

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 181-190

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Sleep is important.

No matter how much a martial artist can use internal energy to invigorate the body, and though it's true that one can stay awake for several nights without major issues because of it...

That's only to say they can endure a bit better, not that sleep is unnecessary.

In truth, there's a subtle difference between how the body feels after proper rest and after forcing through sleepless days.

Still, no matter how important sleep may be, one must get up when the time comes.

Be it for early morning appointments, training, or... simply because you're hungry.

Growl.

“Ugh.”

My eyes flew open at the unbearable hunger I hadn't felt in a long time. It was a familiar room.

The scenery I saw when I first came to the Tang Family. It was clearly a side room behind the Medical Hall.

As I was still half-asleep and trying to assess the situation, a loud voice beside me—so loud I couldn't tell if it was a scream or a shout of joy—rang out.

“L-Lord Tang! Medical Hall Master!!”

Well, looks like I somehow survived.

Slurp.

I practically drank down the porridge, made with finely ground meat and vegetables. The flavor was surprisingly decent.

“Oh my. You’re spilling it all over yourself even though you’re in a hurry. You must have been really starving, Cheon Hwi-da.”

I was starting to feel a bit better now. Didn't I just eat three bowls?

“It’s alright. Even if you were a bit sloppy, I can just clean it up for you.”

Tang Sowol smiled brightly as she wiped my chin and collar.

The proximity, much closer than usual, felt strangely overwhelming, but in any case, she looked fine, which was a relief.

Though I said it was overwhelming, I actually liked it.

I set down my third empty bowl and looked around.

Not long after I'd regained consciousness, the Medical Hall Master had come in to check on me, and shortly after, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, Seo Mun-Hwarin, and even Tang Jincheon had burst through the door with such force it seemed like they might break it.

Feeling like I'd starve to death, I asked them for food right away, and now here we were.

"Whew. I feel alive again. Now, how about you finally tell me what happened after I lost consciousness?"

"Ah, the thing is..."

Tang Sowol started, clearing her throat. She quickly tidied up the small table, then half-stole my blanket and sat right next to me, shoulder to shoulder.

"I did extract the poison from your body and quickly gathered what I could to stabilize your internal injuries, but honestly, I don't know much about what happened after that. I just know that Father and Sister Hwarin came and took us away."

Tang Sowol hadn't left my side even for a moment. I glanced at Tang Jincheon for his reaction, but surprisingly, he simply nodded in silence.

“To be honest, we didn’t do much either. We got word from a young lady of the Sama Clan you sent and rushed immediately to the Thousand Poison Gate... but by then, it was already over.”

“That’s exactly right. If anything, what I and the Head of the Tang Family did was just bring you both back to the Tang Clan. Frankly, I’d rather ask what happened on your side.”

“Didn’t you already hear it from Tang Sowol?”

“Of course I did. But only you truly know what happened to yourself, do you not? Do you realize? You were unconscious for ten full days.”

In Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes—no, in the eyes of everyone present—there was deep concern.

It made me feel a bit ticklish, but also grateful, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Ten days, just in the Tang Clan. It must’ve been even longer counting travel time. No wonder I was so hungry. Tang Sowol, when did you wake up?”

“Not too long ago either. Let me think.”

She folded her fingers, counting, then nodded.

“I woke up on the third day after we arrived at the Tang Clan. I visited you every day for the next seven days, so I’m certain.”

“Isn’t that a strange way to count days...?”

As I gave her a baffled look, Tang Sowol just shrugged silently.

I shook my head and turned to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“Anyway, let me explain what happened to me. It started when I had just left the hideout of the Ghost Shadow Thief...”

I calmly explained everything that had happened.

How I collapsed after fighting the Poison Demon, how Tang Sowol was captured to save me, how I ingested random elixirs to heal my wounds and rushed to the

Thousand Poison Gate, how I deliberately triggered Qi deviation to block the poisoning, and how I finally gained enlightenment and unleashed sword force on the verge of death.

After hearing it all, Tang Jincheon bowed his head.

“Son-in-law. Once again, we owe you greatly. Thank you for saving Sowol... and I’m truly glad you’re safe.”

“Please raise your head, Father-in-law. Receiving such gratitude for what I see as natural makes me uncomfortable.”

“Natural, you say. Who considers fighting while on the verge of Qi deviation as something natural?”

“Isn’t it natural to risk your life for family? Didn’t you also rush over without backup when you heard Sowol and I were in danger?”

“Family... yes, you’ve been part of the Tang Clan for quite some time now.”

They say it was only the two of them who carried Sowol and me back after we collapsed fighting the Poison Demon.

It's not like the Tang Clan lacks manpower. So why only the two of them?

Because they were the only ones at the Flowering Stage who could move nonstop and get there the fastest.

“Ah, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. On that note, I'd like to thank you. I didn't expect you to come running even though you're not family.”

“What?! How can you say something so hurtful out of nowhere?! And besides, you're already...!”

“Just kidding.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin puffed out her cheeks and lightly kicked the edge of the blanket I was half-covered with.

She couldn't bring herself to hit someone injured, but clearly wanted to show she was upset.

Tang Sowol and I looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same time.

Tang Jincheon, who had kept a stiff expression filled with guilt and gratitude, was lost in the emotion of the word ‘family,’ and Seo Mun-Hwarin, despite her outward sulking, was smiling faintly too.

There had been all kinds of hardships, but for now, we were simply happy that everyone was safe.

But that moment didn’t last long. As Seol Lihyang looked me over to check if I was okay, she suddenly seemed to realize something and jumped up.

“W-Wait a second! Did you say sword force? Then, Cheon Hwi, that means...?”

“I’ve probably reached the Flowering Stage.”

“Good heavens. This isn’t just surprising—it’s downright unbelievable.”

“Same for me. That’s why I plan to verify it once I recover a bit.”

My chuckle at Seol Lihyang’s flustered reaction didn’t last long. Seo Mun-Hwarin, understanding her reaction, patted her on the back.

“I’d have reacted the same if I only heard the story. But I saw it myself, so I couldn’t help but believe.”

“Saw what?”

“A sword strike that cleanly sliced through an entire floor of a pavilion.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I didn’t see the sword force myself, but anyone looking at the top of the building would know it was sliced clean through. And who else could’ve done it?”

Seol Lihyang was left speechless and wide-eyed at the mention of an entire floor being cut through.

As I’d just told her, I also couldn’t believe it myself. I had finally reached the Flowering Stage I’d so longed for... yet I felt no sense of it.

Probably because my body was still too weak.

Just as I reflexively clenched my hand, recalling the sensation of that moment—

“Hey!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly crouched and locked down my hand.

Tang Jincheon didn't go that far, but he shook his head with a stern look.

“Don't do that.”

“...Excuse me?”

“We've confirmed, I, the Seomun Clan Head, and the Medical Hall Master, that your life is no longer in danger. However, the concern is... your condition is a bit unique.”

“Unique? What do you mean?”

“Sowol said that right after you defeated the Poison Demon, your body was in such a state that it wouldn’t have been strange for you to die at any moment.”

“That’s true. All my meridians were damaged, and parts of my body were necrotizing from poison. But didn’t the rebirth fix all that?”

I hadn’t aimed for it, but I had indeed undergone Rebirth. That must’ve been why I was still alive.

Or so I thought.

As I blinked in confusion, Seo Mun-Hwarin finally let go of my hand and continued.

“You certainly survived thanks to Rebirth. That’s true. However... the fact is, you shouldn’t have been able to undergo Rebirth in the first place.”

“...What?”

“Rebirth requires the integration of willpower into one’s martial arts and body to reconstruct the physique. The most crucial element in that process is willpower... but what fuses it with the body is internal energy.”

“And my meridians were so destroyed I couldn’t channel any internal energy.”

“Exactly. Rebirth requires a reserve of strength. If Sowol hadn’t helped you, you would’ve died before you could complete it.”

“You mean Tang Sowol?”

I turned my head toward her, finding her absentmindedly twirling my hair.

Noticing my gaze, Tang Sowol smiled shyly and spoke.

“It’s true. I didn’t really know what I was doing—I just wanted to help you somehow, so I combined every kind of poison I could gather to make a new one. It was a poison that temporarily protected your meridians and boosted recovery...”

I asked with a strange feeling of déjà vu.

“Wait, does this poison require constant re-administration after the first dose?”

“...How did you know?”

“Just had a feeling.”

As I gave her a faint smile, she tilted her head in confusion.

Tang Jincheon coughed and continued the conversation for her.

“Kuheum. So during that brief window when your body was relatively intact, you underwent Rebirth and healed all your injuries. That in itself is fortunate.”

“But it wasn’t a normal Rebirth.”

“Exactly. Since Sowol’s poison was maintaining your meridians, and your body was reconstructed in that state, it means your current body is now fused with the poison.”

“Rebirth is meant to recreate a martial artist as a pure existence. But you rebuilt your body using someone else’s energy.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked at me with eyes filled with concern.

“This is extremely rare, even in the long history of Murim. Just to be safe, do not pick up a sword until you’re completely healed. Don’t even think about it.”

“And that goes for you too, Sowol.”

“Huh? Me too, Father???”

“The Poison Demon’s poison... as much as I hate to admit it, it’s potent enough to corrupt even someone at the Flowering Stage. And you absorbed it without hesitation, didn’t you? Along with all the other poisons from the Thousand Poison Gate.”

“Ah...”

Tang Sowol gave a troubled smile, knowing full well she had acted recklessly.

“You must also refrain from using poison arts until you’re completely recovered. Understood? Absolutely.”

“...Yes.”

She nodded a little sullenly at her father’s repeated warning.

Though, of course, that mood didn’t last long.

Tilting her head slightly, Tang Sowol whispered mischievously in my ear.

“Then until we’re all healed... we’ll be lying around doing nothing, right? Should we push our beds together so we’re not bored?”

...Honestly, I was tempted.

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There is inertia in action.

What you do consistently becomes a habit, then part of your daily life... and ultimately, it becomes a direction unto itself.

That's how inertia is formed.

Even if you try to stop, it's not easy, and you end up doing things the way you always have without even realizing it.

That's why martial artists of the Unorthodox Faction often can't bring themselves to switch over to the Orthodox Faction, even when they grow tired of the Unorthodox Faction life.

They've lived that way all their lives and know no other path. In the end, they just keep following the push of their past selves.

"In that sense, I suppose I too had been buried under the killing intent and grudges I'd built up over time."

"Hm? Ah, General's move."

“...Are you even listening to me?”

Tang Sowol had been the one curious about what I'd felt upon reaching the Flowering Stage, yet here she was, eyes fixed on the Janggi board.

As per our agreement, since we were still recovering, we decided to join our bedding together... and surprisingly, that's all we did—literally just shared the bedding.

Well, this was the Tang Clan's inner compound, and there were two other people who treated my room like their own backyard, so I wasn't exactly expecting anything bold.

Still, I can't say I wasn't a little disappointed that we spent all our time chatting or playing board games like Janggi.

In any case, it was... something.

I voiced a bit of that disappointment toward Tang Sowol, who wasn't even properly listening despite being the one who had asked the question first.

“Come on now. I meant that there must be something more. Something simpler and easier to understand. I'm pretty sure you even said it out loud.”

“How did you... wait, were you awake then?”

“Yep. I couldn’t even move my eyelids at the time, but I regained consciousness just before your breakthrough. Probably because the great formation was half-broken.”

According to what she explained, the entire Thousand Poison Gate had functioned like a giant mechanism for extracting poison from her body.

Buildings, martial artists—all part of a refined and intricate formation.

But since I crushed every martial artist I saw and even demolished the buildings, her consciousness must have returned by the time I reached the Poison King.

“So! Now you know exactly what I want to hear, don’t you?”

“So that was your goal from the start, not some fragment of enlightenment.”

“Of course it was. Just like you have your own path, I have mine. What good would it do me to pry into yours? Though our paths may differ slightly, we’re still headed in the same direction, so don’t take it the wrong way.”

“I wasn’t offended.”

“Hmm... You definitely looked offended though... ahem. Anyway, we keep getting sidetracked. Don’t think I’m going to let you off easy. Come on now, tell me!”

“Hoo...”

As I sighed softly, Tang Sowol lowered her voice playfully.

“If you tell me now, I might let you win this round.”

I looked down at the janggi board.

I’d been distracted while talking, and my pieces were a complete mess. Not because I’m bad at janggi, obviously.

After some hesitation, I finally spoke.

“It’s just that...”

“Just that??”

Her dark green eyes sparkled with mischief and anticipation. Seeing that gaze made me want to stubbornly refuse to say what she wanted to hear.

Of course, if I actually did that, she'd start flailing under the blanket or steal my pillow, demanding I give in more aggressively, so I held back.

“I just... wanted to protect. That's all. Satisfied?”

“Hehe. Good. As promised, I'll retreat this move.”

Tang Sowol reset her move on the janggi board and this time focused solely on the game.

“You're going to regret that.”

“I hear that almost every day, you know.”

About ten moves later, I lost again.

This had already become one of our routines over the past five days.

Getting a little sick of Janggi (and definitely not because I'd never won), I started flipping through martial arts manuals I brought from the Ghost Shadow Thief's secret archive.

They said not to use martial arts, but surely reading martial arts manuals is fine.

For the record, this wasn't the original copy. I'd agreed to return that to the rightful owner with a modest compensation. What I was reading now was just a copy.

In principle, when you obtain martial arts from another clan or sect, you're supposed to return them without copying... but who actually follows that to the letter?

Most people make copies or memorize everything. The other side likely knows this too, but as long as they get their manuals back and they don't spread elsewhere, they're usually content.

To be fair, most other sects probably also have a few martial arts from other factions stashed away.

The important part is not to flaunt it, but to hide it deep underground where no one can find it.

That's also why some truly secret techniques can't be learned from a manual alone.

They'll intentionally make the language cryptic or structure it so you have to master several sub-techniques to understand the whole.

Some sects even teach half by oral transmission and half through the manual.

Anyway, the martial arts manuals from the Ghost Shadow Thief's archive weren't that high-level. They weren't too strict.

Thanks to that, just reading through them gave me a rough idea of what they were about.

The techniques themselves were inefficient for direct use, but certain principles and directions were worth referencing.

Lying on my stomach on the blanket, flipping through page by page, I suddenly felt a soft pressure and a warm weight on my lower back.

I had a rough idea who it was, but I tilted my head back to check.

Sure enough, Tang Sowol was lightly perched on top of me.

With one leg elegantly crossed, she was sipping regular tea—not her usual poison tea.

“Would you like a cup too, Cheon Hwi-da?”

“I’m good.”

I shook my head at her clear intention not to get up, then went back to reading.

The martial art focused on deflecting the enemy's attacks and using their force for a counterstrike.

It emphasized the mysteries of softness and explosiveness... but perhaps because it came from the Ghost Shadow Thief's archive, it was a bit niche.

The prerequisites were too demanding. You had to be proficient in both softness and explosiveness, and also have achieved a high level in external techniques to endure the impact and focus it into a single point.

To top it off, it was a spear art.

Spear techniques weren't non-existent, but they were certainly rare.

And the reason was simple: for a long time, spears and bows weren't permitted weapons for martial artists.

The current imperial court is friendly toward Murim, and Murim is loyal in return... but in the past, there was considerable conflict.

Forget inviolability—back then, martial arts were banned for all sorts of reasons, unless they were morally questionable arts, which weren't prohibited.

Weapons like bows and spears were often banned.

The imperial court of the time likely understood the importance of monopolizing martial power.

To ensure practical weapons were reserved for the military, they banned them or even confiscated them.

Not that martial artists would simply give up the techniques they had mastered.

Some families were wiped out for resisting, but most adapted their techniques to the sword, since there were too many sword users for it to be banned.

One example is the Four Sun Sword Technique.

Originally created to match the legendary story of shooting down nine suns with a bow, it had no reason to be used with a sword.

But it was adapted. Only the mnemonic verses remain, now suited for swordplay.

In that sense, this spear art had a certain charm that set it apart from the current martial arts system.

“Cheon Hwi-da. Your internal energy is starting to stir.”

“...Ah.”

Snapped out of my thoughts by Tang Sowol’s voice, I quickly closed the manual.

“Was it really that impressive of a martial art?”

“It was interesting, but not that great... Probably just my body not fully used to the Rebirth yet.”

They said Rebirth happened when your will fused with your martial arts and body.

In other words, it’s the unity of mind, energy, and body—jing, qi, and shen.

So now, even the slightest stray thought could cause my energy to stir involuntarily.

Normally, that kind of responsiveness would be a good thing—but with my body still recovering and so many things left uncertain, it was more inconvenient than helpful.

Probably just a matter of needing time to adjust.

The fastest way to adapt to a new realm would be through intense training...

But since that's not possible right now, it's frustrating.

As I let out another sigh, Tang Sowol, as if to comfort me, set her teacup down and lay herself on top of me.

She stacked her body on mine as I lay face down, and I flinched at the unexpected contact as our positions shifted.

Whether she noticed or was pretending not to, she pressed her chin against the crown of my head and spoke softly.

“Be careful. It’s clearly not an ordinary Rebirth, after all.”

“True enough.”

We had been resting this whole time, but it wasn’t just idle lounging.

Just like I sometimes unconsciously stirred my internal energy, Tang Sowol sometimes released poison without meaning to.

And strangely, even when hit directly by that poison at close range, I felt no ill effects.

It wasn’t a mild poison, either—it was quite potent.

Most likely, when I underwent Rebirth, her poison was also absorbed and incorporated into my body’s reconstruction...

I decided to test that theory once I fully recovered. For now, it was enough to know I had developed strong poison resistance.

“Haa...”

I sighed again, from sheer frustration. If only all life’s frustrations felt as warm and heavy as the one on my back.

Tang Sowol let out a small laugh at my sigh and gently slid the martial arts manual aside.

“Even if it’s just reading, maybe keeping it close is what’s stirring your qi. Just hold off for a few more days.”

“It’s not that simple. I’ve been wielding a sword all my life, and now they’re telling me not even to think about it.”

“You’re not even twenty yet, Cheon Hwi-da. Talking like an old veteran... Did you forget you’re still only nineteen after this winter?”

“I forget my age sometimes, but I clearly remember that you’ll be turning twenty-four soon.”

“Fufu, it’s not a big deal, but it makes me happy that you remember that kind of thing. I’ll give you a compliment.”

“...?”

For a moment, she fluttered atop me in delight, then suddenly shifted to another topic like she’d remembered something.

“Ah, speaking of manuals, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“What now?”

“Are you sure it was okay to give that Lotus Token to Lady Sama?”

“Sama Yuryeon is someone who never breaks a promise, but precisely because of that, she doesn’t make promises easily. If she accepted it, it means the compensation was sufficient.”

“No, I didn’t mean that it was a waste. I’m talking about whether it was okay to give it away at all. Wasn’t it a gift from the Black Lotus Sect Master, asking you to visit sometime? Was it alright to hand it over to someone else?”

“...Ah.”

I’d completely forgotten.

The Black Lotus Sect Master was a classic Unorthodox Faction martial artist—greedy and narrow-minded. She’d definitely hold a grudge.

“I guess I’d better send a letter soon, saying I’ll visit.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, trying to fill my mind not with martial arts, but with Tang Sowol instead.

A few days later, a letter arrived from the Black Lotus Sect.

“...What the hell...?”

In short, it said the Black Lotus Sect Master had taken over the entire Sama Clan, using a mix of force and a political marriage arranged with Sama Yuryeon.

“...What the hell is this...?”

How many days has it even been?

And this definitely didn't happen in my previous life...

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The Black Lotus Sect Master and Sama Yuryeon are said to be getting married soon.

Though it's a political marriage born out of necessity, it's still quite startling in many ways.

“Goodness, if what you say is true, Cheon Hwi-da, then Lady Sama only headed to the Black Lotus Sect after delivering the items from the secret archive to the Tang Clan. That means it hasn’t even been a full month since she met the Sect Master...”

“Right. In less than a month, she dressed up the Sama Clan like a gift box and handed it over to the Black Lotus Sect Master. They must have been preparing this for a long time.”

“Eh? Ah, no. I was just surprised that they’re getting married so suddenly, that’s all.”

“If we’re talking about sudden marriages, ours is no different. It’s just an engagement since we’re not of age yet, but Sama Yuryeon, if I recall, is quite a bit older.”

I remember that Sama Yuryeon is slightly older than Tang Sowol. Martial artists have some freedom when it comes to the “right age” for marriage, but she’s not young either.

In some cases, people already have several children by that age.

“But isn’t the Black Lotus Sect Master also fairly old?”

“He’s young for a martial artist who has reached the Flowering Stage. But since this is a political marriage from the start, the age gap likely doesn’t matter.”

The Sichuan Tang Clan is unusual, and Tang Sowol is even more of a special case within it. But for most prestigious families, political marriage is the norm.

The story of the Peng and Yeon Clans caused a stir in Murim precisely because they were sworn enemies, yet allegedly eloped for love and love alone.

That's how rare love-before-marriage is. Most marry for practical reasons and develop feelings afterward.

More importantly—

“Huh?”

“If it's Sama Yuryeon, I imagine she's thrilled and skipping about right now.”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, not quite understanding what I meant. Then again, if I hadn't known them before regression, I'd have reacted the same.

“Do you remember the conversation we had when entering the archive? Sama Yuryeon said her type is a man with ambition.”

“Ah, right. She did say that.”

“The Black Lotus Sect Master is, as far as I know, a man with the greatest ambition.”

He looks after his own people, but at heart, he’s the classic Unorthodox martial artist—petty and greedy.

His ambition is so overt it’s hard not to notice once you get close, and yet, he managed to found and maintain the massive organization that is the Black Lotus Sect.

Why? Because he can take others along with him on his grand ambition.

Those who follow him are often swept up in that ambition and end up looking in the same direction.

Combine that with his fierce loyalty to his own people, and you get subordinates so devoted that they pledge their loyalty without hesitation.

Putting aside my personal feelings, if he were born in an age of chaos, he could’ve easily founded his own nation.

“He’s that capable? What kind of ambition does he even have?”

“What else would an Unorthodox martial artist desire? Wealth and power.”

“...You’re saying he sways people just by offering wealth and status?”

“Not ordinary wealth. He means to seize the kind of power and riches one can only have by owning everything in the world.”

“...Ah.”

Creating a family or founding a sect is difficult but achievable through talent and effort.

Some will cheer for such ambition, others will be jealous, and some will become enemies because it threatens their interests.

It’s grand, yes, but ultimately still within the realm of reason.

But what if your goal is to conquer all of the Central Plains?

No one would be envious or admiring. They'd just call you insane.

So the only ones left around you would be the rare few truly inspired enough to join that absurd goal.

“The Black Lotus Sect Master is exactly that kind of person.”

“You're saying he's trying to accomplish such a massive goal purely for his own greed?”

“And that's precisely why so many Unorthodox martial artists follow him.”

He's not all talk either—his abilities match his ambition. He started with nothing and built the Black Lotus Sect. By the time of the Demonic Cult's invasion, he had nearly absorbed the Hao Clan and held sway over nearly half of Central Plains Murim.

Even the Murim Alliance, which is considered the counterpart to the Black Lotus Sect, has a leader, but their leader is merely a representative figure of the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects.

In contrast, the Black Lotus Sect is a power structure wholly centered around the Sect Master.

It's no wonder Sama Yuryeon fell for him so completely in my past life—and why she took her own life in despair upon hearing of his death.

To her, his goal had become her goal.

She couldn't withstand the reality that he was gone, nor the despair of the Heavenly Demon, who easily crushed even a top-tier Flowering Stage martial artist like him.

I suspect it was Sama Yuryeon who actively approached the Black Lotus Sect Master again this time...

But what really surprises me is something else: that despite it being a political marriage, they're actually holding a wedding.

“Did you know? Despite building such a vast force and reaching his age, the Black Lotus Sect Master has never taken a concubine.”

“I knew he hadn’t married, but even no concubines?”

“Right. He believed favoring one person too much would mean surrendering part of his power to them.”

It’s common enough—a man who dominates the world loses his way over a single woman, making poor decisions.

That’s why, while the Black Lotus Sect Master enjoys women, he always avoided growing too attached to any single one.

For such a man to marry... Even though the Sama Clan is an unusual case in the Unorthodox world—a long-standing lineage—it makes one wonder: was it the clan he saw value in, or in Sama Yuryeon herself?

Either way, I can’t say for sure—I’m not him. I can only guess.

For example... maybe the current Black Lotus Sect isn’t as strong as the one I remember.

They'll likely grow in power. In fact, back in the day, people were already worrying that the Second Great Conflict between the Orthodox and Unorthodox factions would erupt again within a decade or two.

But how are they now?

Certainly, the Black Lotus Sect is acknowledged in the martial world, but they haven't unified all of the Unorthodox martial artists.

Their sphere of influence is largely limited to Zhejiang Province. Outside that region, there are just loosely affiliated forces—more like allied factions than true subordinates.

Normally, that's fine. The imperial court hasn't fully subdued the martial world, and the Murim Alliance, while powerful, is a coalition, not a ruling body.

But the Black Lotus Sect Master doesn't want a mere alliance. He wants total submission.

So in his mind, the current state of the Black Lotus Sect must seem unstable.

Trying to recruit Seo Mun-Hwarin, absorbing the Sama Clan entirely—these are likely steps in that grand plan.

Maybe he's now planning to make other prestigious Unorthodox factions kneel one by one, starting with this.

Of course, it's also very possible that he genuinely likes Sama Yuryeon.

She's bold and aggressive—when she heard the Sect Master never formed attachments, she didn't give up. She became the General Administrator of the Black Lotus Sect and visited him daily.

He could've turned her away at any time—but he didn't.

That, in itself, shows he held special feelings for her.

In my previous life, their strange relationship worked because Sama Yuryeon knew not to cross a certain line, and the Sect Master allowed her presence.

When I explained it this way—without mentioning things I was forbidden to say due to mental restrictions—Tang Sowol finally nodded in understanding.

“I see. So, what will you do now, Cheon Hwi-da?”

“Hm? About what?”

“We can’t move now due to our condition... but both of them know you, don’t they?”

“Tch. I was already planning to visit eventually, but now I have no excuse not to.”

The Black Lotus Sect Master may be generous to his people, but he’s always petty with outsiders.

Since I have no intention of joining him, it’s best to avoid unnecessary conflict.

More importantly, I plan to unite the Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect earlier than in my past life to prepare against the Demonic Cult. For that, I need to maintain good relations.

“Fine. I’ll send a letter saying I can’t attend the wedding due to recovery, but will visit once I’m better.”

“I’m going with you, right?”

“What, were you planning to send me alone?”

“Fufu, of course not. I was just a bit excited at the thought of getting to see the Black Lotus Sect—practically off-limits to Orthodox martial artists.”

“What are you expecting from the stronghold of the entire Unorthodox world...”

“Good or evil aside, they’re all honest about their desires. The food’s probably great.”

“That... I can’t deny.”

Buddhist monks discourage meat, and Taoists often avoid cooked meals to preserve inner purity, so their food tends to be bland.

Even prestigious clans try to keep meals balanced and modest as part of their training.

They try to make the food taste good, but sometimes the ingredients themselves are just... not.

Even the Tang Clan, which always serves a variety of meat dishes, also includes a lot of herbs—some of which are honestly pretty awful.

But for the Unorthodox faction, food is just food. It's not part of cultivation—it's about indulging in flavor and luxury.

Their culinary culture is far more advanced, much like how their entertainment districts outshine the Orthodox ones.

They've perfected decadent cuisine.

“In that case, why don't we invite Sister Hwarin and Lihyang too? Let's make the most of it at the Black Lotus Sect.”

“I wouldn't mind. With Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin and me, we'll be safe no matter what happens.”

I barely finished nodding when it happened—speak of the devil, and they appear.

Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, who treated my room like their own, burst in dramatically.

Bang!

“Cheon Hwi! Sister Seo Mun and I just got back from the market nearby, and there was this new shop, so we checked it out, okay??”

“The tea was ordinary, but the snacks were divine! We brought back some sweets. Come, let’s eat together!”

Seol Lihyang, giggling over candy like a girl her age should, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, age unknown but definitely enjoying herself.

Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances and chuckled softly.

“Perfect. I was just in the mood for a snack.”

“I’ll go make some tea.”

I could’ve asked a servant, but I decided to do it myself.

After all, when you’re stuck indoors every day, even something like making tea becomes a pleasant way to pass the time.

Nearly a month later, I finally recovered enough to wield a sword again.

With the poison in her body stabilized, Tang Sowol was permitted to resume poison arts, and within less than a week, she reached the Sub-Perfection Realm.

And I finally understood what made my Rebirth different from the norm.

“Wow! You’re immune to all poisons!”

“To be precise, only poisons weaker than yours, Tang Sowol.”

“But since the Thousand Poison Gate was wiped out by your hand, the only person who uses stronger poisons than me is my father.”

Yes—I’m still vulnerable to Father-in-law’s poison. That’s the most important fact.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Flowering Stage.

Even counting all the retired masters, there are barely twenty martial artists in the Central Plains who’ve reached this realm.

It may sound like a lot when you say “twenty,” but remember, most of them are heads of the Five Supreme Clans or the Nine Great Sects.

While others spend a lifetime trying—maybe—just to break through to the Peak Stage, these sects possess multiple supreme cultivation arts that guarantee Peak Stage if you just devote the time.

While most martial artists struggle to become top-tier and debate whether to settle down and open a small dojo...

I once saw a direct descendant of another Supreme Clan, barely past twenty, brooding over why he hadn't reached the Peak Stage like his next-door friend.

It's a memory from my previous life, so it's old, but it left such an impression that I still remember it clearly.

Yes, the Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects are basically the entrenched ruling class of Murim—stagnant pools, if you will.

Just look at the Hwangbo Clan, which took a wrong turn—no longer producing Flowering Stage warriors, they resorted to forbidden arts, didn't they?

“Cheon Hwi-da? Objectively speaking, aren't you now a member of one of those entrenched powers—Sichuan's Tang Clan? You're not even twenty yet, and you've already reached the Flowering Stage, so what are you going on about?”

“If I hype it up, doesn't it make my achievement sound even greater?”

“Even without the hype, Flowering Stage is already something everyone recognizes.”

“But what I say next is the important part. If Flowering Stage warriors are the minimum requirement to establish and maintain such powerful sects, then doesn’t that mean I could do the same now? There’s a big difference between just being strong and being the ruler of a region.”

As I shrugged, Tang Sowol gave me a strange look, like I’d grown a second head.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who’d been listening nearby, had a slightly different reaction.

“Oho! If you’re planning to start your own clan, then by coincidence, the heir’s seat at the Seomun Clan is still—”

“Clan head.”

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, I’m now an equal—another Flowering Stage master like you. Do you expect me to be satisfied with just becoming heir? Unless you’re handing over the clan head position, I kindly ask you to stop offering.”

“Eeit! Are you calling me a backroom elder already...?”

Maybe not “backroom,” but the “elder” part probably isn’t wrong.

Still, that's too rude to say out loud. I'm a Flowering Stage martial artist now. I should act with some dignity.

"Ahem."

"...I have a feeling you're thinking something very impolite right now."

"Don't worry, Sister Seo Mun. Cheon Hwi's always been a little rude, so nothing's changed."

Seo Mun-Hwarin reacted sharply to my clearing my throat, and Seol Lihyang tried to calm her down—but her tone was full of quiet slander.

Apparently, Tang Sowol thought the same, as she chuckled and added:

"Don't be too harsh. That rough edge is part of Cheon Hwi-da's charm, isn't it?"

"You're calling that charm...?"

“If it’s not unbearable to watch, isn’t that charm enough?”

“You’ve got a generous standard.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked at Tang Sowol’s chest with a thoughtful nod—maybe due to the height difference.

“Mmm. Very generous indeed.”

Though she likely noticed the glance, Tang Sowol let it slide and spoke calmly.

“Well, jokes aside, you do seem in a good mood today. Did something happen, Cheon Hwi-da?”

“What else? I finally got approval from the Medical Hall Master that I’m healthy enough to wield a sword again.”

Lazing around the room with Tang Sowol and chatting with visitors like Seol Lihyang or Seo Mun-Hwarin had been nice, yes...

But it's also true that I missed the feel of a sword in my hand.

As my body recovered, I could keenly feel the changes in it. The thirst to swing a sword again only grew stronger.

After nearly a month, I could finally grip a blade once more. And on top of that, the Medical Hall Master confirmed that I now had something close to immunity to all poisons.

How could I not be excited?

“There's so much I want to test—especially sword force, and maybe even get a sense for body-protecting qi if possible.”

“You're ambitious. Focusing only on sword force for now would already be difficult. Though your will has become strong enough to condense sword qi into sword force... being able to use it and being able to use it in combat are different things.”

“Same goes for body-protecting qi, I imagine.”

“Exactly. And since it also consumes willpower, even if your internal energy is plentiful, you can become exhausted just from will depletion. And what about full-body qi protection?”

“Can you train willpower too?”

“Of course. You can’t build it up with cultivation techniques like internal energy, nor skip ahead with elixirs, but...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin explained that willpower is honed solely through meditation, focus, and gradual enlightenment.

As she spoke enthusiastically, she glanced at me and added:

“You’ll figure this out soon enough, so I’ll tell you now. The reason internal energy and willpower train so differently lies in a fundamental difference.”

“Fundamental?”

“Yes. Internal energy is something you accumulate. You refine nature’s qi according to a cultivation method and store it in your dantian. But willpower isn’t something you accumulate—it’s something you hone, like sharpening a blade.”

“So the difference lies in their source.”

If internal energy is about taking something from outside and making it yours...

Then willpower is about drawing out and mastering what’s already within you.

The sensation I felt in that final moment against the Poison Demon.

As I relived that memory, clenching and relaxing my fist, my internal energy naturally stirred.

By habit, I tried to suppress it, but then remembered I no longer needed to.

The energy flowed through my fingertips more naturally than I expected. But that alone wouldn’t be enough.

As we chatted and walked, the entrance to the training grounds came into view. I found myself grinning as I stepped inside.

The first thing we did was scatter to our own stations.

No particular reason. It's just that I wasn't the only one who had broken through during this time.

Tang Sowol had reached the Sub-Perfection Stage. She hadn't been showing off, but she must've been eager to test her new power.

Seol Lihyang likely went back to her usual training, and Seo Mun-Hwarin was helping her.

Hoo...

I let out a deep breath and faced a straw dummy ahead.

It had a core of solid blue steel stone and was wrapped in straw—fairly sturdy.

Sword qi might struggle to slice through it in one strike... but sword force was another story.

The ability to cut what was previously uncuttable—that's the clearest sign of change.

It was expensive, so I might get yelled at later, but with all the loot from the archive, I figured breaking one wouldn't hurt.

I nodded to myself and drew my sword.

The sensation of my palm fusing with the blade—it was the familiar unity of mind and sword.

That hadn't changed much.

Come to think of it, the very act of drawing a sword path with perfect accuracy could be considered a basic application of willpower.

I recalled the feeling from when I had drawn out qi force during battle.

I cleared away emotions built up over a lifetime and faced the truth I hadn't dared to accept.

Only now did I understand the atmosphere unique to Flowering Stage martial artists.

It didn't come from their techniques—but from within themselves.

Their true, unadorned self.

When I cast aside killing intent and confusion, what remained at the bottom of my heart was a desire far purer than I expected.

I had always just wanted to protect those precious to me.

As that awareness crystallized, something other than internal energy—already swirling around the blade—began to stir.

With Soul, Energy, and Body united, there was no reason to keep them separate.

Willpower, born from fierce resolve, naturally blended into my Qi.

The shimmering sword qi condensed, then flared up like flame.

It compressed unnaturally under my will, becoming sharper and more focused.

Woom!

All I did was swing—and yet, the power was so focused that my black iron sword quivered under the strain.

The blazing internal energy that had been blood-red flared one last time—

—and as it crystallized into qi force, that bloody hue shattered, revealing a pure white sword force.

As expected, it took time to draw it out and required intense focus.

But I succeeded on my first try. That alone was worth noting.

It shimmered far too brightly to be just internal energy.

Perhaps the first person to reach this realm thought the same, which is why they called it gang—the essence of the Big Dipper.

To my eyes, though, it didn't look like starlight.

It looked like snow—the color of winter, or perhaps pale moonlight.

The same snow that once melted helplessly in fire, soaked in blood... or the faint glow I couldn't see clearly during my final night beneath the clouds.

I'm not yet strong enough to stand against the looming shadow of the Heavenly Demon.

But I've finally reached the starting line.

With that resolve—to bring light to a night I once failed to illuminate—I swung my sword with all my strength.

The Three Fundamental Sword Arts—this was the Taesan Crushing Slash, a simple vertical strike.

A pale white line traced the air.

KWAGAGAGANG!!

The training dummy, embedded with blue steel stone, and even the wall behind it made entirely of solid stone, were obliterated.

“...Ah.”

Guess I swung too hard.

All strength drained from my body, and a pounding headache made me stumble.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had run over in alarm, examined me carefully and sighed as she shook her head.

“You need to learn to control your strength first.”

“But isn’t it fine if I can finish an enemy in one blow?”

“And what if there are two enemies? Planning to offer your neck to the second?”

I grumbled, but her retort was so logical I had no reply.

This was a first—my strength being a problem.

In my past life, I was always short on internal energy.

In this life, thanks to experience, I thought I had mastered control...

But apparently, things were different now.

Still dazed, I barely kept my balance and asked:

“Of course I’ll practice control, but if I keep destroying training grounds every time I do, that’ll be a problem.”

“If I were the Tang Clan Head, I’d say, ‘My son-in-law reached the Flowering Stage—who cares about a few walls?’ But... best not to break things if you don’t have to.”

“Any alternatives?”

“Of course.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin rose slightly on her toes, puffed out her modest chest, and lifted her chin high.

“Ahem!”

“You’ve got me, haven’t you?”

“...You’re kidding.”

I stared at her, eyes wide, but she nodded firmly.

“Let’s spar for a while, shall we?”

“Ah, I’d rather not.”

“...?!”

As I flatly refused, her previously lifted shoulders drooped.

But I had my reasons.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“For a while, let’s spar together.”

“Ah, that’s a bit...”

“?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had just raised her chin with a triumphant look, suddenly froze in shock, her shoulders slumping.

It was the same reaction as when someone snatches away the side dish you'd saved to savor later, misunderstanding your intention—surprisingly, this had actually happened before.

But this time, the situation was a little different.

It wasn't something I said without thinking—it was carefully considered.

“Please calm down, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. And let's go back to our original goal.”

“Now that you've reached the Flowering Stage, is your desire to challenge me growing so strong that you refuse to spar?”

“Where are you even getting that twisted logic from?”

“Well, aren’t you at that age when it wouldn’t be strange for you to start thinking that way?”

“I’ve already grown past that age, thank you.”

Still, I understood what she meant.

I was nearing nineteen, so it wasn’t as bad now, but a few years ago, I definitely had mood swings that were outside my control.

Of course, with memories from a past life, I never acted out those emotions fully, but it was still a peculiar experience.

Things like puberty or rebellion, which people say stem from the mind, are really more about physical changes.

For someone like me, whose mental and physical ages are out of sync due to reincarnation, it was a rare insight.

“If it’s not that, then why exactly are you refusing to spar with me? We’ve done it plenty of times before.”

“The issue now is that I can’t properly control my strength, and until I get used to it, I’ll keep wrecking the training grounds. That’s the core problem, isn’t it?”

“That’s true.”

“So obviously, if I spar with you, I’ll end up swinging my full-strength sword force.”

“But I can take it just fine.”

“With equally strong sword force, you mean?”

“That’s...”

“Hm?”

Finally sensing something was off, Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked.

Sure, she could easily withstand my unrefined strikes with her own sword force. But the problem is that her martial arts also rely on overwhelming strength and force.

She could counter my sword force with a stronger one, but the resulting shockwave would definitely destroy the surroundings.

Of course, she knows other techniques too, so she could probably deflect the attack.

But that deflected sword force would end up smashing the area around us.

If it were a normal sword slash, maybe—but I don't think she's mastered the kind of subtle technique that can redirect a force-imbued blade without consequences.

Now understanding my reasoning, Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her tiny fist tightly.

“Unbelievable! Because I'm too strong, I won't be the first to experience your sword force?!”

“That's one way to put it.”

“Never in my life have I resented my strength this much—except for twenty-seven times before this!”

“That’s... a lot.”

I replied half-heartedly as she glared at the sky with a tragically aggrieved expression, and beside us, Tang Sowol tilted her head.

“I understand the reason, but then what do you plan to do, Cheon Hwi-da? Should I speak to Father?”

“My father-in-law could certainly dodge my sword force and even poison me through my imperfect immunity. But even in that case, the core problem remains.”

Where would Tang Jinchun’s deflected sword force go? Obviously, into the floor and walls of the training ground.

The area is remote to prevent accidents, and there are likely orders to avoid casual entry, but still...

There's always the risk that someone could be unlucky enough to get crushed by debris or caught in the resulting fragments.

Using the training ground properly is basically impossible.

“If something has to be destroyed, wouldn't it be better to swing freely in a place where it doesn't matter?”

“Such a place exists?”

“Did you know? Winter is the season when more people die than you'd expect. The poor get sick from lack of firewood, and beggars without homes might sleep and never wake again.”

“What's that supposed to—”

“Isn't Chengdu, at least, under the Tang Clan's control? Since we're in this situation, why not do some good?”

“Ah!”

Tang Sowol, who had been tilting her head, suddenly gasped as if realizing my intent.

“You’re going to chop trees in the mountains, aren’t you?”

“Exactly.”

Not only is it harmless, but the more I chop, the warmer Chengdu’s people can stay this winter.

Plus, the Tang Clan’s reputation will rise. And subtly, through the beggar's union—that is, the Beggars’ Sect—I can leak word that I’ve reached the Flowering Stage.

If my cultivation level were middling, it’d be better to keep it secret, but once you reach this high, publicizing it helps ward off unnecessary trouble.

It was the same at the Sub-Perfection Stage, and even more so at Flowering Stage.

Sure, more people will try to attach themselves to me hoping for gain... but the Tang Clan can handle that.

“If anyone takes a loss from this, it’d be the woodcutters who sell firewood during winter.”

“In that case, we can pay them a daily wage to help transport the wood. I’ll speak to Father right away.”

“He must be busy lately, so I feel a bit bad adding more to his plate.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Sure, he’s busy negotiating to return the items you brought from the archive to their rightful owners, busy explaining the fall of Thousand Poison Gate, and busy dealing with the suspicion that your actions might count as a bloodbath incident. And now, he’ll also have to procure rare blue steel stone to repair the broken training ground! But! All of that can be handled by the chief steward!”

“Just to ask, how many chief stewards does the Tang Clan have? Three or four?”

“Just one. Though he may collapse soon from overwork and leave us with none.”

“But don’t worry—his salary’s been tripled, and he’s been given a bunch of health elixirs, so he won’t actually collapse!”

...Can I really not worry?

Even before this, there were major incidents: the so-called “kidnapping” during the Dragon-Phoenix Gathering, my “runaway” incident, defeating the Bloodflame Fist Demon, slaying the Hwangbo Clan Head...

And just when he wrapped all that up, I dumped more work on him.

“Tsk. Maybe I should’ve put Sama Yuryeon to work for a month before sending her off to the Black Lotus.”

But it’s too late. She’s already joined them and is probably enjoying her honeymoon with the Black Lotus Lord by now.

Well, Tang Jinchun seems to be managing somehow despite the hardships, so I suppose it’s fine.

...Though I do plan to cause even more trouble moving forward.

Now that I’ve reached the Flowering Stage, I’m officially among the ranks of peerless masters.

Meaning, no one in Murim can dismiss my words lightly, and I've met the minimum qualification needed to unite the orthodox and unorthodox factions.

Fortunately, the Murim Alliance is already on alert against the Demonic Sect thanks to me and the Ghostblade Duel. The Black Lotus Lord is also fairly favorable toward me.

It's really doable. I can't magically forge the alliance overnight, but as long as we join forces before the Heavenly Demon invades, it'll be enough.

At the very least, I won't just sit and watch half of the orthodox sects—including the Kunlun Sect—get annihilated like last time.

To do that, I need to be the bridge between orthodox and unorthodox factions.

But how?

The unorthodox side is simple. Beat them into submission and promise profit—that's all it takes.

The orthodox side is trickier. There's pride, centuries-old grudges, and factional friction to consider.

Still, they're the type who rally when the cause is just, so the best path might be to keep alerting them to the Demonic Sect's threat via the Murim Alliance.

They already know the Demonic Sect isn't what it used to be, but they don't yet grasp just how monstrous the Heavenly Demon is.

The best option would be to strike before he gets stronger...

But realistically, there's no way the major sect leaders would agree to gather their top warriors and march deep into the Ten Thousand Mountains to wipe out the Demonic Sect.

After all, most Demonic Sect members are people wronged by Murim. So far, all they've done is send spies to cause a little chaos.

You might call it personal revenge, but it doesn't justify a holy war.

Like how their attempt on Tang Sowol's life was between the Tang Clan and the Demonic Sect—not the entire orthodox faction.

Even if I do somehow convince the factions to join forces against the Heavenly Demon, another issue remains:

Can we even win?

Sure, we won't die so helplessly like last time.

But this is the same Heavenly Demon who defeated nearly ten Flowering Stage warriors combined—and he wasn't even seriously injured.

Even with twenty on our side, would we stand a chance? I still don't know.

That's how overwhelming he was the last time I saw him.

Reaching the Flowering Stage is a great feat... but all it does is earn me the right to stand on the same battlefield as the Heavenly Demon.

What we truly need is power on par with him.

Sigh...

“Mm. I may have exaggerated just now, but you don’t need to worry. The chief steward’s managing just fine.”

“Then that’s good. But my worry is something else entirely.”

“May I ask what it is?”

“I need to become stronger—but it’s not as easy as I hoped.”

Tang Sowol fell silent for a moment. Not just her—even Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been grumbling, and Seol Lihyang, who’d been calming her, suddenly quieted.

Then they gave me looks like I’d lost my mind and began whispering among themselves.

“Could it be lingering effects of qi deviation?”

“Didn’t he go through an unusual form of body transformation? I had side effects from my rejuvenation, so it’s not impossible.”

“Really? I thought Cheon Hwi was always like this... even at the Peak Stage and Sub-Perfection Stage, he acted like a martial arts nut who kept spouting self-deprecating nonsense.”

“That... makes sense!”

“Yes, it does!”

The three spoke loud enough for me to hear, shamelessly slandering me—but because of the secrecy curse, I couldn’t even properly refute them.

So instead of trying to prove I was sane, I did what I always do—change the subject.

“Well, once I get used to handling qi force by chopping wood, I plan to visit Yunnan for a bit. How about we all go together?”

“Yunnan? What for? Don’t tell me you’re going to admire the ruins of Thousand Poison Gate, the sect you destroyed...!”

I flicked Seol Lihyang on the forehead with a Ttck! and shrugged as she cried out, “Ow!”

“I said toward Yunnan, not to Yunnan. The real destination is Jeomchang Sect.”

“Jeomchang Sect?”

“Yes. There’s something I need to check.”

By the time I grow accustomed to qi force, winter will likely be over and I’ll be nineteen.

And the Heavenly Slayer awakened when I turned twenty.

I need to at least see his face before it’s too late.

As for what I’ll do after that... I’ll figure it out when the time comes.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Getting used to qi force—more precisely, getting used to willpower—took quite a long time.

The biggest reason, of course, is that willpower operates on a completely different paradigm from traditional martial arts.

Fundamentally, martial arts have always evolved toward greater efficiency—generating greater results with less strength, building internal energy faster, absorbing purer qi, exploiting gaps in perception to appear faster, and so on.

Even if it's difficult to pull off in practice, the direction itself is one that anyone could understand after proper explanation.

But willpower is different. At a glance, it seems irrational, even impossible—yet it forces such irrationality.

Take qi force for example.

Qi is power without a physical form. Its core function is to enhance the essence of the object it's infused into—like amplifying bodily strength, dramatically sharpening a sword's edge, or generating dazzling afterimages to confuse the eye.

This is why external techniques matter as much as internal cultivation. The more qi is compressed, the less efficient it becomes. And if you try to forcefully gather it, at best it becomes qi flame, but no more.

However, willpower very calmly, blatantly, pushes past those limits.

It materializes internal energy, which should not have a physical form, and turns qi itself into a sword.

If internal energy is something that helps you do what was once impossible by enhancing your capability, willpower is the force that makes something fundamentally impossible become possible—by sheer imposition.

“It's like... standing on a stool to reach something placed up high, versus just flying up into the air to grab it.”

“I'd been wondering if all that tree chopping meant you were planning a deforestation project... but looks like my son-in-law's got his own plans.”

Tang Jinchun chuckled as he handed the papers he'd been scribbling on to the steward next to him.

The steward looked healthy in body but had a deathly pale face as he silently accepted the documents. It was a little pitiful.

Tang Jinchun, having offloaded all his work onto the steward for the time being, slowly nodded.

“Your metaphor is apt, but it could use a little clarification. willpower doesn’t make all impossibilities possible. It only becomes absolute when it aligns with what one most fervently desires.”

“I suspected as much.”

The unique aura a Flowering Stage martial artist emits comes from their inner landscape—and willpower springs from this.

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s terrifying destructive punches, for example, likely stem from her single-minded belief that even regrets blocking her path should be crushed for her to move forward.

The Black Lotus Lord tempered his inescapable spear with greed—an insatiable desire to possess everything without exception.

And in my previous life, Tang Sowol, bearing the image of the annihilated Tang Clan in her heart, immersed herself in solitude and became the most fearsome poison master in the clan's history.

So yes, willpower lets you do the impossible—but only in alignment with its source.

It is a forced expression of what's embedded in one's inner landscape.

Even if your essence, qi, and mind harmonize into a perfect whole, you still remain you.

“You're only saying that now because you've awakened your willpower, and you've become able to assert your inner landscape more clearly.”

“Yes, well... something like that.”

Since I reached Flowering Stage by becoming aware of my true inner landscape, the initial awakening wasn't that hard.

But I didn't yet understand how to forcibly manifest it into the world—so I couldn't control my strength, and it took me too long to generate qi force.

But now I know. I understand how my sword moves to paint out my inner landscape.

“My sword now reaches places it never could before.”

“Congratulations. You’re now a proper Flowering Stage martial artist. Even I, once called a genius, didn’t reach it until after forty. The Tang Clan is truly blessed to have a son-in-law like you.”

Tang Jinchun beamed with pride, and I could feel the sincerity of his joy. It made me feel a little embarrassed.

In the past, while he had thanked me for helping, there was also a clear undertone of “You’re the thief stealing my daughter.”

But at some point, his attitude softened—now, he treats me almost like a son.

Which made me feel a bit guilty for what I was about to say next.

“Thank you, Father-in-law. But there’s something else I need to bring up.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Now that I’ve gotten used to this level of strength... I’d like to go away for a short while.”

Again???

Tang Jinchun didn’t look pleased. But it wasn’t quite the same concern as before—it felt more like disappointment.

He knew very well that I usually took Tang Sowol with me on such trips.

Still, someone else gave a far more dramatic reaction.

Clatter!

The steward, who had been working quietly, suddenly shot up from his seat.

The dullness in his eyes disappeared, and even his unkempt beard seemed to twitch with life.

It was like watching a man experience his final flash of vitality before death. Even Tang Jinchun flinched at the sheer force of it as the steward spoke in a solemn voice.

“W-where are you planning to go this time?”

“Jeomchang Sect. I’d like to observe the Four-Seal Sword Technique.”

“Jeomchang Sect...!”

The steward gasped—and then sat back down as if nothing had happened, politely nodding.

“Have a safe trip.”

His reaction was so transparent. It was obvious why he acted like that.

The current Jeomchang Sect is weak—both in terms of martial prowess and influence.

Put more bluntly, the steward likely figured that even if something went wrong there, it'd be trivial compared to my previous escapades.

Of course, the Jeomchang Sect wasn't always like this.

Decades ago, they were nearly on par with the Nine Great Sects.

But their downfall came from geography—Jeomchang Sect is based in Mt. Jeomchang, located in Yunnan Province.

And Yunnan is home to Beast Palace.

Just as Beast Palace wiped out the Five Poisons Sect, they repeatedly attacked Jeomchang Sect in an effort to dominate the province.

Unable to withstand the pressure, Jeomchang eventually abandoned their mountain and relocated to the edge of Sichuan.

But Sichuan already had the Tang Clan.

They managed to settle down, but without a firm foundation, their influence shrank dramatically.

A weakened sect attracts fewer disciples. Unlike martial families, which can rise on the strength of a few heirs, sects rely on talented recruits.

With dwindling numbers, they grew weaker with each generation.

Two generations later, Jeomchang is now barely better than an average sect.

Of course, that doesn't mean their martial arts are weak.

They may have failed to evolve their techniques due to lack of successors, but the Four-Seal Sword Technique is still considered a formidable ascension art.

Which explains why their sect was nearly wiped out when a prodigy with the Heavenly Killing Star trait started using it.

Despite the skill's power, none of their other disciples had the talent or circumstances to wield it properly.

But suddenly, someone blessed with monstrous natural ability starts using it to wreak havoc—there's no way they could stop him.

Thus, in my previous life, Jeomchang was annihilated, save for a few survivors.

Most of the sect's secret manuals were lost in the chaos, and the survivors were too young to have even learned the basics—functionally, they were extinct.

But this time will be different.

Yes, they've weakened—but only compared to the top sects.

Objectively, Jeomchang is still a respectable martial sect. Their fame has diminished, but their name still carries weight.

Helping them would raise my own reputation, which means greater influence in the orthodox Murim.

And I'll need that if I'm to form the righteous-evil alliance.

Though it's also a bit personal... I want to meet the Heavenly Killing Star in person.

Even if I understand what lies behind his bloodlust now, I, too, am someone who handles massive killing intent.

Naturally, I'd be curious about him.

Honestly, I'm slightly hopeful that my presence might help him gain control.

If that kind of talent could be turned toward fighting the Heavenly Demon... nothing would be more reassuring.

Of course, this is just wishful thinking.

Even Master Gakjeong of Shaolin, who dedicated his entire life to researching the Heavenly Killing Star and even raised one as his disciple, only managed to discover a few patterns—never a solution.

Still, trying wouldn't hurt.

And I haven't forgotten Master Gakjeong's heartfelt words, spoken before countless young monks. They weigh on me even now.

While I was silently nodding to myself, Tang Jinchun, after a moment's thought, spoke again.

"I don't think there's any danger to you now—but I'm worried in a different sense."

"Worried?"

"You said you're going to observe the Four-Seal Sword Technique, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You might be disappointed."

"Pardon?"

“You know as well as I do that it’s a great martial art—but no one there today has truly mastered it. You probably won’t find any swordwork that meets your standards.”

“That’s fine. Just because someone’s weaker than me doesn’t mean I can’t learn something from them.”

“Hm. Well, seeing it for yourself is the fastest way. Do as you like.”

“To think you don’t recognize my pure love for the sword... I’m disappointed, Father-in-law.”

“I didn’t say you should be disappointed already.”

Tang Jinchun chuckled and patted my shoulder.

“Anyway, I don’t mind you going, but don’t take too long. Seems like you and Sowol can’t stand staying home for too long.”

“I’ll try.”

“That refusal to give a straight answer is so very like you. It’s honestly charming.”

Pat pat!

His hands smacked my shoulders with surprising force. Even with my newly transformed body, it hurt a little.

Only after beating me for a while did he finally stop. But he wasn’t done yet—his next words were more shocking than the shoulder-thumping.

“Oh, and I think it’s time we started preparing your wedding with Sowol.”

“Pardon??”

“Why are you so surprised? Until now, it was just an engagement because you were still young and focused on martial arts. But that’s no longer the case.”

“Well, yes... but I thought you’d drag it out for a few more years before granting permission.”

“I won’t say I never thought about doing that.”

He avoided my gaze, and as I stared him down, he coughed and continued.

“I’m only mentioning the wedding now. The actual ceremony will still be quite a while off. Maybe not years, but not soon.”

“I understand.”

After all the time I’ve spent in the Tang Clan, I know how things work.

“Picking an auspicious date, inviting guests, possibly rescheduling the event, and planning a grand ceremony befitting the Tang Clan name—none of that’s easy.”

“Exactly. So I’m only telling you in advance. Just keep it in mind.”

“Of course. Does Sowol know?”

“You’re the first I’ve told. Please inform her for me.”

“Understood.”

I bowed and left Tang Jinchun’s office.

“...A wedding?”

Tang Sowol froze mid-packing as I told her.

Her expression darkened just a little.

Why...?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“We’ll be at Jeomchang Sect soon, so let’s pick up the pace.”

“Yeah. Let’s have dinner at a nearby inn, and visit them the next morning. That should be perfect.”

Was it because she knew that the party’s speed of travel essentially depended on her?

At those words, Seol Lihyang nodded vigorously, then performed lightfoot techniques with noticeably increased speed.

Her movements were beyond skillful, they felt almost natural.

It hadn’t been long since she reached the Peak Stage, yet she already seemed to be heading toward mastery beyond stabilization.

Judging by the momentum of her growth alone, she might be progressing even faster than Tang Sowol.

However, that didn't mean she was stronger than Tang Sowol had been at the same stage.

A martial artist's level is determined by how well they unify mind, energy, and body, not simply by how well they fight.

Still, perhaps because we've been traveling together, Seol Lihyang, who only showed average talent in physical activities, was doing quite well with her lightfoot skills.

After about two hours of Seol Lihyang's strenuous effort, the sun began to glow red with the setting light, but we managed to reach our destination on time.

The Jeomchang Sect, which had left Jeomchang Mountain, was now based in the outskirts of Sichuan. Specifically, in Jihwahyeon.

Once we found a suitable inn and sat down, a cheerful-looking server scurried over and asked,

“Welcome, esteemed guests!”

“What dishes here are worth trying?”

“Our head chef is excellent, so everything’s delicious, but as luck would have it, we just butchered a pig today and have fresh meat available.”

“Sounds good. Cold noodles with extra garnishes and Huiguorou (twice-cooked pork) for each person. Also, we’d like to rent a room.”

“I’ll inform the innkeeper right away! By the way, would you like any alcohol, sir?”

“Alcohol...”

Turning to look at the others, I caught Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin both subtly shaking their heads after glancing at Tang Sowol.

“No alcohol.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll bring everything shortly!”

After bowing almost at a right angle, the server headed toward the kitchen. I turned my head.

Then came silence. An awkwardness that was a bit too heavy for a simple waiting period before the food arrived.

The reason was obvious—Tang Sowol still had a stiff expression, sighing deeply with a dark look on her face.

“Haa...”

Surprisingly, she’d been in this state ever since the first day—going on two full days now.

Even when Seol Lihyang or Seo Mun-Hwarin asked if something was wrong, she would just shake her head and say it was nothing.

But anyone could see it was clearly not nothing.

I could roughly guess. She’d been like this ever since hearing about the marriage proposal. That had to be it.

I should've asked her directly at the time, but I didn't expect this kind of reaction, so I held back.

Looking back now, I must have been quite flustered too.

Still, we couldn't just keep letting things drag on like this. It was time to address it properly.

Drrk.

I stood up from my seat and spoke to Tang Sowol.

“Before the food comes out, could I talk to you for a bit?”

“...Just for a moment, right?”

“It won't take long.”

“Alright.”

Had she guessed what I wanted to talk about? Tang Sowol nodded with a serious expression.

We walked together to the quiet back of the inn.

If it were just about preventing others from overhearing, we could've stayed seated and used sound-blocking techniques,

but this seemed like something she didn't want even Seol Lihyang or Seo Mun-Hwarin to hear.

After confirming there were no signs of people nearby, I activated a narrow sound barrier.

Then I looked straight into Tang Sowol's dark green eyes and spoke.

"I'll ask directly. Do you not want to formally marry me?"

"Wh... What?!?"

She began to answer reflexively but was so shocked she choked on her voice and shook her head wildly, enough to mess up her carefully styled hair.

“No! That’s absolutely not the reason! It is because of the marriage, yes, but it’s not that I don’t want to!”

“Then why have you been so down ever since the topic came up?”

“That’s…”

Her lips moved, but she couldn’t seem to bring herself to speak.

Soon, however, her eyes took on a determined gleam.

“This ties back to something I mentioned before.”

“Hm?”

“It’s about the side effects of the Poison Spirit Constitution.”

“Of course I remember. But I thought we already resolved that matter.”

After absorbing the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass, Tang Sowol’s constitution had changed drastically compared to her pre-regression self.

Whatever poison she took in, it would amplify the effects instead of neutralizing them, rendering standard antidotes ineffective.

But that didn’t mean she was definitely infertile.

And even if that were the case, we had agreed she could raise another woman’s child as her own, if she allowed it.

So I blinked in confusion, wondering why she was bringing this up again.

Then she spoke in a careful tone.

“Upon reaching the Sub-Perfection stage and organizing my insights, I discovered something.”

“What is it?”

“Though I broke through the wall in one leap by absorbing the Poison Demon’s venom, it seems I was exposed to an incomplete technique partway through... and that left me with some aftereffects.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“I’m fine. I can’t get poisoned by my own venom, after all.

But... if I were to carry a child, they might not be okay.”

Whether it was because the Poison Demon forcibly extracted most of her poison once, or because of the overwhelming toxins she absorbed afterward—

One thing was clear: poison now coursed through every inch of her body.

To Tang Sowol, with her resistance, it was no problem.

She wasn't leaking it outward either, so externally, nothing seemed wrong.

But for a newborn just starting to develop... poisoning was inevitable.

In essence, she was saying she had become permanently infertile.

"I understand. But if it's an aftereffect, there must be a way to fix it."

"There is, actually. Seeing you gave me an idea. This condition is like a permanent injury or a scar—if I reconstruct my body, I should be able to fix it. Like a full physical rebirth."

"If that's the case, there's no need to worry. I firmly believe you'll reach the Flowering Stage."

Even in her previous life, when her growth was slower, she had reached the Flowering Stage and become known as the Poison Dance Empress.

Now, with more experience and several fortuitous encounters thanks to me, she'd surely get there more easily.

But Tang Sowol seemed focused on a different concern.

“Reaching the Flowering Stage isn't something one can guarantee. Even if I do reach it, by then, I won't be young.

Unless I achieve full rejuvenation, a physical rebirth won't make me youthful again. And as I mentioned before, even after a rebirth, it's uncertain.”

“I still don't understand the problem. Even if it's a bit delayed, doesn't this all just lead us back to the same conclusion?”

She fell silent for a moment, then glanced at me.

“There's one more thing that's been bothering me.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve been observing you for a while, and I feel like... you have a grander goal. Something you haven’t told anyone.”

Now it was my turn to go quiet. The one thing I hadn’t told anyone. She must be referring to the matter of the Heavenly Demon.

“For a martial artist, the Flowering Stage is a major milestone.

You were happy and excited when you achieved it, but... you’ve been training even more obsessively than before, like someone being chased. As if aiming for something far beyond what even the Flowering Stage can accomplish.”

She wasn’t wrong.

If a day ever came when I could finally relax, it would only be after defeating the Heavenly Demon.

But the Heavenly Demon is the greatest martial artist in history. No one in the past, present, or future could match him.

Since I first picked up a sword, I’ve never feared an opponent—but if there was one person I should fear, it would be him.

To me, he's the highest mountain and the ultimate nightmare.

Reaching the Flowering Stage was merely the minimum requirement to stand before him.

We were now past the phase of personal growth—it was time to find a way to unite the Central Plains.

But due to mental restrictions, I couldn't tell anyone about this.

To Tang Sowol, it must have seemed like I was hiding something, even from her.

“I don't know what you're aiming for, but I doubt someone like me, who just entered Sub-Perfection, can help.”

“...Huh?”

“You've even reached the Flowering Stage now. To you, the Tang Clan must seem... less meaningful.”

Not entirely wrong.

If we fought now, I might lose, but... still, I now stood at the same level as Tang Jincheon, head of the Tang Clan.

Since I entered the Flowering Stage, his attitude toward me had changed—not just as someone he cherished, but as an equal peer in martial arts.

“But if you officially marry me, you’ll be part of the Tang Clan, and its master is my father.”

“I have no intention of swallowing the Tang Clan.”

“Still, it would limit what you can do. Compared to forming your own organization or roaming the martial world alone.”

I understood what she was getting at.

Most Flowering Stage martial artists receive top treatment anywhere they go. They prefer to lead rather than serve under someone else.

That's why the Murim Alliance is a loose federation, and the only Flowering Stage martial artist formally affiliated with the Black Lotus Sect is its master.

Flowering Stage experts would rather act independently than be under someone else's command. It's an unspoken rule in the martial world.

"I worry that marrying me would become a shackle for you.

That you might eventually regret it."

"I see."

Now I finally understood what Tang Sowol was thinking.

Already burdened with her fears, the added concern of her condition had driven her into despair.

From my side, it seemed almost ridiculous.

I took a moment to choose my words, then spoke calmly.

“I’m sorry I can’t tell you everything. There are circumstances I truly can’t control. But I can tell you this much—what you’re worried about isn’t something to fret over.”

My final goal isn’t some abstract ideal. I just want everyone to live well and in peace.

The only reason I must defeat the Heavenly Demon is because he’s trying to kill us all.

I explained this in a roundabout way, careful not to trigger any restrictions.

Finally, a bit of color returned to Tang Sowol’s face.

“Brother Cheon...!”

She suddenly hugged me, burying her head into my chest.

A mix of relief and slight embarrassment. As she clung to me, murmuring my name and fidgeting, I gently patted her back.

Eventually, she lifted her head.

“Are you okay now?”

“Yes. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions on my own.”

“Then let’s head back. We’ve been gone quite a while.

Everyone’s probably worried, and the food we ordered might get cold.”

Tang Sowol nodded softly. Together, we returned to the inn.

“Hey! If you wanna die, line up now!”

“Nice one, Hyang-ah! Freeze them all!”

There we found Seol Lihyang panting with satisfaction after knocking down a few black-clad martial artists, while Seo Mun-Hwarin clapped excitedly beside her.

“...?”

What in the world happened here?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Hey! If you wanna die, get in line!"

"Nice one, Hyang-ah! Just freeze them all!"

Seol Lihyang was panting with exertion after toppling a brawny thug twice her size with a flick of her hand.

Seo Mun-Hwarin clapped her hands with delight, clearly enjoying herself.

“...What in the world is this?”

For a moment, both I and Tang Sowol stood frozen in place, unable to immediately grasp the situation.

An inn. A rural town. Two women. Armed men...Thinking that far, I began to get the picture.

I wasn't the only one. Tang Sowol hastily pulled me into a corner to hide.

Then she whispered in a hushed voice,

"Brother Cheon, Brother Cheon. This is one of those situations, right?"

"Yeah. High chance that it is."

Martial artists, by nature, tend to burn through time and money.

No matter how hard you train in martial arts, money doesn't fall from the sky.

But martial artists are still people who live among others. Unless you sever ties with the secular world, you inevitably need money.

That's why they usually take jobs where their martial arts are needed—like guards or problem-solvers—to earn income.

But the problem is that there aren't many occasions where someone hires a martial artist for big money.

Famous sects don't have to worry since people seek them out,

but the rest tend to be territorial, trying to guard their own earnings.

That's why even some third-rate black-clad thugs strut around in their turf.

Add to that a bit of local xenophobia and a beautiful outsider woman... and you often get a "fun little incident" like this.

“An inn brawl between martial artists! I always thought that only happened in stories or novels, but it really does happen, Brother Cheon!”

“It’s actually quite common. It’s just that most of the time they back off when they see the Tang Clan’s robes, or if they still approach, I drive them away beforehand.”

Usually, just leaking a bit of killing intent is enough to make them turn tail.

“Aha, then this time...”

“Look at Senior Seorin’s cheerful smile. They’re not dangerous. She’s just enjoying herself.”

Judging from the ones already lying on the floor, they were barely between third- and second-rate fighters.

Just your average neighborhood thugs. Slightly stronger than common rabble.

Even though Seol Lihyang has the weakest martial prowess among us, she’s still a Peak Stage martial artist.

No way she'd lose to opponents like these. They probably let her handle it for the experience—and, it seemed, for the fun of it too.

Honestly, Tang Sowol and I weren't all that different. Watching a fight is always thrilling.

As we quietly observed, one of the remaining thugs bit his lip and shouted to another black-clad man standing quietly at the back.

“Boss! Are you just going to stand there?! All our guys have been taken out!”

“Mm...”

A man with a deep scar running from his forehead down to his chin. He wore a long saber at his waist and nodded gravely.

That guy was probably the leader of the group that picked a fight with Seol Lihyang.

His appearance and demeanor made it clear he was seasoned in the martial world, but here and there, you could see some awkwardness.

A man of ordinary talent who likely failed to master proper martial arts and instead forged his own style through experience—he gave off exactly that impression.

His martial prowess was first-class. And at that level, he must've realized that Seol Lihyang was above him.

So why wasn't he fleeing or apologizing? Simple—his underlings were watching, and no one had died yet. Some were unconscious or injured, but not fatally.

Once he finished weighing his odds, the man smirked.

“You're not bad. But things have come this far, so don't resent me when I collect blood compensation for my men.”

“What's this? Getting scared? A minute ago you were all ‘woman this, woman that,’ but now you're all talk?”

Leaning on one leg and tilting her head mockingly, Seol Lihyang shot back.

She had cleaned up a lot while staying with the Tang Clan,

but Seol Lihyang was still fundamentally someone from the streets.

Even for a short while, she lived among the bottom-feeders in the Hao Clan, so such posturing came out naturally.

The thug boss flinched at her unexpectedly more polished roughness and shook his head.

“Th-that wasn’t me, it was my little brother...”

“Hey. You think just because you’re whispering without a sound barrier in a not-so-big inn I wouldn’t hear you?”

“You’re the one who sent him. And if the younger brother screws up, shouldn’t the older take responsibility?”

The situation wasn’t going as he expected, so the boss clamped his mouth shut, sweating cold bullets.

Meanwhile, Seol Lihyang casually nudged one of the downed thugs with her foot and continued.

“Let’s see. What was it again... Right, ‘woman.’ If you’re from out of town, you should greet the locals first, pour them a drink, maybe take off a layer of clothing? If you’re going to act like that, why not go to a brothel instead of raising a ruckus at an inn?”

Her voice dropped an octave as she mimicked the thug mockingly.

Scattered chuckles erupted from around the inn, though one person—the boss—couldn’t laugh, busy rolling his eyes in panic.

Seol Lihyang didn’t stop.

“Was that it? Got kicked out of the brothels for having no money, an ugly face, and being terrible in bed?”

“Hmm. Looking at your face up close, I think I nailed it.”

“You bitch! So words won’t work on you!”

Despite his words, his expression said he really didn’t want to fight.

Still, he drew his saber, likely thinking he needed to at least pretend to make a stand in front of his men.

Take a few hits, get knocked down, and be done with it—better than sitting there and getting mocked further.

For a black-clad thug with mediocre skills but long survival, it wasn’t a bad decision.

But the problem was that Seol Lihyang wasn’t in the mood to let this one slide.

Maybe it was because he was the ringleader, or because unlike the others, he had drawn a weapon.

Whatever the case, it was clear Seol Lihyang had made up her mind.

Her smirking lips faded into a cold line. Her eyes turned icy.

Then, her lips parted.

This time, she wasn't just using palm techniques and her whip—She was using her demonic sound arts in earnest.

Cold energy, carried on sound, coiled around the thug's arm.

His swinging motion slowed and then froze—his clothes and part of his arm iced over.

“S-sorcery...”

“Humph.”

Seol Lihyang grabbed the side of the saber blade and let her hand, emitting white mist, flow with condensed internal energy into the weapon.

Chaeng!

The blade shattered.

The broken metal flew to the floor as icy mist burst out.

The thug, wide-eyed in disbelief at the sight of a Peak Stage martial artist, couldn't even react before Seol Lihyang's palm struck his abdomen.

Thud.

“Kuhugh!”

He collapsed, spitting blood. His arm was still frozen, and he fell in a twisted posture. She'd probably destroyed his dantian.

Seol Lihyang coolly looked down at the gasping, writhing man and gave a slight nod.

“What are you waiting for? Take them all and get out. Or do you want a turn too?”

“N-no, ma’am!”

The same man who was earlier yelling at the boss for not acting quickly began dragging the fallen thugs out, bowing repeatedly.

No one died, but this was effectively the end of their group.

They’d been completely crushed by one person, and their strongest member had his dantian destroyed. If his arm wasn’t defrosted in time, he’d have lasting frostbite too.

Satisfied with her own judgment, Seol Lihyang sat down with a self-satisfied snort.

Seo Mun-Hwarin giggled as she patted Seol Lihyang on the back.

I quietly stepped out from hiding and spoke.

“I don’t know what happened while I was gone, but haven’t your skills improved quite a bit? At least compared to last time, your internal energy control and power seem much stronger.”

“You were watching? Since when?”

“Since you yelled ‘Get in line if you wanna die.’ You’ve gotten calmer, but your mouth’s gotten sharper.”

“Ugh! That’s because I learned it from you, Cheon Hwi!”

“From me?”

I thought about it.

When I was with Seol Lihyang, I did tend to provoke my enemies, no matter how strong or old they were, if they were someone I had to cut down.

There was a resemblance.

“Right??”

Seol Lihyang beamed proudly. I chuckled and shook my head.

“But I did it all out of necessity.”

“Huh?”

It was true.

This was a psychological tactic. It often failed, but when it worked, it gave me a huge advantage.

It was especially effective on demonic cultists with past trauma.

For example, members of the Shadow Ghost Division or Jeok Yeonghu, the Bloodflame Fist Demon—their composure had cracked at the critical moment.

As I explained this, Seol Lihyang’s face turned red.

“I-I just did it because I was mad.”

“Well, no martial artist likes being looked down on.

But what you said earlier is what really interests me.”

“What part?”

I glanced between Seol Lihyang’s hand, still fanning her flushed face, and the broken saber embedded in the floor.

Finally realizing what I meant, she chuckled awkwardly and nodded.

“It’s nothing. The last time you saw my techniques was, what, a week ago? It’s not like I had some grand epiphany or anything.”

“Then?”

“It’s just... maybe because it’s winter, the air’s full of cold energy. I just borrowed it here and there and added it to my internal energy on the spot.”

So she was using natural energy to assist her own internal energy.

While it’s not rare for Peak Stage martial artists to use ambient qi without storing it in their dantian, the scale is usually minimal. At best, it’s “barely possible.”

That Seol Lihyang was able to wield it effectively was likely due to her talent and her Glacial True Qi, which was nearly divine.

Of course, I didn’t say that aloud.

Realizing such things too early might tempt her to take shortcuts. Right now, she needed to steadily build her foundation.

Seeing Seo Mun-Hwarin frantically shaking her head behind her, I gave a subtle nod and changed the subject.

“Either way, you handled that well. As a woman traveling through the martial world, you’ll run into these kinds of things eventually. Better to practice in advance.”

“I haven’t run into anything like that so far.”

“That’s because I’ve always handled it before you saw it.

Though... something’s still off.”

Right then, the food arrived.

I noticed a few dishes we didn’t order, which made me suspect those thugs were well-known local troublemakers.

That made it all the more puzzling.

As the cheerful server laid out the dishes with gratitude, I asked,

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes? What is it, sir? Ask away! I know all the rumors around here!”

“I heard Jihwahyeon is Jeomchang Sect’s territory. They even have a building nearby. So how come those thugs were causing trouble like that so openly?”

“You mean the Jeomchang Sect? Actually... they locked their gates and haven’t been active for quite some time now.

That’s just a rumor, but...”

The server lowered his voice and glanced around.

“They say the Jeomchang Sect is in such a bad state of internal conflict it’s practically split in two.”

Effectively closed off. Inner strife. And the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Something serious was already unfolding.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After finishing the meal, I lay down on one of the beds in our rented rooms and quietly organized my thoughts.

Jeomchang Sect was in such disarray that they couldn't even handle a bunch of thugs causing trouble out in front—essentially in a state of self-imposed closure.

Worse yet, the root cause of it all was a serious internal conflict that had nearly split the sect in two.

No matter how exceptional Jeomchang Sect's martial arts might be, or how solid their foundation was outside of that, in this condition, their decline couldn't be written off as temporary.

It was the classic pattern of a sect's collapse. Though it hadn't happened yet, in a year—maybe three at most—they'd be facing annihilation at the hands of the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

So, in hindsight, the destruction of Jeomchang Sect before my regression had been inevitable.

Still, what concerned me wasn't why Jeomchang Sect, a once-prominent group, had been wiped out overnight.

What bothered me was something else entirely.

“They already know.”

Jeomchang Sect was already aware of the existence of the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Right now, they were likely divided—those who opposed and those who supported accepting the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

“Or maybe... they only just realized it.”

If they had found and brought in a Heaven-Slaughter Star from elsewhere, most would've opposed it.

Because no matter how talented, they were simply too dangerous to accept—as martial history had proven time and time again.

More likely, one of their existing disciples had started to show the symptoms of a Heaven-Slaughter Star's awakening.

I'd already investigated the topic and learned more during my time at Shaolin.

As far as we know, the Heaven-Slaughter Star is indistinguishable from an ordinary person at birth.

Before awakening, they're just a child with decent talent—nothing stands out.

But as they grow, they begin to exhibit strange signs—bursts of killing intent, violent tendencies, enjoyment of bloodshed.

Their personality begins to warp. And as their inner nature becomes more twisted, their talent begins to blossom at an alarming rate.

In famous cases, a nobody with no knowledge of martial arts suddenly wielded an axe a few times and self-taught his way to the Peak Stage.

Or someone from a third-rate family mastered third-rate martial arts, only to ascend to Sub-Perfection in a few years, unleashing a bloodbath.

A previously average person suddenly begins growing at an absurd pace.

There are even frequent instances where someone with no martial training at all invents entirely new techniques on the spot.

It's nothing short of an unnatural, monstrous talent—hence the claim that their potential is on par with those born with the Heavenly Martial Body.

However, the more their talent awakens, the deeper their bloodlust becomes.

And when they fully awaken, the Heaven-Slaughter Star becomes consumed by murderous intent—killing everyone in sight, indiscriminately, like a berserker demon.

In other words, the Heaven-Slaughter Star is harmless until their nature is awakened. But once that switch flips, they evolve at terrifying speed while bathing the world in blood.

This is why it's so difficult to detect them in advance.

But then... can't an unawakened Heaven-Slaughter Star live quietly and die peacefully?

I wasn't the only one to have that thought. Countless martial artists throughout the years had tried to determine what triggered the awakening.

Unfortunately, the conclusion wasn't encouraging.

There is no definitive trigger.

Sometimes, emotional extremes like rage or despair could be catalysts, but there are also cases—like the disciple of the former Heaven-Slaughter Star, Monk Gakjeong—where the transformation happened out of nowhere, with no warning.

If someone in Jeomchang Sect had awakened as the Heaven-Slaughter Star, and it had caused such deep division, then that person was likely a highly promising disciple.

Realizing that someone so admired was a Heaven-Slaughter Star, and that they'd have to be either executed or imprisoned—say, in the Murim Alliance's underground prison—would be unbearable for many.

“Solving it is easy, technically speaking.”

The unspoken rule in the martial world is simple—eliminate a Heaven-Slaughter Star the moment one is discovered.

And I have both the justification and the strength to enforce that rule.

Frankly, if I stormed into Jeomchang Sect and started cutting people down, no one would be able to stop me.

The issue is... that's not my only reason for seeking the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

My goals are also to prevent Jeomchang Sect's destruction and, through this incident, increase my influence within the orthodox sects of the martial world.

Even if I did nothing, the Heaven-Slaughter Star would bring mutual ruin to Jeomchang Sect.

But if I were to storm in and kill them myself—sure, the sect might survive, but would they ever agree to join the Orthodox Alliance that I'm organizing?

They'd feel humiliated, emotionally shaken, and resentful—

Even if they didn't outright become enemies, they'd definitely keep their distance.

And then, half of the reason I came here would be for nothing.

“If only they didn’t know...”

If they’d been unaware, they might’ve been shocked and heartbroken, but it wouldn’t have led to inner conflict.

And once discovered by an outsider, they’d have no choice but to act.

So, what should I do?

Whether I kill or imprison the Heaven-Slaughter Star, something must be done. But if I act alone, backlash is inevitable.

“Haa...”

This isn’t something I can resolve right away.

For now, I'll have to visit Jeomchang Sect tomorrow and investigate for myself before deciding on a course of action.

If things go smoothly, great. If not, I'll have no choice but to give up on some of my objectives.

The next morning.

After confirming that everyone was ready, I spoke.

“Alright. Let's head out.”

“Dear. I know it's late to say this, but... don't be too disappointed if things don't go well. There are countless excellent swordsmen in the Central Plains eager to cross swords with someone like you.”

“What's this all of a sudden, Senior Seorin?”

“You already heard about Jeomchang Sect’s state yesterday.

Before I went to sleep, I thought about it, and... they might not even let us in.”

She reached her small hand toward me, hesitated, then tiptoed up to gently pat my shoulder.

She must’ve been thinking about this all night. Maybe she felt I was expecting too much, and didn’t want to bring it up.

To be honest, I was interested in their sword techniques, putting aside all the complicated issues.

It was originally an archery technique that had been transformed into a sword style—yet it still counted as an ascending art. And even more rare, it focused heavily on thrusting techniques.

It was hard not to be curious.

Of course, what Seorin noticed in me wasn’t just pure interest in swordsmanship.

As someone who's lived with killing intent my whole life, it's only natural that the existence of the Heaven-Slaughter Star weighs on me.

Not to mention the burden of having to resolve that issue one way or another.

Since Seorin doesn't know any of this, to her, it probably looked like I was just excited about Jeomchang's swordsmanship and anxious I might not get to witness it.

Smiling faintly, I covered the back of her hand on my shoulder with my palm and nodded.

"No worries. We'll talk first. If it doesn't work out... well, that'd be unfortunate, but that's all."

"If that's how you feel, I'm relieved."

As Seorin's tone softened, I gave a small nod in appreciation and began walking toward Jeomchang Sect.

"Hmm?"

I was still holding Seorin's hand on my shoulder... or rather, I was pressing it down, preventing her from pulling it away.

"Would you mind... letting go of my hand?"

Seorin was being dragged along with her hand stuck on my shoulder, still tiptoeing.

Of course, as someone at the Flowering Stage, she could walk like that without losing her balance. But the real issue was her short legs.

Her feet weren't even touching the ground properly, so she couldn't use lightfoot techniques. She just kept waddling along—until something clicked in her mind, and she suddenly raised her head.

"Wait! Was this your plan all along?!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"If that's how you're going to play it, then I have my own response!"

Her expression turned serious. Then she bent her knees and leapt into the air.

Both feet rose into the air—and I wondered why, since she'd just land and be on tiptoe again. But then—

Ttep.

“What the—?”

She began walking across the air as if it were solid ground.

She used Void-Stepping just for this petty reason?

I stared at her silently in disbelief. She must've taken it as admiration.

“Ahem.”

She shrugged her shoulders like she was saying, Can you do this too?

It did irritate me a little. I might be at the Flowering Stage now, but I'm not fully accustomed to it yet.

I can draw out sword energy with some ease, but using protective qi takes long preparation and burns through my willpower and internal energy too fast to last.

Void-Stepping is similar. I'm still just practicing Void-Grasping with light objects—being able to support my whole body is still far off.

I thought about dashing forward with lightfoot techniques and making her drop, but—

“Brother Cheon, don't tease Sister Hwarin too much. She is older than you, after all.”

“I-I'm fine!”

“And aren't you holding her hand for a bit too long?”

“Not that I mind, of course. But this hand’s free, and it’s a little cold today.”

Tang Sowol gently waved her free hand. Seeing that, Seorin glanced around and reluctantly let go.

She then quietly moved next to Seol Lihyang and whispered a sound transmission.

I already knew what I needed to do.

Grab.

I took Tang Sowol’s hand, and only then did her smile bloom with satisfaction. Seorin let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Only Seol Lihyang shook her head in disbelief, as if watching fools.

And so, in a rather cheerful mood, we arrived at Jeomchang Sect.

While not quite on the level of the Five Supreme Clans or the Nine Great Sects, it was still too large to be considered an average sect.

But no gatekeepers stood watch at the main gate.

For a sect of this size and reputation, they should have dozens of visitors a day. Gatekeepers are meant to guide or turn away such people—they are the face of the sect.

“Should I knock?”

Just as Seol Lihyang tilted her head and reached for the gate’s handle—

A thick, unrefined killing intent exploded from within.

It lasted only a moment—then vanished, as if blocked by something.

But it was unmistakable.

The killing intent of the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Though I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, everyone instinctively froze—their expressions hardened.

I nodded toward them.

“Looks like we don't have time to wait for permission.”

How we'd get in and find the Heaven-Slaughter Star had been the problem...

But I guess that just solved itself.

I exploded into lightfoot movement and leapt over Jeomchang Sect's wall.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A short but unmistakable surge of killing intent. Even Seol Liyang, whose cultivation was the lowest among us, trembled instinctively at the overwhelming threat, causing everyone's expression to stiffen.

“There’s no time to leisurely wait for permission.”

Without hesitation, I leapt over the wall using lightness skill.

The interior, though clean as if newly built, felt desolate and empty. Tang Sowol glanced around and spoke.

“Which way should we go?”

“This way.”

Though the killing intent had vanished as if blocked by something, I could still faintly sense its location, being particularly sensitive to such things.

Heading directly toward the sting I felt at the back of my neck, we soon came upon a firmly shut door.

The silence around us was uncanny, but the unnatural flow of qi from within made the situation clear.

“A concealment formation?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but it seems Jeomchang Sect is trying to hide something. This doesn’t look like an ordinary disturbance.”

“We’re going in.”

“You do realize this means interfering in another sect’s internal affairs. Are you sure?”

“I had a bad feeling from the start. This time, please trust me completely.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin asked again, perhaps hesitant about interfering in Jeomchang Sect’s matters. She wasn’t wrong, considering the unspoken rules of the martial world. But now wasn’t the time to care about that.

I stepped forward and opened the door. Inside was a training ground. The Jeomchang Sect warriors, realizing our presence belatedly, drew their swords in alarm.

“Who are you?!”

“Even if we arrived without notice, drawing swords first—is that the way of Jeomchang Sect?”

An elderly man pressed his lips together. His cultivation was at the edge of Peak Stage, and his formal robes suggested he was a sect elder or someone of similar standing. He paused at my words, then slowly sheathed his sword.

“Are you from the Tang Family? My apologies. However, this is an internal matter of Jeomchang Sect. Would you please leave for now? We will properly receive you as guests shortly.”

He positioned his body to block the center of the training ground.

Of course, it was too late. We had already seen everything.

A frenzied woman struggling wildly and multiple experts trying to subdue her.

“This is a Jeomchang Sect matter, you say?”

“Yes. One of our disciples seems to have fallen into qi deviation. Please step back so no one gets hurt.”

“Qi deviation, huh.”

I nodded and then drew my sword. Even if her aura was concealed and her disheveled hair obscured her eyes, I knew.

That was no ordinary case of qi deviation.

“How dare you! You call yourself guests and now draw your sword? Is this the Tang Family’s way?!”

The elder parroted my earlier words right back at me. I chuckled and released my aura in full.

“W-what...?”

The elder flinched, stunned. With his experience, he must have sensed the unique aura of someone in the Flowering Stage. I walked past his frozen figure and spoke.

“This isn’t a Jeomchang Sect matter. It’s a matter of the martial world. And that’s not qi deviation—it’s the Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

With that, I swung my sword.

Wuung—

In sync with my motion, the sword let out a clear ring and emitted a pale, condensed energy.

Though the blade cut through empty space, it wasn't mere showmanship.

What I held was the resolve born from the pain of my blade failing to reach its mark when it mattered most.

Now, with my will infused into my sword, I would strike even what couldn't be cut, reach even what couldn't be reached.

Ssskuk.

The sword cut through space itself, slicing the concealment formation in a single stroke.

It wasn't merely disrupting the energy maintaining it—it cleaved the formation itself.

The barrier dissolved cleanly without recoil, along with the twisted flow of meridians it had suppressed.

At the same time, the sound and dense killing intent that had been trapped inside burst outward.

“Aaaaahhh—!”

“Third Elder! Sword Division Chief! Is the acupuncture point sealed yet?!”

“It’s not working, Sect Leader!”

“We can’t hold her anymore! At this rate, we’ll—!”

The sect leader and two others were desperately trying to subdue the rampaging woman. It didn’t look easy.

No wonder—the Heaven-Slaughter Star was no joke. Her killing intent was horrifying.

The sect leader, a Sub-Perfection master, seemed to be holding up, but the others, though Peak Stage, were clearly struggling.

As someone who often uses killing intent to subdue enemies, I could tell immediately.

Their cultivation couldn't withstand such intense killing intent. Their bodies were stiff, their movements sluggish.

In some cases, this kind of exposure could even result in internal injuries.

They seemed young for their positions and might one day reach Sub-Perfection, but that day wasn't today.

Unable to do anything effective, they alternated pressing random acupuncture points. I grabbed both by the napes and yanked them back.

They collapsed weakly, clearly exhausted. With the two gone, the Heaven-Slaughter Star's killing intent focused solely on me.

“As expected, quite the extraordinary aura.”

If my killing intent was like a sharpened blade, hers felt raw and primal, like a beast’s fangs.

What was unusual, however, was its purity.

Killing intent usually stems from a desire to kill, and is accompanied by emotions like anger, urgency, or hatred.

But in her case, none of those were present.

She might have felt annoyance or frustration at being restrained, but those emotions didn’t taint her killing aura.

She was simply radiating a pure desire to kill—for no reason at all.

That was what made it so unnerving.

“But, she’s still far from complete.”

The Heaven-Slaughter Star wasn't fully awakened yet. Though fierce, her killing intent wasn't quite on par with what I had once harbored.

I pressed an acupuncture point with internal energy infused not just with qi but with my will, cultivated at the Flowering Stage.

That would prevent the killing aura from interfering.

“Just rest for a while.”

In an instant, her head drooped and her body slumped. The thick killing aura vanished completely.

The middle-aged man, Jeomchang Sect's sect leader, gently laid her down on the floor. He looked both exhausted and oddly relieved.

“Are you from the Murim Alliance?”

“I'm from the Tang Family. But I doubt our purpose is any different.”

“I knew this day would come eventually. I just didn’t expect it to be today. Would you grant me a moment? I’d like to speak.

With you, and with my daughter as well.”

He gently brushed the tangled hair from the woman’s face. Her features resembled his greatly.

After the chaos, the sect leader invited us to his office.

He laid his daughter—the Heaven-Slaughter Star—on a bed in the corner.

It seemed this kind of incident had happened before. Being both her father and the only one capable of stopping her, he had clearly prepared in advance.

He sat with his back straight despite his worn expression, a gesture to show he was still the sect leader.

“We should introduce ourselves. I’ve been so focused on internal matters these past months that I’ve barely kept up with outside affairs. Even with a renowned figure before me, I have no idea who you are.”

“That’s understandable. But I wouldn’t say I’m that renowned.”

Maybe because of my youthful appearance and Flowering Stage cultivation, he mistook me for a rejuvenated senior expert.

I shook my head at the memory of similar misunderstandings in the past, as Tang Sowol chuckled behind me.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded solemnly, and Seol Lihyang simply looked away, sighing deeply.

Surprised by our reactions, the sect leader blinked and asked again.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No. If anything, we’re the ones in the wrong.”

I gave a respectful martial bow.

“I’m Cheon Hwi-da of the Tang Family. I’m known as the Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

“W-what?! You’re really the Blood Flame Sword Demon?! I only just heard of your breakthrough to Sub-Perfection not long ago, and yet—!”

The sect leader gaped, stunned. As his gaze moved to the others, they each introduced themselves and their titles.

Realizing that two Flowering Stage martial artists stood before him, the sect leader gulped and spoke.

“My apologies for the late introduction. I am Heo Yunsang, sect leader of Jeomchang Sect. Though I pale in comparison to you all, I am known by the title ‘Flashing Sword.’”

“Please don’t be so formal. I’m much younger, and not nearly as well-established in the Murim.”

“Thank you. Then, I shall call you Young Hero Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

Softening slightly, the Flashing Sword poured us tea and gestured to the bed.

“And this child is my daughter, Heo Soye. I suspect you’ve already guessed—but she’s likely inherited the Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“Yes. I noticed something strange about her killing aura. Seeing it in person confirms it.”

“You say ‘likely,’ as if there’s still a chance she’s not. That gives me false hope.”

“I’ve never seen the Heaven-Slaughter Star with my own eyes until now. I’m only being cautious. Please don’t take it the wrong way.”

“Ah. Forgive me. I know you’re right. I just... as a father, I can’t let go of my hopes.”

Letting out another deep sigh, Heo Yunsang downed his hot tea as if to drown his regret.

Clack.

He set the cup down and continued, his voice heavy.

“What happens to my daughter now?”

“Does she often lose control like that?”

“Not always. But it’s becoming more frequent.”

“Then, there’s no immediate danger. But we will have to send her to the Murim Alliance.”

She doesn’t need to be executed—yet. But she must be confined.

Understanding the implication, the sect leader stared silently at his empty teacup before speaking.

“If... if I were to begin strict internal control of her from now on—”

“Forgive my bluntness, but I don’t believe Jeomchang Sect has the capacity to contain the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

And if needed, you would have to sever her meridians and destroy her dantian. Could you truly do that?”

Severing a person’s meridians and destroying their dantian is no simple matter. It causes extreme pain, and many end up crippled for life.

Even then, the Heaven-Slaughter Star could still overpower most martial artists.

If things get truly out of control, killing her may be the only solution.

But I doubted the Flashing Sword—who had tried so hard to hide his daughter’s nature—could do it. He must have known that himself, for he simply lowered his head.

A heavy silence settled over the office.

That silence was broken by the slamming of the door and a desperate voice.

“Master! What happened to Soye—ah...”

The man froze upon seeing us, then let out a sigh of disbelief. And we, too, were surprised.

Because I recognized him.

“Brother Jang?”