

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 191-200

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“Master! What happened to Soye... ah.”

A man who called out the name of Heaven-Slaughter Star appeared, but let out a sigh of lament when he spotted us.

He must have realized that Heo Soye's identity had been revealed to outsiders and could no longer be hidden as before.

But we were just as surprised on our end.

“Brother Cheon?”

“You know me?”

The man, still with a half-dazed expression, asked in a feeble voice.

“Aren’t you Jang Inam, who grew up in Yangsu Village in Zhejiang Province?”

“That’s true, but who in the world are you...?”

Jang Inam squinted, glancing around at the air as if trying to recall something.

Did he not remember? Well, I have changed a lot since then.

Even the first time we met after my regression, he didn’t recognize me—so this isn’t surprising.

Jang Inam.

Back when I was still a child struggling to survive under the enemy sect Red Sand Gang, desperately doing whatever I could—he was someone I met during those days.

As his name suggests, the second son of the Jang family, he was born in a backwater village with nothing, yet he held grand ambitions.

He was a peculiar man who, dreaming of one day roaming the Central Plains as a martial artist, went as far as to be conned in buying third-rate martial arts manuals and taught himself with great difficulty.

Of course, the village saw him as an oddball, but he actually had some talent for fighting. And because of his unique, kind-hearted nature, most people liked him.

However, he was too kind, too dreamy, and possessed too little compared to what he sought.

When the Red Sand Gang began wreaking havoc in the village in earnest—and I was barely surviving day by day under my mortal enemies—Jang Inam stood up alone to oppose them.

Naturally, he was beaten mercilessly.

Still, because he was well-regarded and his father had some influence in the village, his life was spared—but perhaps as a warning, the Red Sand Gang severed his right arm, so he could never hold a sword again.

Had it ended there, he would've just been another reckless young man victimized by the underworld.

But the reason I remembered Jang Inam for so long is simple.

He was my first martial arts teacher.

Of course, the Red Sand Gang never taught me proper martial arts.

As a child, they made me do chores, and as I got older, they taught me half-baked martial arts just so they could suppress me at any time.

Especially with internal techniques, they omitted so many crucial parts that building internal energy was nearly impossible.

So I sought out Jang Inam, now disabled and likely a broken man.

I figured if he was useless to them now, maybe he'd throw his martial arts my way.

If neither of us had much, I might as well learn something complete rather than a crippled version.

I went to his house with that in mind—and to my surprise, he was still training, clumsily swinging with one hand.

I hadn't expected he hadn't given up.

I thought it wouldn't work, but... he willingly shared his internal art.

Everything he had learned, however poorly, he gave to me—

for free.

He was the first person to ever show me kindness when all I had known was resentment and enmity.

But what followed wasn't good.

Jang Inam soon lost his entire family to a plague.

Devastated and hopeless, he once again rushed at the Red Sand Gang—but of course, nothing changed.

Even if he was second-rate at best, how could he, who hadn't properly learned martial arts, beat seasoned fighters?

He was beaten nearly to death and expelled from the village barehanded.

He didn't die only because the Red Sand Gang feared the plague.

Since his family died from it, they assumed he was infected too.

Afraid they might catch it, they just beat him with sticks and threw him out.

After that, I didn't see Jang Inam for some time—but now I think I understand why.

By some twist of fate, he entered the Jeomchang Sect, but must have lost his life caught in Heaven-Slaughter Star's rampage.

It wasn't planned, but...this time, I might be able to repay the kindness I once received.

If I take Heaven-Slaughter Star away, Jang Inam won't have to die.

With a faint smile, I spoke.

"I'm Cheon Hwi. That kid who once learned martial arts from you, Brother Cheon."

"...What?"

"Oh! Heavens! You're really that Cheon Hwi?!"

"You grew up safely! Thank goodness. I truly mean it. But those clothes..."

"I'm part of the Tang Clan now. I found a good marriage partner."

At that, Tang Sowol stepped forward and gave a respectful martial salute as if waiting for the moment.

Jang Inam, still dazed, returned the gesture—then suddenly his eyes widened.

Looking back and forth between me and Tang Sowol, he burst into loud laughter.

“Life is truly mysterious. That I would become a disciple of the Jeomchang Sect, and you, the son-in-law of the Tang Clan!”

Despite losing an arm and likely having had many illusions about the martial world shattered, Jang Inam still wore that same kind smile.

But it didn't last long.

“And that you, Cheon Hwi, would be the one to take Soye away... that's even more unexpected.”

His voice, which had briefly risen in excitement, dropped heavily again.

After a long silence, Jang Inam spoke with difficulty.

“The martial arts I gave you... did it help?”

“Yes. Thanks to you, I was able to gain the strength to defeat the Red Sand Gang.”

“Then I have one request.”

With that, Jang Inam suddenly dropped to his knees. Placing his only hand on the ground, he bowed deeply.

“Please. Could you pretend you don’t know about Soye?”

None of us had expected such a sudden and desperate gesture. We all froze.

Only Heo Yunsang, the sect master of Jeomchang Sect, erupted in anger.

“What are you doing! You know that things will only get more difficult now that the truth is out! Stand up at once!”

“But, Sect Master... no, Father-in-law! Isn't there still a chance that something can be done?”

“I thought so too! I want to believe that! But while you were out, Soye lost control again. And this time, even the elders' pressure point strikes didn't work!”

“That's...”

“She has already reached just shy of the Peak Stage, despite keeping her distance from martial training. Now, not even I can stop her. Soon, even that might not be possible.”

Heo Yunsang helped Jang Inam to his feet. He didn't say anything more, and Jang Inam quietly stood up without resistance.

Amid the heavy silence, a small rustle broke the stillness.

“Mm...”

Heaven-Slaughter Star, Heo Soye, who had been unconscious until now, sat up.

“Father? And Brother Jang...? I see... I lost control again, didn't I.”

Speaking in a self-mocking tone, she spotted us and began looking around uncertainly. I downed the remaining tea in one gulp and stood.

“For now, I'll leave you three to talk.”

“Ah, I see. The guest room might be a bit dusty from disuse, but you're free to use it as you like.”

Nodding at Heo Yunsang's words, I left with my companions.

We had our own discussion to hold.

In a cramped guest room given by the Jeomchang Sect—just enough for one, but tight for four—I spoke first.

“How about we just kidnap her?”

“...Who exactly are you talking about?”

“Again with this?”

“Wait, how did you even know she was Heaven-Slaughter Star?!”

Everyone chimed in.

Tang Sowol agreed but wanted to know who, Seol Lihyang stared, blinking as if fed up, Seo Mun-Hwarin simply demanded an explanation.

And none of them protested the idea of kidnapping someone.

That warmed my heart a little.

But I couldn't bask in that feeling now.

“Of course, I mean Heo Soye. Possibly Brother Jang too, depending on the situation. As for how I knew—well, I'm particularly sensitive to killing intent, so I noticed something off. As for a plan... actually, I don't have one.”

After answering them one by one, my last words made everyone tilt their heads.

“I was joking, kind of. I don’t really have a plan. We should think one up now.”

“Hey! Isn’t this a really important situation? Is this the time for jokes?!”

“You...”

Seol Lihyang tapped the floor in frustration, Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head like she was watching a tragedy unfold.

Tang Sowol just gently patted both their shoulders with a soft smile.

“Now, now. Let’s not be too harsh. We all know Cheon Hwi’s original stance was firm, right?”

“That’s true. At first, he said we should send Heaven-Slaughter Star somewhere with proper supervision.”

“But you started hesitating... it must be because of that disciple of yours from your hometown.”

“Exactly. No matter how I look at it, I did receive help from Brother Cheon. I want to repay him, even a little. And... I had another thought.”

“What kind of thought?”

“When I visited Shaolin, Master Gakjeong told me something. I can’t share it without his permission, but...Seeing someone try to help his daughter, his lover, despite knowing she was born with Heaven-Slaughter Star...

reminded me of Gakjeong’s story.”

Gakjeong, having given up too quickly, killed his own disciple with his own hands when she momentarily regained sanity.

He couldn’t forget the bloodlust from the battlefield she exuded, or the moment she let go of it—So he abandoned his martial arts and continues to research Heaven-Slaughter Star to this day.

And he actually succeeded in predicting its emergence.

Until now, the accepted belief was that Heaven-Slaughter Star appears without warning and cannot be cured or controlled.

But Gakjeong overturned the first assumption.

No one knows how.

If the second—its uncontrollability—is also not absolute...

If no one simply knew how to control it...It might prove to be incredibly useful in the future.

“Of course, it’s all hypothetical. If even Gakjeong can’t help, I’ll go through with the original plan and head to the Murim Alliance.”

I could say that only because there was still about a year left before Heaven-Slaughter Star would fully awaken.

Tang Sowol, after deep thought, opened her mouth.

“I understand, Cheon Hwi. If that allows you to lighten your heart of two burdens, then I believe it’s the right choice. However.”

“However?”

“If that’s your reasoning... couldn’t we just contact Shaolin and ask Master Gakjeong to come here instead of kidnapping Lady Heo?”

“...Ah.”

Maybe I’ve gotten too used to extreme methods lately. That hadn’t even occurred to me.

“We don’t... have to kidnap people, do we.”

“Why do you sound like you’ve just had some great realization over something so obvious?” said Seol Lihyang, baffled.

I listened to her incredulous voice with one ear and let it out the other.

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After scrapping the kidnapping plan, we arrived at the evening meal.

Perhaps they had been bracing themselves in the meantime, but a quiet yet resolute determination could be seen on the faces of Heo Yunsang and Jang Inam.

In contrast, Heo Soye, now composed and well-mannered, no longer resembled the beast-like figure we had last seen. She simply looked apologetic.

She knew her fate—either death or imprisonment for life in a dungeon—but more than that, she seemed worried about the damage her loss of control might bring to her sect.

Each of them was preparing for tomorrow in their own way, but their expectations, however slight, would likely be overturned.

“Was the room alright?”

“Yes. You mentioned the upkeep might be lacking, but I didn’t notice anything at all.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. There’s not much on the table, but I hope it suits your taste.”

“Before that, there’s something I’d like to discuss, Sect Master.”

“I’m listening.”

Heo Yunsang flinched briefly at my words, then straightened his posture and nodded.

Facing him, I conveyed what I had shared earlier with the others.

“The reason I don’t intend to take Lady Heo away right now is because the Jeomchang Sect can’t handle the rapidly growing threat of Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“That much, I’m aware of.”

“However, while we’re staying here, the situation is different. We have two Flowering Stage warriors, one Sub-Perfection, and one Peak Stage. Even if she’s Heaven-Slaughter Star, for the time being, we can restrain her ourselves.”

“Surely, you don’t mean...?”

“Yes. I intend to delay taking her for now and remain here temporarily.”

At those words, Heo Yunsang and Jang Inam both took deep breaths, as if their resolved determination was suddenly wavering.

The one to speak up next was Heo Soye, who had been silent until now.

“No. Please take me away at sunrise tomorrow. My father, Brother Jang, and everyone else... you’re all too kind. The longer I stay, the more regrets will grow. So just...”

“You seem to be misunderstanding. I’m not saying we’ll stay here indefinitely, increasing the danger. There’s one final thing we’d like to try.”

“Try...? What do you mean?”

Heo Soye's laugh was laced with bitterness, her tone growing slightly sharp.

“Do you think we just sat idly by, waiting for my madness to worsen? We've tried everything we could.”

“Everything, you say.”

“Yes, everything. I didn't tell my father, but as soon as we learned of my condition, the very first thing I attempted was destroying my own dantian. It failed, of course.”

“Soye... What are you saying...?”

Heo Yunsang recoiled in shock. Heo Soye bowed her head briefly, then continued.

Unlike the others, she had accepted her reality early on.

Perhaps it was because it was her own body.

She recognized that, no matter how much she trained, she couldn't resist the impulse born from within, and thus tried to destroy her dantian.

The problem was, every time she tried, Heaven-Slaughter Star's instincts would erupt violently, and each attempt ended in failure.

She had even gone to the elder who insisted that she be dealt with according to the iron laws of the martial world—but whenever she felt truly threatened, Heaven-Slaughter Star would awaken uncontrollably.

If simply trying to destroy her dantian triggered such resistance, then any attempt on her life would surely provoke even greater backlash.

That was why no one had dared to lay a hand on her, even when the Jeomchang Sect nearly split apart in conflict.

Not because she was the sect master's daughter, but because, aside from Heo Yunsang, no one could stop her when she rampaged.

“So, beyond those simple methods, we tried everything we thought might help.”

They even invited a master from the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace, the very ones who had once driven the Jeomchang Sect out of Mount Jeomchang, asking him to cast a technique that reduced a beast's aggression on herself.

She tried sedating herself and attempting dantian destruction while in a half-conscious state.

She experimented with unknown ancient methods from obscure tomes.

She even tried venting her impulses by killing animals rather than humans.

Literally every possibility they could think of was tested, but all ended in failure—as everyone could see.

After speaking without pause, Heo Soye took a deep breath and resumed.

“I got too emotional. I apologize. But truly, there's no hope left. It would be better to entrust my neck to those of you who can restrain me no matter how violently I struggle.”

“You're saying... instead of another useless attempt, you'd rather we kill you?”

“Yes. Wouldn’t that be better than staying alive and burdening my father, my sect... or my beloved?”

“What melodrama. Sounds like something straight out of a play.”

“You said you reached Flowering Stage before even coming of age, didn’t you? But you don’t seem so different from me. I doubt you truly understand what it’s like to be powerless against something no matter how strong your will.”

“...Huh?”

A bitter chuckle escaped me, unbidden. And a voice scolded her from beside me.

“You insolent girl! Soye! He is a guest of Jeomchang Sect! How dare you speak like that! Did I raise you to be so disrespectful?!”

“My apologies, Cheon Hwi. Her mental state has grown quite fragile. Please, if you can, be understanding—for my sake.”

Even Heo Yunsang and Jang Inam were trying desperately to smooth things over.

Yes. I understood.

Normally, even someone my age wouldn't be addressed so carelessly in front of a Flowering Stage martial artist.

No matter how upright and orthodox a sect is, martial artists in the murim world understand that in the end, strength rules.

But when someone has completely given up like Heo Soye,

when they even wish to be killed—they're no longer afraid of anything.

Maybe she was hoping I'd be provoked and draw my sword right then.

So yes—I understood. But the reason I laughed wasn't out of mockery or anger.

“You're misunderstanding something.”

I set down my chopsticks and looked straight at Heo Soye.

And for the first time in a long while, I let my killing intent pour forth.

A bloodlust that seemed to press down on the very air itself.

Now that I had reached Flowering Stage, I no longer needed to cling to killing intent the way I once had. I knew what I truly wanted now.

But that didn't mean I had lost the ability to release it. Any martial artist at this level can exude it—it's just a matter of degree.

“Wh-what...”

“Huup!”

My companions were used to it by now, and since the intent wasn't aimed at them, they remained calm. But the three from the Jeomchang Sect were different.

Especially Heo Soye—her eyes widened as if she'd been struck in the head.

The killing intent of Heaven-Slaughter Star was alien and senseless, sticky and cloying.

But even so, she hadn't yet fully awakened.

Maybe one day, but not now. Not enough to surpass the killing intent I'd cultivated through countless hellish battles.

Frozen in place, Heo Soye stared. I narrowed my eyes and spoke.

"You said that if your life were in danger, your instincts would awaken. But even under this pressure, you're calm. I suppose that makes sense. If survival instinct is the trigger... this is the expected response."

When faced with a foe they have a chance of defeating, the beast bares its fangs. But when they sense true hopelessness, they retreat and hide.

It's the smarter way to survive.

Heo Soye continued to gaze at me, then finally spoke.

“How... How can you carry this much killing intent and still be fine?”

“Because I own it. And because what I truly want is not the death of others.”

“Could I... be like that too?”

“I don’t know. That’s why we want to try.”

I withdrew the killing intent.

And facing the newly resolved Heo Soye, I gave a slight smile and continued.

“If you’re alright with it, I’ll send a letter to Shaolin. There’s a monk named Master Gakjeong there...He once raised a previous Heaven-Slaughter Star as his disciple, so he should know quite a lot. Of course, I’ll help however I can as well.”

“Of course, that’s fine. But why are you helping us like this?”

I heard you had ties to Brother Jang in the past...”

“Brother Jang left quite an impression on me.”

In Zhejiang Province, where the martial world was filled with outlaws, Jang Inam, who dreamt of becoming a chivalrous warrior, ultimately failed—but he left my young self with much to think about.

“More than that, I also received quite a bit from him.”

Even if his skills were only third-rate, he passed them on freely.

He shared leftover food when I was starving, gave me firewood and clothes in winter.

Of course, he might have only done so because his family was well-off at the time, or maybe for other reasons.

But whether it was to restore his shattered confidence after being beaten by the Red Sand Gang, or because he was truly a noble-hearted man—the fact remains that I received his help.

It's because of Jang Inam's figure, flailing with only one arm, that I didn't stay in my hometown to rule after defeating the Red Sand Gang.

That I didn't become like other martial artists of the underworld—reaching a certain level, joining a sect, indulging in pleasures, and fading away.

Upon hearing that, Jang Inam looked deeply moved.

I shrugged at him.

“Don't get too emotional. Don't you think I've repaid that favor too generously?”

“Well... you have a point.”

“In that case, don't forget this moment. If something happens to me later, I expect you to come running. That's all I ask.”

“Of course. I promise it.”

“I’ll be with you then as well.”

Jang Inam patted his chest with his remaining arm, and Heo Yunsang nodded with a stern expression.

Good.

Now, even if things go wrong and I have no choice but to kill Heo Soye, they won’t direct their resentment at me.

And Master Gakjeong will get a chance to confront his lifelong regret.

This attachment too, will meet its conclusion—one way or another.

Even the current abbot, who has long been concerned about Gakjeong, will likely look upon me favorably.

Then, I remembered something.

“Ah, Sect Master. There’s one thing I’d like to ask directly.”

“Go ahead. What is it?”

“Would you be willing to spar with me?”

“...?”

“At full power, if possible. Don’t worry—I won’t let your blade touch me.”

Heo Yunsang blinked in astonishment.

But still, it had to be done.

I couldn’t come all this way and leave without witnessing the sword of the Jeomchang Sect.

As I nodded to myself, I felt a slight tug at my sleeve.

Turning my head, I found Tang Sowol gently pulling on it.

“Cheon Hwi. Cheon Hwi.”

“Hm?”

“You were really smug just now.”

“I really like that about you though.”

Tang Sowol’s smile gave me a strangely complicated feeling.

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Sincerity often does not get across.

Among the greatest realizations I gained upon reaching the Flowering Stage was that willpower... or rather, the human heart, is far deeper and more complex than one would think.

That's why focusing it on a single point isn't as easy as it sounds.

For the same reason, conveying one's true feelings to another is also an extremely arduous task.

There are plenty of times even a person cannot fully understand their own heart, and yet they attempt to convey it through something as uncertain as words and actions.

That's why sincerity often ends up being distorted. Not because of anyone's fault, but simply because that's how people are made.

"No, isn't it just that you're a little socially awkward, Cheon Hwi?"

"How lamentable. I can't believe even you, Seol Lihyang, didn't understand my sincerity."

“Of course I know what you were trying to say. Being able to fight at full strength without any worries against someone at a higher level than yourself is a rare opportunity. You thought it was good and wanted to recommend it to others, right?”

“Mm. That’s right.”

“But normally, if someone who looks thirty years younger than you comes at you full-force and says something like ‘Try coming at me, rookie,’ people will think one of three things: they’re bragging about their level, they’re looking down on them, or they’ve got issues with their personality.”

...Well, there’s no argument against that.

When I first brought up the sparring, the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal’s expression was pretty complicated.

Like he was contemplating whether to get angry or not.

As I recalled that moment, Tang Sowol, wearing a gentle smile, suddenly wedged herself between me and Seol Lihyang as we lay resting.

Not figuratively—she literally slipped between us, laying my head on one of her knees and Seol Lihyang’s on the other.

“Now, now. Isn’t it something we don’t need to worry about anymore? In the end, even the Sect Leader acknowledged that Brother Cheon’s words were meant in goodwill. And you two even sparred for several hours today.”

“That’s true.”

Ever since we sent a letter to Shaolin, I’ve been sparring with the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal on occasion.

And just as I expected, while the overall martial strength of their members was somewhat lower, the martial arts of the Jeomchang Sect were exceptionally refined, on par with any major sect.

Their swordsmanship was focused solely on the principle of speed, and perhaps due to its origins in archery techniques, it was an extremely aggressive art, prioritizing offense over defense.

That’s why the sword, though single-minded, was honed to a razor’s edge and couldn’t be taken lightly.

Had we been at the same level, I wouldn’t have been able to dodge his thrusts in time.

His footwork was diverse, yet the Four-Direction Sword Art had only a single move—one thrust. That implies it wasn't designed with the expectation that the opponent would dodge or block.

That thrust alone was overwhelming. To face the Four-Direction Sword Art properly, one would have to think not about blocking or evading, but about striking down the opponent before the sword is swung.

“In that respect, it resembles the martial arts of the Hwangbo Clan a little.”

Although I only stole glances, the Hwangbo Clan's Taesan Crushing Fist quietly endures the enemy's attack, then smashes through all obstacles with a single punch.

In contrast, the Four-Direction Sword Art weaves around to create an opening, then drives a thrust into that gap at the fastest possible speed.

They're mostly opposites, but at the core—they share the same idea: to pierce the opponent with the best possible strike.

I know a few other techniques that work similarly, and like when I defeated the previous head of the Hwangbo Clan, I can mimic them to some extent.

They're fairly powerful too.

But at the end of the day, it's still just mimicry.

My martial arts are based on a principle: bring out the right technique at the right time.

Cut powerfully when needed, stab quickly when required, and deflect gently when appropriate.

It's not easy, but thankfully I have some talent for it, and I've managed to get by until now.

Still, compared to those who focus solely on one path, I can feel the limitations.

Hwangbo Yeongcheon was obsessed with talents forcibly drawn out through Evil Methods and trickery, having abandoned the martial arts of his own clan, so he's an exception.

The Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal I fought today, on the other hand, had built his current level through proper and consistent training.

The thrusts he unleashed—at least those—were naturally more refined and faster than mine.

To him, the Four-Direction Sword Art was a sword in which he had invested everything, simple yet refined, and sometimes the only weapon to challenge those stronger than himself.

And I need something like that too.

Not just a thrust—but a move that contains all of myself. A technique to reach someone overwhelmingly powerful—specifically, that monster known as the Heavenly Demon.

To put it simply—

“I need a secret technique.”

“Eh??”

Tang Sowol tilted her head. I snuggled into her lap, trying to find a more comfortable angle before continuing.

“Lately, I’ve been thinking I need a definite trump card—like Ten Thousand Blossoms in the Sky for hidden weapons, or Formless Extreme Poison for poison arts.”

“Hmm. A secret technique... It’s certainly something worth considering for someone like you, Brother Cheon.”

Like most Flowering Stage martial artists, those who ascend through a single martial art naturally acquire its secret techniques.

By now, Seo Mun-Hwarin—who should be keeping watch near Heo Soye in my place—would have mastered the Seomun Clan's secret art through consistent training.

Though in her case, it might be a fist technique instead of a sword.

Anyway, at the end of advanced martial arts lies something worthy of being called a secret technique—but for someone like me, who has customized all sorts of fragmented arts, I have no choice but to create one myself.

“They say secret techniques take shape according to one's heartscape and willpower.”

“I've heard something similar from my father. The one who invented Formless Extreme Poison apparently lived their whole life harboring poison in their heart after enduring many tragedies.”

“Though I can't fully understand, I imagine the realization might've been something like—poison that eats away at one's own heart is deadly to others too, and because it has no form, no scent, no tangible existence, it's all the more terrifying.”

“So reaching the Flowering Stage really does change something, huh? Sometimes, you really do seem impressive, Brother Cheon.”

“Sometimes? I'd appreciate it if you admired me more often.”

I shrugged and joked... though truthfully, I had heard something similar from the pre-reversion Tang Sowol.

She was also someone whose poison mastery wouldn't lose out anywhere.

I brought up the topic hoping it might help her someday...

But it seemed Tang Sowol was focusing on something entirely different.

“Heung. Did you know, Brother Cheon?”

“That came out of nowhere. But I’ll bite—what is it?”

“Since the engagement ceremony, I’ve been receiving lessons for becoming a bride.”

Of course I didn’t know. You never told me. But now I do.

“Originally, I was supposed to learn from my mother, but as you know, she passed away early.”

“Right.”

“So I’ve been referencing old family texts and receiving lessons from the married women among our retainers. And they all seem to say one thing in common.”

Tang Sowol's lips curled into a smirk.

“Men love being recognized and praised. They adore being told how amazing they are.”

“Well...”

I can't deny that. The desire for honor may vary from person to person, but recognition from those close—especially a wife or lover—is something all men treasure.

Even if they know it's said with ulterior motives.

“You really are amazing, Brother Cheon. Have I ever told you how often I'm thankful for and in awe of you?”

“Kuh!”

Tang Sowol's voice tickled my ears. With each movement of her lips, her breath brushed against my skin, sending pleasant shivers down my spine.

“You’ve always been there when I needed you. Yes. Over the past few years, that hasn’t changed, so I can’t help but feel reassured whenever you’re around.”

Her hand slowly slid toward my upper body. Perhaps because of the thick winter martial clothes, she added slight pressure to ensure I could feel it even through the fabric, gently caressing here and there.

“When we first met, you were smaller and just cute... Who would’ve thought you’d grow up to be so gallant.”

“Isn’t your word choice a bit off?”

“It’s all thanks to your diligent training, Brother Cheon.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“Especially after your transformation, you’ve become exactly my type...”

“W-wait. Is this still praise? It’s starting to sound weird.”

“Fufu, I’ll leave it to your interpretation, Brother Cheon.”

Tang Sowol raised her head slowly.

At the same time, Seol Lihyang, who had been frozen and barely breathing until now, suddenly trembled beside us.

Returning to her usual demeanor, Tang Sowol gently helped me up and spoke again.

“It’s time to switch shifts with Sister Hwarin, isn’t it?”

“Already?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin and I had taken turns keeping watch over Heo Soye, in case her Heaven-Slaughter Star flared out of control.

It had already been half a day—my turn was coming up.

Feeling vaguely unsettled, I stood up and straightened my slightly disheveled clothes.

As I confirmed the sword at my waist, Tang Sowol waved from behind, holding a bright-red Seol Lihyang tightly in her arms.

“Then off you go. Hyang and I will be waiting.”

“I’m not sure why you’d wait in my room while I’m not there... but I’ll be back.”

Waving back lightly, I stepped outside.

If the morning had been spent helping Seol Lihyang with her martial arts and sparring with the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal—

Now was the time to teach Heo Soye a few tricks I’d learned through practicing the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art to suppress her murderous intent.

As I walked toward the training hall, looking up at a sky more violet-black than red as the sun began to set...

A Jeomchang Sect disciple, one whose face I had seen before but name I didn't know, came running up to me, panting.

He was of lower rank, typically doing errands... had something happened?

I paused to wait. As he reached me, catching his breath, he spoke.

“Blood Flame Sword Demon! He's here!”

“Who is?”

“The ones from Shaolin you mentioned before!”

“I see.”

Considering the time it takes for a letter to be exchanged, they arrived earlier than expected.

“Well done. I was just on my way to Lady Heo anyway. I’ll guide them. The Sect Leader is at the training hall, yes?”

“Yes!”

The young Jeomchang disciple answered energetically. I patted his shoulder lightly and turned my steps toward the gate.

Not long after, I reached the entrance to Jeomchang Sect—and there stood a familiar elderly man.

Not just one, but two.

“Namu Amitabha. It’s been a while, Benefactor.”

“It has... But is it alright for you to leave your post so easily?”

Abbot Jeong Hyeon of Shaolin, who had been carrying Monk Gak-jeong, responded with hands in prayer.

“If it’s truly the Heaven-Slaughter Star, then it’s all the more reason the Abbot of Shaolin cannot remain absent.”

That’s true. The existence of the Heaven-Slaughter Star wasn’t a matter for one sect, but for the entire martial world.

“And if Master passes out again after encountering the Green Forest Bandits, we’d be in trouble.”

“Mm.”

That was... a joke, right?

Not a funny one, considering how many times I had knocked out Monk Gak-jeong.

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“Was it truly the Heaven-Slaughter Star?”

Despite this being our first meeting in a long while, Monk Gak-jeong skipped any greetings and immediately asked if it was really the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Though his body was here, his mind was clearly elsewhere—it was obvious just how much the Heaven-Slaughter Star was weighing on him.

Abbot Jeong Hyeon let out a wry smile and opened his mouth to say something, but I responded a little faster.

“At least from what I’ve seen, yes. Others also share that certainty. Of course, since none of us have encountered a real Heaven-Slaughter Star before, it might still be mistaken.”

“No, if Young Benefactor Cheon says so, then it must be true. After all, to this monk’s knowledge, you’re the martial artist most adept at handling murderous intent, and now your level stands among the highest in Murim.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Anyone who has once reached the same realm would be able to tell. Even if their body can no longer sense qi.”

Monk Gak-jeong nodded slowly, pressing his palms together as he continued.

“Forgive this monk for being too hasty in my concern. It has been a while, Young Benefactor Cheon. And congratulations on becoming one of the new absolute masters. It seems this old man will live to see a new wind blowing through the martial world before he’s buried.”

“Thank you. Though I feel like the road ahead has only grown longer.”

“Whether it's the path of martial arts... no, whatever it may be, anyone striving for the end of their path will likely feel the same. What once seemed a destination becomes a new starting point. Still, I’ve heard there is something more important you wished to share than an old monk’s advice. Could you tell us in more detail?”

“Do you know how shocked I was when I heard from Master that the Heaven-Slaughter Star had been found?”

Jeong Hyeon let out a hearty laugh, but in his eyes, there was a trace of resentment and even more resignation.

It wasn’t directed at me. Rather, it was because he had witnessed Monk Gak-jeong’s obsession with the Heaven-Slaughter Star ever since losing his disciple—and now, here they were entangled with it again.

Whether to ultimately kill the Heaven-Slaughter Star once more, or this time desperately trying to save her...

Either way, it was only further deepening Monk Gak-jeong's lingering regrets and wounding him again.

Still, the reason I had summoned Monk Gak-jeong despite knowing this, and the reason Abbot Jeong Hyeon hadn't stopped him but accompanied him, was simple:

Just as was said earlier, the Heaven-Slaughter Star's existence was a matter so rare and momentous that it stood out even in a world like Murim, where fantastical events happen frequently.

All the more so if Monk Gak-jeong had managed to uncover even a part of its secrets.

I nodded inwardly and opened my mouth, careful not to trigger any mental restrictions.

“First, let me explain why I came to visit the Jeomchang Sect.”

There wasn't much left to explain once all the unspoken things were filtered out. By the time we arrived at the training grounds, I had conveyed nearly everything.

As the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal reeled from the surprise that the Abbot of Shaolin had suddenly come in person,

Monk Gak-jeong and I merely offered him brief greetings before heading straight to where Heo Soye was.

There, seated in the center of the training hall in lotus position, was Heo Soye. Beside her, Jang Inam kept glancing anxiously at his beloved.

Opposite them stood Seo Mun-Hwarin, passionately explaining something.

“Senior Seorin, it’s time to switch shifts. Also, the guest you’ve been waiting for has arrived.”

“Thus, the only way to overcome murderous intent is by resolutely strengthening one’s own will from day to day... Hm?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin turned toward me, her solemn expression instantly blooming into a bright smile.

“Ah! Half a day already! But the guest is...?”

“It’s been a while, Benefactor.”

“You arrived much sooner than I expected.”

Though they hadn’t spoken much at Shaolin, they were at least acquainted.

Recognizing Monk Gak-jeong, Seorin exchanged a few light words with him, then introduced Heo Soye and Jang Inam.

Afterward, while observing Monk Gak-jeong conduct some inquiries to determine whether Heo Soye truly was the Heaven-Slaughter Star, I asked:

“Senior Seorin, just earlier, you seemed to be teaching them something. May I ask what it was?”

“There’s no reason you can’t. I was teaching how to endure murderous intent.”

“Not suppress it, but endure it?”

“Correct. Her beloved said he felt powerless and resentful when she was at her worst and he could do nothing.”

It seemed the one being taught wasn't Heo Soye, but Jang Inam.

Understandable. A rampaging Heo Soye couldn't be subdued easily by anyone in the Jeomchang Sect unless they were a mature master like the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal.

Judging from his presence, Jang Inam had just passed the threshold into the Peak Stage. Far from helping her, he'd likely be paralyzed by her murderous aura.

If it were me, I'd also feel frustrated and worthless.

“I see. But then, are you not teaching anything to Lady Heo?”

“She knows how to release emotion and empty her heartscape to fill it with something new... but she's not one to maintain composure.”

“Is that so...?”

Right now, Seo Mun-Hwarin laughs easily, but before regression, she was the opposite—always serious except for rare moments.

I definitely prefer her now. That former heaviness had come half from resignation.

At least now, she seems truly happy.

As I thought that, Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes narrowed and her voice took on a more solemn tone.

“Indeed. Whatever method I could think of, she's surely already tried. After all, what I know isn't how to suppress the Heaven-Slaughter Star's murderous aura—but only how to pierce through it and kill, no matter how terrifying it may be.”

“Well, we can't say that with certainty.”

The more Monk Gak-jeong conversed with Heo Soye, the more intense the fire in his gaze became.

He, too, had committed many killings in the name of upholding the Dharma. It was precisely such killings that led him to slay a disciple he might not have needed to kill.

And now?

Though his obsession had deepened, his heart was filled with a desire to genuinely help the Heaven-Slaughter Star this time.

Though no doubt he was also prepared to kill her again, should it become necessary.

After a while, Monk Gak-jeong nodded and looked toward me.

“Could you bring in the others?”

“Understood.”

I summoned Abbot Jeong Hyeon and the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal, who were chatting some distance away, and once they had gathered, Monk Gak-jeong began to speak slowly.

“Sect Leader. While I haven’t personally witnessed her rampage, your daughter is without a doubt the Heaven-Slaughter Star. She matches many aspects of my former disciple.”

“I see.”

The Sect Leader nodded calmly, seemingly already aware of this. But what came next shook him slightly.

“And... she appears to have a gentler nature and greater self-control than my disciple. To think she’s maintained her sanity at this age...”

“Pardon?”

Had he been expecting harsh criticism? The unexpected praise made the Sect Leader blink.

Monk Gak-jeong smiled warmly and continued.

“Many nowadays think the Heaven-Slaughter Star is a type of innate constitution, but based on my direct observation and experience—it is not. Do you know why it’s called ‘Heaven-Slaughter Star’?”

“That’s...”

Apparently caught off guard by the question, the Sect Leader hesitated, so I spoke up instead.

“If it were a constitution, it would have a name indicating such. But it was given a title derived from the stars above because...it’s a trait so incomprehensible and irresistible by human means that it feels like fate.”

“That’s half right. The ancients likened it to a celestial omen—an unavoidable fate of slaughter bestowed by the heavens. But this monk believes that while there may be such things as life’s fate, there is no true destiny.”

From Monk Gak-jeong now radiated a force not tied to cultivation, but to his core as a person.

“Neither Buddhism nor Taoism teaches that all things are fixed. There are things that change and things that do not—but even those interact and create constant change. That’s why so many monks and Taoists strive to become better people and live better lives.”

“Fate... Still, isn’t there a saying that when fortune runs out, gold turns to iron, and when the time is right, iron becomes gold?”

Nothing is truly impossible. It’s just that we don’t yet know the method or have the right conditions—someday, it will be possible.

Such comforting words. And for Monk Gak-jeong, who foresaw the Heaven-Slaughter Star by reading such fate, and for me, who changed many futures through regression—it’s not merely comforting, but truth.

Still, it’s also true that right now, it’s impossible.

Why didn’t I kill the Heavenly Demon when I regressed to the moment he was at his weakest?

Because I couldn’t. At that time, I wouldn’t have even made it to where he was—I’d have been killed by the Demonic Cult’s martial artists before that.

“It may be possible someday—but the most important moment is always the present.”

“Young Benefactor Cheon is right. But for this monk, the present has already passed.”

Monk Gak-jeong smiled bitterly, then began pulling items out of the large bundle he had brought.

“Shaolin rejects Esoteric Buddhism (密教), but it was the practitioners who strayed, not the teachings. This, too, is part of the Buddha’s wisdom.”

“Wait—those are old Shaolin ritual implements we don’t even use anymore! When did you take those, Master?”

Abbot Jeong Hyeon looked dumbfounded as he saw the contents. But Monk Gak-jeong simply brushed off his disciple’s protests.

“No one noticed, since they weren’t being used.”

Just as Daoist sects once practiced sorcery more than swordsmanship, there was a time when Esoteric Buddhism, which uses implements and mantras, thrived in Buddhist sects.

Now, due to various issues, all Buddhist sects except the Potala Palace have distanced themselves from it.

But Monk Gak-jeong had decided to try using it once more.

“And now, memorize this incantation I’ll teach you. It won’t fully prevent the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s awakening, but it should at least stop her instincts from going berserk over minor triggers.”

He even passed down a heart mantra imbued with both Shaolin martial arts and his own enlightenment.

Monk Gak-jeong was motivated, and Heo Soye readily accepted his instruction.

There was no certainty—but with hope, things were going smoothly.

Heo Soye had not gone berserk once. The faces of the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal and Jang Inam were smiling again, and even the skeptical Abbot Jeong Hyeon began to harbor a faint hope.

If things continued this way, perhaps for the first time in Murim history, someone would successfully control the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

That's what I thought.

There is no trigger for the Heaven-Slaughter Star's awakening.

Because the sky is clear, you want to kill. Because today's food was delicious, you want to kill. Because your lover's words were sweet, you want to kill...

That is the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Heo Soye, who had been doing fine—went berserk.

While walking in the courtyard with Jang Inam.

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There is no trigger for the awakening of the Heaven-Slaughter Star.

However, once it awakens, anyone—even from far away—can sense that bizarre and horrific murderous aura.

Just like now.

Kuwoooong!

Like ripples spreading from a stone dropped on still water, a powerful murderous aura surged through the air.

Anyone who trained in martial arts... no, even ordinary people without qi-sensing ability would freeze at this chilling sensation, halting whatever they were doing.

Those with lower martial strength turned pale and began to tremble. Those who could endure it all turned toward one direction in unison.

Tang Sowol, who had been enjoying a relaxed post-meal chat with Seol Lihyang just moments before, spoke with a hardened expression.

“Young Master Cheon. This is...”

“It’s Lady Heo’s Heaven-Slaughter Star. Though I’m not sure if we can even call this a mere outburst.”

Previously, when I’d seen Heo Soye’s murderous aura in the training hall, I could tell right away she was the Heaven-Slaughter Star. But that was all.

As for the intensity of her aura—it was, at best, comparable to that of a notorious demonic path cultivator. It never reached me.

That’s why it had been possible to contain it through various Peak Stage martial artists' energy seals.

But now, it was different. Even at a fair distance, the sensation was like a thin blade scraping across the skin—startling and chilling.

Heo Soye’s murderous aura was now vastly more intense, incomparable to before. No energy seal could contain this, and even if one tried, the resulting internal backlash would injure the person casting it.

“The last I saw of Lady Heo, she was heading off for a walk with Brother Jang.”

“Yes, they definitely went toward the courtyard. But don’t worry—Sister Hwarin went along too, didn’t she?”

“Then at least the worst-case scenario won’t happen.”

The worst case, of course, would be Heo Soye going mad and indiscriminately massacring those around her.

But if Seo Mun-Hwarin was there, that outcome could likely be prevented.

“We should go immediately. What will you do, Tang Sowol?”

“I’ll follow. I’ve trained this hard so I could support Young Master Cheon by your side.”

“Understood. But it’s dangerous—do not step ahead of me unless absolutely necessary.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

With a nod from Tang Sowol, we took to the air with light movement techniques.

The place we arrived at, following the murderous aura, was a small courtyard—normally used for brief rest by disciples, adorned with a few seasonal flowers. A small but well-maintained place.

But now, it had become a space where such serenity could no longer be found.

The overwhelming murderous aura made even breathing difficult. Plants that had curled up awaiting spring simply withered and died.

As if too much sunlight had scorched the world to death, like some ancient myth, the entire space was slowly dying.

Jang Inam, who had accompanied Heo Soye, was collapsed on the ground, clutching at his throat and barely able to breathe.

Seo Mun-Hwarin stood in front of Heo Soye, having clearly stepped up immediately once the situation broke out.

But for some reason, she wasn't striking with her fists nor sealing pressure points—she was simply standing there, silently, guarding Heo Soye.

Looking closer, Heo Soye was trembling, but barely holding on.

It seemed she was trying to suppress her aura of her own volition, and Seo Mun-Hwarin was merely watching over her attempt.

That much, I could understand.

“To emit this level of murderous aura... and still maintain rationality?”

“Perhaps the methods Monk Gak-jeong prepared are proving effective.”

Nodding, I made my way toward the collapsed Jang Inam.

Despite not being able to withstand the aura, he kept his eyes wide open as if unwilling to let Heo Soye out of sight even for a second.

His resolve and burning will were admirable—but that alone wouldn't solve anything.

I drew my sword and infused it with internal energy. Immediately, a white Qi Blade surged forth.

What I needed to do now was simple.

Murderous aura is essentially internal energy mixed with killing intent. Its intensity depends on the depth of that intent, and its breadth on the richness of the internal energy.

Meaning—if you can interfere with either factor, you can do something about it.

With a slow exhale, I swung my sword toward Jang Inam.

Ssskuk.

A sensation like cutting through something reached my fingertips.

Just like slicing through the combined energy seal that the Jeomchang Sect elders had once conjured—I had cut through a portion of Heo Soye’s aura and disrupted its flow.

Thanks to that, Jang Inam, now freed from the pressure of the aura, gasped for breath and turned his head.

“What the... Ah.”

Seeing our faces and understanding why we were there, Jang Inam’s expression turned pale.

“Brother Jang, we’re just as curious as you. What happened between you two while you were away?”

“You know that Soye and I promised ourselves to each other, right?”

“Of course.”

“It took a long time before the Sect Leader and elders finally approved of our marriage. I suppose it’s no surprise—even when I was first taken in as a disciple, they debated for a while since I’d lost an arm. To accept me as a son-in-law would have taken even longer. Though now, it seems to have faded into obscurity.”

Jang Inam gave a bitter smile and staggered to his feet before continuing.

“Yes... it took too long. Long enough for Soye’s true nature to finally reveal itself.”

“Mm. Brother Jang, I understand something big must have happened. But now’s not the time. Please just tell us the result.”

“We said that before her full awakening as Heaven-Slaughter Star, we should marry and maybe even have a child if possible.”

“I proposed again—and she was happy. But then, suddenly... she started rampaging like this.”

Jang Inam said this with a pained expression.

It was unexpected, yes—but I understood what had happened.

What had thrown me off when I first sensed Heo Soye’s murderous aura was simple:

There was still some time before the Jeomchang Sect's downfall, as I remembered from before the regression—so why had her awakening come so soon?

But now I knew: she'd been overjoyed by Jang Inam's words—only to awaken violently.

More likely, the Esoteric Buddhist method Monk Gak-jeong used had a side effect that accelerated the process.

As I thought—there is no specific trigger for the awakening of the Heaven-Slaughter Star...

“Wait.”

Something tickled at the edge of my mind—a sensation just out of reach.

Is it really true that the Heaven-Slaughter Star has no trigger?

I can say with confidence—there's no one in the Central Plains who understands murderous aura better than I do. Among those who are not Heaven-Slaughter Stars, I am the closest to one.

I could not ignore this faint insight.

As Monk Gak-jeong, Abbot Jeong Hyeon, and the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal arrived, Tang Sowol began explaining the current situation.

Meanwhile, I organized my thoughts and then asked Monk Gak-jeong, who was holding on with Abbot Jeong Hyeon's support, despite having no internal energy left:

“Monk Gak-jeong. Is it possible for someone who has awakened as Heaven-Slaughter Star to endure it without going berserk?”

“Yes. My disciple was like that... just before they died.”

“Regarding the Esoteric Ritual you recently used on Lady Heo—I know it suppresses murderous aura, but could you explain its principle in more detail?”

“Young Benefactor Cheon. Why would such a thing matter at a time like this—”

Maybe because the past overlapped too closely—the emotional Monk Gak-jeong choked on his words, paused, then met my gaze.

“Do you remember the story I told you before? About Angulimala?”

“The former Heaven-Slaughter Star who took refuge in Buddha and broke free from the cycle of slaughter, yes?”

“Correct. The mantra is the teaching the Buddha gave Angulimala. By reenacting that moment, it contains the power to pull those tormented by murder out of their torment.”

“By reenacting, you mean...?”

“He was blinded by a false awakening and used the evil teachings of his former master to justify his slaughter. The Buddha corrected that error.”

“More specifically, what did he say?”

After a brief pause, Monk Gak-jeong recited solemnly:

“Angulimala, I have stopped, and I have forever laid down the sword for all beings. But you—having no restraint toward life—have not stopped, though I have.”

“As I thought... thank you.”

“Did you realize something?”

“Before cutting down Lady Heo, I have one thing I must try.”

It has always been said: There is no trigger for the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s awakening.

Because people killed for ridiculous, meaningless reasons—out of nowhere.

But having experienced that murderous aura up close, I think differently.

It’s not that there is no trigger—everything is a trigger.

Whatever one sees, feels, or thinks, it all culminates in a compulsion to kill. Because no clear origin of the aura can be discerned, it seems as though there is no trigger.

The alien quality of the Heaven-Slaughter Star's aura—stripped of emotion or intention—is likely a byproduct of this truth.

If everything can be a trigger, then no single feeling or intent can dominate.

And the mantra Monk Gak-jeong shared—it offers a new kind of trigger.

By confronting someone who bears no killing intent, perhaps the raging murderous instinct can be subdued once more.

“Of course, this is all conjecture. I know little of Esoteric Buddhism and have never closely observed a Heaven-Slaughter Star. I'm simply piecing together what I've felt from Lady Heo and what I've heard.”

“It's fine. At this point, our remaining options are only whether to cut off the head or the limbs.”

Monk Gak-jeong shook his head at my words. The others didn't say anything, but their silence meant they were thinking similarly.

Breaking that silence, Abbot Jeong Hyeon spoke.

“I understand your reasoning. But is it even possible? Any martial artist, when faced with murderous aura, instinctively responds with hostility.”

“True. The only ones who might suppress Lady Heo’s murderous aura would be her father, the Sect Leader, or Brother Jang. But the Sect Leader is too strong—he’s lived too long as a warrior.”

“Ah...”

The Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal nodded grimly.

As Abbot Jeong Hyeon said, martial artists instinctively respond to murderous aura with aggression. And the Sect Leader was far too used to it.

Which left only one option.

All eyes turned toward Jang Inam, who was still gazing anxiously at Heo Soye.

“M-me??”

“Yes. It has to be you, Brother Jang.”

Among everyone here, he alone fits the term pure-hearted martial man. And he's the only one who, even in this situation, could ask her to bear his child—blinded by love.

Assessing Jang Inam's cultivation quietly, Tang Sowol cautiously asked:

“Um... just in case, should I give you a strong anesthetic poison beforehand, so you don't feel pain?”

No. He's not going in to die.

...Though if this goes wrong, he might just die after all.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Just in case... shall I administer a strong anesthetic poison beforehand, so you won't feel any pain?”

Her tone was like one offering the barest mercy to someone heading to their death.

Jang Inam's level was just at the beginning of the Peak Stage. Considering he had reached that stage at roughly thirty and had started learning martial arts seriously only later, it was objectively impressive.

However,

“It'll be fine. Though Lady Heo's Heaven-Slaughter Star has awakened, she hasn't completely lost her reason yet.”

Even at this moment, Heo Soye was crouched down, struggling to suppress the uncontrollable killing intent.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was watching over her carefully. So that if necessary, she could swiftly take her life.

“I can’t speak for later, but for now, she won’t lash out with her sword... The issue is whether Brother Jang can pierce through that killing aura.”

“Hm.”

Jang Inam looked toward Heo Soye, letting out a hum. For now, I was holding back the overwhelming killing intent, so he was okay, but just a moment ago, he had collapsed to the floor, barely able to breathe.

For someone like that to approach Heo Soye relying solely on his own strength... it could result in severe internal injury, or perhaps even deviation.

If unlucky, it might even lead to death.

Jang Inam surely knew that too.

“As I said before, this isn’t a guaranteed method. It’s merely a conjecture based on my senses and what I’ve heard from Elder Gakjeong. I might be wrong. It might require more than just contact. Either way, it could be a pointless risk.”

After a long silence, Jang Inam finally opened his mouth.

“That doesn’t matter.”

His expression firm, as if he had made a decision. It was the same look I remembered seeing in my childhood—when he taught me not all martial artists were cruel.

“Cheon Hwi. Do you know what kind of instruction I asked from Lord Seo Mun?”

“I recall it was about enduring killing intent.”

“That’s right. Soye asked that if things went wrong, I should be the one to end her life. So I sought guidance, and Lord Seo Mun willingly helped me. Most likely, the reason she’s holding on now is because she wants to meet death at my hands, not anyone else’s.”

What is the heart of someone who lives like a condemned soul, choosing to die by their beloved’s hand rather than kill them?

What does someone feel, when they train for the sole purpose of fulfilling such a plea?

I cannot comprehend it. Perhaps no one could unless they were the person themselves.

But there is one thing I can say for certain.

“This was something I had to do anyway. I just lacked the strength and could only sit there... You’ve given me another chance. Thank you.”

There was no trace of hesitation in Jang Inam’s humble smile.

He started toward Heo Soye but paused briefly to bow deeply toward Heo Yunsang.

“Thank you for everything. For accepting me into the Jeomchang Sect, for allowing my marriage to Soye... for all of it.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve burdened you with something heavy.”

“It’s a burden I must bear. Please don’t take it to heart, Sect Leader—no, Father-in-law.”

Then Jang Inam stood. He hesitated for a moment, then unfastened the sword at his waist and set it down on the floor.

“Brother Jang... are you sure about this?”

“Wasn’t it you, Cheon Hwi, who said I should face Soye with no hostility or intent to kill?”

“That is true, but...”

“More than anything, Soye asked me to kill her, but to be honest, I don’t want to do that. Isn’t that only natural?”

Who would want to kill the one they love with their own hands?”

“Then...?”

“If I fail, then it can’t be helped. I won’t hold any resentment. So don’t worry about me—just do what’s needed for Soye’s sake.”

“Understood.”

I nodded, then sent a silent message to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Let's give them a moment alone. If things go wrong, she, Master Jeong Hyeon, and I would step in.

Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed unsure at first, tilting her head. But upon sensing the atmosphere and seeing the resolute Jang Inam, she began walking toward us, still on alert for Heo Soye.

Jang Inam, on the other hand, stepped away from the others' protection and faced Heo Soye's killing aura directly.

Just one step—and his whole body flinched. Yet he did not fall. Instead, blood trickled from his clenched lips as he took one painful step after another.

Had he injured himself just by forcing his body forward? At some point, black blood—not just from his lips, but gushing from his throat—soaked the front of his robe.

Killing intent is the most basic application of willpower combined with internal energy. Thus, enduring it requires either immense internal power or refined will.

Jang Inam's internal strength isn't impressive. What moves him now is a honed, razor-sharp will. And the will he displayed now clearly exceeded his limits.

He carried no sword. His arms were far from whole. But he did not stop. Like an arrow fired with all his being, he didn't falter or retreat. He looked forward and marched on—

Toward Heo Soye, who stood at the center of a killing aura as scorching as the sun.

“...Ah.”

Only then did I realize.

A life devoted entirely to reaching a single goal—throwing oneself into it with no reservations.

That's the true essence of the Jeomchang Sect.

The Sword of Four Deaths is merely a branch supporting that way of life.

If I were to create a martial way of my own, it must embody that same essence—my every realization, my entire life.

Covered in blood, Jang Inam extended his only remaining arm.

And when his fingertips, like the tip of an arrow, touched Heo Soye's face—

Woong—

A strange vibration rippled outward from Heo Soye, then contracted.

The intense killing aura, once palpable even from afar, condensed into a single point.

With all that killing intent reclaimed within her, Heo Soye lost consciousness and collapsed.

Moments later, Jang Inam, who had overexerted himself to embrace her, also collapsed.

Master Gakjeong, who had been staring in a daze, rushed over and checked their pulses.

“Phew...”

He let out a deep sigh of relief, like someone who had been holding their breath.

“They’re both safe! They’re halfway to the other side, so we need a physician right away, but still!”

It was the moment the awakening of Heaven-Slaughter Star had come to a close.

In the days that followed, we remained at the Jeomchang Sect to monitor their recovery.

Jang Inam’s internal injuries were severe, but thanks to timely treatment, they didn’t escalate.

In fact, perhaps the enlightenment he experienced wasn't just mine—his cultivation rose significantly.

After full recovery, he might become an even greater martial artist than before.

Heo Yunsang, grateful for saving his daughter and believing Jang Inam to be the sect's future, spared no support.

Next was the most important—Heo Soye.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. How was she today?”

“No issues again today. No—she seems much better than before.”

The three of us, including Master Jeong Hyeon, took turns watching over her.

Surprisingly, she was stable. Her face, once blank from constantly suppressing her urges, now gradually showed expressions again.

She even said it felt like she had returned to her childhood, with no impulses erupting at all.

“I never imagined it would go this well. She kept her talent and lost the killing aura? I thought at least one would have to be sacrificed...To be honest, I feared both she and Brother Jang might die that day.”

“Still, we can’t be too sure. Don’t relax just yet.”

“Those staying longer will handle that.”

If Heo Soye’s Heaven-Slaughter Star truly settled, it was thanks to the technique Master Gakjeong found buried in old tomes.

Thus, he would remain for a few months longer to observe her. Later, Shaolin would conduct regular checkups as well.

“By the way... tantric Buddhism, was it?”

A sect of Buddhism that emphasizes chants and rituals.

Unfamiliar in the Central Plains, but common at Potala Palace.

Though often shunned for its side effects, it holds unique properties that ordinary martial arts can't replicate.

I don't plan on learning tantric arts now, but it's worth researching further.

Potala Palace lies beyond Xinjiang, in the region of Tibet...

And near it lies the Demonic Cult.

Perhaps the Heavenly Demon's power, which current martial arts can't explain, originates from something else entirely.

If so, such knowledge might become vital when facing the Heavenly Demon someday.

“Still, now that this is resolved... what do you plan to do about Lihyang?”

“Yeah... that’s the problem.”

Seol Lihyang had been training alone in another courtyard.

She felt the wave of killing aura and tried to rush toward the source, but the thick aura froze her body the closer she got.

By the time she arrived, everything was already over.

Apparently, she was shocked to learn that Jang Inam—whom she thought, and likely was, weaker than herself—managed to break through the killing aura and reach Heo Soye.

Ever since, she’s been overexerting herself and pestering me to release killing aura at her.

“I think I get what she’s thinking.”

“Kuheum. Lihyang tends to worry too much about being a burden.”

“She’s actually improved a lot since that fight with the Bloodflame Fist Demon.”

Seol Lihyang is prideful.

More precisely, she grew up in a harsh environment where pride was all she had.

Now, someone her age but far ahead in martial level—me—is beside her.

She still feels a slight debt toward me.

“We’ll talk on the road to the Murim Alliance. I’m sure she’s aware of her own tendencies. She’ll be fine soon.”

“Then that’s good.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded, and we began quietly packing our things.

We planned to leave the Jeomchang Sect tomorrow and head to the Murim Alliance,

With a letter from Shaolin's Abbot Jeong Hyeon, reporting the incident.

"We found the Young Palace Lord...!"

"Huh."

We never expected to meet people from the Northern Sea Ice Palace at the Murim Alliance.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

When Tang Jincheon and Seo Mun-Hwarin brought Tang Sowol and me down from the peak of the Thousand Poison Gate while we were unconscious, Naturally, they made sure to grab a few of the sect's martial arts as well.

Time was short, and we lacked manpower, so they couldn't take much...But apparently, they managed to secure all the important ones.

Right now, the martial scholars of the Tang Clan are likely busy dissecting and researching those new poison techniques, which had developed under their own unique system.

I skimmed through a few of them too, but all I could confirm once more was that poison arts just don't suit me.

That said, a few techniques stuck with me... among them was an experimental martial art created to counter the techniques of the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace, the ruling power in Yunnan.

It makes sense—the Five Venoms Sect was annihilated by the Beast Palace, and its survivors were gathered by the Poison Demon to form the Thousand Poison Gate with the Tang Clan's help.

If you're recruiting subordinates with the promise of revenge, at least pretend to be preparing for it.

That's how I came to indirectly learn about the martial arts of the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace—and they were even more unique than I expected.

It's not surprising they've taken the forms of beast-style martial arts, like tiger or mantis styles from the Central Plains, to their extremes.

But the astonishing part is that they can freely communicate with beasts, teach them martial arts, turn them into artificially created spirit beasts, and perfectly sync their movements.

The Thousand Poison Gate had viewed this bizarre quality as the Beast Palace's true strength, so they studied and analyzed it intensely.

Eventually, they discovered that although it looked like they were communicating verbally, in truth, it was through gestures.

Some beasts were even capable of expressing emotions through specific repetitive behaviors.

For example, the wolves often seen in the Beast Palace would spin in circles chasing their tails when feeling anxious.

Just like Seol Lihyang is doing right now.

“Sit down already, you're making me dizzy.”

“Ah, yeah...”

Seol Lihyang obediently sat down with a blank expression.

On the way from the Jeomchang Sect to the Murim Alliance in Wuhuan City,

We were preparing a light lunch while waiting to reach the next village by dinnertime.

Seol Lihyang had started spinning in circles while the water boiled, unable to sit still,

But as I’d suspected, she eventually realized she was overexerting herself and toned down her training.

Now, she just gets anxious when she’s not actively training.

I gently pressed down on her twitching shoulder and spoke up.

“I said this last time too, but you really don’t need to get so worked up. You’re doing just fine.”

“I know. I know... but once I start thinking I’m falling behind, it just keeps bothering me. Haven’t you ever felt like that, Cheon Hwi?”

“Of course I have. I’d say most martial artists go through it at least once.”

“Really?”

“Really. The anxiety you’re feeling isn’t because you’re weak right now. It’s because you don’t feel like you’re improving.”

“Right! So you really have felt this too, huh? I thought you were just saying that to be nice.”

“When people can envision the future, they can endure the hardships of the present. But once they can’t see what lies ahead, they start to break.”

That’s exactly why martial artists fall into deviation when they hit a wall.

It's been some time since Seol Lihyang reached the Peak Stage. With her growth rate, she's probably now able to faintly glimpse that wall from afar.

And when you combine that with the guilt of feeling like you achieved nothing while someone else advanced—yeah, it hits harder.

I let out a short chuckle and continued.

“Well, most of the time, that kind of anxiety turns out to be a misunderstanding or illusion.”

“Huh?”

Things like impatience, insecurity, the inferiority complex from comparing yourself to others—even your perception of yourself.

They all seem like massive problems at the time, but looking back, they're often no big deal.

Not that I'm denying it felt important at the time.

But I can admit I made a big deal out of it back then too.

“Widen your perspective. Accept things as they are. Don’t obsess over the little stuff.”

“You’re younger than Sister Seo Mun but sound just like her. You do know that’s easier said than done, right?”

“Hick?!”

Beside us, Seo Mun-Hwarin flinched while roasting jerky over the fire.

Startled by the age comment, she slightly burned the tip and sent me a resentful look.

But Seol Lihyang and I just carried on with our conversation.

“Of course it’s not easy. I never said you had to do it right now. More importantly...”

“More importantly?”

“For your martial arts to progress, Seol Lihyang, you need a massive amount of Yin energy. But that’s not easy to find in the Central Plains.”

Though not formally of the Tang Clan, Seol Lihyang was being treated like an honored guest.

Thanks to her exceptional abilities and Tang Sowol’s strong recommendation, she had been receiving decent support.

She sometimes received Yin-imbued elixirs and access to related martial texts...

But these were rare and hard to come by, so the support couldn’t be frequent.

It wasn’t just in her head that she felt better during winter. Nowhere else in the Central Plains had such an abundance of Yin energy.

Up to now, she had grown rapidly thanks to her Pure Yin Physique’s naturally dense Yin energy, But to go from Peak Stage to Sub-Perfection, she would need even more.

That her growth was slowing was inevitable.

“‘Slowing down’ is the wrong phrase. It’s more accurate to say you’re returning to your natural pace.”

“Tch. I figured as much. I’ve been feeling it lately too.”

“Right. Tang Sowol was born with a Poison Spirit Constitution and raised in the Tang Clan, masters of poison arts—it all lined up perfectly for her.”

“Not everyone can be that lucky, huh.”

“Exactly. And even then, the age at which she reached Sub-Perfection was...”

“Cheon Hwi?”

Tang Sowol’s voice came from behind.

It was her usual gentle tone, but for some reason, it felt colder than most Yin-based internal energy techniques.

She's twenty-four. Not even that old. Even in noble families, people rarely reach Sub-Perfection before their thirties.

“It's done boiling. Let it cool and eat slowly.”

With her voice now calm, Tang Sowol served me my share of food.

As I sighed in relief, Seol Lihyang clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“You'd better treat Sister Tang well, Cheon Hwi. I've seen a lot, but I've never met anyone like her.”

“I already do.”

“Then treat me well too.”

“Haven't I been doing that already...?”

“I mean more.”

With a laugh, Seol Lihyang took a bite of her meal and smiled contentedly. When I tasted it, it wasn't bad at all.

“Anyway, I get what you're trying to say. It's not that I need to try harder—what I need is time or an environment to accumulate Yin energy, right?”

“That's right.”

“And instead of pushing myself in frustration, I should look for alternatives.”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah. Thinking of it that way makes me feel better. If it's not a lack of effort but a lack of internal energy... maybe I should visit the Northern Sea Ice Palace sometime? They should have plenty of Yin energy there.”

“Not a bad idea. Honestly, I’ve felt a little guilty dragging you all around just so I can see swords I want to study. Maybe next time, we go somewhere you, Tang Sowol, or Sister Seo Mun wants to visit.”

“Really? But... is that okay? I mean, the Glacial True Qi I use came from that Ghost Shadow Thief Elder, right?”

“Well, the Ice Palace’s situation seems rough lately, so they probably won’t make a fuss. But they might try to recruit you into their ranks.”

“Yeah, no thanks. I don’t want to go that far. Even if I don’t go all the way to the palace, just being nearby should offer more Yin energy than the Central Plains.”

“Fair. Let’s think about it.”

After finishing our meal with a now-still Seol Lihyang, we resumed our light footwork.

It didn’t take long to reach the Murim Alliance.

Maybe it was because I’d gained a name for myself, or because word was spreading that I’d reached the Flowering Stage.

With so much information circulating and many important figures coming and going, the Murim Alliance—center of the orthodox martial world—recognized me immediately.

“B-Blood Flame Sword Demon, sir! What brings you here unannounced?”

“Can I not show up without a reason?”

“N-not at all! I only meant to say—if you let us know your purpose, we’ll assist you right away!”

It was a simple joke, but the gatekeeper freaked out and shook his head.

This wasn’t just any place—it was the Murim Alliance. Its gatekeepers were first-class warriors, even Peak Stage-level in some cases.

Was it my cultivation level? Or the story that I had destroyed the Thousand Poison Gate alone?

The gatekeeper had gone stiff with nerves.

Tang Sowol sighed and smacked me lightly on the back.

Smack!

“Please don’t tease him so much, Brother Cheon.”

“Hmm. He seemed overly tense—I was trying to lighten him up... didn’t expect that kind of reaction.”

I shrugged and pulled out the letter I’d received from Master Jeong Hyeon.

The gatekeeper carefully accepted it, and upon seeing Shaolin’s official seal, his face turned serious.

“This... It’s genuine. From the Abbot, no doubt. Due to certain circumstances, I’m delivering it in his stead.

It concerns an important matter. I would like a private audience with the Alliance Leader.”

“I will escort you immediately. However, there is another guest already here. So instead of going directly to the office, we’ll first lead you to the VIP guest hall.”

“He’s a busy man. Since we came unannounced, that’s fair. As long as we can meet today, I don’t mind.”

“Thank you. This way, please.”

After exchanging hand signals with another gatekeeper to switch shifts, he led our group inside.

When I’d stayed at the Murim Alliance before, I was in the guest quarters. I’d never used the VIP rooms.

The one we entered was quite impressive—tastefully ornate, neat, and comfortably equipped.

Even the Tang Clan didn’t go this far with hospitality. Tang Sowol began scanning the place critically, as if taking notes for later.

Meanwhile, I silently observed her rare expression, trying to burn every detail into memory.

A maid appeared and informed us it was our turn.

Following her, we reached the office. And when we opened the door—finally facing the Alliance Leader again—we encountered an unexpected scene.

“There’s really no way...?”

“We’ve already made many concessions.”

Several warriors, dressed entirely in white, were pleading with desperate expressions, while the Alliance Leader shook his head uncomfortably.

It seemed the previous guests were still inside.

As the door opened, their eyes naturally shifted to us. Then, one of the pleading visitors widened their eyes and pointed at Seol Liyang.

“We found the Young Palace Lord...!”

“Ah.”

Startled, Seol Lihyang hid behind Seo Mun-Hwarin. Though...she wasn't exactly well-hidden.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"We found the Young Palace Lord...!"

"Ah."

Startled, Seol Lihyang quickly hid behind Seo Mun-Hwarin, who stood next to her.

But since Seol Lihyang had now grown taller than Seo Mun-Hwarin, she wasn't exactly well-hidden.

Seo Mun-Hwarin flailed her arms, trying in vain to shield Seol Lihyang, so I stepped forward to stand between them and examine the group.

Unlike the black-haired people typical of the Central Plains, their hair was a pale bluish-white.

Their eyes were blue, their noses high-bridged, and their skin snowy white.

By this point, I was starting to guess who they were.

To confirm, I looked at their clothing. Though similar to martial attire, it had distinct features—everything bleached pure white with obsessive uniformity.

On their hems was embroidered a single character: 氷 (ice).

As expected, they were from the Northern Sea Ice Palace.

I nodded inwardly, then slightly raised my presence—

Not enough to threaten, but just enough to show my cultivation and issue a warning.

“What brings the people of the Northern Sea Ice Palace here, and why are you calling someone in my group the ‘Young Palace Lord’?”

“T-that...”

One of the men, making eye contact with me, flinched and faltered.

Then a woman beside him stepped forward and gave an awkward cupped-fist salute.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Bing Yerin. By any chance, has that young lady learned the martial arts of our Northern Sea Ice Palace?”

Her tone wasn’t broken, but there was something off about it—a slight dissonance.

Considering the Northern Sea Ice Palace is one of the more isolated sects in the outer regions, their manner of speaking made sense.

What caught my attention was how she recognized Seol Lihyang’s martial arts at a glance.

I glanced toward Seol Lihyang. For a moment, her eyes were confused, but then they filled with a kind of resolve, and she gave a slight nod.

Still, perhaps she wasn't ready to step forward just yet. She slipped out from behind Seo Mun-Hwarin, then behind Tang Sowol, and finally came to hide behind me.

After steadying her breathing, she finally stepped forward and saluted Bing Yerin.

"I'm Seol Lihyang. It's true that I've learned martial arts from the Northern Sea Ice Palace, but I—there's a reason for that..."

"Seol!"

"Eh?"

Upon hearing Seol Lihyang's surname, the warriors from the Ice Palace burst into beaming smiles and even leapt up.

Startled by their overreaction, Seol Lihyang flinched, and the group quickly reined themselves in with a few awkward coughs.

“Ahem. Please, continue. Ah—just to be clear, we’re not here to accuse you for learning our martial arts. You can rest easy.”

“O-oh, thank you... So, the reason I had to learn the Glacial True Qi is because—”

“Glacial True Qi?!”

Whatever composure they had regained was immediately shattered. Bing Yerin and the others began to tremble with excitement, grinning from ear to ear.

It was clear they couldn’t contain their joy—but from our perspective, their glee looked unsettling enough to make Seol Lihyang’s eyes twitch in discomfort.

Noticing this quickly, Bing Yerin smacked each of her comrades on the head, finally restoring some calm.

She had also been the one pleading with the Murim Alliance Leader earlier. She must be the highest-ranking among them.

“My apologies. Please, go on.”

“Ah... yes. So, I was born with a Pure Yin Physique, and to manage the side effects—”

“Pure Yin Physique...!!”

This time, their reaction was even more dramatic, enough to make it seem one of them might faint—and in fact, one of the women behind Bing Yerin did collapse in shock, only to be caught by a fellow companion.

But such repeated reactions only made Seol Lihyang more anxious.

Worried she'd said something strange again, she fidgeted in place.

Seeing this, Bing Yerin shook her head so vigorously it looked like it might fall off.

“We know the side effects of the Pure Yin Physique all too well! It may not be as fatal as the Extreme Yin Pulse, but you suffer from chills and all sorts of ailments for life! To suppress them, mastering Yin-based internal techniques is essential! Yes! We, the Northern Sea Ice Palace, understand Lady Seol!”

“Th-thank you. But... why exactly are you calling me the Young Palace Lord?”

“Because you are a candidate to be our Young Palace Lord. No—in fact, it’s nearly a certainty.”

“...Young Palace Lord?”

"Yes."

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?!”

“Because you’re more than qualified—and we’re in desperate need of a capable Young Palace Lord.”

“But I clearly look like someone from the Central Plains! I’m not like you at all.”

“We’ve heard that bloodline matters in the Central Plains, but in the North, we value strength above heritage.

You’ll be welcomed without issue.”

“I mean... huh? Wha—uh...?”

Seol Lihyang’s eyes spun as she tried to grasp the situation, which was clearly beyond her understanding.

Seeing this, Bing Yerin offered a bitter smile and continued.

“Come to think of it, we've only been pressing you for answers. Let us explain our side.”

Though she had said “candidate” earlier, Bing Yerin now referred to Seol Lihyang plainly as “Young Palace Lord.” She cleared her throat.

“Ahem. It all began thirty... no, forty years ago. After the previous Palace Lord, Heavenly Ice Lord, passed away—”

About forty years ago, the previous Palace Lord of the Northern Sea Ice Palace, the Heavenly Ice Lord, died, and chaos followed.

Why?

Because there was no successor.

The Ice Palace's martial arts are largely based on Yin and cold energy.

But whether it was because the sect had grown too large, or they'd stagnated in the same location for too long—or perhaps just due to the natural flow of time—The frozen northern lands had begun to thaw.

In other words, the Yin energy their warriors needed was gradually disappearing.

Naturally, the average martial level across the sect declined.

Some techniques, like Glacial True Qi, even fell into disuse—not because there weren't manuals, but because no one could learn them.

The current Palace Lord, pushed into power amidst the upheaval, took bold steps to ensure the sect's survival.

She opened the vaults and made most martial arts available to everyone—from junior warriors to commoners.

Anyone who achieved excellence would be granted the appropriate rank. She even promised that if someone surpassed her as a Sub-Perfection master, she would hand over the position of Palace Lord.

Though this raised the overall standard, it didn't solve the root issue.

The Yin energy was still fading. Not a single Flowering Stage expert had emerged in all of Ice Palace since.

That's when the five noble houses of the Ice Palace—Eom, Dong, Seol, Baek, and Bing—persuaded the Palace Lord to take even more drastic action.

They proposed adopting a talented heir from a renowned Central Plains clan to become the next Young Palace Lord.

“Adoption?”

“Yes. I heard succession by the eldest son is a big deal in the Central Plains. So we thought to adopt someone from a respected house—someone with talent, character, and ambition—as a candidate.”

“But wouldn’t that dilute the Ice Palace’s bloodline?”

“The Palace Lord’s position has never been about blood. It goes to the most capable. And since the adopted heir would marry into a noble house of the Palace, their children would be true descendants of the Ice Palace.”

“O-oh... is that so?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, clearly unsure.

She had only just gotten used to the customs of the Central Plains, so this was a bit much.

Understandable. Even Tang Sowol, born into a martial household, and I, who had wandered through Murim before and after regression, were shocked at the boldness of it.

Now I saw why the Murim Alliance Leader had looked so troubled.

This kind of plan could easily spark political tension, and if mishandled, even blame could fall on the Alliance just for letting the Ice Palace poke around.

Yet from another view, some families or individuals might see it as an opportunity, which only complicates matters further.

For the Alliance Leader, rejecting the Ice Palace's proposal and maintaining the status quo was the wisest choice.

But then... Seol Lihyang appeared.

She bore the surname Seol, one of the five noble houses of the Ice Palace—even if she wasn't truly part of it.

She had mastered the difficult and symbolic Glacial True Qi, the technique that had nearly vanished.

She'd reached the Peak Stage at a young age, unshackled by the dwindling Yin energy of the Ice Palace.

And, most importantly, she possessed the Pure Yin Physique, one of the rarest talents in Yin-based martial arts.

To Bing Yerin and her group, it was like the heavens had handed them the perfect successor.

They had no need to travel farther or risk conflict with Central Plains families—the ideal candidate had appeared right before them.

Bing Yerin, eyes sparkling as if she were looking at a lifesaving deity, spoke again.

“Miss Seol Lihyang. No—Young Palace Lord.”

“I'm not the Young Palace Lord yet...”

“You soon will be!”

“I have no such intention!”

“The Ice Palace might be far from the Central Plains, but we have everything you could need! If I may exaggerate, the authority of the Palace Lord is no less than a provincial lord’s in the Central Plains!”

“I’m not interested in power.”

“Then men—?”

“Even less interested!”

At that, Seol Lihyang gave me a quick glance and quietly added:

“...Except for one.”

“Ah! I thought it might be a difference in customs between North and Central Plains—but now I see the real reason.”

Nodding in understanding, Bing Yerin lowered her voice slightly.

“Then... how about power?”

“Power?”

“Yes. You must need strength, right? Your opponent doesn’t seem like an ordinary man.”

“Our entire collection of martial arts manuals has been preserved. We just haven’t had anyone to learn them—until now. Of course, the new Young Palace Lord would be free to master them all. Even the Flowering Stage is within reach. In fact, excluding the current one, every Ice Palace Lord in history was a Flowering Stage master.”

“Flowering Stage... mmph?!”

Seol Lihyang’s eyes wavered. I quickly covered her mouth with my hand.

She squirmed briefly, then quietly leaned into me.

With Seol Lihyang calmed down, I pulled her close and half-embraced her, At which point Tang Sowol stepped up beside me and stood in front of Seol Lihyang protectively.

Wearing a gentle but firm smile, she shook her head.

“Lihyang is not up for negotiation.”

...Her phrasing was... a little intense, no?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Cheon Hwi-da covered Seol Lihyang’s mouth with his hand and pulled her back, and Tang Sowol, standing protectively in front of her, shook her head firmly with a resolute tone.

“She’s not someone you can take.”

“.....?”

That wording... isn't it a bit much?

Given the current posture, it kind of looks like we're holding Seol Lihyang hostage.

While I, and Seol Lihyang who was being held, tilted our heads in doubt, Bing Yerin and the martial artists from North Sea Ice Palace suddenly sprang up in alarm.

“P-Please calm down! Who in the world are you to treat the next Young Palace Mistress of our North Sea Ice Palace in such a way!”

“Treating her that way, you say? That's not a very pleasant way to put it. I'm Tang Sowol of the Sichuan Tang Clan. And this here is my fiancé.”

As their gaze turned to me, I hesitated for a moment, then gave a slight nod while still holding Seol Lihyang.

“I'm Cheon Hwi.”

“Cheon Hwi... the Blood Flame Sword Demon?!”

Bing Yerin jumped up again, shouting my alias. Most likely, my name has been spreading lately, and she must've picked it up somewhere.

Still, they're an amusing bunch.

I'd heard that martial artists from North Sea Ice Palace tend to be cold and stoic, but...

Well, I haven't met every one of them, and all I had were records of those who'd visited the Central Plains.

I suppose going along with their rhythm for a bit won't hurt.

Smirking, I tugged at Seol Lihyang's cheek with the hand covering her mouth and spoke.

"That's right. I'm the Blood Flame Sword Demon. Did you just say you were taking Seol Lihyang?"

"W-We weren't taking her! We're inviting her!"

“Same difference. From what I hear, if she doesn’t go, you’ll be heading back empty-handed, no?”

“T-That’s true, but I’m sure the Young Palace Mistress would agree with us!”

“Hm. Then let’s ask her directly.”

I nodded and removed my hand from Seol Lihyang’s mouth.

After rubbing her cheek and shooting me a glare, Seol Lihyang sighed deeply and shook her head.

“You said your name was Miss Bing? I appreciate the offer, but I’ll have to decline.”

“But why?! We promised to support you with martial arts, elixirs, a training environment... everything until you reach the Flowering Stage!”

“Well, I don’t know that much about the North Sea Ice Palace, but even if only half of what I’ve heard is true, I’m sure you would’ve kept that promise. I’m not doubting that part.”

“Then...”

“But if I become the palace mistress, I’d have to live there, right?”

“Of course. The master can’t be away from the palace.”

“That’s why it won’t work.”

Bing Yerin blinked, clearly unable to understand Seol Lihyang’s answer.

Facing her, Seol Lihyang shrugged with a calm tone.

“I plan to live with Sister Tang and Cheon Hwi. I can’t go live far away by myself.”

“Pardon? I believe I heard the daughter of the Tang Clan and the Blood Flame Sword Demon were engaged...?”

Bing Yerin glanced between me, Tang Sowol, and Seol Lihyang—her eyes widening by the second.

“Don’t tell me!”

“It’s exactly that.”

Seol Lihyang took our hands and placed them both on her shoulders for emphasis.

Though the fact that she did it herself made me chuckle a little, it certainly got the message across.

I wouldn’t send Seol Lihyang to the North Sea Ice Palace unless she wished for it herself.

No matter how much more efficient martial arts training might be there, this part will never change.

Everything I’ve done—pushing through hardships to raise my cultivation, trying to bridge the gap between orthodox and unorthodox factions, creating the Justice Alliance—it was all for my people.

If I lose even one of them, what would all that effort mean?

Still, rejecting them too coldly isn't ideal.

If I could defeat the Heavenly Demon, it would be no problem. But if I fail, I'll have to run.

Before the regression, the Heavenly Demon obsessively crushed every sect in the Central Plains, yet was indifferent to the outer regions.

Maybe he only turned his attention to the outer lands after unifying the Central Plains, but as far as I remember, he only cared about the Central Plains.

And so, while chaos brewed in the Central Plains, the outer lands also began to stir.

The Poison King who invaded deep into the Central Plains to capture Tang Sowol, the Southern Barbarians' Beast Palace that devoured Yunnan and Guizhou, and Potala Palace that offered shelter to refugees only to sacrifice them—these were all examples.

Perhaps they had formed a prior alliance, carefully avoiding stepping on each other's toes while grabbing what they could.

Yet only North Sea Ice Palace remained aloof, showing no interest in the chaos of the Central Plains.

Neither the Demonic Cult nor any other outer force provoked them.

Well, attacking them would require a long march north through freezing lands, and even then, there wasn't much to gain beyond martial arts and people.

That cost-benefit ratio probably kept everyone away.

At least, that was the case before regression.

So if I ever need to flee, the North Sea Ice Palace would be a good option.

Better than heading to Haedong or Dongyeong at least—at least we'd still speak the same language.

Rather than cutting ties, keeping a loose connection might be better.

Thinking this, I spoke up.

“Still, I’m not saying you should return to North Sea Ice Palace empty-handed.”

“...Excuse me?”

A flicker of hope lit up Bing Yerin’s previously crestfallen expression.

On the other hand, Seol Lihyang looked at me in confusion, so I gave a small laugh and continued.

“I won’t be sending Seol Lihyang to be your Young Palace Mistress. She doesn’t want to go, and I won’t force her either. But I also understand your position. If you simply leave with nothing, that won’t do either, right?”

“You’re right. If I hadn’t met her at all...”

“I told you, I’m not your Young Palace Mistress.”

At Seol Lihyang's sharp interjection, Bing Yerin corrected herself immediately.

"If I hadn't known about Miss Seol, I would've accepted the rejection from the Alliance Leader and returned quietly, albeit bitterly. But now, I can't do that."

"Aren't you from a strong sect? Can't you manage without me?"

"For now, yes. But what about in thirty or fifty years? This concerns the future of North Sea Ice Palace."

"The future..."

Seol Lihyang murmured absentmindedly.

It's true. As Bing Yerin said, the North Sea Ice Palace is still powerful. It'll remain that way for some time.

The current palace master may not have reached the Flowering Stage, but they reportedly rose to the position with widespread support, so they must be a capable leader.

Perhaps the strongest among the remaining candidates, the most respected, the most skilled, or of the most legitimate bloodline.

In any case, they're competent enough to avoid any major objections.

But there's no guarantee the next palace master will be the same.

This concern about the future must be what's driving Bing Yerin and her current master to search for a successor—even if it means reaching into the Central Plains.

And now they've learned of someone who could shine a light on that uncertain future: Seol Lihyang.

They won't push aggressively to the point of being offensive, but they also won't give up after one refusal.

“That's why, maybe it's worth picking a day to visit together. If, after seeing the North Sea Ice Palace with her own eyes, Seol Lihyang's decision doesn't change, then you'll have no choice but to accept and step back. How about it?”

“That sounds good. Since we’ll be staying in the Alliance for a while, why don’t we coordinate schedules and pick a day?”

“Very well. Let’s do that. But for now, would you kindly step aside? We need to meet with the Alliance Leader for a separate matter.”

“Understood. And... thank you.”

Bing Yerin bowed her head. The other martial artists from North Sea Ice Palace followed her lead, apologizing to us and the Alliance Leader before leaving the office.

Only then did Seol Lihyang let out a deep sigh and nudge my side.

“It’s a little annoying that you made a promise without asking me... but thanks. I don’t want to live there, but I am curious about their martial arts.”

“I figured.”

We’d already talked about how her martial arts training had hit a plateau, and she needed environments rich in yin energy, elixirs, or other similar techniques to reference.

Though it's far away, it's no different in essence from me visiting Wudang, the Namgung Clan, or this time the Jeomchang Sect to hone my sword.

Besides, I had said next time, we should go somewhere someone else wants to visit.

“If you’re satisfied, that’s enough for me. But, if I have somewhere I want to go, would you come with me too, Cheon?”

“Of course. Just say the word.”

We exchanged warm smiles, but it didn’t last long.

Standing on tiptoe and peeking between our shoulders, Seorin—Seo Mun-Hwarin—finally squeezed in and stuck her head through.

“Ahem.”

She then glared at the hand that had been covering Seol Lihyang’s mouth moments ago with a dissatisfied expression.

“What is it?”

“This One asks: Is there nothing for her?”

I wondered if this was truly the side effect of Rejuvenation. Could she actually be senile?

That mildly irreverent thought in mind, I gently covered Seorin’s eyes with my hand instead.

She’d probably prefer something a little different from just covering her mouth.

As expected, she flinched at first, then soon smiled in satisfaction and spoke.

“Alliance Leader. Though there was a slight disturbance, we are here today for a far more important matter.”

“I-Is that so?”

With my hand covering her eyes, the Alliance Leader fumbled for a response, unsure how to react.

He looked at me as if to ask what is going on here...

But I had no idea either.

Seorin does incomprehensible things all the time. This must be one of those moments.

I avoided his gaze and took out the letter from Monk Jeong Hyeon I'd kept in my robes.

“As Senior Seorin said, we've come urgently because of something important. It's already been dealt with, but it concerns the Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“Did you say... Heaven-Slaughter Star?”

The Alliance Leader, who'd been sitting comfortably like the retired sect leader he was, immediately straightened up and took the letter with a serious expression.

He read it thoroughly, but then, unable to believe his eyes, kept rereading it from the beginning. Eventually, he spoke with a dazed look.

“Is this true? Blood Flame Sword Demon. I only saw your martial arts briefly at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, but your killing intent alone... people said it resembled the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s. I’d like to hear your thoughts.”

“As you said, there are few in the current Murim as sensitive to killing intent as I am. And to my eyes, Miss Heo... has completely surpassed the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s killing intent.”

“I see. At last, the long-standing curse of the Heaven-Slaughter Star may finally be lifted.”

Given that he lived during the same era as Monk Gakjeong, perhaps they had some connection.

The Alliance Leader closed his eyes for a moment in deep reflection, then slowly spoke.

“For working to resolve a long-standing issue of Murim, and for choosing the difficult yet righteous path to the end—I thank you sincerely, as Alliance Leader.

Thanks to you all, future generations will be safe from the Heaven-Slaughter Star's rampage, and those born with its energy will no longer be doomed or persecuted."

"It was something I had to do. And I was lucky enough to be able to do it."

"That may be so, but what matters is that you acted. The Murim Alliance will not forget your deed."

As expected of the Alliance Leader. He must have noticed my goal to raise my reputation and influence among the orthodox sects, and responded with implicit support.

Even though he was still deliberately avoiding looking in Seorin's direction.

"In any case, thank you for coming all this way. We'll prepare a room for you, so please rest as long as you wish."

"Thank you for your kindness."

I bowed and left the office.

The guest rooms of the Murim Alliance were as splendid as ever.

“Ah~ Frostjade Celestial Hand is such a great martial art~ It would pair so well with Glacial True Qi~”

The only minor issue was that the martial artists from North Sea Ice Palace were staying in the room next door.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The guest room of the Murim Alliance, which I hadn't used since the Yongbong Gathering, was as satisfactory as ever—aside from the fact that it still didn't feel familiar.

“Ah~ Frostjade Celestial Hand is such a great martial art~ It would go so well with Glacial True Qi~”

“ ... ”

There was just one minor issue—the martial artists from North Sea Ice Palace were staying in the room right next to ours.

As usual, everyone had abandoned their own rooms and gathered in mine—some lounging around, others quietly circulating their inner techniques. A heavy silence hung in the air.

That was because Bing Yerin’s voice coming from the other side of the wall was far too intentional—there was no mistaking that she wanted us to hear.

Perhaps having fulfilled her daily quota of whining, Seorin, who had been meditating quietly with a serious expression in a corner of the room, opened her eyes.

“You there.”

“I know. Now that we’ve finished speaking with the Alliance Leader, she’s clearly pressing to schedule a visit to the North Sea Ice Palace. I’ll pick a date—tomorrow or the day after—and tell her to keep it down.”

“Still, Frostjade Celestial Hand really is an excellent martial art.”

“...?”

Hearing the same line come out of Seorin's mouth made me tilt my head in surprise.

Yet Seorin continued her explanation with a serious face.

“Frostjade Celestial Hand is the famed ultimate technique of the previous Ice Palace Master, Bingcheon Divine Lord. They say that even blazing flames would freeze if touched by that snow-white hand.”

“That sounds like an exaggeration. Freezing even flames?”

Martial artists—and gossipmongers interested in Murim affairs—often exaggerate stories to suit their purposes. Whether to make a loss sound less humiliating, to glorify a victory, or simply for fun.

So, tales of the Bingcheon Divine Lord's martial arts probably got blown out of proportion over time.

Not to mention the common tendency in the Central Plains to regard outer Murim sects like the North Sea Ice Palace as mysterious.

But Seorin wasn't talking about that kind of hearsay.

"In most cases, you'd be right. But this one is more of a metaphor for something that really happened."

"A real event?"

"Have you never wondered who would win in a fight between someone who mastered a blazing technique and someone who mastered a yin-cold one?"

"Don't tell me..."

"It happened when I was about your age. There was a master known as the Solar Fist King—born with an innate Yang meridian, and though his sect was long destroyed, he had mastered the famed Yeolyang Arts that everyone acknowledged."

According to Seorin, this Solar Fist King rose quickly to the Peak Stage using his rare natural constitution and a fateful encounter that let him master exceptional fire-based techniques.

Then, at the height of his prime, he decided—just out of curiosity—to test himself against a master of cold yin-based techniques, and journeyed to the North Sea Ice Palace.

When he returned much later, he reportedly said:

“The Bingcheon Divine Lord was so formidable that blaming the defeat on the cold of the North was laughable. The Frostjade Celestial Hand was fierce beyond measure. He even showed me a chunk of my own qi, frozen into ice the size of a fist.”

“Seriously? That was actually possible?”

“We’re not talking about normal flames and ice—it was qi. When opposing willpower clash, such things can happen.”

“Opposing willpower...”

To put it simply, willpower is the power to impose your inner will onto the world.

In other words, it’s the force that allows a person to partially override reality to make the impossible happen.

So then, what happens when two impossibilities collide?

It's only natural that something hard to rationally comprehend occurs.

The phenomenon of burning qi freezing solid likely stemmed from just that.

“I've heard North Sea Ice Palace has opened up and now lets anyone learn their martial arts freely... but I didn't expect they'd even share the former palace master's divine techniques.”

“Then their current situation must be quite urgent. Or they must see Seol Lihyang's value as very high.”

“Exactly. So it wouldn't hurt to take advantage of this.”

“I'll keep that in mind... also, I think it's about time I take Seol Lihyang out for a walk.”

“Mn. My ears are starting to hurt...”

From Frostjade Celestial Hand to all sorts of martial arts names—her murmurs had gone on for nearly an hour now, loudly enough to be not-so-subtle monologues.

She'd been rambling on about how yin energy needs to be pure, how it pairs well with Glacial True Qi, and how women could achieve great things with such arts...

Now even emotion—grief, anxiety—was starting to seep into Bing Yerin's voice.

“Seol Lihyang.”

“Yeah. No way I'm sleeping like this. Let's just get it over with.”

“Just to be clear—go sleep in your room.”

“Won't she be lurking outside my door then?”

“Exactly my point—”

“You jerk...!”

Seol Lihyang stomped on my foot, but not hard enough to hurt. It was more like she just placed her foot on mine.

In other words, our usual playful complaints.

With a shrug, I stepped outside with her.

Just as expected, Bing Yerin was pacing outside, mumbling nonstop to herself.

“Finally...!”

“Didn’t we say we’d pick a date later? Why are you so impatient?”

“Impatient? I don’t know what you mean. I was simply thinking about which martial art to teach first, should Miss Seol become the next Young Palace Mistress.”

“But you just said ‘finally,’ didn’t you?”

Seol Lihyang's flat remark made Bing Yerin flinch, but she quickly acted innocent and carried on.

“Still, since you're here, I'll just ask you directly. You wear a whip on your waist—how do you integrate that with Glacial True Qi? Did you know it's generally more efficient to channel higher-level yin energy through the body rather than through a weapon? If you still want to use the whip while advancing—”

“Originally, like you said, I fought by wrapping my opponents with the whip and infusing yin energy to freeze them. But lately, I've been relying more on direct yin arts. Using the body as a medium limits power if the body isn't trained enough, after all.”

Seol Lihyang cut her off mid-ramble and answered bluntly.

From the look of disinterest on her face, she clearly wanted to get to the point.

“Yin arts...? You're saying you want to avoid body limitations, despite having a Pure Yin Physique and mastering Glacial True Qi... That's...”

Bing Yerin murmured, clearly confused.

Understandable.

The North Sea Ice Palace must've developed their martial arts independently, with their own methodology.

And so did Seol Lihyang—though she learned Glacial True Qi, she never studied the Ice Palace's techniques.

The Tang Clan only teaches foundational arts—whip techniques and movement skills.

She had to develop her yin-based arts on her own, reading a few rare manuals including Glacial True Qi, and evolving them herself.

From what the Ghost Shadow Thief once told me, Glacial True Qi was the oldest art in the Ice Palace.

So in a way, Seol Lihyang and the North Sea Ice Palace share the same martial roots.

But just like branches growing in different directions from the same trunk...

The Ice Palace evolved its techniques in isolation from the Central Plains, while Seol Lihyang walked her own path within it.

It's no wonder Bing Yerin is confused seeing someone use the same root technique in a completely different way.

Yin arts are rare, even in the Central Plains and the North Sea.

Seol Lihyang's achievement in this field is pure talent—unrelated to her physique.

That, personally, I find the most impressive.

As I nodded to myself, Seol Lihyang let out a deep sigh.

“Haa. I'll show you once, so calm down.”

“Miss Seol's... martial arts?! Shall we go to the training hall? Wait, but I don't know where that is. Why is no one around when I need them...”

“This is a guest area, after all. Servants don’t wander unless called, and people rest here quietly. And I’m just showing you a simple example—no need to go all the way to a training hall.”

Seol Lihyang shrugged, took a deep breath, and opened her mouth.

It wasn’t quite a song—more like a pure vocalization.

But carried by that sound, refined yin energy spread outward, then condensed sharply into a single point.

Tap.

A thin tree branch, now covered in frost, dropped to the ground.

“Wooooow...”

Bing Yerin stood there, mouth agape, eyes blank.

I knew this was the moment to speak.

“When we visit the North Sea, we’ll likely go as a full group. So we’ll need to contact the Tang Clan and wait for their reply. We can’t leave right away.”

“Yes, but how did she move not just her own internal energy but the surrounding energy as well—”

“Still, just sitting around and waiting seems pointless. Could you start by teaching her some basic martial arts in the meantime?”

“That won’t be hard. Honestly, I feel like I’ll be learning more.”

“Thanks. Ah, come to think of it, Seol Lihyang mentioned that her Pure Yin Physique alone isn’t enough lately—she needs elixirs.”

“Of course. I brought some decent ones to use as bribes—or for unexpected injuries. I’ll prepare them.”

“Is it okay if I...”

Still dazed, Bing Yerin nodded vaguely.

Huh. I didn't expect her to be this stunned, but if everyone's satisfied, I suppose it's fine.

I glanced at Seol Lihyang. She gave a faint, exasperated nod as if thinking the same thing.

I focused my mind on the fallen branch.

My inner energy naturally followed my will, reaching toward it.

Though not as responsive as when wielding a sword, my qi extended smoothly, wrapping the branch securely.

Then, I simply recalled it along the same qi path.

“Object-Grasping Through Empty Air!”

Just as Bing Yerin exclaimed in surprise, I successfully performed Object-Grasping Through Empty Air.

Though I'm still not fully used to it—it only works on light objects while I'm stationary, and requires high concentration.

Still, the important part is that I've grown familiar enough with willpower to use it at all.

Smiling with satisfaction at how much faster it was than yesterday, I handed the frozen branch to Bing Yerin.

“Then I'll send the letter today. Once we get a reply, we'll head out.”

“Yes!”

Bing Yerin cradled the frozen branch with both hands and dashed off to her room.

Not long after, her voice rang out from inside, full of emotion.

—“Everyone, listen well! I think our Young Palace Mistress... might actually be a genius!”

—“Waaaaa!”

“I told you I’m not your palace mistress...”

Face flushed, Seol Lihyang muttered under her breath, embarrassed by their over-the-top praise.

A reply arrived from the Tang Clan.

—You said you were going to Jeomchang Sect, so what’s this about the North Sea Ice Palace all of a sudden, Sowol? And what in the world happened with the Heaven-Slaughter Star...?

Tang Sowol closed the letter halfway through and declared:

“Father’s letter has arrived. Everyone, let’s prepare!”

“Wait, did he actually say it was okay? The part I read clearly said—”

“Shhh.”

Tang Sowol raised a finger to my lips and shook her head.

“We haven’t read that far yet. So technically, we’re not disobeying—we’re just taking a slightly longer route home.”

...And here I thought they were the strange ones.