

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 221-230

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We began our return to Sichuan Province, carrying the spoils of subjugating the Azure Cold Serpent and a few gifts from the North Sea Ice Palace.

A procession of three full carts. At this scale, one might expect someone to cause trouble at least once...

Was it because everyone in the group was a martial artist? Or because more people now recognized me and Seo Mun-Hwarin's faces?

Whatever the case, we didn't run into a single vagabond or back-alley bandit—even those who usually wouldn't know the latest news in the martial world or Green Forest. We arrived peacefully in Chengdu, Sichuan.

...Well, except that we ended up facing someone more fearsome than any mountain bandit at the end of the journey.

From a distance that even a martial artist at the Flowering Stage could barely discern with the naked eye, we could already see him.

Not here to greet us, but rather to block the entrance, arms crossed, standing guard at the gate—Tang Jincheon.

That was when the peaceful return turned into a trial.

As I involuntarily swallowed hard, the carts pressed forward in silence. I glanced at Tang Sowol and asked quietly.

“Think he’s angry?”

“Y-Yes. Best to be mentally prepared.”

A dilemma I hadn’t really faced in this life, or the previous one, for that matter.

Well, maybe I’d felt something similar before my parents passed away... It’s been so long I barely remember.

With my heart heavy like a thousand pounds, I sighed deeply and asked again.

“What should I say to my father-in-law...?”

“I was scolded a lot as a child, so I know. In times like this, the best thing is to start with an apology. And add a little charm.”

“...I think I’ll just apologize.”

“Tsk. What a pity.”

Tang Sowol sighed, wiping her mouth with genuine disappointment.

Did she really want to see me act cutesy or something?

Between her stories of being scolded as a child and the little things she does without thinking...

Sometimes, I really think Tang Sowol is no ordinary person.

With that thought and my resolve steeled, I stepped down from the cart as we neared Tang Jincheon.

Just as we discussed earlier, both Tang Sowol and I bowed deeply and spoke in unison.

“We’re sorry, Father! And... we missed you very much!”

“I’m sorry, Father-in-law. I should’ve at least sent a letter...”

“That’s enough. There are more people than I expected. Let’s go inside first.”

His tone was unexpectedly calm. I almost felt relieved, thinking perhaps he wasn’t that angry.

Then I noticed Tang Sowol’s face had gone pale.

I sent her a covert transmission.

—What’s with that look? He seems to be letting this go.

No. This means he's planning to scold us later, when no one's around.

—*Ah.*

I'm screwed.

“My son-in-law, I suppose it's been nearly four years since we met, now that winter is almost over.”

Tang Jincheon spoke while gazing into the distance as if reminiscing.

“All this time, I've thought the same thing about you—you're far too mature for your age.”

This time, his eyes met mine directly, and in his voice was a mix of pride and sadness.

“I understand. It couldn't have been helped. As I said before, I looked into your past. I know what you went through.”

The sadness in his voice grew slightly heavier.

“What you endured would be difficult even for an adult. You had to grow up fast—whether it was to survive, to avoid being belittled, or to seek revenge.”

His tone deepened with sincerity. Because he was genuinely concerned for me, I too began to feel genuinely guilty.

When we first met, Tang Jincheon had shown a mix of gratitude for saving his daughter and suspicion toward the man who “stole” her.

But after our engagement, and after I became an official member of the Tang Clan, that distance vanished. Now, he treated me almost like a real son.

And then he said something that flipped all my guilt into outright panic.

“I know you’re talented, but talent alone couldn’t bring you this far. You must’ve reflected deeply and reached your own realizations. So I didn’t say anything before... but now, I must.”

“...Say what?”

“My son-in-law, you need a good scolding.”

“...”

“I understand you lost your parents early and had to survive the harsh martial world of Zhejiang on your own. Perhaps that’s why you sometimes act more like an outsider or even a demonic path cultivator.”

“...Excuse me?”

“But regardless of your past or how far you’ve come, what you need now is an elder who’ll correct you when you go astray. I’ll take on that role, however inadequate I may be.”

After saying that, Tang Jincheon began pointing out—without sugarcoating—everything wrong with what I’d done by going to the North Sea Ice Palace.

The potential ripples from the movement of a Flowering Stage martial artist, the anxiety caused by my unexplained departure, the complications of interacting with martial artists outside the Central Plains, and the fact that I hadn’t even properly explained major incidents like the Heaven-Slaughter Star...

All fair points. I had no excuse.

After finishing his lecture, Tang Jincheon pointed toward the wall.

“So raise your hands and stand there.”

“...What?”

“As I said, when you do something wrong, you should be punished. I know this won’t be hard for you, but still—go stand there with your hands up.”

I was speechless.

But thinking of the worry he must’ve endured, I had no choice. I bowed my head and went to stand near the wall with my hands raised.

Tang Jincheon was right. My parents had died long before I regressed, so it had been a very long time since anyone scolded me like this.

There was a tinge of nostalgia... and yes, some embarrassment that a grown man—one who had even lived another life—was standing with his hands up.

Just as I was trying to process that strange mix of emotions, Tang Sowol stepped forward in protest.

“W-Wait, Father! No matter what, this is too much for Cheon Hwi! I was the one who insisted on going this time!”

“Good. I’m glad you said it. Sowol, Cheon Hwi is at least still young. But you? You’re not even young anymore! How long are you going to keep acting like this? And you keep dragging more people into it! If your mother were still alive, I wouldn’t know how to face her!”

“Ah... Aaa...”

Tang Jincheon seized the chance and scolded her relentlessly. Head bowed and shrinking in guilt, Tang Sowol ended up standing beside me, raising her hands.

And then—without anyone telling her to—Seol Lihyang quietly stepped up next to me and raised her hands too.

Seo Mun-Hwarin hesitated for a moment, then took her place beside Tang Sowol.

“...What are you doing, Sect Master of the Seomun Clan?”

“I-I am an elder, and I failed to guide them properly, so...”

“I’m not about to scold someone who’s ill. Please stop.”

“Ill?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin leapt in shock, as if she couldn’t believe what she just heard. Well... given that she’s still suffering the side effects of Rejuvenation, he’s not wrong.

So three of us stood with our hands raised while one person stared blankly into space, repeating, “I’m not sick...”

How long did that go on?

Eventually, Tang Jincheon sighed and spoke again.

“Huuu... So? What happened this time that sent you all the way to the North Sea Ice Palace? And what did you do there that led to a whole envoy returning with you and that mountain of baggage?”

“Well... it began when I was delivering Shaolin’s position on the Heaven-Slaughter Star incident to the Murim Alliance Leader.”

Starting from the encounter with the North Sea Ice Palace martial artists at the Murim Alliance, I explained everything—from the defeat of the Azure Cold Serpent to returning with the spoils.

At first, Tang Jincheon looked at Seol Lihyang with surprise. But as the story progressed, his expressions shifted many times, and by the end, he let out a sigh that was somewhere between amazement and resignation.

“Hoooh... In any case, Lady Seol, you may lower your arms. You weren’t even told to raise them.”

“Yes. Y-Yes...”

Seol Lihyang slowly lowered her arms.

Meanwhile, Tang Jincheon seemed to ponder something before speaking again.

“In the end, you returned with something that greatly benefits the Tang Clan once more.”

“Right, Father. So... perhaps now...”

“Just hold that pose for another half a shichen, then go rest in your rooms. I’ll speak with the delegation from the North Sea in the meantime.”

“Huh?”

“My daughter, you’re not a child anymore. Don’t make that sound.”

“...I’ll say it if I want.”

“...Sigh. I give up.”

Tang Jincheon shook his head and turned to leave for his office.

Just as he reached the door, he casually tossed out one last comment, as if it were no big deal.

“Oh, by the way—your sister-in-law is pregnant. When you have time, go congratulate Cheong.”

“...Brother?!”

Tang Sowol’s eyes widened. Sure, in the martial world, it’s common to marry late, but wasn’t Tang Cheong already well past thirty?

He was the sub-leader, and raising his level was important, but considering heirs was just as crucial. In fact, you could say he was late.

With a complex expression, Tang Sowol nodded.

“Y-Yes, of course. We should congratulate him. Right, Cheon Hwi?”

“...Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Hmm. Why do you think?”

Feigning innocence, she tilted her head. Then, confirming her father had left, she lowered her arms and added casually.

“By the way, don’t we still need to visit the Black Lotus Sect?”

“Hm. I suppose so. The Sect Leader personally invited us, and Sama Yuryeon helped us during the Poison Demon incident.”

“Yes. Since those two even got married, we should at least show our faces once.”

...Am I being pressured right now?

“Oh, come on. Pressured? No way. It’s just... Father did mention we should start preparing soon, so I’m a little conscious of it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like pressure to me.”

“Well, we still have some unresolved matters to handle first.”

She glanced briefly toward Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, then added lightly.

“There’s still a lot you haven’t told me, Cheon Hwi.”

True enough. Though Tang Sowol hadn’t pressed me, I had never properly told her anything about my regression.

Since then, Tang Sowol never pushed me to talk.

And maybe because of that, I spent days racking my brain, trying to find a way to weaken or circumvent the mental restrictions.

Meanwhile, many changes came to the Tang Clan.

The Azure Cold Serpent's bones and scales were reborn as hidden weapons by the artisans. The leather became whips. The venom, though weak, was rich in cold energy and began research in both the Hundred Poisons Hall and Medical Hall.

Though results were far off, they were all rare and potent spirit beast materials, and the process would surely deepen the Tang Clan's knowledge.

Also, with the help of North Sea Ice Palace engineers, we began building a training hall for Seol Lihyang.

By now, she was far too tied to the Tang Clan to be considered just a guest. She even received an official position—albeit honorary—under Tang Sowol's jurisdiction, making her a vassal of the Tang Clan in name.

As for our steward, he collapsed once under the flood of work, but thanks to powerful elixirs and attaining a state of inner clarity, he became... a more enduring worker—no, a stronger martial artist.

At this point, another rumor began circulating in the Central Plains.

That the Tang Clan of Sichuan had surpassed the Namgung Clan...

...And should now be called the Greatest Clan Under Heaven.

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Since I'd caused incident after incident recently, I figured it was time to keep a low profile for a while.

Thankfully, during my trip to the North Sea Ice Palace, news about the Heaven-Slaughter Star and the Murim Alliance Leader affirming my cultivation level had spread widely, so my original goals were more or less achieved.

Now, I was no longer just a "promising young martial artist" or "Tang Clan's son-in-law," but recognized as a Flowering Stage martial artist, someone who stands as a pillar of the Central Plains.

Given that, I decided to shift focus from external activities to internal affairs within the Tang Clan.

Of course, that doesn't mean I'm taking over any actual work. I can read and write, sure, but administrative duties are outside my wheelhouse.

I'm a swordsman, after all. No matter how high my cultivation, non-combat matters should be left to professionals.

So, instead, I visited Tang Cheong to offer congratulations, discussed with Seol Lihyang ways to contain the cold energy of the Eternal Ice Essence within the training hall without it leaking out, and offered a bit of comfort to Seo Mun-Hwarin—who, surrounded by her fawning attendants, was snacking on sweets while brooding over the side effects of Rejuvenation and the burden of being a Flowering Stage expert.

And finally, I began seriously contemplating the mental restriction that came with my regression.

Up until now, I'd simply left it alone, thinking I lacked the strength to even try breaking it.

But now... I've reached the Flowering Stage, haven't I? A true top-tier expert.

And in theory, mental restrictions become easier to resist as one's cultivation increases. Most are rendered ineffective once you reach the Flowering Stage.

After all, mental restrictions are, in the end, a force that binds the mind and spirit. If you can manipulate willpower, you should be able to resist it head-on.

Like how internal energy is used to expel poison from the body, one should be able to break a mental restriction with willpower.

Or so I thought.

“...This is driving me crazy.”

The mental restriction placed on me didn't budge an inch.

I had tried to confront it consistently ever since reaching the Flowering Stage, even prioritizing this over all other forms of training. Yet, even now, when I've grown quite adept at wielding willpower, it still felt completely insurmountable.

The only progress I could claim was that I was now aware of the restriction even when I didn't attempt to speak about my regression.

And if you can feel something, you can cut it. If you can see it, you can dodge it. Sensing the restriction means that interference through willpower is possible.

The problem is... this restriction is too solid. Far beyond what a human should be able to impose.

“Judging by its level, it’s stronger than anything at the Flowering Stage.”

They say the Flowering Stage represents the limit of human martial cultivation. While levels beyond it may theoretically exist—such as the “Path of Nothingness”—no one has ever been confirmed to reach it.

Still, there have always been speculations that legends like Zhang Sanfeng, Lü Dongbin, and Bodhidharma transcended the Flowering Stage.

All were said to have ascended or reached nirvana—the realm of immortals and buddhas.

That’s why people say Heaven allows humans to reach only as far as the Flowering Stage. Anything beyond is divine.

And yet, even I—who have just stepped into that realm—can do nothing against this restriction.

Perhaps this wasn’t something created by human hands to begin with.

“...No. Come to think of it, that’s only natural.”

Regression is an act of defying the heavens. Forcibly rewinding time that should only move forward, like an arrow shot from a bow.

It’s hard to believe such a feat could be achieved by human power alone.

Back at Zhongnan Mountain, I heard that in the distant past, Taoist spells were far more powerful. And at Shaolin, Master Gakjeong told me of a passage describing “one who walks toward yesterday rather than tomorrow”—clearly a reference to a regressor.

Putting those two together, two possibilities come to mind.

One: In the distant past, there were Taoist masters equal to Flowering Stage experts, and several of them pooled their strength to craft a time-reversing spell that I happened to activate by chance in my previous life.

Two: Regression has existed for ages, but its source is not human—rather, beings that transcend humanity.

I can’t be sure which is correct, but... I’m leaning toward the latter.

Both theories sound absurd, but considering the nature of the mental restriction, the second seems more plausible.

To a regressor, being unable to speak of regression is a colossal shackle.

If it were humans who reversed time themselves, they'd surely want to speak of it—to warn, explain, or share knowledge. Why place a restriction that only hinders?

Unless... they weren't human to begin with.

Of course, following that logic, I'd still end up wondering why immortals or buddhas would bother creating such a restriction at all.

“Huu...”

A sigh escaped my lips. The more I thought, the more tangled it became, until even frustration began to bubble up.

To sum it up: a being stronger than even a Flowering Stage martial artist placed a restriction on me—one that I, even now, cannot break.

I've made no real progress since first discovering the restriction.

Tang Sowol hasn't pressured me, but we both know I haven't told her anything about my regression.

And while she wouldn't complain even if I stayed silent forever...

The guilt of hiding it, and the occasional loneliness that feels like I've been cast out of time itself, keeps dragging at me.

"...Haa."

Another fruitless sigh. I opened my eyes again from my seated position.

Then—

“Have you not been sighing a lot more lately? Would you like to take a break, Cheon Hwi?”

Right in front of me, close enough that our noses might touch, Tang Sowol crouched down and looked into my face.

Those deep green eyes, full of mischief and warmth—just meeting her gaze was enough to melt the irritation I’d been feeling.

I let out a small laugh.

“What are you doing down there?”

“Hehe. Just admiring your face.”

“...My face?”

“Yes. When we talk, I focus on your words. When you move, I focus on your actions. But there are very few moments when I can focus purely on your face. So when you’re quietly sitting still like this... I can’t help but admire you.”

“I see. I hope it met your standards. I only washed my face once this morning.”

“Oh my? Cheon Hwi worries about such things?”

“If you’re going to stare from this close, even someone who doesn’t normally care would get self-conscious.”

“Then I must say, hearing that you care about how I see you is a rather sweet sound. But no worries. Maybe it’s thanks to Rejuvenation, but your skin is fairer than mine.”

Then she reached out with both hands and gently examined my cheeks, nodding in satisfaction.

I didn’t know why she looked so pleased with herself, but seeing her happy made me feel happy too.

As I watched her beaming, she eventually sat down beside me and spoke.

“Oof. By the way, I haven’t seen you doing much physical training lately.”

“I’ve gotten used to Qi Hardening, so now it’s time to focus seriously on willpower.”

“Willpower?”

“Yeah. My body has been tempered over a lifetime. But willpower—I’ve only just begun to grasp it. Physically moving and wielding a sword is still important, of course, but right now, willpower is still in its infancy. So I’m focusing more on that.”

“Ah. So that’s why Father and Sister Hwarin mostly meditate.”

“That’s right. So what’s your question?”

“Well... Cheon Hwi, you started martial arts late, and you’re not even twenty yet. So technically, your ‘whole life’ of training is just a few years...”

It is my whole life. And I’ve undergone Rejuvenation, haven’t I?

“Hehe. Just teasing. Don’t get grumpy now—or I’ll want to tease you more.”

She giggled and lightly slapped her own thigh.

“Training with your body makes you physically tired. So training with your mind must make your spirit tired, right? Would you like to lie down for a bit?”

“Hah. Did you really think I’d fall for that?”

...Correct answer.

Tang Sowol, as always, knows me far too well.

Especially when the topic of regression—or things that only exist in my memory—comes up, my mind becomes restless.

But when I rested my head on her thigh, all my worries seemed to evaporate.

At this point, even if I fell into deviation again, I might still come back—if Tang Sowol was there.

Separate from how much I cherish her, just being close to her, just touching her, gives me an inexplicable sense of calm.

Maybe it's the pure sincerity I came to realize after reaching the Flowering Stage, or maybe it's the poison from her that helped me achieve Rejuvenation at the core of my being.

Whatever the case, just being like this fills me with contentment.

Tang Sowol gently stroked my hair, a peaceful smile on her lips.

We stayed like that in silence for a while. Then, as if something occurred to her, she opened her eyes wide.

“Oh! Have you heard the rumor going around lately? It's quite amusing.”

“I haven't. I've only been focused on internal Tang Clan matters lately.”

“It's not bad news—it's good news. You'll like it.”

She cleared her throat theatrically.

“Hem-hem. Until now, the Namgung Clan was called the greatest clan under heaven. But after the attack from the Hwangbo Clan and now that your achievement of the Flowering Stage is widely known... people are starting to say something different.”

“...Don't tell me.”

“Yes~. They're saying the Tang Clan might be the new greatest clan under heaven.”

“Well... they're not wrong.”

I'd been slow to realize it, probably because I spent most of my life in sects that valued individuals more than groups.

But truly, the Tang Clan had reached a level deserving of that title.

Tang Jincheon and I alone made two Flowering Stage martial artists within the clan.

And even though she's technically a guest, Seo Mun-Hwarin was also staying here, and willing to lend her strength if needed.

That means three Flowering Stage experts residing in one place.

Other sects might have two—or rarely, three—but only if you count both the current and retired leaders.

Meanwhile, our Young Clan Head Tang Cheong is still at Sub-Perfection. With his talent and dedication, he'll surely reach the Flowering Stage soon.

And if Tang Sowol, who's even more gifted than Tang Cheong, reaches it as well...?

The Tang Clan would become a family housing five Flowering Stage martial artists in a single generation. Unheard of.

And unlike loose alliances like the Murim Alliance or the Black Lotus Sect, all of these would be united under a single household.

“A stroke of fortune.”

“Yes. A blessing, indeed.”

The title Greatest Clan Under Heaven brings not just pride, but also opportunity.

Countless merchants and officials will flock to tie themselves to the Tang Clan.

Prosperity will breed more prosperity—the future couldn’t look brighter.

If not for the Heavenly Demon, that is.

Still, the strength of our name would help push forward the plan for the Justice Alliance.

In fact, we were just about ready to meet with the Black Lotus Sect Leader as the first step.

“Wait. Doesn’t that mean we’ll be busier than ever?”

“Most likely. Especially once word spreads that we’ve opened exchanges with the Ice Palace—merchants will come swarming for North Sea specialties.”

...I hope Father-in-law and the steward can handle it.

“We’re already transferring people from the merchant guilds into the steward’s command, and we raised salaries for those in charge of internal affairs. We’ll manage.”

“It’s not just a temporary surge, though—it’s a long-term increase. And people aren’t so easy to find.”

“...Until then, we just have to endure, right?”

Good grief.

After a moment of hesitation, I asked,

“Do you... have any poison that helps forget fatigue, even for a moment?”

“There is one, but it only postpones fatigue until tomorrow.”

“...So basically, a shell game.”

“If it actually cured fatigue, we’d call it a medicine, not a poison.”

“...Fair point.”

I offered a silent prayer for the poor Tang Clan officials about to be worked to death.

“Looks like it’s time we schedule our visit to the Black Lotus Sect.”

Of course, that’s that—and this is this.

If you just keep waiting for stability, you’ll never get anything done.

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Thanks to having discussed the matter in advance, I was able to get permission to go to the Black Lotus Sect rather quickly.

Of course, that process included Tang Jincheon heaving deep sighs over and over again, warning me several times not to go wandering off on my own or causing trouble this time, and the General Director silently showing up with a bunch of his subordinates and shedding tears without a word.

When grown men start crying openly like that, it's honestly overwhelming.

Anyway, only after promising multiple times to behave myself could I finally prepare to depart for the Black Lotus Sect.

In truth, considering the Righteous-Sect Alliance, we needed to maintain good relations with the Black Lotus Sect, so I had no intention of stirring up any trouble.

Besides, the Sect Master of the Black Lotus Sect wouldn't lure a guest he personally invited into a trap or treat them poorly.

He was someone more honest about his desires than anyone else, but at the same time, had outstanding qualifications as a Sect Master.

So, on the day I finished my preparations and was about to depart, an unexpected guest arrived.

“Brother Cheon! Where are you headed, Brother Cheon!”

“It's been a while. If you have time, how about a sparring match? No? Then just one match anyway.”

Brother Namgung. And the Sword King. What brings the two of them all the way here?

It was the father and son from the Namgung Clan whom I had formed ties with after the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting—Namgung Jong and Namgung Dowi.

They came without any attendants, each wearing only a single sword at their waist.

“What do you mean, what’s the occasion? We heard Brother Cheon returned and came running here.”

“We heard a new master at the Flowering Stage who uses a sword appeared. We came to see that sword for ourselves.”

I was well aware of how mad the Namgung Clan is about swords. Especially the Clan Head, Namgung Dowi, and the young master, Namgung Jong—they were beyond obsessed.

But I never expected both of them to leave their clan behind and come find me. Judging by when they arrived, they must have set out the moment they heard I returned.

Well, I didn't mind. My body was feeling stiff after all the worrying over mental restrictions and whatnot, so a spar with the Namgung Clan sounded like a good way to loosen up.

The problem was the timing.

“First, it's truly a pleasure to see both of you again. I'd love to spar, but unfortunately, I have another matter to attend to right now. Perhaps we could schedule for another time?”

“A shame, but if that's what you say, it can't be helped. When would be good? Tomorrow? The day after? The third day?...That's a bit long, but I'll wait.”

“Hold on, son. Judging by the look of it, he's about to head out somewhere. If it'll take a while, wouldn't it be better to just go with him?”

“As expected of the Clan Head! What do you think, Brother Cheon? If needed, we can lend you our strength—why not travel together?”

The words “Are you insane?” rose all the way to my throat, but I barely managed to hold them back.

Yeah. These two were always like this. I wasn’t exactly normal myself, but I was nothing compared to the Namgung Clan.

I’d bet anything that just like how the martial arts of the Haebuk Paeng Clan seem to pass down extraordinary physical traits through generations, the Namgung Clan’s martial arts must have some hereditary power that makes sword fanatics out of their descendants.

But I don’t hate these sword-mad lunatics.

Had I been traveling alone, I probably would’ve said yes with a smile. However, this time, I was moving with others, so I turned my head to check with them, and—

“Seriously, what’s the meaning of this, Sword King?”

Tang Jincheon landed beside me with light footwork, an expression of disbelief on his face. Judging by the look of him, he must have rushed here at full speed. He seemed genuinely flustered.

And rightly so. He had just allowed his daughter and I to leave after we told him we were only visiting the Jeomchang Sect, and now we were about to head to none other than the Black Lotus Sect, the heart of the Unorthodox Factions.

We were going as guests invited by the Black Lotus Sect Master. Moreover, we had ties through Sama Yuryeon, and both Seorin and I were Flowering Stage masters, so nothing major should happen.

Even so, it was natural to worry.

So, Tang Jincheon had come to see us off. Only to be met with the sight of the Clan Head and Young Master of the Namgung Clan showing up out of nowhere.

Anyone would be dumbfounded.

Well, unless they were the kind of lunatic who came running at the mere mention of a new sword expert.

“This is the first time we’ve met since the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting, Poison King. We heard our close brother-in-arms reached a new realm, and we came in hopes of receiving a bit of guidance.”

“It’s been a while, Poison King. But this time, we’re not here for you—we’re here for your son-in-law, so don’t mind us too much.”

Sword lunatics.

Unlike me, Tang Jincheon didn’t even bother to hold back. He said it outright. I’m sure they heard him, but the two from the Namgung Clan just looked at me expectantly, waiting for my answer.

“So? What do you say, Brother Cheon??”

“You want to test your sword too, don’t you? And right now, you’ll get the chance not just to see the true Namgung sword, but to receive it directly.”

“Do you two even know where I’m going?”

“We don’t. But so what? Is there any reason to fear wherever it may be?”

“As Jong said. The weather is clear, and we carry well-maintained swords at our waists. What place in this world could possibly be off-limits?”

Rather than offering a logical or overly formal answer about how many top-tier experts were in the Black Lotus Sect, they simply trusted in their swords. That firm belief made my opinion of them skyrocket.

Stab.

Just like when striking an acupuncture point, a sharp pain pierced my side, snapping me back to reality. It was Tang Sowol’s hand.

“Brother Namgung, Sword King. We’re headed to the Black Lotus Sect. You may not have heard, but the Sect Master recently got married. The person they married is someone connected to us, and we were invited—albeit late—to offer our congratulations.”

“The Black Lotus Sect...”

“I’ve heard the Sect Master is among the strongest not only in the Unorthodox world, but among all Flowering Stage experts in the central plains.”

After a brief moment of contemplation, the two nodded in satisfaction.

“I heard the Black Lotus Sect holds a sparring tournament for rising talents, like the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting. Few restrictions. Plenty of people die. I wonder what kind of swordsmanship blooms in such a brutal place.”

“If we’re lucky, we might even get a chance to cross swords with the Sect Master.”

Are you people actually insane?

Ah. I couldn’t hold it in after all.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang slapped my back like they were scolding me, but their twitching lips betrayed the smiles they were holding back.

Even Seorin just nodded with her arms crossed.

As a fellow member of the Five Supreme Clans and someone with plenty of prior dealings with the Namgung Clan, Tang Jincheon seemed used to this. He rubbed his temples and finally spoke.

“Phew. I’ll speak with my son-in-law and either schedule a separate time or send him to the Namgung Clan after this is over. So for now, you should return...
hmm?”

Mid-sentence, Tang Jincheon paused and widened his eyes. He suddenly spoke with the tone of someone struck with a great idea.

“No, no. I support this. On one condition. Go with them, and return with them. Spar with my son-in-law as much as you want during the journey—but make sure you return on time. To be more direct, don’t go wandering off again.”

“Father-in-law? What about Sowol and I’s opinion...?”

“Not listening. You didn’t read my letters to begin with, so consider this karmic justice.”

I had no retort. So this is what they meant by reaping what you sow.

As Sowol and I were rendered speechless, Tang Jincheon slyly addressed the father and son.

“What will you do? If you’d like to spar more, feel free to stay at the Tang Family after you return.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Poison King.”

“Much appreciated. I promise, in the name of the Namgung Clan, that we’ll repay this favor someday.”

Namgung Jong and Namgung Dowi accepted immediately, eyes gleaming.

Naturally, they didn’t seem to care what I thought.

I didn’t mind too much though. I had wanted to spar. And I had no ground to oppose Tang Jincheon after everything.

Only then did Tang Jincheon nod in relief.

“Good. That’s settled. Have a safe trip, everyone. And Lady Seol—when you return, the training hall should be completed. You can look forward to it.”

“Uh... Thank you?”

Seol Lihyang gave a tentative bow, unsure if she heard right.

With a shared sigh, Sowol and I exchanged glances and nodded.

“It can’t be helped.”

“Yes. Since Father said that much, and we already have ties with the Sword King and Sword Dragon. But Brother Cheon?”

“What is it?”

“Could you remove your hand from your mouth?”

I lowered the hand I had been using to cover my mouth. Tang Sowol’s eyes narrowed.

“You were laughing, weren’t you?!”

“This too... is something I can't help.”

To Namgung Dowi, it was a chance to spar with a genius who had reached the Flowering Stage at a young age using his own martial art.

To me, it was a rare opportunity to spar with the Sword King, said to be unmatched with a blade.

How could I not be excited?

As Sowol and I bickered, Seorin tilted her head while already munching on the snacks she packed for the journey.

“It's all well and good to bring them along, but I wonder what the Black Lotus Sect Master will think.”

“Eh?”

“Think about it. The Sect Master likely invited you and Sowol, who explored the Hidden Library of Divine Combat with Sama Yuryeon. But now you’re bringing me and Lihyang too.”

“Well... this much should be fine.”

“Probably. I only met him once, but the Sect Master definitely seemed like someone fitting of the Unorthodox Faction—yet he didn’t appear to take his own words lightly. And our presence at your side is fairly well known.”

She had a point. If it were just the Sect Master alone, maybe not, but if Sama Yuryeon was beside him, the letter surely took Seorin and Seol Lihyang into account too.

“But now the Clan Head and Young Master of the Namgung Clan are tagging along too. He’s suddenly receiving not one, but three Flowering Stage masters. One of them even looks desperate to spar with her. Wouldn’t that seem suspicious?”

True.

The Sect Master of the Black Lotus Sect might be one who honors his word, but he’s also strict when it comes to challenges. He once distanced himself from Seorin and her Ironblood Hall in the previous timeline, simply because she kept trying to act independently after receiving a place of honor.

Hearing this, Namgung Dowi shut his eyes tightly and spoke in a sorrowful voice.

“Understood. Then I’ll refrain from dueling the Sect Master.”

“We would be most grateful.”

“Instead, I’ll spar with the Blood Flame Sword Demon twice as much.”

“.....?”

Why did that happen?

While I was blinking in confusion, Tang Sowol stepped forward, looked Namgung Dowi straight in the eye, and said,

“That’s fine. But if it gets late, you have to let Brother Cheon go.”

“Hm? What does late have to do with—”

Namgung Dowi paused mid-sentence, looked between us, then nodded knowingly.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll return him before it gets too late.”

“Thank you.”

Namgung Dowi looked touched, as if reminiscing. Tang Sowol, too, bowed with a faint smile.

...What is this?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

From the very start, a bunch of things happened, and though I gained two unexpected companions along the way... we were able to depart safely, at least.

We left the noisy Tang Family behind, still reeling from the sudden chaos, and once Chengdu had fully faded from view...

Seorin, who had been falling behind slightly due to her different stride, kept rushing to catch up. Eventually giving up, she drew upon her inner energy and asked me,

“You there. This One still does not understand.”

“Understand what?”

“It makes sense that we’re bringing a gift to celebrate the wedding. But... is it really all right for the gift to be that?”

“Hmm. Under normal circumstances, people would find it distasteful. Some martial artists from venerable orthodox sects might even take offense.”

“Then...”

“But the Black Lotus Sect Master will definitely like it.”

The gift Tang Sowol and I prepared was simple.

A toad statue made of gold, lavishly decorated with every sort of gem imaginable. And three pills of the highest-grade Blood Poison Wine Pill, which are relatively easy to acquire within the Tang Family, but insanely expensive and rare outside.

I prepared the golden toad, while Sowol prepared the poison pills.

According to her, they were meant for the Black Lotus Sect Master, Sama Yuryeon, and the child they would eventually have.

In short, my congratulatory gift was an outrageously tacky lump of gold—something that wasn't even particularly beautiful. A piece so overloaded with expensive materials that its value as a sculpture was probably equal to the value of melting it down and selling the parts.

If the recipient were a merchant, this would be a perfect gift. But for a martial artist, this kind of blatantly calculated gift wouldn't be received warmly.

Even so, for the Black Lotus Sect Master, it was the most appropriate choice possible.

“The Black Lotus Sect Master, after all, is someone who managed to gather the notoriously unruly unorthodox martial artists and form the Black Lotus Sect, maintaining it ever since. He has the virtues of a ruler.”

“But?”

“But to my eyes, he’s also the most unorthodox of all unorthodox martial artists. He’s a person devoted to his ambition and desire. So, more than heartfelt gifts, he’s the type to prefer gold he can use however he wants.”

“That’s... something you’d expect from some third-rate thug.”

True.

Even among the unorthodox factions, those aiming for the top prefer investments in the future—like rare martial arts, elixirs, or valuable experience—over money they can use right now.

But those who are barely surviving, who need to resolve immediate hunger, hardship, or inferiority complexes—those people are different.

Even if they have a chance at something better later, they’ll always choose immediate benefit. For them, that’s the rational choice.

Well, those aiming for the future are just enduring for the sake of their own ambitions and wealth, so in the end, it’s not all that different.

There's a reason unorthodox sects are called unorthodox.

Anyway, Seorin knew well what kind of people those martial artists were, which is why it felt odd to her that someone like the Black Lotus Sect Master would be enticed by mere gold...

“Think about it, Senior Seorin. The Black Lotus Sect Master is the leader of the Black Lotus Sect. And that sect includes not just formal unorthodox sects, but even lone wanderers—loosely, but united nonetheless.”

“That much I know, even if it's a sudden reminder.”

“A thousand gold coins given to a penniless swordsman and a thousand given to the Sect Master of the Black Lotus Sect have completely different value.”

The reason the Black Lotus Sect has managed to survive this long is thanks to the model set by a previously successful organization—in simple terms, the Murim Alliance.

The Black Lotus Sect took the structure of the Murim Alliance and modified it to suit the nature of the unorthodox world.

That's why the Black Lotus Sect has its own version of the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting—a tournament called Black Heaven Tournament, held for younger generation martial artists. They may not have secret manuals, but there's a library with a variety of martial arts compiled. They stock mid- and low-tier elixirs, which are distributed as rewards to those who accomplish deeds.

I know this because I've worked within the Black Lotus Sect myself.

The Sect Master can, of course, obtain decent martial arts and elixirs anytime he wants—but running the Black Lotus Sect requires constantly distributing these things to its members.

Unlike the Murim Alliance, where people sometimes act out of righteousness or favor, in the Black Lotus Sect, everything must be accounted for.

Because they're united by profit, not principle, they must be continually provided with rewards.

So in exchange for his great power and authority, the Sect Master must constantly promise money and privileges to those below him.

He's not exactly desperate for cash—but just one golden toad statue could allow him to give an otherwise unreasonable order to a subordinate sect.

To her, the golden toad isn't some insult implying she's a greedy thug—it's a card she can play, a tool that shows we understand her situation and are giving her something useful.

“Of course, the fact that he just genuinely likes shiny things is another big reason.”

“...Eh?”

Startled, Seorin tilted her head, her red eyes wide like a rabbit's. Her cheeks puffed out—she must've been chewing something again.

Recently, even Tang Jincheon had begun calling her a headache, but that just made her cuter in my eyes.

How could someone like her be around the same age as my father-in-law? It made me reflect deeply on the connection between mind and body, and I found myself chuckling.

“In the end, he's an unorthodox martial artist. He lives for blowing money, flexing power, and reveling in debauchery. Maybe not now, since he's married, but still.”

Even though the Black Lotus Sect Master was among the younger Flowering Stage experts, he still wasn't young.

Getting married now only underscored that point.

“He's gone through rejuvenation, and his body remains young. So in a way, it's only natural.”

“Do you really believe that...?”

Seorin's expression brightened. She took a step closer, and I reflexively stepped back—but she ignored that and leaned in.

I could see the top of her head, white strands of hair scattered across her crown. Flustered, I stuttered,

“W-what are you referring to?”

“I'm talking about how if your body is young, then you live younger, too!”

I didn't know why my opinion mattered so much to her, but...

"Personally, I don't really care."

"You don't?"

"Yes. I think most people, regardless of age or realm, live without truly acting their age."

"Ah..."

As if wounded in her heart, Seorin clutched at her chest. Of course, there wasn't much to grab, so she just placed a hand over it. Out of respect for her pride, I didn't say it aloud.

"Just to clarify, I wasn't referring to you, Seorin sunbae. I just think that this idea of 'acting your age' is a kind of illusion."

"Illusion, you say?"

Through her drooping bangs, she peeked up at me with expectant eyes.

I nodded and continued.

“It’s not much. Just something I started thinking at some point—that the mind doesn’t really mature past a certain point.”

Even without experiencing rejuvenation, people carry a younger version of themselves inside. They just become better at hiding it with age.

Reaching the Flowering Stage forces you to confront your true self. Seorin must’ve faced the same. I, on top of that, have even experienced regression.

That’s why I can say this with confidence: most people simply pretend to be their age. And if there’s someone with whom they don’t need to hide it...

Then that must be a successful life.

Seorin nodded after listening to me.

“Hmm. That’s a valid point. Truly, your words ring true. When I reached the Flowering Stage, I was faced with my own weakness. Having someone to share and embrace that truth with... yes, that is indeed a blessing.”

“Exactly. I don’t know what you’re struggling with, but don’t worry too much. Just live honestly, however you’re comfortable.”

“Yes, I’ll remember that. I knew you had gone through many reflections to reach your current level, but... at times, you still surprise me. You never experienced a disconnect between your own time and the world’s time like I have, yet you’ve organized your thoughts so well. How?”

If I hadn’t gone through regression, I probably wouldn’t have thought much about any of this either. Time flows too naturally—it rarely draws attention.

Unable to explain regression, I just stared silently at Seorin. Eventually, her expression cracked.

“D-don’t tell me... you came to this conclusion because of me... because you were pondering my age...?!”

Her expression blended relief, shock, and slight hurt—an amusing mix, honestly.

I was tempted to nod and watch her fluster, but if I did that, she really would sulk.

And while cheering up a sulking Seorin isn't hard, it takes forever and is a huge hassle. So I redirected the attention.

"It's not what you think. Look over there."

"Hm?"

Following my gaze, Seorin turned her head.

There, the two from the Namgung Clan were bickering again.

"I object, Clan Head! After sparring with you, won't Brother Cheon be too tired to show his full strength with me?"

"Don't worry, son. He only needs to show half his ability to spar with someone at your level."

“If he doesn’t need to go all out against me, then it won’t matter if he spars with you later.”

“You brat! Do you hate yielding to your father that much?”

“Can’t you yield to your son just this once? You’re acting like I asked you to hand over the Clan Head position.”

“If I give you the Clan Head seat, will you yield?”

“No. Please enjoy long life and hold on to that troublesome... I mean, honorable position forever.”

“Tsk. Ungrateful child.”

They were seriously arguing over who got to spar first. Petty as hell.

Namgung Jong may be older than Tang Sowol, but he’s still in the younger generation. So whatever.

But Namgung Dowi was a clan head, a Flowering Stage master, the Sword King, and the father of Namgung Jong.

I didn't expect him to throw dignity out the window just to fight over sparring order. With his own son, no less.

Seorin glanced at the two sword lunatics, then gave me a look that said, "Well, I guess you're not the worst."

"Indeed. It seems you were right. 'Acting your age' truly is an illusion."

"Thank you for understanding."

Somehow managing to clear Seorin's doubts, I finally saw that a decision had been made.

Namgung Jong approached with a gloomy face, while Namgung Dowi was all smiles.

"Young Blood Flame Sword Demon. Shall we have today's spar now?"

“The way you said that... it’s like you’re already planning tomorrow and the day after, too. Well, a promise is a promise. But... here?”

If we walked a bit further, we’d reach the next village. In other words, right now, we were in the middle of nowhere.

I looked at him in disbelief, but Namgung Dowi nodded seriously.

“If we’re going to spar properly, the open area at an inn would be far too small.”

“Didn’t think of that. Fine, let’s take a quick break and do it here.”

Almost like we’d rehearsed it, he and I turned off the road in sync.

Watching our backs, Seorin narrowed her eyes.

“At this point, it wouldn’t be strange to say you’re distant relatives. Sword Dragon...is there any chance a branch of the Namgung Clan migrated to Zhejiang Province?”

That's just unfair.

I'm not that bad, am I?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Seorin had raised a suspicion that I might actually be a distant blood relative of the Namgung Clan, but, surprisingly, it was denied immediately.

“That’s not it.”

“I didn’t think so either, but why are you so sure?”

“Because I’ve more or less kept track of all bloodlines within the Namgung Clan.”

“...Excuse me?”

I blinked in disbelief—he seemed like someone who knew only the sword. I hadn't expected him to be so thorough about lineage.

Namgung Dowi spoke with a bitter expression.

“It's been quite some time since the Namgung Clan came to be called the greatest martial family in the world. Naturally, many people have come seeking that power and influence.”

“Ah...”

“Those who come merely to learn the Namgung sword are still acceptable. We just choose someone with decent character and marry them into the actual bloodline. But most of them just covet our wealth and power. We can't allow such people to carry the Namgung name.”

“So that's why you've been keeping track of how far the collateral lines have spread.”

“Exactly. But the next head after me won't have to worry as much. Jong will be able to focus more on the sword.”

“Did something happen?”

Namgung Dowi, who had been clearing an open space by swinging his sword at rocks and small trees, looked at me like I'd just asked the dumbest question in the world.

“Isn't it obvious? Soon, the title of the greatest martial family in the world will belong not to the Namgung Clan, but to the Tang Clan of Sichuan.”

“Hmm...”

“Don't look so troubled. It's true the Namgung Clan grew greatly thanks to that title. But I'm not obsessed with it. In fact, I feel freer now that I can focus more on the sword.”

“Hearing you say that makes me feel a little better.”

“Besides, even if the greatest martial family changes, the greatest sword clan is still the Namgung Clan, is it not?”

He spoke of it so naturally, as if declaring an obvious truth—like how the sun rises in the east, the moon shines at night, and Seorin is not senile.

Arrogant words, perhaps—but if anyone was qualified to speak so arrogantly, it would be Namgung Dowi.

As I nodded in silent admiration, Namgung Dowi, now standing opposite me, drew his sword.

So clean was his draw that I didn't even hear the blade slide against the scabbard. The white blade gleamed in the sunlight.

“This should be good enough. Draw your sword.”

“I look forward to it.”

I also drew my sword. A matte black blade that absorbed the light around it, asserting its quiet presence.

For a moment, we stood face to face in silence, as if all our previous conversation had been a lie.

Yet even in that silence, we continued to speak—through aura, not words.

Two auras that resembled the sword itself clashed, collided, and sharpened one another.

Thanks to that, my senses grew razor-sharp. I could clearly feel not just Namgung Dowi but even the eyes of those watching our duel.

However, all this silent tension was ultimately overshadowed by one immense presence.

Boom—

A unique pressure radiated from Namgung Dowi—not something one could call simply “powerful” or “intense.”

It felt like facing the heavens that had descended to earth.

Until now, it had just been greetings—confirming whether I had truly reached the Flowering Stage, and whether my level was genuine.

But now, what he was emanating was no longer the aura of Namgung Dowi, the individual.

It was the aura of the Namgung Clan itself.

I had experienced it once before, and I'd already understood it intellectually.

But now that I stood at the Flowering Stage myself, it felt completely different.

In the past, it had felt distant and towering—an overwhelming presence that left you breathless. Like a sky built from swordsmanship.

But now, it no longer felt so unreachable.

The Namgung Clan's sword was still as awe-inspiring as ever, but it no longer overwhelmed me.

I raised my internal energy and shaped it with willpower—molding it into form.

Wuuung—

Pale energy, as if awakening from slumber or sliding out of its scabbard, wrapped around my blade.

Namgung Dowi's lips curled into a bright smile as he silently observed.

And then—

Tat!

He moved first.

The distance between us closed in a flash. A blue sword aura fell from above, straight and true.

It looked like a simple downward slash—devoid of tricks. But it was anything but simple.

Footwork that contained speed, subtle timing that disrupted the opponent's breath, the precise movement of joints and muscles, the angle of the blade, the flow of inner energy, the focus of intent...

It was a vertical slash packed with everything a swordsman could possess.

At first glance, it could be mistaken for someone who had devoted his entire life to perfecting just one strike.

Staring straight at the fast, heavy blade, I moved my own sword.

Naturally, I left myself a sliver of margin for what came next. But aside from that, everything about Namgung Dowi had been meticulously tuned for this single strike.

Such monstrous skill... and yet, perhaps because of that, I could see how to counter it.

“Hrrmph.”

With a sharp breath, I swung my sword covered in pale white energy.

A slash stronger and wider than usual. Not as extreme as when I used a different grip against Azure Cold Serpent, but certainly more exaggerated than normal.

Namgung Dowi's eyebrow twitched. He knew my swordsmanship well enough to understand that I always used just the right amount of force in the right place.

KWAANG!

The strike extended farther than its visible reach—by a full hand's breadth—and crashed against his sword.

His blade, filled with decades of expertise, and the accumulated martial wisdom of all past Clan Heads, was struck.

But because that experience was built upon known parameters, when it encountered an unforeseen variable—like a slash that reached beyond its range—it couldn't display its full power.

“This is...”

Namgung Dowi's eyes gleamed as he stared at his sword, now buried in the ground after being thrown off course by an invisible strike.

“An invisible sword?”

“It’s not grand enough to deserve such a name.”

It’s more like a sword wind—sharp and dense enough to rival true energy.

Of course, the farther the distance, the weaker the force becomes.

“A master of the Flowering Stage always carries their own unique essence. Yours seems to lie in range.”

“Hmm. It wouldn’t be any fun if I just told you everything myself, would it?”

Strictly speaking, he’s slightly off.

Just as the Namgung Clan’s sword seeks the infinite, Seorin’s fists seek pinpoint breakthrough, and the Black Lotus Sect Master’s spear pursues certain hit...

My sword is wielded to reach the unreachable, to cut the uncut.

Rather than controlling distance, it's more accurate to say I slice through the concept of distance itself.

Even I don't know what name to give it yet. I simply swing it with sincerity.

But Namgung Dowi didn't seem to care about that.

With a thrilled expression, he readjusted his grip.

“Well said. In the end, swordsmen speak through their swords. Ah, by the way, are you no longer using bloodlust?”

“I don't need to, so I choose not to. If you'd like, I can show a bit.”

“No need. Use that time to show me more of your sword.”

“We've got plenty of time to duel. No need to rush.”

His answer was as Namgung-esque as ever. I couldn't help but chuckle as I took the initiative this time and swung my blade.

A pale white sword aura like moonlight cut through the air.

Namgung Dowi's sword, as always, traced a path near perfect in its trajectory.

But—

Ka-duk!

“Heh!”

He let out a breath of admiration as he watched my sword aura subtly, ever so slightly, pierce into his own.

It wasn't that my willpower had become sharper. He had simply realized that the very direction of my sword was fundamentally different.

We had each shown the other our sword.

Now there was nothing left but to clash in earnest.

Our eyes met briefly—and then our swords began to intertwine in full.

Slashing, parrying, thrusting. Blue and white sword auras clashed and gnawed at each other in a fierce stalemate.

My martial art lacks distinct forms so that I can strike only where needed.

Namgung Dowi's sword disregards set forms not because of ignorance—but because he knows too many of them.

Speed is easy to read. Heaviness is easy to redirect. Sharpness is easy to break.

These long-standing rules began to be unraveled, piece by piece, by both our hands.

Naturally, as the exchange continued, the advantage tilted toward Namgung Dowi.

The skills I had built up couldn't compare to the decades of legacy and discipline within the Namgung Clan. My willpower couldn't yet match a grandmaster who'd been at the Flowering Stage for twenty years.

But that didn't mean I was helpless.

My blade sliced through space, disturbing Namgung Dowi's sword path, and even cut through intangible senses that weren't meant to be sliced.

And Namgung Dowi welcomed it all joyfully—overwhelming it only just enough, savoring the duel.

This wasn't a life-or-death fight. It was a duel meant to better understand each other's swords.

As I had thought before, the Namgung Clan was remarkably open with their martial arts compared to others.

They weren't as generous as the desperate Ice Palace who handed Seol Lihyang their secrets without a second thought, but at the very least, they never acted stingy toward someone sincere about the sword.

They welcomed thieves—inviting them to try, if they could steal anything.

In exchange, one day you'd find your martial knowledge woven into their sword style.

Some might dislike this—but not me.

Our moves meshed like a pre-written choreography. The joy of a duel that only a true match—not a deadly fight—could offer brought a smile to my face.

How many times had we repeated the cycle—letting go of all worries, focusing purely on the sword?

Eventually, our surroundings were filled with signs of battle. The land was scarred with cuts and the air still hummed with fading sword aura. In the distance, the mountains were draped in red sunset.

“It’s about time we wrap up today’s duel.”

“Yes. I still have one more sparring match with your son.”

“And didn’t I promise to return you to the Tang girl by nightfall? We’ll be arriving at the next village quite late.”

“Ah...”

Right. We had stepped off the road for this duel during our travels. If we didn’t want to camp outside, we’d need to hurry to find an inn.

“Then let’s finish it with this last strike.”

“Agreed.”

We both nodded and took some distance.

At the same time, a pressure unlike anything before radiated from Namgung Dowi.

It was like the heavens pressing down on my shoulders. But in truth, he wasn’t suppressing me.

I was suffocating under the sheer number of sword paths emanating from Namgung Dowi—countless trajectories from a single point.

Imperial Sword Form—a technique forged to condense all the Namgung swordsmanship, passed down by generations of sword-mad ancestors, into a single strike.

My instincts screamed—whatever move I made, I'd be cut.

It made sense. His aura wasn't just pressure. Every line was a potential sword path that could launch at any moment.

But it didn't matter.

I focused my will, sharpening it to a razor's edge—to cut through not just the sword path, but the very aura of pressure.

Cut.

That alone consumed my mind as I gripped my sword tighter.

And then, as if in unison—

Ssskuk.

A faint slash.

My robe's hem had been cut. A beat later, Namgung Dowi's sleeve was also not left untouched.

It wasn't a life-or-death match, but I had crossed blades with the Sword King—and held my own.

I nodded in satisfaction.

Namgung Dowi, pleased at having experienced a sword he had never encountered before, nodded as well.

A sigh echoed from a short distance away—it was Tang Sowol.

But... that couldn't be helped.

Living like this every day would be exhausting, but now and then, throwing yourself into the madness of the sword, spending time with those who shared that passion—that was truly enjoyable.

...Well, as long as you don't go too far. No one wants to make the same mistake as the Sword Demon.

They say words carry power.

A few days after we settled into the Black Lotus Sect...

Unorthodox masters began dying, one by one.

The witnesses all described the killer with the same word:

Sword Demon.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The sparring match between Namgung Dowi and Namgung Jong was quite a meaningful experience.

After reaching the Flowering Stage, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I had been completely reborn—many things had changed drastically from before.

First, the body. Thanks to the complete transformation, my physical form was robust even without deliberately drawing on internal energy, and the sense of unity with the sword remained active even in ordinary times.

Next, the internal energy. The chronic problems I had, like narrow meridians and turbid qi, had all been resolved.

The forcibly expanded meridians from falling into qi deviation had now completely become mine, and beyond just the murderous aura of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, willpower itself had infused into it, freeing me completely from issues of internal energy purity.

And finally, the ability to consciously wield willpower.

This, in truth, is the biggest change. Willpower is intent and thought—in other words, it's the heart.

Just as one gains qi sensitivity when awakening to internal energy, awakening to willpower gave rise to a kind of insight, enabling me to perceive where the opponent's intent is directed.

Before, I predicted an opponent's movements through breathing, gaze, and muscle twitches—but now, their intent could be felt directly.

Both Seorin and Tang Jincheon had, at times, seemed as though they could see right through someone—and it must be due to this kind of sense.

Of course, since it's such an unfamiliar sense, I can't claim to fully control it just yet...

But I've become capable of using it to a certain degree.

Now that I'm accustomed to strong qi, my next goal was to master this new perception.

Unlike Seorin, who mainly uses kicks and strikes, or Azure Cold Serpent, who isn't even human, Namgung Dowi, being a swordsman like me, offered many points of reference during our duel.

So, though it was a bit slow, we'd been steadily making our way to Zhejiang Province for about five days.

Just as I was waking up and heading outside the room one morning as usual—when I opened the door, familiar white hair swayed at chest height.

“Today, you shall spar with This One!”

“I refuse.”

Thud.

It didn't take long for Seorin to collapse in shock. Anyone seeing this might think I'd betrayed her.

Seorin hugged her knees with the most miserable expression, sitting there in the corridor where the guest rooms clustered together. The fact that I saw her the moment I opened the door obviously meant she'd been sitting right outside.

I had woken up early to stretch lightly before breakfast, but there was no guarantee that other party members or guests wouldn't walk out.

Not wanting anyone to see, I quickly picked her up and tossed her onto my bed, then closed the door.

Lately, Seorin's reputation had been getting a bit strange—it felt like I ought to help manage it myself.

Letting out a silent sigh of relief, I asked Seorin,

“Haa... What is it all of a sudden, Senior Seorin?”

“There is nothing in particular.”

“No, who suddenly sits down like that for no reason?”

“The fact that there is nothing... is precisely the problem...!”

“???”

I couldn't make any sense of what she was saying and just stared at her silently—until Seorin suddenly started slapping the bed furiously with her little palms.

Pang, pang!

“Haven't you been cold to This One lately?!”

“Hmm. If your hands and feet are cold, would you like me to put a brazier in your room, Senior Seorin?”

“You know full well that's not what I mean!”

“I don't even know why Senior Seorin came to my room in the first place...”

I could understand why Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang gathered in my room—it had started being treated like a common area at some point.

But that didn't mean we slept in the same room. As night deepened, we each returned to our rooms and regrouped after breakfast. That was the unspoken rule.

As I shook my head, Seorin suddenly lay flat with a frustrated expression and flailed her limbs.

Like a tantrum from a drawing. Then—

“Haven’t our sparring sessions been getting fewer lately?! Though you may now be on the same level, I thought I was playing the role of something like a teacher... I didn’t think I’d be thrown away like old shoes the moment that Namgung guy showed up!”

“...?”

“Today you shall spar with This One! I don’t mean you shouldn’t spar with Namgung or whoever! I’m saying This One comes first!”

It was an absurd, tantrum-like excuse, as if taken from a sketchbook.

I was momentarily speechless, but had to sit upright at her next words.

“This One shall personally teach you the swordsmanship of the Seo Mun Clan. So...!”

“Are you serious?”

“Ah.”

Did she blurt that out unintentionally in a fit of emotion? Seorin quickly covered her mouth.

But it was too late. I quickly sat beside her on the bed.

I gently pressed down on the back of her hand that was covering her mouth, keeping it from rising again, and spoke.

The distance had naturally closed, but that wasn't the important part now.

“If I spar with you, will you truly teach me the sword of the Seo Mun Clan?”

“Mmmpf! Mmphmpf!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t leak it—I’ll keep it to myself.”

“Mmpf... mmmphmp.”

“I’m already looking forward to it. You know, I’ve never properly learned any advanced martial arts on my path to reaching this stage.”

Even Nampung Dowi, who is generous with swordsmanship, never directly taught me techniques—he merely turned a blind eye when I copied by observation.

Tang Jincheon would gladly open his family library and let me learn advanced techniques, but the Tang Clan lacks distinguished swordsmanship.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean I’m going to abandon the martial arts I’ve learned until now.”

“Mm, mmph.”

Seorin nodded with her mouth still covered.

Since it's advanced martial arts, the Seo Mun Clan's sword techniques must be excellent. Still, the sword that suits me best is ultimately the one I've developed on my own.

It has no named forms, and relies entirely on my skill and insight.

That's why it could be called a sword forged from my life.

No matter how exceptional the Seo Mun Clan's sword may be, I'm not about to turn my back on the path I've walked just to chase some incomprehensible truth.

I've come too far for that.

Still, the sword techniques of the Seo Mun Clan would be a great guide—especially helpful with the finishing move I've been contemplating recently.

I slowly lifted my hand from the back of Seorin's hand. Only then did she cautiously lower the arm covering her mouth, sneaking glances at me.

She let out a deep sigh. The distance was close enough that her breath tickled my face.

“Ehuu. You already know. Originally, I planned to pass down this martial art to the successor of the Seo Mun Clan when I rebuild it.”

“Yes. You said that someday you’d pass it on to your clan’s heir.”

“That’s right. But there’s a problem. Even though I’m still searching, I’ve yet to find a single surviving branch member of the Seo Mun Clan. And you’ve adamantly refused to become my adopted son... so perhaps this isn’t such a bad alternative.”

“You still haven’t found any?”

“Whether they truly don’t exist, or whether they simply can’t bring themselves to entrust everything built over decades to This One alone... I don’t know. But at least after I revealed myself in the Murim world, the only people who contacted me were scammers.”

Come to think of it, it had been the same before regression. Though she had been the Ironblood Hall Master of the Black Lotus Sect rather than a guest of the Tang Clan, Seorin had made herself known.

Yet no one came to her. In the end, Ironblood Hall had only me, Seol Lihyang, and a few rootless martial artists.

This time, being officially affiliated with the orthodox factions like the former Seo Mun Clan had been, there was hope—but in the end, nothing changed.

Seorin's earnest wish was to reclaim a simple, human life—something she had to give up in her vengeance.

But the family most people have no longer existed for her.

With a bitter smile, Seorin continued,

“It can't be helped. Still, I can't let the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts vanish like this. If someone must inherit it, I believe it should be you.”

“Senior Seorin.”

After a brief pause, I spoke cautiously.

“Please don’t misunderstand what I’m about to say.”

“Hmm? What are you about to say?”

“Well... why don’t you just find a good man, marry, and have a child?”

Just moments ago, Seorin had seemed a bit deflated but still lively—but now the light vanished from her eyes.

Seorin stared at me with a strangely cold gaze—not something she should have, not having trained in yin techniques like Seol Lihyang.

But I had to finish what I started. Our relationship might have changed a lot compared to before regression, but I still wanted what was best for Seorin.

“If you’re worried that you might be too old to have children, you could ask Tang Sowol to get medicine from the Tang Clan’s medical division and—”

“Eeit!”

Without warning, she raised her leg high and stomped down at my temple.

To perform such a kick while lying down...?

Surprised yet calm, I turned my head and deflected it. I caught the blow on my shoulder—it didn't hurt much, as it wasn't imbued with internal energy.

“What are you doing all of a sudden?”

“That's what This One should be asking! What nonsense are you suddenly spouting?! This One... This One...!”

She stammered mid-sentence like something was caught in her throat, then suddenly shouted with her eyes shut tight.

“This One... is still capable of childbearing!”

...Huh? Is that even possible? Senior Seorin's age should be—

Huuup?!

She clamped my mouth shut and flipped me over.

The distance was so close it was more suitable for hand-to-hand combat than swordplay.

Even though I was a martial artist at the Flowering Stage, I couldn't react properly—every unconscious effort I made was deftly nullified by her movements.

Now it was the opposite of before—me lying flat on the bed, and Seorin on top of me.

Her face blushed red, Seorin leaned close and whispered, still keeping my mouth shut.

“Th-This One has begun menstruating again since regaining this body.”

So that's it.

Rejuvenation doesn't just make you look young—it affects your body fundamentally.

No wonder Flowering Stage martial artists sometimes regain their inner child.

As I nodded internally, Seorin continued in a serious tone—though with her ears red, she didn't look very solemn.

“So there's no need to worry about This One in that regard. In fact, this is the youngest and healthiest body This One has ever had. If only a suitable seed were available, even now—hic!”

She trailed off and then suddenly looked downward. Realizing something, she jumped up and off of me.

Then, as if nothing happened, she darted out the door in a blur. All of that occurred within a single breath.

I could roughly guess the reason. Again, I had just woken up.

And the meat of Azure Cold Serpent I ate to restore vitality at the Ice Palace certainly had the effect of a spirit beast.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I stood up and fixed my clothes—when small fingers cautiously gripped the doorframe.

A moment later, white hair peeked in. Looking at a spot slightly away from me, she spoke.

“Ah, um, euh... so, what about today’s sparring?”

“I’ll make time from now on for sparring with you, Senior Seorin.”

“Ooh! Very well! I’ll go wait downstairs first!”

Seorin vanished with a bright smile beyond the doorframe.

A beat later, the patter of her footsteps echoed with satisfaction—I couldn’t help but chuckle as I firmly strapped my sword to my waist.

Though the addition of sparring with Seorin slightly delayed our journey, we arrived at the Black Lotus Sect without further issues.

From behind a grand hall that was so lavish it felt gaudy rather than dignified, the Black Lotus Sect Leader and Sama Yuryeon appeared arm-in-arm, greeting us with loving affection.

And—

"This One extended an invitation, but all that returned was a blade."

"Blood Flame Sword Demon! Is this how you repay our goodwill?!"

They gnashed their teeth at our greater-than-expected fighting force.

"Calm down and take this first."

"I heard late and was a bit delayed in preparing."

Upon seeing the golden toad I had prepared and the golden calf Namgung Dowi brought at my suggestion, their twisted expression smoothed out.

“So we have brought precious guests! Come in, come in! In the name of This One, I welcome you all!”

“...”

Truly, an unchanging person.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The power of the golden toad and the golden calf was remarkable. The suspicion that had filled the Black Lotus Sect Leader’s eyes dispersed quickly.

Of course, that didn’t mean the Sect Leader fully trusted us—but with this level of sincerity, he likely decided not to raise his blade first.

That much was enough. After all, the Namgung father and son accompanying us was unexpected even for us, and we had no intention of using this opportunity to eliminate the Black Lotus Sect Leader.

Well, this was merely the reaction of someone who loves money, has a peculiar sense of generosity, and is confident in his own abilities.

Sama Yuryeon, however, was still glaring at us. Though calling it a suspicious gaze might be a bit off...

It was closer to a resentful look, like she was wondering why we'd brought such a troublesome person (and to some extent, I agree), and whether we'd even considered who'd have to clean up after.

I knew that look well—having received it often from the Tang Clan's Chief Steward...

A rare pang of guilt. To hide the sting in my conscience, I deliberately cleared my throat loudly.

“Kuheum. This is my first time at the Black Lotus Sect, and it's every bit as grand and splendid as the Murim Alliance.”

“Kuh! As expected of the Blood Flame Sword Demon—you have an eye for quality! The others are quick to deny This One's aesthetic sensibilities... scoundrels, all of them.”

The Sect Leader nodded in satisfaction. However, Sama Yuryeon and Tang Sowol's reactions were quite different.

Their eyes widened like they were looking at some fraud who had glued a duck's bill onto a raccoon's body, claiming it was a new type of poison beast.

In other words, they looked at it like something utterly unbelievable.

I turned my head slightly, avoiding their gazes, and looked around at the buildings of the Black Lotus Sect.

Large and flashy. But how should I put it... a bit excessive.

Statues placed in completely random spots. Roofs painted only in garish colors with no sense of pattern. In the corners, strangely cheap-looking furniture could be seen.

It looked exactly like what a nouveau riche would create—gathering anything that looked expensive or fancy, all in one place.

To Tang Sowol and Sama Yuryeon, both raised in old, noble families, it must have been a nightmare to behold.

I understood now. Thanks to my time staying in the Tang Clan, visiting other prestigious orthodox sects, and staying at the Murim Alliance, I knew what elegance looked like.

I also understood now that the Sect Leader's personal tastes, and how those tastes were reflected in the decor of the Black Lotus Sect, came across as rather vulgar. But—

“Such odd folks. If someone builds this much with their bare hands, I'd think they deserve applause first.”

“Come to think of it, you're from Zhejiang Province too, aren't you, Blood Flame Sword Demon? No wonder we speak the same language!”

But in Zhejiang, where life was tough even before the Black Lotus Sect existed and where the influence of the unorthodox factions was unusually strong, this was an easily understood form of success.

Although technically not from Zhejiang, both Seol Lihyang, who had lived in the unorthodox world, and Seorin, who had clashed fists with unorthodox warriors, were looking around as if unsure what the problem was.

For the record, Namgung Jong and Namgung Dowi looked like they had no thoughts at all.

So, after accompanying the Sect Leader through his bragging for some time, we eventually arrived deep within the Black Lotus Sect's main complex, at the pavilion where the Sect Leader resided. The atmosphere shifted.

The vulgar atmosphere vanished, and now it exuded a quality that could be shown off anywhere.

"This area feels a bit calmer."

"Mn. Naturally, comfort comes first where I spend the most time. My wife worked hard."

"Wife? Ah..."

I looked at Sama Yuryeon with a curious expression, and she nodded with a proud tone.

"It is a wife's duty to support her husband, is it not?"

"Heh."

So Sama Yuryeon had started by renovating the closest place. Before regression, this had been the most chaotic part of the entire compound.

Back then, she served as the Chief Steward and strategist but not as the Sect Leader's wife, so she probably couldn't touch it.

I nodded and entered the pavilion, where numerous young, beautiful maidservants and elite martial artists greeted us as if waiting.

Each maid was youthful and lovely, and each warrior was at least high first-class, with some having reached the Peak Stage.

It was a blatant show of power. Fitting for the Sect Leader of the Black Lotus Sect—so I just accepted it.

But thinking about it, this must have been uncomfortable for Sama Yuryeon, who hadn't been married for long.

I glanced her way, and our companions who had the same thought also looked at her.

Noticing their gazes, she casually shrugged.

“He’s always been a lecher. If I cared about that, I wouldn’t have married him.”

“That’s why I love my wife.”

“Fufu. I’m flattered, my lord.”

A conversation that made my brain want to shut down. Of course, it wasn’t impossible for one man to have several women, or vice versa.

Especially in the unorthodox world, such cases among powerful martial artists weren’t rare.

I wasn’t one to talk, either.

Still, there should be some limit, right? While everyone was stunned into silence, Sama Yuryeon smiled faintly and added,

“Think about it. Why oppose my husband’s pleasures and create conflict unnecessarily?”

“That may be true, but...”

“In the end, the position of wife belongs only to me. Any woman my husband has is no different from one of my subordinates. If anything, it adds more hands and feet to my arsenal. It’s a good thing—he’s increasing my power without me lifting a finger.”

“...Is that so?”

“Besides, my martial arts aren’t strong enough for me to handle everything on my own—”

“I think I’ve heard enough.”

Information I really didn’t want to know...

Just as I was internally struggling with how different they were compared to before regression, Tang Sowol nodded with a look of admiration.

“I see. That’s one way to look at it.”

“Big Sis Tang? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Mn. It’s nothing. Really, nothing.”

“Big Sis Tang? ...Big Sis Tang?!”

Realizing something, Seol Lihyang grabbed Tang Sowol’s arm and began shaking it. Meanwhile, Seorin began hovering near Tang Sowol’s line of sight.

But that didn’t last long.

While we talked, we arrived at the Sect Leader’s office.

An imposing door. Upon opening it, a finely decorated interior greeted us.

The Sect Leader sat at a large desk, and Sama Yuryeon naturally took her place behind him.

It was a far cry from what I had expected... but it seemed the two of them were doing well—unlike before regression.

It was likely possible because Sama Yuryeon hadn't grown twisted like before, and the Sect Leader hadn't yet built up the same level of power.

As I stared at them with a complicated gaze, the Sect Leader grinned and asked,

“Though there was an unexpected guest, considering the purpose, this isn't bad. In fact, it's quite good.”

“Purpose?”

“That's right. Before we get to the main point—Blood Flame Sword Demon, why do you think I invited you?”

“Well, first, probably to genuinely express your thanks. I did sort of end up playing matchmaker, after all.”

“That’s half the reason. Just where was a woman like her hiding...?”

The Sect Leader looked at Sama Yuryeon with honeyed eyes. He’s someone who treats his own people well—how much more would he cherish his wife?

It was painful to watch, but they seemed to be living their lives just fine.

Was this how others felt when they looked at me and Tang Sowol?

A brief realization passed—but then, the Sect Leader’s aura shifted dramatically.

Up until now, he had been friendly, especially after receiving those gold offerings—but now, intense pressure flowed from him.

Not to threaten. Rather, he was releasing what he had been holding back, as if preparing to speak honestly with nothing left to hide.

“My wife told me—the Tang Clan has nothing but growth ahead. And you, Blood Flame Sword Demon, are a rare orthodox martial artist who holds little hostility toward me.”

“I’m not fond of the title ‘Blood Flame Sword Demon,’ and I wasn’t happy about being brought before Senior Seorin as a hostage, either—”

As if recalling that moment, Seorin furrowed her brows faintly. I gently patted her back as I continued.

“But I know the title is a form of recognition, and thanks to it, Senior Seorin’s revenge was completed.”

Originally, I had planned to wipe out the Black Sky Sword Sect before its Sect Leader reached the Flowering Stage.

Though it happened earlier than expected, I saved myself the trouble of going to them, so it wasn’t a bad outcome for me.

“Of course, using me as a hostage to recruit Senior Seorin is a clear case of bad blood.”

“But didn’t I offer my own cherished internal medicine and the Black Lotus Sect medallion in apology?”

“Yes. Which is why I consider our grudge settled. There’s no reason to view you negatively.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Anyway, if half of this meeting was for congratulations and gratitude, the other half is simple. I wanted to establish a more long-term relationship with you, Blood Flame Sword Demon. You've grown much faster than I anticipated.”

The Sect Leader let out a short laugh and glanced toward Tang Sowol.

“To put it simply, I’d like to form an alliance with the Tang Clan on certain matters. Of course, I’m also asking the Namgung Clan present here.”

“This is a bit beyond my judgment. I’ll bring it up to my father, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“I understand the orthodox world’s deep-rooted hatred for the unorthodox. Even among us, it’s common to bare fangs at each other.”

The Sect Leader laughed aloud, but then suddenly stopped and turned serious.

“Still, thieves must be dealt with.”

“Thieves...?”

“The Green Forest Bandits. What other thieves do you think I’d be concerned about?”

His eyes gleamed as he spoke. The pressure that had felt intense but non-threatening now carried a murderous aura. However—

“My lord.”

“...Ah.”

At Sama Yuryeon’s quiet voice, the Sect Leader collected himself and retracted his aura.

“It seems I got a bit too worked up. My apologies.”

His reaction was impulsive, but Sama Yuryeon neutralized it with a single word. Silence followed—heavy and thoughtful.

As everyone wondered what to do next, Namgung Dowi spoke in his usual tone.

“So, the idea is to share information about the Green Forest Bandits and actively eliminate them?”

“That’s right.”

“Good real combat training for our clan’s warriors. The Namgung Clan agrees—though I have one condition.”

“Condition?”

“Black Lotus Sect Leader—no, Twin-Saber Spear King. Would you have a duel with me?”

Not a debate over distrust of the unorthodox, nor renegotiating terms. He simply wanted to fight.

The Sect Leader’s brows twitched in surprise. Yeah—he’s probably never met anyone like this before.

Maybe he mistook the silence for a refusal, because Namgung Dowi added in a slightly sullen tone,

“If not, then introduce me to another top unorthodox master.”

“I’ll... I’ll try.”

The Sect Leader reluctantly nodded—with a look that said he was staring at a total madman.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The moment the Black Lotus Sect Leader looked at Namgung Dowi as if he were a demon filled to the marrow with demonic energy, it passed quickly.

Perhaps it was hard for him to understand that someone from the Namgung Clan would agree to something this significant with just a single duel.

Namgung Jong leapt up in protest at his father.

“Patriarch! You can’t decide something this important so lightly...”

“It’s fine. In the end, all we’re doing is cutting down bandits, no? Of course, I understand your concerns, little clan lord.”

Namgung Dowi placed a hand on Namgung Jong’s shoulder and continued.

“It’s possible that the Black Lotus Sect Leader, contrary to rumor, could be a petty man who doesn’t keep his word. Or maybe someone beneath him might act recklessly and cause problems. But what does it matter?”

“...Excuse me?”

Seeing his son's confused expression, Namgung Dowi added in clearer terms.

“If anything contradicts righteousness, or if anyone dares deceive the Namgung Clan—then we’ll just cut them all down.”

A calm tone. And precisely because of that, I knew he meant every word.

Hearing this, the Black Lotus Sect Leader let out a dry chuckle and shrugged.

“Don’t worry, Sword King. Whatever else I may be, I wouldn’t dare play games when it comes to Green Forest matters.”

“Mn. That makes sense.”

Nods of agreement began to spread, starting with Namgung Dowi.

Seol Lihyang, watching the mood, quietly whispered to me.

“Cheon Hwi. Why’s everyone nodding all of a sudden?”

“The reason is simple. There’s a deep grudge between the Black Lotus Sect Leader and the Green Forest Bandits.”

Though Seol Lihyang had grown familiar with the way Murim operated, she clearly didn’t know all the finer details.

The Sect Leader of the Black Lotus Sect harbors a deep hatred for the Green Forest. Even before regression, he was fervently engaged in their extermination... though in the end, he failed to wipe them out completely.

The Green Forest Bandits are madmen who rob without regard for orthodoxy, heresy, or even government offices.

They've survived this long by leveraging their high martial prowess, excellent evasion techniques and footwork, and intimate knowledge of terrain to escape time and again.

They even split into over seventy units, forming an extensive, decentralized cell structure. You might catch one or two by chance, but wiping them all out in one sweep is practically impossible.

Since the orthodox and unorthodox factions drew clear territorial lines, an unspoken rule emerged—don't cross into the other's area—and the Green Forest took full advantage of this. The moment they were pursued, they'd flee to the other faction's land, and no one would follow.

“Just to be clear, I'm not asking that This One or the Black Lotus Sect's warriors be allowed to operate in orthodox territory. We'll share information, and in return, I ask that you capture the bastards.”

“I doubt it’ll be very effective. They’re not easy to catch, and there’s also the issue of spoils, no?”

“The spoils can go to whoever actually carries out the subjugation. What This One wants is to show the world that even the orthodox and unorthodox can join hands if it’s to crush the Green Forest. If others join, great. If not, just making those mountain bastards sweat would be enough.”

“Hoh...”

“This One is sincere.”

Though his speech carried the typical crudeness of the unorthodox, there was genuine sincerity in his tone. Seol Lihyang tugged at my sleeve, gripping it tightly.

“I think it’s true... The Black Lotus Sect Leader suffered under the Green Forest as a child.”

“Ah.”

Seol Lihyang widened her eyes, probably connecting “Green Forest” and “suffering” with what it implied.

The Sect Leader of the Black Lotus Sect was a self-made man who clawed his way up from the bottom to unify the unorthodox Murim.

So what did “bottom” mean in this case? An orphan? A beggar? Shockingly, having no parents or home wasn’t uncommon in Zhejiang at the time.

Having neither wasn’t rare either. There’s a reason the Hao Clan became one of the pillars of the unorthodox world.

If someone was low enough to be called the bottom of even Zhejiang society, the answer is simple.

A slave.

Not a branded government slave, but someone forced into servitude at the tip of a blade, having their life exploited.

As a child growing up in a slash-and-burn village, the future Black Lotus Sect Leader lost his family to the Green Forest and was used like a slave.

Building bandit strongholds in place of lazy bandits, serving them, and when their location was exposed and they had to flee, he was discarded and burned with the stronghold.

He had talent. He managed to learn the martial arts of the boss who took over his village and killed them all—but it wasn't enough.

He slaughtered every Green Forest member he saw afterward.

That reputation became the foundation upon which the Black Lotus Sect was built.

Still, despite his efforts, he never managed to exterminate the Green Forest. His grudge only deepened, and to this day, they disrupt the Black Lotus Sect's events and actively target their merchant convoys.

I know this well, having once worked as a Black Lotus Sect warrior before regression.

Three out of ten missions involved either protecting Black Lotus merchants attacked by the Green Forest or subjugating known strongholds.

In the end, the Sect Leader failed to wipe them out in his lifetime.

But the Green Forest, notorious for tormenting innocents, was eventually torn apart during the Heavenly Demon's invasion and destroyed by the Demonic Cult.

They'll disappear eventually, but the sooner, the better.

Setting aside the Black Lotus Sect Leader's grudge, the damage the Green Forest causes is immense across both orthodoxy and heresy.

And this time... it's a beautiful picture.

Even if it's just for the sake of a common enemy, we're joining hands. It could be the key to forming a future alliance between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy.

Tang Sowol, who had been silently listening, stepped forward and spoke.

"Your proposal is well understood, Sect Leader. However, I don't think I'm in a position to make this decision myself."

"I understand. It's enough that you relay This One's words."

Unlike the Namgung Clan, which sent its patriarch, Tang Sowol—though precious—was not in the line of succession.

The Sect Leader nodded, as if he had expected this.

Just as the conversation was about to conclude, I spoke up.

“Father-in-law will make the final decision, but personally, I view this quite positively.”

“Brother Cheon?!”

Tang Sowol flinched at my added remark, grabbing my sleeve from behind and shaking it gently.

Now both sleeves were being tugged—by Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang. I ignored Sama Yuryeon’s subtle expression behind me and continued.

“No matter the reason, it’s about subjugating the Green Forest. There’s no reason to refuse.”

“Well... yes, but...”

“If father-in-law refuses, I won’t say anything more. So don’t worry.”

“Ahh... if that’s the case, then I’ll join Young Lord Cheon as well.”

“Eh?”

“Only if father approves and there are no major issues... but I too believe the Green Forest should be dealt with.”

Tang Sowol let out a short sigh but soon smiled faintly.

As if that triggered something, the tense mood began to ease.

As the Sect Leader leaned back in his chair, laughing heartily, Sama Yuryeon stepped forward in his place.

“Fufu. Since we’ve finished the serious talk, shall we move on to something more pleasant?”

“Something pleasant?”

“What else? A banquet to welcome guests who came from afar to offer congratulations.”

“I heard you already held one during the wedding?”

“Yes, but this is the first time we’re hosting only orthodox guests.”

“I see.”

The Black Lotus Sect and its leader already held significant status in the unorthodox world—but it wasn’t yet absolute.

That’s why they tried to bring Seorin in as a full member, unlike the loosely affiliated Flowering Stage masters in other unorthodox sects.

Though they failed to bring her in, Sama Yuryeon joined at a much earlier point than in the past, which likely helped stabilize internal affairs.

At the very least, enough that they could start turning their gaze outward.

“The days of orthodoxy and heresy fighting to the death are in the past. For most martial artists like us, such conflicts are closer to verbal spats than sword fights—unless you’re a master from the previous generation.”

“Ugh!”

Though not quite a previous-generation master, Seorin, who was just within elder-level age, stumbled forward and bonked her forehead on my back. But it wasn’t important.

I suppressed my inner excitement and spoke.

“Is the Black Lotus Sect... considering cooperation with the orthodox factions?”

“No. Merely that we don’t need to draw swords anymore. This One does not yet see the Black Lotus Sect as the complete representative of the unorthodox world.”

The Sect Leader answered in Sama Yuryeon's place. He was likely thinking of regions where the Black Lotus Sect's influence was still weak—Fujian Province or Guangdong, where the Hao Clan reigns supreme.

Before regression, he succeeded in extending influence to Fujian, but never fully controlled the Hao Clan.

This time, with Sama Yuryeon, maybe even that will change. And the Sect Leader isn't satisfied with ruling the unorthodox alone.

With deep ambition, he'll eventually aim for martial unity and turn his twin sabers toward orthodoxy—but before that, the Demonic Cult will invade.

He's offering to clean up the Hao Clan for us—why refuse?

Before regression, the Hao Clan feigned loyalty to the Black Lotus Sect but never truly submitted.

When the Demonic Cult invaded, they started playing both sides immediately.

It was the end of an age where people betrayed family, lovers, and friends just to survive.

Among many betrayals, the Hao Clan's was the most painful.

And ironically, though they avoided the Heavenly Demon's hand, they couldn't escape the rest of the cult and were annihilated by accumulated grudges.

As Seol Lihyang's past suggests, the Hao Clan was never clean. Those with nothing often torment others more.

So the offer to handle the Hao Clan's discipline sounded all the better.

Of course, once the Black Lotus Sect Leader gains more power, it'll be harder to form a proper alliance with him.

But he's the most unorthodox man in the unorthodox world.

That is, someone who abides by the rule of the strong.

If we beat him fair and square, he'll accept defeat.

It won't be easy. I've only just reached the Flowering Stage, and it's unfamiliar—I can't grow like I did before.

The Black Lotus Sect Leader, on the other hand, is one of the top Flowering Stage masters, deserving the title of strongest among the unorthodox.

Still, if I want to defeat the Heavenly Demon someday, I can't afford to fear or struggle against him.

If the time comes and I still haven't surpassed him... then I'll have to convince Tang Sowol and Tang Jincheon to flee to the Northern Sea.

After collecting my thoughts, I asked,

“Understood. Then, what should we do?”

“Mn? That's a strange question, Blood Flame Sword Demon. You're guests. Preparing is the host's job.”

“Then...”

“I’ll inform you separately. Just rest well and enjoy yourselves. Preferably, where everyone can see you.”

“Aha.”

So just being seen enjoying ourselves in the Black Lotus Sect as orthodox martial artists is enough.

“Understood. Then, may I request a sparring session with the post-first-class disciples who made a name for themselves in the Black Sky Festival?”

“Blood Flame Sword Demon... is bullying weaker kids your hobby?”

The Sect Leader gave me the same look he gave Namgung Dowi when asked to spar or bring out a master swordsman—like I was insane.

After all, the Black Sky Festival was the unorthodox version of the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

The post-first-class disciples who stood out there were only Peak Stage at best, and since the event was smaller and limited to the unorthodox, the overall standard was lower.

Age aside, someone with a realm even the Sect Leader couldn't easily handle was now asking to gather those weaker disciples—it was absurd.

To prevent misunderstanding, I quickly shook my head.

“Not me. She'll be the one participating.”

“Huh? M-Me?!”

Seol Lihyang looked back and forth between me and the Sect Leader in shock.

After her experiences at the Ice Palace, she had glimpsed a realm beyond her own.

What she needed most now was the experience to organize her vague understanding.

“Kids grow close by fighting, don’t they?”

“Hey! Cheon Hwi, I’m the same age as you, okay?!”

“But if I step up, it really would be bullying.”

Watching our bickering, the Sect Leader’s expression softened slightly—he now looked at me not like a madman, but like a strange person.

“I’ll summon them, but don’t expect too much.”

The day before the banquet.

Seol Lihyang defeated every post-first-class disciple the Sect Leader brought out.

And the decent nickname Pure Sound-Frostflower was slightly altered.

Demonic Sound Ice Witch.

“My perfect title...”

“Don’t mind it too much. In the unorthodox world, they love putting words like Blood, Kill, Asura, Rakshasa, or Witch in nicknames.”

“Still... this only happened because you set up that sparring, Cheon Hwi.”

Well...

That’s how it turned out.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The Black Lotus Sect, which in many ways imitates the precedent set by the Murim Alliance, naturally followed suit with something like the Dragon-Phoenix Meeting.

You could think of the Black Heaven Festival as the Dragon-Phoenix Meeting of the unorthodox martial world. Though, if you look closely, there are quite a few differences.

First, the rule that participants must not kill each other is the same, but the sheer savagery of the attacks—so long as one doesn't die—makes it clear how loosely it's applied.

Unlike the Dragon-Phoenix Meeting, where the prizes are usually martial arts manuals or rare elixirs, the Black Heaven Festival simply offers an enormous amount of gold as the championship reward.

There are also differences in the purpose for holding the event on a regular basis.

“You’re well-informed, Young Lord Cheon.”

“Well, Zhejiang Province is my hometown.”

In my previous life, I was a member of the Black Lotus Sect, and though I never won, I had once participated in the Black Heaven Festival, so of course I know it well.

But since I couldn't reveal that, I just shrugged and continued my explanation to Tang Sowol.

"First of all, the Dragon-Phoenix Meeting is meant to promote harmony among the sects under the Murim Alliance, and to resolve potential conflicts or ego clashes through matches between the younger generation rather than having the elders fight."

"That's right."

Given that many of the orthodox sects have such long and storied histories, conflicts between their factions are inevitable.

But they can't exactly go around killing each other with swords, so unless it's something extreme, old grudges are settled through the Dragon-Phoenix Meeting.

That's why, at its core, it's a festival for the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans, and it's rare for a wanderer to make a name for themselves there.

"In contrast, the Black Heaven Festival is not a festival for harmony. Honestly, do you think unorthodox martial artists could sincerely cooperate with each other or resolve grudges in a friendly match?"

"That's quite the harsh critique... though I'm sure you know this better than I."

“Then what’s the reason for holding the Black Heaven Festival?”

“It’s simple. First, it’s a way to throw a bone to the established unorthodox sects. They get to show off their strength, and if lucky, sweep up a lot of gold.”

“It sounds like there’s a second reason, too.”

“That’s probably the real reason. The Black Lotus Sect Leader wants to strengthen his own power by gathering talented late-stage practitioners under his wing.”

The Black Lotus Sect isn’t a tightly-knit organization. Unlike the orthodox factions, which unite for the sake of their ideals, the Black Lotus Sect is loosely bound together by shared self-interest and the personal strength of its leader.

Because of this, the unorthodox world has far fewer clans or sects worthy of being called prestigious.

But does that mean the unorthodox martial world is small? Not at all. When someone gains martial arts or power, it’s natural to want to use it for oneself.

The unorthodox world is just overwhelmingly filled with wanderers with no affiliations.

And the majority of them, like I was in my previous life, are obsessed with obtaining powerful martial arts or rare elixirs.

Most started learning martial arts late and didn't receive proper training, so they inevitably hit a wall unrelated to talent.

“And the Black Lotus Sect Leader provides those people with what they need, and demands loyalty in return.”

“Does that loyalty really mean anything?”

“No, it does. Those who would have stayed stuck at the first-class level for life might break through the Peak Stage, and sometimes even reach the Sub-Perfection master realm.”

“Ah.”

Our group's strength is generally high, but for most martial artists, it's extremely difficult to surpass the first-class level.

Talent, luck, and superior martial arts—at least two of the three are required to break through to the Peak Stage.

And from the Peak Stage onward, people’s attitudes change dramatically. It's no exaggeration to say your life changes.

Would a wanderer from the unorthodox world, who’s never been treated with respect in their life, just let that pass?

Even if they prioritize self-interest over ideals, in the end, they're still human. It’s not strange to show loyalty to someone who changed your life.

“Of course, it's rare for a wanderer to actually win the tournament, though.”

“Still, a prestigious lineage is a prestigious lineage.”

Tang Sowol nodded. As she said, it’s not easy for someone with no background to overcome a person who’s trained in advanced martial arts since childhood.

Those from prestigious families participate aiming for the Black Lotus Sect Leader’s generous rewards, while wanderers join seeking a path upward, and the Black Lotus Sect Leader sees it as an investment to build his own power.

That's the Black Heaven Festival as I know it.

“Obviously, anyone who gains a new nickname after standing out at the Black Heaven Festival isn't going to be ordinary. At the very least, they'll have a ruthless edge.”

“They certainly look like it...”

Tang Sowol scratched her cheek awkwardly, and with good reason. Right now, the so-called ruthless participants of the Black Heaven Festival were frozen solid, completely powerless before Seol Lihyang.

“Hmph! Is that all? The nickname ‘Blood Serpent Sword’ is wasted on you.”

“Y-You witch...”

The man with the sharp eyes collapsed with clenched teeth.

He had been a Peak Stage expert capable of wielding a softsword freely, but—

When Seol Lihyang entwined her whip with his softsword and used her bewitching techniques, he had no way to counter and was taken down just like that.

Apparently, he lacked the skill to endure the extremely refined yin energy and shake off the cold that penetrated his body.

The defeated Blood Serpent Sword was dragged out of the arena by the referees.

Seol Lihyang, now beaming with confidence, placed her hand on her hip and shouted in a deliberately arrogant tone.

“The Sect Leader said you were all outstanding, so I had high hopes... but I guess it can’t be helped. The rest of you, come at me together!”

“How arrogant!”

“We’ll teach you a lesson!”

Other late-stage disciples of the Black Lotus Sect stormed onto the arena in protest. Tang Sowol tilted her head and commented,

“Brother Cheon, I think Lihyang is getting a little too excited.”

“Let her enjoy it. Lately, she’s only been facing stronger opponents, so she needs to let off some steam.”

Just as Tang Sowol said, Seol Lihyang was riding high on her winning streak. That’s probably why she made that remark.

But considering there were only two opponents left, it wasn’t that arrogant a statement.

Whether Seol Lihyang was stronger than I thought, or the quality of this year’s participants was just poor, I didn’t know.

Either way, this level was well within her capability.

She had faced opponents far stronger than herself until now. In contrast, she lacked experience dealing with weaker opponents while trying to subdue them without causing fatal injuries. This was a valuable lesson.

While I chatted briefly with Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang filled the arena with a humming melody that froze the surroundings, and then steadily took down her sluggish opponents with her whip and palm techniques.

The gap was greater than I expected. She was handling two at once with ease.

Only now did I understand what the Black Lotus Sect Leader meant when he said he would summon the late-stage disciples but not to expect much.

Having seen both sides in action and gauged their abilities, I could understand his reaction.

Still, we'd more or less accomplished our goal, so it was fine.

Seol Lihyang, who had been focused on expanding her internal energy to face stronger enemies, now seemed to recognize the need for refined control.

“This result isn't bad at all.”

The next day, when rumors of Seol Lihyang spread throughout the Black Lotus Sect—

“My perfectly good nickname...!”

“Don’t let it get to you. In the unorthodox world, they like to include ominous words like ‘blood,’ ‘kill,’ ‘asura,’ ‘rakshasa,’ or ‘witch’ in nicknames.”

“This is totally your fault for setting up that duel, Cheon Hwi.”

Seol Lihyang pouted, half exasperated, half resigned, and just a bit resentful.

I lightly patted her shoulder and continued.

“Don’t be like that. ‘Demonic Sound Ice Witch’ isn’t so bad, is it?”

“It sounds way too evil! And what happened to my old nickname, ‘Pure Sound-Frostflower’?”

“Don’t worry. The orthodox side will still call you ‘Pure Sound-Frostflower’.”

“But the other half of the martial world will call me ‘Demonic Sound Ice Witch,’ right?”

“Sounds like a good match with ‘Bloodfire Sword Demon,’ doesn’t it? I rather like it.”

“Eh?”

When I brought up her previous-life nickname, ‘Demonic Sound Ice Witch,’ Seol Lihyang flinched slightly.

She muttered something to herself, then nodded with a gracious expression.

“Fine. Since you put it that way, I’ll accept the new nickname.”

“I’m honored.”

“By the way, Cheon Hwi, are you still using the same nickname? I thought since you’ve reached the Flowering Stage, you’d have a new one by now.”

“Nicknames stick when you make a strong impression. Sure, you can threaten people not to call you something, like how Seomun Hwarin said she’d never accept ‘Bloodfire Sword Demon’—”

“But even if they stop calling you that, it doesn’t mean the nickname itself disappears, right?”

“Exactly.”

Seol Lihyang frowned slightly, displeased with my answer.

“But Cheon Hwi, you’ve done quite a lot since reaching the Flowering Stage.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for one, you wiped out the Thousand Poison Sect singlehandedly after they kidnapped Sister Tang.”

“People might’ve calmed down once they learned the reason, but before that, the Tang Clan got flooded with complaints calling it a bloodbath. I guess it did seem like something a sword demon would do.”

“You stopped the awakening of Heaven-Slaughter Star, worked with Shaolin to find a secret solution no one else knew... That’s a good deed. Your nickname should change!”

“The matter of Heaven-Slaughter Star is a top secret only certain people know. It’s better not to spread uncertain information until Heo Soye passes away quietly.”

“Th-then what about defeating the Qing-White Flood Dragon in the Northern Sea?!”

“People in the Central Plains don’t really care about the outer martial world. And they probably wouldn’t believe in a Flowering Stage-level spirit beast anyway.”

After pondering for a while, Seol Lihyang patted my shoulder as if I were pitiful.

“Cheer up!”

“I don’t really care that much about nicknames anyway.”

Even in my past life, I was called the Sword Demon, so why would it bother me now?

But Seol Lihyang shook her head firmly at my indifference.

“I don’t like it. You’re not such a harsh person, Cheon Hwi. It’s a misunderstanding.”

“Heh.”

Honestly, I can be ruthless. I just choose not to be in front of people like Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun Hwarin.

I also enjoy my current life and don’t want to ruin it.

Of course, I didn’t say all that aloud. Instead, I just tousled the top of Seol Lihyang’s head.

“Hey! Don’t— I’m not Sister Seomun, you know...”

She started off resisting, but quickly melted and leaned into my hand.

“Wait. So it’s okay to do this to Senior Seo Mun?”

“Sister Tang and I do it all the time?”

The morals of the martial world are in freefall.

A few more peaceful days passed in the Black Lotus Sect.

Finally, preparations for the banquet mentioned by Sama Yuryun were completed.

And then, rumors about the Sword Ghost began to spread.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The Black Lotus Sect Leader appeared with Sama Yuryun at his side, lifting the corners of his mouth in a crooked grin.

“I heard the story, Demonic Sound Ice Witch. I hear you really crushed my kids.”

“Uh... about that...”

Seol Lihyang floundered, not sure how to respond to the Black Lotus Sect Leader’s joke. Understandably so—someone unfamiliar with him wouldn’t be able to tell whether it was a joke.

That rough air unique to unorthodox sect leaders, combined with his status, often caused misunderstandings... but surprisingly, this was his version of friendliness.

I stepped in, lightly patting Seol Lihyang’s back to reassure her, and at the same time, Sama Yuryun gently placed a hand on the Sect Leader’s arm.

“My lord, I understand you're pleased with a talented junior, but if you phrase it like that, you'll just end up scaring her.”

“Huha! Did it come off that way? I was just joking. I brought good news, but seeing her so tense in front of me made me want to tease her a little.”

The moment Sama Yuryun touched him, the Black Lotus Sect Leader consciously put away his usual roughness and gave a cheerful laugh.

I’d never thought too much about their marriage, but... it seemed they were doing much better than I’d imagined.

Perhaps the tension eased because of the Sect Leader’s hearty laughter. Seol Lihyang sighed in relief and asked,

“So, um... what’s the good news?”

“What else? Didn’t I mention it before? The banquet. The banquet!”

“It’s already ready?”

That was fast. When I asked too, the Sect Leader shrugged.

“It was only delayed because we didn’t know when you’d arrive. We had most of the preparations done long ago.”

“Then I suppose we should get ready on our end as well.”

“Preparation’s our job. You guests don’t need to do anything. Though, like I said before, you should act familiar with us.”

“If that’s all, then no problem.”

Just hand over our prepared gift again in front of everyone and pour a drink or two, and that would suffice.

As I nodded, the Sect Leader rotated his neck as if loosening it, then continued.

“Now I just need to inform those Namgung fellows... I assume they’re still in the training hall?”

“Yes. I just sparred with them, so they should still be there.”

“So the rumors are true—Bloodfire Sword Demon spars with the Sword King every day.”

“The Sword King is a rather unique individual.”

“Whew... yes, quite the odd one. There aren’t many Flowering Stage martial artists who are still sane, but he’s unusual even among them.”

He started with a sigh and ended by clicking his tongue.

That was all I needed to hear to figure it out—he hadn’t been able to find someone to spar with Namgung Jong and was now going himself.

After a brief pause, I spoke up.

“By any chance...”

“It’s private.”

“Ah, unfortunate, but understandable.”

Honestly, that’s how it should be.

A match between two Flowering Stage experts—the leader of the Black Lotus Sect and the head of the Namgung Clan.

Even if it wasn't a duel to the death, revealing a clear winner could stir up unwanted talk.

“Then at least allow me to cheer you on.”

“Hm? You're not cheering for the Sword King?”

“I've never once managed to gain the upper hand against him, so I'm feeling a bit petty.”

I shrugged as I said it, and the Sect Leader chuckled, patting the twin sabers on his back.

“I wasn't planning to go easy, but now I'll really have to give it my all. Thanks!”

With those words, the Sect Leader and Sama Yuryun walked off, his arms swinging casually.

Even though he called it a private sparring match, he brought Sama Yuryun along—probably hoping it would help her martial insight.

Not that her lacking talent could be fixed by watching a few high-level duels...

I shook my head internally, but not for long. Seo Mun Hwarin, who had been silently watching, finally spoke in a quiet voice.

“Those two... seem happy, in their own way.”

“Hmm? Well, I suppose it’s only natural. Two people who suit each other found each other.”

“But they’re so far apart in age.”

“That’s true.”

I didn’t remember their exact ages, but—

Sama Yuryun was slightly older than Tang Sowol, and the Sect Leader, while young for a Flowering Stage expert, was still well into adulthood.

“Probably about a thirty-year age gap.”

“Hm? So not quite as much as between you and me.”

“W-Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing.”

I was just barely holding back from admitting I’d been wondering if I should treat Seo Mun-Hwarin by her actual age.

“Ahem. Anyway, not only is the age gap large, but... both of them seem to have had difficult lives.”

“That’s certainly true.”

The Sect Leader who unified the constantly warring unorthodox world, and Sama Yuryun, who grew up in an abnormal family with only survival and revenge in mind.

It goes without saying their lives weren't easy.

I understood all too well what it meant to survive in the unorthodox world. Seo Mun-Hwarin was no different.

I glanced over, and there she was—staring blankly in the direction the two had walked off in.

“Yet, even people like that... can find happiness.”

There was a hint of longing in her voice.

The day of the banquet.

This was an event where the display was the purpose, and in keeping with that, key figures of the Black Lotus Sect began to gather one by one.

And as people gathered, so did the rumors and idle chatter.

Most of it was grumbling about how the Sect Leader was throwing two wedding banquets for himself.

But some, having noticed our presence, began to hold their tongues.

Among the mix of familiar faces I recognized from ten years in the future and those who wouldn't last that long, one particular rumor stood out.

A man with a grim aura, appearing before sword-wielding martial artists.

His presence wasn't that of a man, but of a sword itself. Unconcerned with onlookers, he would draw his sword and point it without warning—

And after cutting down his target, he'd show up before another swordsman.

This time, imitating the martial arts of the person he had just slain.

They called him Sword Ghost.

“Sword Ghost...?”

“What’s wrong, Young Lord Cheon? Is it a nickname you recognize?”

“If I do know, then I suppose I should say I do.”

Talent for mimicking techniques is rare, but not impossible to find.

I myself was born with such talent, and the now-deceased Ghost Shadow Duelist was also a natural at it.

Even among legends passed down in the martial world, there were always one or two prodigies who could perfectly replicate another’s techniques with a glance.

It's just a matter of how much talent they had, and how long they survived. It's a talent that resurfaces now and then.

But someone with that mimicry talent, an ominous presence, and the habit of killing every swordsman he duels—only to mimic their swordsmanship before his next fight—

There's only one person who fits all those criteria.

Sword Ghost.

As the nickname implies, he's considered a demon-level threat. He's affiliated with the Demonic Cult, but he's not quite the same as the others.

The Demonic Cult was originally a haven for the oppressed and wronged.

But the Sword Ghost was never wronged. He wasn't seeking justice. He simply became obsessed with the sword—so much that the sword ruled him.

He joined the Demonic Cult because it gave him access to strong opponents, not because of any ideology. He never harmed civilians and showed no interest in weaklings, so the cult welcomed him.

He rampaged until things got out of hand, then retreated quietly back to the cult. And despite the chaos he caused, they praised him for “cutting down martial artists.”

In my past life, he reached the Sub-Perfection master realm, and we clashed swords several times. He even set me as his next target.

Before we could finish our match, I fell at the hands of the Heavenly Demon...

So was he active in Zhejiang during this time?

If so, maybe this is before he joined the Demonic Cult? But he’s already being called the Sword Ghost...

After some fruitless thinking, I let out a sigh.

“Still... I’m not sure.”

“Eh? Did you maybe mistake someone else for him? It happens.”

Tang Sowol tilted her head with a puzzled look.

Right. I couldn't remember if he was already active in Zhejiang at this point, or when exactly he earned the name "Sword Ghost."

But even if I do run into him, I should be fine.

The Sword Ghost rose quickly to Sub-Perfection, but never crossed into the Flowering Stage—not even by the time I died in my past life.

At this point, he may even be weaker than that.

Even if I do meet him, I should be more than capable of taking him down.

In fact, it might even be a stroke of luck.

Given his nature, he would've stood in my way sooner or later, whether or not he joined the Demonic Cult.

The scale of these rumors was larger than I expected, but if I can eliminate him now, that would be best.

I finished sorting through my thoughts and smiled at Tang Sowol.

“More importantly, shouldn’t we head to the banquet now?”

“Yes, but... could we wait just a bit? Lihyang and Sister Hwarin aren’t ready yet.”

“All they need to do is put on the clothes we prepared. Why’s it taking so long?”

“Oh, come now. Women have their own complex reasoning. For example... maybe she wants to look pretty for you, Young Lord Cheon, but also doesn’t want to stand out too much, since she’s not the main guest of honor.”

Just listening to it makes my head hurt. But wait—didn’t you just change into something simple?

“Well, that’s because no matter what I wear, I’m confident I’ll look the most beautiful in your eyes, Young Lord Cheon.”

Tang Sowol suddenly leaned toward me as she spoke.

With the distance between us closed, her presence felt all the more vivid. I involuntarily froze, staring into her eyes.

A confident smirk, as if she knew I liked her. Emerald eyes sparkling with mischief. Her signature fragrance.

I stared blankly for a moment, then nodded.

“You’re right... You look beautiful no matter what you wear.”

“Fufu, of course.”

Tang Sowol beamed, her nose in the air. Just then, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin—both clearly dressed with care—appeared in the distance.

As we waited for them, Tang Sowol, standing beside me, asked cheerfully,

“By the way, Young Lord Cheon, do you know where the banquet’s being held? If not, I could ask someone for directions.”

“No need. I know exactly where it is.”

Surprisingly, the venue was a place deeply familiar to me. It was the building that was originally meant to become Ironblood Hall.

Since Seo Mun-Hwarin hadn’t joined the Black Lotus Sect this time, they must not have designated it as her residence.

A lot had changed since then, but to think I’d return to Ironblood Hall with Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin...

Watching the two approach at a brisk pace, I smiled and took the lead.

“Let’s head out.”

I must be cursed with this building.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

One side of the banquet hall collapsed, having been sliced at a slant.

Of course, I wasn’t the one who caused it.