

My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader

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Chapter 41: The Scheme (4)

The moment Team Four pulled out, I knew instinctively.

'That damned bitch went and caused a mess after all!'

Judging by how flustered the members of the Third and Fourth Teams looked, it was clear she had kept them in the dark about her plan.

But now that things had already exploded, there was no point in complaining. That wouldn't solve anything.

'At this rate, we'll lose. But!'

Victory or defeat no longer held any meaning for me.

I immediately retreated slightly from the battlefield to get a grasp of the overall situation.

I needed to determine whether this was merely a distraction or if things were indeed spiraling into the worst-case scenario as I feared.

And sure enough.

A gloomy-looking man on the outskirts of the battlefield caught my eye.

'An assassin!'

The reason I immediately recognized what he was... was simple.

That same distinctive scent that always lingered around Gu Chil whenever he worked—a scent unique to assassins—was wafting from that man!

'He's not just some random thug. He's a properly trained First-rate assassin!'

There was no way someone like Ju Guk-seon could have brought in an assassin of that caliber.

It had to be someone else. Perhaps... that bastard Han Muyeon!

Sswaaaak!

Just as I'd feared, the man suddenly lunged toward Baek Sang-ah at a terrifying speed.

Sensing the assassin's presence, Baek Sang-ah tried to evade him by even throwing away her flag.

But the man's footwork wasn't something she could avoid.

Of course, that didn't mean I couldn't stop him.

The moment I recognized the assassin, my body had already started trailing his path.

Thud!

Just as the assassin's dagger bared its fangs toward Baek Sang-ah—

My kick landed squarely in the bastard's side.

"An assassin!"

Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass wasn't the only one who noticed the intruder.

"Cease! Cease the mock battle immediately!"

"C-Chief Instructor?!"

Several instructors, not yet fully aware of the situation, looked puzzled at the cry of Chief Instructor Lee Gyubo.

However, the quicker instructors, including Jang Deuk-soo, immediately followed his lead.

"Stop the mock battle and retreat!"

"Instructors, protect the trainees!"

"Subdue the assassin! He must be subdued!"

Only after hearing the word "assassin" did the others finally grasp the situation.

Just as the instructors nearby began to charge in—

“Wait.”

It was none other than the Pavilion Master who raised his hand to stop them.

“P-Pavilion Master?!”

“Why...?”

As everyone stared at him wide-eyed—

“Instructors, halt the mock battle and protect the trainees. However—”

However?

“Leave the assassin to Jin Yeomyung.”

“What?!”

“W-What do you mean...?”

The Pavilion Master turned his gaze to Lee Gyubo.

“You had your doubts too, didn’t you?”

Lee Gyubo shrugged.

“You’re talking about that incident, aren’t you?”

Though it wasn’t said outright, there was only one thing that could be referred to as that incident between the two.

“To be honest, I didn’t believe it at first. But as time passed, I slowly started to change my mind.”

It wasn’t just Jang Deuk-soo who had been observing Jin Yeomyung over the past days.

“Isn’t this the perfect opportunity to confirm it?”

A glint of light sparkled in the eyes beneath the Pavilion Master’s mask.

“To see if a true monster has been born in the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

Lee Gyubo let out a sigh.

“If that kid dies, both you and I will be dragged before the Asura King. Likely with just our heads intact.”

Even if the Pavilion Master was an extreme martial master and Lee Gyubo himself had reached peak Master Level...

Before the might of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, that meant absolutely nothing.

“You and I have lived enough to stop fearing death.”

“I still have at least twenty more years in me. I’m not even seventy yet.”

Despite the Pavilion Master’s scolding, Lee Gyubo remained unbothered.

Even so, he didn’t object to the Pavilion Master’s decision.

Because he too was curious.

“If that boy was truly the one who destroyed the Azure Steel Stone Training Room—”

“The balance of the Six Great Demonic Clans would be overturned. That assassin will be a valuable indicator.”

The opponent was clearly beyond the level a trainee could handle.

Upon seeing the terrifying speed of the assassin’s movement technique, there was no other conclusion they could come to.

Which is why they wanted to confirm it.

That blow just now, the one that sent the assassin flying—was it a display of skill or just a coincidence?

“Guhhak!”

The assassin let out a cry as he was flung to the side.

At the same time, the instructors began to rush in, announcing the end of the mock battle.

“The mock battle is over!”

“Everyone, fall back!”

The trainees were confused by the sudden appearance of the instructors but stopped fighting and followed their orders for now.

But—

‘Wait a damn minute...’

Why were the trainees retreating in such a way that they were forming a circle, leaving just me and the assassin inside?

Why weren’t the instructors, who were supposed to subdue the assassin, stepping in and instead simply managing the trainees?

There was only one person capable of orchestrating something like this.

Pavilion Master Jo Jin-sang!

‘Hah... That damn old geezer?’

Wearing a warm smile beneath his mask, he pointed a finger at the assassin.

The message was clear: ‘Let’s see if you can handle that guy.’

I twisted my lips and glared at the Pavilion Master.

‘So he was suspicious of me?’

Showing some of my abilities at this point wasn’t even difficult anymore... but the method of proving it pissed me off.

‘Since you dared to play it this way, you better be ready to pay a steep price.’

At some point, Jang Deuk-soo had moved in front of Baek Sang-ah to protect her.

In other words, all I had to do was deal with the assassin before me—and this would all be over.

“Phew.”

I let out a small sigh, then shifted my gaze to the assassin, who was slowly getting back on his feet and adjusting his stance.

“If I ask who sent you... you won’t tell me, will you?”

“...Obviously not.”

Swik!

The assassin, Dokjeol, held a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other.

“That’s unusual. What kind of martial art is that?”

“Nothing in particular. I just grabbed whatever felt right.”

I’d heard of a martial school far to the east, across the sea, where they used curved blades instead of swords.

Looking at his stance, though, it was clear this wasn’t some formal martial art. It wasn’t a traditional starter form of any kind.

It was just that... I could sense the fierce resolve of a man who would plunge a blade into someone, even if it meant dying in the process.

‘It’s been a while... this cold and heavy sensation.’

In my previous life—not as Jin Yeomyung but under another name—fighting against killing machines like this one had been routine.

‘Tch. No way this guy can be compared to those monsters.’

If I struggled with just this one assassin, how the hell was I going to take down the Heaven-Defying Society when they showed up?

I began to channel my Qi into my sword.

Surpassing the level of regular sword energy—so much Qi poured into the blade that its material couldn’t contain it, and it began to leak out.

That leaking energy then took shape, forming a visible aura around the blade—Sword Qi.

“Hah!”

“S-Sword Qi!”

Many people gasped in shock.

Releasing sword qi at the Post-Heaven Level meant that person stood at the absolute forefront of all Post-Heaven martial artists.

“I knew it...”

But only Ma Jinseong bit his lip, as if he had expected this all along.

“So the rumor... was true?”

“That he beat Ma Cheolsoo from that brothel...”

Even among the instructors, murmurs of unrest began to spread.

Of course, even among sword qi users, the quality of one’s Sword Qi varied greatly.

And what they saw in Jin Yeomyung’s blade... was far beyond the threshold of an average First-rate martial artist.

“I was considered a genius even within the Demon Dragon Hall, but I only reached that level when I was near forty.”

Lee Gyubo let out a deep sigh.

“Who at that age could possibly release such a refined Sword Qi?”

At that, the Pavilion Master replied calmly.

“There’s one.”

“Who would that be?”

“Young Cult Leader.”

“...!”

Lee Gyubo was stunned.

“The Young Cult Leader has reached that level?”

The Pavilion Master gave a slight nod.

“I only saw it once, but yes.”

“Well, damn.”

Lee Gyubo repeatedly stroked his long beard, laughing in disbelief.

“Come to think of it, wasn’t that kid in contact with the Young Cult Leader?”

“He was.”

“I heard most of the other Six Great Clans were eliminated. If those two continue, they might end up as the strongest couple in history.”

“Perhaps...”

The Pavilion Master’s tone in response was oddly subtle.

The moment I drew my sword qi, the assassin’s eyes revealed a flicker of surprise.

Even if he’d taken a hit due to a sneak attack, he clearly hadn’t expected my level to be this high.

Still, the bastard was experienced. His moment of confusion didn’t last long.

Tsssss...

Before I knew it, a green aura of sword qi had begun to rise from his own blade.

“As expected.”

He smelled similar to Gu Chil. There was no way a guy like that wouldn’t know how to handle sword qi.

‘He doesn’t have sword qi on the dagger, but the surface is glistening... He pulled it out only when going after Baek Sang-ah, so... it must be poisoned.’

And not just regular poison. Most likely, a deadly one.

Paht!

Both the assassin and I kicked off the ground at the same time.

‘I have to be perfect.’

That’s true for most fights, but especially when fighting an assassin.

Even the slightest lapse, and the bastard would slip through and bury a blade in my body.

Even if I had to sacrifice an arm... even if my heart or throat got pierced—

‘Here he comes!’

His sword thrust directly at my heart.

Just like a true assassin, the strike was fast and clean, devoid of any unnecessary motion or trickery.

'I won't play into your game.'

Whether I dodged, blocked, or deflected—

No matter what I did, he would use that moment to go for me with the dagger in his left hand.

There was only one ideal move in this situation.

Overwhelm him.

Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword – Sixth Form – Boundless Realm Demon.

The sword form that had once destroyed the Azure Steel Stone Training Room—this time, unleashed not with qi projection, but with raw sword qi.

From the swing of my blade erupted a burst of jet-black, razor-sharp sword energy.

“Urgh!”

The assassin groaned as he was confronted head-on by this relentless, slicing offensive.

But he didn't give up.

As if to prove he too was a sword qi user, he fiercely parried the oncoming wave and charged in again, trying to pierce my neck.

However—

Kwaang!

“Guh-haaagh!”

When it came to direct confrontation, there was no contest between us.

With his greatest advantage—stealth—now gone, there was no way I'd lose in a swordfight.

“I have one question.”

As the assassin was sent flying,

I recalled something Gu Chil had once told me and asked him,

“Why are you still fighting?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Someone once told me this: if a First-rate assassin fails to kill their target and ends up in a situation like this, what do they do?”

“-Huhhh? That guy’s First-rate? Are you kidding me? Isn’t he just the dumbest bastard in all the land? Why isn’t he just biting down on poison and dying already?”

“-If something like that really happened? Then yeah, either he should just kill himself, or run for his life no matter what. Huh? But if he’s still insisting on a head-on fight?”

“-Tch! That obviously means he’s got something else in mind. Like maybe he’s planning to blow himself up with a bomb strapped to his body, or sacrifice his life to aim for an opening. And if not that...”

“There must be another comrade in hiding.”

Flinch!

“It’s not just one guy targeting her, is it?”

Paht!

As soon as those words left my mouth, someone suddenly leaped out from among the confused crowd of trainees.

And that someone charged straight toward Baek Sang-ah, who was under the protection of the instructors—without a moment’s hesitation.

“That, that bastard—isn’t that Gwan Sang from the Team Six?!”

That Gwan Sang guy had been subtly sneaking closer to Baek Sang-ah from the very start.

“This crazy bastard dares?!”

The instructors shouted in fury and drew their swords.

But—

Just for a brief moment.

The man called Gwan Sang seized that opening and succeeded in closing the distance right up to Baek Sang-ah.

However—

Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

Second Form — Ascending Demon Flame

If the first form, Heavenly River Flowing Blade, was an illusionary sword form blending false and true strikes, then this second form was a single, straight, righteous blow.

Thud!

The moment the bastard pulled a poisoned blade from inside his robe, the jet-black flame-like sword qi I unleashed pierced straight through the back of his hand.

Chapter 42: Traces of the Flame Sword (1)

"Keugh!"

The moment the back of the assassin's hand was pierced by the black flame's sword qi, his body staggered violently.

Still, the bastard desperately tried to push forward toward Baek Sang-ah without falling.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

But he was instantly subdued by the instructors who rushed in. He couldn't even twitch a finger.

"Restrain the entire Team Six! There could be others!"

"W-Wait! I'm not involved!"

"Instructor! Sir!"

The first assassin turned out to be the squad leader of the Team Six. The next assassin was one of its members.

Naturally, suspicion fell on the entire Team Six.

"Was there another one!?"

Lee Gyubo, who had been observing the situation from outside, widened his eyes.

"Just who is that girl, anyway? Pavilion Master! Do you happen to know something about this?"

The Pavilion Master, who should have been the quickest to respond to this crisis, seemed unable to take his eyes off something.

"Pavilion Master?"

"That, that is..."

The Pavilion Master, who had been flapping his mouth like a goldfish, finally managed to speak as he glared at Jin Yeomyung.

"Holy... flame?"

"It seems your last resort has failed."

Risking his life to draw everyone's attention, only for his comrade to use that opening to strike.

If I hadn't been prepared in advance to stop it, it might have actually worked.

"So what will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm asking if you're going to surrender. If you quietly confess everything, I might just spare your life."

At that, the assassin's eyes briefly flickered with interest.

But of course, that didn't mean he'd be easily persuaded.

Whether by his own will—or by someone else's.

Gurgle.

Before he could say anything, dark blood began to spill from his lips.

'As expected...'

While an assassin's primary value lay in killing the target, the second was the absolute rule: never leave behind any information.

That's why they were trained with various poisons, mind-control techniques, and brainwashing through isolation.

If it seemed like the assassin might give up or hesitate, they would take their own life immediately.

That was how the Demonic Ghost Assassination Unit, once hailed as the strongest assassin force in the Cult, managed their operatives.

Drip.

His strength left him, and the blade slipped from his grasp as he dropped to his knees.

This wasn't a trick.

I could see the life fading from his eyes in real time.

He barely managed to lift his head and meet my gaze.

Then slowly, he opened his mouth.

"My name is Dokjeol (毒絶, Poison Severance)."

"I'll remember it."

With those final words, Dokjeol's neck twisted completely.

'An assassin who wanted to leave behind his name.'

Most assassins were disposable tools.

The majority didn't even have names to begin with, so pride was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Yet for him to reveal his name at the end—

It meant he believed his affiliation was worthy of pride.

'Was he really from the Demonic Ghost Assassination Unit?'

The fact that an assassin could wield sword qi, and that he used a fearsome movement technique I would've missed had I not been ready...

If the mastermind had entrusted everything to him instead of messing around with people like Ju Guk-seon, the assassination might've succeeded eventually, even if not this time.

'Well, I'll ask Gu Chil about it later.'

In any case, with such a blatant assassination attempt thwarted, if they wanted to stir up more trouble within the Thousand-Day Pass now, they'd have to be ready to flip the entire board.

'But they haven't built up real influence in the Cult yet. That's unlikely.'

A brazen assassination attempt in the middle of an official Thousand-Day Pass event.

Naturally, the mock battle was halted immediately, and all cadets were banned from leaving the dorms.

"Let go! I said, let go! I'm Ju Guk-seon of the Heavenly Justice Ju Clan!"

Ju Guk-seon, who had deliberately lured Team Four away to orchestrate this situation, was quickly restrained by the instructors and dragged off somewhere.

'Depending on what comes out of her mouth, this could change everything... but it's not going to be that easy.'

Of course, Ju Guk-seon was currently only under suspicion. Realistically, she'd likely be released.

The mastermind wouldn't be stupid enough to directly link Ju Guk-seon to the assassins.

"Jin Yeomyung, the Pavilion Master is calling for you."

As the main figure who stopped the assassination, I was immediately summoned by the Pavilion Master under strict escort.

When I entered, the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass greeted me with a beaming smile and outstretched arms.

"Come in, come in. You and the Thousand-Day Pass owe each other a great debt now, don't we?"

"....."

I couldn't look at him kindly.

"So, did you get a good look at my skills?"

Despite my sharp tone, the seasoned Pavilion Master showed no sign of discomfort.

"I saw everything. I'm honored to witness the birth of a new Demonic Dragon with my own eyes, hahaha!"

"Is that so."

Don't tell me you're going to gloss over this without offering me a single reward?

Judging from that smug look, it seemed like he really planned to let it slide.

"Ahem, I didn't call you here for that."

"Isn't it to accept my withdrawal form?"

"What? Now hold on, what are you saying?!"

My gaze turned even more cynical.

"I thought there must be some deeper reason when the Thousand-Day Pass left a cadet in crisis on their own. I was just about to send a letter to my father."

"H-Hahaha! This seems to be a misunderstanding."

Panic began to show on the Pavilion Master's face.

The decision to allow my duel with Dokjeol to proceed was entirely his.

What would happen if this reached my father, Jin Gun-ak?

Even if he did see me as a tool for political power, he wouldn't let this go.

"I called you here for no other reason than to offer you compensation."

...From the Pavilion Master, who continued speaking without even taking a breath, I could tell just how desperate he was.

"I won't deny that I was curious about your skill!"

"Then should I just leave my withdrawal form here?"

"Ahem! You should at least hear me out to the end! Wasn't your objective always the Main Flow?"

Thud.

The hand that had been about to toss the withdrawal form I had hidden in my robe finally stopped.

The moment I finally showed a reaction, the Pavilion Master sighed lightly and continued speaking.

"To be honest, even if the Thousand-Day Pass wanted to compensate you, do you think there's anything here that could satisfy you? Money, martial arts, honor—any of it?"

"Well, that's true."

It might sound arrogant, but the truth was, I didn't belong here from the start.

When someone without anything says that, it's just bravado. But when someone who has it all says it, it becomes the truth.

"That's why, I want to pay you for this incident in a different way."

A different way?

"Come with me. It's better to see it than to hear about it."

We left the Thousand-Day Pass.

There were no escorts.

The fact that no one showed up in my senses told me—whatever the Pavilion Master was about to show me, it wasn't just any ordinary secret.

"You may or may not know, but the Main Flow Thousand-Day Pass was never originally an educational institution."

We had come to a cliff even deeper into the canyon where the Thousand-Day Pass was located.

I stood with the Pavilion Master in a cold, shadowed section of the cliff, where no light reached.

"The Thousand-Day Pass only became a full-time academy around two hundred years ago. Before that, it was more like a gateway—something you had to pass through with your life on the line."

Indeed, calling a place with only a 5% survival rate an educational institution was a bit absurd.

"The original Main Flow Thousand-Day Pass consisted of ten stages of trials. Do you know about the Ten Trials of Arhats at Shaolin?"

I nodded.

"I do. It's the trial where one who passes all of them is recognized as one of Shaolin's elite—an Eighteen Arhat, right?"

A legendary trial facility hidden deep within Songshan, revealed only to those deemed worthy.

"That's right. It's said that even passing just five of the gates is enough to be acknowledged as one of the greatest prodigies under heaven."

At that moment, my surroundings suddenly began to change rapidly.

Srrrk!

A deafening noise, like marble grinding against marble, tore at my ears.

As the scene before me slowly shifted, the Pavilion Master said:

"But something like the Ten Arhat Trials... is nothing compared to the Main Flow Thousand-Day Pass."

'What... is that?'

A mechanism formation. And it's a hallucination-type, too!

This was a massive-scale formation capable of altering the entire mountain.

Once the illusion settled, what appeared before me—

Was a colossal statue of an Asura, seemingly embedded into a mountain whose peak had been carved out.

'Unbelievable!'

I had never heard or seen anything like this within the Heavenly Demon Cult!

'Isn't there supposed to be a massive stone Buddha carved into a cliff beyond Tianzhu in Bamiyan? This looks exactly like that!'

And to think they could craft such an intricate tri-headed, six-armed Asura statue!

"You're surprised, aren't you?"

As if he understood my reaction, the Pavilion Master nodded.

"Only three people in the Thousand-Day Pass know of this: myself, the Vice Pavilion Master, and the Chief Instructor."

"What about in the cult overall?"

"Other than the former Pavilion Master and Vice Pavilion Master, who are now in the Elder Council, only the Cult Leader knows. You could say this is one of the greatest secrets of the Main Cult."

"And why are you revealing that secret to me?"

"Because this is where the true Main Flow Thousand-Day Pass is held."

Beneath the statue was a massive iron gate, easily six jang tall.

When the Pavilion Master placed his hand on it, the iron gate began to open like an automatic door.

Ruuumble!

With a ground-splitting roar, the inside revealed only pitch-black darkness.

"And because I believe you can obtain something from within."

"...?!"

In that instant, the Pavilion Master's energy changed.

The foolish old man who had stood before me until now disappeared—replaced by an absolute master who had reached the peak of martial cultivation.

"The position of Pavilion Master in the Thousand-Day Pass is considered a quiet, minor post in the cult. But that post is reserved only for those who have reached the apex. Do you know why?"

"To protect this secret?"

"That's right. You're quick."

A cold sweat ran down my back.

There was more to this.

Beyond being a ruthless training gateway that grinds people down, there was something unknown to me inside that place.

"I want to ask you a question."

"...Go ahead."

There was no one else around. It wouldn't have been surprising if he tried to kill me to silence me.

"Where did you learn that sword technique?"

"...!"

I hadn't expected the Pavilion Master to ask about my martial arts. It caught me off guard.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just answer me. It's important to me."

Should I tell him honestly?

It wasn't particularly hard to explain, but it felt like a thorn was caught in my throat. I couldn't get the words out.

Barely managing to compose myself, I answered.

"It was a secret manual stored in our clan's Martial Arts Repository. I came across it while rummaging through the records."

"Your clan's repository? That was in the Jin Clan? Not the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan?"

The Pavilion Master showed obvious surprise, as if he hadn't expected it.

"Yes, that's correct. The Chief Administrator was the one who retrieved the manual. If you'd like, I could arrange for you to meet him."

"N-No, that won't be necessary."

The Pavilion Master waved his hand dismissively.

"Fascinating. If they knew, they'd try to burn it no matter what. But the manual has already found its owner..."

"Sorry? What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind. Even for you, it's not something good to know."

"Then why are you so interested in my sword technique?"

"Because I can't help but be."

Finally, the Pavilion Master said something I never could've anticipated.

"That sword technique... was created to kill the Heavenly Demon."

Chapter 43: Traces of the Flame Sword (2)

What did he just say?

"It seems you learned it unknowingly."

I was so dumbfounded I couldn't open my mouth.

I had learned it because my master recommended it and it had decent power, but I never imagined such a grandiose description would be attached to the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

"The Heavenly Record Sword. Isn't that the true identity of the sword art you've been practicing?"

".....!"

"Judging by your eyes, I hit the mark."

The name had been shortened, but the meaning remained the same.

"But... why is that sword art meant to kill the Heavenly Demon? No, before that... why do you even know about it, Pavilion Master?"

This part needed to be made clear.

The Heavenly Demon was the god of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

If the sword art I had learned was meant to kill such a being, then learning it in itself was a major issue.

"Hmm, before I explain that, I suppose I should begin with the history of our cult."

The Pavilion Master cleared his throat lightly and began to speak.

“In truth, the Six Great Demonic Clans, known as the Six Great Demons, were nearly seven clans. Did you know that?”

“You must be referring to the Heaven-Defying Clan.”

Not many knew of it now.

Even those who did tended to keep it quiet, but among those in the know, it was a kind of open secret.

“Indeed. The Heaven-Defying Clan—it refers to the clan founded by Nameless, the first Heavenly Demon’s top disciple and a candidate to be the next Cult Leader.”

Although the Cheon Clan had been passing down the Cult Leader’s position for generations now, the early days of the Heavenly Demon Cult were quite different, before the laws were fully established.

Now, not even the name remained, completely erased from history—Nameless, the top disciple of the first Heavenly Demon.

“The Heavenly Record Sword was practiced by Nameless and his bloodline.”

“His bloodline...”

My expression subtly shifted.

Sure, nowadays the cult was centered around bloodlines, but was that also the case back then?

“Yes, you’re catching on. Now, you might say, ‘What’s the big deal?’ But back then, Nameless had unilaterally passed on the swordsmanship of the Heavenly Demon to his blood relatives.”

Back then, the concept of the Six Clans probably didn’t even exist, and it would have naturally been a traditional master-disciple relationship, like in other sects.

But that’s just speculation—no accurate records from a thousand years ago remained.

It was only known that some issue had arisen, causing Nameless to rebel against the Heavenly Demon.

As a result, Nameless and his entire clan were wiped out, and their existence erased from the records.

And there was only speculation that Nameless had something to do with the eventual birth of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

“The Heavenly Record Sword was originally created as a counter-sword technique, based on the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art of the Heavenly Demon.”

I blinked.

“A counter-sword technique?”

If that was true, then the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword was created specifically to counter the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

“Well, to be precise, it’s only assumed to be a counter technique. I’ve never seen it directly. That’s just how it’s known, and that’s how I’ve come to understand it.”

The Pavilion Master continued.

“Since then, for hundreds of years, the Heavenly Record Sword hasn’t surfaced.”

“Which means it did appear hundreds of years ago, then.”

The first Heavenly Demon appeared during the late Western Jin Dynasty—that was more than a thousand years ago.

If what he said was true, then the Heavenly Record Sword, created a millennium ago, had surfaced at least once more since then.

“That’s right. When the Second Heavenly Demon rose to power, someone claiming to be a descendant of Nameless appeared and challenged the Heavenly Demon.”

“And the result?”

“Of course, the Second Heavenly Demon won.”

Naturally, if Nameless’s descendant had won, the authority of the Heavenly Demon would’ve been destroyed.

“However, I’ve heard that the Heavenly Demon was so severely wounded in that battle that it took years of recuperation to recover.”

Hoo?

Seems like Master wasn’t lying about that part after all.

He did say the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword wasn’t inferior even to the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

Still, I never thought its value had been proven by going head-to-head against none other than the Heavenly Demon himself.

‘Damn it, one more reason to track down that bastard of a Master.’

Just what was his identity?

Why had he passed down a sword art with such a hidden history to me of all people?

There were too many questions I needed to ask.

“After the Heavenly Demon defeated Nameless’s descendant, the secret manual of the Heavenly Record Sword came into his possession. The fact that it’s a counter-sword was revealed when the Heavenly Demon confided it to his most trusted subordinates.”

That manual might very well be the one I had ordered the chief to retrieve from the Martial Arts Repository.

The condition of that manual had been unusually worn out when I first saw it.

I clicked my tongue slightly.

“Then... does that mean I’ve learned a forbidden technique?”

“It is, but it isn’t.”

What kind of nonsense was that?

Seeing my scrunched-up expression, the Pavilion Master chuckled lightly.

“Though the Heavenly Record Sword is technically a traitor’s sword art, its roots lie in the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art, which was created by the Heavenly Demon himself. Since the technique was originally invented by the Heavenly Demon, it wasn’t forbidden for his disciples or their descendants to learn it.”

So, while it was forbidden to regular cult members, it wasn’t prohibited for me, a direct descendant of one of the Six Clans?

“That’s why the then-patriarch of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan paid a great price to obtain the manual from the Second Heavenly Demon. But after that, the Heavenly Record Sword was never seen in the world again.”

And over the course of centuries, that manual must have somehow passed through certain incidents and ended up in the Jin Clan, huh?

A piece of hidden history, unknown even to me, a direct descendant of one of the Six Clans.

“Thank you for the old history lecture.”

Satisfying my curiosity was all well and good, but—

“So then, why did you bring me here?”

“You’re quite impatient.”

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass raised a thumb and pointed deeper into the cave.

“Follow me. I’ll explain on the way.”

In that moment, I was conflicted.

So it wasn’t a forbidden technique, and the possibility of a massacre to erase all traces had been ruled out.

‘But still, it feels too suspicious to just follow him blindly.’

Even if he was the Pavilion Master, the fact that he knew such an old secret and spilled it all so freely—it was definitely suspicious.

Especially if this was a step right before a clean-up operation.

“You’re quite the cautious one.”

I swallowed hard.

“Of course. If you decided to do something to me, I wouldn’t even be able to resist.”

“A Master Level martial artist being this scared—what a sight.”

So he noticed?

I must’ve been completely seen through during the fight against Dokjeol.

“Like a child showing off tricks before a top-tier expert.”

A super expert ranked within the top twenty of the cult.

If he decided to kill or subdue me, it’d be easy work.

“Hmph. Then, shall I show you something to cure that suspicious mind of yours?”

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass shrugged and dropped a shocking truth.

“My real name is Cheon Jin-sang.”

“...What?”

“Even your father doesn’t know this. Apart from the Cult Leader, not more than five people in the Cheon Clan are aware of it.”

That one line silenced all doubts in an instant.

“Why would a member of the Cheon Clan go so far as to change even his surname?”

“Every person, every family has their own circumstances. You’ll come to understand.”

I nodded slowly, as if I understood what he meant.

“So the mask wasn’t just for show, huh.”

“.....”

The Pavilion Master’s mouth twitched slightly for a moment—but that had to be my imagination, right?

Still, I was seriously shocked.

Who would’ve thought he was someone from the Cheon Clan?

Whether he was from the main bloodline or a branch didn’t matter. A Master Level martial artist was regarded as the pinnacle of power in any family.

That held true for both the Cheon Clan and the Six Great Demonic Clans.

‘He wasn’t a dragon rising from a ditch—he was born in the sea from the start.’

In any case, it made sense now why he knew of such hidden secrets, being a member of the Cheon Clan.

As I followed the Pavilion Master further in, light began to seep through the darkness.

“Night pearls.”

“We can’t exactly manage a place like this with torches.”

“True enough.”

A place that couldn't be accessed by just anyone naturally had to rely on night pearls.

“This way.”

At some point, the path split.

No—technically, the main passage continued straight, but a small side path branched off to the side.

“If you keep going straight, you’ll reach the main flow of the Thousand-Day Pass. I wouldn’t recommend heading that way unless you’ve developed a hobby for suicide.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Didn’t I mention it before? Even the main flow isn’t the real training facility from the time of the first Heavenly Demon.”

“You did.”

And he’d also said that the real training ground no longer existed.

“But this place is indeed the very spot where the Heavenly Demon trained the Six Great Demons. Well—technically, it would’ve been the Seven Great Demons at that time...”

“.....!”

“And in the deepest part of this cave lie the traces left behind by those seven.”

In that moment, I instinctively understood.

Those traces—must be the “reward” the Pavilion Master meant to hand over to me.

“Of course, most of it is nothing special. It’s been a thousand years. If there were any peerless secret manuals or treasures, they’d have long been taken.”

Wow, he really had a knack for killing the mood.

“But there’s one place—just one. Within this cave lies another Martial Arts Repository, separately sealed.”

“A Martial Arts Repository, you say?”

“One that even I can’t force my way into. Well, technically I can, but it’s obvious I’d be buried alive if I tried—so I’ve never attempted it.”

Putting aside the Pavilion Master’s pride as a Master Level expert—

“You mean you need to have learned the Heavenly Record Sword to enter that repository.”

“Sharp as ever.”

“But... do you even know what’s inside? And are you telling me that for a thousand years, no one’s tried to break into it?”

No one could stand against human effort forever.

Worried about being buried? Then just dig out the whole mountain.

Eliminate the mountain, dig deep enough until the word ‘burial’ doesn’t even apply.

The moment I said that, the Pavilion Master blinked at me in disbelief.

“Did you forget what’s sitting right on top of this place?”

“...Ah.”

Right. There was that massive Asura statue with three heads and six arms.

Even if it served no functional purpose, its sheer presence made it a religious relic.

To dig underground here, you’d have to get rid of that Asura statue first.

“You don’t look it, but you’ve got the brain of a Jin.”

“.....”

I lowered my head in shame.

As if I didn’t know that was just a polite way of calling me a meathead.

“Well, there are other reasons too—but you’ll understand when you see it.”

Following the Pavilion Master, I ventured deep, very deep into the inner cave.

It felt like we’d walked several li by now.

Along the way, we passed through several massive chambers.

According to the Pavilion Master, each one had once been a personal training space for one of the Demonic Lords.

Historians would've lost their minds at the sight of such a place—but that wasn't important right now.

Eventually, we arrived.

“This is the deepest part of this cave.”

A massive iron door greeted me.

From the surface of the door, etched with countless marks, a bone-chilling cold radiated—an unnatural chill that didn't come from being underground, but from the very metal itself.

I couldn't possibly be mistaken.

“M-Millennium Cold Iron?”

“Indeed.”

“A solid slab of it, even?”

Now I understood why the Pavilion Master had talked about being buried alive.

That was something not even a Master Level expert could break through.

Well, maybe if you hit it endlessly, it'd eventually give—but you'd be buried in rubble long before that.

“Take a good look at the door.”

Following his words, I approached the door carefully.

The Millennium Cold Iron door, etched with countless scars.

Unless you brought Qi Projection... no, even with that, if you wanted to leave marks without damaging the surrounding area, just how high would your level have to be?

“This is...”

After closely observing the door for a while, I was certain.

Without a doubt.

These weren't just random scars left by wielding raw Qi Projection.

As I traced each line, something familiar rose up through my fingertips.

It was unmistakable.

These were the traces of the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword.

Chapter 44: Outing (1)

No doubt about it.

These were the marks of the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword being executed from the First Form all the way to the Tenth Form.

'In-incredible.'

I kept tracing the marks with my hand.

To be honest, I still couldn't quite believe what the Pavilion Master had said.

Granted, the profoundness and complexity were certainly enough to be considered one of the highest-level sword arts even within our cult. But since I hadn't yet reached the true level of mastery, I hadn't fully grasped just how exceptional it was.

But now—seeing the sword path etched onto the Iron Gate with no damage to the surrounding area—it was finally starting to sink into my skin just how astounding it really was.

'Even the head of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan couldn't pull this off, could he?'

Not even the current head of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan, hailed as the greatest demonic swordsman, could do this.

"Do you understand what this mark signifies?"

"If I think about it logically... it would mean that if you recreate this sword path exactly as it's carved here, the door should open."

"Exactly!"

Looking at the sword path carved into the Iron Gate, the conclusion was obvious.

'It must be executed from the First Form to the Tenth without interruption.'

If it were just about recreating the sword path, I might have been able to manage it somehow.

However—

I turned to the Pavilion Master and said,

“Right now, I can’t do it.”

“Hm? Why not?”

There was a hint of confusion on the Pavilion Master’s lips.

“With my current level of skill, I can’t replicate the sword path on this door as it is.”

I took a step back and released my Sword Qi.

Then I performed the First Form, Opening the Heavens with Falling Flowers, and traced it along the sword path etched into the Iron Gate.

Screeee—shhkk!

A sharp blade of sword qi traced the exact trajectory of the sword path.

“Hm!”

A faint light flickered for just a moment along the trail left behind.

It lasted maybe... two seconds?

“Please watch again.”

This time, I pushed out my sword qi with more force. I didn’t need to show Qi Projection, but the sheer amount of internal energy—nearly enough to qualify as a proper sword technique—slammed against the Iron Gate once more.

Again, the path flickered with light.

It lasted just a bit longer than before—maybe 2.5 seconds?

The Pavilion Master now understood what I was trying to say.

“I get it now.”

As he looked at me with disappointment, I gently tapped the Iron Gate.

“To open this door, I’d need to fully unleash the Heavenly Record Sword using Qi Projection. Sword Qi or even a strong sword technique won’t be enough.”

“Hmm!”

Normally, it would take about twenty seconds to execute all ten forms of the sword art.

Which meant that the sword path from the First Form needed to glow for twenty seconds straight.

And yet even with Sword Qi, it had only lasted two seconds. To make it last for twenty, I’d definitely need Qi Projection.

“On top of that, to execute the full sword dance cleanly without damaging the surroundings, I’d truly need to reach the Pinnacle of Demonic Extremity.”

“.....”

“That’s at least decades away.”

“Yes, I see. What a shame.”

The Pavilion Master sighed softly.

I wondered what lay behind that door.

He must’ve had a good idea, which was why he brought me here.

“Pavilion Master.”

“Speak.”

“I’d like you to make me one promise.”

“A promise?”

“You brought me here as part of my reward, didn’t you?”

At that, the Pavilion Master paused slightly.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Then promise me this: when I finally do open this door one day, you’ll grant me and the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan priority access to whatever lies inside.”

“You say that like you already know what’s in there.”

“I don’t. But you wouldn’t have brought me here under the guise of a reward if you didn’t already know there was something valuable inside.”

The Pavilion Master’s expression hardened slightly.

He thought for a moment before finally letting out a sigh.

“I can’t give you everything.”

“Then claim whatever the Cheon Clan must have. But give the rest to the Jin Clan.”

The Pavilion Master let out a hollow chuckle.

“Are you sure you don’t know what’s in there?”

“Yes. I truly don’t.”

“It’s like you’ve got a hundred sly serpents coiled up inside. Very well. I agree.”

I didn’t know what lay behind that door.

But there was one thing I was sure of.

The shame of the Cheon Clan.

Whether it was a secret technique or some treasure, something inside that place had been hidden away by the Cheon Clan—or the former Heavenly Demon Cult—for a reason.

‘Even if I can open it... I must not do it now.’

If I opened that door now, the Pavilion Master might very well try to erase me completely.

I had to be alone, with no one interfering, when I opened it.

‘But what is that?’

Up until now, I had been so focused on the sword path that I hadn’t noticed it.

At the center of the iron door, something like a marble was embedded.

Upon closer inspection, it was about the size of a human head, though because of the massive door, it looked tiny—like a speck.

“That’s a Qi-Absorbing Orb.”

“A Qi-Absorbing Orb?”

I had heard of such things, but this was my first time actually seeing one.

“It absorbs internal energy to activate a specific mechanism. It’s mostly used in high-level mechanical formations.”

“Oh? Then that means...”

If I poured internal energy into it, the door might open?

The Pavilion Master, reading my expression, shook his head.

“Of course we’ve tried everything. But no one has been able to meet the conditions of the Qi-Absorbing Orb.”

He gently brushed his hand against the orb, his expression tinged with regret.

“In this kind of mechanism, it only works when internal energy with a specific attribute is infused.”

“It didn’t work, huh.”

“That’s right. Just so you know, we’ve tried internal energy from all the top clans within the cult, including the Six Great Demonic Clans and the Cheon Clan. Even the current Cult Leader tried. They all failed. We even tried internal energy from the Orthodox Faction.”

There was resignation in the Pavilion Master’s voice.

If someone of that martial level reacted like that, it truly meant he had tried everything possible.

And yet—

Somehow, I felt like I could do it.

‘There must be a reason why Master specifically told me to learn the Heaven-Flying Boundless Divine Art.’

The Heaven-Flying Boundless Divine Art sounded like a Taoist cultivation technique in name, but in truth, it was a demonic art.

Or more precisely, it was a demonic art that followed the principles of Taoism.

‘Shall I try it?’

If infusing my internal energy here actually opened the door, it might turn out to be a disaster... but for some reason, I didn't think that would happen.

'Would they really go through the trouble of engraving the sword path of the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword, and then embed a Qi-Absorbing Orb on top of that?'

There were only two possibilities one could infer from this.

Either it was a trap—or it was another kind of safeguard.

'Just a bit, let's try putting in just a tiny bit.'

If it truly seemed like the door was about to open, I could pull back right away.

With my senses, I'd be able to retrieve my internal energy before any signs of activation actually happened.

I slowly approached the door and reached out toward the Qi-Absorbing Orb.

The Pavilion Master didn't stop me. On the contrary, he looked on with great interest.

Tsutsutsutsu...

Like a gentle stream, pure internal energy flowed from my palm into the Qi-Absorbing Orb.

And then—

At that moment—

—Why?! Why, Master?!—

'Gasp?!'

A man, holding a blood-covered woman in his arms.

Crying tears of blood, he screamed in agony.

—Did I... did I really desire so much? Is it really too much to ask to love one person, to hold the one I love in my arms? Was that such a terrible greed?!—

Ah.

Aah...

A memory from the distant past clawed its way through my mind.

Someone's memory, flowing into me through the Qi-Absorbing Orb.

'A... shrine?'

A colossal shrine stretching toward the heavens.

And at the summit of that shrine, seated in overwhelming presence, was someone referred to as Master.

Not far from that position, a man hurled words that bordered on a curse toward his master.

—I will never, never give up! If it means saving her, I won't forgive you—not even you, Master!—

Below that master stood six figures gazing down at him.

One of them shouted at the man.

Though obscured by sunlight, his massive frame was unmistakable—a towering man with immense bulk.

—Senior Brother Jeon! How dare you speak so recklessly to Master?!—

Someone holding a gigantic blade stepped in to restrain the giant.

—Let him be, Junior Brother Jin. He's already lost his reason if he dares defy Master—no words will reach him now.—

—He's gone mad. He had the right to stand at the very pinnacle, and yet he threw it all away for a single woman.—

—I heard he even took the hands of those people.—

—Then he's no longer a senior brother. He's a traitor.—

.....

Everyone except one threw harsh words at the man named Jeon.

All four who spoke, excluding the one called Jin, looked at Jeon the same way.

With absolute contempt.

Contempt for the man who once led them from above... now fallen in the ugliest way possible.

—Never forget this, Master! The one who betrayed me first was none other than you!—

As the six stood above and Jeon's hatred surged toward them, Master opened his mouth to speak—

“Why are you just standing there blankly?”

“Huh?”

“Did you gain something?”

The Pavilion Master's voice snapped me back to reality.

‘What was that vision just now?’

I blankly recalled what had just happened.

‘A memory... from someone's past?’

Piecing together the current clues—then the man glaring up at the master beneath that shrine could only be...

Mu Myeong?

“You there! Pull yourself together!”

“Urgh!”

Unable to take it anymore, the Pavilion Master grabbed my shoulders and shook me violently.

My head jerked back and forth a few times before I finally snapped out of it.

“Did you discover something unusual?”

I quickly shook my head. I needed a cover story first.

“Ah, n-no. The rate at which my internal energy was being absorbed was just... faster than I expected.”

Wait?

Internal energy?

I had said it as a desperate excuse without thinking, but—

'W-what the hell?!'

Stagger—!

Suddenly, an overwhelming sense of weakness surged through me, and I collapsed on the spot.

"H-Hey!?"

The Pavilion Master quickly grabbed my arm to support me, but I still couldn't get control of my body.

'My... my dantian is completely empty?!'

When your dantian is emptied to that extent, the vessel usually cracks, or your body suffers damage.

But this time, it had been so cleanly drained that it made the situation even more alarming.

"You overdid it. To recklessly infuse internal energy like that without restraint..."

"N-no..."

"Tsk tsk, can you stand?"

Being treated like some amateur who couldn't even manage his own internal energy made anger rise in my chest, but...

"Thank you, Pavilion Master."

It wasn't the time to arouse suspicion. Best not to do anything that would make the Pavilion Master wary of me.

And besides—what I had just seen... I had a feeling that wasn't everything.

'If I pour in more internal energy, I might be able to see the next part.'

The problem was, just to see that short ten-second scene, I'd lost everything in my dantian.

'Unless I reach the level of Extremity, there's no way I can attempt this again.'

At least I'd memorized the path through the formation at the entrance. As long as I could handle that again, I could return to this place.

And just then—

“Independent of the Main Thousand-Day Pass, I will grant you personal access to this place. You may return to challenge it whenever you wish.”

To think he'd grant me unlimited access even before I asked!

'He's desperate.'

Yes—he was dying to steal the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword's mantras from me.

But I wasn't some ordinary civilian, and with the backing of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan, even someone like the Pavilion Master from the Cheon Clan couldn't force me.

Sure, he could risk a conflict with the Jin Clan, but it didn't seem like he was ready to go that far—at least not yet.

“Thank you. Then I'll take it that our debts to each other are settled.”

“Straightforward. I like that.”

The Pavilion Master nodded in satisfaction.

“Hmm, now shall we move on to the next matter?”

“The next matter?”

I thought he might cling desperately to this topic, but thankfully, he didn't.

“I mean the assassin that recently appeared.”

Chapter 45: Outing (2)

“In truth, the Thousand-Day Pass is the perfect environment for assassinations due to its closed nature and rigorous training regime.”

In fact, over the centuries, countless assassination incidents had taken place there.

Confirmed assassinations alone numbered in the dozens, and even if you only counted suspicious circumstances, the number easily surpassed hundreds.

“However, this is the first time an assassin has appeared so brazenly during one of the Thousand-Day Pass' official events.”

Usually, poisonings or disguised accidents were the norm, but this incident was clearly of a different nature.

“No matter how urgent the matter is, no one would act this openly. There's only one reason someone would.”

“When someone enters the Thousand-Day Pass while hiding their identity.”

“Yes, exactly.”

The Pavilion Master let out a low sigh.

“But even with such an overt incident, the only ones capable of covering it up are the Six Great Demonic Clans.”

“Are you saying you believe one of the Six Clans is behind this?”

“At the very least, in the end.”

Internally, I believed that he was likely correct.

“In the worst-case scenario, there could be a conflict between the Six Clans and the Cheon Clan.”

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass stared at me.

There was no way he didn't know that this incident occurred while I, the eldest son of the Jin Clan, was present.

“Well, even though I said that, the possibility is low. The Six Clans and the Cheon Clan have stayed within their lines until now. They both know well that division only leads to destruction.”

‘Is that really so?’

Knowing the future, I couldn't agree with the Pavilion Master so easily.

Twenty years from now, the Heavenly Demon Cult—

The downfall of the Heartless Demonic Empress, Cheon Yura's reign, wasn't just due to outside forces. Some of the Six Clans had clearly betrayed her.

It was likely because of their betrayal that even the Guardian Court had turned without hesitation.

“That’s why I feel both pleased and slightly troubled that you stopped the assassination this time.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I only realized it late... but it turns out even the Cult Leader didn’t trust me, the Pavilion Master.”

There was a subtle disappointment toward the Cult Leader in his tone.

At that moment, a familiar girl’s voice rang out from the distance.

“D-Deputy Commander!”

‘Huh?’

A young girl with long hair tied in twin braids.

It was Baek Sang-ah, the one who had just been the target of an assassination attempt.

Only the Pavilion Master and I were supposed to know about this location—yet an ‘outsider’ had shown up?

‘She didn’t come alone.’

I sensed several hidden presences around her.

They were clearly the secret martial agents of the Thousand-Day Pass who had been monitoring the officials until recently.

“Hmm, originally, even you shouldn’t be allowed to know the full details, but the Cult Leader gave special permission. She instructed me to reveal the girl’s identity to you.”

I nodded and replied.

“She’s the granddaughter of the Murim Alliance Leader, isn’t she?”

“Yes, the granddaughter of the Murim Alliance—what?!”

This time, the Pavilion Master genuinely looked shocked, snapping his head toward me with a glare.

“H-How did you know that?!”

“I was just speculating vaguely, but your reaction confirms it.”

“Even if it were a guess, it’s an absurd one! How did you figure it out? Did the Asura King tip you off? No, even if it’s the Asura King, that’s—!”

“My father doesn’t know about this incident. I merely guessed after seeing her use the martial arts of Namcheon.”

I locked eyes with the Pavilion Master.

“The Namcheon Baek Clan doesn’t have a particularly hostile relationship with our Cult.”

“Heh... hehehe...”

Even though the current head of the Namcheon Baek Clan served as the Murim Alliance Leader, their domain was far off in the southeastern part of the Central Plains.

With enemies everywhere around them, there was no benefit in openly clashing with our Cult, the ruler of the northwest.

Still, I had no idea their ties were close enough to send a granddaughter this far.

“It’s good to see you again, Deputy Comm— I mean, Young Master Jin Yeomyung.”

As she approached, she clasped her sleeves and bowed respectfully.

“Allow me to formally introduce myself. I’m Baek Sang-ah, daughter of Baek Mun-yak, the current clan head of the Namcheon Baek Clan in Jiangxi Province.”

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

“Hehehe, it’s really nice to see you again like this.”

It had only been a few hours since we parted, but for her, they had been life-or-death hours, so I understood the sentiment.

Only now did I realize why the Pavilion Master had said he was pleased with the outcome of the incident.

‘Since I, the heir of the Jin Clan, stopped an assassination that may have been orchestrated by one of the Six Clans...’

That would exclude the Jin Clan as a suspect and might even prevent further internal strife.

Whether he knew how complex my thoughts had become or not, the Pavilion Master let out a hearty laugh.

“Do you know of the Four Phoenixes of the Central Plains?”

“I’ve heard of them in passing.”

If he were talking about the Six Dragons and Four Phoenixes of my time as Inner Administrator, I could name them all, but...

The current generation’s so-called “promising heirs” of the orthodox faction weren’t of much concern to me. I didn’t bother to remember who was who.

“Southern Lotus Sword Flower, Baek Sang-ah. That’s her moniker.”

“Sword... Flower?”

I looked at Baek Sang-ah with a skeptical gaze.

At that moment, her face contorted with indignation.

“Hey! If you keep looking at me like that—as if saying, ‘Her? Seriously?’—even I’ll be hurt, you know?”

“It’s not your appearance that’s the issue...”

I lightly stroked my chin as I looked her up and down.

“It’s just... you seem a bit too young to be one of the Four Phoenixes.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know, I’m eighteen!”

...Really?

That tiny thing was a whole year older than me?

“Hmph! Come to think of it, didn’t you say you were seventeen?”

“That’s... correct.”

“Then say it. Call me ‘noona.’”

“.....”

My lips parted in disbelief.

No matter how high she raised her chin, this clingy little thing didn’t feel like an older sister at all.

'Honestly, Sa Biyeon, who's the same age, feels more like a noona than she does...'

I brought my index and middle fingers together and flicked Baek Sang-ah on the forehead.

Smack!

"Ouch!"

"I save your life, and now you want the whole package too?"

"Tch!"

"No matter how you spin it, you're not a noona. Definitely not."

Maybe it was her way of showing closeness, but if I took it too seriously, I didn't even want to imagine the consequences.

"A-hem! As delightful as youthful chatter is, perhaps it's time we move on to the main topic."

"Ah, understood, Pavilion Master."

Regaining her composure, Baek Sang-ah smoothed her expression and spoke again.

"Thank you for saving my life, Young Master Jin. I don't have anything to offer you at this moment, but I swear on my name and honor that not just I, but the entire Namcheon Clan, will repay this debt."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise and asked again.

"Is it really alright for you to casually invoke the name of Namcheon like that?"

And to a member of the Demonic Cult, no less—one of the Six Great Demonic Clans at that.

"Ahem! Even so, I am the cherished jewel of Namcheon. That should carry some weight."

With one hand on her hip, she proudly puffed out her chest.

...This girl. In the short time I hadn't seen her, had she returned as a complete airhead? Or was I imagining things?

"Well, if you're offering, I'll accept it with gratitude."

“Yes, and on that note...”

Suddenly, I felt an overwhelming sense of unease from Baek Sang-ah.

She stuck out her tongue slightly and smiled.

“Since you’ve helped me this far, could you help me just a little more?”

“Hehe!”

She laughed innocently, looking adorable... or not, damn it!

This girl really came back for the whole package!

“Well, let’s hear it before I refuse.”

“Once you understand the situation, it’ll be hard for you to refuse, Young Master Jin...”

“May I leave now, Pavilion Master?”

“Waaaah! Wait! At least just hear me out!”

Seeing the veins twitching on my forehead, Baek Sang-ah rushed toward me on the verge of tears.

“You’re the only one I can trust in this unfamiliar land!”

“Why on earth would you trust me?!”

“You saved me even though you’d guessed my identity!”

“What the—this girl?!”

That was only because someone was about to get their head cut off right in front of me and I didn’t want nightmares afterward!

‘Well, my real motive was to prevent the butterfly effect of future events...’

The way she clung to me like a flea made my fists itch on instinct.

“Come now, please just be patient and at least listen to her situation.”

Unable to watch any longer, the Pavilion Master stepped in to mediate.

Only after the Pavilion Master spoke did Baek Sang-ah slowly loosen her grip from my waist.

“Sigh... I’m already drained, so let’s keep this moving quickly.”

“Alright, then...”

Ahem!

The Pavilion Master cleared his throat and continued.

“As you already know, she is the granddaughter of the Murim Alliance Leader. And through a certain secret agreement with the Cult Leader, she is currently hiding within our Cult.”

“That much, I’d already surmised.”

“Yes, but the issue is ‘why’ she came to our Cult in the first place.”

What could have happened that would drive her to abandon the vast protection of the Namcheon Baek Clan?

“Grandfather... I mean, the Murim Alliance Leader is currently in a rather difficult position.”

“A difficult position?”

“First off, some elders from the main clan have joined hands with outside forces, and there are movements to oust my father, the current clan head.”

‘Now that I think about it...’

In my time, the head of the Namcheon Baek Clan wasn’t Baek Mun-yak.

If I recalled correctly, the one who succeeded the Sword King as the clan head was—

“Baek Mun-jeol, the Ruthless Sword?”

“Y-Yes! My uncle, Baek Mun-jeol, has gathered the support of the elders and the branch families of Namcheon.”

“But even if outsiders are involved, that alone doesn’t warrant your fleeing. Unless your father has already lost, and the outcome is settled.”

“Well, it depends on the nature of those outsiders...”

Baek Sang-ah dropped a bomb on my head, her expression gloomy.

“There are signs that a faction of the Evil Overlords of Heaven is involved in the main clan’s power struggle.”

“Who did you say?”

“Evil Overlords of Heaven.”

“Could you repeat that?”

“I said Evil Overlords of Heaven. The Warlords of Qinghai Province.”

“So why... them?”

“.....”

Do you know why I was repeating myself like this?

The distance from Seonyeong in Qinghai—where Evil Overlords of Heaven’s main base was located—to Nanchang, where the Namcheon Baek Clan’s main household resided, was over 4,000 li in a straight line.

Even sending a message would take half a year, and it would take at least two weeks of nonstop running for a Master-level expert specialized in lightness techniques to cover the distance from Seonyeong to Nanchang!

More importantly—

“If something were to happen, it would make more sense for the conflict to involve Fortress of the Unorthodox Path, which is also in the south. Why Evil Overlords of Heaven, of all groups?”

“It’s not the main Evil Overlords of Heaven. It’s a ‘faction within’ Evil Overlords of Heaven.”

Twitch.

Only then did I start to grasp what Baek Sang-ah was saying.

“And the further away these outsiders are, the easier it is to cut ties with them if things go south.”

“.....”

'Heaven-Defying Society.'

I didn't yet know what their goal was, but I had guessed that this mysterious organization was hiding within the orthodox, unorthodox, and demonic factions alike.

If they were the ones behind the attempt on Baek Sang-ah's life... it would make sense.

However—

"Even so, there's still something I don't understand."

"Please, go ahead."

Perhaps nervous, she tightly gripped her left arm with her right hand.

I voiced the questions circling in my head.

"First, no matter the situation, there's no compelling reason to seek refuge within our Cult. There are plenty of prestigious sects on good terms with Namcheon, like Bukcheon, for instance."

I extended another finger.

"Second, even if you are Namcheon's cherished jewel, it doesn't explain why an assassin would follow you into our Cult's inner sanctum."

"I can answer both of those in one go."

With a serious expression, Baek Sang-ah pulled a sword from her waist.

Now that I noticed, unlike before, she had two swords hanging at her side.

Shrrk!

She drew the blade slightly to reveal part of the sword's body.

The moment I saw it, I tilted my head.

'Green?'

I'd seen silver or dark-colored blades plenty of times, but this wasn't rust—this was a radiant green glow.

'No, this is the first time I've seen it... but it feels familiar.'

For some reason, I felt a strange sense of déjà vu. Like there was one famously known green-glowing sword I'd heard of before...

Reading my perplexed expression, Baek Sang-ah nodded knowingly and said,

“This is the sacred treasure of the Murim Alliance Leader—the Jade Green Heavenly Net Divine Sword.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?!”

I swore without even meaning to.

Chapter 46: Real Combat (1)

The Jade Green Heavenly Net Divine Sword.

Alongside Shaolin's Jade Green Buddha Palm, it was one of the two most famous green-colored divine weapons.

If that really was the Jade Green Heavenly Net Divine Sword, then it made sense why they were so desperate to kill Baek Sang-ah.

And also...

'No wonder the Sword King was so easily dethroned in my past life after losing that divine object.'

Who would ever follow a Lord who had lost such a sacred item?

Even if people were ultimately more important than sacred weapons, this was an issue of trust before anything else.

'I never imagined something that important would be circulating inside the cult at this point in time!'

Well, even so...

“Why did the Orthodox Alliance Lord entrust that sword to you?”

“As I've already told you, my grandfather is in a dire situation right now.”

“Even so, what kind of Lord would smuggle out a divine weapon to the Demonic Cult?”

Baek Sang-ah let out a self-mocking chuckle and lowered her head.

“Because right now, the Demonic Cult might actually be the better option.”

She continued.

“According to my grandfather, more than half of the Orthodox Alliance has been overtaken by an unknown group. What’s worse is that it’s not just the Orthodox Alliance—this situation stretches across the entire Nine Great Sects.”

“.....!”

“My grandfather believes the root of it lies in the Wudang Sect... and that there is a movement to crown the current Wudang Sect Leader, the Tai Chi Sword Sovereign Gwan Hyun-jin, as the new Alliance Lord.”

In that instant—

My mind felt as though it had gone completely cold.

Sword Supreme Sage Gwan Hyun-jin. Or rather, is he being called the Tai Chi Sword Sovereign currently?

He was set to become the first man in the Orthodox Faction’s history to be hailed as a great hero for eradicating the Demonic Path.

And...

He was the one who had driven his sword into the heart of Heartless Demonic Empress, Cheon Yura.

‘Don’t tell me... him too?’

From the brief conversation I overheard between him and Han Mubaek back then, there hadn’t seemed to be any connection. But I couldn’t conclude anything from just a couple of exchanges.

Especially considering that the ones presumed to be part of the Heaven-Defying Society were backing Gwan Hyun-jin, the suspicion only deepened.

The mere thought of it sent rage surging to the top of my head. My hands and feet trembled.

“Y-Young Master?”

Baek Sang-ah looked at me in alarm.

“Huu!”

Regaining my composure, I shut my eyes and let out a long breath.

“Just one question. Please answer me honestly.”

“P-please go ahead.”

“Is the Southern Sword King simply trying to create a pretext to drag our cult into the Orthodox Faction’s internal power struggles?”

On the surface, this looked like nothing more than a power play between factions of the Orthodox side.

Even if someone in the Namcheon Baek Clan had gone mad and involved Evil Overlords of Heaven, that could be explained away.

“You might be right, Young Master. However...”

Instead of being flustered, Baek Sang-ah calmly met my gaze.

“If this really were just an internal conflict within the Orthodox Faction, as you say, would they go so far as to send assassins after someone like me, hiding deep in the heart of Ten Thousand Mountain?”

At her words, the Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass, who had remained silent until now, slowly nodded his head.

Her argument gained more weight.

“This isn’t merely an Orthodox matter. Forces from the Unorthodox side are involved too. And perhaps even someone from the Heavenly Demon Cult may be tied into this.”

Baek Sang-ah brought the tips of her index fingers and thumbs together to form a triangle.

“And there must be some person, or some force, that connects all three of these factions.”

Even I, who knew the name Heaven-Defying Society, wasn’t fully convinced yet—but Baek Sang-ah’s eyes shone with unwavering certainty.

“We haven’t even grasped the tail, let alone the thread, but they do exist. I’m sure of it.”

The Pavilion Master added his voice.

“I believe one of the Six Great Demonic Clans is among them.”

“.....”

I knew.

I knew exactly who the traitor among the Six was.

But I couldn't say it so easily.

Not only had their betrayal not been confirmed yet, they were still operating in the shadows. If I made a reckless move, it'd only stir up unnecessary panic and potentially invite a devastating backlash upon the cult.

'And thinking that those Six are the whole of it would be a grave mistake. More importantly...'

The question was whether I could trust the Pavilion Master in front of me.

If he turned out to be a double agent for the Heaven-Defying Society, then everything would be over before it even began.

'Even if I wanted to believe in him, I can't let my guard down in a place where mass extermination is a real possibility. Unless I have a solid reason to trust him, I can't share any information with the Pavilion Master.'

If there was one trustworthy element here, it was the fact that the Cult Leader, the Heavenly Demon himself, Cheon Taejong, had trusted the Pavilion Master enough to reveal Baek Sang-ah's existence to him.

'Though honestly, that man too...'

Sure, he was the Heavenly Demon, so he could be trusted to an extent—but the Heavenly Thunder Corps he had established had made a mess of the cult's internal affairs, so I couldn't help but question his judgment.

"If there is a traitor within our cult, there are very few people I'd truly be able to trust."

"And I'm one of them?"

"That's right. As a proud disciple of the Heavenly Demon Cult, I firmly believe you won't turn your back on us in this crisis."

I tilted my head slightly and asked,

"What if I do turn my back?"

"....."

"....."

Apparently not expecting me to say that, both Baek Sang-ah and the Pavilion Master blinked in surprise.

Then, just as a flush of anger rose to the Pavilion Master's face—

“Hahaha, of course I'm joking. If there really is a traitor in our cult, shouldn't we be the first to root them out?”

“R-right.”

Barely managing to calm himself, the Pavilion Master forced a smile.

“But I can tell you for certain—the Clan Leader will not make a move, traitor or not.”

The Pavilion Master's expression hardened.

“Hrmm!”

“Well, if there were irrefutable proof and the traitor's identity among the Six Clans was made public, then he might personally step forward to sever their heads. But otherwise, you'd best abandon any hope of cooperation from the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan.”

I followed up with the critical blow.

“There's no profit in it.”

Jin Gun-ak was filled with ambition to make the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan the strongest of the Six Clans.

If he involved himself in something like this, all he'd gain would be honor—and in reality, it would only deplete his clan's power.

And besides, there was another reason I deliberately mentioned “profit” in front of my father.

‘Give me something in return, too.’

No matter what, I wasn't going to do this for free.

No matter how much people tried to throw around words like justice or righteousness, I was fundamentally Demonic. And the Demonic never followed the path of chivalry.

The Heaven-Defying Society, the bastards who ruined my life and Cheon Yura's, were already on my list to deal with. But this time, the incident involved none other than the granddaughter of the Murim Alliance Lord.

The Pavilion Master of the Thousand-Day Pass asked,

“What is it that you want?”

“What I want, you ask. Is that question coming from you as the Pavilion Master, the Iron-Blooded Demonic Warlord, or as Cheon Jin-sang, a member of the Cheon Clan?”

The Pavilion Master took a moment to chew over those words, then answered without hesitation.

“Both.”

“Both, huh.”

Grin!

“Well then, I want a lot.”

“Y-you?”

“Shall we begin the negotiations?”

“Y-Young Master?”

Even if I was the eldest son of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, all my power and authority stemmed from my father, Jin Gun-ak.

Sure, right now he fully believed in me and supported me unconditionally. But if the situation turned sour, he could cut me off at any moment.

Which meant—

‘I need to stash away a side pocket of my own.’

If it were just the penniless Pavilion Master, there wouldn’t be much to gain.

But the golden daughter of the Namcheon Baek Clan, and Cheon Jin-sang of the Cheon Clan? That was a different story.

There was plenty I could squeeze out of them.

About two hours passed.

With a contract tucked securely in my robes, I nodded in satisfaction.

“That was a good negotiation.”

Before me, an old man and a girl stood gazing blankly up at the sky as if their souls had left their bodies.

“I wasn’t dealing with a merchant, so how did it end up like this...”

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Grandfather.”

You fools. I used to be the Inner Administrator of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

What’s the Inner Administrator, you ask? It’s the one who oversees the cult’s finances—a steward.

Which meant that being the Inner Administrator was the same as being one of the top merchants in all of the Central Plains.

It was a position where a lack of talent in numbers or foresight would bring ruin to the entire cult.

“Ugh! You figured out the full extent of my authority... How in the world did you know?”

Well, there was nothing I could extract right now from Baek Sang-ah, who had come to the cult alone (well, sort of), but Cheon Jin-sang, the Pavilion Master, was different.

The moment I learned of his hidden identity, I could afford to place some trust in him.

And I’d extracted from him everything I could under that identity—down to the very limits of his authority.

Even though he was retired, his influence was still enormous.

Heheheh!

“Well, since I’ve received my fair share, I’ll do my part. I’ll even try to persuade the Clan Leader while I’m at it.”

“The Money Demon... The Money Demon is right here...”

The Pavilion Master, still somewhat dazed, muttered nonsense under his breath.

“So then, what happens now?”

“You say it.”

The Pavilion Master passed the baton to Baek Sang-ah.

Somewhat more collected than the Pavilion Master, Baek Sang-ah stepped in front of me with a sour expression.

“Now that the attempt on my life has failed, I don’t think the Heavenly Demon Cult will see another attempt anytime soon.”

“Of course not. After what happened last time, a storm is bound to sweep through the cult.”

The attempted assassination of the Young Cult Leader at the Hidden Trace Manor. And now the attempted assassination at the Thousand-Day Pass.

Two separate assassination attempts already.

If anything more were to happen, someone would have to be ready to rip everything out by the roots.

“So I plan to leave the cult for a while.”

“Leave the cult?”

“Yes. Once this current Sword Formation training ends, I was scheduled to be dispatched to the Qinghai region anyway, wasn’t I?”

“Wasn’t that only for our cohort?”

She’s in a cohort two levels above us, and she’s already been out on a mission once before.

At my words, Baek Sang-ah turned her gaze toward the Pavilion Master.

He nodded.

“I’m the one in charge, so why not send her twice?”

“As expected of the Pavilion Master!”

I was at a loss for words. I instantly realized what kind of stunt Baek Sang-ah was planning.

Before me stood a woman more insane than anyone else I’d ever met.

No, Cheon Yura was the true madwoman—this one was just plain deranged.

“An assassin did come after me, but we still don’t know who ordered it. And while I’m within the Thousand-Day Pass, no one else will come for me.”

“So you’re saying, you’re going to intentionally act as bait to go fishing for the big catch?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“And you want me to help with that plan?”

“Yes!”

“.....”

For a moment, I wanted to spit out everything I’d just taken from them and run away.

Clap!

Just then, the Pavilion Master gripped my shoulder and grinned.

“No refunds, dear customer.”

“I mean, do you even know what’s going to pop out?”

Even within the cult it was this dangerous—what if we left its walls?

It wouldn’t be strange if the Lord of Evil Overlords of Heaven jumped out himself and shouted, “I’m with the Heaven-Defying Society!”

“The core of this mission is still to flush out the mole hiding within the Thousand-Day Pass. We’re not going after external enemies.”

“A mole inside the Pass, huh.”

“If external forces interfere too much, the cult will provide backup. At the very least, this operation has received approval from the Cult Leader himself.”

If that was true, then there was hope.

The worst-case scenario in an external operation would be if a supreme-level expert suddenly appeared to take Baek Sang-ah, or if one of the Heaven-Defying Society’s armed factions went berserk and attacked.

‘But if the cult can prevent that kind of interference?’

Then this really might be the chance to catch a big one.

“I have... one idea. Will you hear me out?”

“What is it?”

At the Pavilion Master’s question, I took a deep breath.

Knowledge only I possessed.

Information only I knew.

It was time to turn speculation into certainty.

Chapter 47: Flower, Real Battle (2)

A dark shadow spoke someone’s name aloud.

“Second Order.”

“.....”

“Second Order.”

“.....”

“Second Order, the higher-ups are furious. You should stop ignoring me.”

Only after the third call did Second Order, who had been bowing his head, respond.

“I know.”

“Thanks to you, I couldn’t avoid being reprimanded either. It’s been a while since the last time, and I must say, it’s been quite a joy.”

At the shadow’s sarcastic remark, Second Order gritted his teeth.

“More problematic than the failure of the mission is that you recklessly made contact with the daughter of the main family.”

“There’s no chance she’ll speak my name.”

Second Order spoke firmly.

“Because my Soul-Restraining Spirit Technique was flawless.”

“Don’t be so sure, Second Order. Someone might notice the spiritual suppression and try to dispel it.”

“Let them. I never suppressed her to begin with.”

Second Order's Soul-Restraining Spirit Technique wasn't refined enough to dominate someone's will.

It simply drove their thoughts to one extreme direction.

And when that path extended far enough, all other memories would be erased from the mind.

"This incident will be handled as the act of a woman driven mad by jealousy. The identity of the assassin has already been handled as someone from an assassin clan bought off by Ju Guk-seon. The matter won't escalate beyond this."

Given the nature of the Heavenly Demon Cult, it was only natural that many assassin clans thrived in the shadows.

Most of them existed as secret underlings of groups like the Hidden Trace Manor, but Second Order had willingly sacrificed one of them to cover up his mistake.

"Fine, let's say that part is taken care of. But, Second Order..."

There had never been a time when Second Order felt this burdened by the shadow's voice calling his name.

"You can no longer turn away."

His words weighed heavily on Second Order's shoulders.

"You need to produce results."

"....."

"You must recover the Jade Green Heavenly Net Divine Sword. Without it, we can't proceed with the next step. The commotion we stirred up will only die down as time passes."

If things flowed that way, it wouldn't end with just a reprimand.

"You could be discarded."

Flinch!

Second Order's shoulders trembled violently.

For someone who had always been sly in front of the dark shadow, such a reaction showed just how cornered he truly was.

The shadow let out a sigh and said:

“The only relief is that there’s still one last chance.”

“If you’re talking about a chance...?”

“Before I came here, the Pavilion Master gathered all the instructors and announced that the schedule will proceed as originally planned.”

Second Order’s expression brightened immediately.

“You mean—!”

“Yes, the new cohort will head to Qinghai.”

Both had assumed that, given the recent assassination attempt, all remaining activities would be canceled.

“And because of the current instability, some of the senior cohorts will be selected as escorts. You and your subordinate, San Dojeon, are among them.”

“Th-thank you! My deepest thanks, Myeong-oh!”

Although the announcement came from the Pavilion Master, Second Order expressed his gratitude as if it had all been thanks to Myeong-oh’s efforts.

“This truly is your last chance, Second Order. You must kill Sword Flower and retrieve the Lord’s sacred item.”

“I will. I will make it happen.”

“Though we may belong to different factions, you and I are inseparably tied. If you fall, I fall. The Underworld Corps I lead will be deployed to support you.”

“Ah, the Underworld Corps!”

Even though the Underworld Corps leaned toward an assassination role within the organization, they were powerful enough to annihilate most units head-on with pure force.

Excited, Second Order made another proposal.

“If we’re going to do this, let’s be thorough. I’ll ask the Three Orders in Evil Overlords of Heaven for assistance.”

“The Three Orders, you say?”

Myeong-oh's expression shifted subtly with unease.

"They've always longed to act in the main cult rather than Evil Overlords of Heaven. If I offer the proposal, they'll gladly accept."

"But is it really necessary to involve Evil Overlords of Heaven...?"

"If we're doing it, we do it right! If Evil Overlords of Heaven steps in, it solidifies the cause more than anything else."

"Well... that may be true, but..."

Myeong-oh remained clearly displeased.

If they involved Evil Overlords of Heaven, they could pin all blame on that faction.

However, if things went wrong and the situation led to war, the backlash could easily fall on them instead.

And right now, war was the last thing they needed.

Still, Myeong-oh had no authority to stop Second Order.

"Second Order, you absolutely must not make a mistake this time. Now is the time to incite division, not wage war. Do you understand?"

"Hahaha, of course! I'll make sure nothing goes wrong!"

"....."

Myeong-oh found it difficult to believe Second Order's confident declaration.

The collective battle of the new cohort, where a dramatic assassination attempt took place.

As a result, the three teams from Unit Three were removed from the Thousand-Day Pass.

And right after the outcome was announced, it was decided that the remaining trainees would proceed to Qinghai.

"What the hell is the Pavilion thinking?"

"There was an assassination attempt, yet they're going forward with the schedule?"

“At this rate, something really big might happen.”

They weren't afraid of facing unorthodox martial artists in Qinghai.

But getting caught up in the power struggle of the main cult and dying a pointless death was something they wished to avoid at all costs.

“By the way, just who is this Baek Sang-ah woman that she'd attract an assassin like that?”

Naturally, interest in Baek Sang-ah among the trainees surged.

“It's not like there's no Baek family within the cult, but it's not one of the Six Clans. Could any of them really have the power to pull something like this off?”

“Baek Sang-ah... that's the same name as Sword Flower, one of the Four Phoenixes.”

“Wait, Sword Flower is in the Thousand-Day Pass now? Are you kidding me?”

“N-no. I'm just saying the name, that's all.”

Those well-versed in the affairs of the Central Plains began to connect Baek Sang-ah's name to Namcheon Sword Flower.

Naturally, such remarks were thoroughly dismissed.

Coincidentally, though...

“The brat is supposed to be Sword Flower?”

“Pfft! If she's Sword Flower, then my little sister must be the Graceful Moon Goddess.”

“To be called Sword Flower, she'd better grow a bit taller first.”

“Is it really the height that's the issue, though?”

Baek Sang-ah's distinctive physical features played a significant role in silencing the rumors.

...If she had heard them, those comments would have earned a dual-sword impalement straight through the crown of their heads—and still probably be ruled as justified.

While a whirlwind of gossip about Baek Sang-ah swept through the Thousand-Day Pass—

“Huff, huff!”

I was swinging my sword atop the training arena assigned to new trainees.

The reason I chose the spacious arena instead of a private training chamber was simple.

First, the previous chamber I had trashed hadn't been restored yet.

Second, what I was doing now wasn't some advanced swordsmanship training, but just basic physical conditioning.

Around me, Samsa stood gaping in a daze, watching my training.

They'd petitioned the Pavilion Master and had been relocated to my dorm as of yesterday.

"Huff!"

With sweat pouring down like rain over my entire body, I was overcome with a fierce fatigue.

'Seriously, I feel like I'm going to die.'

A thousand downward strikes with heavy iron rings strapped to my arms and legs. Even if the movements weren't wild, the intensity matched the brutal physical training from when I first joined the Thousand-Day Pass.

'At least now I'm not risking my life doing it like back then.'

The Thousand-Day Pass's introductory physical training was nothing short of a living hell.

We didn't have to wear tons of gear back then, but if you fell, you were skewered to death. Where else in the world does that happen?

Even Baek Sang-ah had demanded serious reform on that point during a casual chat with the Pavilion Master, calling it training that killed people.

Of course, the Pavilion Master firmly rejected the idea, saying "Return" with unshakable conviction.

"A-a-amazing, my lord!"

"To wield a sword while wearing those heavy iron weights!"

"You are truly inspiring!"

The moment my training ended, my subordinates rushed over, showering me with flattery.

I replied with a flat expression.

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“Huh?”

“You’re all going to wear them too.”

I pointed with my chin at a wooden box neatly stored in a corner.

“M-my lord?”

“If you claim to be my subordinates, then you’d better be able to keep up with my training. From now on, you’ll wear those iron rings for every single session at the Thousand-Day Pass.”

Their faces instantly turned grim and ashen.

The most composed of them, Baek-sa, spoke on behalf of the other two.

“Um, if I may ask... how much do those iron rings weigh?”

I’d been waiting for that.

“Since your internal energy is pitiful, I made yours lighter than mine.”

“A-ah! I see!”

“They’re only about thirty kilograms each.”

“...How many kilograms did you say?”

“Thirty kilograms.”

Since there are four total—two on arms and two on legs—that makes it one hundred twenty kilograms altogether.

“Put them on. Now.”

“.....”

“Go on.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Like cattle being led to slaughter, Samsa began putting on the iron rings one by one.

“Ugh!”

“T-too heavy!”

“My skin feels like it’s being ripped off!”

As expected, they were now experiencing the same pain I had felt the first time.

This wasn’t some petty vengeance to make them suffer as I had.

This was an act of boundless compassion from a lord who wanted his subordinates to grow alongside him!

“Hold it up. Like that.”

I spoke to Samsa in a deliberately stern tone, as they struggled to stay upright.

“Everything starts with physical strength. Internal energy or whatever—it means nothing if your strength can’t support it.”

If you’ve been eating rare elixirs since you were a kid and cultivated top-tier Qi-gong, then maybe you can skip this.

Or if your talent’s on par with Cheon Yura.

Otherwise, you must absolutely push your physical strength to the limits of your potential.

“Especially since your basic martial arts are trash, muscle training is absolutely essential.”

“Ugh! Y-yes, understood!”

“To survive in the Main Flow, we’ll have to get used to this kind of torture.”

“We’ve already vowed to risk our lives for our lord. Complaining over something like this is disgraceful!”

Watching them bluff with bravado, I couldn’t help but smile.

Still, it was true—they had grit and tenacity from surviving the back alleys.

Jin Sang and Baekgu, who once treated me like a god, had already run away.

But these three... maybe it was time to give them a little hope.

“If the three of you manage to complete this entire training regimen while wearing those weights.”

“If... if we manage it?”

“I’ll go to the Martial Arts Repository of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan and select a martial art suited for each of you.”

“Gasp!”

Their faces lit up immediately.

It wasn’t just any place—it was the Martial Arts Repository of the Jin Clan, one of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Not quite the Heavenly Demon Pavilion’s supreme repository, but surely a place teeming with high-grade martial and divine arts.

“Wooooah!”

“We pledge our loyalty!”

Just as Samsa lit up with burning determination and dived back into training—

“You’re training quite diligently, I see.”

“...Huh?”

I blinked.

A voice that had no business echoing in this space reached my ears.

When I turned my head—

Standing there was a woman with a sharp aura I hadn’t seen in months.

The Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura.

“It’s been a while, Jin Yeomyung.”

Chapter 48: Real Combat (3)

Was it nearly four months since I last saw her?

Though her figure was occasionally illuminated by moonlight and torchlight, it was still hard to make her out with the naked eye.

But even if I couldn't see her clearly, there was something I could still sense.

'Sharp.'

My heightened senses, now more refined after reaching the Master Level, screamed at me.

Told me not to fight her under any circumstances.

'Good grief, just how strong did she become in that time?'

At last, Cheon Yura's entire figure emerged from the darkness.

I stared blankly at her for a moment.

It had only been a few months, yet the youthful appearance I remembered from before had all but disappeared.

Now, she was a refined lady and martial artist. She was no longer the Young Cult Leader Cheon Yura I had known.

'Cult Leader?'

Yes, she now more closely resembled the Heartless Demonic Empress Cheon Yura I had seen for decades in my previous life.

She briefly scanned me from head to toe, then gave a small nod.

"You've grown quite strong."

Coming from her, that was actually a tremendous compliment.

"....."

But still, my lips refused to part, as if glued shut.

While I was still lost in a daze—

"How dare you!"

A voice struck my ears like a blunt weapon.

“I don’t know where you came rolling in from, but this person is none other than the noble Jin Yeomyung of the great Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan!”

Uh, no.

Hold on, guys?

Jeoksa and Heuksa were pointing their fingers at Cheon Yura, sounding all excited!

“Judging from your looks, you’re probably a senior member of the Thousand-Day Pass, huh.”

“Even if you're a senior, you should show proper courtesy before the Young Master of the Jin Clan!”

“Courtesy?”

Cheon Yura tilted her head slightly.

“That’s right, courtesy! And you dare stand so stiffly upright!”

“Hmm, standing upright, huh.....”

A small twist appeared at the corner of Cheon Yura’s lips.

There was only one person in the world whom the Young Cult Leader needed to bow to.

Were these idiots really not aware they were digging their own graves?

And then.

“You crazy bastards!”

Thwack! Whack!

With something close to a scream from the eldest, Baeksa, the bodies of Jeoksa and Heuksa toppled forward.

Thunk!

After giving a solid smack to the back of their heads, Baeksa grabbed both of their skulls and slammed them into the training ground floor.

“Gah!”

“H-Hyung?”

“You damn lunatics... If you're going to flaunt your status, at least know who you're flaunting it to!”

“Oh?”

Apparently, she hadn't expected anyone to recognize her identity, as she looked at Baeksa with a surprised expression.

“I-It's an honor to see you, Young Cult Leader! I'm Baeksa, newly assigned as a subordinate to Jin Yeomyung!”

“Y-Young Cult Leader?!”

“Seriously?!”

Shock contorted the faces of Heuksa and Jeoksa.

Baeksa ignored his stunned younger brothers and kept bowing his head repeatedly.

“Please, I beg you to forgive my younger brothers' rudeness with your generous heart! At times like this, we should be bowing even lower, but it seems they got too carried away in their excitement. I will thoroughly re-educate them so something like this never happens again!”

Baeksa pleaded with heartfelt sincerity. Cheon Yura, who had been quietly watching, turned her gaze to me.

“You took these men in as your subordinates?”

I shrugged.

“They swore to lay down their lives for me. I figured they deserved at least one chance.”

“Well, if even one of them has a working pair of eyes, that's something.”

Only then did Jeoksa and Heuksa realize the gravity of what they had done and pressed their faces to the ground.

“P-Please forgive us!”

“Since I was the one who showed up unannounced, I won't hold your rudeness against you this time.”

“Thank you, Young Cult Leader!”

All three of them bowed deeply with faces full of gratitude. At least they had enough awareness to quickly back off and clear the training ground.

Cheon Yura fixed her gaze directly on me.

“So? You still haven’t properly returned my greeting.”

“That’s true.”

I formed a fist and palm salute and lowered my head slightly toward her.

“It’s been a while, Lady Cheon Yura.”

“Indeed.”

Only then did she give a faint smile.

“No guards—what brings you here alone?”

At my question, Cheon Yura shook her head.

“It’s not that there are no guards. You just couldn’t sense them.”

If even I, with senses honed to the Master Level, couldn’t detect them...

“Grand Protector?”

“Yes. Still as sharp as ever.”

Cheon Yura smiled, seemingly pleased that I had guessed right.

‘She feels so much more composed now.’

Unlike her previously impulsive and prickly demeanor, there was now a calmness to her attitude.

Conversely, her presence was even sharper than before.

Which could only mean one thing—

‘Did she really break through to the Peak Master Level?’

If so, that would make her growth rate one of the fastest in history.

No, wait. That wasn’t the pressing issue right now.

“Then, with guards accompanying you, what brings you here?”

“I heard you’ll be heading to Qinghai soon.”

“So you’ve placed eyes and ears here.”

Of course, the Cheon Clan’s eyes were everywhere, but I hadn’t expected even matters within the Thousand-Day Pass to be reported to her.

“Well, you could become my husband. Wouldn’t it be strange not to take an interest?”

...Huh?

“What did you just say?”

In that moment, I was so shocked that my inner thoughts slipped out aloud.

“Why? You don’t like that I’m interested in you?”

“No, it’s not that, but...”

No matter what, I hadn’t expected Cheon Yura to come straight at me like this.

“I came here to ask you one thing.”

She came all this way just to ask me a question?

“Grand Protector.”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

Ssshhk—

Before I knew it, a middle-aged man with a rugged beard had appeared behind Cheon Yura.

It was the Grand Protector, Crimson-Faced Battle Demon—Wang Cheongeol.

‘As expected of a peak demonic expert. I couldn’t detect him at all when he was hiding intentionally.’

“Pardon me.”

The Grand Protector gave me a slight nod.

Then he promptly created a vast soundproof barrier around me and Cheon Yura.

‘She’s going this far?’

I realized it instantly.

It might just be a single question, but depending on what it was, my relationship with Cheon Yura could completely change.

With that, all sound from around us disappeared.

Inside the silent void, Cheon Yura finally opened her mouth.

“Jin Yeomyung.”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

“I’ll ask you just one thing.”

She repeated that she would ask me one question—Cheon Yura was clearly hesitating over how to phrase her words.

But her hesitation didn’t last long.

“Do you know of a group called the Heaven-Defying Society?”

“.....”

My mind went completely blank for a moment.

“The Heaven-Defying Society, you say?”

“Yes.”

Heaven-Defying Society (반천회). In my past life, it wasn’t them who destroyed the Cult—it was the Orthodox-Demonic Murim Alliance. But the Heaven-Defying Society was believed to be operating not only behind the Alliance, but potentially all across the Central Plains.

‘Why is their name already coming out of Cheon Yura’s mouth?’

It’s too early.

Far, far too early.

‘Wasn’t it supposed to take at least twenty years just to catch their trail?’

If the Young Cult Leader already knew of their existence...

The upper echelon of the Cult? No.

'The Cult Leader already knows about them!'

Unless that was the case, this situation wouldn't make sense.

And so, what I had to say was already decided.

"I don't know them."

"You don't?"

"Just from the name, it sounds like some treasonous faction—but does such an unofficial group exist within the Cult?"

"....."

Cheon Yura stared silently into my eyes.

As if trying to determine whether I was telling the truth.

"You really don't know?"

"Hmm. From the way you ask, it sounds like I should know."

"I see..."

Was that the final blow?

"If that's your answer, then... very well."

Cheon Yura turned her back.

"Pardon the intrusion. I hope your mission in Qinghai ends well."

Her reaction made it clear she was angry.

I let out a sigh internally and called out.

"Young Lady Cheon."

"What is it?"

"Even if such people do exist, they're not the kind of people you need to concern yourself with."

“Why not? I am the Young Cult Leader of the Cult.”

“Precisely because you are.”

Her head turned slightly as she faced away from me.

“The great matters of the Cult are for the Cult Leader and the Elder Council. Lesser matters are the responsibility of us ordinary cultists.”

“...‘Us’?”

“Yes, people like me.”

I placed a hand over my chest and said,

“The Young Cult Leader’s duty is to prepare to inherit the leadership of the Cult. Please devote all your attention to that and that alone.”

“What if I insist on knowing, no matter what?”

If she truly pressed me like that, I would have no choice but to answer.

But—

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“.....”

At those words, she fell silent.

I had braced myself for her to say something like, ‘Who do you think you are?’ or ‘You dare speak like that to me?’

But strangely enough, she didn’t react to that single line.

For a while, an awkward and tense silence hung in the air.

Until she broke it by turning back to face me.

“Very well. If that’s what you say.”

Her tone was similar to before, but noticeably softer.

“I’ll return later. Seems I need some time to sort out my thoughts.”

“Young La—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Cheon Yura's figure vanished into the darkness.

'I thought she would press harder about the Heaven-Defying Society, but... unexpected.'

Given her sharp mind, she had probably guessed that my recent actions were somehow related to the Heaven-Defying Society.

Which must be why she had come—to confirm it.

'Not yet. She must not know yet.'

Not at this time. And not while I still had a say in it.

She was still too early in her journey to face the truth.

'If possible... I hope she becomes a Cult Leader loved by all, unlike in the past life.'

I had planned to pave the path for her early, so she'd never even have to worry about those kinds of people.

Now that I thought about it, perhaps the reason she'd leaned toward becoming closed-off and authoritarian in the past was because she had recognized the threat of such enemies far too early...

"Hmph."

"Ah! You scared me!"

Grand Protector Wang Cheongeol suddenly appeared before me, cutting off my train of thought.

I hurriedly cleared my throat and asked,

"You haven't left, I see. Is there something you need?"

Just as his title "Jeokmyeon" (Crimson-Faced) implied, even in this darkness, the reddish hue radiating from his face was clearly visible.

He was glaring at me with eyes wide open, and the pressure he emitted was no joke.

No, he was even releasing a killing intent.

"I don't know what you two talked about, but I do know one thing—you rejected the Young Cult Leader's goodwill."

“You were eavesdropping?”

“Of course not. A mere servant does not have the right to eavesdrop on their master’s conversation.”

Goooooo—

The killing intent from this peak-level demonic expert wrapped around my entire body in an instant, locking my movements in place.

But even so, I wasn’t weak enough to shrink away just because of some killing intent.

“Do you have something you want to say?”

“Oh?”

He looked genuinely surprised that I was able to withstand his pressure.

“I only have one question to ask.”

The Grand Protector spoke with a quiet yet piercing gaze.

“Why did you lie to her?”

“And what makes you so certain I lied?”

“There are truths one can know just from the circumstances. I’ve been by the Young Cult Leader’s side since she was in diapers. That’s how well I know her changes—I dare say better than anyone else.”

I gave a bitter smile inwardly.

‘A true loyalist, huh.’

Well, he really was. If someone in the Guardian Hall so much as breathed the word betrayal while he was active, they would’ve had their skull crushed on the spot.

“So answer me. Why did you hurt her feelings? Why did you insult her heart?”

“Because it was the better choice for Young Lady Cheon.”

“The better choice?”

“Yes, and... she is not so weak that she would be wounded by something like this, Grand Protector.”

I had watched her for just as long as he had, if not longer.

“You, more than anyone, should not insult her.”

Chapter 49: Nine Moons Blade Hall (1)

“You're telling me... not to insult that person?”

A ferocious demonic energy surged from Wang Cheongeol.

It wasn't just killing intent—it was the clear manifestation of a will to beat me into a bloody pulp.

‘I'm screwed.’

The Crimson-Faced Battle Demon was a supreme master, strong enough to go toe-to-toe with my father, the Asura King.

Even if I summoned my Qi Projection, the gap in ability was so vast that he could shatter it like glass.

But then—

“Kuahahahaha! This is a masterpiece!”

Wang Cheongeol suddenly burst into maniacal laughter.

Dududududu!

'Ugh!'

The shockwaves from just his laugh made the training hall tremble like a minor earthquake.

It reminded me just how monstrous the realm of an Extreme Demon was.

"Your spirit—I like that. You truly are of Jin blood."

"....."

"Yes, blind obedience is loyalty, but staining your hands for the safety of your master—that's loyalty too."

It seemed he had mistaken my words for an expression of loyalty. Still, I was relieved that he was no longer exuding intent to fight.

"I heard you're challenging the Main Flow test of the Thousand-Day Pass?"

By now, it seemed like everyone and their dog knew.

"Yes, I am."

"Make sure to leave a spot open there."

...No way.

“The Young Cult Leader will be joining you. That was her original intent, but things got a bit tangled.”

‘...What the hell!’

“She’ll bring it up again once you return from Qinghai. Just keep that in mind for now.”

Six people were needed to challenge the Main Flow test at the Thousand-Day Pass.

Besides me and the Three Attendants, two spots remained. I never imagined the Young Cult Leader would volunteer herself for one of them.

And with that bombshell, Wang Cheongeol stomped off in the direction Cheon Yura had disappeared to.

“D-Did he leave?”

The Three Attendants, who had been watching from afar, began to creep over once they saw I was alone.

“Lord, are you alright?”

Baeksa cautiously asked while glancing at my expression.

“I’m fine.”

Baeksa, Jeoksa, and Heuksa were all trembling visibly.

Even from a distance, they had been directly affected by Wang Cheongeol’s Qi pulse—and they were only Second-rate Martial Artists at best...

Baeksa, the first to recover, clasped his hands together and dropped to his knees as if in prayer.

“Heavens! I never imagined I’d meet the Young Cult Leader in this lifetime. Ahh!”

“Heavenly Demon Reigns Supreme! Ten Thousand Demons Revere Her!”

Following Baeksa’s lead, Jeoksa and Heuksa recovered their wits and dropped to their knees in reverence.

Well, this was akin to a peasant meeting the emperor. Their reaction wasn’t exactly unreasonable.

I gave a bitter smile and said,

“You’re all going to have to try a lot harder. Just like me.”

“Yes, of course!”

“No, I mean really try harder. This isn’t just empty praise.”

“.....?”

“If it turns out you’re unqualified before the Main Flow test even begins, the Young Cult Leader will personally behead you.”

“.....Excuse me?”

The Three Attendants blinked like they couldn’t comprehend what I’d just said.

I looked at them the way one would gaze at cows about to be led to the slaughterhouse and explained what had just transpired.

I mentioned Cheon Yura would be joining us, with a slight tone of threat mixed in.

But unexpectedly, perhaps because they hadn’t yet experienced her terrifying nature, they didn’t look afraid.

“Th-The Young Cult Leader will be with us?”

“W-What an honor!”

“Ahh, Lord! We’ve made it in life!”

“.....”

No, seriously—honor my ass. You’re really going to die, you idiots.

“Nine Moons Blade Hall is a demonic sect that branched off from Sun and Moon Sect, the predecessor of the Heavenly Demon Cult. It has a long history of nearly a thousand years in the Qinghai region.”

Even during my time as the Inner Administrator, I’d interacted with them a few times.

Unlike the real scum like Evil Refining Sect or the Blood Demon Alliance, Nine Moons Blade Hall had its own philosophy and values.

Unlike the Heavenly Demon Cult, which had completely succumbed to the law of the strong, Nine Moons Blade Hall could be seen as the only sect still walking the proper path of the demonic way.

Of course, despite its long history, their actual power was barely enough to be considered a mid-tier sect in the Central Plains.

“They walk the demonic path properly?”

“That’s right.”

“Then do they practice human sacrifices, mass slaughters, or forbidden martial arts?”

“.....”

I gave Jeoksa, who asked this with an innocent look, a cold glare.

“If they did, the government forces would’ve wiped them out long ago.”

Even with their organized structure, Nine Moons Blade Hall barely had a few hundred combatants.

In the Central Plains, that was enough to earn them mid-tier status and dominate a region, but if the authorities dispatched a force in the thousands, they’d be swept away in an instant.

“Ah, I see.”

“You’re part of the demonic path too. Has our cult ever performed human sacrifices or mass slaughters?”

Honestly, there were always those sneaky bastards dabbling in forbidden martial arts, so I couldn’t exactly deny that one.

“Well, maybe in the past?”

In response to Heuksa’s guess, Baeksa sighed and replied for him.

“In the distant past, such things happened under Sun and Moon Sect, but after the Heavenly Demon Cult was founded, human sacrifice was abolished.”

“Oh?”

“How do you know that?”

Baeksa scratched his neck, looking sheepish.

“Lord Ruju[a] would teach me from time to time. He said it wouldn’t do for someone aiming to be a martial officer of Tower of Demonic Heaven not to know the cult’s history...”

“And what about these two?”

I gestured toward Jeoksa and Heuksa with a nod.

“T-They ran off because they hated basic reading and writing...”

“.....”

Well, if you hate reading, how could you possibly learn history?

Still, as the eldest, you're at least the most decent one.

Perhaps noticing my pointed gaze, Jeoksa and Heuksa averted their eyes, looking sheepish.

“Yes, as you said, our cult prohibits human sacrifices and mass slaughters. Of course, in special situations like the Orthodox-Demonic War, massacres are a different matter altogether, but still.”

I swept my eyes over the Three Attendants as I continued.

“Listen closely. The path of the demonic way, at its core, shares the same underlying principles as the Daoist pursuit of immortality.”

“What?!”

“Is... is that true?”

I nodded.

“Yes. Whether it's Righteous Qi or Demonic Qi, broadly speaking, both are simply energies that make up the world. They're just one of the many methods used to achieve the Dao and attain enlightenment.”

Demonic Immortal.

Just as Daoist sects cultivate in pursuit of becoming transcendent beings, demonic sects train in order to become Demonic Immortals.

Of course, there was no official record of anyone actually becoming a Demonic Immortal yet—but there were those who had come the closest.

Namely, the entities known as the Heavenly Demon —only three of whom had ever emerged in a thousand years of Heavenly Demon Cult history.

“There are two reasons I’m telling you this. First, you need some basic knowledge about Nine Moons Blade Hall before we’re dispatched there. Second...”

I took out three martial arts manuals from inside my robe.

To be exact, it was one manual, but the contents had been copied twice.

“You’re going to learn this demonic art starting now.”

“Gasp! T-That’s...!”

“You’ll need to master a fundamental cultivation technique to later progress into weapon arts smoothly. And to adapt to the Dark Iron Shackles, you’ll need Internal Energy without question.”

Shackles that are simply heavy only harm the body.

True physical training could only be achieved when balanced with internal cultivation.

“Ah, ahh!”

“This... this is what I’ve dreamed of... longed for!”

“An advanced demonic art!”

The Three Attendants couldn’t take their eyes off the manuals I held out.

Their gazes were so intense I thought honey might drip from their eyes.

- Overlord Art

Even the name sounded powerful, didn’t it?

In fact, Overlord Art was among the top-tier demonic arts in our cult, known for its tyrannical energy.

It wasn’t difficult to begin like Black Corpse Demonic Art, nor did it require special yin constitution like certain niche techniques.

It simply reduced the demonic energy aspect and emphasized a domineering quality, compared to standard demonic arts.

“It’s one of the top ten inner arts in the Main Clan’s Martial Arts Repository. If you master it, reaching the realm of the Extreme Demon isn’t just a dream.”

“Wh-what!”

Extreme Demon? Seriously?!

Even Master Level martial artists who could freely wield Sword Aura were beings who stood above the clouds. And now we were talking about surpassing even *them*?

I snapped at the overly excited Three Attendants.

“Calm yourselves.”

“.....!”

I waved the manual in front of them and said coldly,

“Yes, I know it’s enticing. This is leagues above the second-rate garbage inner techniques you’ve learned so far.”

What they’d studied until now were low-grade martial arts that refined impure demonic energy and made them prone to Qi Deviation.

And now, suddenly, they were being handed a high-grade demonic art? What would happen then?

'It'd be like injecting drugs straight into their veins.'

They'd feel euphoric ecstasy, no doubt.

The joy of building internal energy was something no other pleasure could compare to for a martial artist.

Especially for the Three Attendants who had wallowed in the slums until now—they would get completely addicted to the sensation.

"Mindset is everything. Do you know what would happen if you learned this martial art without proper preparation?"

"N-No, sir."

"You'd suffer Qi Deviation within a month and become a cripple."

"W-What?!"

"Why? Don't believe me?"

Whether demonic or righteous, the higher-tier the art, the more complex the Qi circulation paths.

“Especially you two—Heuksa and Jeoksa—you slacked off even in basic reading and writing, so it’s worse for you. Even if someone taught you how to circulate Qi as a true Qi practitioner, you’d still be crippled in no time.”

“W-Why are you so sure?”

“Because you won’t be able to control it. Whether by your own will... or someone else’s.”

It wasn’t a joke when I said it was like drugs.

The effects—and the side effects—were exactly the same.

This manual didn’t just contain instructions for Qi circulation.

It included the mindset needed to operate inner arts, possible side effects, and how to overcome them.

The higher the tier of the art, the more these aspects were emphasized.

“I put the Dark Iron Shackles on you for that very reason. To forcibly suppress your body when it goes wild.”

“Ah...”

“In that sense, our dispatch to Nine Moons Blade Hall is a kind of fortunate opportunity for you.”

Nine Moons Blade Hall was a demonic sect, but leaned closer to the Daoist philosophy.

Which meant that their internal cultivation secrets for controlling demonic energy were as effective as those of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

‘And for me... this could also be an opportunity.’

It wasn’t certain, but I had my suspicions.

In my past life, I had discovered the existence of that thing while exchanging with Nine Moons Blade Hall.

Back then it might’ve been out of reach—but now, it could be of immense help.

“Anyway, Fortress of the Eastern Sea, where Nine Moons Blade Hall is located, isn’t too far from Western Tranquility, the base of Evil Overlords of Heaven. Surprisingly, though, there haven’t been any major clashes.”

In terms of distance, it was just a bit over 60 kilometers.

If Evil Overlords of Heaven sent an elite unit at a leisurely pace, it would take two days, tops.

And yet, Fortress of the Eastern Sea—considered the second city of Qinghai Province—had not fallen under Evil Overlords of Heaven’s control. The reason was simple.

“Because Kunlun Sect is nearby.”

In short, Fortress of the Eastern Sea was under the influence of Kunlun.

No matter how powerful Evil Overlords of Heaven was as a single faction, they couldn’t recklessly mess with Kunlun.

If they did, orthodox factions from nearby Sichuan and Gansu would rise up like angry hornets and swarm Evil Overlords of Heaven.

That said, the Kunlun Sect, holed up in the Kunlun Mountains, didn’t directly interfere with Eastern Sea either.

“Our mission to Nine Moons Blade Hall is more of a diplomatic display. For you, it’ll be valuable training time.”

[a]?

Chapter 50: Nine Moons Blade Hall (2)

“Training complete! Good work, everyone!”

“Wuaaaaah!”

“Finally! Finaaallyyy!”

“.....”

The new trainees let out ecstatic screams. But to call it mere relief at the end of training would be an understatement—they were practically ecstatic.

The instructors, watching the overly enthusiastic reactions, gave bitter smiles inwardly.

‘Well, I can’t blame them. They finally get to escape this place for a while.’

As the instructors observed the trainees, the Pavilion Master shouted in a booming voice.

“Tomorrow, you will be heading to Qinghai Province!”

“Waaahhh!”

“You’ll be divided into two teams and deployed to different locations. Each team will be accompanied by five instructors and ten senior cadets.”

That meant each team would consist of nearly fifty members.

“You will stay in Qinghai for two months, and your grades will be determined by your performance there. So do not let your guard down!”

Even though he mentioned grades, few of the trainees were actually paying attention to what the Pavilion Master was saying.

“Tsk, there’s no schedule from today on, so get some proper rest!”

Clicking his tongue softly, the Pavilion Master left after those parting words.

“Finally, finally!”

“Waaah! No more of this damned physical training!”

“What do you mean training? That was a life-threatening survival camp!”

Even after the group combat training had ended, the physical conditioning for the new trainees had continued without pause.

No—in fact, the group combat sessions felt like short breaks in comparison. Thousand-Day Pass relentlessly pushed the new trainees into a hellish training regime.

And once again—it had to be said—Thousand-Day Pass’s physical training was not just harsh. It was an extreme training where one had to stake their very life.

The intensity of the training itself wasn’t necessarily overwhelming, but the moment one’s mental focus slipped, the consequences became irreversible.

“If it’s Qinghai, it must be either Western Tranquility or Eastern Sea, right?”

“Probably. There’s no reason to send us somewhere totally remote.”

Qinghai was known as a borderland even within the Central Plains.

However, even in Qinghai, there were a few densely populated regions that rivaled central cities.

The largest city, Western Tranquility, and the second-largest, Eastern Sea, were among them.

“If that’s the case, then warm beds and hearty meals await us, right?”

“Of course—cities should be like that!”

“Anyone who interrupts my sleep is going to die!”

The new trainees vowed with eyes full of madness.

No matter how remote the Ten Thousand Mountain Range was, it was all relative.

The core areas of the cult, including the Eight Great Demonic Seals, lacked nothing when compared to the large cities of the Central Plains.

Coming from such places to living in this resource-starved environment of Thousand-Day Pass—how harsh must it have been for them?

While many eagerly anticipated this “business trip”—

“Huff! Huffhh!”

“Forget Qinghai or whatever, let’s just rest already!”

Even among the sweaty and worn trainees, the Three Attendant’s voice boomed through the training ground—while sporting the most bedraggled appearance of all.

Thud!

Though they collapsed under the weight of their 120 kilograms iron shackles, only a soft thump echoed from their fall.

‘Those guys... they actually survived.’

‘How did they manage to survive?’

‘Poor souls...’

Once envied for joining the direct subordinates of Jin Yeomyung, the Young Master of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan, the Three Attendants had become a pitiful sight in just one month.

And it wasn't just the Three Attendants.

"Why... why am I here too..."

Next to them, Baek Sang-ah lay sprawled, on the verge of tears.

Heavy iron shackles, round and solid, were also strapped to her arms and legs.

That was because a certain Jin had suggested that comrades training together should grow stronger together.

Baek Sa gently patted her on the shoulder.

"You're the team leader, remember?"

"But I didn't have to go through this when I was in training!"

Back then, physical training had only been brutal for the first two months after entering the pavilion.

After that, it was back to regular group combat training and then directly into field assignments without additional training.

“There are senior cadets who still quietly endure their training, you know? Especially someone like Senior Han.”

“That’s because that ba— I mean, that guy is just not normal.”

People like San Dojeon, who had recently joined, and Han Muyeon, considered the most talented among the senior cadets, were examples of that.

“And there's the Young Master.”

“He’s an even bigger freak.”

“Ugh!”

The Three Attendants trembled slightly as they recalled their master.

While each of their shackles weighed 30 kilograms, Jin Yeomyung was currently wearing black iron shackles weighing a whopping 90 kilograms—three times more.

“How can he move around like that wearing those? He didn’t seem especially gifted in external martial arts either.”

There was even a story behind that—how he had originally worn the same type of shackles as the Three Attendants but had switched them out, saying they were too light.

“Oh, we were curious about that too, so we asked.”

Said Heuksa, the biggest and most curious among them.

“He said he was born with it.”

“Huh?”

“You know, the Young Master is from the Jin Clan—of all places.”

“Ah.”

Baek Sang-ah finally understood.

The Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.

A family so symbolic of the physical power of the Heavenly Demon Cult that it was often said any large-framed warrior in the Ten Thousand Mountain Range had ties to them.

A clan known to gather the most brutish and headstrong individuals in the cult.

‘Brutish?’

Baek Sang-ah tilted her head slightly.

‘More like a seasoned merchant than anything...’

Especially the way he manipulated both her and the Pavilion Master of Thousand-Day Pass—it felt like dealing with a merchant with over a decade of experience.

‘What kind of person is he, really?’

“Everyone seems tired.”

Just then, as they huddled together chatting, a young man with a kind-looking face approached them.

The number ‘3’ was inscribed on his right chest, indicating he was two cohorts above the newcomers—same as Baek Sang-ah.

“Ah, hello, Senior!”

“We greet Senior Han!”

“Ah, no need to be so formal. Just take it easy.”

Waving his hand gently, the young man offered a benevolent smile.

He was Han Muyeon, currently hailed as the top talent in all of Thousand-Day Pass.

Behind him stood San Dojeon, known as the greatest physical force of Thousand-Day Pass.

Nod.

Nod.

San Dojeon and Baek Sang-ah exchanged silent greetings with their eyes.

“Seeing all my team members gathered like this makes me curious—what were you talking about?”

“Ah, it wasn’t anything big. We were just talking about the Young Master.”

“Young Master? Ah, Junior Jin Yeomyung?”

Baek Sang-ah noticed it.

Just for a moment—one of his eyebrows twitched slightly.

“Yes, Junior Jin Yeomyung. I’ve heard he stands out the most among this cohort.”

“He certainly does.”

“Of course!”

The Three Attendants nodded proudly with satisfied expressions.

“Hahaha, he’s so excellent, I’m worried he might steal all my spotlight. Come to think of it, where is Junior Jin? Didn’t he take part in training? I don’t see him.”

“Ah, the Young Master was summoned by the Pavilion Master as soon as training ended.”

Han Muyeon’s face stiffened as he tried to make light of it.

“The Pavilion Master? Why?”

“No matter how high-ranking the Pavilion Master is, he can’t ignore the presence of the Young Master.”

“Hmm, true.”

Indeed, being from the direct bloodline of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan made that expected.

He himself remembered how much attention Ma Chulsoo had received when he entered the pavilion as a top senior cadet.

But Han Muyeon couldn't ignore the possibility that the matter could also be heading in a different direction.

"A shame. I was hoping to have a conversation with him as team leader."

Clap clap.

He clapped his hands once as he continued.

"If you're ever interested in the Heroic Will Society, just let me know anytime. We're always open to accepting new members."

"Ah."

"Yes, understood, Senior."

"I'll think about it."

Their responses were far more lukewarm than expected, and Han Muyeon's expression twisted slightly.

In truth, the Heroic Will Society, which he led, was a powerful faction.

Even senior cadets far more experienced than Han Muyeon were part of it, and with the backing of an actual Elder, anyone who joined was practically guaranteed a solid post upon completion.

And yet—those insolent eyes!

After that, Han Muyeon kept trying to continue the conversation, but between the Three Attendant's blatant idolization of their master and Baek Sang-ah's sour attitude, he gained nothing.

"H-hmph! Well then, I'll see you all tomorrow."

And so, Han Muyeon departed in a lonely stride.

"Why do you think he came?"

As soon as Han Muyeon disappeared, Baek Sang-ah's eyes turned sharply cold.

"Reconnaissance."

Baek Sa's eyes, along with everyone else's, sharpened as well.

"If he really is behind all this, then the Young Master's presence would have hit him like a sudden natural disaster."

"True enough."

"But... do you think he'd really make a move outside? Isn't that too risky?"

Even if he did act outside, he'd be going with five instructors.

"It's fine. The whole setup was created for that to happen."

Baek Sang-ah muttered darkly.

"The daughter of the Ju Clan has died. If we drag this out any longer, who knows how many more victims there will be?"

Ju Guk-seon had ultimately been assassinated.

Not even at Thousand-Day Pass, but after being transferred to the main headquarters.

She was taken to the underground prison of the main cult, and just a few days later, she left behind a suicide note claiming she had brought disgrace to her clan—and took her own life.

It was ruled a suicide, but no one believed it wasn't effectively an assassination.

Gulp.

At those words, the Three Attendants unconsciously swallowed their spit.

Whether this was a power struggle inside the cult or a conflict with an outside force...

They now realized they were entangled in a battle they could no longer escape.

Bang Manhu, the Pavilion Master of Nine Moons Blade Hall, sighed.

“Ugh! No matter how you look at it, managing fifty people continuously is just too much.”

“Pavilion Master, perhaps it’s time we request the Heavenly Demon Cult to stop sending people.”

At a subordinate’s cautious suggestion, Bang Manhu raised his voice in frustration.

“Do you really think we can do that?! The only reason we’ve been able to hold out here as demonic sect members is because of our connection to the Heavenly Demon Cult!”

“But the branch’s finances are reaching their limit. The tribute we pay to the cult is one thing, but covering food costs for all these fledglings is bleeding us dry.”

“Urgh!”

Bang Manhu's face twisted at his subordinate's words.

"Damn it, if not for those damn Evil Overlords of Heaven bastards..."

A martial sect doesn't survive by just sitting on land.

They had to run businesses—escort agencies, trading companies, inns, pleasure houses, and more—to sustain themselves.

In the case of Nine Moons Blade Hall, they had taken a relatively moderate approach, operating things like fortune-telling parlors and general stores.

But the first problem was that such businesses didn't generate much profit. The second was that lately, competitors were flooding into the area.

"These pests who used to keep quiet are suddenly flooding into Eastern Sea City. Aren't they afraid of the Kunlun Sect?"

Though Eastern Sea City was a mix of various fringe factions and demonic sects like theirs, if one had to pick who the territory belonged to—it was clearly the Kunlun Sect.

Half of Eastern Sea City was occupied by Kunlun's branch families, and disciples from the main sect occasionally made patrols.

Even though the Evil Overlords of Heaven's main base was only about 20 to 30 kilometers away in Western Tranquility, Kunlun had effectively served as the fortress wall that blocked their expansion into Qinghai.

But now, that balance has slowly begun to collapse.

"If we're not going to request a halt in reinforcements, we should be demanding even greater support instead."