

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 161-170

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

I was momentarily speechless.

Maybe it was because winter was approaching, but the morning air felt unusually brisk today.

Still, people tend to grow stronger when cornered. The lingering drowsiness in my body vanished instantly, and the level of focus I mustered rivaled that of a life-or-death duel as I quickly sought a suitable response.

“As expected of Shaolin. Though Master Gakjeong can no longer use internal energy, his insight into martial arts remains unmatched—”

“Oh no, I was referring to what you did with Hyang last night.”

I was cut down.

If this had been a real duel, it would have been the equivalent of a fatal strike to the chest.

A critical blow—no way to survive.

In that case, all I could do was acknowledge my death with dignity.

“...Listen for a moment. I think there’s a misunderstanding here. What you’re worried about didn’t happen. I did administer Chugung-Gwahyeol on her feet, but that’s all. We returned to our separate rooms immediately aft—?”

“Heehee!”

Far from calmly accepting my fate, I flailed pitifully to explain, which only made Tang Sowol giggle.

She poked at my cheek with a mischievous grin and spoke playfully.

“Brother Cheon. Brother Cheon.”

“What?”

“Did you know? There are only two times when the normally cold and distant Brother Cheon makes exceptions.”

“I’m not that cold and distant.”

“You totally are. If left alone, you just quietly swing your sword, and when someone talks to you, you either give a flat reply or sneer. Isn’t that right?”

“That makes me sound like some antisocial weirdo.”

It’s not coldness, just decorum. And I don’t sneer—sometimes one corner of my mouth just twitches. And only at enemies!

Though I felt unjustly accused, I held back a sigh. If she was changing the subject, I wasn’t going to stop her.

Then Tang Sowol reached out with one hand and lightly touched both corners of my mouth with her index fingers.

I flinched slightly at the soft sensation on the edge of my lips, but she just kept smiling brightly and continued.

“See? Both corners of your mouth moved this time. Sure, they turned down instead of up... but still, it proves this is one of those exceptional moments.”

“Exceptional, how?”

“Well, either when you're teasing us or when you're being teased by us. Those are the two times, aren't they?”

Having said that, she lifted the corners of my mouth into a forced smile.

“Haven't you figured it out yet? That whole thing just now was a joke to tease you, Brother Cheon.”

“Huh?”

“Hyang may have tried to keep quiet, but it wasn’t that late—and there’s no way anyone wouldn’t notice such a fuss.”

“Then... the clatter I heard wasn’t the wind but you?”

“Oh, no. I just listened. I didn’t peek. That would’ve been kind of creepy and shady, don’t you think?”

“...?”

We both tilted our heads and slowly turned to look at the still-closed door of Seo Mun-Hwarin’s room.

Maybe... the things Seol Lihyang had said about her weren’t slander after all.

A stream of past memories—including those from before my regression—flashed through my mind, but I forced them away and spoke.

“Let’s pretend we didn’t hear that just now.”

“Yes, and let’s pretend I didn’t say what I said either, Brother Cheon.”

Thus, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s reputation was—probably—preserved.

“Ahem. Technically speaking, even if it was just pressure-point massage, such close contact—especially playing around with someone’s foot so passionately—isn’t exactly appropriate. But since I gave permission, I don’t plan to make a fuss. Rest easy.”

“Thanks. That’s a relief.”

I let out a long breath of relief, feeling the weight on my chest lift.

I mean, it’s not like Chugung-Gwahyeol is something new. I got her permission years ago, and she said anything’s fine as long as we follow the proper order.

Given how she sometimes grabs my arm or pokes at my back or cheek for no reason, I suppose foot massage falls within the allowable range.

“But still... must you emphasize the foot so much? It’s not exactly a special body part.”

“Maybe not now. But did you know that in the past, feet were considered a rather intimate area?”

“They were?”

“Yes. Everyone wears shoes when going out, right? And inside, we wear socks or inner cloth. So typically, you’d never show your bare feet—unless to your spouse.”

“Ah.”

Feet themselves may not be inherently special, but since they’re rarely exposed, they came to hold special meaning.

As I nodded in understanding, Tang Sowol lightly brushed my instep with her toes and continued.

“So, in the past, people avoided showing their feet. And because small feet were considered beautiful, there was a custom called foot binding to make them tiny from a young age...”

“And?”

“It fell out of fashion in less than fifty years. Small feet make it hard to move, and if you can’t move, you can’t learn martial arts.”

“Right. Makes sense.”

Footwork is the foundation of any martial art. Even noble families train abit for health and self-defense.

It may have been trendy for a while, but since it hindered martial arts, it disappeared quickly.

“That custom’s gone now, of course, but... in old families, there’s still a lingering sense that feet are somewhat special.”

“People’s beliefs don’t change quickly.”

“Exactly. It’s not like feet are forbidden to be seen or anything, but they’re something to be hidden when possible. Kind of like... your upper body, Brother Cheon.”

“My upper body? What about it?”

“Well, not now with the cool weather, but during the summer, didn’t you often train shirtless in front of us?”

“I only did that because I was sweating.”

“I still wore all my layers and trained, even in the heat.”

“You and I are built differently.”

“And yet, even you, Brother Cheon, only strip like that in front of us—when you’re outside, you’re always fully dressed, aren’t you?”

She tugged slightly at her sleeve as she said that.

That gesture... for some reason, it made me imagine her one day standing before me like that, and my face suddenly flushed.

I looked away, and only then did she nod in satisfaction.

“In any case, the point is: in old, noble families, feet are still considered a slightly sensitive area. So, Brother Cheon, you’ll have to do something even greater for me next time.”

“How does that follow?”

“Hm... oh! How about this? I’ll lay my head on your leg, and you can comb my hair. Doesn’t that sound lovely?”

“...Are you even listening to me?”

“But you’ll end up doing it anyway, won’t you?”

As shameless as her words were, she wasn’t wrong.

If she came at me with a brush and her head on my thigh, I’d probably just sigh and go along with it.

“Hehe, you understand now, don’t you? Don’t resist unnecessarily—just accept that I’m adorable.”

“You mean my fiancée who’s five years older than me?”

“Then I’ll consider it adorable when you awkwardly brush my hair with those clumsy hands of yours.”

“...Either way, the result is the same.”

I shook my head and continued.

“Well, let’s leave it at that and head over to the sparring grounds.”

“Is that a promise? If you forget, I’ll start mixing ginkgo fruit scent into your herbal supplements.”

“You can do that?”

“Ginkgo has a mild toxin, but surely you’ve tasted it at least once. So, are you heading to the sparring grounds already this morning?”

She casually dropped a very real threat about adding autumn stench to everything I ingest.

Unlike Seo Mun-Hwarin, who might already be secretly watching, Seol Lihyang was probably still half-asleep.

Heading to the sparring ground this early was a bit much, but—

“I didn’t get to spar yesterday because of Master Gakjeong calling me. I thought I’d exchange a few light moves with any monks who were already up.”

“And afterward?”

“I’ll spar with those who wake at the usual hour.”

“And after that?”

“I suppose I’ll spar with the slightly lazy monks.”

A brief silence followed. Then Tang Sowol cautiously asked,

“Brother Cheon... you do know this isn’t a challenge to break the sect’s reputation board or something, right?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll go easy on them.”

Even if Shaolin is mighty, there likely aren’t any post-peak masters there who can match me.

If I want a proper spar, I’d need someone of higher rank, but if they lose to a post-peak martial artist, it’s a humiliation—and if they win, it’s nothing special.

That’s why even Seo Mun-Hwarin is sparring with one of the Diamond Warriors rather than the Abbot—despite being in the Flowering Stage.

Shaolin doesn’t obsess over face like some families, but still, rumors of their elite being beaten by a young outsider wouldn’t be great.

I get it. Shaolin's mere presence is enough to keep many unorthodox sects from even approaching Henan. Maintaining that aura of calm is important.

But Tang Sowol clearly didn't trust me.

"You must go easy, alright? Promise me."

"I told you, don't worry."

I shrugged and headed to the sparring ground with her.

To summarize: Tang Sowol was right.

"Guh...! I knew I had a long way to go, but not this far..."

One monk walked away in defeat, hands clasped in frustrated respect.

“Unbelievable! So martial arts really are meant only for killing... they cannot embody the Buddha’s compassion!”

Another monk, apparently suffering minor inner-demon symptoms from the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art’s sheer killing aura and the overwhelming skill gap.

“I think I’m just not suited for martial arts. Shaolin is famous for its martial prowess, but wouldn’t studying scriptures and guiding others toward liberation be a better fit for me?”

A third monk said, sounding calm—but his voice wavered with held-back tears.

And finally...

“Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu...”

The top-level post-peak monk of Shaolin—the one who placed second at the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting—was mumbling chants with a deeply conflicted expression.

As I scratched my head awkwardly, Tang Sowol crossed her arms and glared at me.

“Brother Cheon??”

“I tried.”

They were the ones who asked me to go all-out. What was I supposed to do?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

What is it that makes a warrior truly a warrior?

Is one a warrior simply by learning martial arts? Is it someone who artificially cultivates internal energy? Or does one become a warrior only by surpassing human limits and materializing qi?

The standards for this are vague, and every person would likely have a different answer.

It's not a question with a single correct answer, so it's difficult to say anyone is definitively right or wrong.

Yet, there is an answer that most martial artists would likely agree upon. Something like...

A warrior is someone who holds confidence in their own martial prowess.

On this, most would nod in agreement.

Understandably so, as this is what changes most drastically before and after one begins learning martial arts.

There's a reason why renowned orthodox sects constantly warn their rising talents to remain humble.

Because, more often than not, those overflowing with sky-piercing confidence end up causing trouble.

“In that sense, I'd say this wasn't my fault. It's the monks who broke down on their own. Sometimes, one must know how to be humbled.”

“So what you’re saying is, it wasn’t your fault that you crushed them before they could even attempt a single technique while exuding murderous intent. Rather, it’s their fault for losing heart over something so trivial?”

“Exactly! They asked me to go all out, and I did just that. You’ll never see another top expert like me so generously sharing their skills with juniors they just met.”

“Hmph. I recall telling you to go easy at the start. So what you’re implying is that these Shaolin monks you met for the first time today are more important than your fiancée?”

“Wha—...”

Whether in the previous life or now, Tang Sowol is far too skilled at paralyzing me without even using pressure points.

Startled into silence and unable to explain myself, I stood awkwardly while Tang Sowol offered a softened smile.

“I’m joking, so don’t look so distressed. But could you perhaps be a bit more honest?”

“They were more skilled than expected for their level, so I got a little carried away.”

“And?”

“As the rumors of me defeating the Bloodflame Fist Demon spread, they started looking at me with reverence. I felt like showing them something.”

That’s right.

It’s been a while since I defeated the Bloodflame Fist Demon, and I didn’t hide it. I even reported it to the Murim Alliance to raise awareness of the Demonic Cult threat.

By now, it wouldn’t be strange for the rumors to have reached Henan Province.

Shaolin’s post-peak trainees—no, most orthodox sect trainees—are forbidden from traveling the martial world until they’re older and more skilled.

It's to prevent them from sullyng their sect's name or dying pointlessly due to lack of strength.

Most of the monks gathered here have likely never stepped outside Songshan Mountain.

And yet, suddenly the protagonist of all those wild rumors appeared before their eyes.

If it had been me, I would've leapt at the chance too, wanting to know whether the stories were true, and just how powerful he was.

At least they asked politely, saying things like, "I understand there is a gap in skill, but I would like to personally witness your sword."

Had they been unorthodox sect bastards, they would've started with "I heard you're tough—prove it."

"Well, I didn't think they'd be this shaken, honestly."

"I wouldn't know firsthand since you've never directed your killing intent at me, but... haven't you grown more intense lately, Brother Cheon?"

“I haven’t.”

When I defeated the Black Sky Sword Lord, it brought closure to a long period of mourning within me.

With that, the festering wounds stopped transforming into murderous intent.

The inner demon within me remains the same. My killing aura hasn’t increased, nor has it lessened.

But I can guess why others, like Tang Sowol, are sensing something different.

“I’ve simply gotten better at handling it.”

“Pardon?”

“There are things you can see more clearly only by stepping back.”

“...???”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, clearly not understanding.

Clinging tightly to something is fine, but you can only see the full picture by letting go.

It wouldn't be hard to explain this to her, but I hesitate. My insights may influence her path, which differs from mine.

While we both know each other's martial arts well, our directions are fundamentally different.

More importantly, Tang Sowol possesses the potential to reach the Flowering Stage through her own efforts. Unlike me, who is still feeling out that realm, I worry that I might interfere.

She may not realize it herself, but she's now standing right at the edge of Peak Stage.

Perhaps unintentionally, being entangled in various matters with me until now has steadily fed her growth.

Those experiences have become nutrients for her.

So I simply shrugged and made a lighthearted remark.

“There are things that only someone who has reached Sub-Perfection would understand.”

“Oh, so now that you’ve flattened the Shaolin monks, you’re trying to push me into inner demon deviation?!”

Tang Sowol smacked my shoulder repeatedly, her grin a mix of disbelief and defiance.

Then the noisy training ground suddenly fell quiet.

Footsteps approached—three sets.

Two of the presences were unfamiliar, but one was very familiar.

Light steps. A slightly excited spring in the stride. And occasional stumbles, as if trying to act nonchalant while sneakily gauging the situation.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had spied on Seol Lihyang and me the night before, had arrived at the training ground. She was accompanied by two large-shaven monks.

“Ahem. I see you arrived early. Hyang-i had something to take care of and will be here shortly.”

“Something to take care of?”

“You know, that place... the Haewuso.”

“Ah.”

So it really was that kind of business.

I nodded and turned to the two large monks standing beside her with serene smiles.

“Could it be that you two are...?”

“Nice to meet you. Are you the famed Blood Flame Sword Demon, by chance?”

“You may have heard from the Abbot, but we are humbly called Diamond Warriors. I am Geum Myeong, and this is my senior brother, Gak Myeong.”

They joined palms in greeting.

I hadn't expected two Diamond Warriors to come.

“You came to spar with Senior Seo? But both of you?”

To my question, Geum Myeong, whose gentle tone contrasted his massive build, shook his head.

“No. I alone will receive instruction from the head of the Seomun Clan. Senior Brother Gak Myeong simply accompanied me.”

“I heard three spectators were allowed, so I came along shamelessly.”

Gak Myeong, the burly monk, spoke a little sheepishly.

Despite his hulking body and rough features, his expression and eyes revealed a gentle sincerity.

“There’s no issue. We agreed on three spectators per side without other conditions... and I’m one of them.”

The agreement between Seo Mun-Hwarin and Abbot Jeonghyeon was simple:

Since he couldn’t personally step in, he would send one Diamond Warrior as her sparring partner.

The match would be private, its results not shared, and each side could bring three spectators.

That was all.

As someone at Sub-Perfection, I had more than enough qualification to observe. And so did Gak Myeong.

Grateful for the sentiment, Gak Myeong nodded at me.

“Thank you for the consideration. I’ll go fetch the other two—could you wait a moment?”

“We’re waiting on someone ourselves, so that works perfectly.”

With that, Geum Myeong and Gak Myeong began calming the shaken post-peak monks still reeling from the earlier sparring.

They shouted at those caught in light inner demon deviation with Buddhist qi, and offered gentle encouragement to those rethinking their futures.

Eventually, they filtered out everyone but two—one being the runner-up of the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, the other an older post-peak monk.

And around the same time, Seol Lihyang arrived, looking especially tired today.

Her bleary eyes made me speak cautiously.

“Are you... feeling unwell lately?”

“Why so sudden?”

“No need to be embarrassed. And don’t worry either. The Pure Yin Physique is inherently imbalanced, disrupting the harmony of yin and yang. Even if you control it with martial arts, it’s hard to avoid minor issues.”

“Uhh, thanks for worrying, but what are you talking about?”

“You said you had something to take care of, but took a while, so I just thought...”

“Y-You!”

Seol Lihyang’s face turned crimson, and she unleashed slaps filled with frosty qi at my back.

If one landed, not even I—who had recently made great strides in external arts—could laugh it off. Some internal damage and frostbite would be inevitable.

That is... if I got hit.

Dodging her flurrying hands, I spoke calmly.

“Calm down. There’s a solution to everything, right?”

“Maybe if you just let me hit you a few times! Stop dodging already!”

“Talk to me after you drop the qi from your hands.”

As her face grew redder, so too did the chill in her palms sharpen.

“If the issue is imbalance, it just needs correcting. The fastest way would be to replenish yang energy—but that’s only temporary. Once you ascend in realm, most problems will sort themselves out.”

“I said that’s not it!”

“Now that I think about it, I’ve sparred with Tang Sowol and Senior Seo before, but not really with you. If you set aside time today—”

“This is all your fault! And you’re still talking nonsense?!”

“...Huh?”

“W-We did that yesterday, and I couldn’t sleep properly, which is why I overslept! I just washed up and did my hair, that’s why I was late—not whatever you’re imagining!”

As Seol Lihyang shouted in frustration, everyone—including Seo Mun-Hwarin, Geum Myeong, and the other spectators—turned their eyes on us in silence.

Then came a series of awkward, unnatural coughs from all around.

“Ahem. Now that everyone’s arrived and those who had to leave have left... shall we begin the sparring?”

“Yes, that would be best. This match is to exchange martial insight, so let’s refrain from using energy techniques.”

“Namu Amida Butsu. I, Geum Myeong, will humbly learn from the Lady of the Seo Mun Clan.”

Geum Myeong pressed his palms together in gratitude and assumed his stance. Seo Mun-Hwarin also raised her fist.

Everyone shifted focus to the duel, as if nothing had happened.

Only Seol Lihyang remained, gritting her teeth as she whispered in my ear.

“One day... I’ll pay you back exactly the same way, so look forward to it!”

“...Mmm.”

How cruel.

All I had ever done was be kind.

Letting out a quiet sigh, I watched as golden light enveloped Geum Myeong's fist.

The match had begun.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The awkward atmosphere dispersed the moment Geum Myeong threw a punch, and the sparring began.

Golden inner energy flowed from his massive body. It went without saying, but it wasn't body-strengthening qi, nor was he forcibly igniting energy throughout his whole body.

It was simply that the fist energy wrapped around both his fists spread its light across his body in an unusual way.

It wasn't flashy, nor was it blindingly bright.

The enormous figure radiated a soft golden glow. Even though his fists weren't aimed at me, and even though I could easily block them if I tried, a strange sense of pressure settled over me.

It felt as if an enormous wall were rushing forward, threatening to engulf the entire space—

"Huh?"

Only now did I realize that Geum Myeong's hulking body was gliding forward.

There was no upper body movement, so I must have momentarily mistaken it as him throwing a punch from a standstill.

He looked like a charging Buddha statue. Though it was my first time witnessing it in person, I knew the name of that footwork.

"Immovable Wisdom King Steps."

"Correct. You seem well-acquainted with it?"

It was Gak Myeong's voice from beside me. Without turning my head, I acknowledged him while keeping my focus on the match.

"It's that famous of a footwork, after all. You could even say it's one of the symbols of the Shaolin Temple."

"A symbol, hmm. It's understandable to see it that way..."

Gak Myeong's reaction was somehow unconvincing. Perhaps he noticed my puzzled look, as he gave a faint smile.

"I'll explain later. For now, it'd be best to focus on the match, no?"

"You're right."

It wasn't every day you got to watch a spar between Seorin, once called the White-Haired Rakshasa, and one of the Vajra Warriors.

I heightened my focus, determined not to miss a single detail.

Though he appeared stiff, Geum Myeong moved with flexibility, unleashing an unrelenting barrage of attacks.

Perhaps it was the softly glowing fist energy, but his punches didn't look particularly threatening from the outside...

That was only true when judged by the eyes.

Each and every strike, as felt through my open senses, was incredibly heavy—like a mountain bearing down.

And yet, despite unleashing such force, his movements were composed, as if he were simply out for a stroll.

That meant he still had plenty of strength in reserve. Trying to counter with brute force would be a grave mistake.

If it were me, I would've focused on dodging or redirecting, searching for any opening.

But Seorin was different.

Geum Myeong's massive fists, reminiscent of a Buddha statue.

Seorin, standing against them, looked so small she almost seemed fragile. But for her, this was no issue.

Her tiny fists were clenched tightly. Yet, those fists carried a ferocious red fist energy.

She extended her punches toward Geum Myeong's incoming blows, intercepting each and every one.

An utterly reckless way to respond—yet for Seorin, it was more effective than anything else.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Every time their fists collided, broken inner energy exploded with a loud roar, sending shockwaves outwards.

It looked like a child facing off against a giant without yielding an inch.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who thought so—awed gasps echoed from those around us, mostly from Shaolin disciples.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang had already seen Seorin use both fists to overturn rivers and split boulders twice a man's height, so this was nothing new to them.

Despite her small frame, Seorin's fists held the strength to remove anything in her path.

At first, the two seemed evenly matched. But as they exchanged more punches, Geum Myeong gradually began to be pushed back.

Before his punches could even fully extend, they were blocked, and sometimes they were deflected outright from the impact.

What initially felt like Seorin countering Geum Myeong's attacks soon turned into Geum Myeong barely managing to endure Seorin's onslaught.

Perhaps realizing this wouldn't do, Geum Myeong began drawing upon a more varied set of techniques.

Using his fists, palms, legs, and even full-body strikes,

he unleashed a vast array of martial arts with his Vajra body as the weapon.

Each technique was distinct, yet seamlessly linked into one flow. Though it was my first time seeing it, there was something familiar about it.

It was the Seventy-Two Secret Techniques that Gakjeong had once displayed.

The weight behind each strike had lessened, but that didn't mean they were weaker.

Geum Myeong had made a wise decision. A typical opponent would've panicked and lost the initiative here.

But of course, this didn't work against Seorin.

Regardless of how Geum Myeong changed his techniques, Seorin calmly continued to throw her fists.

Her strikes grew stronger and stronger, as if asking whether he could withstand even this.

If Geum Myeong's martial arts were based on solid training and focused on weight, then Seorin possessed only strength.

Each of her moves contained refined technique, yet what one felt was only primal violence.

And in the face of that overwhelming force, Geum Myeong eventually crumbled.

Thud!

Struck in the chest, Geum Myeong rolled backward a long distance before springing up with a refreshed look, putting his palms together in a bow.

“Thank you for the guidance, benefactor Seorin.”

She seemed a bit flustered, perhaps having misjudged her own strength, but still responded calmly.

“As expected, the Vajra Indestructible Body lives up to its name. This one also found joy in witnessing the depths of Shaolin martial arts.”

Though she had been flustered at first, Seorin soon nodded with satisfaction.

Even though he had lost, no one found it strange or disgraceful.

After all, Seorin had reached the Flowering Stage, even if only recently.

A proper, classic spar where simply experiencing each other’s martial arts was enough.

I hadn’t fought him myself, but I still came away with something from watching Geum Myeong.

Shaolin martial arts are built on solid fundamentals.

Of course, no martial art can neglect fundamentals,

but for Shaolin, it's even more important—because their secret techniques are ultimately just basic forms trained to the extreme.

The opponent I had sparred with earlier was a late-stage second-class warrior, and naturally lacked those fundamentals.

Building basics takes talent, yes, but more than that, it takes time.

What Geum Myeong showed me gave a glimpse of how far Shaolin's foundation-based martial arts could go.

Though I've been working on my fundamentals in my own way, I still feel there's quite a bit I'm lacking.

It's no surprise, considering I never really built a proper foundation.

Before my regression, I learned my sword by jumping straight into live combat, and in this life, I've focused on reclaiming my former realm.

Of course, I don't need to train my fundamentals to the level of Shaolin's warrior monks. But then, what's the proper amount?

How much exactly am I lacking?

Reflecting on such questions—I suddenly felt a gaze. Lifting my head, I saw Gak Myeong still watching me with that fierce expression.

“Is something the matter?”

“Now that the spar is over, I’d like to continue the conversation from earlier. Would it be alright to do so here in the training ground?”

“...Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

“Indeed. I saw something good, and my body’s itching a bit. If the Blood Flame Sword Demon benefactor doesn’t mind, I’d like to test hands with you.”

“I’d be happy to. But is that alright? Weren’t we only given permission by Master Jeong Hyeon to spar with either Seorin or one of the Vajra Warriors?”

“Well, for a sparring partner of your level, the abbot would’ve had to step in himself. But he has too many burdens as the abbot, and it couldn’t be helped.”

With a pure smile that didn't match his vicious face, Gak Myeong continued,

“No one will complain if I take the initiative to spar with the Blood Flame Sword Demon. Especially not with you being a guest of the former abbot.”

“Well, in that case, I have no reason to refuse.”

I grinned and rose from my seat. As I did, Seorin, who had been chatting with Geum Myeong, tilted her head curiously.

“You there? Has your respect for me blossomed so fully that you stand in Reception?”

“Huh? Ah, kuheum. Of course, I always hold great respect for you, Seorin, but this time, the reason is a bit different.”

“Ehhem. Hm? What reason might that be?”

Not content with merely lifting her chin, Seorin even stood on tiptoes, only to blink in surprise.

“I’m going to spar with Monk Gak Myeong.”

“Huhhh?”

Seorin looked between the two of us, then nodded.

“In that case, this one shall observe your match.”

Waving her arms as if to cheer me on, Seorin stood back.

Though she sometimes displayed the shady behavior of spying on younger martial artists playing around... she was, at her core, a good person.

I gave a slight bow, then stepped onto the training ground.

A short distance away, Gak Myeong had already taken position.

As I assumed a respectful pose, he responded with a joined-palms gesture.

Only after confirming this did I draw my sword and settle into a stance.

Still in his clasped-hands posture, Gak Myeong spoke.

“Before we begin the match, allow me to continue our earlier conversation.”

“Earlier...? Ah, you mean the Immovable Wisdom King Steps?”

“Indeed. The Blood Flame Sword Demon benefactor said that it was symbolic of Shaolin, and that's true... but in fact, that technique is not originally from Shaolin.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Not only the Immovable Wisdom King Steps, but most of the Vajra Warriors’ techniques are not from Shaolin. Long ago, during an era of exchange with Potala Palace in Tibet, we received and developed martial arts symbolizing the Five Great Wisdom Kings they revered just after Buddha.”

“Still, Potala Palace is part of Buddhism. And if these techniques were honed in Shaolin for so long, it seems fair to call them Shaolin martial arts now.”

“The Prajnaparamita Sutra and the Diamond Sutra are different... well, never mind. That may be too complicated. Just understand that though they both come from Buddhism, the sects and their goals are quite different.”

“I see.”

“Exactly. The Vajra Warriors’ martial arts may have originated from Potala Palace... but that place has changed drastically.”

“What do you mean by ‘changed’?”

“I visited on request from the former abbot. The monks there had become excessively immersed in esoteric Buddhism. They had forsaken the Buddha's role of guiding all beings to enlightenment, and now obsessed over strange rituals and mantras they claimed were full of wisdom.”

“That sounds like just a sectarian difference.”

“That’s what the abbot and former abbot also said. But... I cannot agree.”

From my perspective, it didn't seem like a big deal.

But for someone who had spent his entire life in Shaolin, following the teachings of the Buddha, it must have felt very different.

Even among Shaolin's foundational martial arts, the Immovable Wisdom King Steps had a distinctly foreign feel.

And Gak Myeong, who had learned both traditions and seen them firsthand, would have noticed the contrast even more sharply.

I was about to nod and brush it off when his next words made me flinch.

"Shaolin, too, may change at any time. Don't you see? Lately, Shaolin has become more renowned as a martial sect than as a temple."

"...Indeed."

"I don't know if that's truly the right path. That's why I must ask you, Blood Flame Sword Demon benefactor."

“Ask me what?”

“Whether it's right for a disciple of the Buddha to be given this much power. And whether we are not simply repeating the mistakes of the former abbot.”

He feared that he and Shaolin might become like Gakjeong—

Who had become so used to killing that he ended up killing a disciple he didn't need to.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

At some point, Shaolin's reputation became greater as a martial sect rather than a temple.

The towering symbol of the orthodox sects, “All martial arts under heaven originate from Shaolin.”

These two phrases, often used to describe present-day Shaolin, emphasize not the Buddha's compassion, but the strength of their martial arts.

Gak Myeong was asking if this was truly the right path. Had Shaolin not lost sight of its essence?

It was a valid question, and one that seemed necessary—a kind of self-reflection for a long-standing organization like Shaolin.

As he said, a wrong turn could lead them down the path of the Potala Palace, now deeply immersed in esoteric Buddhism, transforming into something else entirely.

However, there was one thing I couldn't understand.

“Why are you asking me this?”

Why was Gak Myeong sharing his doubts and concerns with me, of all people? I was, after all, an outsider.

Unable to understand his reasoning, I had to ask.

Still holding his clasped-hands posture, Gak Myeong nodded.

“Because I believe the Blood Flame Sword Demon benefactor is the most appropriate person. As an outsider, you can see things those within cannot. You’re still a young warrior of the late second class, so your thinking won’t be rigid like mine.

And though your experience may be narrow, given your reputation, it surely isn’t shallow. Most importantly, you’re a martial artist who, despite the killing intent you carry, has not lost your way.”

“Ah.”

As if he’d been waiting for me to ask, the answer flowed naturally from his mouth. And upon hearing it, I understood.

The words Gak Myeong spoke were ones he had pondered for a long time.

To him, I—someone who wielded a sword heavy with killing intent, someone with a fearsome nickname yet still recognized as a martial artist of the orthodox path—perhaps represented the very contradiction Shaolin was facing.

No wonder he had rushed over upon hearing I wished to experience Shaolin’s martial arts.

The outcome of the spar didn't matter. His sincerity was clear. And so, I pointed my drawn sword at Gak Myeong.

Gak Myeong was both a disciple of Buddha and an excellent martial artist. And between martial artists, the most genuine conversation occurs when exchanging full-force blows.

"I'm grateful that you think so highly of me, but I'm not someone who can offer a clear answer to your question.

My vision is narrow, and I've never carried any grand ideals... I'm just struggling to survive today."

With that, a blood-red sword aura, thick with killing intent, began to surge around me.

Though I hadn't released my killing intent in earnest yet, Gak Myeong seemed to understand my intent, breaking his clasped posture and assuming a stance.

I grinned crookedly at him.

“Still, if it’s that struggle you wish to witness up close... you’ve come to the right place. Watch all you like, and in return, show me the martial arts of the Vajra Warrior. If that’s still not enough, then we can talk afterward.”

As if agreeing, Gak Myeong responded not with words but by drawing out his internal energy, dyeing his entire body in golden light.

His hands, once spread for the clasped-palm greeting, were now tightly clenched fists.

A silent exchange of will through our eyes. The first to move was Gak Myeong.

Swish—

Not even a sound of footsteps. His upper body, as steady as a Buddha statue, didn’t budge an inch.

He simply drew closer in that immovable posture.

The Immovable Wisdom King Steps had been impressive to watch from the side, but facing them directly, they were even more astonishing.

It was baffling—how such movement was possible at all.

But I didn't have the luxury to simply admire. Before I knew it, Gak Myeong had already closed the distance and swung his fist with that fierce face.

A large fist wrapped in soft golden light. I swung my sword toward it.

Kkwaang!

An explosive sound rang out as our inner energies clashed.

But neither of us was blown back. Instead, sword and fist met and quivered midair in a contest of strength.

My blood-red sword flame, blazing fiercely, clashed against the dim yet unyielding golden fist energy.

Like a starving wolf trying to bite into a fist, the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art surged with killing energy, yet it failed to pierce even a single tooth into Gak Myeong's inner energy.

We remained locked in that clash briefly, but eventually, the balance broke.

“Kh...?”

My sword began to slowly get pushed back.

A momentary burst of force can be overcome with technique, but in pure physical strength, Gak Myeong was far superior. It was inevitable.

Enduring just enough while using the feel through my sword to read the flow of power, I instantly reversed my force.

As my blocking sword suddenly disappeared, his fist pierced through empty air.

Woosh!

The wind grazed my ear, stinging even though I had made sure to put ample distance between us.

Normally, swinging with that much force and missing would ruin one's stance.

But Gak Myeong's posture remained unchanged.

His upper body, unmoving as ever. As though only his arms moved from a statue of Buddha, his other fist came flying in.

Now having gauged his strength from our earlier exchange, I angled my sword to redirect it with appropriate force.

That was the plan.

Kkwaang!

“What...?”

I had certainly meant to deflect it. And to an observer, it looked like I had.

But the impact I felt in my hand was just as heavy as before.

It was as if I had deflected the fist, but the force contained within still came directly at me.

“I see. Now I understand why Senior Seorin met him head-on with her fists. If you can’t completely dodge it, you’re better off countering directly than half-heartedly trying to avoid it.”

“The fist of the Immovable Wisdom King Fist may waver, but the Buddha’s will within does not,”

came Gak Myeong’s voice, deep like a Vajra statue rather than a Buddha now—perhaps due to his grim face.

Though I didn’t fully grasp the theory, the unmoving upper body clearly had its reasons.

It was a Buddhist-style martial art—stubborn, but carrying deep meaning.

Unlike other Shaolin martial arts that refine the basics to the extreme, however, the Immovable Wisdom King Steps and Fist incorporated complex techniques.

That unmoving upper body wasn't built solely through external physical training.

If it were, his deflected punch earlier wouldn't have held such power.

It likely required a blend of refined inner energy control atop his physical training.

I had only seen one technique, but since he showed me first, it was only right for me to take the next move.

As if shaking off the lingering force that flowed through my sword, I stepped back rapidly to open distance.

Then, lowering my stance, I dashed inward—unleashing my suppressed killing intent all at once.

“Namu Amitabha...”

Eyes widening at the overwhelming killing intent, Gak Myeong chanted a Buddhist phrase.

To him, it must have felt like a blade had been suddenly thrust under his chin.

Other than Gakjeong, the former abbot, he was probably the first in Shaolin to experience my killing intent this directly.

The surrounding air was saturated with my murderous aura.

With my senses heightened, I caught a faint scent of burning in the air—and took that as my cue to swing.

Sswaeek!

Like Gak Myeong's fist, my sword strike shot out in a straight line.

To intercept it, he too thrust out his fist—but just before we collided, my sword curved strangely downward.

Then with another sudden twist, the blade shot upward, slashing across Gak Myeong's forearm.

Kkaduduk.

The savage inner energy of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art tore across Gak Myeong's arm, but his deep Buddhist inner energy and Vajra Indestructible Body prevented it from penetrating.

Still, it reached deeper than when our fists clashed. That was enough.

Ignoring the pain of his grazing punch scraping my shoulder, I swung again.

Movements driven by the Divine Sword Unity—not swinging the sword, but moving in sync with the sword's path.

No profound meaning, no style—just pure killing intent.

A sword that wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice flesh if it meant slicing even a fraction closer to a vital point.

A ruthless, blunt sword style—a reflection of my wretched past.

I swung it for many reasons: hunger, pride, helplessness, the need to vent unspoken anger, and to protect the bonds I had finally regained.

Though in the end, it had all led to loss.

A life of constant loss, and a hunger growing in proportion.

Loss—and the yearning born from it.

That was the foundation upon which my sword was built.

So to me, the sword was not a noble teaching—but simply a necessary tool.

Of course, conveying this fully would be impossible.

Just as I could sense the unyielding nature of Gak Myeong's martial arts but not understand what that conviction was for,

he might have felt my sword's sense of loss and longing, but not what they were directed at.

But there was one thing that surely came through—

that martial arts do not always reflect the original intent of the art itself.

Blood Wolf Arts, the foundation of my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, was never meant to carry such violent killing intent.

But because it was me wielding it, it became that way.

Every sword technique I learned or stole a glance at surely had its own intent and form—but in my hands, they simply became practical tricks used as needed.

So what if the Potala Palace's martial arts were corrupted?

As long as the one wielding them has a righteous heart, corruption is meaningless.

So what if a disciple of Buddha learns martial arts made to kill? By that logic, even a kitchen knife would be forbidden—it too can kill.

Martial arts are just tools. What matters is the heart of the one who wields them.

Whether it be political power, physical might, or financial wealth... power itself does not corrupt.

It is the person holding the power who chooses corruption.

Killing intent, martial arts—they are all part of me.

I might be able to pinch my own fingers, but those fingers will never move of their own accord to strike me.

I wield them—they do not wield me.

It was similar to what I once told Gakjeong.

But unlike him, who only showed admiration, Gak Myeong seemed genuinely moved.

His grim expression eased, and his eyes opened wide.

The fists that had relentlessly pressured me without moving his upper body stopped.

My sword, which had persistently sought out even the slightest weak point, also halted.

In the brief silence that followed, Gak Myeong spoke in a dazed voice.

"Teaching isn't always in words, and the Buddha doesn't dwell only in temples. What truly matters is..."

"Ah!"

As if he had achieved enlightenment, Gak Myeong began to radiate golden light across his entire body.

Then he simply sat down, as if trying to absorb that enlightenment—leaving me momentarily dumbfounded.

“What the...?”

Just when I was getting into the mood, you stop like this?

We sparred together—so why is he the only one having a breakthrough?

I couldn't help but feel a little cheated and hollow inside, and my posture slumped without realizing it.

Tsk.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Envy and jealousy were never particularly special emotions for me.

In my life, I had far more experience with lacking than possessing.

At one point, I practically lived with jealousy always at my side.

Why does that child still have living parents?

Why was that person born with talent?

Why did that one get lucky and obtain a fateful encounter? And so on.

But, well... those feelings never lasted long.

Because I had pride in what I had built with my own hands,

because I had confidence I could achieve even more in the future, and because a bit of arrogance had taken root within me—that I had already surpassed those I once envied.

At some point, the "above" was no longer something to look up to, but something to climb toward.

And so, there were few things that could make me feel envy again, and even if I did, the feeling would fade quickly.

Surely, even this reaction to Gak Myeong, who gained enlightenment mid-sparring, wasn't a big deal either.

"Tsk."

No, the more I think about it, the more absurd it seems.

How could a Sub-Perfection master gain enlightenment from a single sparring match?

I don't know what he saw in me, but... I wish he'd shown me too.

I only briefly watched him, my posture naturally slouching with annoyance.

Despite his size, sitting down brought him nearly eye level with me—that amused me enough to sheath my sword with a soft chuckle.

Well, what good would envy do me anyway?

Enlightenment is merely the trigger. Whether or not you can grasp it depends entirely on the preparations you've made up to that point.

Gak Myeong had been prepared. He would have gained enlightenment sooner or later, with or without me.

So there was no need to obsess over the fact that we just happened to be sparring when it happened—

"Namu Amitabha! Brother Gak Myeong has gained enlightenment not once but twice before the end of the year! And it's all thanks to this good karmic encounter with Benefactor Cheon. I offer my sincere gratitude!"

"Uh, Monk Geum Myeong! Shouldn't you be maintaining protective duty? We'll help!"

"Haha. Your intentions are admirable, but leave this to me.

From what I've seen, when someone like Brother Gak Myeong with his level of martial prowess gains enlightenment, he sometimes draws in nearby internal

energy to its limit. Normally it's fine, but... if you stay too close, you may suffer internal injury."

"Ah! Understood! Then we'll observe from a distance, Monk Geum Myeong!"

The young Shaolin disciples scampered away, and Geum Myeong kept offering his heartfelt thanks to me, face glowing with emotion.

But the only phrase echoing in my ears was:

"Twice in one year?"

I had managed to grasp a thread of willpower while facing the Blood Flame Fist Demon, but the last time I had experienced anything remotely like enlightenment was years ago—back when the Orthodox-Murim Alliance and the Demonic Cult were still in fierce conflict.

In the chaos of battle, where multiple warriors clashed, I had managed to survive by wielding killing intent like a sensory field.

Since then, I've only focused on becoming more familiar with what I already have, regaining what I'd lost.

But nothing that could be called true enlightenment.

And yet this Sub-Perfection master had a casual spar and gained enlightenment?
For the second time this year?

Suddenly, my stomach began to ache.

At that moment, Tang Sowol approached with her usual bright smile—and instantly caught on.

“We don’t know who really won, but I suppose you now owe Shaolin a favor!...But what’s with that face? You look like someone forced to leave the training hall because it suddenly rained just after you drew your sword.”

“...Isn’t that a little too specific?”

“Well, it’s because soaked Little Cheon looks just like a drenched puppy—absolutely adorable, you know?”

“...?”

It was a comparison I'd never heard before in my life, and I was honestly at a loss.

But judging by her chuckles, Tang Sowol wasn't just joking—she meant every word.

“You come trudging along all messy, and when I get a close look, your face is all sulky.”

“I've never done that.”

“But if I shake the water off your head and play with you a bit, you smile and your lips twitch.”

“...So you've been playing with me this whole time?”

“Ehay. It's just a way of speaking. Just words.”

Tang Sowol giggled into her wide sleeve, and I found myself tempted to tug on her round ears peeking through her dark-green hair.

Just then, Seorin narrowed her eyes, watching the golden aura surrounding Gak Myeong, and spoke.

“Well then, how was it, you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The spar, of course. You looked like you were really starting to enjoy yourself when it got cut off—and then your opponent got enlightenment on top of it all. No wonder you’re so prickly.”

“I said it’s not like that.”

Ignoring my protest, Seorin poked Seol Lihyang’s shoulder beside her.

“What do you think, Hyang?”

“Hmm... He does seem a little moodier than usual,

but I don't think he's that upset.”

“You saw it too? Same here.”

“Why are you deciding my emotions between the two of you?”

“Isn't it true?”

“...It's roughly accurate.”

Though the ending wasn't quite to my liking, the spar itself had been enjoyable.

For one, I got to experience a Buddhist martial art—something that had nearly vanished due to the Heavenly Demon annihilating entire sects before my regression.

The Immovable Wisdom King Steps, especially, were fascinating.

Instead of using the body to control force, it was about using force to control the body.

That immovable upper body, the way force still transferred even when attacks were deflected—it was likely all due to that reversal of principle.

This wasn't something that could be imitated just by moving one's body the same way.

It required incredibly complex internal energy manipulation, and a profound internal reservoir to support it.

But I didn't need to be discouraged.

I had already achieved Divine Sword Unity, perfectly controlling every motion of my body.

A body that didn't sway even during intense movement wasn't something I considered extraordinary.

Since I'd seen it once, mimicking it to some extent was doable even now.

What truly impressed me wasn't the flawless stance, but the way the impact transferred fully even when deflected.

I didn't know the exact formulas behind the Immovable Wisdom King Steps or Fist, so I couldn't copy it exactly.

But the fact that such a thing was possible—that alone meant I could experiment with my own method.

For example—

What if I didn't just contain the energy of a sword strike within the blade itself, but extended it into the sword wind?

Even now, my sword wind was sharp enough to slice flesh,

but not enough to claim a life.

Against someone with properly trained external techniques, it was virtually useless.

And the further the distance, the more its effectiveness diminished exponentially.

In truth, sword wind was little more than a cheap trick for cutting down weaklings.

But if I could fully transfer the power of a strike into the sword wind, its applications would expand dramatically.

A hidden trump card in an unexpected moment... or perhaps—

“Mn. Like this, maybe...”

Focusing on the sensation in my fingertips, I swung a knife-hand through the air.

My hand sliced through the air. And as it cut, it seemed to carry some of the space along with it.

As if someone had pushed me from behind, the motion felt far smoother than usual.

It was only my hand, and the swing was half-hearted,

but had I used my sword, it would've looked like the blade suddenly accelerated mid-motion.

This wasn't simply swinging a sword filled with inner energy.

It was pushing the sword forward using both the arm and the inner energy together.

With more elements to manage, I could barely execute it once by concentrating fully—and even then, it lacked noticeable effect due to my inexperience.

But once I grew used to it, its power would skyrocket when applied to techniques that valued speed, fluid movement, or explosive impact.

It wasn't enough to be called enlightenment, but...if I gained even one thing from it, wasn't that more than enough?

My path is one no one else has walked. So there's no need to compare or rush.

If I just continue forward one step at a time...

“Ah.”

I forgot—I had a time limit. Until the Heavenly Demon’s invasion.

The joy of learning didn’t last long. Still, I wasn’t overcome with anxiety—just a tangle of complicated feelings. I sighed briefly.

That’s when Seorin narrowed her eyes again and said,

“What you just did... it’s quite similar.”

“There’s a clear difference in the fundamentals.

It only looks similar on the surface. The actual execution will differ greatly.”

Gak Myeong was able to pour everything he had into that unshakable, straightforward fist of the Immovable Wisdom King Fist. But I couldn't do the same. At best, I could use it occasionally as support for my sword.

“Still, the fact that you sparred once and already stole something from it—isn't that already remarkable? You grumbled about not gaining enlightenment, but you definitely walked away with something.”

“‘Stole’ is kind of a loaded word, isn't it?”

“Regardless of your intent, that's how people will see it. Just look over there, for example—at that wide-eyed disciple.”

Following her finger, I saw a young Shaolin monk standing with his mouth agape.

His name... I forgot.

But I remembered his face.

He was the runner-up at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering and had been granted permission to observe today's match, so he was likely considered a rising star within Shaolin.

After a brief silence, I spoke.

“If you’d like, I’ll show it to you again.”

His expression twisted bizarrely, like someone who’d just been cruelly deceived.

How unfair.

It had only been a short while since my goodwill—sharing what I learned at Shaolin without holding back—was twisted and misinterpreted as a cheap deception.

From time to time, bursts of internal energy leaked out from Gak Myeong, and in front of key Shaolin figures, including Abbot Jeong Hyeon and former Abbot Gakjeong, Gak Myeong finally opened his eyes.

He hadn’t reached the Flowering Stage. That wasn’t something one could reach so easily.

He remained a Sub-Perfection master, but his energy had clearly transformed.

He had leapt from a level I could cut through with intention

to one I could only barely cut through at full power.

After that...

There was a bit of commotion.

Some claimed I'd stolen Shaolin martial arts. But I managed to escape the controversy once I explained that what I had shown was only superficially similar, and fundamentally different in execution.

Unfortunately, they asked me to refrain from joining the second-class disciples' sparring matches.

“I miss the Namgung Clan's boldness, letting me learn whatever I wanted.”

“That’s because the Namgung Clan is a little strange. This kind of reaction is normal. Shaolin’s actually being generous.”

“This is why noble families...”

“You do realize you’re part of a noble family now too, don’t you?”

“Speaking of which, shouldn’t we head to the Tang Clan soon?”

“Mn. We’ve stayed quite a while. We’ve built good relationships and sparred plenty. We shouldn’t leave Little Cheon unattended any longer.”

As we chatted about when to return and how we’d get there—

I suddenly sensed a familiar presence in the distance—along with a familiar puppet.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

As Tang Sowol and I tilted our heads in sync at the strange familiarity, a middle-aged man in green robes appeared before us in a flash of lightness skill.

Tang Jincheon opened his mouth.

“It’s been a while, Sowol. And you too, son-in-law. What were you talking about?”

“Ah... We were just saying it might be time to return to the Tang Clan.”

“Hmm. So the conversation we had nearly a month ago still wasn’t settled. In the meantime, the Hwangbo Clan has been annihilated, and for some reason, the Namgung Clan sent us a generous gift of gold and rare poisons. I assumed everyone had returned home by now.”

“Ah, well...”

“You see, Father-in-law...”

“Also, I heard Shaolin made the rare decision to allow a woman inside their temple, and not long after, one of the Vajra Warriors gained enlightenment. A month feels longer than it is, doesn’t it? Yet somehow, it still wasn’t enough for you to plan your return.”

Tang Jincheon’s voice made it clear—he’d had enough.

Neither Tang Sowol nor I could say a word.

He gently patted our shoulders and spoke.

“You’ll leave tomorrow. I brought the family’s carriage,

so you need only sit back and rest.”

“Understood, Father-in-law.”

“Yes, Father...”

Thus, the long journey that began at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering came to a close with Tang Jincheon's arrival.

Rumors of the Ghost Shadow Thief's Hidden Treasure would reach the Tang Clan months later, with a single encrypted letter arriving in their hands.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After returning to the Tang family alongside Tang Jincheon, who came out to greet me, a few uneventful months passed.

It's not like I wanted something to happen, but things were so peaceful that it felt a little disappointing.

If I had to mention anything, perhaps the retainers freaking out because an unexpected Flowering Stage master had joined the household, or the fact that Seorin seemed more harmless than expected, which put people at ease.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang had received flashy titles like "Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix" and "Pure Sound-Frostflower," but their son-in-law ended up with

something as ominous as the “Blood Flame Sword Demon,” which made people tilt their heads in confusion.

Also arriving were various rumors—one about the famous master of the Black Sky Sword Sect, another about the notoriously infamous Bloodflame Fist Demon, and even one saying that I had defeated the old monster from the Hwangbo Clan, who had lost his mind.

These rumors caused people to keep a bit of distance...

But that didn’t last long, likely because of Tang Sowol, who would stick to me like glue at every chance, grinning from ear to ear.

Just like right now.

“Brother Cheon, Brother Cheon! What’s the plan for today?”

“Morning training just ended, so first, I’m going to eat.”

“And after that?”

Tang Sowol stepped closer, hands behind her back.

“I was thinking of heading back to the training hall to swing the sword a bit. I’ve been learning how to control willpower from Senior Seorin... and while it’s small, I feel like there’s been a bit of progress.”

“Wow! That’s amazing! And then?”

She took another step closer.

“After that, I’m going to spar with Seol Lihyang. She’s decided to use the whip purely as support now and is focusing on her sonic arts, so she said she needs as many sparring matches as possible to get the feel for it.”

“True. Her whip techniques weren’t bad, but she really seems to have talent with sound-based martial arts. It’s said to be difficult to master, but if it suits her, she’ll probably improve quickly. And then?”

Each time she said ‘and then?’, Tang Sowol drew closer until she was right in front of my nose.

Because of her posture, with her hands behind her back, her upper body was leaning slightly forward, and although we were just a handspan apart, her poison pouch gently pressed against my chest.

Was this intentional? I flinched, and Tang Sowol giggled as she rose up on tiptoes. In that breath-close distance, she whispered.

“Is there nothing else on your schedule?”

Green light flickered in her eyes. That confident gaze, as if she already knew my answer, made me chuckle and nod.

“Of course... there is.”

“Oh my, what is it?”

“I figured I’d spend time with my fiancée, who looks particularly bored today.”

“Hehe. I shall look forward to it with joy.”

Only then did Tang Sowol finally back away, humming a tune and swinging her long-sleeved arms as if dancing.

She seemed in a great mood—so much so that just watching her lifted my own spirits.

Tang Sowol lingered around me for a while longer, clearly content. For someone like me, who wasn't exactly sociable, it was no doubt thanks to her that I was so warmly welcomed by the Tang family.

Even on the way to breakfast, we chatted about when I'd make time and what we'd do...

But unfortunately, all those discussions and plans were nullified with a single letter.

“Here, take this. It seems to be addressed to you.”

“Huh?”

It was during the family breakfast that Tang Jincheon insisted on, as he believed that if lunch and dinner were busy, at least we should try to eat breakfast together.

Seol Lihyang and Seorin had recently begun attending as well, and in that gathering, Tang Jincheon handed me a letter.

—Cheon Hwi-da

Just my name, written plainly on the outside. Upon opening it, I found a crudely drawn map inside.

“This is... Gansu Province?”

Though the drawing looked like something a child had scribbled, the names of places were written in neat handwriting, contrasting the map’s rough style.

Gansu Province—more specifically, a place called Mount Giryeon.

And that was it for text. The rest of the map guided the way using notable landmarks, ending with a picture of a small tombstone and something resembling the character for “gold.”

I immediately knew what kind of map this was.

A hidden treasure map. A map that records the location of hidden treasures. And there was only one person who would send me something like that.

“The Ghost Shadow Thief...”

“Huh? Why would he... Oh...”

Tang Sowol peeked at the map in my hand, and her expression darkened.

Had it already been over three years? Nearly four?

I had encountered the Ghost Shadow Thief in a place said to house a lucky chance, inherited some of his martial arts, and... heard his real name, not just his nickname.

At the end of his life, the Ghost Shadow Thief gathered everything he had ever stolen into a single vault, hoping that news of it would spread and that every martial artist in the Central Plains would go mad trying to reach his grave.

This treasure map was proof that his final wish had come true—and it was effectively a death notice.

So it was only natural that Tang Sowol's voice faltered.

“Father-in-law.”

“I think I know what you're going to say, but go ahead. What is it?”

“I need to make a quick trip to Gansu Province.”

“You just got back, can't you stick around the house a little longer?”

“He said the chaos to come would be the best funeral possible... but I still think I should pour him a drink at his grave.”

“Didn't you say it was a treasure map?”

Tang Jincheon looked exasperated. Come to think of it, I'd never told him the full story of the Ghost Shadow Thief, so I gave him a quick summary.

“If that’s the case, I guess it’d be hard to stop you. And... honestly, I don’t think you’re in much danger anymore.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

While Tang Jincheon was giving me a once-over to gauge my martial level, Tang Sowol suddenly raised her hand high.

“I’ll go with Brother Cheon, Father.”

“What?”

Tang Jincheon blinked in surprise.

Tang Sowol continued calmly.

“The Ghost Shadow Thief had ties with me as well. So I’d like to send him off properly.”

“Huh...”

We met the Ghost Shadow Thief while pretending to visit Shaanxi, chasing a pre-return opportunity. Naturally, Tang Sowol had been there too, and though she didn't receive direct tutelage like I did, she had grown close to him.

“And we'll collect the contents of the vault while we're at it.”

“???”

Both Tang Jincheon and I widened our eyes at her sudden, outrageous statement.

Tang Sowol straightened her back and added, smiling confidently.

“The Ghost Shadow Thief wanted people to burn with desire over his vault, so his name would be remembered forever.”

“Well, he did say that...”

“Isn’t honoring the deceased’s will the most important ritual of all?”

“Is... is that so?”

Tang Jincheon’s expression was complicated. He knew she had a point, but still wasn’t entirely convinced.

I felt the same, so I understood him instantly.

But then Tang Sowol continued, her tone growing serious.

“He once said he’d stolen everything worth stealing in the Central Plains. Even in his final years, he came and went freely between North Sea Ice Palace and the Southern Savage Beast Palace. He did lose one treasure in an accident and gave another to Brother Cheon...”

“Now that I think about it, the Glacial True Qi that Lady Seol learned was stolen property, huh.”

“Yep. It may not be the most righteous path, but he had the skill to back it up, and he declared that just revealing the vault would shake the whole martial world. I’m sure there’s a lot of valuable stuff in there that could benefit the Tang family.”

“Mm. That does seem likely. He was a senior of my generation, so I never heard vivid tales, but... I do know that even the Tang family had a few precious items stolen.”

“Ah, um, from what I heard, he only took a lesser whip technique and a paralyzing poison recipe...”

“Not quite wrong. But actually, there were more valuable things nearby. Like a poison three times as expensive as gold, and core martial arts like the Five Poisons Technique or Body-Chasing Steps. Instead, he stole an obscure technique that few practiced and a prototype poison with volatility issues.”

“Huh?!”

“He didn’t go after the most important things, but the ones hardest to steal. Just to prove he could. That was his style.”

That’s why, at Wudang, he stole the sheath instead of the sect leader’s sword. At North Sea Ice Palace, he took Glacial True Qi instead of Ice White Divine Art. At the imperial palace, he stole the Empress’s undergarments instead of the jade seal.

So if he stole something from the Tang family, it must've been the hardest-to-reach, most obscure item.

Most likely the Golden Dragon Hundred Victories Whip Technique and that prototype paralyzing poison.

Tang Sowol, finally realizing she'd been duped, pulled a weird face and spoke up.

"A-anyway, regardless of how useful it is, it's bound to be full of valuable stuff, so won't it help the Tang family a lot if we bring it back?"

"Well, better than nothing... Sowol."

"Y-yes?"

"Be honest."

"I just really, really want to go on a treasure hunt that starts with a hidden map, Father."

At last, the truth came out, and Tang Jincheon burst into laughter.

“Then there’s no helping it. Go ahead.”

“Really?!”

“Of course. But don’t ever leave his side. Not even for a moment.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Day or night, on the road or at an inn—I’ll be stuck to him the whole time.”

“Now that I think about it, maybe that’s a bit much.”

“But Father insisted. Right, Brother Cheon?”

“Son-in-law.”

Tang Jincheon gave me a look, while Tang Sowol sparkled her green-black eyes with absolute confidence that I'd take her side.

It wasn't something worth agonizing over, so I shrugged.

“Don't worry, Father-in-law. Rain or shine, day or night, no matter what happens—I'll never let go of Tang Sowol's hand.”

“You rascal!”

And so, with Tang Jincheon's loud roar—the first in a while—our journey to Gansu was decided.

At the same time, torn pieces of the treasure map began circulating throughout the martial world, and rumors of the Ghost Shadow Thief's vault spread far and wide, bringing his legend back into the spotlight.

Just as he had claimed—the entire martial world was starting to tremble.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Did you hear that rumor?”

“Not exactly, but I know it’s probably nonsense as usual.”

“But isn’t it interesting?”

Well, that’s true. “So, what kind of rumor is it this time?”

“Apparently, people from the Nine Great Sects and the Five Supreme Clans are gathering to search for the Ghost Shadow Thief’s hidden vault.”

“Renowned orthodox martial artists? I thought they usually tried to mediate and cool things down in situations like this.”

“Turns out, even the prestigious sects had things stolen from them.”

“Huh. So that’s why...”

As the conversation drifted from a distant table, everyone in the inn began to listen in. We were no different.

According to a fairly eloquent man speaking, the Ghost Shadow Thief was a legendary eccentric who stole the secrets of the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects alike. So naturally, his vault must rival the storerooms of the Murim Alliance or even the imperial palace...

“...Or so they speculate. But it’s probably not on that level.”

“Right. At best, it’s probably just below that—things that would be nice to have, but not critical. Or items with ambiguous symbolic value.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re useless, though.”

When it comes to martial arts, it might not reach the level of divine techniques, but it would still be more than enough to be considered top-tier. That’s why it was stored securely.

Besides, if the prestigious clans and sects were robbed in the past, that vault itself is proof.

Returning what was taken could earn us favors—or put others in our debt.

And the Tang family is one of the few factions in the Central Plains that must never be taken lightly.

In the past, when the Tang family wasn't as strong as it is now, there were those who broke promises or stabbed them in the back.

They all met the same end.

Like any martial family, the Tang family built its reputation through blood. Who would be so foolish as to willingly make an enemy of them, even casting away their own honor?

If we're the first to reach the vault and seize what's inside, we could certainly use it to strike favorable deals.

As I nodded inwardly, Tang Sowol, having been glancing at the excited man from earlier, continued speaking.

“Those who don't know what's actually inside will only feed their delusions, and that's when things get dangerous.”

“Be careful. This time, most of those who should be acting as mediators are participants themselves. You could get caught in something unpredictable.”

“The Ghost Shadow Thief must have anticipated that and sent us the complete map. Well, whatever happens, I believe Brother Cheon will handle it somehow.”

With one hand propping up her chin and the other holding a piece of meat from the table to my mouth, Tang Sowol smiled slyly.

I took the bite, and only then did she beam with satisfaction.

As I shook my head at her antics, her smile slowly faded.

“But... I wonder if this is really okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“Leaving behind Hyang and Sister Hwarin like this.”

Right. This trip to Gansu was to be just the two of us—me and Tang Sowol.

Seol Lihyang needed to focus on her recently begun training in sonic arts, and Seorin's appearance was becoming increasingly recognizable, meaning any movement on her part drew excessive attention.

To quietly reach the vault using the complete map we had, it was best for only the two of us to go.

Besides, this wasn't just about raiding a vault—it was about giving the Ghost Shadow Thief a proper sendoff.

And since we were the only two who truly had a connection to him, it made sense.

Above all...

“Isn't it nice to go out together like this once in a while?”

“Oh my... I didn't think you'd say something like that, Brother Cheon.”

Tang Sowol smiled, her eyes curving into crescent moons.

This time, I picked up a piece of food with my chopsticks and held it out to her.

“I have some awareness, you know. All things considered, I think we needed this kind of time.”

“Awareness...? Really?!”

Pretending to be shocked, Tang Sowol trembled with laughter, unable to hold it back.

“Heheh. Just kidding. It’s a joke, so don’t look like that. Besides, isn’t it true that you usually have no awareness at all?”

“I’m not totally clueless. Just... not great at it.”

“Hmm. From my perspective, outside a few rare cases, you’re basically clueless. Yum.”

Tang Sowol opened her mouth wide and accepted the food I offered—like a baby bird being fed.

After chewing for a bit, she finally spoke.

“Mmm. Truth is, I also kind of wanted time like this. Let’s enjoy it in moderation.”

“Right. In moderation.”

It goes without saying, but the treasure map isn’t the only one.

Aside from the one we have, the rest were scattered in pieces that need to be gathered.

I don’t know how many copies were distributed, but considering the Ghost Shadow Thief’s intention to drive the entire Murim world into a frenzy over his vault, he was surely well-prepared.

Judging by the current scale of the commotion, by the time we reach Gansu and locate the vault, someone else might have completed their map too.

And the vault surely isn’t just sitting there. It’s bound to be protected by traps and mechanisms, which means it’ll take time to breach.

“Let’s hope nothing goes wrong...”

I finished my meal while speaking a line I didn’t even believe myself.

“Hehe. I’ve been waiting for you, Blood Flame Sword Demon and Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix.”

Just as we crossed out of Sichuan and stepped into Gansu Province, a woman with a gentle smile approached us as if she had been waiting.

And that’s when I realized—it had finally begun.

I had become fairly well-known recently. Not as much as Seorin, perhaps, but enough for people to take interest in me.

Whether they were after the vault or had other intentions...

I subtly raised my qi sense as I looked at the woman approaching.

Her smiling face, her faintly narrowed eyes that gave the impression of being perpetually squinting, her emotionless lips curved into a grin—and even the perfectly neutral tone that anyone would find pleasant.

It brought back unpleasant memories, but I knew who she was.

Sama Yuryeon.

A woman who spent her life fighting to become the heir of the Sama Clan but ultimately lost, then joined the Black Lotus Sect, where she climbed to the rank of Chief Administrator.

She was also the one who, under the Black Lotus Sect Leader's orders, persistently hounded Ironblood Hall, and in my experience, she was the most dangerous con artist I knew.

She was the lover of the Black Lotus Sect Leader, and after hearing of his death at the hands of the Heavenly Demon, she committed suicide.

At this point, she's still probably just struggling for footing within her clan. And that's exactly why she's approaching me and Tang Sowol now.

I remember it clearly, having suffered enough in my past life to recognize the signs.

That two-faced lunatic is here to scam us.

Even if she doesn't go around actively swindling people, she's extremely good at manipulating others to achieve her goals.

So I trusted my gut—and acted accordingly. First, by stopping Tang Sowol before she could respond.

—Just ignore her.

—Huh?

—How would she know when or where we departed? Doesn't she already seem like trouble? Do you know her?

—Hm. Not at all. And she doesn't appear to be carrying any symbols of affiliation either...

—Exactly. We didn't even travel all night using lightness techniques. We're not newcomers. She could have tracked us using information, but if she paid to track us through the Beggar's Sect or the Hao Clan... then she's not here with good intentions.

Tang Sowol nodded subtly and naturally clung to my side, linking her arm with mine.

“Brother Cheon, what shall we do for dinner tonight?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Ah, I know a good inn nearby. The dishes are Gansu-style, but they use Sichuan-style seasoning. I think it'll be both familiar and refreshing.”

“Dinner's just dinner. As long as it has meat, I'm fine.”

“You really do like meat, don't you, Brother Cheon?”

“That inn is famous for its duck. You won't regret stopping by.”

“Delicious, isn’t it? Ever since I was young, it was my dream to eat my fill of tasty food. It even helps with external martial arts training. Think about it—Shaolin warrior monks ate meat. The Peng Clan even more so. On the other hand...”

“On the other hand, the Daoist martial artists with their slender builds don’t usually eat meat. Even commoners are stronger if they eat well. But personally, I’d prefer if you didn’t get any bulkier than you are now, Brother Cheon.”

“Meat helps with external cultivation, but at higher stages, the benefits diminish. That’s why Shaolin has their 72 Extreme Skills, and the Peng Clan supplements with elixirs... Um, you two? Are you listening?”

“Don’t worry. I couldn’t bulk up even if I wanted to. My bone structure is just average.”

“That’s true. Even among Shaolin monks, external strength varied regardless of martial level. And the Peng Clan is said to have innate talent for physical strength passed down through bloodlines.”

“Are you... ignoring me right now?”

Sama Yuryeon’s narrowed eyes widened, incredulous. But to us, it only made her seem more suspicious.

I let out a faint killing intent around me and Tang Sowol.

As she tried to follow us, Sama Yuryeon flinched and instinctively clutched her throat.

Just a brief moment—a single blink’s worth of time—but her face had already gone pale from the clear killing intent she’d sensed.

It wasn’t especially strong or sustained... but she was never particularly gifted in martial arts.

Sama Yuryeon had only reached the Peak Stage thanks to the Black Lotus Sect Leader’s full support. To someone like her, that moment of killing intent must’ve felt like a nightmare.

Confident that the warning had been clear, Tang Sowol and I turned our backs to her and headed to our next destination.

“I already know where the Ghost Shadow Thief’s vault is—Ugh!”

“Tang Sowol!”

“Already handled it!”

She had been waiting outside our inn since early morning, chattering away, so we immediately struck her meridian point to shut her up.

Then, as if waiting for the cue, Tang Sowol used sleeping poison to completely knock her out and slung her over her back.

We exchanged a brief glance, then, as if perfectly coordinated, turned around and headed back into the inn.

Good. Smooth execution.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

We naturally brought Sama Yuryeon back to the inn as if kidnapping her was no big deal.

The innkeeper widened his eyes in shock... but once we slipped him a generous amount of money, he shut his eyes with a determined expression.

“Money really is powerful.”

“Ehay. But it's not everything, you know. There are things in this world that money simply can't buy.”

“Which just means everything except for those few things can be solved with money.”

Back in my previous life, even when I was known as the Sword Demon, I never spent money this lavishly.

No—maybe I was a bit of a special case.

To be fair, I earned a considerable amount back then. If I had wanted to, I could have built a lavish house and lived a life without lifting a finger.

Things were tough when Ironblood Hall was still functioning, but after Seorin died and I became a direct subordinate of the Black Lotus Sect Master, I was heavily favored.

The pay I received for completing missions was substantial, and there were plenty of people trying to curry favor with me, hoping I'd connect them with the sect master.

The problem was, I spent most of what I earned on martial arts techniques and elixirs.

In this life, however, I already remember all those martial arts I spent a fortune to acquire, started off with refined internal energy cultivation methods, and have taken top-tier elixirs to resolve long-standing issues in my inner energy flow.

Which means I've saved the money I'd have spent on martial arts and medicine, allowing me to spend freely on other things.

Maybe it was seeing Sama Yuryeon's face, but I couldn't help drifting back to memories from before the regression.

As I stood quietly watching her unconscious body laid out on the bed, Tang Sowol nudged me in the side.

"Brother Cheon. Brother Cheon."

“Mn?”

“What are you going to do from here?”

“Well...”

This was the woman who'd once cut my compensation over violating an outdated regulation no one followed anymore...

Or who cut Ironblood Hall's funding in half by nitpicking a flawless budget.

Or who got so petty when the Black Lotus Sect Master seemed more interested in me than her, she'd deliberately step on my feet every time we crossed paths.

Now that we've rendered her powerless, what should we do?

“She might make a decent arrow-catcher for when we explore the vault and check for traps.”

“...Excuse me?”

Startled by my candid remark, Tang Sowol gasped. She asked in a cautious tone,

“This is the first time I’ve seen you react so harshly. Normally you’d at least say to hear the person out.”

“Normally, yes.”

“Do you know her? The only people you’ve reacted this strongly to were usually members of the Demonic Cult...”

Tang Sowol’s eyes narrowed. A green and purple hue began to rise subtly from her fingertips—as if to say, “I’ve got a good poison ready, just say the word.”

I hesitated, just for a moment, then shook my head.

“I do know her, but she’s not from the Demonic Cult. So you can put away the poison for now.”

“Understood. Then... may I ask who she is, to make you so wary?”

“No reason not to.”

Letting out a short sigh, I gestured toward the one lying on the bed, likely conscious thanks to a pre-prepared antidote, but still paralyzed due to her sealed pressure point.

“Sama Yuryeon. A woman you gain nothing by getting involved with.”

And sure enough, as soon as I released her mahyul (a sealed blood point), Sama Yuryeon sprang up—without even waiting for the poison to be cleared.

Raising both hands in surrender, she looked at us with narrowed, clearly scheming eyes.

“I’m not a suspicious person.”

“You’re suspicious.”

“Definitely suspicious.”

Sama Yuryeon drooped slightly at our sharp, immediate responses, as if hurt.

But we couldn’t afford to be fooled. That too was a calculated move. Every action she took was likely premeditated.

Someone capable of that could get so close to victory in her clan’s successor battle, despite dealing with stigma like being born of a concubine or having a daughter.

Even after losing, she managed to survive and climb her way to the position of Chief Administrator in the Black Lotus Sect.

I examined her closely without letting down my guard.

She was wearing decent clothes, but the way she moved suggested she wasn’t used to them. Her complexion didn’t look great either, though she tried to hide it with some skillful makeup.

But most of all, there was that suspicious smile. It was clearly an attempt to look composed... but I had once seen her true face.

Back when she heard about the Black Lotus Sect Master's death, she smiled out of habit—but couldn't hide the trembling in her body.

Right now, Sama Yuryeon looked like someone standing on the edge of a cliff, trying not to show how close to panic she was.

She was doing her best to keep it together, but perhaps due to her inexperience at this point in time, her nervousness was visible.

If she's already this cornered, it could only mean one thing.

“Something must've gone wrong with the successor battle.”

“I've been wondering since earlier... could it be that Brother Cheon knows me?”

“Don't act familiar. Call me by my title, Sama Yuryeon.”

“What?! But you’re calling me by my name...”

Flustered, Sama Yuryeon’s lips twitched in disbelief.

After regaining her composure with some effort, she corrected herself.

“A-anyway, Blood Flame Sword Demon, you seem to know something about my situation despite claiming not to know me. That’s why I asked.”

“And didn’t you wait here because you had your own suspicions about me?”

“I won’t deny it.”

“I figured as much. Sowol, contact the Tang family. Tell them to send someone here immediately. We’re tying someone up, so they can come collect and lock her up.”

“Huh? Oh... if that’s what you want, then...”

Though slightly confused by how readily I moved to eject Sama Yuryeon, Tang Sowol began pulling out a spare sheet of paper from her pack.

Sama Yuryeon quickly shook her head in a panic.

“W-wait! Don’t be so hasty! Aren’t you curious how I found you, or what my goal is?”

“I’m not curious. So don’t tell me. Just go back as if nothing happened, and don’t drag us into your mess.”

“You really must have some kind of history with me. And not a pleasant one.”

“I said we don’t. This is our first meeting—and I hope it’s our last.”

“Please, just hear me out—”

“Say one more word and I’ll send you to the Sama Clan instead of the Tang family.”

Finally, Sama Yuryeon shut up.

I let out a subtle pressure of intent toward her—not enough to intimidate her seriously, but just to remind her of yesterday’s warning.

She didn’t change expression, only kept up that same troubled smile. But I’d expected that.

“From here on out, I’ll ask the questions.”

“Feels like an interrogation.”

“If you want a real interrogation, I can do that too.”

“I tried to speak and was ignored. Then I said something you couldn’t ignore and got kidnapped and woke up in a strange bed. I think I’m entitled to a few complaints.”

“No. You’re not. So enough whining—get to the point.”

“There are many ways to find our location, so I’ll give you that. But how did you know we had the complete map to the vault?”

“You showed up acting suspicious, then said you weren’t suspicious. What kind of twisted logic is that?”

“Answer the question.”

“Just answer. It’s okay now.”

Sama Yuryeon, who had kept her mouth shut in apparent protest over being dismissed earlier, finally spoke.

“It’s simple. If you look into the rumors about the Ghost Shadow Thief’s vault and the fragmented maps, a natural question arises.”

“Keep it short.”

“The rumors seem artificial, and the maps—though well-crafted—look like the ink hasn’t dried that long. Which means this whole commotion isn’t a coincidence.”

“Huh...”

“So where did this start? Who stands to benefit? If it’s nonsense, who spread it and why? After considering everything... I concluded the one behind it all was the Ghost Shadow Thief himself.”

“Go on.”

“If he really was behind it, he probably wanted to make his name famous. But he wouldn’t have wanted to part with his treasures while still alive. So instead, he created chaos across Murim after death.”

She added that, according to the records she’d found, the Ghost Shadow Thief was known for being extremely flamboyant.

Amazingly, everything she said was true. She had figured it all out on her own from just a few clues.

“Then I figured someone must’ve started spreading the rumors and distributing the map pieces after his death. If not them, maybe someone involved in building the vault was still around.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t hurt them. Doing that would only draw more attention and make others suspicious. So I persuaded them... gently. Eventually, I learned that the two of you had something.”

Yeah, “gently persuade” my ass.

Sama Yuryeon probably didn’t have many resources left right now, so she must’ve tricked someone to extract the info.

She’s likely telling the truth about not hurting anyone—she always left herself a way out, hiding lies inside truth.

Not knowing all this, Tang Sowol whispered uncertainly.

“Is... that really possible? I mean, it is possible, but still...”

“If you’re asking whether it’s possible to figure all that out this fast and track us down to wait here—yes. Sama Yuryeon can do it.”

After the Heavenly Demon's invasion, the Murim-Alliance-style coalition that formed survived not just because they had half their power intact—but because they had competent strategists.

I once saw Sama Yuryeon and the Zhuge Clan Head in a planning room together. I'll never forget it.

That itchy, skin-crawling sensation, like ants crawling over your body without being able to scratch them—it was unforgettable.

“Tch. This is why clever people are the worst.”

“You don't like smart women, Brother Cheon?”

“Not true. I just don't like people who try to deceive me. And as for you, Tang Sowol—I'd gladly be a fool if it means staying beside you. So don't worry.”

“Oh goodness...”

Tang Sowol said that with a bashful tone, but looked immensely pleased as she gently slapped my arm.

Sama Yuryeon, who had been putting on a desperate front, looked a bit rattled—but quickly composed herself and spoke.

“No more hiding, then. Let me be honest. Please include me in this expedition. I may lack martial strength, but I’m confident in dealing with traps and mechanisms. I’ll be a help.”

“Sure. And what do you want in return?”

“Just the martial arts techniques and some gold bars the Sama Clan lost.”

The Sama Clan is an old faction within the unorthodox side, so it’s not strange if the Ghost Shadow Thief stole from them.

She’s probably trying to raise her standing in the clan by retrieving those items.

But—

After thinking it over, I spoke.

“That won’t change anything. You know that too.”

“But I still have to try, don’t I? If I don’t even try...”

If she doesn’t even try, she’ll be swallowed up in an instant.

Just like so many of Sama Yuryeon’s siblings were.

Or like Sama Suryeon—the Demon-Eyed Witch—who defected to the Demonic Cult.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Demon-Eyed Witch, Sama Suryeon.

She had skin like dry tree bark and a body tough enough to endure a certain degree of sword energy.

However, she suffered from a side effect that made her feel intense pain just from a passing breeze or the slight movement of her lips.

She was a member of the Demonic Cult who had instigated the assassination of Tang Sowol, and also someone who had fallen by my hand in Guangdong Province alongside Shadow Ghost Division.

Unlike Shadow Ghost Division, who insisted that all martial artists and martial arts should disappear from the world, Sama Suryeon was a woman who had simply pursued revenge against the Sama Clan, only to stray far off course.

Whereas Shadow Ghost Division was unwavering enough to declare she would end her own life in the end, Sama Suryeon, in her final moment, realized that joining the Demonic Cult and attempting to kill the innocent Tang Sowol would only create another version of herself.

She offered a brief apology and left behind her name as a final testament.

I know nothing of her circumstances. Nor did I want to.

What mattered was that the Demon-Eyed Witch and I clashed, and one of us had to die.

I won, and she lost. That was all there was to it.

However, if you add Sama Yuryeon into the mix, the story changes.

Before my regression, Sama Suryeon and I did not have a good relationship, and that likely wouldn't change in the future.

But that doesn't mean I was indifferent toward Sama Yuryeon. In fact, I had even done some digging, intending to one day punch that annoying face of hers.

I know nothing about Sama Suryeon. Even when we were in open conflict with the Demonic Cult before the regression, I had never crossed swords with her or even heard rumors.

But I know a bit about Sama Yuryeon.

When the half-sister she most cherished was driven out during a power struggle and became a sacrificial pawn of the family, When she, despite being of Sama blood, was confined not to a spacious warm room but to a cold underground prison, treated worse than livestock—Sama Yuryeon's heart turned cold, and within it, a snake coiled. That much, I know.

So even knowing that Sama Yuryeon's offer of cooperation is quite rational, I still had to ask.

“Sama Yuryeon.”

“Yes. A wise choice. Though we cannot be sure what sleeps within the secret vault, I believe what I asked for is not unreasonable...”

“I’m the one who killed the Demon-Eyed Witch, Sama Suryeon.”

“I’m the one who finally cut through bark tougher than iron, the one who snuffed out the burning firewood she had become.”

“I know.”

“Even so, you're saying you'll join hands with me?”

“Yes.”

Sama Yuryeon opened her eyes slightly wider and looked straight at me.

“No matter how misguided her path, my sister fought as a warrior, and died by the hand of you, Blood Flame Sword Demon, also a warrior. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right.”

“Then it’s fine.”

With those firm words, Sama Yuryeon’s eyes returned to their usual squint.

“I bear no grudge against you or against the Young Master of the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix. Nor do I have any reason to.”

“Is that so.”

I nodded slowly and turned my gaze to Tang Sowol, who had been silently observing the exchange.

“So she says. I think it’s a good offer... What about you, Tang Sowol?”

“Hmm.”

Tang Sowol tapped her chin with her index finger and tilted her head.

“First, there’s something I want to clarify.”

“What is it?”

“It’s no surprise anymore that you’re so well-versed in people and matters related to the Demonic Cult and the Unorthodox Factions. You probably have good reason not to trust them. But...”

She trailed off, then pointed her tapping finger directly at Sama Yuryeon.

“I’m not sure if she’s really competent enough to warrant cooperation, even if you’re uneasy. Her martial ability seems to be at most first-class—and just barely at that.”

“You’re right about her martial skills, Tang Sowol.”

But what I want from Sama Yuryeon isn't force. It's intelligence—specifically, knowledge to identify and break through the mechanical devices and formations likely filling the secret vault.

“Do you know anything about such things? I, for one, have no clue.”

“I can't say for sure either, but... Would the Ghost Shadow Thief's vault really be filled with traps like that?”

“It will be. That's what makes it worthy of being called his vault.”

“Ah.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief didn't just want a secret warehouse to hide his stolen goods.

He wanted a grand stage to flaunt his achievements to the world.

That's why he publicly scattered his treasure map and spread rumors. Naturally, the inside of the vault was designed with flair.

An entrance inaccessible even when you know the location. And inside, constant, qualification-testing traps that never stop.

“I’m quite sure of it. And if we fail to break through in time and other martial artists catch wind of it...”

“They’ll waltz in through the path we struggled to open and get in our way.”

“That’s why I agreed to cooperate with Sama Yuryeon.”

“I understand up to that point. But there’s still something unclear.”

“Something else? Ah...”

Now I understood what Tang Sowol was getting at.

I had seen Sama Yuryeon's capabilities before regression, but to Tang Sowol, this was her first time meeting this odd woman.

I nodded in understanding and answered her question.

“Don’t worry. She probably knows more than we, who only know martial arts. And if she turns out to be less useful than expected, it doesn’t matter.”

“Why is that?”

“Like I said from the start—we can always use her as a decoy.”

“You were serious about that?”

“I’m always serious.”

Tang Sowol sighed deeply after a moment’s thought.

“Whew. Fine. I agree to cooperate for now.”

“Ah...!”

Perhaps relieved that things were going according to her plan, Sama Yuryeon's anxious face brightened instantly.

“Thank you! You won’t regret it!”

“But! Brother Cheon does have a fiancée, so you’ll need to be more mindful of your behavior.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I prefer men with ambition.”

Tang Sowol glanced my way. She scanned me up and down, then nodded as if reassured.

“It’s a short time, but let’s work well together.”

“Yes. I’ll do my part and make sure I earn my due reward.”

The mood had softened significantly. Still, I felt compelled to step in due to a strange sense of discomfort.

“Wait. I don’t care about impressing Sama Yuryeon, but the way you say it makes me sound like a man with no ambition.”

Now I understood why Sama Yuryeon had once been smitten with the Black Lotus Sect Leader.

He was the most covetous man I’d ever known—in other words, the most ambitious.

Even so, I couldn’t understand why I appeared as someone completely without desire.

As I questioned them, Tang Sowol opened her mouth carefully.

“By any chance, are you planning to use our marriage as a stepping stone to take over the Tang Clan?”

“Why would I go through such trouble? You’ll do anything I ask if I just ask nicely.”

“Then, are you perhaps trying to build secret influence in the unorthodox world using the approval you got from the Black Lotus Sect Master? A righteous hero by day, a shadowy puppet master by night. Isn’t that cool?”

“If I have work to do both day and night, when would I ever get time to swing my sword? A sword dulled by power is no sword at all.”

“Then, what does your ideal future look like?”

“Well... isn't it a world where everyone lives peacefully without worry, eating well and living happily?”

Surviving the calamity known as the Heavenly Demon.

And building a proper family—something I've never had.

Isn't that an incredibly terrifying ambition? Just saying it makes my throat tighten, filling me with a strange mix of motivation and hesitation.

Sure, I also want to reach greater heights in martial arts—but that's a desire every martial artist has, so it's hardly worth mentioning.

As long as that desire doesn't stray into obsession, it's fine.

But after hearing me out, Tang Sowol and Sama Yuryeon began nodding as if they expected this all along.

“Truly a family man. He’d make an ideal son-in-law for a noble house.”

“Yes, I have no complaints. He values me more than what I possess—how could I not like that?”

“I don’t really understand it, but... I hope this proves that I’m harmless.”

“Don’t worry. You've made your case—we won’t be changing our minds.”

The two of them drummed their own beat, nodding in agreement.

Still hard to understand, and a little frustrating in many ways.

But in any case, Sama Yuryeon's inclusion was now official.

We moved fast to locate the vault, investigating and claiming what we could, and returning or selling off what we couldn't handle.

Even after Sama Yuryeon joined, that basic plan didn't change.

We just picked up the pace.

“I may not be as fast, but the sharp ones are already looking into the source of the treasure map, not the map itself.”

“You mean they'll be tracking my movements instead of the map.”

“Exactly. Some might even wait until Blood Flame Sword Demon brings things out of the vault, and ambush you then.”

“Any Flowering Stage martial artists likely to get involved?”

“Eh? Ah, no. No master of that level would get involved directly. That would only justify the involvement of other Peak Stage fighters. And the items stolen by the Ghost Shadow Thief aren’t worth that level of commitment.”

Indeed. Useful, but not irreplaceable. Valued, but not enough to die for.

What the Ghost Shadow Thief stole were just such items, and only the desperate would risk everything for them.

At least no one from the Flowering Stage would.

“Then it doesn’t matter. I’ll just cut down anyone who draws their sword first.”

“...So you’re confident you can win against anyone short of Flowering Stage? Arrogant, but if the rumors of the Blood Flame Sword Demon are true, justified. Still, you’re not fighting alone.”

“I can protect at least one person.”

“There are three of us, though.”

“Then I suggest you write your wills ahead of time. You never know what’ll happen.”

Sama Yuryeon was momentarily speechless, but quickly composed herself.

“H-ha... At any rate, I think our current pace is too slow. I waited two days just to meet you both.”

“You’re right.”

I hadn’t expected people to track my movements instead of the map. I’d gotten complacent, half on vacation with Tang Sowol.

“Then let’s pick up the pace.”

“Speed alone won’t do. The key is to throw off pursuit...”

“Of course, we’ll erase our traces too.”

“But if we’re stopping in villages anyway, why not add disguises? Tang Clan attire stands out too much.”

“Hm. Disguises, huh.”

I glanced at Tang Sowol. Noticing my gaze, she smiled lightly.

“I don’t mind. Since we’re changing anyway, it might be fun to wear something completely unexpected. Like... something bright.”

“Anything would look good on you, Tang Sowol.”

“Oh my. That’s a lovely compliment, but I was talking about what you should wear, not me. If you’re feeling brave... maybe even a dress?”

“I’d rather run nonstop for three days and nights to the destination.”

“Oh dear.”

Tang Sowol clicked her tongue in disappointment. Why...?

In the end, we decided to both disguise ourselves and hurry our steps.

Arriving several days earlier than planned at the spot marked on the map—

At the junction where the desert leading to Tibet and the mountain range leading to Sichuan met, We spotted a rock shaped like a horse's head.

It was a place protected by powerful formations, making it impossible to approach carelessly.

“It's time to work.”

“I've never slacked off once, you know...”

Sama Yuryeon muttered as she stepped ahead into the thick fog.

She glanced back at us and said,

“Just step where I step.”

The entrance to the secret vault was right before our eyes.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A rock shaped like a horse’s head.

As we tried to approach it, mist that hadn’t been visible from afar suddenly engulfed the surroundings.

A thick fog so dense, we couldn’t even tell which direction we had come from.

Now that a task had finally come up that was more than just a minor errand, Sama Yuryeon stepped forward ahead of me and Tang Sowol and spoke.

“They’ve forcibly merged a modified Confusion Mist Formation with the Concealed Cloud Mist Formation into one space. As expected, the Ghost Shadow Thief wasn’t really trying to hide the vault with sincerity.”

“You understand something?”

“Yes. While it thoroughly disrupts the five senses, it was crudely slapped together. Even if one gets lost, wandering for a few hours will naturally lead them out.”

So it was a formation that increased the difficulty of finding the path, but allowed for repeated attempts.

I could understand the Ghost Shadow Thief’s intentions.

He probably wanted to watch countless martial artists panic helplessly before the entrance.

It was truly distasteful... and yet, the fact that he didn’t cross the line made it undeniably like him.

“Can you find the path?”

“As I said, it’ll take a little time since it’s a complicated mess of two formations forcefully combined... but...”

“But even if we get lost, we can return, so we can afford to be a bit bold inside?”

Tang Sowol supplemented the thought, and Sama Yuryeon nodded in response.

“Just once. I think it’ll only take one trial run.”

“That’s no problem at all.”

Though she was the oldest among us now, Sama Yuryeon was still at an age referred to as a late-stage youth.

I knew she couldn’t show the level of ability she had before my regression. Even so, she was still more useful than having no one at all—that’s why I brought her.

If she could break through an unfamiliar formation after getting lost just once, that was more than enough.

Nodding, I spoke.

“It’s time to work.”

“I’ve never once slacked off, though...”

Sama Yuryeon muttered under her breath and glanced back at me and Tang Sowol.

“Just follow the exact steps I take.”

“Didn’t you just say we’re bound to get lost anyway?”

“I’d rather not waste several hours. I plan to identify the Life Gate and exit from there... but if I’m unlucky, I might end up separated.”

“That would be a problem.”

I held onto Tang Sowol’s hand tightly and followed behind Sama Yuryeon, who shook her head with a slightly dismayed expression.

Then, she stepped into the mist.

Following her lead, Tang Sowol and I also entered the fog.

Finding a path within the dense mist was more exhausting than expected.

Not physically—but mentally.

The helplessness of not being able to grasp anything brought more pressure than anticipated.

Of course, once it became overwhelming, we followed Sama Yuryeon out once and escaped the formation.

On our second entry, we took the correct path and successfully broke through the formation.

The sky above had cleared as if there had never been any mist.

Even looking back, all we could see was the horse-head rock. Not a trace of mist remained.

“I’ve experienced formations before, but it never ceases to amaze me.”

“Oh? It was my first time, but not for you, was it, Brother Cheon?”

“That sounds a little weird when you say it like that.”

“Weird? I’m not sure what you mean.”

Tang Sowol feigned innocence with a sly smile in front of my firmly closed mouth.

She gently pressed my nose and spoke in a teasing tone.

“Would you care to explain?”

“No matter what I say, you’re going to tease me about it, aren’t you?”

“Hehe, was it that obvious? I didn’t think I’d be found out so easily.”

Still pressing my nose, she giggled. Only after laughing for a while did she withdraw her hand and continue.

“Well, to be precise, I’ve seen formations many times too. After all, even formations created by martial artists follow the same principles, don’t they?”

“Formations are, in the end, about distorting the flow of qi to produce desired results. Whether by using tools and natural energy, or by coordinating martial artists and their internal energy.”

When well-trained martial artists move in specific patterns, exchanging qi to unleash greater power—that’s also a type of formation.

In fact, that probably accounts for the majority of formations.

Manipulating the natural flow of qi, like the one we just passed through, is something only possible in limited environments by those with exceptional skill.

Of course, the potential applications are so different that it's hard to say which is better.

What's always important is using the right thing in the right place. Even if they're both formations, their purposes differ—so it's fair to treat them as distinct.

“By the way, I'm curious—when you say you've experienced formations before, are you referring to ones created with these kinds of devices?”

“Yes. It was an extremely low-level formation, so I just smashed my way through it.”

“Excuse me...??”

The Demonic Cult favors evil techniques but rarely uses formations.

They're not especially helpful in direct combat, and even trying to use them requires innate talent and years of study.

But the Unorthodox Factions are a bit different.

While true masters of formations are rare, it's not unusual to find someone who picked it up half-heartedly and uses it clumsily.

The Orthodox Factions, knowing that half-baked formations are meaningless, rarely use them—except for the Zhuge Clan.

But in the Unorthodox world, they'll try anything that might give them even a slight advantage.

“That was quite a while ago. It was when I destroyed the Red Demonic Sect, the enemies of my parents, and roamed around dismantling similar dark sects.”

“W-wait a moment. About four years ago... Was that perhaps you, Blood Flame Sword Demon?”

Sama Yuryeon, who had been catching her breath in the back, widened her eyes in shock.

“Hmm? You've heard of it?”

“Yes. It was fairly well-known. If you had continued hunting the dark factions for another half-year, you probably would've had a bounty on your head and a fancy nickname too.”

“That’s why I quit while I was ahead. I’d already extorted enough money anyway.”

Thanks to that, I got the Poison-Flame Wine and used it well to kidnap Tang Sowol. A net gain, clearly.

“Anyway, four years ago... And the Blood Flame Sword Demon is eighteen now... That means you were fourteen or fifteen... huh?”

Sama Yuryeon mumbled to herself, tilting her head with a stiff expression.

Smirking at her, I continued.

“Anyway, some of the dark sects I crushed back then used crude formations. One was called the Ghost Bone Gate or something.”

If I count up to my regression, there were a few more unorthodox groups using formations.

Regardless of size, the quality of their formations was mostly the same.

“They’d distort your senses, make eerie cries ring in your ears. But that was all. I just smashed the surroundings until it canceled itself.”

“Ah. That would be the Ghost Spirit Soul Formation. If set up improperly, it often fails to activate, but... one of its characteristics is that it will activate, even if weakly. That’s why it’s so popular with con artists.”

Perhaps because it was something she knew, Sama Yuryeon spoke up with a twitch.

“Con artists, huh. Well, to someone properly trained, I suppose it would look that way. Speaking of which—how does the Sama Clan teach formations?”

“Teach, you say... I’m not sure it counts as teaching, but there is a method. After memorizing the basics, you’re thrown right into the middle of a formation.”

“What??”

“It’s usually harmless, just causes a few hallucinations and auditory delusions... But for children, that alone can cause seizures.”

They repeat the process over and over.

Eventually, the child, forced into an extreme situation, figures out how to escape the formation.

It's a basic enough formation that even a child can find the Life Gate if they know how.

“How quickly they escape determines whether they're considered talented in formations. Sometimes, kids don't get out for over a year—then we switch them to something else.”

“That's harsh.”

Tang Sowol frowned slightly.

In response, Sama Yuryeon just shrugged with her usual inscrutable smile.

“Well, it's what it takes to keep a clan going in the Unorthodox world. Anyway! Since we made it through the formation, let's look for the vault entrance. We've walked quite a bit—something should show up... oh? Doesn't that cave look suspicious?”

An obvious change of subject.

But the cave really did exist, not far away—and it looked suspicious enough that all our gazes turned toward it.

At first glance, it looked like a regular cave, but its location was strange.

There was no way a natural cave would form there.

As we got closer, it became clear how artificial it was.

Cleared ground to create a path.

Uprooted trees that seemed placed to avoid blocking the entrance.

Rocks chiseled not by wind and rain, but by tools.

And despite all that, the giant letters engraved above the entrance were the most blatant of all.

“‘Ghost Shadow Vault.’ He wasn’t even trying to hide it.”

“Well, we did make it all the way out to some remote mountain in Gansu Province and pass through a formation to get here. He probably figured there was no need to hide it further.”

As Tang Sowol said, this was probably Ghost Shadow Thief’s idea of showing off.

He’d exercised enough restraint—now it was time to boast.

I peered into the entrance, but it was too deep—only darkness awaited beyond a certain point.

“Nothing strange about it at first glance. Shall we go in? Do you need to rest?”

I asked Sama Yuryeon, who had to be tired after dealing with the formation. She slowly shook her head.

“No. I rested enough along the way. I’ll go in first and check for mechanical traps or formation devices, but...”

“If anything unexpected happens, we’ll step in too. I can at least block arrows and poison.”

“Thank you. Then, please follow me.”

Sama Yuryeon passed me and Tang Sowol, walking toward the cave—not to enter it, but to stand near the wall beside it.

“The entrance is here.”

“That’s fake. This is the real entrance.”

She examined the wall and began fiddling with something. Then—

Kugugung—

With the grinding of stone, the wall slid open, revealing a passage leading inward.

So much for saying he wasn't trying to hide it, when we saw the giant engraved sign—Tang Sowol and I both fell silent.

Had it been just the two of us, we'd have spent a lot more time flailing here.

As expected, having a professional is best.

Whether she noticed our embarrassment or deliberately ignored it—most likely the latter—Sama Yuryeon stood before the passage, lit by embedded luminous pearls, and urged us onward.

“I can't go in alone. It's scary.”

“We're coming.”

“Wait, why... why is there a spring painting Grandpa drew in here...?”

“Isn't that better than having our clan's secret techniques stolen?”

I shrugged toward Sama Yuryeon, whose expression had gone strangely blank.

Didn't seem to comfort her much, though.