

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 111-120

## I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, subdued by Tang Sowol's poison and my acupoint strikes.

We carried them into a nearby inn—run-down, but the room was spacious enough. At least, it seemed that way until—

“He's practically twice the size of a normal person...”

“All Peng Clan members are like this. And they get even bigger as their cultivation deepens.”

“...Even bigger?”

I shook my head as I looked at his hulking frame, which made the room feel cramped even though he was just lying on the floor.

While I dealt with Peng Woojin, Tang Sowol gently laid the much smaller Yeon Gahye on the bed before returning to my side.

Looking at the two of them lying still, only their breathing visible, I began to speak.

“You may not be able to move, but your minds are clear, so just listen. I know it’s hard to believe, but neither I nor Tang Sowol intend to harm you. We don’t want anything from this either.”

“Cheon Hwi, even if you say that, I doubt they’ll believe it. You did poison and drag them here by force.”

“I know. But I still have to say it.”

Tang Sowol fidgeted like someone attempting their first kidnapping. To ease her nerves, I explained further.

“Considering the situation they’re in, they’re probably feeling anxious about what’s coming next. But people naturally pay attention when the topic they’re most concerned about comes up. Right now, they can’t move or argue back—they can only listen and reflect. It’s the perfect opportunity to think deeply.”

“That’s... true, I suppose. But why do you look so smug while explaining all this, Cheon Hwi?”

“Well, now that we’ve cleared that up, let’s move on to the real topic.”

“Cheon Hwi? Hello?”

I let Tang Sowol’s exasperated voice drift in one ear and out the other as I continued.

“As I said earlier, we didn’t do this to harm you. But yes, we did have a purpose. If not, we wouldn’t have gone this far—to protect you.”

“What does it matter if you change your wording now?”

Tang Sowol pouted and poked my side, clearly displeased at being ignored.

Honestly, I wanted to tug on those lips of hers... but I held back. Didn’t want to ruin the mood I worked so hard to build.

Definitely not because I was afraid she'd get back at me.

“There are several minor reasons, but the biggest one is this—I wanted to have a real, honest conversation with no secrets or pretenses. If I had approached you normally, tried to get close the usual way, you two would've kept up your little act of mutual hostility, wouldn't you?”

Even Namgung Jong, who said he was an old friend, didn't know Peng Woojin's secret. Maybe no matter how long we'd known each other, he wouldn't have told me.

“So why is a candid conversation necessary? That's the most important part. You both know, don't you? That the strange elixirs spreading in Hubei Province are from the Demonic Cult. I think it's a serious warning sign.”

I crouched in front of Peng Woojin as I spoke.

“My fiancée and I have already been targeted by the Demonic Cult once. We even fought them. Sure, they haven't caused much visible turmoil in the Central Plains yet, but that doesn't mean they should be underestimated.”

I placed my fingers on Peng Woojin's sealed pressure point. At the same time, Tang Sowol moved to place her hand on Yeon Ga-hye's abdomen.

“Now that we’ve said everything, let’s release you.”

With a brief glance between us, Tang Sowol began extracting the poison from Yeon Ga-hye’s body.

I, too, removed the needle sealing Peng Woojin’s pressure point.

“Ggh! Kill me!”

“I already said I’m not going to...”

He only got his voice back, and that’s the first thing out of his mouth? I couldn’t help but sigh. If I released his movement now, would he just start fighting again?

While I hovered my fingers over his still-sealed vital point, glaring down at him growling like a beast—

A voice came from behind. Flat, mechanical even, but oddly laced with clear embarrassment.

“Peng, that’s enough. Neither of us is hurt. If the Bloodfire Sword Demon had brought this up normally, we would’ve kept pretending not to know. It started off rude, yes, but it’s not completely unreasonable... And he’s not exactly who we expected, either.”

“If Ga-hye says so, then fine.”

“What the—”

Just moments ago, he was yelling “kill me!” like a madman, radiating bloodlust—and now he calmed down in an instant because his lover spoke?

I was dumbfounded—but at the same time, I could understand.

Though reversed in direction, I too had once risked my life for Tang Sowol. The emotion behind it was probably the same.

Once I saw that Yeon Ga-hye’s stiff arm was slowly regaining flexibility after the detoxification, I finally released Peng Woojin’s remaining pressure point.

As soon as his body was free, he rushed straight to Yeon Ga-hye’s side.

“Are you alright? I just had my weapon broken and got pressure pointed. But you were poisoned.”

“Thanks to Miss Tang’s clean detoxification, I’m fine. But... weren’t you also poisoned? Is it really okay to be moving around like this?”

“It wasn’t a deadly poison. It tingles a bit, but I can move.”

“Most people would not call that ‘okay.’”

Eon Ga-hye replied in her usual flat tone, clearly unimpressed.

When she turned to look at us, Tang Sowol took the cue and reached out her hand.

Soon, a thick brown miasma was pulled from Peng Woojin’s body. The pungent-smelling poison was instantly absorbed into Tang Sowol’s palm.

Eon Ga-hye flinched slightly.

“It was strange before too... Instead of giving an antidote, she draws out the poison directly.”

“Poison techniques are my specialty.”

Tang Sowol replied with a relaxed smile... but I knew.

She was a bit flustered right now.

Though she didn't administer a second dose like with Yeon Ga-hye, she hadn't expected Peng Woojin to remain so unaffected by a compound paralytic poison that required two toxins to activate.

Still, it didn't mean her poison was weak—it was just that Peng Woojin's body was absurdly strong.

The Yeon Clan trained their bodies using medicines derived from techniques used to create undead martial beings. When trained properly, their skin and bones became resilient enough to block even sword qi—but it was purely physical reinforcement, resulting in stiffness of movement.

The Peng Clan, however, had naturally gifted physiques—further refined by external martial arts training.

Not only did they have tough skin and hard bones, but their muscles were massively developed, granting great strength and durability. Even internal injuries were rare, and most poisons had little effect.

I'd fought with a collateral line of the Peng Clan before my regression, so I knew. If that side branch was already like that, Peng Woojin, the main line heir, had to be even more remarkable.

That is, assuming he lives long enough.

I gently tapped Tang Sowol's back to comfort her sulky mood, then opened my mouth.

“You've had time to check on each other. Now talk to me too. I've been wondering—why is the conflict between the Peng and Yeon Clans so much more intense than usual lately?”

“It's probably the Demonic Cult. We've suspected it for a while. Me, Ga-hye, and even the elders of both clans.”

“...What?”

I was surprised, not just by how unexpectedly rational and calm Peng Woojin was, but by the fact that they already knew.

“Then why are you still fighting?”

The one who answered wasn't Peng Woojin, but Yeon Ga-hye, leaning against his shoulder.

“It's simple. The elixirs worked better than expected. We pretended to argue, but in reality, we were competing to monopolize the supply. The short distance between Shingang and Hebei... and underestimating the Demonic Cult's power also played a part.”

“Do you know what those elixirs are made of?”

“Humans—at least, that's what the Murim Alliance's intelligence suggests.”

So they weren't disclosing the Ghost Shadow Thief's (Jang Cheok) involvement. Just attributed it to a Murim Alliance informant. Well, Jang Cheok had technically retired.

And considering his plan to stage a flashy funeral, revealing his identity could be a problem.

Still, that wasn't the part that bothered me.

“You make it sound like Hebei's version is different. I heard it was a lower-quality batch.”

As I tilted my head, Peng Woojin continued.

“It is different. According to the Peng Clan's Medicine Hall, it's made from animals, not humans. Still brutal—they're turned into pills alive—but technically, it's no worse than eating meat.”

“Eon Clan's Medicine Hall reached the same conclusion. That's why we're not accusing each other out of real concern—it's about who gets to claim the remaining supply. Though yes, our mutual dislike adds fuel to the fire.”

So even though the Demonic Cult's involvement was exposed, the situation hadn't changed from my previous life.

Actually, it might be worse.

The Demonic Cult must be on high alert now, ready to flip the table if needed. But the Peng and Yeon Clans—knowing full well what’s going on—are still playing into their hands.

I couldn’t help but sigh.

“If it were me, I wouldn’t touch that stuff even if it made me stronger.”

“That’s because you’re an individual, Cheon Hwi. Leading a great clan is different.”

Tang Sowol shook her head with a troubled look. When I gave her a curious glance, she explained with a bashful smile.

“Individuals are limited in how much they can benefit from elixirs. The effect often drops drastically with repeated use, and for those with deep cultivation, minor elixirs aren’t much help. So from a long-term perspective, it’s often better to skip dangerous ones.”

“Right. And you can always make up for lacking inner energy through insight.”

“Who even says stuff like that... Ah.”

Tang Sowol rolled her eyes, then nodded.

“I suppose you could. But it’s something only you could do, Cheon Hwi.”

“Really? I always thought how you use your qi matters more than how much you have.”

Before my regression, I often struggled with a lack of inner energy—but I never lost a fight because of it.

Well... judging by the way even Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye were staring at me like I was an alien, maybe it really was just me.

“Anyway, forget about me. What did you mean when you said it’s different for a clan?”

“To strengthen and maintain a large group, everyone—not just individuals—needs to grow stronger. That’s why family martial arts techniques, even secret ones,

sometimes get partially opened to the public as the clan expands. And for the same reason, elixirs—especially mid- to low-grade ones—are useful in bulk. They help build up the backbone of the clan.”

“I see.”

Even after spending a long time in the Tang Clan, I still had trouble understanding that kind of mindset.

But I suppose this was another lesson.

After nodding once, I turned my gaze back to Peng Woojin.

“I get why the clan wants the elixirs. But you speak like you two think differently. Why’s that?”

“It’s nothing special. Our elders had dealt with the Demonic Cult’s problems in the past. Since nothing serious happened to them, they took it lightly.”

“But the real reason is something else. One day, while Peng and I were secretly sharing information and investigating the Cult behind our families’ backs...”

Eon Ga-hye paused, then scowled—her expression twisting in rare visible anger.

“We received a letter. It said they knew about our relationship, and warned us to stop poking around if we didn’t want our secret revealed to our families. Probably from the Demonic Cult.”

Ah...

I think I finally understood why the two of them died before my regression.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

Before I ever approached Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, a suspicious letter had arrived during their independent investigation into the Demonic Cult.

It was a threat. The sender claimed to know about their relationship and warned that unless they stopped poking into the Demonic Cult, the secret would be exposed.

“Ah...”

Only then did I understand why they had died before my regression.

Of course, it was still just a hypothesis. To be sure, I slowly opened my mouth.

“This may be a strange question, but... what would you do if your families found out about your relationship?”

“I’d try to persuade my father, first.”

“Same here. Though I doubt he’d listen, and I’d probably be confined.”

Eon Ga-hye’s face darkened slightly, and seeing that, Peng Woojin added calmly,

“It’s alright. If it comes to that, I’ll come get you.”

“...What?”

“I feel bad for my father, but I’m lucky to have an excellent younger brother. He may not match me in martial arts, but he’s far more qualified to lead the clan. I’m proud of him.”

“W-Wait, are you saying—”

“Yes. It may sound selfish, but if it comes to it, I’d give up the Peng Clan name and leave. That is, if you’d still be willing to be with me, Ga-hye.”

“Of course! Do you think I love you because you’re from a prestigious family? Absolutely not. Even if you become a wandering rogue, my feelings won’t change. If that happens, I’ll leave with you.”

“Ga-hye...”

“Peng...”

The two clasped hands and gazed into each other’s eyes with deep emotion.

I flinched at the sudden flood of affection, but at the same time, I felt reassured.

They truly loved each other despite their families’ bitter rivalry—no doubt it was painful.

But was that alone a reason to die together? That's what didn't sit right with me.

The Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye I knew were people of strong will. Even now, they were clearly prepared to go their own way rather than succumb to despair.

So then, if they truly died together in my previous life, perhaps it wasn't by their own will.

Maybe they were driven into a corner—or murdered by the Demonic Cult, and their deaths were staged as a double suicide.

Personally, I leaned toward the latter.

Eon Ga-hye might despair. But Peng Woojin? He would more likely charge through the front door.

“This might be more dangerous than I thought.”

“So you think so too, Cheon Hwi? I understand how sincere their feelings are, but thinking ahead... it's not going to be easy.”

“Hmm?”

“Especially since the Yeon Clan has no other successor. Unlike the Peng Clan, Yeon Ga-hye is the only heir. That’s the only reason a woman like her could become acting clan head.”

“That’s not what I meant, but okay.”

“Even if she’s a woman, she’s direct blood, which is more important than being from a side branch. That’s why she was given the role. But if she runs away, I doubt even hiding in Outer Murim would keep her safe... Wait, this wasn’t the point?”

I chuckled at Tang Sowol’s genuine concern for their future and replied,

“They’re not planning to run away now. That’s just a worst-case scenario. They’re simply saying there are things they can’t give up, even if it means bearing the consequences. I’m the same.”

“So... you’re saying that if I caused trouble one day and had to flee the Tang Clan, you’d come with me?”

“Of course. Though just the two of us would be tough... if needed, I would.”

“Hmph. So I’m not enough for you?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Fufu, just teasing. I wouldn’t want to see Cheon Hwi gloomy all day, so when the time comes, I’ll try to drag along Hyang and Hwarin as well.”

That whisper from the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering came to mind. She had said she understood I still had lingering feelings for Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Yet, every time it’s brought up, I can’t help but feel uncomfortable.

Tang Sowol, watching me fidget and roll my eyes, grinned.

“So, what did you mean earlier when you said ‘that’s not what I was talking about’?”

“Oh, I meant their lives might be in danger right now, not in the future.”

“Cheon Hwi? Didn’t you say earlier you wouldn’t hurt them?”

Apparently hearing that, both Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye flinched and looked this way.

“Why does it sound like I’m the bad guy? Even if I had malicious intent and kidnapped you, hostages are more valuable alive.”

“You say that like it’s experience talking...”

Tang Sowol admired me while the two looked... slightly disturbed.

Feeling a bit too much like a villain, I quickly clarified,

“I meant the Demonic Cult might be targeting you.”

“What do you mean ‘targeting’? At most, they'd tell our families. You really think they'd come after the Peng Clan heir?”

Peng Woojin sounded incredulous. I shrugged.

“They already tried to kill the Tang Clan’s precious daughter. Why would the Peng Clan be any different?”

“Huh?”

“No way...?”

The two turned toward Tang Sowol with wide eyes.

With all seriousness, she nodded.

“It’s true. They didn’t try to kill me directly, of course. But they rallied people who hated the Tang Clan and incited them to attack me.”

“The Demonic Cult’s goal hasn’t changed—destruction of the martial world. They want every martial artist dead. But their methods... those are different now.”

In the past, the Demonic Cult had been a band of vengeful ghosts.

No wonder the Peng Clan elders dismissed them as nothing more than savage brutes. That’s exactly what they were.

But once the Heavenly Demon—Cheonma—rose to leadership, everything changed.

Instead of rushing blindly into Central Plains with blades, they plotted. They shifted blame to others and stirred up internal strife.

Before my regression, I never knew this. Only thanks to certain coincidences in this life did I begin to uncover it.

“I’ve been thinking about why they targeted Tang Sowol. The simplest answer is... since the Demonic Cult absorbed the Assassins of Sal Valley, they needed to unify the group. Targeting the Tang Clan, their sworn enemy, would serve that purpose.”

“Wait—did you say Sal Valley joined the Demonic Cult? Not just working for them, but actually part of it?”

“Oh? You hadn’t heard that yet? Well, don’t go spreading it. The informant who brought us that info confirmed it firsthand—barely escaping from Sal Valley with his life.”

“Monsters really do find each other...”

Peng Woojin shook his head.

“That’s not even the shocking part. If they really wanted Tang Sowol dead, they’d have sent their best assassins. Instead, they hired second-rate thugs. Why? Because the goal wasn’t to kill her. It was to provoke a feud between the Tang Clan and the dark sects.”

“Huh? Really, Cheon Hwi?”

“I think so. Imagine if I hadn’t been there. If you had died, or barely escaped the clutches of a back-alley killer, what would’ve happened?”

“My father would’ve been furious.”

“Furious doesn’t cover it. He would’ve reminded the entire martial world why he’s called the Poison King.”

In my past life, Tang Jincheon had razed through the dark sects, reducing anyone remotely involved in the attack to a heap of poison-ravaged corpses.

As a result, the Tang Clan’s relationship with the Black Lotus Sect worsened drastically.

Many died—some of them even Black Lotus officers.

The Tang Clan already had many enemies, but after that, their numbers multiplied. Most of their strength went toward surviving the backlash.

If the Demonic Cult’s goal is to divide the martial world—

Then it makes sense to kill Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye and make it look like suicide.

Staging a fight-to-the-death is harder—you’d need martial traces. But faking a suicide? That’s easy.

Even if the conflict between their families quiets down temporarily, the emotional rift would deepen. And the Demonic Cult walks away clean.

Right now, the Peng and Yeon Clans are at odds—but under the banner of righteousness, they could unite against a common enemy.

But once they lose their heirs, that changes. They failed to unite, and one by one, the Heavenly Demon wiped them out.

Of course, I couldn't say that out loud.

Because that was from a future that hadn't happened yet. Trying to phrase it like a guess only triggered the mental restriction.

My body tensed. My chest tightened. Sensing my discomfort, Tang Sowol gently stroked my back.

“Are you alright, Cheon Hwi?”

“I'm fine. I just lost my train of thought for a moment.”

Once I gave up on finishing my sentence, the restriction eased and my body relaxed.

Tang Sowol smiled warmly at me.

“You care so much... even though this is someone else’s problem. I guess... you were seeing a bit of our story in theirs, weren’t you?”

“Can’t say that’s entirely wrong.”

Both were suffering because of the Demonic Cult. In that, we shared a bond.

And deep down, I wanted to foil the Cult’s plans and maybe help the Peng and Yeon Clans reconcile—so they could one day stand with us against the Heavenly Demon.

With a shrug, I concluded,

“That’s as far as I’ve thought. To sum it up: they’re in more danger than they realize, and if possible, I’d like to help them—and strike back at the Demonic Cult.”

“Ahem. I appreciate the intent.”

“Though I still have plenty of complaints about the method.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye coughed awkwardly. Tang Sowol, on the other hand—

“Ehem.”

Struck a proud pose, hands on her hips, nose in the air.

The sudden warmth of the atmosphere made me avert my eyes.

“Well... it’s not like I have a clear plan. I just know something has to be done.”

So Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye might die at the hands of the Demonic Cult.

But why did the Demonic Cult spread mid- and low-tier elixirs all over Hubei in the first place?

If it was just to start a fight, using elixirs seemed like overkill. One side would clearly grow stronger.

The Demonic Cult may lack martial power, but in terms of mental restrictions and poison-induced pain, they're second to none.

Could they be planning to use the distributed elixirs for something else?

If so, how do we stop it?

The questions piled up with no easy answer.

Just then, Tang Sowol's eyes lit up as if she had a great idea.

“Ah! Cheon Hwi! In the end, what you want is to expose and crush the Demonic Cult's plot, right?”

“In short, yes. But charging in blindly is risky. I don’t even know where to start.”

“There’s a way to solve all of that at once.”

My ears perked up. I leaned in.

“Instead of going home, let’s head to Hubei together—with Hyang and Hwarin.”

“What?”

“If anything happens, Sister Hwarin is a Flowering Stage master. She’ll keep us safe. And Hyang could gain some real-world experience.”

“...!”

“And you don’t have to worry about the investigation either. If the threatening letter was in response to their current path, then that means they’re on the right track. Just keep going.”

“Everything you’re saying makes sense, but... no way your father would approve.”

He already worries every time she leaves. There's no way he'd allow this.

But Tang Sowol tilted her head like she didn't understand.

“Huh? Who said anything about asking permission? You did say we're doing it the same way as last time, right?”

She beamed.

“Let's quietly run away!”

...What the hell kind of suggestion is that?

“Let's do it immediately.”

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

The next morning.

From early on, Tang Sowol called Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin out, asking if they'd like to get some fresh air.

It wasn't as though they had packed anything extravagant, and she even greeted Tang Jincheon like always. A perfectly ordinary day, a perfectly ordinary outing. However—

“Hm? Isn't this a bit too far for a simple outing? This One doesn't mind, since Wuhuan City was so crowded and tiring, but there's nothing but paths and grass around here.”

“Ah, you're right. If we don't head back soon, we'll probably miss breakfast, won't we, Sister Tang? The Clan Head really enjoys having breakfast with you.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head as she looked around, while Seol Lihyang, seeming a bit hungry, rubbed her flat stomach.

Tang Sowol, who had been walking in the lead while chatting casually, suddenly turned around. Without stopping, she began walking backward and said,

“We're heading to Hubei Province from now on.”

“Pardon? Where did you say we're going, Sister Tang??”

“What nonsense is that? Why would Hubei Province come into this?”

“Because we're planning to run away from home.”

As if she were casually mentioning what they'd be having for breakfast, her tone was calm and natural.

Maybe that's why the two blinked, not immediately understanding, only realizing a beat later what she meant.

“R-Run away?! Just like that?!”

“What do you mean, as if it's the most natural thing in the world?! Running away! And you're even taking me with you...?! This will only cause more misunderstandings with the Poison King!”

“But Sister Seorin, that wasn't a misunderstanding. You really did follow us with one foot out the door, sniffing around to see what was happening...”

“That was all because of you two!”

Seol Lihyang teased mid-surprise, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, as always, played along.

As the two bickered briefly, Tang Sowol let out a giggle and continued,

“No need to worry too much. I left a proper letter for Father at the residence.”

“Sister Tang? I just want to clarify that leaving a letter doesn’t mean it’s okay to run away... right??”

“Cheon Hwi! You’re her fiancé—why didn’t you stop her?!”

Seol Lihyang asked with concern, and Seo Mun-Hwarin directed a scolding glare at me.

At this point, there was really only one thing I could say.

“There were valid reasons for all of this.”

“Everyone has their reasons.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin crossed her arms and came to a halt. Her posture clearly conveyed she wouldn't take another step unless we convinced her.

When I glanced at Tang Sowol, she gave a small nod. Only then did I speak.

“Well, we've come this far, so I suppose it's time to explain. It'll be a bit long, so please have this while you listen.”

I pulled out a piece of candy I had prepared in advance. Seo Mun-Hwarin scoffed.

“Ha! Do you think This One would be appeased by something as simple as—munch, munch... huh!?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin instinctively accepted the candy and popped it into her mouth. Her sharp eyes had suddenly softened.

Seol Lihyang, watching from the side with a baffled expression, had a very valid question.

Though she had regained her youth through Rejuvenation, Seo Mun-Hwarin was still around the same age as Tang Jincheon. Was it really possible for someone like her to become this simple with just one candy?

Surprisingly, it was.

Rejuvenation was certainly incredible. It defied natural lifespan, and replaced an aging body that even great martial cultivation couldn't avoid.

But it wasn't a miracle gifted by the heavens—it was a feat achieved through one's own strength and will.

Naturally, it came with side effects.

The biggest of which was how a youthful body could heavily influence one's mind.

Smirking to myself at how things were going according to plan, I suddenly noticed Seol Lihyang narrowing her eyes.

“Hey, Cheon Hwi. Just what are you planning to say that you had to go this far...?”

“Shh.”

Of course, she was quickly silenced by Tang Sowol’s firm hand pressing down on her shoulder.

“Hyang. I get that you’re not thrilled, but Cheon Hwi was just about to explain. We’ll know everything soon enough, right?”

“Y-Yes...”

Softening under Tang Sowol’s presence, Seol Lihyang relaxed. With everyone now ready to listen, Tang Sowol and I exchanged a brief, satisfied glance.

“Let me start from the beginning. When Father-in-law mentioned that the situation in Hubei seemed suspicious, it sparked a thought...”

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“So you had to go because he told you not to?!”

“I was reminded of the time I was attacked under the Demonic Cult’s orders.”

“Kuheum.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin cleared her throat awkwardly and quietly listened, still munching on the candy.

“Well, that’s how it happened.”

“I see. So your plan is to investigate the Demonic Cult in Hubei along with Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye?”

“Yes.”

“That seems too dangerous. Of course, Cheon Hwi, you're beyond what people would call a late-stage first-class warrior, but... even the Demonic Cult has Sub-Perfection masters. It's just that they lack Flowering Stage warriors and are underestimated because of it.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked at me with worried eyes. Her blatant concern softened me a bit, and I shook my head.

“There’s no need to worry. If we’re facing a Sub-Perfection master, I can’t guarantee victory like you said... which is why I brought you along, Senior.”

“So you're saying you’ll rely on This One’s protection if it gets dangerous?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Of course not! You’re free to rely on This One as much as you wish! Still, since there’s risk involved, how about you learn a few more martial arts from the Seo Mun Clan this time?”

“If this is going to end with you saying that since I learned your clan’s secret techniques I must now be considered a member, then I’ll have to refuse.”

When I gave her a suspicious glare, Seo Mun-Hwarin clicked her tongue in disappointment.

“Tch! Then at least learn a few of This One’s Golden Hand Techniques. If you promise that, I’ll gladly help you.”

“Well, in that case...”

As I reluctantly nodded, Seol Lihyang shook her head and asked Tang Sowol,

“Sister Tang. Is it that I just don’t understand Murim very well yet? Or is this whole situation just weird?”

“Of course it's weird. Normally, people would give their entire fortune just to learn anything from a top-tier master like Sister Hwarin. So what are you gonna do, Hyang?”

“Me? Uhm. Well, it’d be kind of awkward to go back alone now, right? And you probably called me because you need me. So what should I do, Sister Tang?”

“Ah, hmm. I guess... you could gain practical experience when we run into appropriate opponents?”

After tilting her head, Seol Lihyang finally realized why she had been brought along.

“Wait, you brought me along even though I’m not that useful, just so I could gain some experience?!”

“Mn. Cheon Hwi? Since Hyang is joining us too, let’s get moving.”

“Sister Tang? Sister Tang?!”

Ignoring Seol Lihyang’s desperate tug on her sleeve, we headed to the designated inn.

There, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye were already waiting, dressed slightly differently.

The martial robes they used to wear proudly—emblazoned with their family crests—were gone. Now, they wore plain, black uniforms with no patterns or text.

Well, Tang Sowol and I were still in the Tang Clan’s green martial robes, so I supposed we’d need to change before we left.

Adding that to my mental to-do list, I gave them a small wave.

“Any trouble getting here?”

“No trouble. But still...”

“I’m not sure this is really the right thing to do.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye let out heavy sighs.

It seemed sneaking out to meet each other was fine, but secretly leaving home to “see the world” weighed more heavily on them.

I lightly patted Peng Woojin’s shoulder in consolation.

“It’s fine. We’re just keeping our identities hidden while continuing the investigation in Hubei. Even if we aren’t, you two are just making a trip outside your front gate.”

“That’s why it’s more concerning! What if someone who knows our faces sees us?!”

Snapping in frustration, Peng Woojin then sighed again and finally turned to look at Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin behind me.

“I heard we’d have companions... is it those two? I recognize one of them.”

“That’s Lady Frozen Melody Blossom. A close junior to the Poison Dance Empress, and someone with such talent that she lived in the Tang Clan as a guest since childhood. As for the other...”

Eon Ga-hye glanced at Seol Lihyang, then her gaze moved to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Seol Lihyang quietly stepped behind me, seemingly intimidated by Peng Woojin’s large frame.

Just then, realization struck Peng Woojin, and he stood up in shock.

“Could it be... Senior White-Haired Rakshasa?!”

“This One is indeed known by that title, but it is not one I am fond of.”

“My apologies. I heard through the Murim Alliance that the Seo Mun Clan has once again chosen to walk the path of the righteous.”

“Kuheum. Yes, that is so.”

“However, I can’t call a senior of the same generation as my father by name. What should we address you as?”

Despite his huge build, Peng Woojin was extremely respectful—an appropriate attitude, considering she was one of the few Flowering Stage warriors in all of Murim, with a long-standing history in the martial world.

Still, I thought to myself, our group really does treat Seo Mun-Hwarin a bit casually.

From the beginning, we treated her more like a new friend. And in my case, I had eaten meals with her in my previous life for years, so there was a sense of familiarity.

Above all, Seo Mun-Hwarin never acted dignified around us, which was why we didn’t treat her formally.

“Kuheum. Kuheum.”

She puffed her chest slightly and looked back and forth between me and Peng Woojin. Though she didn't say it out loud, she was clearly asking to be treated better going forward.

Then she opened her mouth.

“This One will be helping you for a while, so we'll be seeing each other often. As long as you don't call me Rakshasa, call me whatever you wish.”

Peng Woojin hesitated, but Yeon Ga-hye spoke up instead.

“Thank you for stepping forward for people you don't even know, Elder. While we won't be able to rely on our family's strength for a while, we'll do our best to make sure you're not inconvenienced.”

“Elder...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin's expression turned glum. Her eyes held a trace of sorrow as she looked our way.

See? I told you she wouldn't be happy being treated like an elder.

I smirked slightly at Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, who were clearly confused by her reaction.

By now, my father-in-law and likely the Poison King and the Fist King had all read the letters we left behind.

"I'm a bit hungry, but let's skip breakfast and head out."

The road to Hubei was long.

After leaving Wuhuan City and arriving in Hubei, we soon headed toward a small house where Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye had occasionally met in secret to share their findings.

But all that remained was a burnt-down, abandoned village—and the charred remains of a few buildings.

However—

“There are traces of demonic techniques here.”

It didn't seem like this was just bad luck.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

There's a saying that “a word without feet travels a thousand li.”

By the time our group arrived in Hubei Province, the rumor that the heirs of prestigious families had run away together had already spread throughout the region.

Even though we traveled at the speed of Seol Lihyang, who was the slowest among us in lightness skill, the speed at which the rumors spread was still unnaturally fast.

They were probably deliberately spreading the rumors using the Beggar's Sect, trying to locate us. Just as expected.

If I were to offer one defense, Tang Jincheon might clutch the back of his neck, but he wouldn't be too worried.

Not only because of my martial strength, but because he knows Seo Mun-Hwarin, a master of the Flowering Stage, is moving with us.

Of course, this only applies to Tang Jincheon, who knows that despite Seo Mun-Hwarin's notorious reputation, she's righteous in nature, and that any opponent we face will likely be dealt with by either me or Tang Sowol before it comes to her.

As for the heads of the Peng Clan and Yeon Clan, I imagine they're in a frenzy by now.

After all, the heirs of two families that hate each other have disappeared at the same time.

They were such good actors that even Namgung Jong, who calls himself their friend, believes that Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye genuinely hated each other.

Now rumors must be flying with all sorts of wild, negative speculations.

“For now, we’re safe, but we don’t have all the time in the world. Do you have a destination in mind?”

“Of course. Ga-hye and I have a house we use for secret meetings.”

“Wait... not a cave?”

That’s the reason?

I looked at Tang Sowol in disbelief, but she just blinked at me innocently, as if she didn’t understand what was strange.

Even if my senses have sharpened due to regaining the realm of Divine Sword Unity, she hadn’t whispered, so she must’ve heard it too.

I couldn’t help but let out a hollow laugh, but before I could dwell on it, Yeon Ga-hye asked cautiously, as if something felt off.

“Did you just say cave? I understand that Blood Flame Sword Demon Sohyeop may not have had much wealth stored up, being a wanderer, but you, Lady Poison Phoenix, would be in a different position, no?”

“Ah! You’re absolutely right. I couldn’t afford anything extravagant, but I could’ve at least bought a small house in a small village. That said, well... I didn’t really have a choice. I was kidnapped by Cheon Sohyeop, after all.”

“...!”

“Ah.”

Now they understood. Yeon Ga-hye’s eyes widened, and Peng Woojin nodded dumbly.

Their impression of me was taking a solid dive. Not that I could deny it—everything she said was true.

So I just shrugged once and changed the subject.

“I get that the two of you have a secret house, but is there a reason we have to go there specifically?”

“Of course. It’s located between the territories of the Peng Clan and Yeon Clan, a place that skillfully avoids both sides’ attention. It’s ideal as a base.”

“And most of the information we’ve gathered so far is stored there. We’ve shared what we could remember or describe verbally, but everyone sees things from different perspectives and with different knowledge, so if you all read it, you might notice something new.”

She had a point.

Especially for me—because everything related to regression is sealed by mental restrictions (geumje), being able to check what they’ve recorded is a great help.

I still don’t know the principle behind it or whether it can be undone one day—but phrasing things as if they’re logical deductions in the right context avoids triggering the restriction.

If we can catch the tail of the Demonic Cult again this time, if we can spread word of their plans and the Heavenly Demon’s might, then we won’t be crushed individually like in my previous life.

We arrived at the small village that Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye mentioned. But it was no longer a village.

The ground was pitch-black, covered in ash and soot. Only traces remained where houses once stood.

“What is this...?”

Peng Woojin looked around in shock. There were no signs of life. Either the villagers had long since fled—or they had all died.

Usually, even after such a fire, survivors return to rummage through the ruins for anything salvageable.

The complete absence of people meant one of two things.

“The fire happened some time ago—or everyone in the village was killed.”

“Who would do something so horrific... wait—no, it can’t be...”

Eon Ga-hye looked around with the same expression as Peng Woojin, her face twisting in horror.

“We’ll find out soon. Let’s check a few houses, then head to your secret residence.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye nodded silently, and we split up to investigate the remains.

I lifted a pile of charcoal that barely held its shape. Clearing away the collapsed roof and pushing aside broken pillars, the interior was revealed.

There, I found two burned bodies—one large, one small—locked in an embrace.

It looked like a parent shielding their child until their last breath. A tragic scene, yes—but something felt off.

I stared hard, trying to identify the cause of the unease.

Then I saw it—on the scorched back of the body.

“...A sword wound.”

“A sword wound.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin reached the same conclusion at the same time.

Seol Lihyang furrowed her brows.

“A sword wound? I can’t really tell... but if Cheon Hwi is right, someone wiped out an entire village and then set a fire to make it look like an accident?”

“That’s highly likely.”

There are only a few reasons to burn the dead.

To hide their identities. Or to prevent anyone from examining how they died.

Even for someone confident with a sword like me, all I could tell was that their heart had been pierced cleanly—I couldn’t guess what sword technique was used.

Which was likely the point.

“This One agrees with Cheon Hwi’s reasoning. But for now, we should check more houses. We don’t have enough evidence to draw conclusions.”

“Yes, Sister Hwarin is right. Everyone has their circumstances. This house might be a special case.”

With a more solemn expression, I moved on to another house and cleared away the debris.

This time, I found no sword wounds, but bodies that looked like they had died writhing in agony.

Unlike before, where the bodies were static, here you could see their desperate will to live.

The sight darkened Seol Lihyang’s face immediately.

I gently ran my hand along her back to calm her and continued speaking.

“Usually, when there’s a fire, most people die from smoke inhalation. Death by burning is rarer than you’d think.”

I knew this all too well, having seen it countless times when Ironblood Hall fell in my previous life.

“Those who suffocate on smoke pass quietly. Even if they struggle, it’s never this violent. This kind of death—”

“—is from someone burning alive. I remember a few who died like that when the Seo Mun Clan was exterminated.”

Recalling the past, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s aura turned cold.

I gently patted her back with one hand and turned to Tang Sowol, who had been searching another ruin.

“What about you?”

“It’s the same. Here, the victim’s head was crushed.”

She spoke in a rare, cold tone. Perhaps the reality of an entire village being slaughtered and burned was especially hard to bear for someone raised in the orthodox sects.

We regrouped with Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye. Their findings were similar.

Even if there were no visible sword wounds, many of the bodies had clearly died before the fire started. The death toll was too high to call it an accidental blaze.

It was likely that no one escaped alive. Maybe, just maybe, one person survived.

Peng Woojin, who had at least some rapport with the villagers, clenched his jaw.

“This was the work of the Demonic Cult, wasn’t it?”

“We can’t be certain yet. It could’ve been bandits—this is a remote village, after all. Or it could’ve been a rogue martial artist from the unorthodox sects.”

“This is Hubei. Who would dare do something like this?”

“You said it yourself. It’s located between the Peng and Yeon territories—where neither clan’s influence fully reaches.”

The central lands are vast, and many martial artists possess power beyond the norm. But the weapons of the government don’t reach every corner.

That’s why the Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects came to be.

This place, though within orthodox territory, was left unprotected due to the dispute between the two clans.

That must’ve hit home. Both Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye looked downcast.

“This wasn’t your fault. It happened long ago. This is something that requires both clans to act, not two individuals. No need to blame yourselves.”

“Thank you.”

“For now, we should head to your house. We’ve learned all we can here.”

“What’s the point? Even if it’s a bit farther, it was still part of this village. It must’ve burned down with everything inside.”

Eon Ga-hye’s voice was resigned.

But that was precisely why it was important.

“You’re right. We can’t expect it to be intact. But—at the very least—we might be able to tell whether it was the Demonic Cult.”

“Huh?”

“You wouldn’t have left important documents just lying around, would you? You’d have buried them or hidden them somewhere difficult to find.”

“Y-Yes. We didn’t make it fireproof, but we did hide it in the deepest spot.”

“If I were with the Demonic Cult, there would only be one reason to come all the way out here—to kill you both, since threats didn’t work. Or... to destroy all your records and evidence.”

Naturally, they would've searched thoroughly. And burned everything even more thoroughly.

But such deliberate destruction often leaves its own traces.

Guided by Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, we arrived at the house slightly removed from the main village.

As expected, even after digging through the wreckage, all that remained were blackened coals and shattered debris.

Not a single structure had kept its shape.

But most importantly, we found the hidden vault beneath the half-buried floor, just as Yeon Ga-hye had said.

And there—we found a trace.

A melted and scorched stone surface, marked by winding, snake-like grooves.

I recognized them instantly.

*Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art*. A demonic art that slithers like a living snake and intensifies its flames when it smells blood.

The martial art of *Bloodflame Fist Demon*—a foe I had fought before the regression but never defeated, until Tang Sowol came to help.

## I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

It's true that the martial prowess of the Demonic Cult's followers—aside from the Heavenly Demon—wasn't all that impressive, but that didn't mean they were devoid of powerful figures.

Take Shadow Ghost, for instance—the one I defeated before. In my previous life, he had eventually reached Sub-Perfection and even rose to the rank of Elder.

Though the Demonic Cult lacked any true top-tier masters at the Flowering Stage, they did have a few warriors who had attained Sub-Perfection.

One of them was Jeok Yeonghu, the Blood Flame Fist Demon, another Elder of the Demonic Cult who had reached Sub-Perfection long ago.

The difference between him and Shadow Ghost? Shadow Ghost would reach Sub-Perfection in the future, but the Blood Flame Fist Demon had already attained it a while ago—even by current standards.

Though infamous, there were likely quite a few people across the Central Plains who recognized his name.

I brushed my fingers lightly over the melted stone floor, which bore tracks like those of a snake slithering through molten rock.

Naturally, no heat or demonic energy remained. All that was left was the cold, smooth texture.

As I quietly ran my hand over the floor, Tang Sowol crouched beside me and joined in brushing away the soot, asking,

“This is definitely unusual. Even if the house caught fire completely, it shouldn’t have melted the stone floor like this.”

“It’s a trace of a demonic art.”

“Excuse me??”

Maybe if the evidence is right in front of me, the mental restriction won't activate.

This time, my thoughts came out of my mouth without being blocked.

"I suspect it's Blood Flame Serpent Life Demonic Art."

"If it's that technique... you mean the martial art of the Blood Flame Fist Demon?"

"You know of him?"

"Well, not as much as you do, Cheon Hwi, but since I learned that the Demonic Cult was behind the attempt on my life, I've looked into many things. He's the one who caused the Blood Calamity at the Kunlun Sect around thirty years ago, right?"

She didn't know the exact timeline, but it was true—the nickname he earned from that incident had become widely known.

As I nodded, Seo Mun-Hwarin narrowed her eyes and chimed in.

“This One has heard of the Blood Flame Fist Demon as well. Although Cheonghae and Jiangxi are far apart... the event was so infamous that even I heard rumors of it.”

“What kind of incident was it, Sister Seorin?”

Seol Lihyang, though she knew the basics now, still had far more she didn't know when it came to the affairs of Murim.

At her calling Seo Mun-Hwarin “Sister,” Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye—who had been respectfully calling her Elder—wore complicated expressions, but Seo Mun-Hwarin remained unshaken and explained,

“The story goes that the Blood Flame Fist Demon, seeking revenge for his father who was beaten to death by a Kunlun Daoist, set fire to every young disciple of the Kunlun Sect he came across.”

“Sure, it's sad when a Demonic Cultist goes overboard with revenge, but it's not really surprising... Are you saying the Kunlun Daoist actually did that first?”

Seol Lihyang widened her eyes in disbelief.

She had learned that righteous sect members—especially Daoist warriors—would never commit such acts.

But—

“There are always exceptions. These are only rumors, so I can’t confirm every detail... but they say a notorious merchant’s son paid a massive donation to enter the Kunlun Sect and couldn’t fix his rotten habits. He supposedly caused an incident while secretly drinking.”

“So he was a bad person from the start. But why did the Kunlun Sect accept him? Was it really because of money? I can’t imagine a group like Kunlun stooping so low.”

“There may have been financial reasons, but more than that, it’s likely due to the Daoist belief that accumulating virtue leads to enlightenment. Guiding the lost is considered a significant act of virtue.”

She was right. Though many Daoists today have grown more secular, they still pursue virtue.

Unlike noble clans, which value blood ties and tend to keep their own close whether they’re good or bad, sects can choose whom they accept.

That doesn't mean Wudang or Mount Hua only take in talented people either.

Most of those accepted into Daoist sects are orphans who lost their parents in incidents, or children abandoned by families too poor to raise them.

It's rare for a sect to accept a rich family's child or a genius with great talent.

They mainly take in those who have nowhere else to go, those who wouldn't survive on their own, or those who have wandered for a long time and truly want to change.

From a practical standpoint, this may seem inefficient.

But when viewed through the lens of accumulating virtue, it makes sense.

That said, some wealthy families still try to dump their problem children on the sects from time to time.

If the child is truly incorrigible, the sect will reject them, of course. But if they're only moderately troublesome, they'll usually be accepted.

Still, things don't always go well.

Every so often, incidents and accidents happen. Murder is rare—but not unheard of.

Seol Lihyang nodded with a complex expression.

“I think I get it now. So the Blood Flame Fist Demon held a grudge against the Kunlun Sect for not managing their disciple properly and got his revenge after joining the Demonic Cult.”

“Your understanding is correct, but... you can't call that revenge. He didn't just go after the person responsible—he burned countless innocent people alive. Revenge usually lacks righteousness, but this was just the rampage of a mad killer. That's why he was called the Blood Flame Fist Demon.”

“I see... I'll remember that. So that nickname wasn't just because he was good with fire and his fists, huh?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, and this time, I answered her.

“The ‘Blood Flame’ part comes from his yang-type demonic art, Blood Flame Serpent Life Demonic Art. And yes, ‘Fist’ is there because that’s his primary technique. But the ‘Demon’ part wasn’t because he was from the Demonic Cult—it was because he truly earned it through his actions.”

“You and Sister Seorin both speak so decisively about him. I’ve heard the term ‘Blood Calamity’ before, but what exactly did he do?”

“It’s good you remember. Then here’s a question: what do you think happened to the Kunlun warrior who beat the Blood Flame Fist Demon’s father to death?”

“Huh? Let’s see...”

Seol Lihyang tapped her chin with her finger and tilted her head.

“Well, since he committed murder, he was probably handed over to the authorities, or maybe locked up in Kunlun’s prison? Considering the Blood Flame Fist Demon sought revenge later, I guess he didn’t die right away.”

“Close. He was imprisoned in Kunlun’s dungeon and released about ten years later. He sincerely repented and lived out his life helping others—up until the moment he was killed by the Blood Flame Fist Demon.”

“Huh?!”

Seol Lihyang blinked in shock, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

But it was true.

In my previous life, after narrowly surviving a battle against the Blood Flame Fist Demon, I had gone around gathering information about him—speaking with seasoned masters and survivors of the Kunlun Sect.

From what I learned, the Kunlun warrior who had killed his father changed completely after the incident.

He never turned a blind eye to injustice. He spared even the most vicious opponents, making them pay in other ways.

Whenever he had time, he sought out the Blood Flame Fist Demon, hoping to give back everything he had—his wealth, and even his life.

Most people don't change.

But he spent over a decade in the dungeon, tormented by guilt, and only found peace by performing good deeds.

The Kunlun Sect must've recognized this, since they officially reinstated him as a disciple after his release.

So when the Blood Flame Fist Demon finally returned, already at Sub-Perfection, he could've easily taken his revenge.

But by then, it wasn't so simple—neither for him nor for the Kunlun Sect.

“He'd spent his whole life sharpening his blade for revenge, only to learn it was unnecessary. He exacted his justice, but everyone pointed fingers. He came face-to-face with the emptiness of it all—his purpose shattered. And when that moment of denial hit... a person breaks.”

“Sounds like he was still sane up to that point.”

“Which only made his fall worse. He was already suffering from the side effects of Blood Flame Serpent Life Demonic Art, and that was the final push. He completely lost his self-control.”

Blood Flame Serpent Life Demonic Art is among the most powerful demonic arts.

It relies heavily on the practitioner's innate yang energy, and for those with enough, it becomes one of the most destructive techniques in all of Murim.

The problem is that it burns even its own master.

As a technique that intensifies in the presence of blood, it begins to burn the practitioner's own blood as well.

Once someone reaches a certain level in it, they constantly feel searing pain.

And the stronger they become, the worse it gets.

They can't sleep, they burn with agony at all hours, and become irritable and unstable.

The Blood Flame Fist Demon had managed to hold on to sanity through his obsessive focus on revenge.

But once he lost that purpose, all that remained was his still-smoldering grudge—and a martial art that burned everything it touched.

“And so, after completing his revenge, he returned to Kunlun.

There, he began burning alive every disciple the man had helped—all the young ones he had raised.”

“W-What...?”

Seol Lihyang nodded faintly, her expression blank.

Over the years, how many lives had that man saved?

Surely dozens—perhaps even hundreds of people died by the Blood Flame Fist Demon’s hands.

The Kunlun Sect didn’t sit idle, of course.

But since he avoided direct confrontation and only targeted the weak, they were driven to despair.

He slaughtered over half of the next generation of Kunlun disciples, along with countless civilians in surrounding villages.

Only then was he caught by Kunlun's Heaven-Net Formation.

Not only the elders at Sub-Perfection, but even the Sect Leader at the Flowering Stage came out to personally cut him down.

He had no escape.

The issue was, Cheonghae—unlike other regions—shared a direct border with Xinjiang, where the Demonic Cult resided.

Upon hearing of it, the Cult sent reinforcements.

And in the end, they managed to extract the Blood Flame Fist Demon.

Of course, most of the Cult's elite were slaughtered in the process.

But still—he survived.

After that, he continued committing massacres large and small.

He became one of Murim's greatest threats.

Then, at some point... he vanished.

Everyone assumed he had finally succumbed to the art's backlash, burning himself alive.

Or that a passing swordsman had taken his head.

It wouldn't be unusual. That's how many like him ended.

But from what we learned while interrogating Demonic Cultists alongside Tang Jincheon, I reached a different conclusion.

The Heavenly Demon.

The Blood Flame Fist Demon's disappearance coincided exactly with the rise of the Heavenly Demon within the Cult.

And now—seeing him move in secret, like this—I was certain.

He had become utterly devoted to the Heavenly Demon and was now following his commands.

But unlike the story of the Blood Flame Fist Demon, this theory triggered the restriction. I couldn't say it aloud.

I was finally starting to understand the rules of the restriction.

It seemed I was allowed to speak freely about things many people already knew, like the story of the Blood Flame Fist Demon—especially with people like Seo Mun-hwarin or Tang Sowol around, who also knew the tale.

But the Heavenly Demon? Too few people knew of him.

Even mentioning him lightly would trigger a powerful mental block.

I sighed inwardly and looked over to Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, who had been listening silently.

“With this, I think we understand the nature of our enemy. What will you do?”

“There’s no reason to turn back now that we’ve come this far.”

“I agree.”

They answered without hesitation.

But after speaking, they both started glancing nervously at Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“Hm?”

She tilted her head, not understanding their looks.

I gave a dry laugh and added,

“Right. With a Flowering Stage master like Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin supporting us, Sub-Perfection, Murim’s enemies, or even yang-based demonic arts aren’t much of a threat.”

“This One... you mean me?”

Only then did she realize why everyone had been looking at her.

She glanced around the group, then placed her hands on her hips.

Her expression full of pride.

Her heels lifting slightly in a triumphant pose.

Her lips quivering as if trying to suppress a smile.

Seo Mun-Hwarin raised her chin and declared, unmistakably showing off:

“Indeed! You may rely on This One! Be it the Blood Flame Fist Demon or anyone else, This One’s fists are stronger!”

“Oooh...”

“Truly reassuring.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye clapped in admiration.

But for some reason, seeing Seo Mun-Hwarin that excited only made me feel more uneasy.

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While pursuing the Blood Flame Fist Demon, I ended up isolated—with Seol Lihyang.

“Are we screwed?”

“Not yet, so shut up!”

A strange sense of déjà vu crept over me.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye were both warriors who had reached the Peak Stage.

Of course, with their innate talent and their clans' renowned martial arts, it might seem natural that they attained the Peak Stage in their twenties.

But putting their backgrounds aside, in terms of pure martial strength, they were undeniably powerful anywhere in the Central Plains.

If one truly wished to eliminate them, it wouldn't be enough to send just a few average Peak Stage experts. A Sub-Perfection-level master would be needed.

Someone like the Blood Flame Fist Demon, for example.

“But the Demonic Cult wouldn’t have expected that we have Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin on our side.”

“Mhm. You may leave it to This One. I had been quietly troubled that I could only watch when you fought the Black Sky Sword Emperor, but now it seems I have a chance to repay that debt sooner than expected.”

“A debt, you say? I made that decision back then because I believed it was the best option, and I stepped up because I wanted to.”

“That may be how you feel. But the feelings This One holds are This One’s alone. I’ve been thankful and sorry toward you, so I intend to settle those feelings now.”

“Well... if that’s how you feel, then I won’t argue. Honestly, I do feel reassured.”

“Hem-hem!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, noticing how the group relied on her, puffed out her chest proudly, clearly pleased.

But the reason I brought this up wasn’t to cheer up Seo Mun-Hwarin, who’d been slightly sulky from everyone calling her “Elder” during the journey.

“Then we’ll trust in Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin and begin tracking the Blood Flame Fist Demon.”

“Mn? You said tracking? He went to great lengths to erase his traces and silence any witnesses, committing atrocities to hide his presence... Do you have a way to pursue him?”

“It would be difficult alone, but with help from others, I believe it’s possible.”

“Huh. I don’t know what you have in mind, but do as you see fit.”

I nodded to Seo Mun-Hwarin, then turned to Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye.

“This has grown into a significant situation, but it’s too late to seek aid from the Peng or Yeon clans now. You both know why.”

“Mm. That’s true.”

“Yes, I feel the same as Brother Peng.”

A Sub-Perfection-level Demonic Cultist had infiltrated Hubei and committed these atrocities. Regardless of the circumstances, the right move would be to ask for help from their clans.

After all, both the Peng and Yeon clans were righteous families rooted in Hubei Province.

A massacre of an entire village wasn't something that could be ignored just because of inter-clan tension.

But there was a reason they couldn't act so freely.

“We don't know where the spy is hiding in your clans, so we can't risk leaking information.”

“Once this matter is over, we'll flush out that rat and make them pay.”

That's right. There was a spy from the Demonic Cult hidden within both the Peng and Yeon clans.

The two realized this after comparing information they had gathered separately and noticing discrepancies.

That's also why they chose to store their findings in a separate, secret location—believing it would be too dangerous to hide anything within their own households.

Of course, that secret house was eventually discovered, and all the evidence they had gathered was turned to ash.

Still, what they had memorized wasn't gone. And thus, the Blood Flame Fist Demon's next targets would likely be the two of them.

As I nodded internally, Peng Woojin let out a deep sigh.

“Whew. If the spy had access to information meant for the Clan Head, they must hold a fairly high position. What on earth made them betray the Peng Clan...?”

“Let me just say this: they might not have betrayed you of their own will.”

“What kind of nonsense is that? Betrayal that isn't betrayal?”

“I’m saying there are times when someone becomes a spy against their will. Have you heard of mental restrictions or poison-induced pain?”

“I’ve heard of mental restrictions. The Peng Clan has a few techniques similar to that. But poison-induced pain... I thought that was just an exaggeration.”

“Normally, yes. But not with the Demonic Cult. Their martial arts might be inferior, but when it comes to sorcery, no one in the Central Plains has deeper expertise.”

“Sounds like something they’d do. Are you suggesting the spy was forced to act by such means?”

“I’m not certain. Just that the possibility is high. And besides, even if they were manipulated through mental restrictions or poison-induced pain, that doesn’t erase the fact that they betrayed you.”

“That’s true as well.”

Peng Woojin sighed again, his expression complicated.

After a moment, I waited for Yeon Ga-hye to finish gently patting his back before continuing.

“In any case, while we can’t rely on your clans for help, we can rely on Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. That’s why I intend to track the Blood Flame Fist Demon from here.”

“You know tracking techniques?”

“To an extent.”

Before my regression, as the war against the Demonic Cult grew longer and more brutal, I had to learn more than just swordsmanship to survive.

To prevent future threats, you had to chase down fleeing enemies. And to survive pursuit, you had to learn how to erase your own tracks.

So yes, I had learned the basics of tracking techniques.

“Of course, that alone won’t be enough to find the Blood Flame Fist Demon. Even if the fire erased some traces, it’s rare for things to be this clean. The Cult knows how to fight—but not how to hide.”

“It’s the work of the Soul Reapers, then.”

I slowly nodded at Yeon Ga-hye's grim voice.

“Most likely. We've already eliminated many of their capable fighters, but just because they lack combat power doesn't mean they're easy to catch. The fact that someone like the Blood Flame Fist Demon is moving so discreetly means these assassins are likely helping him cover his tracks.”

“That's reasonable. But that makes it even harder to understand—how do you plan to track down someone with traces hidden that thoroughly?”

“Not everything has to be solved with one's own power. I'll use Tang Sowol's poison.”

“Excuse me??”

“Poison can be medicine too, if used correctly.”

“You sound very much like someone from the Tang Clan right now.”

Eon Ga-hye gave an admiring nod, and I continued.

“Anyway, there’s a reason I’m telling you this. Even with Tang Sowol’s help, it’ll still be difficult to perfectly see through the work of professional assassins. So I want to narrow down the possibilities first.”

“Narrow them down, how?”

“Peng Woojin. Yeon Ga-hye. Tell me every single place you’ve used for your secret meetings—leave nothing out. If they already knew about your hideout, then their investigation on you is complete. That means the Blood Flame Fist Demon’s next destination will likely be one of the places you two frequented together.”

The two of them exchanged glances, blushing deeply.

After a long moment, Peng Woojin broke the silence with an awkward cough.

“Kuheum! If that’s the reason, then of course I’ll tell you... but what you’re about to hear must remain strictly confidential. Understood?”

“Obviously. Don’t worry.”

I nodded without hesitation, and Peng Woojin leaned in to whisper.

And that's when I understood why the two of them had reacted like that.

These two... had really been doing everything, huh.

After accidentally learning a bit more about Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye's private life than I wanted to...

I made my way to Tang Sowol, who was digging into the ground with the others.

“What are you doing?”

“I didn't feel right just leaving. The village isn't that big, and we've already overturned half the ruins. I figured we should at least bury the bodies.”

“I'll help.”

We dug up the rest of the half-finished graves and gave the dead a proper, if simple, burial.

Only after that did I speak.

“I need poison.”

“What kind of poison?”

“One made from equal parts of Yeolhongcho, Jahwankwa, Samyeophwasa, and the venom of the Baekgak Ogong.”

“If you need it to interrogate Demonic Cultists, there are far more efficient poisons...”

“It’s for me to take.”

“...I don’t know why Young Master Cheon wants to leave this world, but please know that I intend to follow you soon after.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but no. If I die, Tang Sowol, you’re to live on. Besides, I’m not taking it to die. I value my life too, you know.”

“Not sure about that. Judging by your usual actions, you act like you could drop dead any day.”

“I always had full confidence that I’d survive. This time’s no different.”

“Hmph.”

Tang Sowol tilted her chin skeptically, signaling me to explain further.

I chuckled and clarified.

“You know as well as I do—those poisons I listed are all extremely potent yang-based poisons.”

“They’re not just yang-based. Each one is lethal enough to melt internal organs.”

“But too much of anything is bad. When mixed, the toxicity drops significantly.”

“I know that much. But the poison doesn’t disappear completely. Even when neutralized, the remaining effect may not kill—but due to the nature of yang poison, it’ll be extremely painful.”

“But in return, the user’s senses are heightened to their limit.”

“So you’re saying in a long-winded way that it’ll hurt like hell.”

“That’s where Seol Lihyang comes in.”

“...?”

Tang Sowol blinked in confusion, and I gave her a small smile.

“With Seol Lihyang’s yin energy, I’ll neutralize the pain.

What remains is only heightened sensitivity.”

“It’s a clever approach, but there’s no guarantee it’ll work.”

“I’m not saying I’ll take it immediately. We’ll test it first—maybe on a mountain beast or something. If the results are acceptable, then you can administer the poison to me.”

“In that case, I don’t mind... but I still wonder if it’ll work.”

Despite her doubt, Tang Sowol began producing droplets of different poisons from her fingertips.

It would probably be fine.

In my previous life, after I was beaten senseless by the Blood Flame Fist Demon, Tang Sowol had developed this very poison mix for me—telling me to strike first next time and avoid being caught off guard.

Back then, Seol Lihyang wasn’t around, so Tang Sowol had done the yin neutralization herself.

But with Seol Lihyang here, that wouldn’t be necessary.

If Tang Sowol had unmatched talent in poisons, then Seol Lihyang had similar innate skill in handling yin energy.

Not to mention, this Tang Sowol—unlike the one in my past life—was still somewhat unpolished.

That’s why I chose this method.

As Tang Sowol mixed the poisons with a doubtful expression, we called over Seol Lihyang and tested it on a bird flying nearby.

As expected... the bird flew off completely unaffected.

Only after confirming that did Tang Sowol approach, poison dripping from her fingertips.

“Where on earth did you learn something like this, Young Master Cheon?”

“It’s a secret. But I can tell you this—I heard it from the person who developed the formula to improve the Poison Spirit Constitution.”

“...Don’t tell me. Another woman?”

“She was a woman, yes. But you don’t have to worry—she’s no longer of this world.”

“...Ah.”

That was long ago now.

The day after I defeated Shadow Ghost, I’d told Tang Sowol—who had snuck into my room—about it.

Recalling that memory, she nodded with a somewhat awkward expression.

“Well then, I’ll administer the poison now, so please open your mouth. Hyang, put your hand on his back and be ready to neutralize the poison immediately.”

“Yes!”

Seol Lihyang trotted over and placed her hand on my back.

Meeting her wide-eyed gaze, Tang Sowol slowly inserted her fingers into my mouth.

Four fingers filled my mouth, and before I could even process the sensation, the thick poison slid down my throat.

My body flushed with heat in an instant. Just as I was about to cry out from the unbearable pain surging through me—

Cool energy flowed from Seol Lihyang's hand into my back.

The pain that had risen like a storm quickly subsided.

Before long, my five senses expanded. And faintly—very faintly—things I couldn't normally perceive began to come into view.

“...Found it.”

Now, we would be the ones doing the hunting.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The pursuit was going smoothly.

Originally, tracking techniques relied more on the five senses than on qi perception.

Thus, the foundation of tracking arts could be said to be cultivating martial arts that heighten one's senses over a long period of time.

And now, with the help of Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, I had temporarily acquired enhanced senses.

A field of vision where the world felt clearer. Though it was not mine, but a borrowed perception, and thus would be of no help in martial arts cultivation...

It was more than enough to fulfill my original purpose of chasing the faint traces of the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

Leaving behind the blackened village, I followed the faint, unnaturally clean traces.

And whenever I came upon a fork in the road where no signs remained, I continued choosing the path based on the places Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye had mentioned—how many times had I repeated this process?

Perhaps thinking they were far enough from the massacred village, familiar traces began to appear one by one.

They were signs of someone writhing from the side effects of the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art.

No matter how emotionless an assassin may be, they couldn't completely eliminate fatigue.

Thinking they were safe, they had likely grown complacent and failed to erase several traces entirely.

However, one strange thing stood out.

“It doesn't seem to be the trace of just one person.”

“What do you mean, Brother Cheon?”

“Exactly as it sounds. There’s a chance it’s not just the Bloodflame Fist Demon traveling with a few assassins.”

“Oh... did you discover traces of a different demonic technique?”

“No. They’re all from the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art, but the traces differ in physique and level of mastery. They might not be direct disciples... but it seems others trained in the same art are moving with the Bloodflame Fist Demon.”

Even within the Demonic Cult, martial arts are practiced, but like most martial artists in the Central Plains, they don’t revere martial arts themselves.

To them, martial artists are enemies, and martial arts are merely the enemy’s sword.

They learn martial arts out of necessity, but have no desire to monopolize them. No matter how incredible the technique, to them, it’s just a tool. If asked, they willingly teach it to others.

It sounds noble when put like that, but... the problem is, most of them are obsessed with revenge, and all the techniques they teach are demonic arts.

In any case, because of that situation, even in my past life, there were others besides the Bloodflame Fist Demon who practiced the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art.

Even after learning from the already accomplished Bloodflame Fist Demon, they all either went mad from the side effects or ended their own lives.

Back then, it was a thing of the distant past. But now, it might be a matter of the present.

“Even if their numbers have increased, most of them are first-class. At best, barely at Peak Stage, so there’s no need to worry too much. Still, it’s good to know.”

“Aha, I understand. I’ll inform the others as well.”

Tang Sowol nodded and relayed the information to the rest of the group following behind.

While watching her for a moment, I once again set out to trace the next clue—how many times had we repeated this process?

Before long, a wide river and a long, stretched-out riverside village came into view.

It was the perfect spot for boating.

“This looks like a great place for boating, Sister Tang.”

“Shh! Don’t say things like ‘a nice place to secretly have fun out of sight’ when we’re out in a scenic place like this!”

“I-I didn’t mean it like that...”

Seol Lihyang shook her head with an awkward look, while Tang Sowol gave her a mischievous smile.

Of course, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye were trembling with their eyes tightly shut, and for some reason, Seo Mun-Hwarin had also turned bright red, hiccuping repeatedly.

Shaking my head, I lightly tapped Seo Mun-Hwarin on the shoulder.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Hiick! T-this One wasn’t thinking anything inappropriate! This One just thought... since the boat will sway on the water anyway, we wouldn’t stand out...!”

“I’m always impressed by your imagination, Senior, but that’s not the important thing right now.”

“What’s wrong with This One’s imagination! ...Still, I suppose you’re right. Just wait a moment.”

If this was one of the places Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye frequently visited, then the chance of the Bloodflame Fist Demon being here was high as well.

Of course, he may have already left... but it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious.

Seo Mun-Hwarin stood still and closed her eyes. Faint energy began to spread out from her body.

It was so subtle it would be hard to detect without focused attention. Even that gradually weakened until it extended far beyond the range of my own qi perception.

It felt like dough being spread thin and wide with heavy pressure.

Upon reaching the Flowering Stage, when one can refine inner energy through willpower, techniques previously impossible become attainable.

Like moving objects without touch, creating sword qi condensed to unnatural density, and the massive qi field currently covering the village—these are all such techniques.

After quietly scanning the surroundings, Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes suddenly snapped open.

“There is a suspicious presence.”

“Is that certain?”

“Of course. If they notice This One is watching, they'll flee, so This One didn't look in detail... but from a brief scan, there was a spot with faint demonic energy.”

“I'll leave it to you.”

“Kuheum! You can rely on This One! Ah, but even This One only has two hands. Someone may try to flee, so let’s proceed with a slow encirclement here.”

“Reasonable. Then, I’ll place Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye—the targets of the enemy—with you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. That should be the safest position.”

“Even an assassin or martial artist trained in Yang River Qi Techniques could suffer defeat if they lack experience, regardless of their level. Understood. Let’s do that.”

“Yes. I’ll stay with Seol Lihyang, who is the least skilled, and Tang Sowol will...”

As I turned to the side, Tang Sowol spoke up confidently.

“Since the Bloodflame Fist Demon, now at Sub-Perfection, will be taken by Sister Hwarin, it’s actually easier for me to fight the rest alone. I can bring out my extreme poisons.”

“Well, unless someone has resistance like yours, Tang Sowol, having them near you would only get in the way.”

“Hehe. It takes some time, but Brother Cheon, you’ll get there too, so don’t worry.”

“I’ve never been worried. I’ll be expecting it.”

I gave her a small smile and turned to the others.

“Everyone okay? If you have any objections, speak now.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye nodded silently. Their expressions were already filled with resolve. However—

“Hey. We’re going to fight now, right?”

“Yes. If you’re scared, you can stay in a safe place.”

“No. I knew this kind of day would come eventually, living as a martial artist. I’ve heard it from you and Master often. I’m just nervous, that’s all. Just nervous.”

Seol Lihyang took a deep breath, and before long, the disordered flow of her qi settled.

“Alright. I’m ready.”

“There won’t be any danger.”

“I’m not worried about myself. I mean being ready to kill others, even if they’re from the Demonic Cult. I know I’ll be safe—you’re here, Cheon Hwi.”

So that’s what she had been thinking.

While admiring her silently, Seol Lihyang played with the whip at her waist and spoke.

“Let’s go.”

“Understood. Where should we go, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

After a nod, she replied with a faint smile.

“Follow This One.”

With that short instruction, Seo Mun-Hwarin stepped forward. We followed her quickly, weaving through the crowd again and again.

In the distance, a group that clearly looked like outsiders came into view.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who spotted them within visual range, whispered quietly.

“Any closer, and we’ll be detected by that Bloodflame Fist Demon’s qi perception. From here, we’ll split according to plan.”

Exchanging silent glances, we spread out and maintained a wide triangle formation.

With so few people, a tight encirclement was impossible anyway. At most, this was just a precaution for any unexpected situation.

This should be enough.

Apparently thinking preparations were done, Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly dashed toward the man in front.

**Tat.**

Not full force, but still a glimpse of the prowess of a top-tier master at the Flowering Stage—swift and powerful.

The intensity was such that it seemed the natural qi in the area was being sucked toward her.

Around the time she took her second step, the Bloodflame Fist Demon sensed her presence and, without even looking back, hurled one of his subordinates and began fleeing in the opposite direction.

“What the hell...!”

Though dumbfounded, Seo Mun-Hwarin smashed the skull of the Demonic Cultist who had been thrown.

**Puuhk!**

There wasn't even time for last words. The scream of surprise he involuntarily let out was his only farewell.

Wiping the blood off her hand, Seo Mun-Hwarin shouted angrily.

“Running away without even looking back! And you call yourself a martial artist?!”

“Whoever said it, there's a saying in Murim—beware of women, children, and the elderly. I don't know who, but they were right again this time.”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon yelled while using full-speed lightfoot technique. Come to think of it, Seo Mun-Hwarin was a woman, had the body of a child, and was elderly in age—so all three applied.

As expected of a former escapee from the Heavenly Net of the Kunlun Sect, his instincts were sharp.

The other Demonic Cultists and assassins, who belatedly grasped the situation, all rushed at Seo Mun-Hwarin to buy time for the Bloodflame Fist Demon to escape.

In the Demonic Cult, where true experts are few and vengeance is taken on each other's behalf, it was a rational choice.

Of course, no matter how many came, they couldn't hold Seo Mun-Hwarin for long.

At best, it would buy a few breaths. But the Bloodflame Fist Demon was an expert at fleeing, contrary to his fearsome nickname.

He had a plan, charging toward the river using the shortest path without hesitation.

At that speed, he'd reach the river before being caught by Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Whether he'd escape safely or be caught in the turbulent waters remained to be seen.

What was certain was that he was running directly toward me.

"Get far away, Seol Lihyang."

“Huh? Oh, oh... okay!”

Realizing she couldn't interfere, Seol Lihyang quickly stepped back.

But maybe that made her look like an important figure. Narrowing his eyes, the Bloodflame Fist Demon suddenly swung his fist at Seol Lihyang's back.

**Ffwoosh.**

The internal energy ignited from his fist shot forward.

It wouldn't kill, but if hit wrong, it could cause severe burns across her body.

An obvious ploy to create a wounded party and slow pursuit.

But more than that, what bothered me was that he dared ignore me and attack Seol Lihyang in front of me.

“Pathetic move.”

I drew my sword in an instant and slashed.

The sharp sword wind split the air and collided with the internal energy flame released by the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

**Puhhng!**

With a near-explosive sound, the flame was split in half and dissipated.

I stood in his path and pointed my sword at his brow.

“If you want to pass, you’ll have to defeat me.”

“Then I’ll go around.”

Without hesitation, he veered off and jumped straight into the river.

The sight of him without even a shred of pride made me flinch for a moment.

This guy... is this really the infamous Demonic Cultist?

He was far too different from the Bloodflame Fist Demon I had known before the regression.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

Before the regression, the Bloodflame Fist Demon was a true demon befitting his name—both in strength and temperament.

My memory of seeing him for the first time was still vivid, which said it all.

A monstrous figure who burned all the reinforcements sent by the Orthodox Alliance and laughed maniacally atop the charred corpses.

When I found him, his flames had turned the night sky crimson, and the moment he noticed me, he swung his fist without hesitation.

It was a surprise attack, but since I hadn't let my guard down either, I was able to block it without much difficulty.

The problem was the fist technique that followed, imbued with the nature of extreme yang.

It was a condensed internal energy that rippled like fire, called Qi Flame, and in his case, it was actual flame.

Where my killing intent constricted him and I aimed to slice his stiff neck with my sword, the Bloodflame Fist Demon repelled my blade and tried to incinerate me with heat so intense it was hard to even keep my eyes open.

There were no words exchanged. The moment our eyes met, we battled to kill one another.

The old man, whose eyes didn't even seem properly focused—perhaps truly insane—kept laughing madly even as sword wounds etched themselves onto his arms.

I hadn't taken a direct hit, but the rising heat rapidly drained me, both physically and mentally.

I was certain that if it went on, I'd collapse first, so I overexerted myself to retreat and returned to Tang Sowol's side.

The battles that followed after that encounter felt similar.

Because of all that, to me, the Bloodflame Fist Demon was a deranged arsonist, a cruel demon who found solace in burning people alive, and one of the few powerful foes I failed to surpass by the slimmest margin.

I had heard rumors—that he targeted only the weak and fled whenever necessary.

But regardless, to me, he was strong, tricky, and completely insane. And yet—

“Then I’ll go around.”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon twisted his body without a moment’s hesitation and leaped into the river.

His utter lack of pride made me flinch and react a beat too late.

He was far too different from the Bloodflame Fist Demon I had known before the regression.

Back then, he was a lunatic willing to burn everything before his eyes—even if it meant using his own body as fuel.

And now, the moment he realized Seo Mun-Hwarin was a Flowering Stage expert stronger than himself, he fled without hesitation.

Right. I already knew. That this was his true nature.

That the Bloodflame Fist Demon I remembered as a formidable foe only saw me back then as someone worth testing his strength against.

I knew. I knew, but still...

“And you call yourself an Elder of the Demonic Cult?!”

**Splash!**

Instead of a reply, came the sound of his body plunging into the river. So he hadn't gotten too far yet.

I dashed toward the direction of the sound using Lightning Thunder Steps.

Having taken a step into the Sub-Perfection realm, my body had become significantly stronger. Through Yongcheon Acupoint, I could now explosively release more internal energy, allowing for even faster movement.

**Kkkraang!**

A sound now resembling thunder accompanied my accelerating body. My vision stretched like molasses, and the distant river came rushing near.

The water's surface rippled gently. The river was wide—if he were swimming to escape, he'd still be in the middle of crossing.

Which meant he hadn't crossed fully and was likely hiding somewhere.

Clicking my tongue, I released all the killing intent I had been restraining.

A thick wave of murderous intent blanketed the surroundings. Yet, nothing was caught—just a few moored boats swaying in place.

Though my qi perception, connected to that killing intent, could pick up fine details, its range was still average.

Left frowning by the riverbank, I soon noticed Seo Mun-Hwarin approaching. She had taken down or killed the remaining Demonic Cultists and assassins.

“Where did he go?”

“I’m not sure. I did hear him fall into the river, though.”

“Wait just a moment.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin closed her eyes and released her energy outward again, just like when she first detected the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s position.

Her expansive perception as a Flowering Stage expert easily covered an area the size of a small village. Even the Bloodflame Fist Demon couldn’t completely escape that.

But—

“This is troubling.”

She narrowed her eyes and stared toward the flowing river.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me...”

“It’s not that. Even the King of Assassins, the pinnacle of assassins, couldn’t completely hide from my perception. Naturally, I can still sense the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s location. But...”

With a helpless expression, Seo Mun-Hwarin sighed deeply and pointed downriver.

“Seems he’s learned water techniques. He’s submerged in the middle of the river and moving quickly away.”

“What?”

“I can still sense him now, but not for long. Chasing him... seems like it’s already too late.”

“Even with your speed, Senior?”

“If it were on land, I could easily catch up. But he’s hiding deep underwater.”

According to her explanation, running over water using Surface-Stepping or Air-Walking slows you down significantly.

She didn’t have the speed to catch someone like the Bloodflame Fist Demon, who was swimming downstream with the current while using Sugong.

And using fist force from land was also impractical due to the width of the river.

“Unless This One had trained in the Shaolin’s Hundred Steps Divine Fist, it’d be hard to land a blow.”

“Ah...”

Once you reach a certain level, it becomes possible to maintain the form of internal energy released outside the body.

When Tang Sowol reached Peak Stage, she could imbue her poison weapons with qi, and I had imbued my sword wind with qi to protect Seol Lihyang from the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

Though it varies by talent, anyone can do it by the time they reach first-class, or certainly by Peak Stage.

But still, since you're releasing internal energy externally, the efficiency naturally drops.

No matter how powerful the qi, the speed of a projectile is relatively slow.

Unless you've trained in martial arts that specialize in external energy attacks—like Kanggi Arts, or something like the Shaolin's Hundred Steps Divine Fist—you can't overcome that issue.

In the end, as Seo Mun-Hwarin said, capturing the Bloodflame Fist Demon right now was impossible.

I sheathed my drawn sword and looked quietly at Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“W-why are you looking at This One like that?!”

“It’s nothing.”

“Nothing, my foot! If you’ve something to say, speak without holding back!”

“I have nothing to say. I just thought something.”

“Eeh! Then tell This One what you were thinking, now!”

She stomped one foot with a pout. After watching her somewhat ridiculous gestures, I slowly spoke.

“Well... for someone who spoke so confidently, didn’t you produce rather underwhelming results?”

“Ggeaaahh!”

She clutched her flat chest and collapsed dramatically. It was a pitiful sight, so I patted her round shoulder.

“Don’t take it too hard. It’s not that you were useless, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. Just a bit unlucky this time.”

“Don’t look at This One with those eyes...!”

“It’s fine. I don’t blame you. Next time, you’ll do better.”

“Why can’t you say such commendable things all the time, not just now?!”

“We may have lost the Bloodflame Fist Demon, but you still captured a good number of Demonic Cultists. It’s a shame, sure—but still a solid outcome. Let’s interrogate them and pass them to the Peng and Yeon families. As for the Bloodflame Fist Demon... well, I’m sure we’ll get another chance.”

“Eeit! I will catch him next time! Remember that! Got it?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin jumped in place, making angry noises, swinging her arms wildly like she wanted to smack me—but couldn’t.

Smiling faintly, I turned around.

“Of course I’ll remember. Now let’s head back. Everyone’s waiting.”

“Kuheum. Very well.”

With Seo Mun-Hwarin now somewhat composed, we returned to where the others were.

Some of the enemies had been killed by Seo Mun-Hwarin, but most had just been rendered unable to move, their limbs shattered.

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye bound those squirming figures tightly to prevent them from committing suicide. Tang Sowol neutralized them with poison, and Seol Lihyang lined them up.

Watching the Demonic Cultists lying in a neat row, I smiled in satisfaction. Seol Lihyang frowned and asked in a half-annoyed voice:

“Cheon Hwi. Isn’t that a bit too much joy?”

“Think about what these guys did to the previous village. Of course I’m happy.”

I shrugged and brushed off her gaze, then squatted down in front of the nearest Demonic Cultist.

“Greetings.”

“Gguugh...!”

“Hmm. Interrogation won’t work if they can’t speak. Tang Sowol, can you free their mouths?”

“That’s simple.”

Tang Sowol drew a Feather Needle from her sleeve and stabbed the cultist’s face without hesitation.

Not to perform acupuncture, but to administer a mild dose of poison, as evidenced by the faint purple shimmer.

Soon after, the cultist finally regained the ability to speak.

“Uugh...”

The moment he opened his mouth, he tried to bite his tongue, so I quickly inserted a finger wrapped in internal energy to block him.

“Where do you think you’re going? From now on, even dying requires my permission.”

“Mmph! Mmphmph!”

He cursed with my finger in his mouth, though the foreign object made his words unintelligible—not that it mattered.

The cultist, weakened by the poison, squirmed weakly in resistance. I placed my palm on his chest.

**Vhuung!**

I injected internal energy and traced the meridians in the order I remembered.

It was a technique developed by the Orthodox Alliance before my regression to neutralize both the Mental Restrictions and Poison-Induced Pain implanted in Demonic Cultists.

The internal energy, far more refined than when I used it in front of Tang Jincheon, ransacked the cultist's body. Then—

**Puhak!**

He suddenly coughed up blood and stared blankly into space as if his soul had fled.

He looked like a complete fool now, and if left alone, he'd become one for real.

But until then, he'd have no choice but to answer any question I asked truthfully.

Thankfully, we had plenty of captives. I'd extract as much information as possible, step by step.

“First question. What's your purpose for sneaking into Hubei Province?”

“W-we... were targeting the Peng and Yeon families...”

He murmured weakly.

His sudden betrayal caused the surrounding Demonic Cultists to stir and seethe with rage.

But—

“Relax your eyes.”

You’re all next.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

The interrogation didn’t take very long.

It was something I had done dozens of times before my regression, and the captured Demonic Cultists weren't of a particularly high level, so it was only natural.

However, there was one issue.

“Brother Cheon, could it be that you've had a long-standing grudge against the Demonic Cult?”

The interrogation proceeded so smoothly that not only Tang Sowol, but the rest of the group also gave me curious looks.

After a brief pause, I shrugged nonchalantly.

“There were some incidents in the past. This is the same technique I used with Father-in-law when we interrogated the Demonic Cultist who orchestrated the attack on you.”

“Ah, that's why!”

“The Family Head must’ve been quite terrifying too.”

“That’s only natural. His daughter’s life was in danger—what sane parent wouldn’t act the same?”

Though I had invoked Tang Jincheon’s name, everyone accepted it without much suspicion.

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked over expectantly as if hoping for something more, but when she got no further reaction, she sulked slightly. Still, the situation smoothed over easily.

I turned to Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, both of whom wore serious expressions, deep in thought.

“We knew the situation was serious, but it was worse than expected. What will you do now? I’d like to continue pursuing the Bloodflame Fist Demon, but... you both seem to have more urgent duties.”

“I’ll return to my clan. This must be reported immediately.”

“Same for me. If it’s alright, may I take a few of the prisoners with me?”

Peng Woojin let out a deep sigh, and Seo Mun-Hwarin gestured toward the cultists we had intentionally left alive. I nodded to them.

“There are still plenty left alive. Aside from the ones we’ll turn over to the Murim Alliance, take whoever you want. But until you reach your clans, we’ll accompany you. The Bloodflame Fist Demon is a persistent one. If you move separately, you may not make it back alive.”

“You’re right. Thank you.”

“Thank you. I will make sure this favor is repaid when I return to my clan.”

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye bowed quietly.

Unlike their initial confident demeanor, they had become extremely cautious—which was understandable, given what they had just heard.

The information we uncovered through the interrogation had been shocking.

As expected, the Demonic Cult’s goal was to worsen relations between the Peng and Yeon families, and if necessary, to kill Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye in the process.

But that wasn't the only problem.

“To think they would use Poison-induced pill like that...”

The Demonic Cult's inferior version of a spiritual pill—referred to by their members as the Blood Pill—contained the heart of Poison-induced pill (Poison-induced pill).

It wasn't made from spiritual herbs or beasts, but by extracting the vital essence of ordinary animals. The process was cruel, and the resulting energy was murky.

Ironically, this made the Blood Pill the perfect place to hide the faintly foreign energy of Poison-induced pill's heart.

Still, I had no idea what the purpose of placing the heart of an already dead Poison-induced pill, and only the heart, into the pill could be.

The captured cultists knew very little, perhaps because they were merely accompanying the Bloodflame Fist Demon, so it was hard to learn everything through interrogation. Fortunately, there were many to question, allowing at least for some guesses.

As the Peng and Yeon families had already suspected, the Blood Pill itself was merely an ordinary pill with severe side effects. However, the Demonic Cult seemed to have a method to tamper with those who consumed it.

Exactly what kind of trick it was, I didn't know. Perhaps it allowed them to inflict pain at will on the user, or to perform evil methods using the pill as a medium.

Whatever the method, one thing was certain—it benefited the Demonic Cult, and would bring great harm to the Peng and Yeon families.

I briefly recalled how things unfolded before the regression.

After the deaths of Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, the two clans fell into a catastrophic relationship—while they stopped short of drawing swords, their feud was at its worst.

In the end, even when one side faced total annihilation, the other did not come to their aid.

Thus, the Peng Clan of Hubei and the Yeon Clan of Jinju were both defeated separately by the Demonic Cult before the Orthodox Alliance could even be formed.

Their destruction had come unnaturally fast, but that wasn't so different from other places where the Heavenly Demon had intervened directly.

If anything, the difference was that fewer survivors remained in their clans compared to the other fallen sects and houses.

Of course, most of their direct lineage and first-generation disciples were killed, with maybe one or two lucky enough to escape.

But the Demonic Cult was less persistent in hunting down collateral bloodlines and young, weak third-generation disciples.

Thanks to that, a good number survived and were able to bear witness to the fall of their clans and sects.

I wasn't sure if that was related to the current plan.

Well, it didn't matter much now.

The Demonic Cultists who had pursued Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye had either been turned into fools or completely subdued.

The only one who had gotten away was the Bloodflame Fist Demon, who fled in terror from Seo Mun-Hwarin's martial power.

It was a shame we hadn't killed him on the spot, but... right now, it was more important to ruin the Demonic Cult's plan than to capture the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

Letting out a long sigh, I turned to the others and spoke.

"For that reason, I plan to head for the Yeon Clan next, since it's closer. Is that alright?"

"Please proceed as you see fit, Brother Cheon."

"I'm fine with it too. But won't it be tough to transport this many prisoners on foot?"

"This One also agrees with you, Cheon Hwi. While it's a pity we let the Bloodflame Fist Demon escape, protecting those two and delivering this information must take priority."

Seeing the others agree without complaint brought a small smile to my lips.

“Thank you. And like you said, Seol Lihyang, it would be difficult to bring all these prisoners on foot. But fortunately, this is a riverside village. We’ll travel partway by boat.”

“Boats... I’ve never ridden one before.”

Maybe it was the relaxed atmosphere after the fight, or maybe she was just excited to try something new—Seol Lihyang giggled with anticipation.

Not far from the Yeon Clan’s territory ran a river called Yoha, and this stream connected to it.

Including our group of six and the surviving prisoners, we needed transport for over ten people. There was no way a small village like this would have carriages that large.

It was much better to travel by boat to the nearest point, then send a message and wait for an escort.

“Well then, let’s depart. But before that, we should handle some things first.”

I drew my sword and pointed it at the mindless Demonic Cultists. Watching me, Seol Lihyang hesitated for a moment, then asked:

“You’re going to kill them?”

“Yes. Just so it’s clear, even if we left them alive, they’d die soon anyway—they can’t even feed themselves in that state.”

“Mm. I’m not going to stop you. We saw what these guys did when they burned that village. They deserve to die. It’s just... I got a little scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“That even these guys probably have their own grudges, and since they had no other outlet, they turned to martial arts... but in the process, they hurt others and created more grudges. That cycle—it just felt overwhelming.”

“Let me be clear. Even if resentment and vengeance are important in Murim, the Demonic Cult has long since crossed the line. As Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin said before, what they’re doing is just madness and slaughter.”

“I know that too. It’s just... I nearly died just now, remember?”

“If you mean the fist technique the Bloodflame Fist Demon used—no, you wouldn’t have died from that. I’ll always block it. No matter how many times.”

“Huh? Uh... th-thanks?”

Seol Lihyang blinked, then looked away. After taking a deep breath, she continued.

“Anyway! That’s what I wanted to say. That... I really thought I might die. And I worried—about what would happen to you and Sister Tang if I did.”

“What do you mean what would happen? Obviously, I’d have to get revenge.”

That sort of thing won’t happen in this life. It won’t—but if Seol Lihyang were to be killed for any reason, I would absolutely avenge her. Just like I had in my past life.

Seol Lihyang looked stunned at my immediate answer, then shook her head.

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about. That it’d be too much. Of course, I want to live long too, but if something happens, I’d rather just go with Sister Tang and—”

“Stop. Don’t say anything so unlucky. That’s enough of that talk.”

Perhaps it was because I suddenly recalled Seol Lihyang’s end from my previous life. I cut her off with an unusually cold tone.

She flinched, then forced a bright smile.

“Mm. I guess I went a bit far. Sorry. I’ll go with Sister Tang and check on the boats while you finish up here.”

“Alright.”

I reverted to my usual tone, but Seol Lihyang had already darted off, grabbing Tang Sowol’s arm and heading toward the villagers.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I efficiently cut down the mindless Demonic Cultists.

Then I handed the still-conscious ones over to Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye and approached Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been silently observing from nearby.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. I have a request.”

“I already know. If the Bloodflame Fist Demon hasn’t given up, his last chance to strike will be during the boat journey. I’ll remain vigilant until we arrive.”

“Thank you.”

“But... you look troubled. It doesn’t seem to be just about Seol Lihyang. This One also wishes to ask something.”

“What is it?”

“This One knows you once had a master from the Seo Mun Clan, like me. And I understand your grudge against the Black Sky Sword Sect.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked up at me, her expression more serious than usual.

“But now I see—your grudge against the Demonic Cult isn’t ordinary either. You accepted the risk of ruining your reputation and even your life for This One. I am deeply grateful for that.”

“Helping me like this and watching over my martial arts occasionally is more than enough.”

“This One is not trying to pressure or pry anything out of you. Just... I want you to know. Not only This One, but everyone here is on your side.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, avoiding the faint crimson gleam in Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes.

I still didn’t know the reason for my regression. Just thinking of the Heavenly Demon was overwhelming. The Demonic Cult was more meticulous than expected, and their mental restrictions were airtight.

Even I couldn’t help but feel stifled.

But still, I was making progress.

I had become stronger than before my regression, protected people I hadn't saved before, and was uncovering and preventing the Demonic Cult's schemes one by one.

I might never forget the past, but I didn't need to keep reacting so sharply to it.

Taking a deep breath, I spoke.

"I should talk with Seol Lihyang on the boat."

"That's a wise choice."

Seo Mun-Hwarin smiled and gently patted my back with her small hand just as Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang returned.

"Brother Cheon! There aren't any boats big enough for all of us, so we just borrowed several! Some of the local fishermen will act as guides and oarsmen."

"I figured as much."

When fighting the Bloodflame Fist Demon, I had already noticed the docked boats were all similar in size. At most, they'd hold three or four people not counting the boatman.

“Hehe, it’s a bit different from the boat ride I imagined, but at least I get to be on the same boat as Brother Cheon.”

“Ah, sorry. Would it be alright if I rode with Seol Lihyang this time?”

“...Huh?”

My tone and expression were calm, but my answer came a beat late—and it created a subtle pressure, so I quickly added:

“There’s something I need to talk to her about. I’ll head over to your boat right after.”

“Ah? If that’s the case, sure.”

Satisfied, Tang Sowol nodded with a bright smile.

Relieved, I boarded the somewhat cramped boat.

And then—the Bloodflame Fist Demon, whom I had thought long gone, reappeared.

**KWAANG!**

Together with a torrent of mud and stone as he collapsed the embankment nearby—

The boat carrying Seol Lihyang and me capsized.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

It's something I occasionally think about—martial artists often have a poorer imagination compared to others.

That's because, the higher one's level becomes, the more problems they can solve with strength alone.

If your body is strong, there's little reason to use your head.

But that's only a tendency, not an absolute rule.

Before the regression, the martial artists of the Zhuge Clan and the Sama Clan wracked their brains to buy time against the Demonic Cult, and now, the Bloodflame Fist Demon—who revealed himself from so far away that even Seo Mun-Hwarin's qi perception couldn't reach—was doing the same.

Flames erupted from the tiny, distant silhouette. Without that fire, we might not have even realized it was him.

**KWAANG!**

“W-What was that?!”

Seol Lihyang jumped to her feet mid-conversation, startled by the explosion echoing from afar.

A quick glance told me the other boats were in similar confusion.

Not because they were frightened by the Bloodflame Fist Demon's attack—but because of its consequences.

He must've prepared in advance—he brought down the embankment we had passed in a single blow.

At the same time, the contents of a small reservoir, previously blocked by the embankment, poured into the river.

**Ka-ga-ga-kak!**

The surge of earth and rock, unleashed from the collapsing sides the Bloodflame Fist Demon hadn't yet destroyed, overturned the once-calm river.

Perhaps to avoid Seo Mun-Hwarin's detection, he did this from a considerable distance—but that didn't mean we had the luxury to leisurely dock and escape.

Someone like Seo Mun-Hwarin or myself could manage to avoid it, but the others wouldn't be so lucky.

Of course, it wasn't likely anyone would die just from this debris flow.

As intense as it looked, it wasn't quite at the scale of a full landslide. Besides Seol Lihyang, everyone else had martial strength beyond Peak Stage, and their bodies were strong.

As long as they avoided drowning, they should be fine. And Seol Lihyang was right next to me, so I'd protect her no matter what.

But that's only if things go well.

If we made a mistake... I didn't want to imagine what could happen.

Even if no one died, severe injuries were more than likely.

And it wasn't just us. There were the fishermen we'd brought from the previous village as guides and rowers, and the captured Demonic Cultists. Most of them wouldn't survive.

Seo Mun-Hwarin must have had the same thought. She scowled and shouted loudly:

"Everyone, hold on tightly to the boats so you don't get thrown off!"

A surprising order. Not to disperse and escape, but to cling to the boats?

As if she intended to hold it off head-on.

And shockingly, she was right.

Seo Mun-Hwarin unleashed her vast internal energy without restraint and struck toward the approaching debris flow with a fist glowing red from qi energy.

**Puhhng!**

Her punch, formed purely from condensed qi, crushed the surging earth and stones, splitting even the river to reveal its bottom for a brief moment.

But that only pushed back the debris flow for now.

So Seo Mun-Hwarin didn't stop.

**Puhhng! Puhhng! Puhhng!**

There was no finesse in her movements. She simply threw her fists as fast and as hard as she could.

And that alone was enough. Her punches shattered the furious debris flow head-on.

The rocks and dirt lost their momentum and began to sink. The water, previously held back, split around us and flowed harmlessly past.

It was like watching someone defy the laws of nature with sheer human power.

But the moment of awe didn't last.

Though Seo Mun-Hwarin blocked most of the debris flow, a problem arose at the final moment.

The redirected water surged and rolled back in waves, making the boat rock violently.

And as she stood on unstable footing, pouring all her power into her fists, her punch skewed—just slightly.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't be an issue. But with such overwhelming force clashing, even the smallest mistake could lead to disaster.

In simple terms, Seo Mun-Hwarin's punch barely missed, and a chunk of debris and rushing current came crashing straight toward my boat.

There wasn't enough time to jump to a nearby vessel. Jumping higher would mean more time spent suspended midair.

There was no choice.

“Cheon Hwi!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin turned toward me with a panicked expression, but I shook my head and drew my sword.

“Don't worry. Just focus on your part.”

We'd nearly blocked the whole thing. It'd be a waste to make a mistake now.

I poured all my inner energy into the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art and swung my sword.

**Ssskuk.**

The blood-red flame of my sword sliced cleanly through the boulder barreling toward me, splitting it in two and parting the rushing current behind it.

Though I couldn't match Seo Mun-Hwarin's power, I'd seen enough of her to replicate at least this much.

“Oof.”

Maybe because I sliced rather than smashed, the two split rocks didn't fly off completely. One grazed the end of the boat.

**KWAJIK!**

A sharp cracking sound as one side of the boat was torn open. The violent water surged through the gap and, before I could react—

The boat rocked hard.

Just as I pulled Seol Lihyang into my arms—

The boat could no longer hold. It capsized completely, and the current swept us away.

A chilling cold seized my whole body. I unknowingly inhaled river water through my nose. I caught a glimpse of our little boat growing distant.

That's when I realized—

Seol Lihyang and I had been separated from the others.

“Puhah!”

I gasped for breath and threw myself onto the welcoming land.

While helplessly swallowing water, my foot happened to hit something. I didn't miss the chance—kicked off it with all my strength and crawled ashore.

Anyone watching might've likened me to a fish leaping from the river.

“Ugh.”

I gagged out the mud and river water I'd gulped. My vision cleared.

Once I regained my senses, I checked the unconscious Seol Lihyang in my arms.

“She's... still breathing.”

She must've just passed out from the shock. At a glance, she didn't appear to be seriously injured.

With a sigh of relief, I sent qi through every part of my body to assess my condition.

Unlike Seol Lihyang, I'd taken some hits, but I had used internal energy to protect myself, so other than some bruises, I had no serious injuries.

It hurt, sure—but I could move.

I stood up and looked around.

“...I have no idea where we are.”

The only clear thing was that there were no signs of human habitation nearby, and a short distance away, there was a gap between some rocks.

Sighing again, I picked up the unconscious Seol Lihyang and carried her to the spot I had seen.

It was just large enough for two people to fit. Damp, buggy—not a place to stay long.

But I couldn't let her stay soaked. This would have to do for now.

First, I released a light wave of killing intent around the area.

Soon, bugs and small animals began fleeing. That should keep them away for a while.

After laying Seol Lihyang down gently, I drew my sword and used concentrated sword qi to slice off part of a nearby rock.

I hammered the cut piece into the floor of the crevice to create a rough platform where she could lie more comfortably.

Then I gathered some dry grass and branches, lit a small fire a little away from the entrance, and angled it so that the smoke would drift out while the heat stayed in.

With that, I finally laid Seol Lihyang down inside and sat back, leaning against the wall.

I took off my soaked shirt and draped it over a protruding rock to dry.

I guess I'd grown accustomed to roughing it—this was surprisingly manageable.

“Phew...”

As I exhaled, the tension left my body. While my body was still relaxed, I adjusted my posture and began circulating my qi to recover.

I didn't have any major internal or external injuries—just too much qi expended.

I had used internal energy constantly to protect my body during the entire drift.

How long had I stayed in meditation like that?

I hadn't let my guard down, so I could still feel faint movements around me.

I paused my breathing technique and opened my eyes.

There, Seol Lihyang was slowly regaining consciousness.

“Khak! Khak... bwuaaagh!”

Just like I had, she coughed a few times and vomited out a good deal of water.

After wiping her mouth with her sleeve as if nothing had happened, Seol Lihyang blankly looked my way.

Her eyes were unfocused, like someone just waking up. But it didn't last long.

Like light shining through murky water, her eyes quickly regained clarity—and settled right on my bare chest.

“W-What?! Why are you undressed?!”

Flushed red, she panicked. Her eyes darted, arms flailed, voice trembled.

It was obvious what kind of misunderstanding she was having.

Frankly, it was amusing, so I decided to let her play it out.

“I mean... I wouldn’t never consider it, but there’s a proper order to things, right? I should settle things with Sister Tang first, and there’s still a lot we need to do, so doing this now is a bit...”

Mumbling nonsense, Seol Lihyang looked around—and finally realized something was off.

“Where are we?”

“Tell me what else you think we ‘should do’ first, and I’ll tell you.”

“Eeit!”

She shot up, still bright red, and began furiously smacking my head.

She didn’t hit hard—more like harmless swats.

“Forget it! Forget everything you saw and heard just now!!”

“Unfortunately, I have a very good memory. I’ll probably remember this even after dying and being reborn.”

“Kyaaaah!”

Even if I fail to defeat the Heavenly Demon and regress once more, I doubt I could ever forget this moment with Seol Lihyang.

That was all I meant—yet for some reason, she screamed and shook my shoulders like crazy.

I let her for a moment, then gently placed my hand over hers.

“Calm down.”

“I can’t! I’d rather bite my tongue and die here before Sister Tang finds out!”

“She won’t kill you.”

“You don’t know that! If it were me, I’d be so annoying about it!”

...Ah.

I recalled the Seol Lihyang from before the regression. After spending the night together, she’d slowly approach and give me side-eyes if I so much as talked to another woman.

The only exception was Seo Mun-Hwarin—maybe. Even then, when we sparred late into the night, she would wait in my room to see when I came back.

Smiling wryly, I gently lowered her hand and wrapped both of mine around it.

“It’s alright. Calm down.”

“Ugh!”

Seol Lihyang glared as if asking how I could stay calm. I continued, still holding her hand.

“Do you remember what happened? When the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s trap made us fall into the river.”

“That... yeah, I remember. I clearly recall clinging to you for dear life so I wouldn’t be swept away. But after that, it’s a blur. What happened?”

“Not much. You must’ve hit your head—just passed out for a bit. We ended up here by luck. I don’t know exactly where, but it’s clear there are no people nearby.”

“Passing out doesn’t sound like ‘not much’... but okay. I guess if we keep going downriver, we’ll find something. Our destination was downstream anyway.”

“You’re right. A river this big must have at least one or two villages that rely on it.”

“But...?”

“There’s just one concern.”

“That the Bloodflame Fist Demon might know we got separated.”

Judging by his past behavior, he would definitely try to find us and take us hostage.

He couldn't beat Seo Mun-Hwarin, so he'd likely try to make a deal—us, in exchange for Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye.

In the Demonic Cult, completing the mission matters more than a comrade's life.

If it were any other enemy, I might have simply vowed to cut them down if they dared target us—but the opponent is the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

He had remained just short of Sub-Perfection for years, so there shouldn't be much difference between now and before the regression.

But even back then, when I was stronger than I am now, I never once had the upper hand against him.

I had no intention of going down easily—but if you asked whether I could win, honestly, he was a difficult foe.

With all these thoughts spinning in my head, my mouth moved on its own, expressing what I truly felt.

“...How about we just live in hiding for a while?”

“Wha—huh?! Wh-What?!”

Seol Lihyang made a strange noise, like a machine malfunctioning.