assignment - Read My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader Chapter 31 : Fire Formation Assignment

Chapter 31: Fire Formation Assignment

Time passed at the Thousand-Day Pass.

“Phew!”

The internal energy that had spread throughout my entire body’s meridians was safely collected back into my Dantian.

“Stable. At this level, I can say I’ve crossed the threshold.”

Since breaking through to the Master Level two months ago, I had been tormented by an impatient thirst for a higher realm.

Normally, a master would soothe a disciple and help quell that longing—but I had no master now.

It was a dangerous situation, to the point that a Qi Deviation could have taken root.

However, by sheer luck, I was able to avoid it.

That was thanks to the unexpected accident in the training room, which ended up reducing my training time and forcibly calming my impatience.

Only after the threat of a Qi Deviation had passed did I realize I had narrowly escaped danger—and I couldn't help but laugh at myself.

‘Well, a blessing is a blessing, I guess.’

If this could be called a fated opportunity, then so be it.

With that thought in mind, just as I returned to the dormitory—

“Young Master! I've prepared your blanket!”

“Please, take a seat here!”

“Thanks.”

The moment I entered the dormitory, two figures stationed in the corner rushed to greet me.

They were Jin Sang and Baekgu, the two subordinates I had taken under my wing at the Thousand-Day Pass.

“Young Master! Tomorrow, we’ll finally be done with this hellish physical training!”

Jin Sang—someone who, if he grew a mustache, would perfectly look like a scheming court official.

“I’m not too confident when it comes to brainwork...”

And Baekgu—a hulking figure who reminded me of Jin Yeowoon in sheer build.

These two were the first to pledge loyalty to me, faster than anyone else at the Thousand-Day Pass.

In truth, I hadn’t accepted them based on talent or personality.

I accepted them simply because they were the quickest to pick up on things.

“Out of the way, you bastards!”

“The Young Master needs his rest!”

Most of the trainees acknowledged my position and followed those words without much complaint.

Even so, quite a few still looked at me with eyes full of desire—but I made a point to ignore those looks.

After accepting Jin Sang and Baekgu, I had sent away every person who came to pledge loyalty.

And I left the trainees with one message:

‘If you wish to stand beside me, you must prove your worth.’

Not a rejection—but a deferment.

If anyone truly wished to seize the opportunity that was “Jin Yeomyung,” they would have to show something worthy of it.

I only accepted these two to act as my attendants because I didn’t want to be distracted by anything beyond martial arts training.

They were sharp enough to manage some matters, but if they didn't meet my standard within the half-year deadline given by the Pavilion Master, I was ready to cut them loose at any moment.

"Tch, the neighborhood boss has arrived!"

Only one person in this dorm dared to mock me to my face.

Ma Jinseong, a collateral of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan, who had shown hostility from day one.

"If you want, I could make you the boss of the neighborhood."

"Hah! You think I'd ever serve under you?!"

Still bearing the traces of youth, Ma Jinseong stuck out his tongue at me, taunting.

"H-How rude!"

"A collateral like him dares—!"

"Enough."

When I raised my hand to stop them, both of my attendants immediately closed their mouths.

"You're always welcome, Ma Jinseong."

"Tch. You mean joining that 'main flow' or whatever?"

"That's right."

In truth, this cohort of the Thousand-Day Pass was all but under my complete control.

I heard that upper-level cohorts were a mess of factional strife and infighting, but in this one, I stood as the absolute powerhouse.

Factions couldn't even form.

So I declared openly:

A survival rate of five percent. If there was anyone willing to step into that hell with me, let them come.

Of course, no one had joined me in that suicidal venture—yet.

‘That one’s got the qualifications, though.’

Despite the grueling physical training, he never missed a single day of cultivation, locking himself in the training chamber from the very first day.

After closely observing him for the past two months, I could tell—he wasn’t without talent.

I didn’t particularly like the idea of doing the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan a favor, but if I had to pick one noteworthy person in this cohort, it was Ma Jinseong.

“Hard to believe, honestly. And doesn’t choosing this ‘main flow’ thing mean completely deviating from the normal Thousand-Day Pass education?”

“That’s right. But if you undergo main flow training, you can grow twice as strong.”

A serpent-like voice tickled Ma Jinseong’s ear.

“You could even surpass Ma Chulsoo—the one you admire so much.”

“R-Really?”

Ma Jinseong’s eyes trembled.

The reason he came to the Thousand-Day Pass was likely because he admired Ma Chulsoo.

To surpass someone you looked up to—it was an ecstasy close to divine.

With a deliberately arrogant expression, I said,

“I’ve fought Ma Chulsoo before, so I know. His Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art has reached a decent level, but if you keep going like this, you can surpass him before you even graduate.”

Gulp.

Ma Chulsoo was at the level of a First-rate Martial Artist who could emit Sword Aura. Ma Jinseong, meanwhile, was barely able to perform a proper thrust or slash—a mere Second-rate Martial Artist.

Sure, I was sugarcoating things a bit, but depending on how he performed, it wasn’t necessarily a lie.

“Think it over. There’s still time.”

“.....”

With Ma Jinseong falling silent, I turned to Jin Sang.

“Jin Sang.”

“Yes, Young Master!”

“What about the task I assigned you?”

“I investigated it thoroughly!”

Jin Sang handed me a folder.

“The report on the faction structure and current status of the upper-level cohorts you requested.”

“Impressive.”

“Hehe, it’s all thanks to your support, Young Master.”

Jin Sang was as sociable as he was perceptive. With just a bit of money and alcohol from me, this newbie trainee had managed to gather this intel in only two weeks.

‘Though I used the Jin Clan’s resources to obtain the roster, it wasn’t enough to identify the assassin.’

Gu Chil had managed to grab a faint tail, but because the Pavilion Master had been moving around so much, that trail never reconnected with the Thousand-Day Pass.

‘It’s clear—there are fewer people the higher you go.’

There were currently about 480 surviving trainees at the Thousand-Day Pass. Among them, more than thirty had names that included "Sang" or "Yeon."

Some had names that were outright “Sang-yeon” or “Yeon-sang.”

I scanned the list one by one.

‘It won’t be the highest-ranking cohort. He’s not from one of the Six Clans or an elite household either.’

In the case of the topmost cohort, which was practically the graduating class, there were only eighteen survivors.

Those individuals were talents who had already drawn the attention of the main sect. The Seventeen Parties and Nine Demon Halls were likely burning with desire to recruit them.

‘Ah, come to think of it, San Dojeon the squad leader... no, San Dojeon was in the cohort right above mine.’

That blunt martial artist with no connections or cunning didn’t seem like someone who would belong to any faction...

And yet, he did.

“...Han Muyeon?”

I frowned at the strangely familiar name.

“Ah, he’s currently one of the most talked-about talents in the Thousand-Day Pass,” Jin Sang, who had been watching me warily, spoke up in response.

“Explain in detail.”

“As stated in the report, he’s three cohorts above us. He’s not from any prestigious family, but his talent is so outstanding that various top households and institutions within the cult are eager to recruit him.”

“How outstanding are we talking?”

“It’s said he can use Fist Qi.”

‘Fist Qi?’

To be able to manifest Fist Qi at that age was a level of talent highly regarded even in the Heavenly Demon Cult.

The Six Demonic Dragons, the greatest prodigies of the cult, were around that level.

“A talent worthy of the Demon Dragon Hall...”

“Yes. Even in the top cohort, many can’t emit Sword Qi, so it’s only natural that the Pavilion Master holds him in special regard.”

‘Suspicious.’

It wasn’t impossible for a dragon to rise from a stream, but the timing felt off.

Most of all, the name stood out. A sense of incongruity that only I, someone living his second life, could perceive.

‘Han Mubaek, Han Muyeon, Han Mubaek, Han Muyeon...’

The Demonic Faction Lord Han Mubaek had also come from humble beginnings and turned his life around.

“Jin Sang.”

“Yes, Young Master!”

“Can you find out more about this Han Muyeon?”

“Of course! There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Young Master!”

He likely buttered up to an instructor to get this information. If that was true, it wouldn’t be too hard to dig a bit deeper.

“Focus on what martial arts he uses—especially if he’s trained in demonic arts, find out exactly what he’s learned.”

“Leave it to me!”

Truthfully, Han Muyeon didn’t fit the image of an assassin. He was far too prominent and in the spotlight to make a move like that.

But my instincts, sharpened through my previous life, warned me.

There was something about him.

“From now on, the eleven of you will be grouped into one squad!”

After the physical training phase—which served as the initiation period at the Thousand-Day Pass—was over...

Eight people had dropped out during that time. The remaining ninety would now begin learning the basics of group combat, the next stage.

Jang Deuk-soo, the senior instructor assigned to our cohort, bellowed out.

“However, the squad leaders won’t be chosen from among you. They’ll be assigned from the upper cohorts.”

“Upper cohorts?”

“They’re individuals who have already passed the group combat exam with excellent scores and are now receiving squad leader training.”

It was said that if one placed within the top ten in this round’s evaluation, they would be eligible to receive squad leader training in the next cohort.

And that training came with a hefty bonus.

“I’ll now call out the members of Squad A. Jin Yeomyung, Ma Jinseong, Bu Yeojoon, Myeongho, Sim Bae...”

I was assigned to the same squad as Ma Jinseong.

And soon after, we were introduced to the senior cohort member who had been appointed as our squad leader.

“Ah, hello everyone.”

The moment she appeared, everyone was a bit stunned.

“A... a girl?”

“No, more than that...”

“An incredible beauty!”

She gave off a slightly dazed impression.

No, more like a girl than a woman.

Her hair was braided into twin plaits and tied behind her head, making her look even younger.

Our squad leader bowed her head politely toward us.

“My name is Baek Sang-ah.”

Baek Sang-ah.

To the other squad members, her presence felt completely out of place.

‘What’s this?’

Trembling eyes, shaky arms and legs.

She didn't look the part of a squad leader at all.

Those who had initially been entranced by her beauty gradually began casting suspicious glances her way.

'How did she survive?'

Trainees who entered the Thousand-Day Pass with half-hearted resolve didn't even make it past the first round of physical training.

Though some lacked talent, all the remaining trainees had unshakable will and ruthless determination.

But this girl standing before them had none of that ferocity.

"I-I've been assigned as your squad leader! I'll do my best!"

That girl made it into the top ten of her cohort?

Lacking spirit, full of timidity—the doubts among the trainees deepened.

At the Thousand-Day Pass, group combat wasn't just about practicing formations.

After learning the basics, it became full-on live combat.

And being selected as a squad leader meant not only surviving that ordeal—but doing so with a top-tier score.

'Something's not right. Something's definitely off.'

While the squad members were consumed by suspicion—

There was a reason behind her behavior.

'I'm screwed. Totally screwed!'

Among the assigned squad members was one boy in particular, someone who gave off a uniquely sharp presence.

'Of all people, why did I end up in the same squad as him!'

The eldest son of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan. To her—a mere "outsider"—Jin Yeomyung was basically the high-ranking elite of the cult, someone she absolutely had to avoid.

But she couldn't stay in her daze forever.

Steeling herself, Baek Sang-ah avoided looking at Jin Yeomyung and continued.

"A-As you all know, you'll be learning the doctrines of group combat, and then you'll be deployed into live missions."

She calmly recited the information she'd been taught.

"The Thousand-Day Pass doesn't confine live combat exercises within its walls."

"If not within, then where?" one trainee asked.

Baek Sang-ah nodded as if she had been waiting for the question.

"In conflict zones beyond the borders of the cult's territory."

Chapter 32: Mount Hua San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah (1)

The Heavenly Demon Cult was forming its sphere of influence in the northwestern part of the Central Plains, centered around Gansu Province.

To be exact, only the northern part of Gansu Province and the adjacent areas of Qinghai, Shaanxi, and a portion of Xinjiang could truly be considered the domain of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

But in reality, the only region where the Cult's influence was absolute was the northern area of Gansu Province, where the Ten Thousand Mountains were located.

Even now, in the southern part of Gansu, the Orthodox Sect "Gongdong Sect," one of the Nine Great Sects, and the Northern Heaven Clan, one of the Twin Heavenly Clans of the Central Plains, held sway.

Below that, in Sichuan, there were Emei, Azure Star Sect, and the Tang Clan jointly supporting the Orthodox faction.

And that wasn't all.

To the east in Shaanxi stood Mount Hua and Zhongnan, unwavering in their positions.

To the west in Qinghai, Evil Overlords of Heaven, the largest Unorthodox alliance, was in constant conflict with the Cult's demonic sects.

In truth, with the exception of the largely ungoverned Inner Mongolia and the vast but desolate Xinjiang, the Cult was surrounded on all sides.

Although things had been relatively peaceful lately, the areas where the Orthodox and Unorthodox factions clashed still frequently resulted in deaths—making them dangerous and fierce battlefields.

“Th-The disputed areas outside... where exactly are we going?”

“Ah, let me explain that.”

At that moment, Jang Deuk-soo appeared before us without anyone noticing.

“Ah! Greetings, Instructor!”

“Mm.”

I tilted my head.

It was nice of him to explain, but why had he come all the way here himself?

“Ahem! As you all know, our Cult isn’t the only one walking the path of the Demonic Way.”

Just as he said, while the power and recognition of the Heavenly Demon Cult were overwhelming, there were several historic demonic sects in the western Central Plains that had existed since the Warring States era.

‘The main ones would be... the Evil Refining Sect, Blood Demon Alliance, and the Nine Moons Blade Hall.’

The Evil Refining Sect had taken root in the Qinghai desert, while the Blood Demon Alliance had survived in the treacherous southern regions of Sichuan. The Nine Moons Blade Hall had branched off from Sun and Moon Sect, the predecessor of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Most of the surviving demonic lineages now practiced secret or solo transmissions, but groups like these still maintained open spheres of influence.

Jang Deuk-soo glanced around at the team members and said,

“You will be dispatched to an area near Qinghai.”

“Qinghai, you say...”

“As you know, that’s the territory of Evil Overlords of Heaven, one of the greatest Unorthodox powers.”

Alongside Castle of the Demonic Way, which had its sphere near the south of the Yangtze, Evil Overlords of Heaven was one of the twin giants of the Unorthodox Faction within the Central Plains.

Unlike the reclusive Kunlun Sect, Evil Overlords of Heaven ruled like a king over the regions of Sichuan and Qinghai.

“Of course, you won’t be going up against the true elites of Evil Overlords of Heaven. You’ll be dealing with minor sect trash that only holds nominal affiliation.”

Even so, no matter how much they were called trash, they were formidable opponents for trainees with little experience.

“Still, better than facing those prissy Orthodox folks, eh? Kukuk!”

It was true that Qinghai was much closer than Sichuan or Shaanxi in terms of distance.

No matter how much we mocked the Orthodox factions as prudes or softies, the Cult’s greatest enemy had always been the Orthodox Sect, not the Unorthodox ones.

“All your seniors went through this too. If this makes you nervous, you might as well renounce your place in the Demonic Way, don’t you think?”

Just as he said, only one or two people among the team looked nervous.

The rest smirked instead, their fighting spirit ignited.

“In any case, what you need to focus on right now is mastering the pass formation. If you can’t even do that, you know what’ll happen before you’re ever deployed, right?”

Of course I knew.

This group battle had two phases.

First, each of the nine teams had to master the designated pass formation within a set period. Then, they would conduct mock battles against other teams.

Second, three teams would join forces to form a secondary pass formation.

In that formation, thirty-three members would fight as one, and the three allied teams would take turns fighting in two more rounds of mock battles.

Finally, the three teams with the lowest scores out of the nine would be...

‘Eliminated on the spot.’

It would suck to be eliminated after just three fights, but no one in the Heavenly Demon Cult ever complained that it was unfair.

In this place, luck was considered a part of one's skill.

'I can't afford to let my guard down either.'

Even if I performed well alone, it wouldn't mean a thing.

This was, after all, a team battle.

Even if I took down enemies solo, if the rest of the team didn't manage a single swing of the blade, they'd score the lowest.

Which meant the entire team would be eliminated together.

'In other words, the most important factor in this test isn't the team members—it's the team leader's capabilities.'

My eyes turned toward Baek Sang-ah.

"Huaaah!"

She flailed about in confusion, not knowing what to do, and my gaze cooled.

'...Can I really trust her?'

In that moment, I seriously began to consider what would happen if we got eliminated.

'So, Evil Overlords of Heaven, huh.'

With this deployment looming, I found myself deep in thought.

'I'd been meaning to investigate Evil Overlords of Heaven at some point anyway.'

Evil Overlords of Heaven was founded some thirty years ago by Gu Yomyeong, the so-called Prodigy of the Unorthodox Path and known as the King of Ten Thousand Evils.

Despite its short history, Evil Overlords of Heaven was considered one of the twin pillars of the Unorthodox faction alongside Castle of the Demonic Way, which had been around for over a century.

There were two reasons for this.

First was the sheer number of its followers.

Second was the presence of Gu Yomyeong, one of the Five Kings of the Central Plains.

‘That Gu Yomyeong is destined to die of illness ten years from now.’

He had been fifty when he founded Evil Overlords of Heaven.

Which meant he was now over eighty years old.

No matter how much of a supreme master he was, unless he underwent a full rejuvenation, he would have to consider retirement.

‘After Gu Yomyeong dies, Evil Overlords of Heaven falls into an internal conflict between his disciples.’

Gu Yomyeong had four disciples.

Strangely, he never named a successor before his death. As a result, Evil Overlords of Heaven plunged into civil war as soon as he passed.

Eventually, the youngest disciple—twenty-eight-year-old Cheong Museong, the Dark Cloud Sword—emerged victorious and became the new leader of Evil Overlords of Heaven.

Most had expected the eldest disciple, Gwi Hwanggun Geum Jeoksan, who commanded the largest faction, to win, so Cheong Museong’s rise came as a massive shock.

Up to that point, it had just seemed like typical unpredictable Murim drama.

But the real problem came afterward.

‘The real issue was how quickly relations between the Orthodox Sect and Evil Overlords of Heaven warmed.’

After the civil war ended, Evil Overlords of Heaven quickly signed a non-aggression pact with the Orthodox Faction.

The justification sounded reasonable enough.

They needed to recover from the losses suffered during the civil war, and the young new leader needed time to cultivate his martial arts.

So, to avoid unnecessary clashes, they should maintain friendly relations with the Orthodox.

More than a justification, it was the logical thing to do.

Five years later, Evil Overlords of Heaven would join forces with the Murim Alliance to establish the Orthodoxy-Unorthodox United Murim League.

‘On the surface, it seemed like a natural progression, but if you looked closer, there were all kinds of suspicious details.’

I had a strong feeling about this.

That the Heaven-Defying Society and the Demonic Faction Lord Han Mubaek had a significant hand in the founding of that alliance, whether directly or indirectly.

‘Still, that’s something to investigate only after getting outside.’

Right now, I needed to focus on mastering the pass formation—somehow—under that unreliable team leader.

The first gathering of the team leader and the members.

Baek Sang-ah still hadn’t found her composure.

“Th-Then, I’ll explain the details!”

Baek Sang-ah raised her hand and spoke.

“For the next month, you’ll be learning the Small Black Star Sword Formation.”

The Black Star Sword Formation was one of the Cult’s most basic formation techniques, where eleven people formed one unit to execute nine different formation structures.

“And after one month, three teams will merge and train for another month in the Great Black Star Formation!”

“I have a question, Team Leader.”

Then, a cold voice called out from the side as someone raised their hand.

And that someone was a person I knew well.

‘Ma Jinseong?’

“Ah, yes, go ahead!”

Ma Jinseong stood up, his expression oozing hostility as he spoke to Baek Sang-ah.

“Can we replace the team leader?”

“.....!”

I let out a laugh inwardly.

‘Didn’t expect someone to openly challenge her from the start.’

Even if he didn’t outrank me, Ma Jinseong was still a blood relative of the Ma Clan.

If someone like that started causing trouble from the get-go, it would make team control extremely difficult.

Perhaps understanding that, Baek Sang-ah bit her lip slightly before replying.

“Sorry, but no. The team leaders were assigned by the instructors. We can’t change them arbitrarily.”

“Even if the leader isn’t reliable?”

I focused on the next words that would come from Baek Sang-ah’s mouth.

‘If she simply says "yes," this team is done for.’

Accept it just because it was assigned from above?

That might fly in the Orthodox Sect, but in the rebellious Heavenly Demon Cult, that wouldn’t cut it.

Responding that way would tear the team apart and completely destroy any hope of cooperation.

‘I could step in and mediate, but...’

Instead, I wanted to see how this team leader would respond.

And then.

“Got a problem with that?”

She responded with a boldness that completely defied my expectations.

“W-What?!”

Shrrrk!

Baek Sang-ah yanked her sword belt off her waist with a rough motion.

She drew her blade and pointed it straight at Ma Jinseong.

“My grandfather always said, if a man won’t listen, beat him every three days. That way, he’ll behave properly.”

“.....”

“.....”

Everyone, including me, blinked in stunned silence.

Her grandfather taught her that?

Just what kind of old man was he?

“Seems like you want me to prove my qualifications. Fine. Come at me. If you win—”

“If I win?”

“I’ll voluntarily withdraw from the Thousand-Day Pass and recommend you as team leader.”

Proving one’s worth through martial strength.

It was the simplest and clearest form of self-verification in the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Even if martial strength wasn’t the most important quality in this context—it still counted.

‘Wait, is this really the same girl who was stumbling just a moment ago?’

It wasn’t just a shift—it was like a total personality switch.

Or maybe... was that previous stammering all just an act to bait this situation?

But that didn’t add up. When she’d looked at me earlier, her expression had been truly filled with fear.

“Woooooah!”

Anyway, the other team members, now getting to see a free fight, focused their eager eyes on Ma Jinseong.

And it wasn’t just our team—others nearby quickly picked up on the commotion and turned their attention our way.

“Y-You bitch!”

With Baek Sang-ah stepping forward like this, Ma Jinseong had no way out.

If he backed off now, it would not only disgrace the Ma Clan’s name but also force him to live like a ghost in the Thousand-Day Pass from here on out.

“You’d better not regret this, wench!”

“You look younger than me. Maybe try using prettier words?”

“Haaap!”

Ma Jinseong’s sword drew a graceful red arc.

It was the same Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art that Ma Cheolsoo had used previously.

Though it wasn’t quite at Ma Cheolsoo’s level, it was undoubtedly one of the best among the later-stage trainees in the Thousand-Day Pass.

“O-Ohhh!”

“That’s the sword technique of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan!”

The watching trainees gasped in awe.

Among the Six Great Demonic Clans, the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan was unmatched in swordsmanship, so witnessing even a single form of their technique was a rare opportunity for many here.

Ma Jinseong called out the name of one of the sword forms from the Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art.

“Flying Blood Bombing Stance!”

He aimed a strike at her shoulder.

“Hmph!”

Baek Sang-ah calmly took a stance.

Then she struck at the flat side of his approaching blade with a fierce swing.

Kaang!

'Oh?'

His precision thrust was dismantled in a single blow, exposing Ma Jinseong's chest completely.

And Baek Sang-ah didn't miss that opening.

"Haaap!"

Pow!

"Guaaaagh!"

Struck hard in the chest, Ma Jinseong's body went flying, flung across the ground in a humiliating fashion.

Chapter 33: Mount Hua's San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah (2)

".....!"

".....!!"

Perhaps no one had expected Ma Jinseong to be subdued in just a second. Not only those around, but even I widened my eyes in surprise.

"Y-You damn wench!"

But the shock didn't seem too deep. Ma Jinseong twisted his body and managed to land using a breakfall technique.

"I'll kill you!"

Uuuuuung!

Humiliated, Ma Jinseong's sword began to resonate with qi.

'Qi-infused Sword!'

The bare minimum standard required to be called a 'master' in the world.

Ma Jinseong had surpassed that threshold.

'He must be really pissed off.'

Qi-infused Sword was the stage before Stagnant Qi, the stage of materializing one's qi. A swing at this stage could cleave through stone.

Among all the trainees, aside from me, none had reached the level of a Qi-infused Sword.

However—

“I’m warning you.”

Baek Sang-ah stood her ground in front of that sword, without even a hint of flinching.

“You’d better put that sword away. Unless you want to get seriously hurt.”

“You little runt, dare to look down on me?!”

Just as the furious Ma Jinseong was about to strike at Baek Sang-ah—

“That’s enough.”

Several instructors appeared out of nowhere and stepped in front of Ma Jinseong.

“You’re getting carried away, Ma Jinseong. We let that little skirmish slide, but if you go further, you’ll be crossing the line.”

“Kh, tsk!”

Even Ma Jinseong, one of the most notorious figures in the cult, couldn’t brazenly defy the instructors within the Thousand-Day Pass.

“No matter how much our cult worships strength, we are still a society ruled by law. That should be clear enough, don’t you think?”

The instructors’ voices were stern.

After all, one of the founders of those very laws was the progenitor of the Ma Clan—Ma Jinseong’s own ancestor.

They were essentially asking: ‘Are you planning to disgrace your forefather’s name right now?’

“...Understood.”

Ma Jinseong trembled all over but finally restrained his fury and sheathed his sword.

Just like that—

Baek Sang-ah, who had subdued Ma Jinseong in just one second, made her presence clearly known among the trainees.

However, there was a bit of an issue.

“A-Are you alright where you got hit?”

“.....”

I couldn't tell whether she was mocking him or genuinely worried.

No—more importantly...

‘That stance just now... I feel like I've seen it before?’

The stance she took to deflect Ma Jinseong's thrust—

You might think it's absurd to recognize something from just a stance, but martial arts weren't all the same.

I shook my head slightly.

‘No, it can't be. That technique requires a second sword.’

If—

If by some absurd chance my guess was right...

Then something that could overturn the entire cult was about to unfold.

“Deploy the Diagonal Line Formation!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

“N-Next, Ghost-Scattering Formation! In full formation!”

Those stationed at the end of the Diagonal Line Formation slowly began to shift into a valley-like formation.

Their movements were relatively orderly.

There was little to criticize in the trainees' execution.

However—

“A-And... F-Finally, the Doom-Wielding Formation!”

The squad leader, who should be giving commands swiftly, was still stammering and fumbling through it.

It had been two weeks since the trainees began learning the Black Star Sword Formation in earnest.

While learning the basic form hadn't caused much trouble, issues began cropping up as they moved into the application phase.

"Grrgh!"

Though dissatisfaction was clear on the trainees' faces, they still followed Baek Sang-ah's orders without protest.

After all, they had seen what happened to Ma Jinseong when he tried to defy her on the first day.

"Lastly, the Battering Ram Formation!"

The Battering Ram Formation was virtually the core assault pattern in the Black Star Sword Formation. Three carefully selected trainees formed a Tri-Talent Formation and charged the enemy.

As I charged at an imaginary enemy, two others wielding a spear and an axe followed behind me.

"Stab!"

"Yes, Young Master!"

The three of us thrust our weapons at the straw dummies arranged in front.

Despite being called a Sword Formation, not everyone in the unit had to wield a sword.

This wasn't a high-level combined formation that required ultra-precise coordination down to every single step.

"G-Good work! That's all for today!"

As our Black Star Sword Formation training wrapped up, Baek Sang-ah sighed in relief and declared the end of the session.

I opened my canteen and took a sip, thinking to myself.

'Her judgment itself isn't wrong. But the timing of her commands is consistently one beat late.'

Was it a matter of talent?

No, I didn't think so.

I tilted my head in thought, and soon I found the answer.

'She doesn't seem fully accustomed to it yet.'

Tactical formations were about concealing your own weaknesses and exploiting your opponent's.

There was nothing wrong with the deployment itself.

But when it came to striking at the opponent's weak points, Baek Sang-ah's decisions were consistently delayed.

'Almost as if she's hesitating on purpose.'

If her clumsiness was genuine, fine. But hesitating even in a situation where the path was obvious? That seemed intentional.

I scratched my cheek lightly.

'I think I get what she's trying to do.'

Distrust was growing.

For now, we were just sparring against straw dummies, but if that distrust continued to build, it might cause unexpected problems during a real battle.

In other words—elimination.

It was at that moment.

"Hey."

"Ma Jinseong?"

Until now, Ma Jinseong had remained quiet—but now, he approached me.

"What are you going to do?"

The intent behind the question was blatant, but I deliberately answered with feigned ignorance, concealing my thoughts.

"What are you talking about?"

“What do you mean, what? Are we just going to get dragged around by that idiot and get eliminated together?!”

It seemed he had held it in well for the past two weeks, but now he couldn't take it anymore.

“You mean the guy who got knocked out in one strike by that idiot?”

At my mocking tone, bloodshot veins rose in Ma Jinseong's eyes like a ghost's.

“Tch! That's not the issue here! You know what I'm talking about! Her pathetic commanding!”

If even this brat was acting like this, then it was a clear sign our entire squad was in danger.

“So, what exactly do you want me to do?”

Only then did Ma Jinseong's expression turn more serious, as if he now thought we could have a proper conversation.

“When we go into actual combat, you give the orders. If we follow that woman's lead, we'll be humiliated for sure.”

Whoa?

That's pretty direct.

But more than that—you, a member of the Ma Clan, are willing to follow my orders?

Really?

“To be honest, following your orders would be humiliating. But in terms of rank, there's no one more suited than you. The others think the same. If it's you giving the commands, they'll all follow.”

Of course they would—if I took the lead, they'd fall in line.

Still, I didn't expect Ma Jinseong, who brimmed with pride in his Ma Clan heritage, to bow his head first.

But my response was already decided.

“No.”

“W-Why not?!”

“First of all, the instructors aren’t blind.”

In this test, squad members are required to obey the squad leader unconditionally. You can’t replace the squad leader either.

Ma Jinseong clenched his teeth and countered.

“There’s also the position of vice-squad leader.”

“The vice-leader is merely someone entrusted with limited authority by the squad leader.”

Whether the vice-leader was simply fulfilling their duties or turning the squad leader into a mere puppet would be obvious to the instructors at a glance.

And the moment they saw through it, the instructors would no doubt say:

—Hahaha, what a bunch of disorganized fools.

And then eliminate the entire squad.

“Ma Jinseong, here’s a bit of advice.”

“Advice?”

“This situation where you’re losing your mind right now—that is the real test of the Thousand-Day Pass.”

“W-What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t it strange? They created a system where we can’t replace the squad leader, yet that same squad leader suffers no consequences?”

In this group examination, where the bottom three squads are automatically eliminated, it’s only the thirty members—the squad members—who get disqualified.

Squad leaders receive no penalties and simply return to their original cohorts.

Ma Jinseong wasn’t dumb enough not to understand what that meant.

“Don’t tell me...”

“That’s right—they’re intentionally provoking mutiny.”

It was a kind of variable.

No matter how fairly the squads were divided, there would inevitably be differences in the capabilities of squad leaders and members. And those differences would turn into insurmountable gaps.

But what if you added a non-skill-based variable to the mix?

‘Depending on how they handle it, the skill gap could be overcome.’

Like Ma Jinseong here—if he acted out like a mad dog and rebelled, he’d be eliminated.

But if someone endured and trusted the squad leader to the end, or persuaded them to change for the better, then there was a chance of passing.

“I...”

Ma Jinseong was about to say something when—

“Shut the hell up!”

Clang!

A loud crash rang out as something metallic hit the floor, followed by a shout.

Judging by the direction, it wasn’t from our squad.

It seemed to have come from another group training nearby.

Ma Jinseong and I exchanged glances.

Without a word, we silently agreed through our eyes and headed toward the source of the commotion.

“I can’t trust your judgment at all!”

There, a trainee was shouting at his squad leader while pointing a finger at him.

“Why did you use the Battering Ram Formation instead of the Heat Dispersal Formation? Were you trying to send your squad into a death trap?!”

Apparently, the trainee’s complaint had some merit—several other squad members nodded in agreement.

“I told you, the squad leader’s orders are absolute.”

The squad leader, a towering man, responded coldly.

“If you’d followed my command precisely, you wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

My eyes widened when I recognized who the squad leader was.

‘That’s... San Dojeon?’

I hadn’t had the chance to see him since the entrance ceremony, and now I was seeing him again like this?

Unfortunately, San Dojeon’s current situation didn’t seem favorable.

“You can just return to your cohort without a care, but not us! We have to survive and climb higher!”

“That’s right! Even if you’re our senior, we doubt you have any strategic sense!”

“If you have any conscience, you’ll step down as squad leader!”

San Dojeon’s expression didn’t change.

But that was only on the surface.

‘He must be hurting inside.’

I looked at him with a trace of pity.

Father of the Wind Demon Unit.

That was another name for Bloodless Thunderstorm, San Dojeon.

Even though the Wind Demon Unit was officially part of the Thirty-Four Demon Squads, their mission was to patrol and guard the outer territories of the cult.

Naturally, they were the most looked-down-upon among the Demon Squads.

But San Dojeon carried himself with unmatched dignity as their commander, and his pride became the backbone that restored the unit’s self-worth.

Even on the day I died in my past life, the Wind Demon Unit threw away their lives without hesitation under San Dojeon’s command.

‘At this point in time, San Dojeon probably hasn’t fully developed his tactical judgment as a commander yet. No—if my guess is right, he made that misjudgment on purpose.’

And if that was true, then his response would be predictable.

“I won’t say it twice.”

San Dojeon stood in front of them, exuding killing intent.

“Follow orders. Or else...”

“Ha! Or else what?”

“I’ll subdue you by force for disobeying orders.”

“Subdue? Go ahead and try!”

The trainee grabbed the sword he had thrown on the ground and shouted fiercely.

I found myself quietly impressed by his attitude.

‘Wow, even after seeing that massive body, he’s not backing down.’

He had guts.

Though whether that came from actual skill or just a puppy’s bravado remained to be seen.

Well, judging by my instincts, it was overwhelmingly the latter.

‘The Black Star Sword Formation is a basic tactical formation used by small groups. As long as there are at least seven members, the rest don’t matter much.’

In other words, even if the squad leader kicked out four people, it wouldn’t be an issue.

‘Now then—how will San Dojeon handle this?’

Chapter 34: San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah (3)

Though San Dojeon was considered a symbol of benevolence within the Wind Demon Unit, he was undeniably a former mountain bandit with a naturally rough disposition.

‘A martial artist who strictly upholds the chain of command and never tolerates insubordination.’

San Dojeon’s strength was already well-honed, so it was clear how that reckless brat’s fate would turn out.

Still, it seemed there were some in that squad who hadn’t lost their minds just yet.

“Hey! Stop it!”

“Do you want to be expelled before you even take the exam? No matter how dissatisfied you are, this isn’t the way!”

As several people immediately voiced opposition, the expression on the trainee who had defied San Dojeon twisted in frustration.

“D-Damn it!”

I smirked at the sight.

‘He probably thought that if he took the lead, the others would naturally follow. But that was a miscalculation.’

Desperation could drive someone to resist.

But desperation could also make someone endure.

That guy belonged to the former, while the ones who stopped him belonged to the latter.

“I’m sorry.”

Perhaps realizing he had no chance, the trainee lowered his head and apologized to San Dojeon.

San Dojeon also didn’t seem intent on escalating the matter further, and simply declared the end of training.

Thus, the attempted insubordination against San Dojeon was quietly swept under the rug.

“...Maybe you’re right after all.”

Ma Jinseong, who had watched the entire situation unfold, muttered blankly, as if in shock.

“Things are probably similar in other squads too.”

“Then what do we do? Just stand by and watch?”

“We need to bring balance.”

“And how exactly do we do that?”

“I’ll have to step in. Isn’t that why you came to find me in the first place?”

In the end, the simplest way to resolve this situation was for me to get involved.

Only, I had to approach it in a different way than the blatant insubordination Ma Jinseong had initially suggested.

“I’ll talk to the squad leader first. We’ll decide the next move after that.”

“Sigh.”

All I inhaled were worries, and all I exhaled were sighs.

“Ughhh...”

My gaze wouldn’t lift from the ground.

“What’s troubling you so much?”

Baek Sang-ah’s constant gloom was interrupted by a heavy voice echoing in her ears.

“Ah, Venerable Warrior San Dojeon.”

“Seems like things aren’t going well for you either.”

“Same goes for you, Venerable Warrior.”

San Dojeon quietly took a seat a short distance from Baek Sang-ah.

And then, he did exactly what she had just done.

“Whew...”

“How are things? Are your squad members still not listening?”

“No, they do follow along, though they occasionally say unpleasant things. It’s just...”

“Just?”

San Dojeon covered his face with his thick hand, perhaps recalling a moment of shame.

“They manage to endure things so well, yet some old guy like me couldn’t even hold back and ended up causing a mess.”

“Ah...”

A faint smile crept onto Baek Sang-ah’s lips.

“Come to think of it, you nearly got expelled back then... didn't you?”

“If it weren't for Senior Han's intervention, I really would've been kicked out.”

Truthfully, San Dojeon had been lucky.

Despite beating up his squad leader, he not only avoided expulsion but even ranked within the top ten.

“No amount of thanks would ever be enough for what he did.”

“Yeah, he definitely seems to be someone with a lot of virtue.”

Baek Sang-ah nodded.

One of the top-ranked in their cohort and currently the most prominent man in the Thousand-Day Pass—Han Muyeon.

But to Baek Sang-ah, he was a man whose thoughts were unreadable, and who seemed to harbor a strange sense of inferiority.

San Dojeon cautiously opened his mouth, watching her reaction.

“Um, the thing is...”

“Another recruitment offer?”

“I'm sorry. Senior really wants to recruit you.”

“There's nothing to apologize for. It's natural for a lord to desire talent.”

Despite her words, Baek Sang-ah shook her head.

“But as I've said many times, due to personal circumstances, I can't affiliate myself with any group. Please pass on my apologies to Senior Han.”

She had already turned him down several times.

Despite that, he kept persistently pursuing her. But Baek Sang-ah was beginning to run out of patience.

San Dojeon, well aware of that, bowed his head apologetically as though he were guilty of something.

“There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Miss. If Senior brings it up again, I'll try to dissuade him myself.”

“Hehe, thank you, even if it’s just words.”

With that, a short silence fell between them.

Normally, this would’ve been the time to wrap things up and return to the dormitory. But San Dojeon had a strong feeling that if he left now, his connection with Baek Sang-ah would be severed for good.

So, he deliberately tried to change the subject and strike up conversation.

“Um, Miss...”

“Yes?”

In truth, they were merely peers.

But to San Dojeon, Baek Sang-ah gave off a daughter-like vibe.

For some reason, he wanted to look after her and care for her, like a father would.

...Considering the age difference, she really could be like a daughter, anyway.

“Come to think of it, I heard there’s a big shot in your squad.”

“Ah, a-ah, y-yes...”

The moment she heard the word “big shot,” Baek Sang-ah’s expression turned to one of utter despair.

“This is seriously a disaster. Grandpa told me again and again to never get involved with that guy, and now fate’s gone and done this to me.”

“M-Miss?”

The always composed and polite Baek Sang-ah suddenly began to unravel, even spewing crude language.

“He listens well enough and his eyes aren’t too rebellious or anything, but if he ever decided to go after me, I’d be done for. Normally he just goes around grinning like some carefree loafer, but you never know when that face might suddenly cause a disaster, and that’s what makes it terrifying!”

“M-Miss, please calm yourself...”

San Dojeon gently tried to soothe the suddenly rampaging Baek Sang-ah.

A cold sweat began to trickle down his back.

At that moment, a third voice interrupted the two of them.

“She’s right, Miss. Even if he’s involved, talking behind his back like this...”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah tilted their heads in unison, exchanging glances.

They were standing in a garden slightly removed from the dormitories.

Though called a garden, it was a place rarely visited due to the persistent cold.

“Who’s there?!”

San Dojeon suddenly shot up and shouted.

“Reveal yourself!”

He bared his hostility more than usual and growled.

‘How could I miss someone’s presence?!’

That same thought crossed both San Dojeon’s and Baek Sang-ah’s minds simultaneously.

She, too, slowly reached for the sword hanging at her waist.

Then, from beyond the darkness the two of them were staring into, a young man’s voice rang out.

“Ah, long time no see... No, it’s our first time meeting, Venerable Warrior San Dojeon — no, Senior.”

A man appeared, muttering under his breath, ‘Tch, I just can’t break that habit.’

“J-Jin Yeomyung!”

Baek Sang-ah gasped when she recognized the man’s identity.

Baek Sang-ah shot me a sharp glare, putting on an indignant expression.

“Young Master Jin Yeomyung, this is not where your cohort resides!”

I nodded nonchalantly.

“I’m aware.”

“You came despite knowing that? Do you take the rules of the Thousand-Day Pass so lightly?”

“And you say that while knowing who I am?”

Just as a flicker of disdain was about to flash in Baek Sang-ah’s eyes—

“I entered with the Pavilion Master’s permission. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Huh? I-Is that so?”

He said he had the Pavilion Master’s approval—so what could she even say?

A flush of red instantly spread across Baek Sang-ah’s cheeks.

Leaving the flustered Baek Sang-ah behind, San Dojeon stepped forward.

“Seems like you’ve got business with the young lady. What brings you here at this late hour, junior?”

“Well!”

I paused for a moment and studied San Dojeon’s face.

He looked much younger than I remembered, but overall, his impression hadn’t changed.

No, maybe the truth was that his original face was already so weathered that even twenty years later, there hadn’t been much change.

“This is perfect, actually. I have business with both of you.”

“What? Me too?”

San Dojeon’s eyes widened.

Without hesitation, I extended my hand toward him.

“Senior San Dojeon, would you join me?”

He clearly hadn't expected a recruitment offer the moment we met, and his eyes widened even more.

"You... Do you even know who I am?"

"Of course."

Better than anyone here in the Thousand-Day Pass.

"You're the former leader of Mighty Hero Fortress—Slaughter Blade San Dojeon, aren't you?"

"...!"

"S-Slaughter Blade?!"

Baek Sang-ah was so shocked she was about to faint.

Never had she imagined that the peer she'd been close to was a renowned mountain bandit, and one with a nickname that included the word "slaughter" at that!

"R-Really?"

"...."

San Dojeon didn't respond to Baek Sang-ah's timid question.

His silence was affirmation. The way he stared at me, cold and intense, was all the confirmation needed.

"Amazing. That someone who knows my past turns out to be a member of the Six Great Demonic Clans."

"I've taken an interest in you, senior."

"I don't recall doing anything to draw the attention of a junior like you."

"Well, it was rather memorable when the Seventh Elder dragged you out of the Ten Thousand Mountains along with your entire stronghold."

It was exactly as I said.

San Dojeon hadn't originally belonged to the Green Forest, but he was daring enough to engage in banditry within the territory of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

Because it was a remote part of the Ten Thousand Mountains, the cult didn't pay much attention to it—until the current Seventh Elder, the Yin-Yang Fist Demon, decided to go on a whim of a subjugation trip.

The Elder had been impressed by San Dojeon's talents upon their first meeting and decided to absorb Mighty Hero Fortress into the cult to recruit him.

It had been a well-known story among the higher ranks at the time.

"Still, isn't it bold to make a recruitment offer to someone you just met?"

"I have complete confidence in your potential, senior."

In his past life, San Dojeon only rose to become the Wind Demon Unit Commander, but with the proper support, he could go even further.

"Senior San Dojeon, I know exactly what your weakness is."

Flinch!

"Weakness, you say?"

A twitch appeared in San Dojeon's eyes.

"Yes. It's internal energy. And advancement-level martial arts."

"...."

The tension in his eyes slowly faded.

"So, you're saying you can provide me with those?"

"Of course. You're the one who reached First-rate by learning Second-rate martial arts late in life, aren't you?"

Not just First-rate—he was practically at Master Level.

"I can guarantee, under the name of Jin Yeomyung and the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan, that you will receive the full support you need."

"Based on what...?"

"I promise I can make you a peak Master Level expert in ten years."

"P-Peak Master Level?!"

Baek Sang-ah, standing beside him, let out an audible gasp.

Peak Master Level—an absolute powerhouse, of which only a few dozen existed across the entire Central Plains.

I was confident San Dojeon would accept.

In the future, we'd even shared drinks together.

During those times, he often grumbled about wanting advanced martial arts and spiritual medicine.

He reached Peak Master Level without any support over twenty years.

But if he had the full backing of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan?

He could smash that ten-year mark with ease.

He might even become one of the few in the Six Great Demonic Clans to reach the Extreme Demonic Realm.

'Come on, take the offer!'

I waited for San Dojeon's answer with confidence.

"...Sorry."

"I was sure you'd say yes—wait, what?"

Did I hear that right?

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll have to decline."

Wait, what the hell?!

Chapter 35: San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah (4)

He... turned this down?

I stared at San Dojeon in a daze.

Advanced martial arts, spiritual pills, and the guidance of a master.

Even if I had made such an offer not to someone from the Thousand-Day Pass, but to someone from the Demon Dragon Hall, they would have jumped at it without hesitation, one hundred out of one hundred times.

“I’m... really grateful for the offer, but...”

San Dojeon clenched his eyes shut and tilted his head back.

No, what’s with that face overflowing with regret, and yet you still say no?

“I really am grateful! But—!”

“...You should just accept it,” Baek Sang-ah, who had been watching from the side, chimed in softly.

San Dojeon’s expression was so serious that even she had to speak up.

“Still! I can’t betray the one I serve.”

“The one you serve... is that the Seventh Elder?”

“Yes.”

‘San Dojeon’s loyalty to the Seventh Elder is this strong?’

Granted, if he was the one who opened his path, that was understandable.

But as far as I knew, the relationship between San Dojeon and the Seventh Elder wasn’t particularly close.

‘He was sent to the Thousand-Day Pass in the first place.’

If he was truly going to be made a close aide, they would have sent him to the Demon Dragon Hall instead.

If it was a matter of San Dojeon blindly offering his loyalty, that would make things a bit complicated.

‘No, it can’t be that. If that were the case, he wouldn’t look so full of regret.’

There was some other connection.

Some relationship I was missing.

For now, I continued trying to persuade him.

“If it’s the Seventh Elder, I’m sure he’d understand. A subordinate brought in from the outside has a chance to spread his wings in a bigger pond—he wouldn’t refuse that, would he?”

In other words, I was indirectly telling him, "You're not even the elder's close confidant, so why cling to this so stubbornly?"

But it seemed San Dojeon had already made up his mind.

"I can't. I was ordered by the Elder to serve the senior."

Senior?

"When you say 'senior,' who are you referring to?"

"Senior Han Muyeon."

What?

Did he just say Han Muyeon?

"You said... Han Muyeon?"

I had known that San Dojeon belonged to Han Muyeon's faction.

But I never imagined they were this close.

San Dojeon nodded.

"Yes. He is the true heir to the Seventh Elder. I entered the Thousand-Day Pass with the mission of protecting him."

The second reason why the older San Dojeon had joined the Thousand-Day Pass.

Realizing that, I was momentarily taken aback.

'What's going on? This wasn't mentioned in my past life.'

In my previous life, the one who succeeded the Seventh Elder was a man named Heuk Gumyeong, wielder of the Thunder-Splitting Demonic Sword.

And naturally, the name "Han Muyeon" never once appeared among the high ranks of the cult.

'Ah... or maybe, even after twenty years, he still hadn't grown enough to be offered the position.'

If not that, maybe he was already expelled. Or he changed his name.

If my suspicion about who Han Muyeon really was turned out to be correct, then any of those scenarios could be plausible.

“I’m sorry. I can’t go with you.”

“Ah...”

Well, that’s the end of that.

If San Dojeon was this firm, there was no way to convince him—at least not right now.

Unless something huge happened to shatter his loyalty entirely.

‘No, there’s still a possibility. Just... not today.’

More importantly, discovering that the person he currently served—Han Muyeon—had a connection to the Seventh Elder, was an unexpected windfall.

‘The Seventh Elder...!’

I recalled how the Seventh Elder would visit the Jin Clan every New Year to pay his respects to Jin Gun-ak.

A lower-ranking elder, yes—but still the top-ranked among that group.

And this person had chosen to back the one I suspected most?

“I understand. But please remember that the offer I gave you remains valid.”

Suppressing my emotions, I bowed my head to San Dojeon.

“Thanks... even just for the words.”

He gave a bitter nod.

“Seems the young lady has something to discuss with you as well. I’ll leave you two.”

With a ‘tsk,’ San Dojeon left the scene with a face full of lingering regret.

And just like that, only I—left standing in rejection—and Baek Sang-ah, who had been watching with a surprised expression, remained.

“Th-that was quite the scene.”

“Ugh!”

A groan of shame slipped out.

“What a pathetic sight I’ve shown you.”

“N-no, it’s not like that. Being rejected after making such an offer—that’s what’s strange.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Still got rejected though, so I had to move on and do what I needed to do.

“So, it seems you have something to discuss with me as well?”

Baek Sang-ah looked at me with a slightly hopeful expression and said,

“By chance, were you going to make the same offer to me?”

“Keep dreaming.”

Her face deflated in an instant, like a frog caught in the rain.

“T-then... what is it about?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s about the squad.”

“Ah...”

Perhaps because the conversation with San Dojeon had been so intense, she hadn’t even considered that.

“Don’t you think it’s about time you start taking things seriously?”

Flinch!

“I’ve been suppressing the dissatisfaction of the other squad members. So I’d appreciate it if you stopped making judgment errors on purpose.”

“You... noticed?”

“Took me a while. You mixed in quite a few actual misjudgments.”

“...”

Baek Sang-ah’s face twisted in agony.

What, did she think I wouldn’t notice just because she tried hiding it here and there?

Normally I might've sugarcoated it a little, but being rejected left me a bit salty.

Baek Sang-ah bit her lip slightly.

"I still... can't do that."

"Is it because of the Thousand-Day Pass's policies?"

"You even know that? Yes. That's right. The instructors ordered me to stir up discontent among the squad members until the mock battle begins."

"But is it really necessary, now that the squad members have caught on?"

"Um, that's..."

Baek Sang-ah trailed off, seeming to think my point was valid.

"You're right. In some ways, Young Master Jin, you were the first to grasp the purpose behind this training."

"Then?"

"Yes, starting tomorrow's training, I won't be giving incorrect orders on purpose anymore. But..."

She averted her gaze and mumbled under her breath.

"Please go easy on actual mistakes..."

...

She still hadn't realized that lacking the decisiveness to ruthlessly exploit an enemy's weakness at a crucial moment would only lead to harm among her own.

'She's exactly like a noble lady who grew up without a single hardship.'

Surely she'd learned something while participating in previous mock battles as a squad member.

Or maybe this was her first time ever leading others?

"Don't worry. I'll make up for the squad leader's mistakes as much as needed."

"What do you mean by that?"

“I’ll become the vice-leader. That way, no one will dare challenge the authority of the squad leader.”

Because they’d have to go through me first.

“Th-thank you, Young Master.”

Baek Sang-ah bowed her head.

“It’s nothing. Just don’t hesitate when it comes time to make decisions. Like you did when you blew Ma Jinseong away.”

Whoosh!

Perhaps embarrassed, she kept her head down and didn’t raise it again.

“T-that was just me trying to get into the spirit of my grandfather’s teachings...”

“Let’s be thankful all you did was get into the spirit.”

I casually voiced something I had only suspected before.

“If you’d had one more sword, it might’ve been a fatal blow.”

“...What?”

“Am I wrong? From what I saw, it was the perfect sword form for striking down instead of using palm techniques.”

At that moment—

The shy flush on Baek Sang-ah’s face froze instantly, like a ghost had possessed her.

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“How... do you know that?”

The way she glared at me now, there was actual hostility in her eyes.

And in that moment, I was sure of one thing.

Baek Sang-ah wasn’t someone from the Cult.

If she were some spy or agent, she wouldn't show such blatant hostility over a single pointed observation.

'Though of course... even that could be deception.'

Still, I decided to trust my gut.

"Ahem!"

I cleared my throat lightly.

"Do you take me for some fool who doesn't even know the basics of twin swordsmanship?"

I put on an offended face and glared at her.

"There's a limit to treating someone like an idiot, don't you think?"

"N-no, I just..."

"It's not that strange for a female martial artist to learn twin sword techniques. And when a dual-sword user switches to using only one, the opening created is something any seasoned martial artist could catch."

That's true.

But still—

"Are you saying, Young Master, that you're one of those seasoned martial artists?"

There it is. I knew she'd say that.

"Of course."

"Can you... prove that?"

Her tone had returned to formal speech, but the suspicion in her eyes had only grown deeper.

"If you'd like, I can prove it by subduing you right here."

"Interesting. You're going to subdue me, Young Master?"

"Why not?"

I casually broke a branch off a tree in the courtyard and held it in my hand.

From the branch, a dark black light began to rise.

“...Sword Qi? With... with a branch?!”

Baek Sang-ah was visibly shocked.

Naturally.

Drawing Sword Qi through a tree branch was just as difficult as producing Sword Force among martial artists.

A single misstep in Qi infusion, and the branch would explode. It required an incredible level of focus and control.

“So, how about it? Care for a match?”

Gulp.

Baek Sang-ah swallowed a little.

Her level wasn't far below mine, so she could probably put up a fight. But after seeing something like that, she wouldn't see a way to win.

She slumped her shoulders and sighed.

“You must be... one of the Six Demonic Dragons.”

“...?”

“One of the most powerful of the Demonic Faction's rising stars. So the rumors weren't false after all. I don't know why someone like you is here, but...”

A noble lady who didn't even know who was in the Six Demonic Dragons?

The more she spoke, the more convinced I became that she was just a clueless noblewoman.

“No, that's my younger brother.”

“...Excuse me?”

“The one in the Six Demonic Dragons—Fist Overlord Dragon, Jin Yewoon—that's my younger brother. I'm not one of them.”

“W-what? You're not... with that level of skill? Then just how strong are the Six Demonic Dragons...?”

Before she could get the wrong idea, I corrected her.

“They’re all below me.”

“...Huh?”

I raised a finger to my lips.

“Please keep this a secret. Even within the Cult, only a few people know this.”

“...”

“You don’t want people to know you use twin swords either, right? Since we’ve each got a secret now, how about we call it a draw?”

Smirk.

I gave her a gentle smile and made the offer.

“Let’s both keep our mouths shut.”

“Ah...”

She stared at me blankly for a moment, as if taken aback by the unexpected suggestion.

“L-let’s... do that...”

For some reason, blushing deeply, Baek Sang-ah couldn’t meet my eyes and fled back to the dormitory.

“Th-then I’ll be going now!”

As I watched her retreating back, I thought to myself—

Well, with a name like mine, she probably won’t break the promise.

No, more than the promise itself—

“Gu Chil.”

“Yes, Young Master.”

At some point, Gu Chil had appeared right in front of me.

“Keep a close eye on Baek Sang-ah for a while. Until I head out for an external mission. Think you can do that?”

Gu Chil looked up at me in surprise, as if the command was unexpected.

“If you’re suspicious, want me to just kill her? I can do it without leaving a trace.”

“What kind of crazy talk is that? Why would we kill her?”

I frowned and smacked him on the head.

“Ow!”

“We need to keep her alive.”

“Alive... why?”

“Because someone might try to kill her. No, the chance of that happening is actually very high.”

If my prediction was correct—she was fated to die soon.

Chapter 36: Simulated Battle of the Flame (1)

Gu Chil’s expression hardened.

“You’re certain, Young Master?”

The usual drawl in Gu Chil’s voice shifted into a calm and composed tone. No, this was probably closer to his true nature.

“I’d prefer to think I’m just speculating, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

More than anything, hadn’t that bastard Han Muyeon tried several times to recruit Baek Sang-ah into his faction?

If his motives weren’t solely about strengthening his forces...?

“I’m counting on you.”

Gu Chil gave me a broad grin.

“Of course. I’m your loyal servant, aren’t I, Young Master?”

“That’s right.”

“Just don’t go getting yourself beat up somewhere while I’m gone.”

“Stop talking nonsense and go.”

“Yes, sir!”

With that, Gu Chil vanished.

Unless someone on the level of the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass was nearby, Gu Chil wouldn’t get caught.

‘A dual-sword formation unique to One Defense, One Counterattack. Not from the Cult, but an outsider. Yet capable of raising at least a first-rate martial artist.’

And yet, the family didn’t send her as a spy, but seemingly as a hostage—or possibly seeking refuge in the Heavenly Demon Cult.

‘There are quite a few prestigious families known for their twin sword techniques.’

From what I remembered, there were at least ten of them.

‘But only two of those don’t have particularly bad relations with the Cult.’

One of those two, the Peerless Sword Sect, was famed for its one-hit-kill sword style that entirely disregarded defense.

But Baek Sang-ah’s techniques were structured around counterattacks.

Which left only one possibility through process of elimination.

‘One of the greatest sword sects in the Central Plains.’

Alongside Wudang and the Namgung Clan, it was one of the three sword titans—referred to as one of the Three Greats.

The Namcheon Baek Clan, often paired with the Northern Heaven Geon Clan as the Southern and Northern Twin Clans of the Central Plains.

The twin sword style they prided themselves on—“Heavenly Wolf Twin Saints Sword Art”—was precisely what Baek Sang-ah had demonstrated.

‘And the one most famed for wielding that sword art is...’

The current leader of the Justice Faction and one of the Five Kings of the Central Plains.

The Southern Heavenly Sword King—Baek Dogyung.

Twenty years from now, the leader of the Justice-Murim Alliance would be the Sword Supreme Sage of Wudang, Gwan Hyun, but for now, the Southern Heavenly Sword King reigned as the leader of the Orthodox Faction.

‘I don’t know why he would send someone who’s practically his granddaughter to the Heavenly Demon Cult...’

But there must’ve been a tangled web of reasons behind it.

My thoughts spiraled deeper and deeper.

‘Then does that mean the Cult Leader knows about that little girl’s identity?’

Couldn’t he at least have whispered a word or two to me?

I mean, I am his prospective son-in-law, after all!

‘Sigh, anyway.’

The Southern Heaven’s Baek Clan boasted a vast sphere of influence across the southeastern provinces of Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong.

‘And the Heavenly Demon Cult is located in the exact opposite direction—in the northwest of the Central Plains.’

I swallowed hard.

‘If I start digging, I feel like something massive is going to come out of this...’

Something that would make the Hidden Trace Manor and Jeokun look like child’s play.

‘No, this isn’t the time for that.’

I shook my head, restraining my greed.

‘If I poke my nose into things I can’t reach, even what’s possible might fall apart. What’s important right now is keeping Baek Sang-ah alive.’

There was only one reason why I went as far as sending Gu Chil to protect her.

‘Because in the future I know, Baek Sang-ah never existed.’

There was literally no mention of her in any of the Heavenly Demon Cult’s records.

‘To assume she returned safely from all this would be naive.’

Rather than having returned quietly, it was far more likely she had quietly disappeared here.

And more than anything, the direct cause behind the creation of the Orthodox-Demonic Alliance Murim Union—

‘The Namchang Calamity, where the Namcheon Baek Clan and Namgung Clan were annihilated together!’

Roughly fourteen or fifteen years from now, an incident would occur where the orthodox forces based in Namchang would be completely slaughtered.

According to the intel I had obtained back then from the Heavenly Thunder Corps, the main clans of Namgung and Namcheon had engaged in a full-blown war and ended up mutually annihilated.

As a result of that incident, the Sword Supreme Sage replaced the Southern Heavenly Sword King as the new Alliance Leader and declared that our Cult had been the mastermind behind the incident.

Not long after, with the active support of the Orthodox Faction, the Justice-Demonic Alliance Murim Union was born.

‘The justification sounded perfect. Damn it, now I’m pissed again just thinking about it.’

The reason for my anger wasn’t anything trivial.

It was because that incident occurred right after I was appointed as Inner Administrator.

I recalled the past with a bittersweet feeling.

‘God, I really worked my ass off back then.’

Even if I didn’t have real power, I was still technically part of the Cult’s leadership.

Because of that incident, I had to help the Outer Administrator, pulling constant all-nighters for two months straight.

Sure, I learned a bit more than others as a result, but—

‘I wasn’t close enough to the truth. Damn.’

In the end, Cult Leader Cheon Yura had chosen silence regarding the incident.

'The idea that the Cult orchestrated it is utter nonsense. It's true that the two clans destroyed each other, but that wasn't the whole story. There was something more to it.'

Back then, I had no clue what that "something" was and just buried the case out of frustration.

But once the puzzle piece called "Heaven-Defying Society" fell into place, the larger picture that someone had once drawn finally began to emerge.

'Baek Sang-ah was originally supposed to be assassinated here. And the Sword Supreme likely used that assassination and connected it to the Namchang Calamity for political gain. That might explain why the Cult Leader never defended us too strongly.'

Even the sudden downfall of the Southern Heavenly Sword King could be related to all this.

'Damn... Come to think of it, isn't this the very first point of that whole butterfly effect?'

I'd somewhat anticipated this, having traveled back a whole twenty years.

But I hadn't expected to face one of the origin points so directly.

'Alright. Whatever your plan is, I'll completely ruin it.'

Grip!

Especially—

Han Muyeon and the Seventh Elder.

Figuring out their connection was the biggest success I'd had in recent days.

* * *

And so, time passed, and the month-long training in Black Star Sword Formation came to an end.

My team was scheduled to face Team Four in a simulated battle.

Watching their situation from a distance, I frowned slightly.

'This won't be easy.'

As expected, most of the teams were a mess, practically falling apart on their own, but one or two of them had managed to pull together quite solidly.

Unfortunately, the team we'd be facing—Team Four—belonged to the latter.

“Form ranks!”

Members of both our team and Team Four lined up in formation, facing each other.

And in that moment—

‘Hm? What’s this?’

I felt the intense stares of three people directed squarely at me.

‘Is it those guys? The core that held Team Four together?’

One of them had a sly look, kind of like Jin Sang.

Another was somewhat decent-looking.

The last had a solid, dependable air about him.

They didn’t look like they came from the same mother, but for some reason, they shared a similar vibe.

Sworn brothers, maybe?

“Take fifty steps back! Prepare for the simulation match!”

Following the instructor’s command, we each retreated fifty paces to get into our initial formation.

Baek Sang-ah, our team leader, and Ju Guk-seon, the leader of Team Four, raised their voices at the same time.

“Diagonal formation, deploy!”

“Diagonal formation, deploy!”

When both sides used the same formation, the protruding points at the front would collide head-on.

In other words—

“Oh!”

“A head-to-head clash right from the start?!”

“This is going to be fun!”

The observing instructors gasped in amusement.

“Who do you think is going to win?”

To that question from one of the instructors, Jang Deuk-soo, who had remained silent until now, responded.

“If it’s a straight fight with no variables, I’d say Team Two.”

Another senior instructor immediately objected.

“Don’t underestimate Team Four. Those three over there—insane coordination.”

“Oh, those three? Right, they were the first to realize the hidden intent behind this simulation match, weren’t they?”

“Yeah. I noticed they’d try to carry out any command their leader gave, no matter how unreasonable.”

“Looked to me like they were just sucking up to their leader. The Ju family’s no joke, after all.”

“If we’re going by that logic, it’s the same for Team Two. Who’s going to challenge the Young Master of the Jin Clan?”

“True. Once he stepped up in the third week, Team Two hit its stride.”

“So the conclusion is—”

“You never know till it starts, huh?”

This little betting ritual between instructors was a quietly accepted tradition.

It had begun.

Clang!

With a crisp metallic sound, a thick silver ingot flew into the sky.

The instructor who caught it announced loudly:

“One silver tael on Team Four’s victory.”

“Oh? Instructor Jeon’s coming in hot, huh?”

“We need balance. I’ll bet a silver tael on Team Two.”

That was the signal.

The surrounding instructors began placing bets left and right.

Once about six or seven had placed their wagers, the still-silent Jang Deuk-soo finally opened his mouth.

“Ten silver taels on Team Two.”

“What!?”

“You’re betting half your monthly salary?!”

It was the largest wager so far.

Jang Deuk-soo grinned and teased his fellow instructors.

“If you’re scared, feel free to die.”

That bold line only ignited the others even more.

“Looks like Team Two just became the favored bet.”

“Can’t resist a longshot, can we?”

With those beast-hearted or beast-brained instructors finishing up the betting, the match was set.

Now all that was left was to see the result.

“Charge!”

“Crush them!”

“Uwooooooh!”

Team Two and Team Four roared as they charged toward each other.

Baek Sang-ah didn’t alter her formation, even when Team Four mirrored our diagonal formation.

Of course, I had already told her I wouldn’t be using my full strength, but still, she hadn’t wavered in her choice.

To be fair, even in terms of coordination alone, our team wasn't inferior to any other.

Just before the vanguard of Team Two and Team Four clashed—

“Nice to meet you!”

Huh?

The trio from Team Four's vanguard suddenly shouted greetings at me.

They were clearly still teenagers, but their voices were so loud and spirited, even grown adults couldn't match them.

“My name's Baeksa!”

“Heuksa!”

“And I'm Jeoksa!”

“...What the hell?”

The one who introduced himself as Baeksa charged at me, yelling,

“We call ourselves the Three Demonic Serpents! It's an honor, Young Master Jin Yeomyung!”

With that thunderous self-introduction, the three of them rushed at me in unison.

‘Seriously?!’

The other frontliners on my side were immediately blocked by Heuksa and Jeoksa.

Their antics aside, the so-called “Three Serpents” neutralized our triangle formation with ridiculous ease.

“Oh?”

‘They're not particularly strong individually, but their coordination is top-notch!’

“Please remember us!”

Baeksa used that moment to aim a dagger at my shoulder.

It was an incredibly precise coordination—no way they could've pulled this off with just a day or two of practice.

“Ridiculous little punks.”

If it had been anyone other than me, that surprise attack would’ve landed clean.

‘Seventh Record Form: Heaven’s Net Ensnaring All’

A defensive technique from the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword focused on evasion.

Baek Sa’s dagger was sharp, but nowhere near fast enough to land a hit on me.

Thud!

I deflected the stab with ease and kicked Baeksa squarely in the gut.

“Urgh!”

His expression twisted in pain as his sneak attack failed.

“Big bro!”

“You okay?!”

“Pity. That was a pretty solid combo.”

I turned to the regrouped trio and said,

“The Three Demonic Serpents, huh. Why not call yourselves the Three Demonic Dragons or, hell, even the Three Demonic Pythons?”

Three little snakes? Bit underwhelming for self-proclaimed titles.

Baek Sa gave a bitter smile.

“We’re not worthy of that yet.”

“Yeah?”

“But under your guidance, Young Master, we believe we might one day earn the title of Three Dragons.”

“Well, maybe.”

“So... will you accept us?”

Guts, courage, and humble self-awareness. With those traits, they should've caught my eye sooner—but this was my first time seeing them.

'Ah, right.'

No wonder their faces weren't familiar—they must be from a different dorm.

Even within the same cohort, there were so many students that the dorms were split across three buildings.

I grinned and pointed my sword at the Three Serpents.

"I'll consider it, depending on how you perform."

"Thank you!"

Maybe today... I just found some talents worth bringing into my fold.

Chapter 37: Simulated Battle of the Flame (2)

'This might actually be useful.'

It felt like I had found an amusing toy.

To be honest, the Three Serpents' skills were practically trash.

In terms of pure martial ability, they were even weaker than the other two main members in our team.

'They're the type that fights using their innate killing intent and viciousness.'

If they survived for another ten or twenty years like this... yes, they might just become a textbook example of an unorthodox faction expert.

'Their instincts are quite good. They still have potential.'

It didn't seem like they had learned any proper cultivation techniques.

However, they compensated for their lacking martial skills with impeccable coordination and animalistic instincts.

'Guys like that grow rapidly once you fill in their missing pieces.'

Alright, time to see what these guys are really capable of.

'I will absolutely catch his eye!'

The eyes of Baeksa, Heuksa, and Jeoksa burned with determination.

The Demonic Three Serpents.

In truth, they came from the backstreets of Miok Fortress. By background alone, they were part of the absolute lowest social class—so much so that it would have been impossible for them to enter Thousand-Day Pass.

Though they gave themselves the grandiose title of “Demonic Three Serpents,” before joining the Thousand-Day Pass, those around them used to call them “Three Worms”, just three measly worms.

The only reason they had come this far was entirely thanks to the power of their godmother, the Lord of the Demonic Heaven Tower.

She hadn't shown it openly, but the Tower Lord cherished these three quite dearly.

To these ones who yearned for martial arts, she had passed down techniques used by her tower guards—even if they were third-rate.

She had even gone so far as to lie with high-ranking members of the cult who visited the tower, all to get the three admitted into the Thousand-Day Pass.

'I must succeed—no, I will succeed!'

The Three Serpents wanted to repay their godmother for opening the path for them.

The quickest way to repay that debt was to achieve great results in the Thousand-Day Pass and become successful.

And they had luck on their side.

The kind of “opportunity” that some never got in their lifetime had just shown up right before their eyes.

The eldest, Baeksa, grinned darkly while holding his sword.

“I fell for you at first sight, Young Master!”

“...Hearing something like that from someone with your face gives me the creeps.”

The expression and tone were exactly like some knife-wielding thug from the underworld.

“Th-that’s not what I meant!”

Baeksa frantically waved his hands in denial.

“I—Isaw you suppress Ma Chulsoo, the Young Master of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan.”

“What? You saw that?”

That entire floor had been reserved, and both the Ma Clan and Jin Clan had their guards there. How?

Jeoksa spoke up shyly.

“W-we’re from the Demonic Heaven Tower where that happened. There are plenty of ways for us to witness such things.”

“Ahh, is that so?”

The Three Serpents swallowed hard.

I could see it in their expressions.

If I rejected them because of their lowborn background, that would be the end of them.

But fortunately for them, I wasn’t the type to care much about birth.

“Watching you that day, we thought—if we were ever to serve a lord, we’d want it to be someone like you, Young Master!”

“We’ll give our utmost loyalty! We know we still have a long way to go...”

“Enough.”

I raised my hand to stop them.

“I understand your enthusiasm, but we’re still in the middle of the mock battle, you know?”

Just like Isaid, I could feel the eyes from all around wondering what the hell these guys were doing, not even caring about friend or foe.

But the Three Serpents didn’t care in the slightest.

They had been through too much hell to feel embarrassed now.

And I liked their boldness.

“Alright, I get it. Let’s continue for now. I’ll evaluate everything after the battle ends.”

“Yes, Young Master!”

Determination blazed in the eyes of the Three Serpents.

The team that had won the first power struggle began gaining momentum.

“Temporary retreat!”

Team Four’s leader, Ju Guk-seon, barked the order with a scowling face.

“Switch to the Defense Formation!”

The defensive pattern of the Black Star Sword Formation, the Defense Formation, was used when the formation was being pushed back.

Using it this early on was already a negative point in itself.

“Damn it!”

Ju Guk-seon cursed toward the front lines.

“Those damned bastards! What the hell are they doing?!”

They should have been doing everything they could to take down the enemy, and instead they were messing around like this?

Those lowborn mutts had obeyed orders without complaint until now, and now they’re pulling this kind of stunt during a real match!?

‘Those damn commoners... I’ll never let them off later!’

Right now, without the Three Serpents, she couldn’t win this fight.

Ju Guk-seon’s gaze shifted to Baek Sang-ah, who was waving her flag from afar.

‘At this rate, I’m going to lose to her.’

She harbored a deep inferiority complex toward Baek Sang-ah.

That tiny girl from who-knows-where had dared to outperform her, a direct daughter of the prestigious Ju Clan within the cult.

And with her youthful looks and naïve behavior, she easily drew the attention of all the men—so irritating it couldn't even be put into words.

'I'll definitely flatten your nose one day!'

Though not widely known among the team members, in truth, the team leaders could receive significant bonus points depending on the mock battle results.

Since they had to focus on different responsibilities for two more months than their peers, this kind of special treatment was expected.

'The Jin Clan's Young Master is better than I thought. That damned girl, how did she get someone like that as a teammate? He'd suit me so much better.'

Moreover, this team also had Ma Jinseong, a branch member of the Ma Clan.

In terms of sheer power, they were probably the strongest of all the teams.

'Still... it's not like I don't have any options!'

Ju Guk-seon grabbed her flag.

"Switch to the Ascension Formation!"

At those words, the Three Serpents clicked their tongues softly and retreated from the enemy.

Absolute obedience—that was the Three Serpents' greatest strength.

The moment the order to switch to the Ascension Formation was given, the tangled formation began to slowly realign.

But due to the earlier clash, the team members' stamina had already been heavily depleted.

'It doesn't matter! This exam is about capturing the enemy commander!'

Even if they suffered total defeat, as long as they captured the enemy leader first, they'd win the match.

"Jeoksa, Heuksa! Move to the end of the Ascension Formation!"

"Yes, Team Leader!"

At Ju Guk-seon's command, the two immediately moved away from Jin Yeomyung without hesitation.

Then—

“Baeksa, you're the key. Wait for the signal and when I give it, make sure you break that girl's flag!”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“You'd better. If we lose this mock battle, I'll crush the Demonic Heaven Tower using the Ju Clan's power.”

“...!”

Baeksa's expression stiffened instantly.

Ju Guk-seon's clan, the Heavenly Justice Ju Clan, was a top-tier family with over a thousand members.

No matter how prestigious the Demonic Heaven Tower was as the cult's foremost pleasure house, it stood no chance against the Ju Clan.

“Your answer?”

“Y-yes... understood.”

The Demonic Heaven Tower was the home the Three Serpents would return to.

To protect that home, they had to win—no matter what.

Watching Team Four's maneuvering, Baek Sang-ah quietly came to a conclusion.

‘They're aiming for me.’

The Ascension Formation was designed to disrupt enemy lines with a single-point breakthrough.

It was usually employed to open a gap in the enemy's formation before deploying the Battering Ram Formation.

‘But they won't come straight in.’

Baek Sang-ah knew her peer, Ju Guk-seon's, personality very well.

She was obsessively fixated on victory—so much so it bordered on pathological—and she had a tendency to mercilessly bite down on any weakness she sensed.

And sure enough.

Just before the clash, while charging in with the Ascension Formation, Ju Guk-seon gave an irregular command.

“Initial Roar Formation!”

“I-It’s the Initial Roar Formation! Move!”

Even though the command came right before impact, the members of Team Four tried to execute it as best they could.

However, because they hadn’t completely mastered it, their formation was inevitably sloppy.

And that gap—Baek Sang-ah saw it.

‘A-an opening!’

In that moment, a perfect counter to Ju Guk-seon’s strategy formed in Baek Sang-ah’s mind.

But it would come at the cost of her allies.

Her mind raced at lightning speed.

‘No hesitation!’

Even a brief moment of doubt would cost them the entire match!

And right then—

—Don’t worry, I can cover for any mistakes you make as team leader.

A voice reached her ears, and Baek Sang-ah made her decision.

“Rapid Flow Formation! Right flank!”

At the same moment, a response came from the front line as if perfectly coordinated.

“Rapid Flow Formation, right side!”

“Pull them in!”

“Huh? Wh-whoa?!”

Team Four’s members panicked at the seamless maneuver of the opposing team.

Baek Sang-ah’s team had begun pulling Team Four inward like a spiral.

This wasn’t just breaking through—it was creating a space for them to be drawn into.

‘A brawl!’

Ju Guk-seon was flustered.

It was a tactic that dragged the fight into an all-out melee, regardless of injuries.

She never imagined the side with the upper hand would initiate a Rapid Flow Formation first!

“Kraagh!”

“My arm! My arm!”

As the melee broke out in full, injuries erupted across the battlefield.

But Ju Guk-seon didn’t notice any of those sacrifices.

Only one thought consumed her mind now.

‘She read my intent!’

Now, she couldn’t use Baeksa. If she tried to reorganize the formation clumsily, they would lose momentum and be crushed.

‘Nicely done.’

I was the one who shouted Rapid Flow Formation and rallied our team.

From the start, we held the upper hand in terms of power.

At this rate, victory was all but certain.

‘Oh? Still not giving up, huh?’

At that moment, Baeksa and the rest of the Three Serpents were desperately trying to push through the chaos to get to Baek Sang-ah.

‘They might actually break through.’

If so, then I'd better make sure we land the final blow.

I quietly raised my hand toward Baek Sang-ah.

It was one of the pre-planned signals in case we ever encountered this kind of opponent.

Seeing my hand, she nodded slightly.

"Battering Ram Formation! Open!"

"It's the Battering Ram Formation! Disengage the melee!"

The team members began retreating in perfect unison.

Normally, withdrawing from such a chaotic melee would be no easy feat, but Team Four was already on the verge of collapse.

They were even thankful for the retreat initiated by our team.

"Stop them! I said stop them!"

Ju Guk-seon screamed.

In their current state, Team Four couldn't stop the charge from our team aiming for a breakthrough.

"Block them somehow, you idiots!"

But the team was too sluggish to execute any new orders.

The only ones still able to move were the Three Serpents, hardened by their vicious intent.

They stepped forward to block my path.

"So the situation is reversed this time."

"We won't let you pass!"

"You seem exhausted."

"If we let you break through here, we're not qualified to call ourselves your subordinates!"

They stood their ground with desperate resolve.

But the world doesn't run on resolve alone.

"Well, you don't have to let me through."

"...What?"

"Because I'm not the main attacker."

"N-no way?!"

Baeksa snapped his head back.

"What the hell?!"

His eyes widened in horror.

While all the attention and strength had been focused on me, Ma Jinseong—who had gone largely unbothered the entire time—had sprung toward Ju Guk-seon.

"He—he got through!"

"Stop himmmmm!"

By default, a team leader only commands with the flag and doesn't engage in combat.

So when the formation is broken or a gap is revealed, they're completely defenseless.

"Damn it!"

Baeksa cursed and tried to retreat.

"Where do you think you're going? If you really want to be my subordinate, shouldn't you stay focused on me to the end?"

I blocked Baeksa's path with a smug grin.

"To think you'd resort to something so cheap!"

"Yeah, it's a cheap trick that normally wouldn't work. But you, coming from the back alleys, should know better than anyone."

Baeksa's eyes trembled.

"That once you fall for a cheap trick like this—you lose everything."

Even if Ju Guk-seon was a senior cohort, without a weapon, there was nothing she could do against Ma Jinseong.

Crack!

And so, the flag in Ju Guk-seon's hand snapped in two under Ma Jinseong's assault.

The mock battle ended in our victory.

Chapter 38: The Scheme (1)

“Uwaaahhh!”

“We won! We really won!”

The members of team Two hugged each other tightly, practically leaping for joy.

It was only natural.

They had faithfully fulfilled their roles and secured victory.

“At this rate, we've basically survived!”

“Exactly!”

Though the team battle still remained, they had effectively crossed the critical threshold to survive this team competition.

In stark contrast...

The atmosphere in team Four was like that of a funeral.

“D-dammit...”

Baeksa pounded the ground in anguish.

They had boldly declared their names to make an impression, but ended up losing without achieving anything noteworthy.

More than the shame, they were now on the verge of being expelled from the Thousand-Day Pass.

And that wasn't even the worst part.

Ju Guk-seon's threat to demolish Demonic Heaven Tower—it now felt like a very real possibility.

“Why the long face?”

“Y-young Master?!”

Baeksa blinked wide in surprise.

“Did someone piss you off?”

“Uh, no, it’s just...”

His expression said he never expected the Grand Heir of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan to use such crude language.

“You feeling bitter ‘cause you didn’t perform well?”

“.....”

“Or maybe... someone threatened you?”

“T-that is...”

Baeksa couldn’t bring himself to speak, like a dumb mute who had eaten honey.

Seeing his clouded expression, I clicked my tongue.

‘Tsk! I can already guess what’s going on.’

Every desperate face and fierce gaze has a root cause behind it.

The moment I heard Baeksa was from the Demonic Heaven Tower, I figured out how things had gone down in team Four.

Those three didn’t support their team leader out of loyalty.

Rather, their team leader had coerced them, using threats to rally the team under her control.

“What? Did she say he’d flatten Demonic Heaven Tower if you lost or something?”

“H-how did you...?”

Baek Sa’s face twisted in utter shock.

“What do you mean ‘how’? Obvious is obvious.”

Maybe I'd been living too mildly for my status, but people from one of the Six Great Demonic Clans could be utterly vile.

Even my little brother Jin Yewoon wouldn't hesitate to kill someone if they annoyed him.

In the rigid hierarchy of the Cult, it was standard practice for higher-ranking families to exploit lower ones. That kind of power abuse was practically tradition.

With my hands behind my back, I said,

"I'll stop that from happening."

"R-really?!"

Not just Baek Sa, but Jeoksa and Heuksa also looked at me with disbelief in their eyes.

No matter how powerful the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan was—even capable of easily overpowering the Heavenly Justice Ju Clan—they never imagined someone would lift a finger for bottom-dwellers like them.

Especially since they weren't even under my command yet.

I raised one corner of my lips and said,

"I hate seeing my favorite tavern go out of business."

"....."

Who'd dare call Demonic Heaven Tower of Miok Fortress just a tavern?

Well, I could—if anyone could, I could.

"Th-thank you, Young Master!"

"We will never forget this grace!"

Thud! Thud!

The three repeatedly slammed their foreheads to the ground in gratitude.

"Enough with the thanks."

I crouched in front of the kneeling trio and said,

"You all said you wanted to become my subordinates, right?"

“Y-yes! If you’ll accept us, we’ll give you our absolute loyalty.”

Despite their desperate tone, I tilted my head with a skeptical expression.

“I don’t care for loyalty that’s all talk.”

“Ah...”

“If your ears work, you should know what I’ve announced by now.”

At that, Jeoksa cautiously spoke up.

“We heard that you’re recruiting for something called the ‘Main Flow,’ a special kind of test.”

“Yeah, that’s right. And you heard the pass rate for the Main Flow too, didn’t you?”

“Five per...cent...”

That’s right. Not five out of ten, but five out of a hundred.

This wasn’t just a trial—it was hell on earth, where only five out of a hundred made it out alive.

“If you want to be my subordinates, then you’d better have the guts to follow me into hell.”

Even Jin Sang and Baekgu, who acted as my hands and feet, broke into a cold sweat and dodged the question when I asked them to enter the Main Flow with me.

So what about these three?

“If we merely attempt it, will you accept us as your subordinates?”

“Nope. You have to survive. Can’t take corpses as subordinates, can I?”

“If we do survive...”

“Then I’ll guarantee your future success. You can count on that. But only if you really make it through to the end.”

“.....”

The three of them stared at one another in silence.

The pause didn’t last long.

Thud!

“I’d follow you into somewhere worse than hell. Please, grant us the honor of serving you, Young Master!”

“Oh?”

Hearing their bold declaration, I let out a whistle.

Didn’t expect them to decide so quickly and without hesitation.

“Good. From today on, you three are my subordinates—Number Two, Number Three, and Number Four.”

“Huh? Who’s Number One...?”

“There’s someone else. You’ll meet him later.”

It might’ve sounded cold, but honestly, I didn’t have high hopes for these three.

They had guts and grit, sure, but they’d missed the optimal window for mastering higher-level martial arts. And more importantly, they weren’t especially talented.

But if they survived the Main Flow?

And if that test yielded the results I was hoping for?

Then—and only then—would I truly accept them as my subordinates.

In this team trial, those who were appointed team leaders were given recognition and granted their own rooms in the dormitories.

And from one of those rooms, the sound of something breaking could be heard repeatedly.

“Damn it! Damn bastards!”

Crash! Crack!

Chairs and tables flew through the air and lost their original forms.

At the Thousand-Day Pass, any damaged items had to be replaced using one’s own resources, but the person venting her fury wasn’t thinking about that at all.

“Damn lowlifes! How dare they use Young Master Jin to threaten me?!”

The one raging in the room was none other than Ju Guk-seon, the team leader of team Four.

She was the youngest daughter of the main family's patriarch's younger brother, and within the Heavenly Justice Ju Clan, she had received a fair amount of affection as a direct blood relative.

"I'll never, never let them off! Not just those three damn worms, but also that wretched bitch who screwed me over!"

The reason for her fury was none other than the warning she had received from Jin Yeomyung after their loss in the mock battle.

"Demonic Heaven Tower is a place I frequent, even if it makes people call me a slacker. If that place were to disappear, I think I'd be very sad."

He had spoken indirectly, but she wasn't so foolish as to miss the meaning behind it.

In truth, Jin Yeomyung had only ever visited Demonic Heaven Tower once.

And even that had ended in disaster, when his father Jin Gun-ak found out on the very first day of their past life.

But Ju Guk-seon had no way of knowing that. All she saw was that those three bastards had betrayed her and run off to grovel before Jin Yeomyung.

Even so, she hadn't been that angry just yet.

The influence of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan was simply overwhelming, and Jin Yeomyung's radiant looks and outstanding martial prowess had instantly stolen her heart.

'Ah, how wonderful would it be if I could sit by his side?'

It was while indulging in such fantasies, having come out to see Jin Yeomyung off...

That the real reason for her rage emerged.

"Ah! Young Master Jin Yeomyung!"

"Lady Baek?"

Of all people, she'd run into that woman in the dormitory corridor.

Ju Guk-seon saw it.

The gentle expression that melted over Jin Yeomyung's face the moment he saw Baek Sang-ah.

"The team battle isn't over yet, so feel free to keep calling me vice-leader, team leader."

"Hehe, shall I? Vice-leader!"

"Your leadership was very impressive."

"Oh, no! It would've been tough without your coordination on the front lines!"

They looked extremely, ridiculously close.

In that instant, a fire blazed in Ju Guk-seon's chest.

And her hatred surged—to the fox who flirted with her man, and the three traitors who'd betrayed her.

While her dark heart was growing even darker...

"Oops, did I come at the wrong time?"

"...Who are you?"

A man appeared before Ju Guk-seon—not quite her man, but still decent-looking enough.

"Your hatred toward Baek Sang-ah seems intense."

"What business is that of yours?"

At this point, Ju Guk-seon still had some rationality.

But his next words sent her reason flying.

"If that hatred is strong enough to make you want her dead... what then?"

"Of course I want her dead!"

Of course, that wasn't actually acceptable. Even in the Demonic Cult, murdering a fellow cultist outright was a grave offense.

"In that case, what if I could give you that opportunity?"

"Opportunity?"

“Yes. There’s supposed to be a second mock battle in a month, correct? A simulation of the Black Star Formation, where teams of thirty-three face off.”

“And?”

“Do you not understand, or are you pretending not to?”

The man leaned in closer.

“In a battle involving that many people, it wouldn’t be strange for someone to die.”

“...!”

“When fights get intense, accidents happen. In fact, there were real fatalities among previous cohorts.”

Ju Guk-seon’s expression finally shifted into something intrigued.

“What are you saying?”

“I’ll use my influence to merge your team with hers. Meaning, you’ll be in the same team.”

Now, she was starting to understand where he was going with this.

“And during the battle, someone from your side will ‘recklessly’ charge toward her team?”

“All I have to do is make sure my team moves in a way that keeps them safe, right?”

Ju Guk-seon’s eyes curved into crescent moons.

“You’re very easy to communicate with.”

“So, what do you want in return?”

“Nothing.”

The man waved a hand.

“Nothing? Then... ‘Young Master Han’—why are you so eager to see that bitch dead?”

“For the same reason as you. Wanting someone you dislike to disappear... isn’t that natural for anyone in the Demonic Path?”

“Hahaha... that’s true!”

Of course, it wasn't true at all. But to Ju Guk-seon, raised among the upper class of the Demonic Faction, this felt entirely reasonable.

"My subordinate is so useless, I have no choice but to move myself. Ugh, all brawn and no brains."

"Not sure what you mean, but I agree—useless subordinates are the worst. Hahaha!"

And so, the two of them clasped hands while wishing for the death of one woman.

* * *

After that, the other team mock battles proceeded without issue.

Just yesterday, Senior Instructor Lee Hanmyeong—who had gambled away two nyang of silver—glared at Jang Deuk-soo, who was whistling.

"Grr! Instructor Jang, you seem to be in a very good mood these days?"

"Of course. I just won a whole month's salary in one go."

"Damn it! I thought my instincts weren't too bad..."

"Gambling's always a matter of fine margins."

In truth, the reason Jang Deuk-soo had bet on this team's victory was simple.

'That Jin Yeomyung brat... no matter how I look at it, he's hiding his true abilities.'

Naturally, Jang Deuk-soo was someone who had personally witnessed Ma Chulsoo—the top graduate of last year's cohort at the Thousand-Day Pass.

At the time of graduation, Ma Chulsoo had reached the level of a First-rate Martial Artist, capable of emitting Sword Qi with ease.

With that level of achievement, he earned a spot in the Six Demonic Dragons, despite not being from the Demon Dragon Hall.

Moreover, those who survived the program didn't head off to the Nine Demon Halls or the Seventeen Parties—instead, they willingly followed Ma Chulsoo.

Even if he was a direct descendant of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan, word was the succession was already settled around his elder brother, the Grand Heir.

He was truly a rare genius of recent years, possessing both martial prowess and charisma.

And yet, the one who defeated that very Ma Chulsoo... was Jin Yeomyung—the infamous slacker of the Jin Clan.

At first, he hadn't believed it.

There was no clear evidence, and the rumor had seemed like mere gossip. Even when he first saw Jin Yeomyung, his doubts remained.

But then something happened that changed his mind.

Right after this cohort entered the institution, there was an incident—

The underground training chamber for new recruits exploded.

Chapter 39: The Scheme (2)

Well, it was called underground, but in terms of depth, it was more like a semi-basement level training chamber.

Still, the training chamber was completely surrounded by Azure Steel Stone, and it was sturdy enough to withstand even a considerable blast of Sword Qi.

'To be honest, I did find it a bit suspicious. Even now, knowing the circumstances.'

If it had been an assassin aiming for Jin Yeomyung's life, that would have made sense.

But in the end, Jin Yeomyung came out without a scratch, and only the poor training chamber was blown to bits.

'Was it really the work of an assassin?'

Would an assassin who infiltrated past all that surveillance really create such a loud mess, blasting out Qi Projection like that?

Sure, there was definite evidence of an external intrusion, and the investigation was still ongoing.

But Jang Deuk-soo couldn't shake the subtle feeling of unease.

'What if... he's really reached a realm beyond imagination? And now he's hiding it?'

It made sense.

The problem was that the likelihood was extremely low.

To confirm that possibility, Jang Deuk-soo had not taken his eyes off Jin Yeomyung since.

Of course, Jin Yeomyung had never once revealed anything special.

During training, he was always humble and never tried to stand out, simply fulfilling his role.

A completely different attitude from the arrogance he had shown when they first met.

But ironically, that behavior only fueled Jang Deuk-soo's suspicion.

Because Jin Yeomyung had proclaimed to the officers—

'Main Flow, Thousand-Day Pass.'

Only the Pavilion Master, Vice Pavilion Master, and the senior instructor of a similar age to the Pavilion Master knew what that truly meant.

As far as Jang Deuk-soo was aware, it was no different from throwing oneself off a cliff.

'It was almost like he was evaluating the ones who might accompany him.'

He was definitely hiding something.

If—really, if—Jin Yeomyung was hiding his true strength...

If he had the ability to survive even a challenge to the Main Flow Thousand-Day Pass?

Thinking that far, Jang Deuk-soo let out a small chuckle and shook his head.

'Well, what can you do. Just sit back and enjoy the show.'

It would be like a genius emerging to overturn the structure of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Ten, twenty years from now, the Cult might be shaken by that guy—but so what?

Someone like him, a mere commoner, only needed to pick up the crumbs that fell from the table.

With a smirk, Jang Deuk-soo boldly called out to his fellow instructors.

"Ten silver nyang on Unified Unit One!"

Unified Unit One was the unit that included the team Jin Yeomyung belonged to.

The atmosphere in our team was very warm and cheerful.

It was a stark contrast to a few weeks ago, when everyone kept their mouths shut and let out complaints through body language.

After our victory against Team Four and witnessing the chaotic mess that other teams displayed, everyone had become convinced.

That our team leader, Baek Sang-ah, was nothing short of an angel.

"At this rate, we might even aim for the top in the mock unit battle!"

"Right?! We're counting on you, Team Leader!"

"O-of course!"

Baek Sang-ah gave an awkward smile and nodded in response to the team members' intense gazes.

Well, good vibes were always welcome.

'It's quieter than I expected though.'

I glanced toward Team Four in the distance.

Ever since I had delivered a warning to Ju Guk-seon a few days ago.

I had expected her to be scheming something behind the scenes, but surprisingly, she had been silent ever since.

She hadn't even caused trouble for the members of Team Four.

From what I had heard through Baek Sa's reports, she had only been glaring and hadn't inflicted any serious consequences.

'Didn't seem like the type for that.'

Given her fierce impression, it wouldn't have been surprising if her grudges lasted longer than a serpent's body.

'Well, I guess peace is good...'

That line of thought was shattered just an hour later.

Once the initial team-based mock battles were over, three teams were grouped into a single unit.

And naturally, with the formation of a unit, a unit commander had to be selected.

So, at the meeting where all the team leaders gathered—

"A defeated team leader can't very well be appointed as the unit commander, can they? I think it makes sense for the leader of Team Two to take the position."

"Ah, what?"

"Don't you agree? I doubt Team Five's leader would have any objections."

"A-hem!"

The leader of Team Five, Jong Hoe, who was pointed out by Ju Guk-seon, awkwardly cleared his throat and averted his gaze.

In truth, Team Five was in the worst shape here.

Team Four had at least put up a good fight, but Team Five had suffered a disgraceful defeat in actual combat due to the disobedience and rebellion of its members.

"N-no objections here."

"It's decided, then."

With a clap of her hands, Ju Guk-seon casually finalized the matter.

The conclusion wasn't particularly bad for our team, so Baek Sang-ah didn't object.

'Suspicious.'

As the assistant team leader attending the meeting, I frowned slightly at Ju Guk-seon's attitude.

'She definitely holds a grudge against Baek Sang-ah.'

I could clearly tell, recalling the murderous gaze she had given Baek Sang-ah in the dorms a few days ago.

That venom, as if she would chew through her flesh if she could, was no lie.

Smile.

Noticing my gaze, Ju Guk-seon flashed a warm smile as if nothing had happened.

But it was slightly different from the one she had given Baek Sang-ah—it left me with an uneasy feeling.

‘Feels like she’s plotting something.’

If she harbored such resentment and still held back, there was only one reason why.

She was enduring it to deliver a bigger retaliation later.

‘There’s no way she’s doing all this just to humiliate her.’

One possibility crossed my mind.

‘Don’t tell me—assassination?’

It wouldn’t be strange if someone got seriously hurt during a team match.

Even in the recent mock battles, there were no deaths, but around twenty people from the entire cohort had suffered varying degrees of injury.

In a massive team match with over sixty people going wild, something worse could easily happen.

‘But how?’

No matter how influential she was in the Ju Clan, planting an actual assassin would be impossible.

‘But making someone suffer a serious injury? That might be doable.’

Just like during the Little Black Star Sword Formation, the unit commander only held the flag and didn’t move directly.

If Ju Guk-seon was aiming for that—

‘I absolutely won’t forgive her.’

Tears of flame streamed from my eyes.

If she intended to ignore my warning and go through with it, then not only Ju Guk-seon, but the entire Ju Clan would have to pay the price.

A month passed uneventfully.

The Black Star Grand Formation, composed of thirty-three members uniting as one, was significantly more complex than the Little Black Star Sword Formation.

Just trying to synchronize our breathing had already eaten up the whole month.

“How do you see the situation?”

“Hmm, to be honest...”

Baek Sang-ah made a complicated expression in response to my question.

But she was honest.

“It’s a complete mess!”

“...Right?”

Even though the number of members had only tripled, the difficulty of operating the formation had increased to another level entirely.

“At this rate, it’ll be impossible to bring out the true essence of the formation. The Black Star Sword Formation may have ‘sword’ in its name, but it’s not much different from a regular military formation...”

“But the Black Star Grand Formation is a true formation in every sense.”

Combining strength to unleash even greater power—

That was the core characteristic of formations in Murim.

“At this pace, we’ll have to practice for a full year before we can draw out proper strength.”

“Hmm!”

Truthfully, even a year was an optimistic estimate.

Formations involving dozens of people typically required at least three to four years of consistent synchronization to produce full power.

Even the Shaolin’s famous 108 Arhat Formation was said to be forbidden from being deployed without at least ten years of training.

To the still-worried Baek Sang-ah, I spoke firmly.

“We have no choice. If we don’t have teeth, we use our gums.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uniformity. Let’s focus on that one thing.”

Frankly speaking, if Unit One, which had formed naturally around Baek Sang-ah, was already this unorganized, we could easily imagine what shape the other units were in.

Didn’t Units Two and Three even get into fights over who would take the position of commander?

In the case of Unit Two, San Dojeon had finally had enough and beat down all the commander candidates himself before claiming the role.

‘That works out for us.’

If San Dojeon was leading, then their organization would probably improve, but he was more suited to being a field captain who crushed enemies on the frontline rather than a proper unit commander.

So if he didn’t join the actual fighting, all the better.

“The Thousand-Day Pass wouldn’t expect such high-level coordination from new trainees anyway. More than anything, they probably just want us to avoid looking like a disorganized mob during group battles.”

“Absolutely!”

Baek Sang-ah nodded enthusiastically.

In truth, only our team and Team Four had shown particularly impressive performances. Looking at the chaos in the other teams, it was clear that *they* were the average.

“Let’s not overcomplicate things. We’ll just unify movement by team. And reduce the number of sub-formations we use to around five.”

“That’s a great suggestion! If we win, there’s really no need to be flashy!”

Since Baek Sang-ah was quick-witted, she immediately understood the logic behind my suggestion.

But in truth, I had another reason for making it.

‘There’s definitely going to be an incident.’

I had already ordered the Three Attendants to keep a discreet eye on Ju Guk-seon's movements, but since then, they reported that she hadn't done anything suspicious.

On the contrary, she had even gathered the Three Attendants and apologized, saying she was sorry for everything until now, and vowed to appoint them as her main aides going forward.

'Why make the Three Attendants your aides?'

That meant if the Three Attendants became Ju Guk-seon's main force, they would naturally distance themselves from Baek Sang-ah.

In turn, that meant Baek Sang-ah would have fewer guards around her.

It was incredibly, incredibly suspicious.

That night.

"Dokjeol."

"Yes, Second Order. Ask whatever you wish."

The trainee known as Dokjeol knelt before Second Order.

"You said you were the team leader of Unit Six, right?"

"That's correct."

"Then that means you'll be facing Unit One in battle."

"That's correct."

Dokjeol answered calmly to each question.

After a brief silence, Second Order gave the order.

"Kill Baek Sang-ah."

Dokjeol lifted his head.

"Have you informed San Dojeon, team leader, separately?"

Though they were technically in different units, San Dojeon served the same lord as he did.

“Forget about that incompetent fool.”

Second Order’s expression twisted slightly at the mention of San Dojeon.

“And knowing his personality, he’d surely object.”

Though he expected a prompt agreement, Dokjeol surprisingly hesitated for a moment.

“There is one concern I have.”

“What is it?”

“The Thousand-Day Pass search team is closing in. If I act recklessly now, my identity might be exposed.”

“.....”

Second Order’s face stiffened slightly at that statement as well.

Dokjeol was one of the top-class assassins assigned by Eight Lords who had sent him here.

His skills were considered on par with the Demonic Emperor’s elite assassination squad, the Doom-Wielding Ghost Commanders.

“Which damned bastard exposed traces...”

During the previous training chamber explosion, one of the secret passages connecting the Thousand-Day Pass and their organization had been exposed.

And the Thousand-Day Pass had seized on that clue and been relentlessly investigating ever since.

“No, actually, this might work in our favor.”

A plan flashed through Second Order’s mind—an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

“If you kill Baek Sang-ah, the investigation will come to you no matter what.”

Dokjeol’s expression stiffened slightly. Second Order’s meaning was clear.

“You’ll have to take the fall. I’ll arrange the escape route. Just put everything you have into killing Baek Sang-ah.”

An escape route? Would he really do that?

For a brief moment, a hint of doubt flickered through Dokjeol's heart—then disappeared.

In the end, he was a tool.

Even if his master discarded him, he was a tool that had to accept being thrown away without complaint.

From birth until now, Dokjeol's life had been one bound to the "organization."

"Understood."

Dokjeol bowed his head.

Chapter 40: The Scheme (3)

Time passed, and the day of the mock battle dawned.

"Depending on the outcome of this mock battle, it will be decided whether you can move forward or not!"

A chilling atmosphere swept through the grounds.

Regardless of whether they had won or lost previously, everyone was wary of each other, maintaining a palpable tension.

Some instructors, upon seeing the condition of the trainees, let out faint sneers.

"Hmph, judging by the look of things, they've still got a long way to go."

"With winners and losers mixed together, there's no way proper cooperation will happen."

The losing teams would have to put on an extraordinary performance in this Team battle.

The winning teams, on the other hand, had a slight advantage and room to breathe.

This mismatch was the cog in the wheel that created the current icy mood.

"If there's any hope at all..."

"It would be Team One. At least they're somewhat passable."

Almost all the instructors considered Team One, which had rallied around Baek Sang-ah, as the most promising top contender.

“Ah, it’s always good to be from a reputable family. You don’t even have to say anything—they just follow orders perfectly. It’s a dream for a captain.”

“Honestly, this Team had the highest chance of becoming a total mess.”

“Who would’ve guessed? That Jin Clan brat actually listened to his team leader without a fuss.”

“In the end, Team One secured solid organization at least.”

Even if high-level tactics were out of reach, at least they wouldn't disobey orders.

Given the current situation, even that would be a major advantage.

“On the flip side, Team Two is hopeless. They picked the wrong captain.”

That statement wasn’t a criticism of the captain himself.

“They made the vanguard the captain. That alone killed whatever slim chance they had.”

“Come on, if it weren’t for that big guy, Team Two would’ve ended up like Team Three.”

“Tsk, that’s true enough.”

To their eyes, Team Three was the worst of them all.

Incredibly, Team Three had failed to appoint a captain until the very end.

So who held the captain’s banner?

They simply stuck a flag in the base camp, and three team leaders stood there weaponless, guarding it.

At that sorry sight, a few instructors covered their faces in disbelief.

“That one's doomed.”

“Two of the team leaders, who are supposed to be the main combat force on the front line, are gone. Don’t even need to watch to know how it’ll go.”

“There’s a slim chance if massive casualties occur during the clash between Team One and Team Two...”

“But with them looking like that, it’s hopeless.”

“Damn it, my money’s on Team Three!”

At one instructor’s lament, the expressions of other instructors varied from pity to schadenfreude.

There were so many variables in this bet that the wagers had been locked in a full month before the actual mock battles even started.

Those instructors who failed to predict the situation and placed their bets accordingly could only put on long faces.

“Alright, enough about money. The Pavilion Master is coming.”

As news of the arrival of the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass spread, the instructors immediately straightened their postures.

The Pavilion Master often attended events like these mock battles in person.

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass, Jo Jin-sang, arrived accompanied by the chief instructor and others.

Taking a seat on the high platform, the Pavilion Master raised his hand.

“Very well, let’s begin.”

At that signal, Jang Deuk-soo shouted loudly across the grounds.

“Team One, Team Two! Form ranks in triple column formation!”

Chak! Chak!

In accordance with the order, Team One and Team Two faced each other in formation.

The stares they exchanged were fierce.

‘Who could it be, the sniper?’

Scanning the opposing side, I searched for any trace of an assassin who might be lying in wait.

‘There’s a chance they’re in Team Three...’

Team One and Team Three would have their match last. It would be the most exhausting moment with the highest number of injuries, so the timing was ideal for any scheme.

However—

'I'll consider all possibilities in case they flip the script.'

That didn't mean I could afford to lose focus now.

"Back off fifty paces!"

At the instructor's command, the two Teams slowly widened the gap between them.

When they reached the designated distance—

The captains of each Team raised their flags and issued the first commands.

"Deploy Rising Current Formation!"

"Deploy Anti-Penetration Formation!"

Team One set up an Anti-Penetration Formation, stacking layers of defense.

Team Two, from the start, clearly aimed to break through using the Rising Current Formation formation.

"Oh?"

The Pavilion Master, observing the scene, showed a glint of interest in his eyes.

"Their intent is blatantly clear."

Beside him, the masked chief instructor, Lee Gyubo, responded.

"It's a clash between Team One, relying on stable coordination and defense, and Team Two, aiming to end it quickly in a short-term battle."

"The captain of Team Two is using his head. He must've realized early on that fighting normally would leave them no chance."

Lee Gyubo frowned slightly as he examined the battlefield.

"Team One's left flank seems a bit unsettled."

From their vantage point, the left side referred to Team Four.

The Pavilion Master also noticed and nodded.

“Yes. It seems like there's a lack of control—or maybe someone's acting on their own to gain merit?”

“Team Four lost to Team Two in the last mock battle. And with their current defense-oriented strategy, they might be dissatisfied.”

“Hohoho! I'm curious to see how this turns out.”

Despite having advantages, their weaknesses were equally evident.

While watching the battlefield, the Pavilion Master spoke again.

“Come to think of it, what's the update on the investigation?”

“We've almost caught the tail. We're sure it's among the new trainees.”

“You're certain it's not someone from within our main sect families but an outside force?”

“Without a doubt. The trace left behind isn't something a sect member would've done.”

“I hope we catch them soon. I'd like to know what their purpose is in coming all the way out here to the Thousand-Day Pass.”

“The Vice Head of Security is personally on their trail, so it won't be long.”

But the hopes of the Pavilion Master and the chief instructor would not be fulfilled.

Because, right in front of their eyes—

The very “tail” they had been pursuing would soon cause an incident.

* * *

‘So, San Dojeon wants to settle this right from the start!’

At the sight of the enemy deploying Ascending Tide Formation right from the start, Baek Sang-ah bit her lower lip lightly.

Contrary to his rugged, mountain-bandit-like appearance, San Dojeon had sharp tactical instincts, not just martial arts prowess.

The first stage of his tactical insight was to assess the power difference between allies and enemies.

Having quickly figured out the outcome, San Dojeon had chosen to go for a swift, decisive battle.

'We could win if we block them, but it won't be easy.'

She couldn't use Surging Current Formation like before.

Their strength lay in solid organization, but Surging Current Formation was a formation that inherently disrupted such coordination.

It was practically self-sabotage.

"Charge!"

"Uwoooooo!"

Members of Team Two charged toward the center of Team One with ghost-like ferocity.

And at the center of Team One—

Were the Samsa members, brought over specially from Team Four, holding the vanguard.

"Take down all those bastards!"

"Let's show our Lord what we can do!"

Though the challenge to join the Main Flow still remained, Samsa's morale had been soaring ever since aligning with Jin Yeomyung.

This deployment had also been their voluntary offer to prove their usefulness to him.

Thus, Samsa and the first outer layer of the Blue-Rank Formation formation clashed directly with Team Two's vanguard.

'Not bad.'

No matter how fierce the assault, it was difficult to break through if they held their position.

Especially since shields were allowed in this mock battle.

Samsa, holding shields as big as their own torsos, were desperately bracing against the enemies' charge.

However, Ascending Tide Formation was a formation where all members concentrated their power into one point to break through.

Even Samsa couldn't hold on indefinitely.

"Team Four, Team Five, focus on the center! We can't lose the power struggle!"

At Baek Sang-ah's shout, Team Five's leader obediently led his team to reinforce the central struggle.

However—

"Team Four! What's the team leader doing?!"

Team Four's leader, Ju Guk-seon, was inexplicably hesitating and not following the orders!

While Team Four showed no particular movement—

San Dojeon seized that gap immediately.

"Deploy Surging Current Formation!"

"It's Surging Current Formation! Everyone circle and push through!"

It was the same Surging Current Formation Baek Sang-ah had previously used to plunge the battlefield into chaos.

Now, San Dojeon was turning that same formation against her.

Baek Sang-ah watched as cracks began to spread through their formation, horrified.

"N-No!"

At this rate, it would devolve into a melee!

The victor would remain uncertain until the very end!

And then—the worst possible thing happened.

"W-What the hell are you doing?!"

Team Four, who had been holding the left flank, wasn't even participating in the chaos. Instead, they were pulling away to the side!

This could only mean one thing.

'Betrayal!'

Baek Sang-ah's face turned pale.

Ju Guk-seon, Team Four's leader who had stayed quiet until now, had ruined everything to spite Baek Sang-ah, even if it meant elimination.

"N-No!"

And through the gap left by Team Four's retreat, members of Team Two came flooding in like a tidal wave.

"Y-You damned traitors!"

"What the hell are those Team Four bastards doing?!"

"..."

Except for Samsa, the rest of Team Four showed no reaction to their allies' curses.

They had already been bought out by Ju Guk-seon beforehand and agreed to cooperate with his betrayal.

"Block them! If they break through, we're finished!"

Team Five's leader, Jong Hoe, led the remaining members in a desperate attempt to fill the void left by Team Four.

Thus, chaos erupted across the field, teams entangled everywhere, and Baek Sang-ah clenched her fists, realizing that further commands were now useless.

With Team Four gone, if things continued like this, they'd lose!

Her eyes were locked onto the now-chaotic battlefield, unable to look away.

And because of that, her narrowed focus kept her from noticing—

That someone was approaching, hiding a murderous intent, aiming straight for her neck.

'Too easy.'

Dokjeol, Team Leader of Team Six, activated the Vanishing Mark Stealth Technique right after ordering his team into the fray.

Using Vanishing Mark Stealth Technique in broad daylight would normally make him visible from outside, but the important part was to deceive the eyes of those fighting right in front of him.

'I'm going in.'

Dokjeol had only one goal.

To slice Baek Sang-ah's neck.

Here, no matter what stealth technique one used, it could all be excused under the name of "strategy"—until the blade actually struck the neck.

'It's the worst possible timing for an assassination, but it can't be helped. I'm a tool, after all.'

Thanks to Team Four's betrayal, a massive hole had been torn open in the enemy formation.

But he didn't even need to force his way through that gap.

In their effort to fill it, an even bigger one had opened elsewhere.

'Die.'

As Dokjeol dashed toward Baek Sang-ah, he pulled out a dagger from within his robes.

It was a hidden weapon laced with Seven Treasures Soul-Chasing Poison, one of the Sichuan Tang Clan's proudest creations.

"Wait, what's that?!"

Only then did the Pavilion Master notice something odd and leapt to his feet.

His sharp eyes had caught the poison laced on the hidden blade.

"Too late," Dokjeol sneered.

His body suddenly accelerated.

Though just a trainee in rank, Dokjeol was originally a top-class assassin.

Once he fully deployed his movement technique, not even an instructor could easily catch him.

"...!"

The moment Baek Sang-ah sensed Dokjeol barreling toward her at terrifying speed, she threw her flag aside without hesitation.

She wasn't dull enough to mistake him for just another trainee.

But even for someone like her, surviving unarmed against a top-class assassin was nearly impossible.

'S-So fast!'

She tried to run, using her own movement technique to the fullest, but it was futile.

As Dokjeol's emotionless face drew within striking distance, Baek Sang-ah's vision turned a blinding white.

'I-I'm going to die...!'

Just as Dokjeol was about to thrust his poisoned dagger into her neck—

"I knew it."

Thwack!

A foot slammed powerfully into Dokjeol's side.