

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 151-160

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

“Have you perhaps gotten married yet?”

“I’m not married yet, but I do have a fiancée.”

Near the end of the duel. After witnessing the slashes and thrusts that had taken down the Blood Flame Fist Demon and Hwangbo Yeongcheon, Namgung Dowi’s gaze changed slightly.

How should I put it? It was like he had found a gold nugget lying on the street.

“I only have one child myself, so I was just asking. Don’t think too much of it.”

Though he said that, Namgung Dowi wore a slightly sour expression, like someone who had just realized the gold nugget he picked up had a name tag on it.

He let out deep sighs for a while before finally speaking.

“So? Did you gain anything from this? I hope it was at least worth what you’ve done for the Namgung Clan.”

“Yes. It was more than enough.”

I saw the Sword King’s sword. No, not just saw it, but did everything I could to overcome it.

I poured every martial art and technique I knew into it, and even received advice along the way on how to wield my sword better.

This was an invaluable time for someone like me, who had learned a patchwork of rootless martial arts cobbled together from here and there.

No matter how hard I tried to improve, a person’s time is limited.

Even counting my regression, I haven’t wielded the sword for even half a century.

Meanwhile, the Namgung Clan has focused solely on the sword for hundreds of years.

What I considered my best efforts were, from Namgung Dowi's perspective, often just trial and error.

If Seo Mun-Hwarin taught me the general way of fighting, then Namgung Dowi taught me the way of the sword.

That alone was impressive enough, but the real treasure was—

“The Imperial Sword Form. Was it really alright for you to show it to me?”

“It's not a shallow martial art that can be stolen in a single sparring session. So what would the problem be?”

“But I feel like I've learned at least the general path it takes.”

“Overconfidence has always been the privilege of the young. And you do have the skill to back it up. Still, don't get too greedy.”

Namgung Dowi shook his head with a wry smile. Then, standing once again at the center of the training ground like when we first met, he began pointing at sword marks carved into the floor one by one.

“That one is part of the Tai Chi Sword left by a Wudang Sect leader two hundred years ago. It may have changed much by now, but the core of internalizing the flow as your own would remain the same.”

“This one is from my great-grandfather. He left it behind after an enlightenment late in life. That’s when the Imperial Sword Form was truly completed.”

“This brings back memories. I don’t remember exactly when, but that middle sword was left behind by someone who claimed to be a close friend of my father. See that rough tear in the blade? As a child, I tried to imitate it and ended up breaking a lot of innocent swords.”

Namgung Dowi continued pointing at each mark on the ground, explaining them one by one.

Eventually, he pointed to a newly formed mark, still dusted with white stone powder.

“That one is yours. You called it Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, didn’t you? A sword imbued with killing intent is always sharp, but that also makes it

dangerous. I don't know how you controlled it, but the fact that it's possible means I also learned something from you."

"Ah."

Only then did I understand how this training ground, full of sword scars, had come to be.

Long ago, the Namgung Clan must have invited or personally sought out outstanding, unusual, or unfamiliar swordsmanship and had those swords leave their mark here.

"Your sword is the kind often seen in martial artists who trained without formal affiliation. Taking what you've experienced and adapting techniques you've picked up here and there to suit your own tastes."

"That's right."

For martial artists without proper affiliations, there are two options.

Either join a reputable sect and learn verified martial arts,

Or blend together techniques picked up from the streets or combat and forge your own patchwork style.

I, and the Ghost Shadow Thief, would fall into the latter.

However, such martial arts lack strong foundations, making it difficult to climb high.

The Ghost Shadow Thief was stuck at the wall of Sub-Perfection and was preparing for death.

And I, despite countless life-or-death battles in my past life, failed to break through the wall.

It wasn't until I actually died once that I finally grasped the thread of willpower.

What's important is that both the Ghost Shadow Thief and I were born with considerable talent.

But what if someone with lesser or mediocre talent tried to learn such cobbled-together martial arts?

Nine times out of ten, they wouldn't even reach the Peak Stage.

In that sense, the Imperial Sword Form that Namgung Dowi showed me shares similarities with the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

It's the culmination of countless sword techniques the Namgung Clan personally experienced or collected over time.

The overwhelming pressure of the Imperial Sword Form. Beyond its power, the sheer sense of helplessness it evokes stems from this origin.

It contains countless swords, and so it can respond to countless sword paths.

It is the extreme of late-initiative dominance. A pinnacle achieved solely through understanding the sword.

The Imperial Sword Form is the product of exceptional sword talent refined over a long period.

If the Namgung Clan had lacked even a bit of sword talent, or if they had been just a bit more sane and less obsessed with the sword—

This martial art would never have come into being.

As I nodded inwardly, Namgung Dowi continued with a faint smile.

“By now, you’re probably thinking that if enough time and unrelenting effort are poured in, your martial art could become like the Imperial Sword Form.”

“Am I wrong?”

“You are.”

Namgung Dowi shook his head firmly. He stared at the new sword mark I had left and spoke.

“I understand how you reached that conclusion. It’s based on the belief that, over infinite time, refining infinite swords will eventually lead to something similar.”

“That’s correct.”

“Swordsmiths like us spend every day pondering how to wield better. It’s natural to think that way. But, there’s one thing you must never forget.”

“What is it?”

“It is always a person who wields the sword. No matter how much you deny it, every sword you wield inevitably carries traces of you.”

With that, Namgung Dowi drew his sword and assumed a stance. It was the thrust I had shown him, a reinterpretation of the Hwangbo Clan’s technique — the Taesan Piercing Sword.

He slowly extended his heavily drawn-back arm forward.

It was just a slowed-down version of my own strike.

But something was different.

Taesun Piercing Sword is a simple, powerful thrust, not even really a proper form. Until I become more familiar with willpower, that's all it is.

Embedding willpower into it is difficult, but the sword path itself is easily imitated – it shouldn't have surprised me.

So how was it different?

It was clearly a straightforward thrust, driven by the will to push forward.

Only after watching the halfway-completed thrust intently did I realize the difference.

“It's not a point.”

“Well observed.”

My imagined thrust always focused into a single point. But the one Namgung Dowi unleashed was a strike that sought to dominate a surface.

If my Taesan Piercing Sword pierced through an obstacle, his would shatter it to pieces.

Both swords sought to push through what lay ahead. Their stance and trajectory were the same.

But the difference in how one conceptualizes a thrust changes everything.

“Even if our martial knowledge were exactly the same, the results would differ based on our experiences. Have you ever wanted to be a king?”

“I understand now. The path and process of refining one’s martial art – that’s where Sir Sword King and I diverged.”

“A path is just that – a road. It’s natural for there to be forks.”

Even if my martial arts and those of the Namgung Clan share the same principles, the years we’ve built upon them differ.

More importantly, the goals we pursue at the end cannot be the same.

I was not born into abundance, never received universal affection or respect, never gained insight without facing death, never had a desire to be the best at everything, nor enjoyed attention and recognition.

Thus, I cannot wield the Namgung Clan's sword, and likewise, they cannot wield mine.

This isn't about the level of martial arts — it's simply how it is.

Different people walk different lives, and so, naturally, wield different swords.

“What did the head of the Seo Mun Clan say while teaching you?”

“Don't rush, don't compromise, and think with intensity,' she said.”

“All wise words. Then allow me to add one more.”

Namgung Dowi sheathed his sword and, after a moment of contemplation, spoke.

“The sword is already swung before it is drawn.”

“...Pardon?”

“You’ve reached Divine Sword Unity. You’ll understand it soon enough.”

“???”

The cryptic remark made me tilt my head. I didn’t quite understand it yet, but I doubted someone like the Sword King would say something meaningless, so I made sure to remember it.

“Let’s call it a day. The sun’s about to rise — you should get ready to leave.”

“Ah, it’s gotten that late already.”

When I looked up, the red hue of the lantern had already been swallowed by the dawn sky.

I secured my sheathed sword tightly, straightened my clothes, and gave a formal fist salute.

“Thank you for your guidance.”

“No need. I should be the one thanking you for the help you gave. Ah, before you go, may I ask one thing?”

“Please.”

“If you one day reach an even higher level, would you spar with my son again?”

“Not you personally, sir?”

“As I said before, a different person wields a different sword. Even though my son and I share blood and grew up in the same house, we can never be exactly the same. There’s a limit to what I can teach him.”

“I believe I understand.”

Namgung Dowi felt like a man born for the Imperial Sword Form.

If the tower of swordsmanship built by the Namgung Clan reached the heavens, then he was the one standing at the top, looking down.

But Namgung Jong was different. Like other members of the Namgung Clan, he wanted to be the best and was obsessed with the sword, but—

He wasn't someone who sought to reign.

If anything, he was someone who embraced others but always needed to stand at the forefront.

At least, that was what I felt from our clash of swords.

Before regression, Namgung Dowi earned the title of Sword King through the Imperial Sword Form. In contrast, Namgung Jong mastered the Limitless Blue Skies Sword Technique and was known as the Sky Piercing Sword Lord — a reflection of this difference.

“I also enjoyed sparring with Brother Namgung. I would welcome the opportunity.”

“Thank you.”

With those final words, I left the training ground.

Unlike the sword-scarred training ground, the outside was pristine. At that moment, a thought occurred to me.

The marks I left behind would eventually become part of the Namgung Clan’s sword.

And likewise, Namgung Dowi’s teachings would remain within my sword.

Though we walk different paths as different people... a path is not made up of forks alone.

There are crossroads too.

Perhaps today was the day our paths crossed.

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On the way to Sichuan, passing through Hanan as scheduled.

“You little brat, your mind is full of demons!”

I tried to help a monk being attacked by Green Forest Bandits, but got mistaken for one of them.

So I just took them all down.

Well... that's how it went.

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

After the sparring match ended, I returned to my room to find the rest of our party already gathered, chatting cheerfully.

“What? Sister Seorin can break the Chugung Pressure Point with her foot, but she can’t use chopsticks with her toes?!”

“Why are you so surprised? The structure is completely different, so of course she can’t.”

“Well, yes, but still...”

“Why are you even thinking about eating with your feet in the first place?”

“Fufu. Sister Hwarin, Hyang was just surprised because she thinks anyone at the Flowering Stage can do anything.”

“What! If it’s like that, then I suppose This One must demonstrate her magnificence!”

I sighed deeply as Seo Mun-Hwarin—Seorin—started taking off her socks while glaring at the chopsticks.

“Don’t. That’s gross.”

“Eep!”

Seorin flinched in surprise, jumping a handspan high despite being seated, and I shook my head.

“You could clearly sense my presence. Why were you so startled?”

“When it’s someone I see every day! Of course I let down my guard! Otherwise it’s exhausting!”

Using that jump as momentum, Seorin got up and stomped her feet in frustration. I turned my gaze away from her and toward Tang Sowol instead. I figured Seol Lihyang would take care of Seorin.

“Don’t tell me you stayed up all night here waiting for me?”

“Of course not. We just naturally gathered after waking up this morning.”

“I told you all to stop treating my room like a public square, no matter where we’re staying.”

“But there’s nowhere else to meet, is there? Ah, and if you’re worried about waking us up early, don’t be. I slept here last night.”

Why would you even do that?

“Maybe because she wanted to see you get flustered like that?”

For a moment, I wondered if it was only natural that Tang Sowol would sleep in my room, given how boldly she said it.

Shaking my head, I glanced at Seol Lihyang and Seorin bickering in the background.

“That’s enough teasing. We’ll be leaving the Namgung Clan soon. What are your thoughts on traveling through Hanan Province?”

“I’m for it. I’ve always wanted to see the famous Shaolin Temple. I doubt we’ll be allowed inside the main hall though.”

“It’s not like any sect will let outsiders wander freely outside of designated reception areas, so don’t be too disappointed. Besides, This One is fine with it. I’ve been interested in Shaolin martial arts for a long time.”

“Understood. Then let’s just pay our respects and set off. We can ask for directions while we’re at it.”

I nodded and packed my scattered belongings into a bundle. I’d chosen to carry money instead of heavy luggage, so it didn’t take long.

The others had clearly anticipated this—they’d been packed for a while.

We left the manor and exchanged farewells with the Namgung father and son, then headed for Hanan Province.

Hanan is a bustling region.

In truth, a region’s prosperity is determined more by which city, sect, or clan resides there than the province itself.

Still, Hanan has a reputation for being lively—and that’s largely because, while it’s no longer the capital, former imperial dynasties often made it their seat of power.

“Did someone smear honey on this place or something?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head after I gave her a brief history of Hanan Province.

“Pretty much. Geographically, it’s at the center of the Central Plains. Merchants naturally pass through, and as money flows, development follows.”

“Ahem. To add to that, in the distant past, the land near the Yellow River was fertile and ideal for farming, so people gathered there.”

“Heh. So maybe it feels like my hometown at night?”

“Not exactly.”

“Huh? But it’s a busy city, right? Where people gather and money flows, there’s bound to be drinking and women, isn’t there? That’s even why the Hao Clan opened a branch here.”

True, where people and money gather, entertainment often flourishes.

But Hanan is an exception.

“Shaolin Temple is here, remember?”

“What?”

“Just like the Tang Clan rules Sichuan, Hanan belongs to the Shaolin Temple. Most people probably behave themselves under the monks’ watchful eyes.”

“Hmm. But it’s hard to believe even people in far corners would care about that.”

“Well, even in Hanan, outlying areas are sparsely populated, so it’s hard for entertainment to take root there anyway.”

“That’s true.”

Seol Lihyang nodded in understanding. Then Tang Sowol turned to me with a question.

“Then are you planning to head straight to Shaolin?”

“No. It’d be a waste to come all this way and only see the temple. Hanan might not have nightlife, but it has plenty to see. Like I said, remnants of the old dynasties remain.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning to let you enjoy any nighttime fun anyway, so that works out!”

Just so we’re clear—I never said I was going anywhere.

“I was just speaking hypothetically~”

Tang Sowol smiled sweetly, lips curling up, but her eyes were chillingly devoid of humor.

I swallowed hard and casually shifted the topic.

“If we follow the road, we should reach a decently sized village. If any merchant group there is heading to our next destination, we’ll tag along. Otherwise, we’ll just ask for directions.”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

For some reason, despite the road being wide enough, Tang Sowol stuck so close our shoulders were touching. As we walked like that, memories of my past life resurfaced.

Back then, even the belated efforts of the Orthodox-Demonic Alliance couldn’t stop the Heavenly Demon, and all martial artists fighting in scattered regions were forced to retreat to Hebei.

As one of the close aides of the Black Lotus Sect Leader, I had carried out many missions since the early days of the alliance—I was fairly well-known.

Not quite at the level of someone like the Poison Dance Empress, Tang Sowol, but among those from the Unorthodox Faction, most had heard my name.

After surviving countless battlefields and even making my mark a few times, it was only natural.

And surviving long in the Unorthodox Faction meant one thing: strength. So it was inevitable that many people tried to cling to me.

Some brought boxes full of devalued gold coins. Others offered suspicious elixirs of unknown origin, or martial techniques stolen from annihilated clans.

But the most common were women who offered themselves as the bargaining chip.

Not because they felt anything for me. They just wanted safety and a sliver of influence by sticking close to someone strong.

Among the female martial artists of the Unorthodox Faction, there were many trained in seduction techniques.

Some surely approached me intending to unravel my mind and control me slowly.

But no one ever succeeded.

Not because I was unusually chaste or paranoid—

It was because of Tang Sowol, who clung to me just like this.

Back then, I thought she was simply lonely after losing her family or just curious about everything.

But thinking back, she was fiercely guarding her territory.

When I didn't take the hint, she eventually grabbed my hand and placed it on her own waist.

Even I couldn't remain oblivious after that—it became clear how Tang Sowol saw me.

“Hmm.”

“What's wrong all of a sudden, Sir Cheon?”

“Mm...?”

“If I'm clinging too much—”

After a brief moment of thought, I nodded. This much should be fine.

This time, I was the one to place my hand on Tang Sowol's waist as if a bit reluctantly.

She, just about to pull away, instead melted into my side.

Her scent filled my nose, warm and soft sensations pressing against my body.

“Oh my?”

Tang Sowol's face flushed slightly at first, her tone calm, but the subtle excitement in her voice wasn't hard to catch.

With a bashful shrug and a grinning expression, she said,

“Well? If Sir Cheon wants to be slightly uncomfortable, I, as your fiancée, can certainly accommodate you.”

“You can be honest with me.”

“You’re the one who made the first move, so don’t pull away until I say so.”

Her response was more direct than expected. I chuckled and nodded.

It was a bit embarrassing, and I could feel Seol Lihyang and Seorin watching, but—

Still, I was content. That was how we ended up wandering around Hanan, sightseeing together.

After seeing all there was to see, we set our course back toward the Tang Clan, with a stop at Shaolin Temple as originally planned.

And just as we expected, we got caught up in trouble.

“Hey, monk. Won’t you spare some charity for this poor bandit?”

“I don’t have much, but I can spare a little grain.”

“Kehaha! I don’t want grain—I want your heads! And everything in your wagon!”

With that, a burly man draped in wolf pelts burst into laughter. It was the signal.

Bandits hiding in the bushes leapt out from all directions.

Merchants begging for their lives in fear. Mules running amok. A lone elderly monk, leaning on his staff with a resolute expression, blocked the path of the bandits and was quickly surrounded.

We were some distance away, and perhaps because Seorin had quietly cast a sound-isolation field, they hadn’t noticed us.

Thanks to that, we could calmly observe the situation from afar.

“Green Forest Bandits, huh.”

“Cheon Hwi, do they often operate in Orthodox regions like this?”

“The Green Forest is notorious not just for its size and skill, but because they rob both Orthodox and Unorthodox factions alike.”

“Crazy bastards.”

“They’re the type who’ll challenge you to see who’s crazier. Don’t talk like that in front of them—they’ll enjoy it.”

“What kind of...”

Seol Lihyang looked exasperated. Seorin, on the other hand, was visibly shocked.

“Heavens! The Green Forest I remember would let people go peacefully after collecting a toll! They were at least somewhat reasonable!”

“They used to be. But recently, with a new chief, they’ve been targeting merchants indiscriminately, claiming to avenge their fallen brothers.”

“That’s just asking for death...”

“Exactly. Among the younger generation, hunting Green Forest Bandits is now considered a mark of honor.”

Tang Sowol recalled something she’d heard at Yongbong.

Seorin seemed a bit shaken by the generational gap, while the rest of us watched the unfolding slaughter with wary eyes.

“Cheon Hwi...”

“I know. I promised not to get involved in troublesome matters, but I can’t just stand by while innocent people die.”

I nodded and leapt straight into the middle of the bandits.

“Ah, crap.”

“Eh?!”

Because I'd spent the past few days walking with my arm around Tang Sowol's waist, I accidentally pulled her along with me.

Well, it'll be over soon anyway, so it's fine.

As a startled Tang Sowol blinked her green eyes—

I unleashed Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art to its extreme, flooding the area with intense killing intent.

Now that I could mimic willpower to some degree, my killing intent had grown even more potent.

The bandit leader was likely only at Peak Stage—no need to even draw my sword.

Indeed, the moment the killing aura blanketed the area, the bandits turned pale, grabbing at their throats in panic.

All except one.

“(Gal)!!”

The elderly monk, who had stepped forward to protect the merchant, had entered the killing field—

And remained completely unaffected.

...How?

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

The Green Forest Bandits don't discriminate between targets.

Whether it's because they see themselves as lords of the mountain, or because they've trained martial arts far better than the average ruffian, there are many reasons.

But the biggest one is this:

They're confident they can escape anywhere as long as they don't lose their heads.

The mountains are practically their living room. That's why large-scale exterminations have always failed, even if a few Green Forest bandits get caught here and there.

Unless someone like Seorin, an absolute top-tier martial artist, personally hunts them down, it's inevitable that some of the bandits scattered in all directions will escape.

So my plan was to drown them in killing intent from the start, rendering them unable to move, and capture every last one of them.

As expected, most of the bandits—ranging from Peak to first-class martial artists—were overwhelmed by the killing aura and froze in place.

Which is why I was surprised.

“(Gal)!!”

An elderly monk, who had stepped forward to protect the merchants traveling with him, had entered the area suffused with my killing intent—yet was completely unaffected, swinging his staff wildly as he marched toward me.

“Young one, your head is filled with demons!”

“To see such wicked killing aura again! I cannot stand idly by and watch this!”

“...Excuse me?”

Judging by what he said, he wasn't unaware of my killing aura. He could sense it clearly—he was simply outraged by the malice within it.

Most likely, he had mistaken me for one of the bandits.

This wasn't like Tang Sowol, who couldn't be affected by my killing intent at all because she was incapable of harboring murderous thoughts herself.

I had never seen this monk before in either my past or current life.

Which meant he was likely a reclusive martial artist, living in hiding.

But no matter how I looked, I couldn't sense any presence or force coming from him.

Since Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art infuses inner energy with killing aura, when I surround an area like this, my senses become twice as sharp.

Under normal circumstances, even a martial artist at the Flowering Stage would have a hard time hiding their energy from me in this domain.

So when I examined him with that heightened awareness, I realized—he didn't have any inner energy at all.

He was just an ordinary old man.

How could someone like that withstand my killing aura so casually?

Caught off guard by this unexpected reaction, I froze. That's when the monk shouted with conviction:

“But it's not too late. If you repent now and live quietly, offering prayers, you can still die as a man, having lived as one.”

“...I think there’s a misunderstanding, sir. I’m not one of the Green Forest Bandits.”

“Have you not realized it yet? Or are you trying to deceive me...? Then I have no choice. I must personally guide you!”

With that, the old monk gripped his staff like a cudgel and charged.

His movement was slow and stiff, like any ordinary elder. Yet strangely, I couldn’t take my eyes off the path of his staff.

It wasn’t just decent—it was outstanding. Among the staff techniques of Shaolin I saw during my time with the Orthodox-Demonic Alliance, his was among the best.

And so, without meaning to, I swung my sword at full strength.

A crimson flame-tinged slash struck the monk’s staff. Or rather, obliterated it.

**Kwajjik!**

I had held back at the last moment, so I avoided slicing the monk himself along with the staff, but the shock of the impact sent him flying.

He didn't get up, just lay there staring at the sky—likely unconscious.

...

A brief silence.

Thankfully, his chest was still rising and falling peacefully, so it didn't seem too serious.

Tang Sowol, who had been watching the whole scene nearby, spoke in a dry tone:

“...Shall we finish up first?”

“That would be best.”

As I let go of Tang Sowol, she flicked her sleeve and released a faint yellow poisonous mist into the air.

The Green Forest Bandits, most of whom were of second- to first-class level, collapsed one after another. Their strength visibly drained, as if they'd been reduced to powerless civilians.

The hulking man in wolf pelts, likely the leader, was the only one who managed to endure the poison... though even he was staggering as his inner energy scattered.

Satisfied that things were under control, I withdrew the killing aura and walked over to the pale-faced leader.

“Just asking—do you have any special purpose or secret information worth whispering to me alone?”

“Kgh! If I did, would you even consider sparing me?”

“I could offer you a painless death.”

“Hah! If I can unsettle the bastard who's about to kill me by gritting my teeth through the pain... sounds like a good deal.”

“Actually, even that won’t be easy. Sowol, please.”

“Yes, I already prepared it.”

Tang Sowol raised her palm and blew gently over it.

A white poisonous mist, seemingly from nothing, spread out from her hand and engulfed the leader’s face.

“Poison?! You cowardly—!”

“I don’t know why a bandit who robs the weak and runs at the first sign of danger thinks he has the right to talk about cowardice.”

As I shrugged, the mist spread, and the leader’s eyes turned blank.

“Cheon Hwi,”

“Mm?”

“Sometimes, having a test subject to try new poison combinations on isn’t such a bad thing.”

...That’s a pretty intense statement, but now that I think about it, all the poisons you used today are ones I’ve never seen before.

The yellow mist she released at first probably combined the effects of a sleeping toxin and an air disruption poison.

If effective, it’d be a perfect subjugation poison. Though its potency still seemed too weak to affect anyone above Peak Stage.

Then there was the white powder she blew from her palm.

Normally, poisons used in interrogations to cloud the mind could only be made in liquid form, and only on the hand.

The formula was so complex and delicate that even Tang Sowol, with her Poison Spirit Constitution, could make mistakes and end up with a completely different poison.

But today, though still mixed in the palm, she'd produced a powder-type variant with far more flexibility.

Recently, with all the incidents we've been involved in, she's begun experimenting with poisons that have more diverse effects than just causing death.

Clearly, she's had some breakthroughs.

I mean, I have memories from a past life, but she only recently began her journey through the martial world.

Every bit of experience is valuable for her right now.

Smiling inwardly with pride, I began questioning the dazed bandit leader.

Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately—no hidden conspiracy came to light.

Just the usual banditry: hoarding wealth, sending regular tributes to the main chief, recently looting a small farming village...

Vile, yes, but nothing more than typical scum behavior.

I had been worried that taking down these bandits might draw us into some bigger mess, but it seems that won't be the case.

Good. I might actually keep my promise not to get involved in troublesome affairs this time.

Nodding inwardly, I struck the bandit leader's dantian with inner energy.

“Ghak!”

He coughed up blood, eyes dazed.

After our late-arriving companions joined, we shattered the dantians of the remaining bandits and tied them up, now writhing on the ground in pain.

Then I approached the merchants, who were glancing back and forth between me and the fallen monk.

Some of the armed escorts cautiously stepped in my way, sensing the lingering killing aura even if they hadn't been directly targeted.

I gently pushed them aside. A well-dressed merchant stepped forward and bowed deeply.

“Thank you for your help. I am Gwak Yeong, leader of the Oeum Merchant Group.”

“Ah, I'm Cheon Hwi of the Tang Clan in Sichuan.”

“And I'm Tang Sowol, also of the Tang Clan.”

“Oh! You're from the Tang Clan!”

Only then did the merchant leader's tense expression ease.

He must've been nervous after seeing us take down even the elderly monk.

Chuckling lightly at his sigh of relief, I asked,

“We plan to hand over the captured Green Forest Bandits. Do you know the way to the nearest local authority? We’re unfamiliar with Hanan Province.”

“Hm... this area only has small villages nearby, so you’ll need to travel quite a bit. May I ask where you’re headed? If it’s on the way, I can direct you to the right government office.”

“We’re planning to stop by Shaolin Temple.”

“Ah! In that case, you can simply come with us! We’re heading toward Songshan as well.”

“You have business with Shaolin Temple, sir?”

“Oh, no! We’re just a small merchant group. There’s no way we could do business directly with Shaolin. We’re just selling goods to shops in a nearby village. Still, would you care to join us? Since we owe you our lives, we’ll treat you as comfortably as possible on the way.”

The merchant leader watched us carefully as he made the offer again.

Having just been attacked, he was probably desperate for extra protection.

And since we were escorting the bandits anyway, we couldn't travel quickly by ourselves.

If we can travel more comfortably, that's a better deal.

I looked around at my companions—they all nodded. I gave a nod in response.

“Then we gratefully accept your hospitality.”

“Of course! You saved our lives—it's the least we can do!”

The merchant leader waved his hands with a laugh and ordered his workers to move their goods and make room in the wagon.

He pointed at the unconscious monk and asked,

“By the way, who is this man?”

“Ah... well...”

The merchant leader hesitated, and I shook my head.

“There was a bit of a misunderstanding. Despite his age, he bravely stepped up to stop evil. We bear no ill will, so don’t worry.”

“That’s good to hear. He’s a scholar monk from Shaolin Temple. He came out on an errand but lost his travel funds to thieves, so we offered him a ride.”

“...A scholar monk?”

Shaolin is famous as the source of all martial arts under heaven.

They teach a vast and profound martial curriculum, and many great masters come from there.

They’re even called the North Star of the Orthodox Factions.

But not every Shaolin monk practices martial arts.

Those who train their bodies and learn martial arts to fight evil are warrior monks.

Those who study Buddhist scriptures instead, aiming to save others through preaching, are scholar monks.

But the old monk earlier—while lacking inner energy—demonstrated martial skill on par with the top-tier staff techniques I knew.

Unless he was a former warrior monk with a shattered dantian, there's no way he could be a scholar monk...

Still, I suppose Shaolin has its own internal issues.

It's a place full of people, after all—problems are bound to exist.

I nodded and squeezed into an empty spot in the wagon with my companions.

The misunderstanding could be cleared up later once the monk woke up.

For now, we could just enjoy a peaceful journey.

...Or so I thought.

That is, until the monk woke up and, without any inner energy, charged at me using one of Shaolin's Seventy-Two Ultimate Techniques.

“Ah.”

Only after I reflexively overpowered him again due to his incredible execution did I let out a long sigh.

I guess the misunderstanding will have to wait.

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By the time we reached Shaolin Temple,

The old monk had fainted and regained consciousness seven times.

There was nothing I could do.

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

The old monk, who claimed to be a scholar monk, possessed astonishing martial skill.

If only he had sufficient inner energy, I suspect I would have had a tough time dealing with him.

So really, I had no choice.

“Hu, huhuhu...”

“We truly did our best, Master Monk.”

“Amitabha... While this monk was unconscious, you could have tied me up.”

“Do you think we didn’t try? After the first time you sprang at us the moment you regained consciousness, we tried tying you up, wrapping you in heavy baggage to restrain you—everything.”

But he escaped each time in the blink of an eye and came charging again.

He had no inner energy and was in that old, worn-out body—yet I still had no idea how he could manage it.

Seorin said that even though he used only his bare body, his movements contained a level of insight so profound that even she couldn’t fully understand it at a glance...

Impressive? Certainly.

A pain in the neck? Also yes.

He broke free every time he woke up and demonstrated flawless techniques.

It was only when we drew near to Shaolin, the peak of Songshan rising behind me, that he finally came to a stop.

Which brings us to now.

Tang Sowol handed the monk a bowl of porridge, prepared by the merchant group.

“You fainted and woke up seven times over four days. Please eat something.”

“Hm. Thank you. And... I apologize. It seems I misunderstood a bit.”

“A bit...?”

I'm the one who had to spring into action every time the monk rose up with that unmistakable intent in his body.

Thanks to that, I hadn't gotten proper sleep for four days either.

Tang Sowol's voice carried a slight edge, and I couldn't blame her.

“A small misunderstanding doesn’t mean my regret is small.”

With a strangely persuasive tone, the old monk gratefully received the porridge.

Though there were only about three hours left to reach Shaolin, the merchant group had decided to camp here for the night, weary from travel and with nightfall upon us.

The merchant leader’s earlier boast of making our journey comfortable wasn’t an empty promise—his guards and porters had prepared everything.

Sleeping rolls, night watches, porridge like the one Tang Sowol had brought over, and even meat roasting over a fire for us to share.

Everything was taken care of, and yes, it was indeed convenient.

“Ah, and please don’t think we’re just hogging the good food, Master Monk. You’ve gone four days without eating because of all the fainting...”

“I understand. And with this old body already creaking all over, adding meat to an empty stomach would be difficult to digest.”

“...Wait, are monks even allowed to eat meat?”

“I’m not at Shaolin yet, am I? For now, I’m a wandering monk who lives off alms. I eat what I’m given—I can’t afford to be picky.”

“Still, meat seems a bit...”

“That’s a common misconception. Unless the meat is seen, heard, or suspected to be killed specifically for the monk—that is, if it doesn't violate three pure meats (samjeongyuk)—then it’s permissible.”

“Three... what now?”

Even with everything I’ve learned from Seorin since before my regression, Buddhist terminology is still beyond me.

As I blinked blankly, Tang Sowol leaned in and grinned brightly at my face.

“Fufu. Sir Cheon, have you ever heard of samjeongyuk?”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

“It refers to the three conditions under which monks may eat meat: they must not see the animal being killed, not hear it being killed for them, and not suspect it was killed for them. If all three are met, it is considered pure.”

“Well explained, young lady. That’s correct. Depending on the sect, some prohibit meat entirely, and others impose stricter rules—but fundamentally, those three are the standard.”

“Sects, huh... Come to think of it, the Mount Emei Sect is technically a Buddhist sect, but unlike other temples, their nuns are allowed to grow their hair.”

“Emei was built atop Mount Emei, which originally had Taoist roots. It's a peculiar place with rules that apply only to women—but yes, similar enough. Besides, how do you think Shaolin’s warrior monks built such sturdy bodies in the first place?”

Indeed.

Shaolin is renowned for its deep, pure inner energy techniques—but their external arts are just as profound.

No way could they achieve that physique on grass and grains alone.

Soon, the monk emptied the entire bowl of porridge and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Whew... I feel alive again.”

“I was careful to go easy on you, Master Monk.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. I meant that literally.”

The old monk chuckled dryly, then brought his palms together toward us in thanks.

“Amitabha. This humble monk’s Dharma name is Gakjeong. And what might yours be?”

“Ah, so you are Master Gakjeong. I am Cheon Hwi of the Sichuan Tang Clan.”

“And I am Tang Sowol. As for those two... we’ll introduce them when they return.”

Tang Sowol pointed toward Seorin and Seol Lihyang, who had gone to fetch our meals.

For the record, no one asked them to.

With our arrival at Songshan imminent, the announcement that all remaining food would be shared had excited them.

It made sense for Seol Lihyang, who was still of an age to be food-obsessed...

But why Seorin?

A part of me wondered if this was another side effect of Rejuvenation.

At least... I hoped that was it.

I shook off that impolite thought.

Now that I think about it, Seol Lihyang had been oddly irritable with Seorin after her identity reveal, but the two seemed to be getting along again.

It made me smile, recalling my past life.

Then Gakjeong spoke again, more solemnly this time.

“Once more, I must apologize. Due to my misunderstanding, I nearly returned kindness with hostility.”

“No need. I was grateful for the opportunity to witness such skilled martial arts.”

I didn't regret asking Seorin to abduct me, nor forfeiting the duel at Dragon and Phoenix because I'd sustained internal injuries from defeating the Black Sky Sword Sect Master.

But I did regret not having seen more martial styles from various sects and clans.

So seeing Gakjeong's techniques was a great opportunity.

Though it was all physical movement with no inner energy, he showed me a lot.

Particularly how he lifted objects many times his weight with only slight movement—it was a feat that couldn't be shown unless one had mastered the control of pure strength.

“Martial arts... what I used cannot truly be called martial arts.”

Gakjeong shook his head with a self-deprecating smile.

A reaction I found hard to understand.

“If what you used wasn't martial arts, then what is? If a lack of inner energy disqualifies one from martial arts, then all second- and third-rate fighters are just flailing their arms pointlessly.”

“When a baby mimics their parents' words, it's called babbling, not conversation.”

“Still, your so-called 'babble' was quite impressive.”

“Hm... but ‘impressive’ is defined by the goal you pursue, isn’t it?”

He looked off into the distance with a bittersweet smile and stood up with the empty bowl.

“Once again, apologies for troubling you, Sir Cheon. You mentioned visiting Shaolin?”

“Yes. Since our party is what it is, we’ll only be viewing the shrine at the foot of Songshan—not the main temple.”

I shrugged. Gakjeong seemed to think for a moment, then pulled something from his robes.

“Take this.”

“...What is this?”

A small jade Buddha statue.

It fit in one hand, yet its detailed craftsmanship suggested it was no ordinary object.

“When you arrive at Shaolin, show that to the gatekeeper and tell them you were invited by Monk Gakjeong. They’ll let you tour the main temple—with your companions. Of course, only the areas open to guests.”

“But isn’t Shaolin a no-women zone?”

“That rule exists because of the temptation young monks face. It’s not the guests’ fault, but a matter of their own lack of discipline—so they hide behind precepts. Tsk tsk.”

“Still, rules are rules. Can you really ignore them so easily?”

“That statue will suffice. It’s a rare item, so don’t sell it. As for me, I’ll clean up and lie down again. I may be old, but a little exertion really takes its toll.”

Grumbling, Gakjeong took the empty bowl and headed for the riverside to wash up.

Soon after, Seorin and Seol Lihyang returned with our meals.

“Hmm? What’s with the mood, Cheon Hwi? You said you’d talk to that monk when he woke up.”

“I did.”

“And?”

“Looks like we’ll be allowed into Shaolin’s main temple.”

“???”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head in confusion.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure what just happened either.

The misunderstanding was cleared up, but somehow I had even more questions now.

Still, I couldn't interrogate an old man who had fainted seven times.

Especially not when I was the one who kept knocking him out.

I'll just ask again tomorrow.

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When I woke the next morning, Gakjeong was gone.

I asked the porter who had been on watch—he said Gakjeong left at dawn, telling them not to wait because he had other matters.

“I didn't sense anything... Senior Seorin, did you?”

“I felt him moving away in my sleep. I thought he'd be back after relieving himself, not that he meant to leave entirely.”

So he concealed his presence so well that only a Flowering Stage martial artist could even faintly sense it...

Who the hell was he?

“Does it matter that much? Who that Gakjeong monk really is?”

“...Not really. It just nags at me.”

I shrugged and toyed with the jade Buddha in my hand.

“Well, if this statue actually gets us in, I suppose the monks at Shaolin can explain it.”

“Indeed. If they let you in, it means they know what it is.”

We arrived at the village at the base of Songshan, where we parted ways with the merchant group.

Then we headed directly to Shaolin Temple.

After climbing a long flight of steep stairs, we arrived at the gate and showed the small jade Buddha to the gatekeeper monk.

“H-how did you get this?!”

“A monk named Gakjeong gave it to us on the way here... why? What is it?”

“...You didn't know? Monk Gakjeong is the former Abbot of Shaolin.”

“...Excuse me?”

I blinked in disbelief, prompting the gatekeeper to elaborate as if I'd misunderstood.

“In the past, he was known in the martial world as Punisher Asura.”

...That's one terrifying title.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Punisher Asura.

It was the first time I'd heard the title, but it certainly sounded fierce.

At the same time, I could now understand the blind hostility Gakjeong had shown toward my killing intent.

If he'd earned a nickname like that, he must have lived a rather intense life in his youth.

And if he had once been chosen as the head abbot of Shaolin, that explained the flawless techniques he had demonstrated.

Still...

"I really have no idea who he is."

I was aware that even the current abbot of Shaolin was quite old.

So how could I possibly know a former abbot who was active before I was even born?

Naturally, all eyes turned to the eldest person present.

“W-what’s with those looks?”

It seemed the others were thinking the same. Both Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang turned to look silently at Seorin.

Pressed by their sparkling eyes, Seorin let out a deep sigh.

“Hoo... Very well. This One has indeed heard of the nickname Punisher Asura. But I do not know much beyond that.”

“That’s more than enough.”

“Hmph. Why do I feel like you all expect less from me than others?”

Seorin narrowed her eyes, looking annoyed.

An unjust accusation.

“We don’t know a thing, so even a rumor from Senior Seorin is good enough.”

“Truly?”

“Of course! Though you’ve spent most of your life secluded in Jiangxi and only recently began traveling again, and even if the information you have is a bit outdated, making the occasional generation gap unavoidable... it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Kuhk!”

Seorin clutched her chest as if mortally wounded.

Tang Sowol giggled and patted her on the back.

“Oh, come on, Sister Hwarin. If anything, that just means you can experience all sorts of things with us now.”

“Things... together...?”

“Yes. Things you might have done at our age if you'd lived an ordinary life. Like saving a merchant caravan from bandits, as we did recently.”

“Hm. Indeed, This One has lived solely for vengeance for so long that I have little experience in the usual affairs of the martial world.”

“Or experiencing how it feels to be treated as a righteous martial artist instead of a demonic one. Back when you were called the White-Haired Rakshasa, you wouldn't have been able to approach Shaolin Temple, would you?”

“That's true. Even if not outright attacked, I would not have been welcomed, so there was no reason to come. But now... it's different.”

Seorin gazed at the gate of Shaolin Temple with a fresh, emotional expression.

Tang Sowol leaned closer and whispered into her ear.

“There’s also... romance, you know.”

“Th-that’s not something we should be doing together, is it?! What’s wrong with kids these days...!”

With a red face, Seorin jumped in place in flustered denial.

Her reaction, sounding like an old grandma, made Tang Sowol burst out laughing.

“Ahaha! I was joking. Now, why don’t we return to what you were saying? What rumors did you hear?”

“Sigh, I will. But shouldn’t we finish what we came here for first?”

Seorin pointed behind us.

The gatekeeper monk stood there quietly, his bald head glinting in the sun, clearly flustered that we had said nothing of our business after showing him a former abbot's relic and instead were chatting away.

Well, I guess it would be awkward to interrupt.

I nodded and got back to the matter at hand.

“We wish to tour Shaolin Temple. Monk Gakjeong said this statue would grant us access.”

“If you were alone, that would be no issue. But due to our precepts, I cannot give an immediate answer regarding the others. Would you wait a moment?”

“Of course.”

The gatekeeper offered a short bow and turned to leave the gate to another monk as he headed up the long staircase.

I watched him go, then turned back to Seorin.

“Seems it’ll take a little time. How about you tell us your ‘ancient tale’ in the meantime?”

“Don’t call it ancient! It was only—”

She began counting on her fingers, then trailed off.

She glanced at the next oldest among us—Tang Sowol, who was only twenty-three—and pouted.

“Long, long ago, back when This One still held naive fantasies about the martial world... Punisher Asura was already the abbot of Shaolin. Unlike most abbots, he was known for his ruthlessly decisive actions.”

Finally giving in, she began to speak like a storyteller recounting a legend.

Tapping her chin with her fingers, she gazed off into the distance, recalling the past.

“Despite being called decisive, he wasn’t someone who attacked all evildoers without exception. He would strike them down first, yes, but always offered them a chance to repent and start a new life.”

“And I suppose most took that offer?”

“Indeed. With their lives in his hands, what else could they do? He always tried to reform them... but only once.”

“Meaning...?”

“If they broke their promise, he wouldn’t even listen to excuses. He would destroy them. During those chaotic days when the conflict between the Orthodox and Unorthodox peaked, many lost their heads.”

This was just before my generation, when the Black Lotus Sect Leader was still a child.

At that time, there was no organization like the Black Lotus Sect to unify the demonic path, so clashes between the orthodox and unorthodox factions happened everywhere.

It was an era of deep chaos—and one where many opportunists thrived off others’ suffering.

But also a time when many famous martial artists rose to prominence.

Punisher Asura was one of them.

“Though he only gave one chance to each person, his willingness to offer that chance to anyone made him a role model among Buddhist disciples. But the fact that he shed so much blood, even that of villains, made people say he was no mere monk, but an Asura. He was one of the most controversial top masters of his time.”

“He sounds impressive... but wasn't he too violent to be made abbot?”

“Normally, you'd be right, Hyang. But it was an age of chaos—sects and clans were constantly being wiped out and rebuilt. More than a flawless man worthy of reverence, they needed someone powerful who upheld Buddhist duty.”

Even Shaolin couldn't ignore the importance of strength at the time.

A single misstep could've led to annihilation—or at the very least, a long closure in disgrace.

In such a time, Punisher Asura was the perfect person to lead Shaolin.

“Shaolin, being the center of orthodox martial arts, was targeted multiple times...But each time, Punisher Asura resolved the threat personally.”

“...Then how did someone like that lose his inner energy?”

If he had been one of the top Flowering Stage martial artists of his time, why did he end up risking his life against mere Green Forest bandits?

Just as a sigh was about to escape me—

“I’ll explain that as we walk to the main temple.”

The voice didn’t come from Seorin, but from the top of the stairs.

I turned to see a middle-aged monk, wearing a yellow Shaolin robe like the others but with an orange outer robe slanted over one shoulder.

He radiated the calm, upright presence unique to Buddhist masters—and a level of cultivation I could not yet approach.

He was undoubtedly a Flowering Stage martial artist.

He let out a deep sigh on our behalf and lifted the jade Buddha we had brought.

“I am Jeonghyeon. Are you the ones who brought this?”

“Master Jeonghyeon... You’re the abbot of Shaolin?”

Tang Sowol’s eyes widened as she clasped her hands and bowed.

“I, Tang Sowol of the Sichuan Tang Clan, greet the abbot of Shaolin. Yes, we received that statue from Monk Gakjeong... or rather, the former abbot.”

“Hm. So it was indeed from Master Gakjeong.”

So that’s why everyone was so surprised—he was the current abbot.

If I recalled correctly, his nickname was Divine Monk—the opposite of the fearsome Punisher Asura.

Seol Lihyang and I belatedly offered respectful bows, while Seorin, whose cultivation was on par with the abbot's, simply nodded politely.

To my surprise, Abbot Jeonghyeon returned the greeting with equal respect, bowing with joined palms to each of us.

“Welcome. Thank you for bringing word of my master.”

He looked a bit younger than expected, but everything else about him fit the image of a perfect monk.

Given his level, he was probably much older than he looked.

“Shaolin is traditionally closed to women, but this situation is an exception. As Master said, it is our disciples who lack discipline, not the guests.”

“Thank you.”

I hadn't expected the gatekeeper to bring back the abbot himself.

Judging by the slightly stunned look on his face, I don't think he had expected it either.

I gave the monk a small nod of thanks and followed the abbot up the temple steps.

"Sir benefactor, is my master well?"

"Too energetic, if anything."

"Pardon?"

As I explained the events with Gakjeong, Abbot Jeonghyeon burst out laughing.

"Haha! I truly can't tell if my master is lucky or unlucky.

He snuck out against our advice, got into trouble with Green Forest Bandits, got saved by you, then mistook you for an enemy and fainted over and over for four days—but still returned safely to Songshan."

“Just to clarify—I didn’t repeatedly knock him out out of malice.”

“I understand. Though he lost his inner energy and aged, he once possessed martial arts so advanced that they’re still among the greatest in Shaolin history. If you had held back carelessly, you might’ve been the one in danger.”

“That’s exactly right.”

“If you’re at a stage where your senses are just beginning to open, that’s how anyone would respond—don’t worry. Even my master said he was the one who felt sorry. How could I possibly punish you for that? There’s no reason, no justification, and no need. You can rest easy.”

“...However, there is one thing that troubles me.”

“What is it?”

“Why was my master so fixated on you? In his prime, as Punisher Asura, he was resolute and ruthless. Now, he’s not nearly so extreme...”

“I can’t say for sure, but... I think he mistook my killing intent for something else.”

“Killing intent...?”

Abbot Jeonghyeon’s brow furrowed.

He paused and let out a long sigh.

“I see. That’s what it was. He said it wasn’t anyone’s fault... and yet he still held onto it in his heart...”

His voice was quiet, his expression heavy.

After another sigh, he resumed climbing the stairs.

“Earlier, you asked why my master—once strong enough to be called Punisher Asura—lost his inner energy. I’ll tell you now.”

Whether he was gazing up the steep steps ahead or the sky above, I couldn’t tell.

“My master killed the Heaven-Slaughter Star... and then shattered his own dantian.”

“...What?”

“And that Heaven-Slaughter Star... was my junior brother.

Another disciple of my master.”

That explained why Gakjeong reacted almost violently to my killing intent.

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

Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Because of Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art and its inherent violent killing intent, this is a suspicion that’s always shadowed me.

That's why I've done some research—so I know quite a bit about Heaven-Slaughter Stars.

It's not quite a matter of innate talent or physique.

Tang Sowol's Poison Spirit Constitution or Seol Lihyang's Pure Yin Physique—these kinds of unique constitutions are, strictly speaking, a form of disability.

Whether it's internal energy accumulating as poison or excess yin energy—either way, to the average civilian, it's practically a curse.

Exceptional talent is really just the desperate survival mechanism of a body trying to adapt under extreme conditions.

So why are these constitutions praised as blessings today?

Simple: because people have worked tirelessly to overcome them.

Those with Poison Spirit Constitution learned poison arts, which enabled them to control the poisons accumulating inside their bodies and avoid dying of self-intoxication.

Those with excess yin or yang found martial techniques that could moderate the effects and prevent death from blocked meridians.

Countless other constitutions were gradually analyzed and resolved by geniuses born with them.

Thus, what once were heaven-sent punishments became regarded as talents.

All except one: the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

It cannot be fixed.

Despite numerous attempts, the outcome is always the same:

Once someone is consumed by the killing aura of a Heaven-Slaughter Star, they never return to sanity.

They lose reason, become obsessed with slaughter, and, in pursuit of bloodshed, awaken talents rivaling even the greatest martial prodigies.

Unable to be cured, and sure to slaughter those around them if left alone, the Heaven-Slaughter Star eventually came to be seen as a public enemy of the martial world.

If one is confirmed, they must be killed—before they mature, before they awaken to bloodlust.

This is the unwritten rule of Murim, written in blood.

My own technique might raise suspicion, but I am not labeled as one.

Unlike a true Heaven-Slaughter Star, who is swept away by blind and overwhelming bloodlust, I have control over mine.

But now, to hear that Gakjeong took such a being as a disciple—

“So... he tried to sever the fate of a Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“You’re correct, Sir Benefactor,” Jeonghyeon replied. “My master found his disciple at a place called Salcheongyo.”

“Salcheongyo...? What kind of place is that?”

“A cult. They preached that since the world is in chaos, all martial artists causing that chaos must be exterminated.”

“...Isn't that just the Demonic Cult?”

I frowned, recalling similar stories.

But Jeonghyeon shook his head with a chuckle.

“They sound similar, but they're fundamentally different in one way: sincerity.”

“Sincerity...?”

“Yes. Whether you agree with the Demonic Cult or not, they believe what they preach. They genuinely think that martial artists—and the martial arts that produce them—should disappear. And they act accordingly.”

“That’s true. Some even vow to kill themselves once their mission is complete, since they, too, have learned martial arts.”

“You’ve had more tangled run-ins with the Demonic Cult than any other post-regression martial artist I’ve met,” Jeonghyeon said, nodding.

He paused briefly, then continued:

“Why are they so sincere? Because they’re victims. But in Salcheongyo’s case, it was the opposite.”

“...You mean they were perpetrators?”

“Not exactly. But they exploited victims, so yes, you could call them perpetrators.”

In the growing chaos between the orthodox and unorthodox sects, innocent civilians had lost family, lovers—everything.

Salcheongyo preyed on them, whispering the things they most wanted to hear.

Martial artists, whether righteous or evil, will soon all die.

The Heaven-Slaughter Star is a divine punishment sent by the heavens to purge them.

We're raising such a being now. He's exceptional, so we need funds. Will you support us?

A classic con.

They fed off victims' grief, claiming they were nurturing a divine executioner.

"But... they were really raising a Heaven-Slaughter Star?"

"Surprisingly, yes. They originally found one by chance and built their entire scam around it."

"...They had guts, I'll give them that. One wrong move and they could've been the first to die."

“They didn’t really understand what a Heaven-Slaughter Star was. Their plan was to restrain him and hand him to the Murim Alliance for a reward before he got too strong.”

“They even planned their final scam? Either insane or just plain ignorant. If word got out they’d been secretly raising a Heaven-Slaughter Star, the Alliance would’ve executed them on the spot.”

“They didn’t get that far. Word of Salcheongyo eventually reached the Alliance. My master, I, and many top martial artists moved in to exterminate them.”

Salcheongyo wasn’t nearly as dangerous as expected.

They preyed on civilians, staged phony executions using low-tier martial artists to keep morale high, and that was it.

The Alliance dismantled them almost immediately.

Then we moved to kill the Heaven-Slaughter Star hidden within.

In the underground chamber, a small child was sobbing as he dissected a fresh corpse—clearly forced to do it.

When he saw one of us, not from Salcheongyo, he burst into tears and said:

“I don’t want to kill anyone anymore.”

“That was the first meeting between master and disciple.”

A Heaven-Slaughter Star doesn’t begin life as a killer.

At first, they’re just slightly more violent, a bit short-tempered, exuding the occasional trace of killing aura.

Only later, when the bloodlust consumes them entirely, do they awaken as Heaven-Slaughter Stars.

A child of six or seven can’t possibly be all that murderous.

But this one... looked exactly like the legends.

“Salcheongyo taught him to act like that. Told him he was a Heaven-Slaughter Star, forced him to wield a sword, and made him kill.”

I see.

If he didn't act the part, their cultists wouldn't be moved—and wouldn't donate.

But to force a child who doesn't know any better to kill...

“That's... unforgivable.”

“My master thought the same. Still, he believed everyone deserved one chance.”

Though known as Punisher Asura, Gakjeong had always kept compassion in his heart.

No matter the crime, he gave each person one opportunity to redeem themselves.

Even a Heaven-Slaughter Star who wept, saying they didn't want to kill—he couldn't just cut them down.

“So my master took the child in. The others objected, of course. But he swore an oath to get their permission.”

“What kind of oath?”

“He vowed to teach the child Buddhist disciplines that could suppress and control the killing aura. But if the child failed and gave in to bloodlust...he would personally kill him.”

At that point, the rest of the picture came into focus.

Gakjeong took the boy in and taught him sincerely.

Jeonghyeon, I assumed, must've cared for the boy too.

But... a Heaven-Slaughter Star is a Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Eventually, the disciple lost control.

And Gakjeong had no choice but to kill him with his own hands.

Whether out of grief, guilt, or some other reason, he destroyed his own dantian.

Thus, the former abbot of Shaolin became a wandering monk, studying scripture as a scholar monk.

While I let out a quiet sigh, the others around me nodded solemnly.

“...I thought he was just a weird old monk.”

“So that’s why he could escape ropes and heavy luggage like it was nothing.”

“This One didn’t know either. That part was never part of the rumors.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Jeonghyeon interjected.

“When he brought the disciple to Shaolin, he kept everything secret—so no one would know a Heaven-Slaughter Star had ever entered. Even his death was disguised as an accident.”

Fair.

There would’ve been no benefit to revealing any of that.

But there was one thing I still didn’t understand.

“Thank you, Master Jeonghyeon. That explains most of it.

But may I ask—what was Monk Gakjeong doing outside the temple in the first place? I don’t mean to boast, but this time... he really could’ve died.”

I knew firsthand how formidable he still was, even without inner energy.

But his aged body could probably only handle first-class martial artists at best.

That's strong enough to command some respect—but not enough to survive an unlucky encounter with a Peak Stage expert.

Jeonghyeon gave a wry smile and replied.

“...He couldn't let go.”

“Excuse me?”

“After burying his disciple, he passed the abbotship to me.

Then he began devoting himself to deeper research into Heaven-Slaughter Stars.”

“...So that's why he calls himself a scholar monk?”

“It's one of the reasons.”

He chuckled softly.

“It’s regret, really.

If only I had done this instead...

If only I had known more back then...

Could I have suppressed the bloodlust? Could I have saved my disciple?”

He must’ve known his obsession was self-destructive.

I may not know much about Buddhist teachings, but I’ve heard enough to understand this much:

Desiring what cannot be changed only leads to suffering.

To be free, one must let go, accept, and move on.

But... people can't always do that.

Even when we know we should let go, our hearts cling tighter.

“My master began compiling everything he had learned from teaching his disciple and all the records left in Shaolin to fully analyze the Heaven-Slaughter Star. Then one day, he claimed he had discovered something—and ignored my protests to pack his things and leave.”

“...What was it?”

“He said Heaven-Slaughter Stars appear according to a cycle.

And that cycle was due to repeat.”

“...What?”

“So he snuck out, saying he would personally find the next Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

A rule... a cycle?

I said nothing.

I couldn't.

Because in my past life—

When I was around twenty—

A Heaven-Slaughter Star appeared in Yunnan and annihilated the Jeomchang Sect.

He might've been off by a few years...

But Gakjeong had uncovered part of a truth that no one else in Murim ever had.

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Gakjeong had said that the appearance of the Heaven-Slaughter Star followed a certain cycle, and that the time for it was approaching again. With that, he left Shaolin Temple.

And indeed, according to the memories from before the regression, the Heaven-Slaughter Star appeared a few years later and turned Yunnan Province into a wasteland.

“If what Master Gakjeong discovered is true... then that’s quite something.”

Had he succeeded in uncovering even a portion of the secrets of the Heaven-Slaughter Star, something no one in the history of Murim had ever managed to do?

That was undeniably a remarkable achievement.

Although it seemed Jeonghyeon had a slightly different perspective.

He gave a bitter smile and slowly shook his head.

“I’m not so sure. Of course I want to believe in my master, but more than that, I just want him to spend his remaining years in peace. Thankfully, he no longer has inner energy. Lately... my master’s been so obsessed, it’s a wonder he hasn’t succumbed to qi deviation.”

“Obsessed, you say?”

The most important tenet of Buddhist teachings is said to be letting go of attachments.

But to hear that someone who once served as the head of Shaolin is now so consumed with obsession that even his disciple worries about qi deviation—it was hard to believe and made one pause for a moment. Still, Jeonghyeon, eyes fixed forward, continued.

“Namu Amitabha. To my master, a disciple was like a child. And unless a person has truly attained enlightenment, they will, in the end, live bound to the secular world. So, I don’t blame my master... I just hope he finds peace.”

“What do you think will happen if Master Gakjeong really finds the Heaven-Slaughter Star?”

“It won’t end well.”

He might succeed in killing the unawakened Heaven-Slaughter Star this time, or, as in the past, he might try to suppress the killing intent and raise the child himself.

Either way, it didn't seem like Gakjeong would find a happy ending.

Considering his age, he might not even live long enough to see what becomes of the child if he does take them in.

In the end, he'd spend the rest of his days full of regret and lingering attachment until the moment he closes his eyes.

That is the very attitude a Buddhist should most avoid, and as a disciple, Jeonghyeon likely wished to stop his master from walking a clearly thorny path.

The mood grew heavy for a moment. As if to lighten it, Tang Sowol spoke up in a somewhat exaggeratedly cheerful tone.

“Ah! That's right, Master Gakjeong reached the base of Mount Song, but then said he had something to attend to and left ahead of us. Except for Sister Hwarin, none of us even noticed—so we were a bit surprised. I did see him from a distance during the Yongbong Meeting, but... Shaolin's martial arts really are incredible!”

“Heh heh. Come to think of it, I haven't even asked the benefactors why you came. Though you're still considered late-stage second-class, you're clearly proper martial artists, so I doubt you came just to sightsee.”

“Well... I suppose I was hoping to get a look at Shaolin’s martial arts, if possible...?”

“If that’s the case, you are welcome. Shaolin monks rarely leave the temple, and even if they do, they seldom leave Henan Province. So this would be a great chance to gain new experience. Especially for Benefactors Cheon and Tang, even more so.”

Indeed. How often would one meet someone who emanates such strong killing intent that it could fool even Gakjeong, who had raised the Heaven-Slaughter Star himself, or someone skilled in poison and hidden weapons?

“I’ll make arrangements separately, so rest well today. ...And Master is probably visiting his disciple’s grave. He should return in a few days, and then we can formally thank you again for your assistance.”

“We only did what was natural, so there's no need to go that far... but we’d very much like to see Master Gakjeong again, so please call for us.”

“Fufu, I never thought I’d get to witness Shaolin’s martial arts, so my heart’s pounding a bit.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin placed her hand on her relatively flat chest and smiled as if excited.

Jeonghyeon, who had been about to leave, stopped and turned back with a stern face.

“Hey now, it’s a bit much for an adult to meddle when the kids are playing... don’t you think?”

“Pft.”

“I’ve heard about your situation from the Murim Alliance, Benefactor Seo... but hm. If I step in myself, it’ll turn into a matter of pride. How about testing your skills against one of Shaolin’s Vajra Warriors instead?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin silently clenched the hand she’d had resting on her chest.

She looked like she had a lot to say, but couldn’t bring herself to speak.

Vajra Warriors referred to Shaolin monks who had mastered external martial arts and achieved the Invincible Vajra Body.

There might be none or several in a generation... but currently, there were four.

Even if Seo Mun-Hwarin defeated one, it would just be laughed off as a good match.

In response to Jeonghyeon's mature suggestion, Seo Mun-Hwarin reacted childishly.

She pouted, tapped her toe on the floor, and showed her displeasure in the most obvious way.

“Is it alright if these kids observe as well?”

“If we allow three of Shaolin's own disciples to observe, I see no problem.”

“I don't mind.”

With their next match scheduled, Jeonghyeon finally parted ways.

Just as everyone was about to head to their rooms to unpack, Seol Lihyang, instead of going into hers, ran straight over to me.

Standing on tiptoe, she whispered into my ear.

“Cheon Hwi, Cheon Hwi.”

“What is it?”

“This time, I’m going to spar with a monk who's around my level, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Is there any reward if I win?”

“...?”

Isn't winning the duel itself reward enough? It boosts your mood and gives you a sense of accomplishment.

"You've got that weird look again... but I need an incentive to get motivated, right? Even something simple is fine, so think of something for me."

"If you want something, just say so."

"It's not that I want anything in particular. I just want to receive something, okay? So you think of it."

A completely unreasonable request. But this wasn't the first time—I'd dealt with plenty of this in my past life.

Seol Lihyang often made vague, out-of-the-blue demands like this, and no matter how I responded, she never made a big fuss.

Still, there were definitely things she especially liked.

Recalling those somewhat old memories, I nodded.

“Alright. I’ll come up with something. Just win first.”

“Heehee, got it. And actually, that wasn’t the main thing...”

That wasn’t the main point?

I tilted my head, puzzled, and Seol Lihyang shook hers.

“If you’re going to spar with Sister Seo again before bed, you should cheer her up a little afterward.”

“She didn’t seem that upset, though?”

“Tsk! Just do it when I say. It’s not like it costs you anything to do something for her, right?”

“Well, sure... but what should I do?”

“Hmm... maybe give her a shoulder massage? Elders like that kind of thing.”

Honestly, maybe Seol Lihyang was the most disrespectful of us all.

I held back the urge to laugh and nodded, relieved that Seo Mun-Hwarin wasn't around.

“Alright.”

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Seol Lihyang's advice was quite effective.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been noticeably down, visibly brightened after receiving a brief massage before bed.

Now the only thing left was to figure out what to give Seol Lihyang if she won her match.

Unfortunately, that would have to wait a bit.

“Would you follow this humble monk for a moment? There is something important I must discuss about your martial arts.”

“Huh?”

At some point, Gakjeong had returned to Shaolin Temple, and early in the morning, he spoke to me like that.

“But didn’t you already confirm that I’m not the Heaven-Slaughter Star, Master?”

“I suppose the head monk must have told you about me.”

“More or less, yes.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not because I suspect you to be the Heaven-Slaughter Star. I simply wish for us to exchange a bit of help.”

“Help...?”

What help could I possibly offer Gakjeong?

Unless it's like last time—protecting him from an enemy he couldn't face due to his age—he's far more renowned and skilled in martial arts than I am.

I tilted my head, puzzled, and Gakjeong shook his head slightly.

“You harbor immense killing intent, yet you've managed to control it well. Could you teach me how? In exchange, I'll not withhold my own teachings.”

“That is...”

Simply put, he was proposing we exchange martial arts knowledge to help each other grow.

Naturally, this would benefit me.

The Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, barely a century old, versus Shaolin martial arts, the towering cornerstone of orthodox Murim with a history spanning centuries. And the one offering this exchange was a former head monk.

If all went well, this could be a chance to deepen my lacking martial arts foundation.

Having gained some insights during my previous spar with Namgung Dowi, I might find new understanding through this exchange as well.

**Whish, whish!**

Still, I was already scheduled to spar with other Shaolin monks alongside my companions today, so I looked to them first.

They nodded desperately in unison, as if they had rehearsed it. I chuckled softly.

“Understood. Where shall we go?”

“There’s something I’ve been working on in my spare time. Let’s head there.”

I followed Gakjeong deeper into Shaolin Temple... into areas guests normally weren’t allowed to enter.

After walking in silence for some time, we reached a path even the Shaolin monks seldom used. Then, Gakjeong finally spoke.

“I can guess what the head monk told you, but let me ask again. What did Jeonghyeon say about me?”

“He said he just hoped you could find peace.”

“Of course. That child is a model student, unlike me. Then what do you think of me, Benefactor?”

“I think you’re admirable.”

“...Oh?”

“The Heaven-Slaughter Star is a mysterious constitution—no one knows how it’s formed, nor how to suppress its nature. That’s why killing them early to avoid future calamity is often considered the best course. But you didn’t choose that.”

You chose the harder path, even knowing the end would not be pleasant.

You gave your heart, and when that heart was broken, you fell.

Someone who could have spent his final moments peacefully and respected by all, instead gave it up to do what he believed was right.

“I don’t think such a person is foolish. I see no reason to dismiss such natural affection as mere obsession. I simply respect someone who stuck to their path.”

“I didn’t expect such a generous view. However... there’s one thing that must be corrected.”

Gakjeong smiled bitterly as he turned down a small side path.

“I never told anyone this... but I wasn’t able to face myself—or the Buddha within us—until the very end.”

Branches overgrown onto the path from lack of upkeep. Within the grassy shade, he continued.

“My disciple, Jeong Shim, at the final moment, suppressed his killing intent and cultivated pure Buddhist inner energy. But I did not.”

“What...?”

“Whether it was from the blood on my hands over the years, or the overwhelming killing intent of the Heaven-Slaughter Star... the moment I believed Jeong Shim had been devoured by that destiny, killing intent began to seep into my martial arts.”

Jeong Shim, who resisted until the very end, may not have been fully awakened— or may have been the first to break free from the fate of the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

But Gakjeong failed.

Unable to bear the sight of his rampaging disciple, he gave up... and directed killing intent at him.

“Jeong Shim’s death was not because of the Heaven-Slaughter Star... it was because of me.”

The reason Gakjeong destroyed his own dantian wasn’t grief, but guilt.

At the end of that narrow, shaded path was an open clearing.

There stood numerous statues of child monks carved from stone and wood.

They were of various ages, but all resembled the same person.

They were likely depictions of Jeong Shim—from childhood until the moment of his death.

“In my twilight years, I no longer seek Nirvana. I only hope no one else repeats my foolishness.”

Surrounded by the many child monk statues, Gakjeong sat down with a heavy thud.

“So, would you tell this old monk?”

“Tell you what?”

“About the hell within you.”

His gaze pierced through me, eyes gleaming between his aged wrinkles.

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“So, would you be willing to tell this old monk?”

“Tell you what?”

“About the hell within you.”

“...”

Gakjeong’s gaze neither urged nor interrogated. He simply looked at me quietly.

But perhaps that made it all the more intense—like he could see straight into my soul, creating a strange tension.

My own personal hell.

I know it well.

Even now, if I push the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art to its peak, the scenes of that day come rushing back.

The scent of burning flesh brushing my nose. The flickering crimson flames of destruction. And blood—redder and thicker than fire.

The words I couldn't say. The vow I made before that single flower blooming from death.

Each time I fight for real, each time I grasp that sense of Divine Sword Unity, I am reminded of it.

Of course, it no longer torments me as it once did.

When I defeated the Black Sky Sword Emperor, the lingering regrets from before regression found some closure.

The inner demon no longer festers within me. The killing intent from the past doesn't swell to unbearable levels anymore.

But that doesn't mean I've forgotten everything and only bliss remains.

It's simply something that happened in the past, not something that never happened at all.

The regrets and mistakes of my past still loom large behind me.

And that's why—even though it's in the past—for me, it's still a sensitive and significant subject.

Not something I can easily reveal to someone I've only met a handful of times. And yet...

Gakjeong had already revealed his own scars to me—his suffering and shame.

Judging from Jeonghyeon's reaction, even he, as Gakjeong's disciple, hadn't known.

It's surprisingly difficult to ignore someone who approaches you with sincerity.

Above all, this is all rooted in Gakjeong's desire to understand the nature of the Heaven-Slaughter Star, and to prevent others from suffering the same tragic fate.

He's the one who discovered the appearance cycle of the Heaven-Slaughter Star. If he can even develop a method to control its killing intent...

Then a few years from now, when the disaster at Jeomchang Sect strikes, the damage might be minimized.

And if I become that influential among the orthodox Murim sects, the proposal to join hands with the Black Lotus Sect against the Demonic Cult might gain real momentum.

Having thought that far, I finally opened my mouth.

“I—”

**Thump!**

The moment I tried to speak the first word, a heavy shockwave rippled from around my heart, and my voice was cut off against my will.

What followed was the sensation of something gripping my heart tightly.

Damn it. The mental restriction had activated. And stronger than usual at that.

“Are you alright, Benefactor?”

Gakjeong, sensing something wrong, asked with concern. I forced a nod, and only then did the backlash from the restriction subside.

I paused, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

It’s true I was about to speak about my past from before regression—but why would that trigger the restriction? I wasn’t going to say anything that directly revealed the regression.

It didn’t take long to reach a conclusion.

Even if I hide the fact of regression, if someone like Gakjeong could reach that answer on his own...

Then the stronger-than-usual reaction from the restriction made sense.

After all, even though Gakjeong had lost his internal energy, his insight and wisdom, built up over decades of holding sutras instead of fists, remained intact.

Why that leads directly to uncovering the regression, I don't understand—but it is what it is.

Now that I understood what was happening, I simply had to adjust accordingly.

I chose my words carefully, describing my "hell" in a way that wouldn't guide Gakjeong to the truth of regression.

“My hell ultimately stems from loss.”

“Loss?”

“Yes. A loss that occurred beyond my control. And even the one I could have sought vengeance against was lost as well. With nowhere left for my emotions to go, they turned inward—toward myself.”

“A sad tale, but also a common one.”

“In the martial world, it’s even more common.”

He was right. Though it felt like a dagger through my heart, such tangled, murky stories of grudges are not rare in the murim.

Mine was just another case of the martial world’s cruelty finding me.

“However, Benefactor Cheon... you carry killing intent far beyond others with similar stories. Why do you think that is?”

“Because I chose not to forget.”

Even now, countless people are losing their families, friends, and lovers.

Some due to malice, some due to illness, some due to famine or banditry.

But not all of them turn out like me.

Some make a place in their hearts, visiting that grave in their minds from time to time.

Some wander aimlessly for a while but eventually return to daily life.

The reason is simple: time.

Time piles like snow, covering up the pain of the past.

If it were real snow, one could shovel it away. But time cannot be cleared—so the wound gets buried, and we say it has “healed.”

“But I couldn’t bring myself to do that.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin told me to forget, but I couldn't bear to.

“So I etched it into my heartscape. To remember. To recall it vividly at any moment.”

“I see. So you didn't fall into hell—you chose to build your own hell.”

“Exactly.”

“Then, having made yourself the master of that hell, you also became the master of the killing intent born from it... So, it's about control. Rather than simply suppressing it, you acknowledge and accept it, and wield it by your own will... Huh. All things are impermanent, and all dharmas are without self... Still, to accept recklessly is...”

Gakjeong fell into a quiet mutter, endlessly repeating Buddhist phrases.

After a long while, he finally seemed to reach a conclusion, nodding with a deep sigh.

“Hoo...”

“Was that the answer you were looking for?”

“Certainly. Your method is one of self-imposed penance, so I can’t call it a healthy path... but now that I know it’s possible, that alone is enough.”

“I’ve heard Buddhist disciples actually prefer penance.”

“Penance is not the path to enlightenment.”

“But I thought Buddha attained enlightenment after a long penance?”

“Haha. I didn’t know you were so interested in the Buddha’s teachings.”

Gakjeong chuckled warmly, his eyes kind.

“Indeed, the Buddha attained enlightenment after six years of penance. But it was not because of the penance. He awakened to the truth that penance does not lead to enlightenment—and in that realization, attained it.”

“That’s a lot of 'enlightenment.' It’s getting hard to follow.”

“In simpler terms: though your hell wasn’t built to control killing intent, it led to that result anyway—so it’s similar in effect.”

“Glad the martial arts explanation was easier to understand.”

I nodded with a faint smile as Gakjeong slowly rose to his feet.

“Since you’ve shared your story, it’s now my turn. Do you have any questions?”

“Many. So many I’m not sure where to start.”

“Take your time. My old eyes can’t see well at night, so I’ll need to head back before sunset—but until then, I’ll answer as best I can.”

What I most wanted to know was his martial arts, especially how he displayed such monstrous strength and flexibility without a drop of internal energy.

But what came out of my mouth was something entirely different.

“Master Gakjeong... do you believe the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s fate can be overturned?”

The Heaven-Slaughter Star is said to be not just a constitution, but a destiny—so bizarre in nature, without explanation or cure, that it’s called a fate rather than an affliction.

From the start, its very name likened it to the stars in the sky—suggesting resignation from the one who first discovered it.

But Gakjeong sought to overturn that.

I know well the desire to challenge the impossible. Someday, I too must face the Heavenly Demon and raise my sword against that incomprehensible power.

To say I’m not afraid would be a lie.

All my training, all my attempts to seek insight, are because I fear that overwhelming strength.

I imagine Gakjeong feels the same. He's made some progress, yet the Heaven-Slaughter Star remains mysterious.

Still, he keeps moving forward. Is his resolve the same as mine? If not, then what is it?

Perhaps because the mental restriction prevents me from sharing my own burden, I found myself deeply curious about this man who walks a similar path.

Gakjeong blinked at my question, then, after a pause, organized his thoughts and answered.

“I have no certainty. I simply hope... and do my best.”

“Ah...”

Even as disappointment crept into my expression, Gakjeong continued in a calm voice.

“Have you ever heard of Angulimala?”

“No. It’s the first time.”

“He was a murderous specter of his time—yet Buddha took him as a disciple. To attain enlightenment, he sought to kill one hundred people. He had already killed ninety-nine and was about to murder his own mother.”

“A truly heinous man. I don’t see why such a person would be accepted as a disciple.”

“The Buddha stopped him before he could commit matricide, and through teaching, helped him repent. So, making him a disciple was not such a stretch. I believe Angulimala was the Heaven-Slaughter Star of ancient times.”

“What?”

“His teacher deceived him, claiming he could attain enlightenment by making a rosary out of one hundred fingers. But no matter how naïve he was, could anyone truly believe such a method would lead to enlightenment?”

Surely, he must've realized he'd been deceived at some point. But he couldn't stop himself—because the killing intent had overtaken him. That was Gakjeong's interpretation.

“Well, the full story is long, so let's skip to the point. Angulimala's tale perfectly mirrors the blood-soaked history of the Heaven-Slaughter Star. The only difference is...”

“At the end, Angulimala repented and was redeemed. Unlike all other Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“Exactly. I may not be comparable to the Buddha... but if redemption was possible once, then perhaps the method can be found again.”

Even if he himself fails, another person, and then another, may continue the research and eventually reach heaven with their sincerity.

“Whether you believe it or not, Benefactor Cheon, I've already seen some success. Based on Angulimala's tale and records of past Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“One: that the timing of a Heaven-Slaughter Star's emergence can be predicted by observing Heaven's Palace—in other words, the constellations.”

Heaven's Palace... predicting a Heaven-Slaughter Star through the stars?

He may not have proven it, but I know he's right—because one does appear a few years later.

“And the second: that for a Heaven-Slaughter Star to awaken fully, the death of someone close is required. In Jeongshim's case, it may have been my death. For Angulimala, it was his mother.”

With that, Gakjeong let out a hearty laugh.

“I've read the scriptures about Angulimala over and over, trying to find something a mere mortal could do... but alas, my old brain can't figure it out.”

“So that's why you said you weren't certain, but just doing your best.”

“Indeed. Even in a sutra I had brought all the way from Tianzhu, it says: ‘If you seek help, find the one who walks not toward tomorrow, but toward yesterday.’ Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?”

The offhanded remark hit me like a blow to the back of the head.

The restriction reacting more sharply than usual.

And now, a line about someone who walks toward yesterday instead of tomorrow.

It wasn't hard to see what it implied—regression.

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

Regression has existed as a phenomenon since ancient times, and regressors, though rare, have always appeared now and then.

What I learned through Gakjeong was quite shocking—but the shock didn't last long.

After all, I'd already suspected that regression wasn't just a coincidence when I realized the existence of the mental restriction.

Even back when I visited the Zhongnan Sect, I'd heard stories—not of regression, but of Taoist arts from the past that would be unthinkable today.

So regression could be a legacy of that distant past, from a time when Taoist magic still existed and immortals occasionally descended to the mortal world. Or perhaps it's one of the many miracles recorded in Buddhist scriptures.

The reason this truth remains unknown is likely because of the very restriction I'm now suffering from.

What concerned me wasn't the principles of regression, nor who in the past might've been a regressor.

What caught my attention was what Gakjeong found in the scripture from Tianzhu: a phrase that urged one to seek help from “one who walks toward yesterday, not tomorrow.”

Doesn't that mean someone who isn't a regressor recognizing one and helping them?

So, either they've freed themselves from the restriction, or they have a method to see through it regardless.

If that's true... maybe, someday, I'll be able to share my story with someone else.

Because I know—those I knew before regression are not the same people they are now. Even knowing that, I still want to talk about everything.

...Because living with this weight alone, trapped between who I was before regression and who I am now, has been exhausting.

After the conversation about regression, I mostly talked with Gakjeong about martial arts.

As the saying goes, “All martial arts under heaven originate from Shaolin.” Shaolin’s martial arts were deep and vast, and Gakjeong was someone who had penetrated that depth.

Though we didn’t spar directly, even his brief advice and philosophical exchanges broadened my understanding noticeably.

I got so carried away that we ended up talking until the sun had completely set.

Despite saying his night vision had worsened with age, Gakjeong made his way down the mountain path just fine. After parting ways with him, I headed back to my lodging.

The weather had started to grow chilly. A sigh escaped me before I even realized it.

“Hoo...”

I looked up blankly at the sky.

Night had fallen. The faint light of a crescent moon made the sky seem even darker.

Maybe that’s why the stars, scattered across the sky, shone even more brightly.

Perhaps... I’m just a little tired.

Since my regression, I’ve lived relentlessly, and I’ve accomplished a great deal.

But I couldn’t be satisfied here—I didn’t want to stop, and I couldn’t.

Gripping the creeping weariness of my heart, I resumed walking at my usual pace back toward the building that had been assigned to me.

“Mn?”

Sitting on the wooden floor of the porch, her shoes neatly removed, was Seol Lihyang, gazing absentmindedly up at the sky.

She was humming a tune and lightly swinging her feet.

Maybe because of her snow-white skin, her figure stood out clearly even under the faint moonlight.

Was it because I had just been thinking about regression? Or because the grown Seol Lihyang now looked more and more like the one from my memories?

Without realizing it, I paused and looked at her.

It was as if there was an invisible wall between us—one I couldn't cross.

I stood there watching for a moment, then Seol Lihyang noticed me, her eyes widening.

“Cheon Hwi!”

Her cheerful voice rang out as she leapt to her feet. She was about to run over, but paused when she noticed her bare feet.

Instead of putting her shoes on, she started patting the floor beside her with enthusiasm.

“Here! Hurry, come sit here!”

“What’s with all the urgency?”

I laughed dryly and approached the porch. Lihyang beamed and brushed off the spot where I was to sit.

I gave her a slight nod of thanks and sat down. She immediately leaned her body toward me, her gaze so overt it was almost overbearing.

Was it the sparkle in her black eyes? For some reason, it reminded me of the night sky I had just been looking at.

And just like that, the image of the pre-regression Seol Lihyang I'd been unconsciously envisioning vanished without a trace.

The Lihyang from my past life was never this bright, never this openly expressive.

“So? What’s the matter? You called me so happily that you left your stargazing behind.”

“Stargazing? I wasn’t doing anything like that.”

“Mn?”

“I don’t have the time to sit around doing that.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“Obviously, I was waiting for you.”

She said it with a giggle and leaned even closer, resting one hand on the floor.

Our faces were now suddenly close. Her black hair spilled forward slowly, carrying a clean, subtle fragrance.

More precisely, it was her natural scent blended with the yin chill of her Pure Yin Physique that made it feel that way.

Seol Lihyang had been showing a fairly bold attitude ever since getting Tang Sowol's tacit approval, but this time, it felt different.

There was no calculated intent—just pure excitement bringing her closer.

And as always, it's those unexpected strikes that are the most dangerous.

As I stared blankly at the Lihyang right in front of me, she tilted her head slightly.

“Cheon Hwi? What's wrong? Do I have something on my face...?”

“No, it's nothing. I was just thinking about what got you so excited.”

“Ah! Right! That!”

She took a big step back with a cheeky grin, not giving me time to feel disappointed.

“I won my sparring match!”

“Oh?”

“I fought a monk who had also just reached the Peak Stage like me. He was really sturdy. Even when I tried injecting yin energy with my whip, it just bounced off!”

“Shaolin’s martial arts are based on robust inner strength and tempered external skills. Not exactly a favorable matchup for someone like you.”

“Yeah, I totally felt that.”

“But you said you won? How did you turn the tables?”

“Remember when I fought the Bloodflame Fist Demon?”

Of course I remembered. Back then, the intense heat of the Heat Yang Arts overwhelmed her abilities, so she forcefully countered with yin energy to neutralize the heat.

That yin energy, which might've frozen the area solid had the Bloodflame Fist Demon not been present...

She had projected her internal energy not just around herself, but into a distant space. That experience, requiring energy far beyond her level, likely became the seed for her breakthrough to the Peak Stage.

Still, while a flash of insight can elevate your level, mastering it takes time.

That's why newly advanced martial artists tend to meditate alone—to understand themselves better.

“Don't tell me...”

“I think you guessed it. I pulled a bit of a trick, but I managed to control a similar amount of internal energy. I just overpowered him. Doesn’t matter how—it worked!”

“Skill includes capacity as well as technique. You should be proud.”

To think she could now wield energy equal to what she had used against a Sub-Perfection-level opponent like the Bloodflame Fist Demon...

Her Pure Yin Physique gave her the innate energy, but controlling it was another matter. That was all her effort.

“But what was the trick? Shaolin monks aren’t exactly vulnerable to tricks.”

“It’s not a big deal... remember that new Sound Art technique you got from Lord Paeng and Lord Yeon?”

“Oh, that. Right.”

Sound Art involves embedding internal energy in one’s voice, then weaponizing it through various skills.

It requires mastery of sound control and deep understanding of energy manipulation. It's hard to block, hard to dodge, and allows for irregular combat—disrupting senses or causing internal injuries.

But it's incredibly difficult to learn, which is why its secret manuals are so rare.

“I doubt even you mastered it in such a short time.”

“Yeah, I didn't. I just learned one technique—One-Heart Sound Focus. It concentrates sound at a single point.”

“Focusing power is fundamental to everything.”

That's the foundation of proper swordplay—transmitting power directly and precisely.

The Three Talents Swordplay was designed to train the body in that very discipline.

“But it must've been hard to focus that much yin energy into one point?”

“Yup. So I made multiple points.”

“...What?”

“Basically, the sound comes from here and there at the same time... Want me to show you?”

She cleared her throat, imbued just a bit of energy, and then—

“Oh—”

“Huh...”

Though she had clearly spoken right in front of me, the sound came from above my head and from my left ear.

...Honestly, that sounds way harder than she made it out to be.

“If done properly, it would be hard. But I just brute-forced it with internal energy. If you listen carefully, each point has different volume. It wasn’t on purpose—it just turned out that way.”

So, she could mimic it, but not finely control it yet.

“Then wouldn’t it lack combat practicality?”

It’s like swinging a fancy sword that never actually hits.

But she solved it simply.

“Yup. That’s why I swung my whip.”

“Your whip?”

“When you swing a whip, it makes sound too, right? When that sound mixes in, it disrupts the concentration, causing the focused sound to scatter in all directions, like it’s bursting outward.”

“Hm—”

Only then did I understand how Seol Lihyang had won her duel.

As she herself said, strictly speaking, it wasn't like when she fought the Bloodflame Fist Demon and wielded an overwhelming amount of internal energy in full control.

Instead, she focused her internal energy into multiple points along with her sound, and then used the cracking noise of her whip as a trigger to simultaneously release it all.

**Boom.**

It's impossible to focus sound with perfect precision at a specific point. But since the concentrated energy explodes regardless, it didn't matter as long as it was in the general vicinity.

She couldn't press forward with pure sound and overwhelm the opponent directly, as she had when unleashing it all at once, but the power of the exploding internal energy would have increased substantially.

In the end, sound imbued with energy burst forth from unexpected directions—at a level comparable to when she fought the Bloodflame Fist Demon—something even Seol Lihyang hadn't anticipated.

Even for a Shaolin monk, the only way to defend against such a technique would be to concentrate their energy on one spot for defense.

But unlike conventional weapons whose trajectories are bound by physical limitations, Seol Lihyang's sound-based techniques had no such constraint—meaning the monk failed to respond properly.

It was slightly different, but in the end, she had applied the same concept from her previous enlightenment: filling the entire space with her Yin energy.

“That doesn't sound like a trick to me. Maybe it was a bit rough, but it's a proper application. If you refine it, I'm sure it'll become a solid technique.”

“Right? I did pretty well this time, didn't I!”

Apparently pleased with herself, Seol Lihyang lifted her chin slightly and shrugged her shoulders in satisfaction.

There was something about her that resembled Seomun Hwarin—perhaps she was picking up some of her habits, since the two had been spending more time together lately.

As I chuckled quietly, Seol Lihyang scooted even closer to me—much closer than before.

One hand rested on my thigh, while the other pressed lightly on my shoulder. Her face drew close, her breath brushing against me, and her sparkling eyes locked onto mine.

“Hey. Didn’t you say that if I won, you’d give me a reward?”

“I... did say that.”

“Then doesn’t that mean you’ll do whatever I say?”

“???”

I blinked in confusion at her sudden turn of phrase, but her black eyes were still full of expectation—not with the innocent excitement from earlier, but something subtly different.

Maybe it was due to the overflowing Yin energy, but her smile carried a faint seductive charm.

“What should I make you do, hmm? Cheon Hwi, what do you think I should ask for?”

Her gaze was like that of a beast who’d completely captured its prey—confident, assured.

I recognized that look. It was the same expression Seol Lihyang used to make in my past life, whenever she handed me a single pear she’d gone out of her way to buy.

But the situation now was different from back then.

Swallowing hard, I opened my mouth calmly.

“We shouldn’t be doing this within the temple ground—d-hehk...!”

Ah, I bit my tongue.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“You shouldn’t be doing this within the Shaolin Temple groun–dehek...!”

A pathetic noise trailed off at the end of my sentence.

Yes. I bit my tongue.

An awkward silence settled in the air for a moment.

But it didn’t last long—because Seol Lihyang burst into laughter.

“Ahahaha!”

She slapped the thigh where her hand had been resting just moments ago, still laughing uncontrollably.

Naturally, the faint tension between us vanished, along with my mental stamina.

In fact, I felt more exhausted than I had after discussing martial arts with Gakjeong for hours.

“Haa...”

I let out a sigh without realizing it. Seol Lihyang, still snorting with laughter, began wheezing like she might choke.

“Uhhut! I was wondering what you’d say with that usual deadpan face, and then— Ahaha! You said ‘dehek’... You bit your tongue! Ahahaha!”

“Hey, people bite their tongues now and then. You don’t have to laugh that much.”

“But why now, of all times? Huh? What were you imagining that made you panic like that? You weren’t thinking something weird, were you? Huh? Cheon Hwi, say something! I’m really curious!”

“Could you shut your mouth for a bit...”

“Nope! I won’t! If you want me to be quiet, then why don’t you shut it yourself, Cheon Hwi?!”

With that, Seol Lihyang puckered her lips out like a duck.

She even wiggled her head and puckered them more, clearly trying to provoke me.

I snapped.

**Grab.**

“Ughb?!”

I grabbed her lips as they were and gave them a light shake.

“Bbph?! Uhuhbb!”

“What do you take me for? I’m human too, you know. When I see something pretty, I think it’s pretty. When the mood suddenly shifts like that—even more so when I know I’m already betrothed—I get nervous too.”

“Mmmbph?! Bbbhuhp!”

I figured that was enough. She was trying to say something, but I couldn’t understand her anyway, so I let go.

**Pwah!**

Finally free, Seol Lihyang spoke again, her voice still tinged with laughter though a bit less intense than before.

“It’s all because you always act like a rock, Cheon Hwi.”

“Me?”

“You were fine when we were kids, but once I grew up a bit, and especially after Sister Tang said something, you started acting all stiff when you deal with me.”

“Oh, and don’t misunderstand—that wasn’t a dirty joke just now.”

I hadn't taken it that way at all.

Smiling wryly, I reflected on my recent behavior.

She was right. I had been a bit awkward around her lately.

Not for any great reason, really. It was just... Seol Lihyang was starting to resemble her pre-regression self.

Her smile looked the same. The way she flicked her fingers out of habit. Her voice. The way she teased me whenever she could... Even how she liked me.

It was no wonder I sometimes found myself thinking of her past self without meaning to.

Just like earlier, when I'd caught myself staring when she was humming on the porch.

Though I snapped out of it quickly, I couldn't deny these instances were becoming more frequent.

Maybe it was because this Seol Lihyang—unlike her broken, wounded former self—was more honest and open in her emotions.

There were times when I saw her now and finally understood things I couldn't back then.

Still, I thought I'd been handling it well. But from the other person's perspective, that might not have been the case.

Just like how Tang Sowol had sensed that I sometimes overlapped the present with memories of the past...

Seol Lihyang might've sensed my subtle reactions too.

The difference being that while Tang Sowol thought I saw a ghost of someone lost...

Seol Lihyang probably thought I saw Tang Sowol herself.

“Haa... Sister Tang said it'd be fine as long as I kept to the right order, but... Honestly, Cheon Hwi, do you just not like me?”

“There's no way.”

“Huh??”

“How many men in this world do you think wouldn't like someone like you, Seol Lihyang? I'm certainly not one of them. I've got perfect eyesight, after all.”

“Ah...”

Finally smiling in satisfaction, Seol Lihyang flopped backward onto the porch.

“Well. This is fine then. Even if Sister Tang bothers me, it bothers you too, right? Then it's fair. Yeah.”

She muttered to herself.

Maybe because she'd already taken off her shoes while waiting, her bare feet shifted naturally toward me as she lay down.

In the darkness of night, her pale skin almost glowed as it drew my eyes.

After a moment's hesitation, I reached out and gently lifted her foot.

“Hyak?!”

Seol Lihyang flinched and peeked up.

“W-What was that all of a sudden?”

“I just figured I should finish what I started earlier.”

“Mm?”

“I promised to give you a reward for winning your match. We never settled on what it would be.”

“Ah!”

She'd brought it up herself, and yet she reacted like it had just occurred to her.

“Wasn't that what just happened?”

“What?”

“You said I was pretty...”

Even she blushed a little as she said it. Was a simple compliment really enough for her to consider it a reward?

“What do you take me for?”

“A martial arts-obsessed log who gets flustered at crucial moments?”

“That’s slander of the highest order.”

Feeling slightly wronged, I tugged gently on her foot.

The round little ankle bone pressed against my palm. Seol Lihyang slid toward me like she was being reeled in.

“W-Why do you keep grabbing my foot?! What are you trying to do?”

“Just a simple pressure massage. I’ll add a bit of internal energy, of course.”

“Internal energy? Don’t tell me you’re going to use Chugung-Gwahyeol...!”

Her voice trembled faintly—probably out of anticipation.

Seol Lihyang had liked Chugung-Gwahyeol even before regression. Especially on her feet.

She had small feet and a slightly flat arch, so her fatigue often built up there.

I gently but firmly secured her foot on my thigh.

“W-Wait a sec! You’re doing it here?!”

“That was the plan.”

“Can’t we go inside? My room, or yours! Everyone will hear us like this!”

“They should all be asleep by now.”

“They’re not, I’m telling you! Sister Tang maybe, but Sister Seo? No way! She’s definitely watching us through a gap in the door or some hole she poked in the screen!”

“What kind of grudge do you have against Seo Mun-Hwarin to paint her like a voyeur?”

“I’m serious! Do you have any idea how complicated her face gets when you and Sister Tang are being all lovey-dovey?”

“...That might be true.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin held a quiet longing for the youth she had sacrificed for vengeance.

Given that, it wouldn't be strange for her to take an interest in the sight of me and Seol Lihyang joking around—not quite flirting, but close.

“Still, she wouldn't go so far as to spy. She's probably just looking because it's visible.”

**Clatter.**

A door in the distance rattled—maybe from the wind. But Seol Lihyang's frustrated voice quickly buried it.

“Ugh! You're so hopeless! ...Fine. Just be like that forever. It suits you.”

Even while lying down, she pounded her chest—small as it was—with exaggerated pride.

I shook my head at her.

Same in the previous life, same now—Seol Lihyang seemed to genuinely like Seo Mun-Hwarin, but she still got petty like this sometimes.

Or maybe it was because they were close.

Pushing that thought aside, I gently wrapped my hand around the top of her foot.

When I pressed my thumb to the center of her sole—

“Hik!”

She hiccupped involuntarily and quickly clamped a hand over her mouth. I smiled faintly and pressed deeper.

**Squeeze.**

“Huuh...!?”

Her toes curled instinctively. Then, as I injected a measured amount of internal energy into the pressure points, her foot spasmed like she’d gotten a cramp.

“You’re pretty stiff. Looks like there’s a lot of tension built up. This will be worth it.”

“W-Wait! Let’s take it slo-”

*Press.*

“Hiiiiieek?!”

Her cry was muffled as she quickly covered her mouth again.

I focused on the spots she used to complain about before regression and massaged them thoroughly.

Unlike the casual massages I gave sometimes, this was a reward—so I was more meticulous.

“Nhk! Hrrk... Ahp!”

Like a fish flopping out of water, she twisted and squirmed all over the place. But soon enough, she'd relax.

I secured her foot more firmly and continued applying pressure, pressing and gliding with my thumb.

“W-Why are you so good at this?!”

“Because I'm stronger now, obviously.”

Thanks to fully reaching Sub-Perfection, my internal energy control had improved dramatically, as had my sensitivity.

“C-Could you just... be a little gentler...? I'll try to hold it in, just don't make me yelp...”

**Heek?!**

“If I don’t do it properly, it’s not a reward.”

Mouth clamped shut, Seol Lihyang glared at me—but her eyes had no strength left in them.

“Don’t worry. You’ve been traveling since you left for the Yongbong Meeting. You must’ve built up a lot of fatigue. I’ll take care of all of it tonight.”

*Press.*

Seol Lihyang shut her eyes tightly like she’d given up.

After the massage was over, she lay limp, staring blankly up at the sky.

Her black hair was a mess, clothes loose and disheveled from all her squirming.

With her mouth agape and eyes half-lidded, she looked completely dazed—someone could easily get the wrong idea.

“...Didn't you say we shouldn't do this in the Shaolin Temple?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Seol Lihyang glared weakly at me, barely able to lift her head.

She couldn't keep it up for long. Her head drooped again, and she rolled lazily toward her room.

Once she reached the door, she used the wall to stand, barely.

“J-Just wait! Next time...!”

Biting her lip, she muttered that and stumbled into her room.

I blinked, unsure what just happened.

Well, it took longer than expected... but I suppose she should get some proper rest now.

Tomorrow, it's my turn to spar with Shaolin's warrior monks.

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The next day.

As I stepped outside, Tang Sowol was already waiting, smiling with her usual gentle expression.

“Brother Cheon.”

“Mn?”

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

The morning air felt strangely chilly.

Looks like winter is coming.