

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 121-130

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"How about we hide out together for a while?"

“Huh? Uh? Eh? Hek?!”

Seol Lihyang suddenly let out strange noises. She kept gasping but couldn't exhale properly, and her limbs flailed about without rest.

Even in that state, her eyes kept scanning over my upper body.

I gave a hollow laugh and shook my head at her odd behavior, like she'd short-circuited or something.

“It's a joke. Don't take it seriously.”

“Hey! What kind of joke is that?!”

“Did you think I was serious?”

“A little?”

Maybe it was because she had just shouted, but Seol Lihyang seemed slightly calmer now. She let out a deep sigh and leaned back against a nearby rock.

It looked like she was facing me. Though her eyes were closed, as if exhausted, she continued speaking.

“The situation is what it is. Even if you seem reckless, Cheon Hwi, I know you’ve thought this through. I was prepared for at least a month or two. After all, the Bloodflame Fist Demon will come after us, right?”

“He probably will. If he wants to gain the upper hand over Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, he’ll have no choice but to take one of us hostage.”

Maybe it was because he was so easy to read. Seol Lihyang seemed to be slowly understanding the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s mindset.

Whether or not he could actually find us, I didn't know, but I was certain he'd thoroughly search the path downstream from the river.

It would come down to whether Seo Mun-Hwarin or the Bloodflame Fist Demon found us first, and how long we could stay hidden. That would be the key to this entire situation.

Nodding, I added jokingly,

“So we're screwed?”

“Not yet, so shut your mouth! Don't you know words have power?!”

A strange sense of déjà vu in this conversation. Seol Lihyang must've felt it too, as she reflexively shrieked.

Afterward, she looked like she was mulling something over, her lips moving silently for a while before she finally spoke.

“If. If the Bloodflame Fist Demon finds us first...”

She continued in a voice full of certainty, the kind only someone who had truly thought things through could manage.

“Then just use me as bait.”

“What did you say?”

“You’re going to get stronger, Cheon Hwi. There’s so much you still need to do. But I’m not at that level, right? Besides, I’m only alive thanks to you.”

“You said the Bloodflame Fist Demon reached Sub-Perfection while we were still crawling as babies. And yeah, you’re at Peak Stage now. But it’s still dangerous, isn’t it?”

“So if it comes to that, just leave me behind. If there’s only one hostage, he won’t be able to kill me easily. Come back later with Sister Seorin and save me, okay?”

I didn’t respond, just listened to Seol Lihyang’s words. After turning them over in my mind for a moment, I slowly stood up.

“W-what? You said the Bloodflame Fist Demon is strong and evil, and that we only got away because of Seorin! Isn’t it better that at least one of us survives rather than both getting caught or one dying—”

Maybe she sensed something unusual as I stood up, because she started rambling in a panic.

I covered her mouth with my hand.

“Mmmp?!”

The soft feel of her lips and the tickle of her breath against my palm—warmth that should’ve been calming only made things worse.

I took a deep breath to settle the whirlwind of mixed emotions swirling within me.

Then, with a bit of resentment, I grabbed Seol Lihyang’s cheeks with both hands and pulled.

Stretch. Stretch!

“Ow! That hurts! What the heck, why are you doing this all of a sudden?!”

“That’s what I should be asking you.”

I kept pulling her cheeks as I continued.

“Yeah, I might’ve said something weak. Things aren’t going great right now.”

What I couldn’t say was that I had already challenged the Bloodflame Fist Demon multiple times before regressing—and lost every single time.

“But so what? If I’m the type to run away and leave my people behind out of fear, I wouldn’t have picked up a sword to begin with.”

Swinging a sword whenever you feel like it is disgraceful, but not being able to draw it when you must—that’s just pathetic.

I never wanted to become that kind of person.

“So don’t go around saying crap like ‘leave me behind.’ Got it?”

“Nope. I don’t get it.”

Still in the same cheek-pinched position, Seol Lihyang reached out and pinched my cheek in return.

She stared at me with an indignant, sharp gaze and continued.

“Then what, we all die together? At least one of us should make it back alive!”

“You think you’ll be able to sleep peacefully if you survive that way? I know I wouldn’t.”

“You’re right. But do you have a plan? If you don’t have a method, you need to be prepared for the worst!”

“Then we just win. That’s the plan.”

“And how exactly are we going to win?!”

“We’ll figure it out now.”

“That means you don’t have a plan!”

Seol Lihyang pinched my cheek harder. I also kept pulling on hers, and we went back and forth like that for a while.

Eventually, I let go, wondering what the hell we were even doing.

“Huuu...”

“What now?”

She also let go awkwardly after I released her first. I shook my head at her.

“We’re too old for this nonsense.”

“Eighteen’s not too bad, right?”

In the face of a real eighteen-year-old’s cautious logic, the fake one—me—couldn’t say anything.

Instead, I sighed deeply and sat down beside her.

Seol Lihyang, still rubbing her reddened cheek, looked at me for a moment before letting out a small laugh.

“Doesn’t this feel kind of nostalgic?”

“Nostalgic... ah, right. We did have a similar talk when we first met.”

Back in front of the Pavilion Master of Honghwaru, when I kidnapped Seol Lihyang and had to shake off the pursuing Hao Sect members...

When I was getting worn out, Seol Lihyang had said something similar back then too.

She brought her knees together and rested her forehead on them, speaking in a slightly subdued tone.

“Actually, I think the same way you do, Cheon Hwi. I didn’t want to be a burden in times like this. That’s why I decided to learn martial arts.”

“Is that why?”

“Yeah. I thought if I got strong, I could be helpful, like Sister Tang. But it’s not easy.”

“Nothing in life ever is.”

“You know, sometimes you talk like an old man. Like just now.”

She didn’t know I had regressed, so that’s not what she meant—but still, it felt like a gut punch for some reason.

I just stared at her instead of answering, and she stared right back without flinching.

It felt like I'd lose if I looked away first.

As our sudden staring contest continued, I found myself peering into her dark eyes... and then a thought came to me.

“Could you focus your Yin Qi on me with your sound arts, but make sure it doesn't harm me?”

“Huh? You mean just cool you down? I already do that all the time.”

Seol Lihyang hadn't been in the martial world long, so while she had learned martial arts, she wasn't constrained by a martial artist's traditional thinking.

Unlike the orthodox sect warriors who treated their swords as sacred objects and hesitated to even cut meat with them, saying swords were only for battle...

Seol Lihyang freely used her martial arts for practical purposes when needed.

When it got hot, she'd come into my or Tang Sowol's room and release Yin Qi to cool the place down.

When we drank water, she'd chill it with her internal qi to make it icy.

During particularly hot nights, Tang Sowol often hugged Seol Lihyang to fall asleep.

But what I was asking for now was different.

“It’s similar, but not quite. Before, you just adjusted the intensity to make things cool. Now, I want you to go all out and try to freeze me—but keep the chill on the surface only, not letting it enter.”

“Hmm. Like clothing, then?”

“Exactly like that.”

I had never once beaten the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

But that didn’t mean I was absolutely weaker than him—it was more about me not being able to withstand his blazing yang qi.

Natural Qi is fundamentally balanced, with Yin and Yang in harmony.

Martial arts techniques usually absorb this balanced Qi, making one's internal qi neutral as well.

But some rare techniques build up either Yin or Yang exclusively—like Seol Lihyang's Glacial True Qi or the Bloodflame Fist Demon's Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art.

Normally, such imbalance causes side effects—but those with special constitutions like Seol Lihyang, or those willing to endure the side effects like the Bloodflame Fist Demon, can wield terrifying power.

It turns their internal qi into a weapon, like a sharp awl. A slip, and that unbalanced qi will tear through an opponent's insides.

That's why Seol Lihyang had been able to fight so effectively against those stronger than her at the Yongbong Gathering.

And why, despite my sword not being inferior to the Bloodflame Fist Demon's fists, I was still overwhelmed.

Even a small mistake would lead to internal injury. Even with sword qi for defense, the heat would make my sword too hot to grip properly.

And just raising my qi caused intense heat, draining me quickly.

I couldn't show my full strength, but the Bloodflame Fist Demon could.

That's why martial artists hide their techniques and only pass them down to disciples or blood relatives.

Once a technique becomes known, counters arise. And if there's a counter, the technique's power becomes meaningless.

Techniques like extreme Yin or Yang-based arts are rare, so counters are less known.

That's why I knew what the problem was but couldn't deal with it—until now.

Because Seol Lihyang was right beside me.

Her cultivation level was lower, but her purity and control of Yin Qi were second to none.

And everyone with even a basic understanding of martial arts knows—Yin cancels out Yang.

If I fought in front while Seol Lihyang backed me up with Yin Qi, maybe... just maybe, we could do this.

“That’s why I asked. Can you do it?”

“I’ll try... but it’s hard. I’ve never done it this way.”

Of course. It’s basically asking someone to swing a sword with full strength and stop just before it hits.

That’s not easy for Seol Lihyang right now.

While I nodded to myself, Seol Lihyang scratched her head with a complicated look.

“You want to use my Glacial True Qi to block some of the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s qi, right? I get what you’re thinking, Cheon Hwi. But even if it works, you’ll still be moving all over the place during the fight, right? I don’t think I can keep up.”

“Oh.”

I hadn’t considered that—but she was right.

Even if Seol Lihyang had a genius talent for handling Yin Qi, it would be hard for her to match the speed of a Sub-Perfection master and maintain Yin coverage around me.

It’s practically saying she’d have to follow the battle between two Sub-Perfection level experts using pure qi techniques.

If she could do that, she’d be at Sub-Perfection herself already.

After a short pause, I came up with another solution.

“Then I’ll just have you inject the Yin Qi into me from the start.”

“H-how?”

Seol Lihyang gulped and asked. I shook my head at her.

“Don’t be dirty. It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“How do you know what I’m thinking, Cheon Hwi?!”

“Besides, we haven’t trained in Seduction Techniques. Even if we did 'unite,' it wouldn’t change much.”

“U-unite?! I wasn’t thinking that!”

Despite her protests, she hid her face in embarrassment.

I let her flustered excuses go in one ear and out the other as I continued.

“Just place your hand on my back and inject the qi. As long as you guide the purest Yin Qi into me while avoiding my meridians, I’ll handle the rest.”

“Oh, if it’s just that...”

Seol Lihyang nodded, eyes still tightly shut.

After that, we spent a few days traveling along the river, practicing with her Yin Qi in various ways.

Then, the Bloodflame Fist Demon appeared in front of us.

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“It’s not easy.”

“Who was the one saying, ‘Just give me pure internal qi and I’ll handle the rest?’”

Seol Lihyang giggled as she pulled her hand away from my back.

After taking a day to rest, we carefully traveled along the riverbank, trying out various methods to see if I could make use of the Yin Qi she had transferred into me.

Like suppressing a spreading poison by concentrating it in one place using internal qi when afflicted—

I tried encasing Seol Lihyang's Yin Qi within my own internal qi, binding it to a corner of my body and releasing it when needed.

Or instead of drawing it into my meridians, simply pushing it out to coat the surface of my body.

We tried several other methods too, but most of the results were... underwhelming.

Well, of course—they weren't my internal qi. I couldn't operate them directly, and the longer I held onto them, the more chills I got, with minor side effects as well.

Even worse, when I tried drawing up my qi to swing my sword in earnest, my focus would scatter, interfering with my power.

Still, I figured it was worth trying for a simple reason.

“At the very least, it’s better than before.”

“That... yeah, that’s true.”

The more I repeated the process, the more familiar it became.

That was partly thanks to Seol Lihyang’s incredibly refined Yin Qi and also due to my own skill at managing internal qi.

But more than that, it was likely due to my past life’s experience of syncing up with her.

Our martial techniques may differ, but the Yin Qi at their core originated from Seol Lihyang herself.

I was quickly adapting to her qi.

Also, by cautiously infusing me with only the most purified qi every day, Seol Lihyang’s own internal qi control had visibly improved.

“I still can’t keep it for long, or use it like my own... but since the point is just to block invading Yang Qi momentarily, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But I’m not sure if this is the right way. When I was learning from my master, they told me never to accept someone else’s internal qi, or inject mine into someone else.”

“They’re not wrong. From a conventional viewpoint, what I’m doing is practically suicidal.”

“What?! Wait, you mean it’s that dangerous?!”

“It’s fine. I’m a bit of a special case.”

After all, why is it dangerous to mix internal qi with someone else’s? It’s because energies of differing nature can clash, tearing through the meridians.

In other words, the risks lie in internal injury or qi.

But those are things I’m all too familiar with.

The internal qi of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art is soaked in the killing intent I've accumulated. And after defeating the Black Sky Sword Emperor, that intent no longer grew darker, freeing me from the risk of Qi.

In other words, I had been living side by side with Qi until recently.

It's not like Seol Lihyang is violently forcing her Qi through my meridians—she's gently pushing it in. So there's no real danger from this.

“So don't worry. It's all right.”

“Ugh... if you say it's okay, then I'll keep going, but... can we really make it in time?”

“In time for what?”

“I mean for your fight with the Bloodflame Fist Demon. Can you get used to it enough before then?”

“There’s no way to know. But since I don’t know, I figure I should try as much as I can. Actually, looks like we’re about to find out.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

A familiar presence—if you could call it that—was approaching from ahead.

Seol Lihyang hadn’t noticed it yet, probably because her sensory range didn’t reach that far. She only tilted her head, puzzled.

But not me. It wasn’t just the range—it was the unmistakable demonic qi, unpleasant yet impossible to ignore.

There was only one person in the area with that level of maggi.

“Bloodflame Fist Demon.”

“Why are you suddenly saying his name—huh??”

A sudden gust of wind rustled the long-hanging branches near the riverbank, revealing the landscape beyond.

A wide, open gravel field. At its center stood a middle-aged man I had seen once before, arms crossed, waiting for us.

Though he was still far enough away to just barely register at the edge of my senses, it wasn't far enough that we could escape now.

I might be able to get away if I was lucky, but Seol Lihyang? She wasn't fast enough.

Perhaps aware of this, the man didn't even bother telling us not to run. He simply smiled with leisure.

He looked completely different from when he faced Seo Mun-Hwarin, which was a little amusing—but the quiet pressure emanating from the Bloodflame Fist Demon's body was very real.

With a tense expression, Seol Lihyang carefully hid behind me and gently pressed her hand to my back, beginning to infuse Yin Qi.

Maybe worried he'd notice, she did so slowly. I opened my mouth to stall for time.

“Hey, after running away once, shouldn’t you have gone home quietly? Why the hell are you wandering around outside so dangerously?”

“Heh. Mouthy for someone so young. Though I suppose you’ve got the skills to back it up. Unless you’ve been through some rejuvenating transformation like the White-Haired Rakshasa... are you just a genius? A shame, but you’ll still have to die. One hostage is enough.”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon uncrossed his arms with a smirk. He didn’t look like he was going to attack immediately, but it didn’t seem like he’d drag out the conversation either.

I calmly placed my hand on my sword hilt and observed him.

Red hair streaked with gray, thick muscles defying his age thanks to the overflowing Yang Qi, and skin tanned like he lived under constant sun.

Then there was his twisted mouth—perhaps from the constant burning pain caused by the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art’s side effects—making it impossible to tell if he was smiling or crying.

Altogether, a man with an unsettling appearance.

“Who’s going to die is still up in the air... but before one of us does, I want to ask you something. Do you also think, like Shadow Ghost, that all martial artists deserve to die?”

“Hm? I heard Shadow Ghost was killed by the Tang Clan, but to think he lost to such a young one.”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon clicked his tongue in disbelief, then suddenly grew serious.

“Of course not. I’m not that extreme. I just believe that things like the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans need to be wiped out. You’re Tang Clan’s son-in-law, aren’t you? That kid behind you doesn’t even wear the green robe—she’s probably just a guest, if anything.”

“...That’s right.”

“Hostages are only useful when alive. You can’t take someone you’re about to kill hostage. So that’s how it is. Blame your talent, and blame marrying into the Tang Clan.”

Yeah. I already knew.

It's not like I hadn't fought him several times before my regression.

Shadow Ghost wanted the death of all martial artists, including himself, so there would be no more innocent people harmed by the martial world.

The Ghost-Eyed Witch—though I didn't know the details—sought the destruction of the Sama Clan.

Other martial artists in the Central Plains only killed when necessary.

But the Bloodflame Fist Demon didn't seek the eradication of martial arts or vengeance against any specific group responsible for his misfortune.

He simply wanted to eliminate the powerful—specifically, the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans.

No, more precisely, he believed that any group which gained too much power had to be destroyed.

So even if the current great powers were wiped out, and new ones began to rise, the Bloodflame Fist Demon would try to burn those fledgling forces to the ground.

He hadn't said it, but given the chance, he'd likely want to burn the Imperial Court too.

What he desired was one thing: a single set of rules applied equally to all.

No excuses like, "He's strong," "He's rich," "He was born into a good family," or "He's saved many lives."

He hated the idea of such reasons becoming excuses to overlook a person's sins.

It was as if he were trying to correct a world where the man who beat his father to death was praised, and the one who exacted rightful revenge was condemned.

But there's a huge flaw in that thinking.

"You're full of crap. So you want to destroy the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans? Sure, I know your backstory, so I can guess your reason. Let's say you succeed. Then what?"

“What do you think? I’d burn anyone else who starts amassing too much power too—”

“Then you’d better burn yourself first. Or maybe you already are. After all, that technique of yours is a demonic art for a reason.”

I grinned as I mentioned the side effects of the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art. The Bloodflame Fist Demon’s expression hardened.

“You... What did you just say?”

“What do you think I said? It’s obvious. You’re a monstrous killer who believes in his own strength and massacres innocent people.”

“Massacre? It was all necessary. A justified sacrifice for a greater cause!”

“Do you really believe that?”

Of course not.

He didn't want to admit it, but the Bloodflame Fist Demon knew all too well.

That at some point, he had become the very kind of person he once despised.

It's not rare. Whether we like it or not, we're shaped by vivid memories, and we often swear to never become like someone from our past—only to end up that way.

Even I became a dark martial artist, killing for money and martial arts, just like the black-path bastards who killed my parents.

Sure, there's a difference between killing powerless civilians and killing martial artists ready to die—but still.

“There's no need to feel ashamed. Everyone's like that. Everyone thinks they're the exception. 'I'll be fine. I can do it. I'm different.' But it's all meaningless in the end.”

Shadow Ghost wanted the death of all martial artists. That included even the Heavenly Demon he revered, and himself.

That's why, when asked, he could easily say that once his mission was complete, he would take his own life.

But look at this guy.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon was spouting words he didn't truly believe.

That contradiction—that unresolved inner demon—is why even after more than ten years at the Sub-Perfection level, he's still stagnant.

As I stared him down, the Bloodflame Fist Demon answered with a calm, composed look. The gaze that saw me as a mere child was gone.

In a more serious tone, he spoke.

“You seem to know quite a bit about me. Don't tell me... you knew I was in Hubei?”

“Hardly. I've just always kept an interest in the Demonic Cult. Isn't it odd not to recognize one of its most famous names just because of his age?”

“I see. Then all the more reason to kill you. You’d be a hindrance to our great work.”

With a growl, the Bloodflame Fist Demon clenched both fists, and crimson-black flames rose from them.

At that moment, Seol Lihyang removed her hand from my back and stepped away.

The weight of the Yin Qi settled deep in my core. I grinned and raised my sword.

“In the end, you're no different—but you still call it some great mission.”

Two warriors with no intention of backing down had drawn their weapons.

Kill, or be killed.

Only one ending awaited us.

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I drew my sword and leveled it.

A movement I had repeated hundreds, no, thousands of times—my internal energy flowed naturally, awakening every sense in my body.

My five senses sharpened, allowing me to perceive the world more precisely, and the killing intent that exuded instinctively merged with my aura, responding to any hint of hostility in the surrounding area.

And then, my sword.

From the blade, now wreathed in a crimson-red aura close to the color of blood, rose the history I had carved out with every battle—thick with killing intent.

All of it for one purpose: the death of the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

He flinched when he faced the full force of my killing intent and narrowed his eyes.

“You. Why are you standing over there?”

“You acted like you were about to fight any moment, and now you're asking me that?”

No matter how intense my killing aura was, it wasn't enough to make a Sub-Perfection master hesitate. At most, it would slow them down a little.

Instead of striking with his flame-wreathed fists, the Bloodflame Fist Demon opened his mouth to talk.

“Your aura... it's certainly not ordinary, but I've seen that kind of killing intent before. There were quite a few maniacs in the Demonic Cult who carried that same stench. How can someone like you stand on the side of the orthodox sects?”

“What nonsense are you spewing now?”

He must've felt something from the imagery within my killing aura and deluded himself into thinking we shared the same ideals.

“If our goals are aligned... if you're hiding in the Tang Clan just to wait for the right time—then perhaps we can talk.”

“Are you suggesting I join the Demonic Cult?”

“I’m saying, if you want to, I’ll help you.”

“Hah.”

I let out a short, incredulous laugh.

Sure, the darkness I harbored might resemble the Demonic Cult’s—but still.

“Typical cultists. Always thinking they’re the victims of the world.”

“No more talk. Raise your fists—or offer your neck. If there’s anyone I need to take revenge on, it’s people like you.”

The Yin Qi I’d received from Seol Lihyang wouldn’t last long.

I had stalled for time earlier to let her finish the transfer, but now, I had to strike before that energy dissipated meaninglessly.

Instead of continuing the conversation, I exploded my internal energy from my Yongcheon point and stepped forward using Thunderclap Step.

Kkwaang!

The distance between us closed in a flash. I aimed for the nape of his neck, attacking that thin margin—just outside his fist’s reach, but within my sword’s range.

“Ha!”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon scoffed, casually thrusting his fist toward me. I could already guess what he was thinking.

He figured that even if my level was high, I didn’t have the accumulated energy to match him, and he’d simply overpower me with brute strength.

It was a logical conclusion. My internal energy was pitiful compared to his.

But when fists and blades clash, it's not just about the amount of energy. There's something far more important.

Ssskuk.

“What the hell...?!”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon recoiled in shock as his sleeve and the back of his hand were lightly sliced.

Shame. I had aimed to cleave him wide open while he was caught off guard.

“How... what did you just do?!”

“I didn't do anything. Guess your fists got soft, only ever picking fights with those weaker than you.”

Half of it was just to provoke him—but the other half was the truth.

Fist masters harden their bodies and refine their techniques to withstand bladed attacks when facing armed opponents.

But the Bloodflame Fist Demon always swung his fists to efficiently burn weaker enemies.

As a result, he could manipulate his Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art with more heat, more range, more finesse.

He had extended his mastery beyond normal limits, stepping into the realm of advanced external energy techniques.

But in doing so, he'd strayed from the essence of what it meant to be a fist master.

An indestructible body that cannot be cut. An absolute fist that nothing can block.

That's every fist master's dream. But the Bloodflame Fist Demon gave that up in pursuit of a more efficient way to incinerate the weak.

Naturally, with gain comes loss.

His energy became more potent, his control more refined—

But as a fist master, he had regressed.

Meanwhile, my sword had been honed to cut down those stronger than me.

I couldn't burn down houses or shatter levees like him—

But my blade was sharp.

And even if he had let his guard down, the fact that he was wounded so easily was proof of that.

He seemed to realize it too, as his face turned red, then pale, and he drew up his energy even more fiercely.

“You bastard!”

Unlike a moment ago, when it had just been hot, the distinct heat of Yang Qi now began choking the air.

At the same time, the Yin Qi from Seol Lihyang responded instinctively, beginning to spread within me. I guided it through my body and spoke.

“So now you’re finally taking this seriously.”

“Fine. If you truly can't stand with the Demonic Cult, then I have no choice.”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon lowered his stance, assuming a ready position—but it was unlike any typical fist stance.

Most guard stances are designed to allow for swift movements or easy responses to enemy attacks.

Even though forms vary, they generally minimize openings and allow for efficient strikes.

But his was different.

He spread his arms wide, elbows bent in an awkward position. It looked full of openings, even if it allowed quick strikes.

But I knew better. I'd faced him too many times before I regressed.

That posture wasn't for punching—it was to discharge internal energy through his fists.

He channeled the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art to its limit. Flames erupted even more violently from the fist I had cut earlier.

The fire consumed his blood and flared up even higher—then suddenly burst forth.

Ffwoosh!

Like a snake slithering along the ground, the flame twisted through the air in a sinister curve. I slashed through it with my sword, which was cloaked in dense energy.

The flaming snake scattered the moment my sword passed through it. But the heat remained.

Sharp Yang Qi seeped into the surrounding air, making it hard to breathe. Even the scattered remnants of his fist aura penetrated my sword aura, trying to burn my palm.

Just as Seol Lihyang had infused Yin Qi through a weapon, the Bloodflame Fist Demon was doing the same with his flames.

Normally, this is where my body would begin to dry out.

Even if I countered his strange technique and cut through it with my sharp blade, the mere graze of his energy would scorch my internal qi and send Yang Qi into overdrive.

But once again, Seol Lihyang's Yin Qi responded.

A cool current swept through me, quenching the rising heat. I tightened my grip on the sword.

Before this Yin Qi runs out—I need to defeat him.

With that single-minded determination, I swung my sword.

“Hnnngh...!”

My sword, brimming with killing intent, aimed for his vital points—his forehead, neck, heart, wrist tendons, armpits...

Each sword swing naturally became the setup for the next, never allowing a pause in my onslaught.

I refined the boiling killing intent born of completed vengeance, focusing it solely on the enemy before me.

And every time my blood-colored blade carved a dazzling arc through the air, red lines appeared on the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s body and droplets of blood splattered.

He couldn’t fully take advantage of his Yang Qi, and thus, despite being Sub-Perfection, he wasn’t overwhelmingly dangerous.

He could dominate the weak—but against someone of equal or greater level, he couldn’t bring out his full strength.

I may not have reached full Sub-Perfection yet, and both my energy and physique were inferior—

But my sword had long surpassed his fists. So this outcome was natural.

Of course, he wasn't going to just take the beating.

“You freak! I don't know how you're holding up—but it won't last long!”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon had realized I had a way to endure his overwhelming Yang Qi—and that it was only temporary.

His Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art blazed fiercer than ever, feeding off both his fists and his fresh wounds.

Black-red flames now covered his whole body, looking almost like protective Qi armor.

But unlike true Qi armor forged through willpower, this was a crude imitation—he was simply flooding his internal energy outward.

It was inefficient. But unfortunately, it was effective against me.

The Yin Qi from Seol Lihyang wasn't my own, so I couldn't control it. It only responded instinctively to the surrounding Yang Qi, trying to restore balance.

Even if the enemy's energy didn't carry clear intent, as long as it was Yang-based, the Yin Qi would react by matching and canceling it.

If the Bloodflame Fist Demon kept wasting his energy like this, the Yin Qi would be wasted too.

Like snow falling onto a hot stove—it melted in an instant.

And the heat I had been ignoring until now suddenly surged into awareness.

The strand of coolness that had been inside me thinned and finally vanished.

Now, every time I blocked his fists or cut through his flames, Yang Qi rode the attacks in and threatened to cause internal injuries.

The burning pain within, and the mental and internal energy it took to resist it—

Even with the perfect unity of sword and spirit, my momentum faltered as my strength waned.

Kkwaang!

Instead of a slicing sound, I heard the sound of a collision. For the first time, my sword failed to cleanly cut through his fist.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon grinned.

“Looks like your trump card’s already used up. Now it’s my turn.”

“No. Not yet.”

I grit my teeth and swung my sword again. Ignoring the pain, I refocused and condensed my sword energy.

Seol Lihyang's Yin Qi was gone, but the Bloodflame Fist Demon had also overexerted himself.

And he was still being slowed by the residual killing intent swarming from all directions.

I could still fight. Or so I thought—

Sswaeek! Kwadeuk!

My sword slashed toward his waist, ready to slice him in half—but was blocked by his flame-wrapped hand.

It didn't block everything, as blood flowed from his palm—but even before it could hit the ground, it ignited and added fuel to his fire.

“Got you.”

“Like hell you do!”

I tried to pull my sword back, but the Bloodflame Fist Demon held it tight, ignoring the wound on his palm, and began forcing his energy into the blade.

Ffwoosh!

The flames reacted to the blood from his palm and instantly swelled.

The heat devoured the blade.

I tried to counter by forcing in my own energy—but at most, it bought me a few seconds.

It wasn't just a matter of energy quantity—his control was on another level.

Even if his fist techniques had stagnated for over a decade, his mastery of internal energy had steadily advanced.

In the end, my sword—crafted from solid black iron—turned red-hot.

The blade, which should have felt like an extension of my own body, now began burning me.

Ssskkk!

The searing pain in my palm was joined by the stench of burning flesh.

I should let go.

But I couldn't. The only advantage I had over him was my swordsmanship.

If I let go, I might live a little longer—but soon, the flames would jump to my body.

So I endured.

Even if I lost the use of my hands, I could not back down now.

Just as I tried to pour all my remaining internal energy into the blade to sharpen it—

A familiar song drifted through the air.

At the same time, the heat from the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art noticeably weakened, and the oppressive presence of Yang Qi dropped.

Both the Bloodflame Fist Demon and I turned to look—only to find Seol Lihyang, who should've been in hiding, standing tall before us.

Frost sparkled at her feet. Her eyes gleamed with chilling resolve. And her voice rode a wave of energy that tore through space.

“Oh...”

In that moment—she looked just like she had before my regression.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

I hate fire.

To be exact, I hate the memories fire brings back.

The helplessness I felt watching someone die in my arms, unable to do anything.

The despair of holding a sword in my hands, yet having no one left to swing it at.

And the resentment that kept piling up with nowhere to go—that alone was enough to twist the core of my mind.

Of course, now I've gone through something that can't even be explained as mere regression. I've saved those I couldn't save before, killed the enemies I once couldn't.

So the demon in my heart has settled, and I no longer boil with uncontrollable rage.

But fear—that still remains.

Part of it is a vague fear of the Heavenly Demon, but at its root, it's fear of loss.

Yes. I have to admit it.

What remained after I cast off my inner demon was fear, and a weakness I had long ignored.

Coming face to face with what I once couldn't see through the haze of killing intent was not a pleasant experience.

In that sense, the scene unfolding before my eyes now held no small significance.

The frost sparkling beneath her feet. The cold gleam in her eyes. The qi that rode her song and pierced the space between us.

“Ah...”

Seol Lihyang, who had leapt out in spite of the danger, looked—strangely—like her former self before my regression.

And I didn't mean just in appearance.

The heat from the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art that had engulfed the area had weakened.

Just breathing moments ago felt like it would burn my lungs, but the violent Yang Qi had now subsided.

The sword held by the Bloodflame Fist Demon, who had seized it and poured his internal qi into it, was still hot—but no longer searing my skin.

She had said she couldn't keep up with the speed of the Bloodflame Fist Demon and me.

I had tried to solve it by receiving Yin Qi directly from her—but the answer Seol Lihyang presented was far more daring.

Just as the Bloodflame Fist Demon had recklessly unleashed his internal qi across the area to gain the upper hand—

Seol Lihyang, unable to follow our movements, had instead poured all of her Yin Qi into the entire battlefield.

Normally, that would be impossible.

Even though she'd reached the cusp of Peak Stage after gaining insight at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, she was still just a first-class warrior.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon, on the other hand, had reached Sub-Perfection long ago. His fist techniques may have stagnated, but his control over internal qi had only improved.

So Seol Lihyang's effort should have failed—her power insufficient to produce any meaningful effect.

At least, that's what would've happened under normal circumstances.

But Seol Lihyang possessed the Pure Yin Physique—not quite as extreme as the Extreme Yin Pulse, but still a natural constitution that allowed her to produce several times more Yin Qi than usual, with a refinement even greater than that of Extreme Yin Pulse.

And the Glacial True Qi—while difficult to master—was a rare technique, even among the masters of the North Sea Ice Palace. Not only that, it specialized entirely in the control of cold qi.

But most importantly—she wasn't just someone with these two gifts. She was Seol Lihyang.

A song echoing as if from every direction. Beautiful, yes—but laced with a murderous chill that made my spine tingle.

This was the first time in this life Seol Lihyang had directed killing intent at someone. And it was so chilling that the cold itself was almost secondary.

It wasn't the kind of killing intent I carried.

It wasn't overflowing with power or suffocating in its thickness.

It was perfectly controlled. And fanatical to the point one could hardly believe it came from a human being.

I knew what to call this all too well.

Demonic Aura.

Seol Lihyang now, just like in my previous life, was emitting guigi—with nothing but her own human body.

No, it wasn't real guigi. But it looked the part—because she was throwing everything of herself into it.

Over her dark eyes shimmered a cold blue gleam, reminiscent of the Demonic Sound Witch I had known in my previous life.

So that's how it is.

Though fully conscious, she was not in her right mind. It was a state I knew too well.

Seol Lihyang was ready to burn her core essence if necessary.

Maybe it's because she grew up watching a martial artist like me from up close. She'd developed a strange habit—stepping even deeper into danger when things got dangerous.

But this wasn't a reckless, thoughtless act.

Unlike the deadly chill in her eyes toward the Bloodflame Fist Demon, her gaze toward me was full of unwavering trust.

Seol Lihyang remembered.

She remembered me saying that if we could just neutralize his Yang Qi, we might be able to defeat the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

She believed in that single statement—and staked her life on it.

And if that's the case, then I must respond in kind.

“You wretched wench! Do you think this pathetic interference will—!”

The moment the Bloodflame Fist Demon tried to separate part of his qi into a flaming mass and hurl it at Seol Lihyang—

“Silence.”

Ssskuk!

A slash of crimson sword qi sliced across his wrist, cutting through the flame just as it began to surge forward.

“You...?!”

He recoiled in shock. The Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art flared again in response to his spilling blood, but... it no longer felt threatening.

No matter how fierce his fire was—if Seol Lihyang was suppressing that heat, it wouldn't reach me.

“There's no time. Within the span of a single quarter-hour, one of us will die.”

It was a resolve I had long since accepted—but I said it aloud anyway.

Not for myself, but for Seol Lihyang to hear.

A plea—hold on just a little longer, don't burn your core essence.

Whether it reached her or not, I didn't know.

But I knew what I had to do.

I withdrew all the internal qi I had used to protect my body, and all the killing intent I had released to suppress him—and I poured it all into my sword.

Fwhhh!

The dark red aura burning on the blade grew brighter, transforming into a visible flame.

Unlike the fire of the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art, it radiated no heat. It was so dense with killing intent that it felt almost cold.

A fire that wasn't a fire—Sword Flame—and it devoured the flames of the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

Yes, Yang Qi is like a sharp awl. Even protected by internal qi, it pierces through.

But this level of density, combined with the killing intent within, could not be so easily overcome.

“You think that’ll change anything? I don’t need hostages anymore. I’ll kill that woman first, and then burn you!”

“No. That’s not going to happen.”

I no longer felt pain in my battered hands. I had forgotten pain, becoming one with my sword.

Entrusting myself fully to the state of Divine Sword Unity, I spoke.

“I’ve already decided.”

Because I would make it happen.

I swallowed the rest of my words and swung my sword—a simple, horizontal slash. Nothing fancy. Just a clean, fundamental strike.

One of the first three sword techniques I learned—the basics everyone scoffed at, yet no one could deny—this was the Three Fundamentals Sword, the technique known as Heaven-Cleaving Slash.

“Hah! And here I thought you were about to pull something—”

Ssskuk.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon scoffed as he punched forward—only to find a long cut scored along the side of his forearm.

“What the...?!”

He stared at his wound in shock.

He wasn't surprised because I cut through the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art—he'd already seen that once.

“What?! I couldn't even see it!”

What truly shook him was that he hadn't been able to react at all.

But I didn't waste time celebrating. I swung again, expressionless.

Ssskuk!

A strong vertical slash—Mountain Pressing Down Peak. Straightforward, but immensely powerful. Another cut opened on his opposite arm.

Neither wound was deep. Slightly worse than the first, but nowhere near fatal for a Sub-Perfection master.

In fact, the blood only fueled the flames of the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art.

But so what? My sword had only just begun.

As he expanded his aura to keep me at bay, I pierced through it with a flash of light.

Some called it Raging Winds of Eight Directions, others Path of the Sage's Blade. But it was nothing grand—just a simple, direct thrust.

The carefully built-up aura scattered in an instant, and I kept swinging at the flustered Bloodflame Fist Demon.

The Red Snake Sword I stole with my eyes from the Red Snake Sect Master. The Blood Wolf Blade that persistently targeted wounds.

And the unstable Swift Blade I bought with nearly all my money from a nameless vagabond.

Every technique I'd ever learned now flowed out in succession.

It was a kind of consolidation—a deep examination of myself from the bottom up.

I may have housed a hellscape within my mental realm, but it wasn't only filled with fire.

There was also the scent of a pear left behind. A camellia blooming red across a snowy field.

And always, always—there had been a sword in my hand.

Though I'd saved Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, and slain the Black Sky Sword Emperor—marking an end to much of my inner torment—

The sword had been the sole exception.

Back then, I held a sword. And now, even now—I held a sword.

So I retraced my steps from the beginning, searching for the path ahead.

At first, my strikes were simple and lacked depth—but they grew ever more refined and complex.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon thrashed wildly and summoned ever more spectacular flames.

But that alone couldn't block my sword.

The moment I grasped the essence of Forceful Blade, his pinky flew off.

When I understood the subtleties of Balance and Flow, a cut stretched from cheekbone to collarbone.

When I could finally wield True Swift Blade, a shallow wound opened on his chest.

I then learned how to maximize impact through rotation—and adapted it for defense, developing a technique to blend and break flame like Blossoms Grafted into One.

What had once only wounded his fists and forearms now carved into his entire body.

“This—this can’t be! It shouldn’t be like this!”

Now drenched in blood, the Bloodflame Fist Demon screamed in anguish. The flames of the Bloodflame Serpent Demon Art roared wilder than I’d ever seen—even before my regression.

But neither his cries nor his violent flames could reach me anymore.

I kept cutting. And cutting. As if I had become a blade myself.

Maybe a piece of my inner self reached him—because his face twisted in realization.

“You’re no different! That hatred of yours—it’s not even aimed at me or the Demonic Cult! You must have someone else to take revenge on! What right do you have to cut me down?!”

He’s not wrong. Technically speaking, there aren’t many I truly need to take revenge on.

The Black Sky Sword Emperor. The Heavenly Demon. A few other demon lords.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon wasn’t one of them.

In fact, in this life, none of the wrongs I sought vengeance for had even happened yet.

I’d slain the Black Sky Sword Emperor not for what he had done, but for what he would do.

I burned with hatred toward the Heavenly Demon not because he had invaded the Central Plains or killed Tang Sowol—but because he would.

My hatred had become directed at the entire Demonic Cult.

In that sense, I wasn't all that different from him.

But—

“You're mistaken about one thing. I'm not swinging this sword for vengeance. Or hatred with nowhere to go.”

“Then what?!”

People should know restraint. Know when to step back. Know how to reflect.

That kind of righteous talk isn't for me. I just—

“I swing my sword for the one who believes in me.”

There is someone who believes in me—without condition. Who's willing to risk her life for me.

Then it's only right that I return that trust.

The Bloodflame Fist Demon's eyes widened in shock—clearly not expecting that answer. It was the perfect opening.

But my sword technique had just reached its conclusion.

From the first sword I ever held, to the most recent insight I'd gained—

Even after pouring out everything I had, I was one strike short.

Then I'd simply take one more step forward.

As if pushed by all the time I'd spent to get here, my body moved on its own.

Even I couldn't follow the strange arc my sword traced—as if it moved beyond my control.

Not quite the Divine Sword Unity—but something deeper. An unknown unity.

And then—the sword lodged itself in the Bloodflame Fist Demon's throat.

The blood that gushed forth—could no longer become flame.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The sword was half-buried in the neck of the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

Blood spurted out and soaked the clothes, but it didn't ignite into flame.

Rather, the heat seemed to subside.

“Kuhuk!”

The Bloodflame Fist Demon spat out a mouthful of blood. With a faint voice that sounded like air leaking from a broken bellows, he spoke.

“W-Who am I...?”

A pitiful sight, far from someone known as one of the most infamous demonic warriors of the Demonic Cult.

His expression was like that of an old, exhausted man tormented by years of anguish... and I didn't like it.

No matter the reason, he slaughtered innocents, and even turned those flames against me.

More than anything, I was worried about Seol Lihyang.

“I'm not going to listen.”

Ssskuk.

With the last of my remaining strength and internal energy, I slashed the rest—clean through, easily.

After confirming the head rolling across the ground and the lifeless body collapsing, I finally turned around.

There she was—Seol Lihyang, curled up on the gravel, panting heavily.

“Are you alright?!”

I whipped my exhausted body into motion and ran over. She barely managed to lift her head.

I supported the back of her neck with my arm.

The chill I felt from her forearm sent shivers through mine. Seol Lihyang's body temperature was usually low, but this was abnormally cold.

I was flustered and at a loss, but she managed a faint smile.

“Hehe. Did we win?”

“Yeah. Thanks to you, we did. Now we just need to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine... just a little cold...”

“Cold?”

This was Seol Lihyang, born with the Pure Yin Physique. She had such immense yin energy that she was practically immune to cold—if anything, she was vulnerable to heat.

Yet now, in the middle of summer, someone like her was shivering. Something was clearly wrong.

I pulled her trembling shoulders close and held her tightly.

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay. You didn’t use your True Source Yin Energy, right?”

“Mm. You said you’d finish it before I had to, so I endured it. I did good, right??”

Her eyes were half-closed, and she gave a silly smile. I nodded and grabbed her hand.

I'm not a physician, but I'm a martial artist well-versed in the body. Even if I don't know how to treat, I'd know if something was wrong.

With that, I gently pressed her wrist to check her pulse.

"Ah."

Just as she said, her True Source Yin Energy was intact. She collapsed simply from exhaustion and because her body, having never handled this much yin energy at once, was overwhelmed.

Like how a fever follows body aches, the overexertion of yin energy caused her temperature to plummet unnaturally.

Her chills were severe, and her body felt like ice, but it wasn't life-threatening.

Warm clothes, a good meal, and plenty of rest would be enough. A tonic would help speed recovery.

“Phew...”

I let out a sigh of relief without meaning to, but Seol Lihyang misread it and wore a wistful expression.

“Mn? So... that’s how it is.”

“It’s okay. I have no regrets. My life was basically a gift from you anyway. I’m just glad I could help in the end.”

“Wait. What’s with the sudden—”

“So it’s okay. But I do feel a bit of regret. If I knew it’d be like this, I would’ve been honest with myself a lot sooner.”

“I think you’re misunderstanding something—”

“Mn. No, I’m not just getting sentimental because I think I’m dying. I’ve thought about this a long time, and I finally decided to say it.”

“That’s not it—”

“Hold me tighter. Mm. Just a bit more.”

“Are you even listening to me...??”

I was speechless, but I hugged her tightly as she asked. She needed body heat right now anyway.

Of course, to Seol Lihyang, who was clearly misinterpreting everything, it probably felt different.

She closed her eyes slowly, as if to absorb my warmth. When she finally opened them again, they had a strangely wistful look—reminding me of the last moments before my regression.

“Thank you. And... I’m sorry.”

“Seol Lihyang.”

“The truth is... I like y—”

“You just caught a cold—”

“???.”

Both of us cut off mid-sentence, then blinked at each other in silence.

“What was that sound?”

“Seol Lihyang, what were you just about to say?”

Silence again. Like synchronized puppets, we tilted our heads left, then right.

Suddenly, her face flushed bright red in realization.

“Forget it!”

“What? Forget what?”

“Just forget it!”

“You mean that thing you were about to say? Like, the part where you said you actually l—”

“Kyaaaah!!!”

She screamed and buried her face in my chest.

Just like a child who believes if they can't see something, others can't see it either.

Even Seo Mun-Hwarin (Seorin), suffering side effects from Rejuvenation, wasn't this extreme—so she must be so embarrassed she can't bear it.

I gently patted her on the back.

“I-It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“You heard more than half!”

“But I don’t know what came after.”

“You’re lying! You totally know!”

Sharp. Honestly, I already knew Seol Lihyang liked me as a man—ever since that song she sang at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

I’m not the only one who knows—Tang Sowol does too, which is a problem.

Still, her words now were a clear insight. She must've thought she was really dying and decided to confess at the end.

Best to pretend not to know for now.

I kept my face serious and spoke.

“I don't know what you're talking about. More importantly, that's not what matters right now.”

“Suspicious...”

“I said it's like a cold, but sometimes a bad one can leave you on death's door.”

“You said I wouldn't die!”

“I don't intend to let you, so don't worry. You'll suffer like hell, though.”

“That's not comforting! That makes me more anxious! Explain properly... Kuhk!”

Mid-sentence, Seol Lihyang started coughing. I just turned my head slightly to avoid the spray.

She stiffened up and asked in a cracking voice.

“I-Is this really okay...? I’ve never even properly coughed before, only sneezed...”

“Don’t worry. Your energy is depleted, but your body’s still trying to absorb yin energy both internally and externally. That’s what’s causing this.”

“Explain that in simpler terms.”

“Your body can’t handle yin anymore, but it’s still drawing it in like usual.”

“Uhm. Even simpler?”

“It’s like you ordered a ton of food while starving, then realized your coin pouch had a hole and you’ve got no money.”

“That’s dine-and-dash!”

“Exactly. So soon, your whole body’s gonna feel like you’re getting beaten up.”

"Ah."

She finally understood and opened her eyes wide—back to their usual deep black.

As if that triggered it, her body slumped and leaned heavily against mine.

“W-Wait... It’s really cold now... So cold it hurts...”

“I told you. Your body’s in bad shape right now.”

“Don’t just say it, give me a solution! What do I do... Hnn!”

A shiver shook her body mid-sentence. Her temperature had dropped again.

Through chattering teeth and a pale face, she murmured:

“I really feel like I’m going to die…?”

“I said you won’t. Just hang in there a bit more.”

I hoisted Seol Lihyang onto my back and headed toward the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s corpse.

I stripped off his upper robe, wrapped his severed head in it, and tied it to my waist.

Then I secured Seol Lihyang’s thighs tightly so she wouldn’t slip.

“Hyat! Wh-Where are you touching?!”

“If you don’t like it, put some strength into the arms around my neck.”

“They won’t move!”

“Then stay still.”

“Is this really the best method...?”

She sighed, eyebrows twitching. Even her breath against my nape was cold.

She acted nonchalant, but she must’ve been in unbearable pain—like her blood vessels were freezing.

Thanks for pretending otherwise so I won’t feel guilty for being late—but I’ve already checked your pulse. It won’t work.

Before we left, I rifled through the Bloodflame Fist Demon’s belongings one more time.

A pouch with a strange texture, like leather or silk. It had burn marks, but remained intact. Must be fire-resistant or immune to internal energy.

“Hopefully something useful inside.”

Usually, such pouches carry valuables. A first-aid elixir would be ideal.

I dumped out the contents.

Several tightly sealed letters, a small container of ointment, a few gold coins, and an elixir I recognized.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The letters must be messages to the Demonic Cult, the ointment likely a wound salve like Golden Wound Balm, and the gold for expenses.

The elixir?

“A Demonic Explosive Pill...”

The Demonic Cult gives this to its warriors—if you’re dying, better to explode.

It grants power beyond your limits, but at the cost of death. At best, you'll survive but never use martial arts again.

That's why the Bloodflame Fist Demon didn't use it—he cared more about saving his own skin.

All useful evidence against the Demonic Cult, but nothing helpful for Seol Lihyang right now.

“No choice. This'll be rough, but cling to me as much as you can.”

“What for?”

“We've walked far enough. There should be a village nearby. This looks like a river with moderate flow and lots of fish.”

More importantly, the Bloodflame Fist Demon hadn't been chasing us—he was waiting ahead of us.

Meaning, he probably found a nearby village, learned our route, and decided to ambush us.

We're close to a place where we can rest and get treatment.

I'm tired from the fight, but I still have the strength to carry one person.

After explaining this, Seol Lihyang nodded.

“Okay. I'll follow your lead. But first, one little problem.”

“What is it?”

“I, uh... Let my guard down and now I've got... the urge.”

“???”

“Ugh... I really have to go. Like, soon. I might leak...”

I carefully set her down.

After a moment of internal conflict, I asked,

“Do I have to pull your pants down for you?”

“W-Wait! I’ll try on my own!”

Fortunately, Seol Lihyang still had enough strength left for that.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

How many times had I walked with Seol Lihyang, warm and soft yet on the verge of biting her tongue from embarrassment, carried on my back?

My stamina was finally starting to run out, and even the internal energy I’d recovered was almost fully spent. I was barely able to drag my feet when, at last, we came upon a village.

It was a fairly large one, and perhaps because the Bloodflame Fist Demon had prioritized tracking us over destruction, there were no burn marks—just the usual signs of meat having been grilled over fire. A perfectly ordinary village.

“Thank goodness. I was honestly thinking of digging a hole and crawling into an underground burrow if I had to.”

“Wow, a soft bed... a warm meal... I’m so glad...”

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me your condition’s worsened so much you can’t even talk...”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then why the lackluster reaction?”

“Because I’m still embarrassed, okay?!”

“You managed to pull your pants down and back up all on your own. Even cleaned up neatly. What’s there to be embarrassed about?”

“You watched me, Cheon Hwi!”

“My eyes were closed.”

“Your ears were open!”

“Ears are always open...? It'd be a much bigger problem if they weren't.”

As I shook my head, Seol Lihyang sank her teeth into the back of my neck.

Of course, in her exhausted state, it was more of a tickle.

“Uugh!”

“Alright, alright. I won't bring it up again, so quit it. You're making me damp with spit.”

“It's not that much!”

Hearing the word “spit,” she quickly released her teeth. She seemed to be coming back to life.

A foreign man walking around in broad daylight carrying a girl on his back—especially one who was biting his neck—must’ve been quite the sight.

The villagers had been sneaking glances at us, pretending not to be curious.

If I hadn’t been openly wearing martial attire with a sword at my waist, someone might’ve already come up to say something.

Suppressing a chuckle, I approached the middle-aged woman closest to me.

She had a stall with cheap trinkets laid out. I handed her a handful of copper coins and asked,

“I’m looking for a place to stay. Could you point me to the nearest inn, and also the best pharmacy here?”

“Eh? O-Of course, young master!”

Indeed, money makes people kind.

Satisfied, I nodded as she explained the way. Fortunately, there was a pharmacy along the path to the inn.

Though it was just a regular town with no top-grade elixirs, I bought every herb that seemed nourishing before heading to the inn.

It was a bit rundown, but thanks to good upkeep, the inside was cleaner than expected.

I rented a decent room, endured some odd looks while borrowing a brazier in the middle of summer, and brought up food that would be easy to eat.

As soon as the door was shut and carefully locked—

“You rented only one room?! Are you planning to do something to me?!”

Her voice carried both a strange sense of hope and intense embarrassment—but she was so weak, it came out more like a squeak.

Without a word, I laid Seol Lihyang on the bed, brought the lit brazier close, sat beside her, scooped up a bite of the food, and held it out.

“Eat.”

“I mean, if you don’t say anything, it’s kind of embarrassing for me...”

She took the spoon with an awkward expression and began to nibble. I was hungry too, so I took the next bite for myself.

And so, one bite for me, one for her—we alternated until the meal was done.

Afterward, I pulled the blanket over her still-feeble body, then climbed in beside her and gently embraced her from behind.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Raising your body temperature.”

“There’s a brazier though?”

“Honestly, it’s making me too hot. This way’s more comfortable. You owe me a bit for carrying you all the way here, so think of it as being my body pillow for now.”

“Body... pillow?”

“You say it like that and it sounds weird. I’m a taken man, you know.”

“Then don’t do things that cause misunderstandings!”

“It’s for your recovery, so it’s fine.”

“What kind of—!”

Seol Lihyang gave a baffled snort, but her pale cheeks were slowly regaining color, as if pleased in spite of herself.

Of course, I knew. This was risky.

But after realizing her feelings—and seeing her so willing to risk her life for me—how could I treat her coldly?

So this was my way of showing gratitude and warmth, without crossing the line.

Stiffened for a completely different reason now, Seol Lihyang was too flustered to argue. I let her reaction pass and pulled out the ointment I'd taken from the Bloodflame Fist Demon's pouch, applying it to my hand.

Most of me was uninjured, but my hand—burned from gripping the overheated sword—still needed treatment.

I had already applied some earlier while on the move, but I'd wiped it off while eating, so this was a reapplication.

Once I'd carefully finished, I gingerly pulled out the letter from the Bloodflame Fist Demon, making sure not to smudge it.

“Could you open this for me?”

“Huh? Oh, because of the ointment?”

“Yeah. Forgot and applied it before reading. Should’ve waited.”

“I can still move a bit. Just give me a second.”

Taking the letter from me, Seol Lihyang swallowed once and broke the seal.

We read it together over her shoulder—and the contents were shocking.

Seol Lihyang reread it several times in disbelief before asking in a shaken voice,

“Cheon Hwi... is this really true?”

“It must be. It’s too detailed to be fake. No one from the Demonic Cult would’ve expected the Bloodflame Fist Demon to die so meaninglessly after escaping even Kunlun Sect’s Thousand-Net Heaven Trap.”

“What is the Demonic Cult thinking, planning something like this...?”

She instinctively recoiled, her shoulders trembling.

Anyone with a sane mind would react the same after reading it.

The letter outlined two main plots:

First, how to kill Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye, and use their deaths to drive a wedge between the Peng and Yeon Clans.

Second, a plan involving the distribution of High Blood Pills throughout Hebei Province.

I already knew of the first plan—its results had played out before my regression, and the scheme's outline was visible in this life as well.

The plan in the letter was even crueler than I remembered.

In my previous life, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye had committed joint suicide. Their deaths deepened the grudge between their clans, but at least ended immediate conflict.

But that was their best choice—made only after realizing they couldn't escape the Demonic Cult's scheme.

The original plan? The Bloodflame Fist Demon would kidnap both, subdue Peng Woojin's mind using drugs and sorcery, and then command him to brutally kill Yeon Ga-hye.

Afterward, Peng Woojin would be taken to the Demonic Cult and made to disappear, while the scene would be staged—traces of Peng Clan's swordsmanship and signs of arson, but no intact body.

That would've been more than enough to drive Yeon Ga-hye's father into a frenzy.

Even righteous clans would stop at nothing if pushed that far.

Had the plan worked, one of the two clans would've surely been annihilated.

In my previous life, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye likely chose to die together to prevent that outcome.

The Demonic Cult, unfamiliar with their martial techniques, couldn't forge every detail of a faked scene.

No wonder the mere thought of it left me feeling heavy.

“And the second part... what do we do about that?”

“What else? We inform the clan heads of Peng and Eon, report it to the Murim Alliance, and do everything we can to prevent any deaths.”

The second plan involved spreading a mid-grade elixir, High Blood Pills, across Hebei.

At a glance, it looked like a generous act—but of course, the Demonic Cult wasn't doing it out of kindness.

Their real goal? To use the people who consumed the pills as ingredients for another elixir.

It sounded absurd, but the logic behind it was horrifyingly sound.

High Blood Pills were made from animal blood, various herbs, and the result was called Poison-induced Core—a monstrous embodiment of poison and curse.

These pills offered murky internal energy and carried the risk of deviation, but were otherwise considered relatively safe. Two clans had even been fighting over the rights to monopolize them.

But here's the truth: whoever took in the Poison-induced Core's core would eventually become another Poison-induced Core.

A Poison-induced Core is created by locking multiple poisons together and letting them fight—only the survivor remains, infused with dark power.

Depending on the poison and the environment, the resulting Poison-induced Core takes on different natures—ones that control minds, inflict pain, or override bodily autonomy.

Among these, the most basic type is one where the toxin multiplies the host's venom exponentially.

Martial artists who consume High Blood Pills become like those Poison-induced Core—when they fight, the victor gains a massive boost in internal energy.

Not earned through righteous means, so it leads to deviation. But that doesn't matter.

Because they're not people anymore—they're ingredients.

And the pill they become?

We already knew its name.

It was the same one the Ghost Shadow Thief had seen in the Demonic Cult—an elixir made from human beings.

Blood Vitality Pill.

The high-quality Blood Vitality Pills made this way would, of course, be reserved for the Heavenly Demon.

Now I finally understood the overwhelming demonic energy I'd seen in my previous life.

Back then, Peng and Yeon hadn't gone to war, so the Poison-induced Core didn't mature.

But this time, the Demonic Cult could just lead its poisoned followers into Hebei to attack.

These are fanatics—if it meant vengeance, they'd gladly die for it.

No wonder so few survived from Peng and Yeon in my previous life.

They were all fattened up like Poison-induced Core, then squeezed dry to make the Blood Vitality Pill.

“The only fortunate thing is... we figured this out in time.”

With such a monstrous plan in motion, the Murim Alliance wouldn't just raise their guard—they'd take real action.

I let out a breath of relief and put the letter away.

“We've done all we can for now. Once we regroup with the others, we'll share what we've learned. For now, we rest and recover.”

“Mm. Let’s focus on recovery.”

Seol Lihyang gave a small, resolute nod.

She tossed and turned a little, but before long, both of us—exhausted—drifted into sleep.

The next morning.

The door—supposedly locked—burst halfway open, and a familiar voice jolted me awake.

“Cheon Sohyeop! You’re saf— huh?”

“Wait! Let me explain! I can explain everything!”

So please... take your hand out of your sleeve first.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Experiencing the unexpected isn't all that surprising in itself.

After all, how often in life do things really go according to plan?

Even the simplest things—what to eat today, when to train, or where to take a walk—often go awry.

You might suddenly crave a different dish, or it could rain, forcing you to use a different training ground, or Tang Sowol might beg to walk a different path.

Even when it comes to one's own matters, full control is extremely difficult. If anyone claims otherwise, they must be the very definition of arrogance.

That's because most things we think are entirely our own actually involve others too.

Yes, like yesterday. I thought it'd be fine to relax for just one day, so I fell asleep holding Seol Lihyang in my arms—only for our separated companions to find the room we were in the very next morning.

Clack!

The door opened with a half-shattering sound.

“Cheon Sohyeop! You're safe—... huh?”

Tang Sowol, who had been rushing in with a voice full of worry and urgency, froze mid-step.

Actually, it wasn't just Tang Sowol.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who looked like she was barely holding back her anger, Peng Woojin, who radiated a heavier, more mature aura, and even Yeon Ga-hye, who had a determined look in her eyes.

All the companions from the Hubei trip, who'd arrived with serious expressions, now had blank looks of stunned disbelief.

And it didn't take long for that bewilderment to turn into contempt.

"...Wait. Let me explain. I can explain everything."

"Yes, Uncle said something similar when he got into trouble outside and ran back home to the main house. I guess it runs in the family."

Uncle—did she mean Tang Yujin, the personal guard of Tang Jincheon?

I think I heard he had three or maybe four wives...

A cold sweat trickled down my back.

Maybe the commotion woke her—Seol Lihyang rubbed her eyes and slowly sat up.

"Ugh... what's going on? Is it morning already? I was tired yesterday, so I thought I'd sleep a little—huh?"

Seol Lihyang's drowsy eyes gradually sharpened.

And the moment she was fully awake, she opened her mouth in shock, slowly turning her head back and forth.

Once toward Tang Sowol and the others, once toward where I was.

There wasn't much to think about.

Faces filled with betrayed expressions, as if we were traitors to our country, or as if they were looking at human trash.

And what about our side?

A man and woman clinging tightly together under one blanket in the middle of summer (to warm Seol Lihyang, whose yin energy was surging out of control).

The green robes I wore as a member of the Tang family were nearly shredded, like they'd been torn apart (they were burned during the fight with the Blood Flame Fist Demon).

Seol Lihyang's clothes had slipped, revealing the curve of her shoulder (from absentmindedly brushing it in her sleep while shivering).

And to top it off, she'd just said something ominous about sleeping more because she was tired yesterday (we were exhausted from fighting the Blood Flame Fist Demon).

To anyone looking, this was unmistakably the scene of a scandal...!

Seol Lihyang's face turned pale as she grasped the situation.

Her yin energy outburst should've subsided by now, yet her shoulders trembled as if she were freezing.

“Sister Ta-Tang??”

“Yes. I see you still call me ‘Sister,’ huh?”

Her lips smiled sweetly, but her eyes didn't budge—an eerie smile.

Seol Lihyang's breath caught in her throat.

As she stood frozen like someone who had forgotten how to breathe, I tried to speak up—

“Cheon Sohyeop. I did say it would be fine if you had permission. Permission, remember?”

“I’ll just say this now—I have no intention of saying anything stupid like ‘it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.’”

“You kidnap me on a whim, and this time you run away with me too???”

Well... I had no excuse.

As my words dried up, my eyes darted nervously.

Watching this, Tang Sowol sighed deeply.

“Haa. I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“! You’ll listen to me, right...?”

“At this point, the only option is to kill Cheon Sohyeop and then die myself.”

Tang Sowol slid her hand into her sleeve.

Seeing her eyes turn a deeper shade of green, I panicked and lunged at her.

“Just—take your hand out of the sleeve first, and then we’ll talk!”

Fortunately, the surprise tackle was a success.

To be precise, Tang Sowol let herself be pinned down without resistance.

Holding Tang Sowol’s hand tightly, I led her to sit on the bed.

Seol Lihyang had already adjusted her clothes and made room beside us.

Tang Sowol, knowing how things would play out, allowed herself to be caught in the smooth flow of events.

But now, she was the one grabbing my wrist—maybe to stop me from running.

Letting the thought pass, I calmly explained everything that had happened over the past few days.

How we barely escaped the river, finding solid ground at last.

How we moved cautiously along the river and eventually encountered the Blood Flame Fist Demon.

How Seol Lihyang and I worked together to defeat him.

And how Seol Lihyang's body froze due to the rebound from the yin energy.

“That’s everything that happened yesterday. Sharing a blanket and sleeping close was all for emergency treatment.”

“Is that... really true?”

“Of course. If you don’t believe me, ask Seol Lihyang.”

“It’s true! Nothing happened between us! Sister Tang was so kind to me, there’s no way I could... but what did you mean earlier by permission...?”

Waving her hands to calm Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang tilted her head in confusion.

Tang Sowol let go of my hand, then cupped Seol Lihyang’s ear and whispered something.

Whisper whisper.

“Huh...? Huhh??”

“We’ll talk about the details later, Hyang-ah. What I was really asking was something else.”

“Something else?”

Instead of answering, Tang Sowol held out one hand to each of us.

Drawn by instinct, I reached out and took it.

Seol Lihyang followed suit.

Tang Sowol gently clasped our hands together and let out a deep sigh.

“I meant—was it really true that you fought the Blood Flame Fist Demon? He’s a seasoned martial artist who reached Peak Stage long ago. Did either of you suffer serious injuries?”

“I have a few burns here and there, but I’m fine. I did push my internal energy a bit too far, but the internal injuries were minor. However, Seol Lihyang...”

“Mn. I’m okay too, Sister Tang. I still feel a bit cold, but it’s definitely better than yesterday. I think a few days of rest will do the trick. Actually, maybe I even grew stronger? I almost grasped something during the fight.”

“That’s a relief.”

Tang Sowol gave a faint smile, paused as if thinking, then gently pulled Seol Lihyang closer.

“Eh? Sister??”

Surprised, but not resisting, Seol Lihyang was drawn into Tang Sowol’s lap and embraced from behind—

Just like I had done the night before.

“If you're still not fully recovered, someone needs to warm you up. It doesn’t have to be Cheon Sohyeop. I can do it, right, Hyang-ah?”

“Y-yes... of course!”

Seol Lihyang responded stiffly, her body frozen in awkwardness.

Tang Sowol chuckled and whispered something again—

And this time, Seol Lihyang melted like a limp doll, becoming Tang Sowol's cherished plush toy.

I shook my head and spoke up.

“Anyway, now that the misunderstanding's cleared up, I'd like to move on to the next matter.”

“Next? There's something else? Didn't you explain everything just now?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been quietly observing, blinked.

Peng Woojin, now composed again, and Yeon Ga-hye, who at some point had placed a hand over his eyes, also looked puzzled.

Did she cover his eyes earlier when Seol Lihyang was disheveled? Thorough.

I gave a small nod of thanks in Yeon Ga-hye's direction.

She responded with a faint smirk, as if saying it was no big deal.

With the greetings done, I unfolded a cloth that had been stashed in the corner.

Inside was the severed head of the Blood Flame Fist Demon, eyes wide open in death.

“Wh-what the—! I thought you were just shoving something gross in our faces, but yes, that's definitely the Blood Flame Fist Demon. He was ranked above the Black Sky Sword Emperor, and his Flame Yang Technique was no joke. You did well.”

“I couldn't have done it alone. As I said, it was thanks to Seol Lihyang's help. Her qi might not have matched him in volume, but the coldness of her energy wasn't easily overwhelmed by his heat.”

“Huhhh?”

The companions now looked at Seol Lihyang with admiration.

But Seol Lihyang, still mentally drained and curled up in Tang Sowol's lap, didn't even notice.

Shrugging, I continued.

“Anyway, this happened after we took him down. Neither of us were in good shape, so I searched the Blood Flame Fist Demon's body for anything useful. There were no elixirs, but I did find this letter.”

“A letter? Don't tell me it contains orders from the Demonic Cult?”

“Something like that. It seems to be a mid-mission report meant for the Demonic Cult.”

I pulled the letter from my robes.

“It details everything—the plan to capture the heirs of the Peng and Yeon clans, the reason for spreading elixirs in Hubei Province...”

“Oh! That’s a relief to uncover!”

“But the contents are pretty serious. It’s beyond what we can handle. This needs to be reported not only to the heads of the Peng and Yeon clans but also to the Murim Alliance Leader.”

I handed the letter to Seo Mun-Hwarin. She hesitated for a moment before looking around.

Peng Woojin, who had just regained vision, and Yeon Ga-hye, quietly watching her.

Tang Sowol, still holding Seol Lihyang.

Maybe she felt some pressure.

After a moment, Seo Mun-Hwarin began reading the letter aloud.

“If you succeed in capturing the Peng and Yeon heirs, use the Shaman sent with this letter to...”

Her voice echoed through the room.

Though it sounded like a child reading an essay, the content was far from innocent.

By the time she finished the last line, the room fell completely silent.

Some gasped.

Others trembled in anger.

But in the end, all were left speechless.

“So... they planned to use sorcery on me to make me kill Ga-hye?”

“And use me, who died at the hands of the Peng clan, to pit our families against each other.”

“Grinding down those turned into living poison vessels to make elixirs... It’s too horrific. Even demonic paths should have limits.”

The three of them sighed heavily.

Tang Sowol, meanwhile, remained quiet for a long time before speaking softly.

“I understand now that the situation is worse than we thought. I also agree that everyone should be informed. So—what will you do now?”

“You said the Yeon Clan is the closest, right? Let’s head there first. We need to inform the clan heads who are probably investigating elsewhere right now.”

“And tell Father, too.”

“Yes, the father-in-law should come as well.”

Whether I should hide behind Tang Sowol or kneel and beg first—That’s what I need to start thinking about now.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

I wanted to leave immediately, but though I was fine, Seol Lihyang's condition was still too serious, so we decided to rest for a few more days.

...It's absolutely not because the time to face Tang Jincheon again is getting close.

Instead, Yeon Ga-hye sent a letter to her clan asking them to send an escort, so we wouldn't be staying long anyway.

“But hey, where did you get all banged up like that?”

He only swung his sword using pure physical strength without internal energy for a moment, but my gaze naturally shifted to Peng Woojin, who was silently stretching nearby.

His impressively muscular frame remained as enviable as ever, but unusually, thick bandages were wrapped all around his body.

“Well, it wasn’t as bad as what you two went through, but I did have my own run-in with Demonic Cult members and got these wounds from that fight.”

“Hm. Maybe they were the sorcerer and guards the Blood Flame Fist Demon had on standby.”

“I don’t know their exact identities.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I had sealed his blood channels and suppressed him, but the guy suddenly went berserk, as if he fell into Qi Deviation. He went straight for Ga-hye, so I blocked him with my body in the heat of the moment. This is the result.”

“Huh...”

Demonic Explosive Pills... Maybe it was a kind of delayed-trigger technique.

But one thing was clear—when Yeon Ga-hye was in danger, Peng Woojin didn’t hesitate to throw himself in front of her.

As a fellow man, I had no choice but to respect that.

...Though what he said next left me a bit speechless.

“After that, the Elder didn’t care about gathering intel or anything. He just made sure not a single one of them got out alive. So we still don’t know who they were.”

Maybe he was frustrated about losing sight of Seol Lihyang and me right in front of him. Seo Mun-Hwarin probably has a lot pent up inside.

“A-anyway, I’m glad you’re okay. Since you’re out and about, your shoulder injury must not be too serious?”

“It was serious. If it had gone even a little deeper, I might’ve lost the use of one arm for life.”

“But you look fine now?”

“That’s thanks to how effective the emergency treatment was. The Tang Clan’s medicine lives up to its name.”

He must be referring to the Golden Wound Salve Tang Sowol always carried.

Considering how much Tang Jincheon cares for her, it's likely filled with the Tang Clan's secret formulas.

It might not help internal injuries, but for external wounds, you'd be hard-pressed to find anything better.

"Of course, only the surface wounds healed. I still can't perform martial arts properly, and I'll have to avoid intense movement for a while."

"Then why come all the way out here? Wouldn't it be better to rest by Yeon Gahye's side?"

"I stayed so still trying not to tear the wound open that it was making me restless. I just wanted to move around a bit, avoiding the injured arm."

"Well... since you say you're okay, I guess there's no point in me nagging. I won't say more."

"There's also something I wanted to thank you for in person."

"Mm?"

I stopped swinging my sword and turned around, confused by his sudden tone.

There stood Peng Woojin, bowing deeply toward me.

“Thank you. The method may have been a little aggressive, but thanks to you, Gahye and I are alive, and our clans avoided falling into the Demonic Cult’s trap.”

“Well... Tang Sowol and I have our own history with the Demonic Cult, so we may have been meddling a bit. Like I said, the method was pretty extreme, so don’t worry too much about it.”

Still, the outcome was good, so that’s what matters.

Though technically, we kidnapped the successors of the Peng and Yeon clans and ran away with them—

Under normal circumstances, we’d be severely reprimanded. It was also a stain on the Tang Clan’s reputation.

That's why I brushed it off as no big deal since it worked out well... but Peng Woojin still kept his head bowed.

“Even with all that in mind, I’m sincerely grateful. I know it’s not much, but would you visit the Peng Clan sometime? I’ll do everything I can to repay you.”

“Are you serious about that?”

“Of course I’m serious.”

I couldn't help the smile creeping up my face. I casually covered my mouth with a hand and gave his shoulder a pat.

“I had sworn brotherhood with Namgung Jong, and I was always a bit reluctant to call his close friend ‘Brother Peng.’”

“Wait, suddenly...??”

The ever-serious Peng Woojin twitched at the abrupt change in tone from me, who had never changed facial expressions and only spoke casually before.

But considering I was eighteen, and if he was Namgung Jong's age, he'd be at least seven years older than me.

Peng Woojin inherited a strong physique thanks to his clan's bloodline and cultivation methods, but the downside was a prematurely aged appearance.

Honestly, his face could easily pass for someone in their early thirties.

More importantly, considering what I plan to get from him, calling him "brother" was hardly a loss.

"How long are you going to keep bowing in front of your younger brother? Raise your head."

"You call me younger brother, but you talk just like before."

"Kuhem. That's not important. You said you'd give anything you could in return. If that's true, could you provide an elixir?"

"Of course. Judging from the fact you brought it up right away, I take it you're having a hard time with internal energy cultivation?"

“Unfortunately, most of the Tang Clan’s elixirs are tailored for poison techniques. To me, they’re more like toxins. But the Peng Clan’s should be different.”

“Kuhem. It’s not for me to brag, but Peng Clan’s elixirs are known for being widely applicable. A wise choice.”

Just like how the Wudang Sect pursues Taiji, and the Namgung Clan seeks the Azure Sky, the Peng Clan of Hebei pursues Origin.

They aim for something more fundamental than yin and yang, or the five elements.

I’m not too versed in such philosophical stuff, but I know they’re obsessed with the fundamentals.

Their secret martial art, only taught to the clan head, is even called Origin Thunder Saber.

They believe that before becoming a martial artist, one is human, and the foundation of a human is the body.

So the Peng Clan focused on finding a way to pass down exceptional physical qualities and developed external martial arts to maximize them.

As a result, like Shaolin's elixirs, the Peng Clan's medicines are effective on anyone.

They may not raise internal energy as much as Shaolin's, but they significantly strengthen the body, which suits me better right now.

The reason I know all this is simple.

In my past life, the last place I was driven into was Hebei Province.

We from the Orthodox Alliance all made sure to learn everything we could about the fallen Peng Clan, hoping we could salvage something.

All we found were some undiscovered remains, but still...

That old hope resurfaced as I asked:

“Then could I possibly get a Honyondan?”

“Th-that’s a bit much for me to decide...”

Tsk.

Clicking my tongue reflexively, I saw Peng Woojin look at me with a sour expression. I shook my head and spoke.

“Then what can you offer, Brother Peng?”

“I’m pretty sure you just called me that earlier...”

“How about a Heavenly Tiger Pill?”

“That, at least, should be possible.”

He nodded reluctantly, as if seeing something outrageous.

Too much? Maybe. But for a Heavenly Tiger Pill, I'll let it slide.

The Heavenly Tiger Pill, Earth Tiger Pill, and Human Tiger Pill are symbolic elixirs of the Peng Clan, ranked by power.

Human Tiger Pills are low-grade, helpful for second- and first-class martial artists.

Earth Tiger Pills are mid-grade, helpful even to Peak Stage warriors.

Heavenly Tiger Pills are high-grade, given only to blood relatives or those who've done great service to the Peng Clan.

For reference, the Honyondan is a top-tier secret elixir reserved only for the Clan Head or the Young Master.

I asked knowing I wouldn't get it, just to try.

In my past life, I couldn't even get a Human Tiger Pill.

But now I'm getting a Heavenly Tiger Pill?

Satisfied, I nodded and added,

“Make it two, please. One for Seol Lihyang too.”

“What?”

“She helped me take down the Blood Flame Fist Demon. If you're thanking me, you should be thanking her equally.”

“But two is—”

“Oh, and if possible, I'd like one for Tang Sowol as well. She's the one who suggested we get involved, even if it meant running away.”

Still sweating from his lingering injuries, Peng Woojin groaned and replied in a crawling voice.

“F-fine. But I can’t promise. I’ll speak to the Clan Head.”

“Mm. That’s good enough. By the way, Brother Peng, it’s almost mealtime. Shall we head in together?”

Peng Woojin gave me a look that said, What even are you?

But I had nothing to be ashamed of.

It’s not every day you get a high-grade elixir from one of the Five Supreme Clans.

“Cheon Hwi! When Sister gets to the Yeon Clan, she said she’ll make sure we each get an elixir!”

“I—I said I’d bring it up, not that it’s certain, so don’t get your hopes up too high...”

“I’m still excited! Aren’t you?!”

Even while still recovering, Seol Lihyang's radiant smile was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Whoever taught her—she learned well.

Three days later, martial artists from the Yeon Clan arrived with carriages.

Seol Lihyang had mostly recovered by then, but since the carriage was already here, we decided to ride comfortably.

When we arrived at Jinju Yeon Clan, my first thought was—

“It's... eerie.”

“Shhh! They might hear you, Cheon Sohyeop!”

I muttered unconsciously, and Tang Sowol whispered urgently.

I glanced toward Yeon Ga-hye.

“It’s fine. I feel the same way. But once you get used to it, it’s actually quite a nice place. Don’t worry.”

“I-I didn’t mean anything bad. It’s just so different from typical martial clans, I was surprised.”

“It’s really fine. To begin with, our Yeon Clan only became a martial family a little over a hundred years ago. As Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix once said, the different atmosphere is inevitable, and it means our ancestors were remarkable. It’s something to be proud of.”

“Thinking that way makes me feel better.”

Tang Sowol finally relaxed a little and smiled faintly.

Though she still kept jabbing my side, which I accepted quietly since it was my fault.

Still, saying it aloud may have been rude, but I wasn’t wrong to feel it.

Jinju Yeon Clan is originally a family renowned for Zombie arts.

That art is now practically extinct, just like Taoist spellcasters disappeared from the Daoist sects.

But back then, the Yeon Clan developed various martial arts based on jiangshi techniques, building a strong lineage.

In other words, jiangshi arts are the root of the Yeon Clan, and it's only natural that they give off demonic aura.

Even if that's understandable, the discomfort that Demonic Aura causes is real.

Except for one person—Seol Lihyang.

She looked more lively than usual, as if the place energized her.

Demonic Aura falls under yin energy, so it makes sense for someone with a Pure Yin Physique like her to feel at home.

Yeon Ga-hye noticed something unusual in Seol Lihyang and watched her with interest for a moment, then turned her gaze and stood beside Peng Woojin, who had a bandaged shoulder.

Then she leaned gently against his thick arm—about as wide as her waist.

Shocked and disbelieving gazes poured in from all around.

Regardless, Yeon Ga-hye calmly declared:

“I’ll explain everything once the Clan Head arrives, but these guests provided great help to the Yeon Clan. Treat them as honored guests, and see that they lack nothing. Shall we go, Peng Clan?”

“...Mm.”

Peng Woojin nodded with a hardened expression. Seems like they’d already agreed to make their relationship public.

While I was admiring the situation internally, Tang Sowol latched onto me and locked arms.

The soft pressure at my elbow warmed my heart... but the words that followed were anything but sweet.

“I think we should make it obvious too... that we’re also engaged, like those two.”

I couldn’t say a single word.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Yeon Ga-hye had ordered that we be treated as honored guests... but to be honest, I expected to hear some gossip behind our backs.

And understandably so, since the fact that she was kidnapped by Tang Sowol and me hadn’t simply vanished.

But contrary to my expectations, they really did treat us with respect, showing not only no hostility, but not even curiosity.

The reason was simple—all their attention was focused on Peng Woojin.

“The Peng boy must’ve gone through a lot.”

Watching from a distance as Peng Woojin stood surrounded by Yeon Clan’s retainers, sweating profusely, Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head.

“Well, thanks to that, we’re quite comfortable, aren’t we?”

“True, but... I can’t help feeling a little sorry for him.”

To a certain degree, I agreed.

The Peng and Yeon clans had long been on bad terms, and in recent years, their conflict had reached its peak.

So it was only natural that the man Yeon Ga-hye brought home as her chosen one—Peng Woojin—wasn’t met with warm looks.

Still, because Yeon Ga-hye had clearly instructed them to be respectful, and because Peng Woojin had thrown himself into danger to protect her, they weren’t openly hostile.

Instead, they watched him with extremely critical eyes, questioning him thoroughly whenever something came up.

And it wasn't just one or two people—every Yeon elder he encountered was like that. It had to be driving Peng Woojin insane.

“Well... even if we wanted to help, it'd be awkward for us to step in.”

“Not to mention, the real show hasn't even started yet.”

“Hmm. When is the Clan Head of the Yeon Clan supposed to arrive?”

“Considering the time it took for the letter to arrive and the journey here, they said it would take about seven days and nights.”

“I see. So we've got some time. In the meantime, try resolving things between Sowol and Hyang.”

“I've been trying, but... it's not easy.”

It's not like they had a fight. The misunderstanding about them sleeping together had been cleared up.

In fact, Tang Sowol still talked to Seol Lihyang like usual, sometimes teasing her playfully.

But lately, Seol Lihyang had started avoiding Tang Sowol—and me as well.

As if she was guilty of something.

I could guess what she was thinking, but... I couldn't just let her keep running away. So I kept trying to talk to her.

Even now, Tang Sowol was probably chasing after Seol Lihyang somewhere.

“Then why are you here right now?”

“Because I have business with you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“With me?”

She tilted her head in confusion. Her long white hair flowed to the side, and her sparkling red eyes blinked curiously.

No matter how I looked at her, she still appeared to be just a cute young girl.

But I knew better.

Inside that form dwelled a veteran martial artist whose age, combined over my past and present lives, still surpassed mine—someone on the level of a clan head or sect leader.

“If... if you have business with me, then surely...?”

For some reason, her expression flushed as she suddenly bounced with excitement.

Her eyes sparkled with hope, and I nodded solemnly.

“Yes.”

“So you’ve finally decided to become my adopted son after seeing how amazing I—”

“I feel like I gained a small insight recently. Would you be willing to spar with me for a bit...?”

“???”

“???”

We blinked at each other in confusion.

Then, realizing what kind of misunderstanding she had made, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes went vacant.

And then, as if something inside her had short-circuited, she plopped down in place, her face blazing red.

“Kyaaahh!”

“W-wait, don’t be so embarrassed. It’s a common misunderstanding.”

“Kyaaaahh!”

“People tend to notice only what they’re focused on. I was preoccupied with my insight, and you, Senior... well, you were focused on that.”

“Kyaaaahhh!”

Curled up on the floor with her ears covered, Seo Mun-Hwarin still reacted to every word I said—

She was clearly listening, despite the attempt to block out sound. Her sensory perception as a Flowering Stage master couldn’t be dulled that easily.

“Oh, and while we’re at it—my answer hasn’t changed. I’m sorry.”

“S-stop! That’s enough! Please, just stop already...!”

“Mmmp!”

Maybe she really couldn’t take it anymore.

Still sitting, she suddenly leapt up and clamped her hands over my mouth.

Tears welled up in her eyes from sheer embarrassment.

Now sparkling again for a slightly different reason, Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded furiously.

“Fine! A duel! That’s what you want, right?! Then let’s just do that! Just stop stabbing my heart with your words...!”

“I don’t recall stabbing you, but... alright, let’s go to the training ground.”

As I led the way, Seo Mun-Hwarin followed behind, completely deflated.

The training ground we arrived at shortly after had a strangely calming atmosphere.

It wasn't that the Yeon Clan had installed a formation to induce mental clarity or gathered natural energy here.

They had simply taken some precautions to ensure the demonic aura that pervaded the rest of the Yeon estate didn't leak into the sparring area.

It's not like the surrounding demonic aura could drastically impact one's martial arts—but still, it was better to be without it.

It wasn't about whether I was used to Demonic Aura, or whether it got naturally suppressed by my killing intent-enhanced qi.

It was just... different. Unfamiliar.

Nodding inwardly, I took position a short distance from the center of the training ground.

And then, as if nothing had happened, Seo Mun-Hwarin stood across from me, exuding sharp, refined energy.

Her face was still a little flushed, but her expression was now that of a seasoned martial artist.

She took a deep breath and spoke.

“I know your level is half a step short of Sub-Perfection, but in a life-or-death duel, you can take on even established masters at that level. I saw it myself when you beheaded the Black Sky Sword Emperor.”

“Yes. With enough internal energy, I could reach Sub-Perfection at any time.”

“But the Blood Flame Fist Demon wasn’t just any Sub-Perfection master. His refinement was formidable, and his Flame Yang Technique was extremely tricky. To be honest, I thought you’d die, or come very close.”

“You were right. If it had been the usual me, I wouldn’t have won.”

Just like how I'd lost to him multiple times before my regression.

“I heard that Hyang’s martial arts helped reduce the Flame Yang Technique’s advantage.”

“Even with that, we were still a step short. By some stroke of luck, I was able to take that final step.”

“You still don’t believe that step is truly yours, do you?”

As she said—I had meditated and swung my sword countless times, trying to replicate that final strike...

But it always felt just out of reach, like a shape in the mist.

“I understand how that feels. At times like that, you need an opponent who can take your full strength. You’ve come to the right person. I can handle everything you’ve got, so don’t hold back!”

“Thank you.”

I bowed deeply to Seo Mun-Hwarin, who puffed out her chest with pride.

She had often helped me in my past life too—offering guidance or helping me embody insights.

Even now, she was supporting me like this again.

I couldn't help but feel grateful.

“I'll make sure to repay you someday, Senior.”

“You've already done more than enough... but I am a little curious. How do you plan to repay me?”

“Hmm... I suppose the fairest way would be to grant you one request? As long as it's not anything too outrageous.”

“A wish token...!”

Something about that seemed to fire her up.

Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her fists, her voice filled with excitement.

“Then come! Let’s begin!”

“Hoo…”

I chuckled at her sudden good mood and drew my sword.

“Here I go, then.”

Dark blade—

From its surface, a blood-red energy rose like smoke, soon coiling into the shape of roaring flames.

A martial technique formed by pure internal energy without any willpower mixed in.

Logically, without the support of proper energy channels and qi flow, this Blood Flame Sword Aura should've been weaker than in my past life.

Yet somehow, it felt just as powerful.

That alone would've been good news. But the problem was—I had no idea why.

My dantian and energy channels hadn't changed drastically.

So why did my control of internal energy feel so much more fluid?

And it wasn't just internal energy.

“Hup!”

I dashed forward.

But not using the explosive leaping of Thunderclap Steps.

Instead, I took short, rapid steps—

Boom! Boom!

Internal energy exploded through my pressure points in rapid succession.

Though quieter than a typical Thunderclap acceleration, it echoed ceaselessly through the training ground.

In truth, this was a half-measure that didn't make full use of Thunderclap Steps.

But when mixed with the core of Ghost Shadow Steps, it became something else.

Each step carried a different rhythm and speed.

Even though I was moving in a straight line, it was impossible to get used to.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes sharpened with interest.

"I knew you weren't limited to Thunderclap Steps... this is quite amusing."

"It's about to get more so."

Originally, I developed this movement technique to help reduce the consumption of Seol Lihyang's yin energy during our battle with the Blood Flame Fist Demon.

I refined it further afterward, and the results exceeded expectations.

Grinning, I swung my sword.

A sword that always targeted the opponent's vital points with uncanny accuracy.

Every strike contained the best possible trajectory and method based on the situation.

The collarbone, waist, armpit, neck, wrist, eyes—Blows that, if even one landed, would be fatal or crippling.

Sometimes fast, sometimes heavy, sometimes flashy to deceive the eye.

I'd done this countless times before.

But each strike now felt familiar—yet strangely different.

Had I always been able to swing my sword this quickly?

This forcefully?

No.

I had now re-examined what I once believed I had already fully internalized—and made it truly my own.

This was proof of that.

Ever since I grasped Divine Sword Unity and gained full control over my sword, I thought that was the limit of my precision.

But now, as the mental image of each move became clearer, the path of the sword grew sharper too.

Of course, it still wasn't enough to land a hit on Seo Mun-Hwarin, but—

“Impressive.”

Kaang! Kagakak!

It sounded like metal against metal, but that wasn't the case.

Her Qi-enhanced fists had shattered my sword aura, broken its rhythm, and struck my defenseless blade aside.

Despite the fierce assault, she didn't even blink. She didn't counter, just focused on receiving my strikes.

Seeing that, I decided to push further. No holding back—I focused solely on cutting down the opponent before me.

My concentration rose to a peak.

The sense of unity from Divine Sword Unity heightened, and the sword in my hand felt heavier, more alive.

Just like in the fight with the Blood Flame Fist Demon, the history of my sword flashed before my eyes like a revolving lantern.

Following my own path, I swung.

At first, Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head at the sudden simplicity of the strikes.

But as the swordplay continued, her eyes widened.

And when I finally poured out everything—My body moved before I could think, carving a trajectory I couldn't even comprehend.

“Tch.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin frowned and threw a punch—

KWAANG!

Her first strike not to defend, but to counter.

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It was the first time Seo Mun-Hwarin had thrown a punch not for defense, but for a counterattack.

A fist imbued with red qi burst forward so fast and straight that it gave the illusion of swelling in size. The moment it entered his sight, instinct told him—

‘That can’t be blocked.’

Even if the energy surrounding his sword were not sword flame, but solid sword qi, it would be the same. Better to dodge than try to meet it head-on. There would be no one who could stop that fist in a frontal clash.

That was how overwhelming the force of the strike felt.

But once a sword is swung, it cannot be recalled.

The fiercely burning sword flame collided with the tightly condensed fist imbued with fist qi. And then—

It shattered the sword flame as it pushed forward, an unrelenting blow that allowed not a single moment of resistance.

Even a sword that traced an incomprehensible trajectory thanks to Divine Sword Unity could not be compared to Seo Mun-Hwarin's fist.

As he clenched his teeth in anticipation of the impact—

Suddenly, the momentum radiating from Seo Mun-Hwarin's fist weakened. The fist qi remained, but the oppressive aura that had been present a moment ago vanished. And then—

KWAANG!

With a tremendous roar, his body was flung backward.

“Kuhugh!”

“A-Are you alright? You could’ve just let go of the sword! Why were you being so stubborn!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin flapped both arms as she rushed over, anxiously examining his arms. Her reaction drew a helpless chuckle from him.

Still, wasn’t the difference between when she clenched her fist and when she didn’t a little too drastic?

Of course, Seo Mun-Hwarin, displeased with him smiling to himself, puffed out her cheeks and glared at him resentfully.

“What’s so funny? You're not fully recovered, just like Hyang, and yet you're grinning like a fool. Do you want to end up flat on your back again as soon as you’re up?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then why were you gripping that sword so tightly? I know you're serious about your sword, but you're not some Daoist who believes he must never let go of it under any circumstance.”

“Well, if letting go of my sword would let me win, or if I could just get a little hurt instead of dying, I’d gladly let it go. But in this case, I really had no choice.”

“Explain.”

“It becomes difficult to let go of the sword while maintaining Divine Sword Unity.”

“I see. The state of becoming one with your sword. I hadn’t thought of that since I’m a fist user and my fists have always been a part of me. No matter how urgent the situation, it's hard to just detach your own arm.”

“Yes. That’s why I have to deliberately break my concentration to disrupt Divine Sword Unity or intentionally build a technique around letting go of the sword. However—”

“However?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head, and he continued, clenching and opening his fist as though trying to grasp the lingering sensation.

“The final sword strike... was beyond my understanding. I don’t even know how I swung it. How could I control it?”

That had been the issue tormenting him these past few days.

Divine Sword Unity is a state where one can swing their sword exactly as they envision. It allows for flawless execution, but it also means one cannot go beyond what they themselves understand.

And yet, the final strike that felled the Blood Flame Sword Demon was the most perfect sword technique he had ever performed—no, it was beyond that.

At a level that surpassed his own comprehension.

No matter how many times he tried to replicate it alone, it was impossible.

It had been a good decision to ask Seo Mun-Hwarin for help. Even if it took a bit of time, to succeed in just one spar was—

It was like chasing after someone running just ahead rather than running alone in uncertainty—one runs faster that way.

He nodded inwardly and continued.

“Isn’t it strange? I know that enlightenment often comes like that. At first, you don’t understand it, but retracing your steps helps you grasp it little by little. You keep swinging your sword, guided by that vague understanding and lingering sensation, until it becomes part of you... But even so, no one denies the enlightenment they've already attained, do they?”

“Hm. So that’s what’s been troubling you.”

“Yes. Divine Sword Unity is the highest realization I’ve attained, and the one most tied to my life. I don’t know if it’s right to deny it.”

The sensation he felt when he fought the Blood Flame Sword Demon was gradually fading. Unable to recreate the sword from that moment, his body couldn’t internalize it.

With effort, he could reclaim it. It would just take longer than usual.

That wasn't the part that truly bothered him.

What did disturb him—was the idea that Divine Sword Unity, born of the lament of a wretched swordsman who had lost everything and clung to one sword, might have been wrong.

He didn't want to deny it. How could he?

It was a realization born from the very Heartscape that formed the foundation of who he was, even if he had undone those tragedies through regression.

If someday his Heartscape changed, and Divine Sword Unity changed with it, that would be fine. But he didn't want to suddenly prioritize some unfamiliar enlightenment over what came before.

Even if that new insight might lead to the future.

Yes, he knew it well.

This was obsession—another form of inner demon.

Maybe sensing his inner turmoil, Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke with a faint smile.

“I didn’t think you’d face it so soon... But in truth, your confusion is surprisingly common.”

“...What?”

“The sword strike you just performed. Do you know why you couldn’t understand it, or why I was shocked enough to respond seriously?”

“I do not.”

“It’s because that strike—though only faintly—contained Willpower.”

“Willpower?”

It was an utterly unexpected answer.

The biggest barrier between Peak Stage and Flowering Stage. In his previous life, he had faced death countless times and even died once, but could never reach it—Willpower.

They said Willpower was the embodiment of will and thought.

Most martial artists use it consciously or unconsciously, but the effect is minimal, almost imperceptible.

Much like how all living things possess qi, but not all are martial artists.

Even the killing intent he frequently used was a basic application of Willpower, where thought is given form.

But once one began wielding Willpower in earnest, everything changed.

Just like how saltwater will no longer absorb salt at a certain point, no matter how much internal energy one pours into a point, it can't condense beyond Qi Flame. But—

Willpower forces that to happen. It forges massive amounts of internal energy—many times stronger than Qi Flame—into something denser, harder.

That's why Willpower can only be countered with Willpower. Even with defensive qi, a swarm of Peak Stage masters would struggle to land a proper hit.

With it, one could split rivers with a punch, stir up deadly poison that kills both man and qi, or ensure an attack always hits its target.

In short, Willpower made the impossible possible.

“You're saying I used Willpower?”

“Correct. It was crude and clumsy... but it was unmistakable.”

“That's... a little shocking.”

Certainly, the insight he gained from battling the Blood Flame Sword Demon had expanded his limits.

But no matter how large a step, a single step was still just that—a step.

He'd assumed it would be a long road to Willpower.

Seo Mun-Hwarin chuckled at his bewildered expression.

“Why so surprised? You’ve always infused your swordsmanship with killing intent, haven’t you?”

“There are many martial artists who exude killing intent. But that doesn’t mean all of them wield Willpower.”

“True. But your case is special. How many people carry such dense killing intent as you?”

That was hard to deny.

“It’s simple. Until now, your sword swung first and killing intent—some Willpower—followed. This time, Willpower stirred first, and the sword followed.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t understand or reproduce it. I didn’t consciously swing.”

“Exactly. And that’s also why it’s not a contradiction to Divine Sword Unity. You said it yourself—Divine Sword Unity turns your ideal sword trajectory into reality. But where does that ideal trajectory come from?”

“From all the swords I’ve swung until now.”

“Then isn’t it natural that you couldn’t imagine, let alone execute, a sword you’ve never even considered before?”

“I understand. But there’s still one thing that bothers me.”

“What is it?”

“If that was my Willpower, why couldn’t I feel it? If Willpower is will and thought, shouldn’t I be the first to notice?”

“You already did. You just didn’t realize it consciously.”

Of all things, self-control was what he prided himself on. So that stung a little. But what she said next made perfect sense.

“Well, your Willpower is only at a fledgling level. It’s just a clue leading toward the Flowering Stage... But don’t get too arrogant or excited. Many martial artists cling to this clue their entire lives and die without advancing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Still, a little advice wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“I suppose. I can offer vague, general advice. That much is fine. That’s why I too imbued my last strike with Willpower. But— I can’t tell you what it was.”

“Why not?”

He asked, a bit hurt. Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes flickered slightly, then she shook her head and spoke firmly.

“As I said, your Willpower is still in its infancy. Who knows what kind of person a child will grow into? If I define it now, based on a faint impression, I’ll only be placing limits on you.”

“Ah...”

“You are still young, and not someone who will stop here. So don’t rush, don’t settle. Just think fiercely and yearn deeply. Don’t cage your own martial path.”

With those words, she raised her fist toward him.

Then, somewhat sheepishly, she added,

“Of course, if you want general advice, I can always offer that.”

“To me, even that is precious.”

He bowed his head, and Seo Mun-Hwarin lightly tapped his forehead with her raised fist.

“Willpower is just single-minded thought. Don’t forget that.”

“I’ll remember.”

As he raised his head again, she withdrew her fist with a slightly regretful look.

Then, after glancing at it, he cautiously asked,

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. There’s still a lot of time until dinner... would you be willing to spar with me a bit more?”

“Hmm?”

Her eyes widened, then she smiled brightly and nodded vigorously.

“Of course! Come at me again!”

What followed was an absolute mess of a spar.