

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 231-240

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Returning to Ironblood Hall... how should I put it—it had become far more lavish.

The outer walls, which had previously only been haphazardly wiped down in a few obvious places due to chronic lack of funding, now shone as if every corner had been polished clean.

Inside the building, it was hard to believe it was the same place I had once lived before my regression.

Gorgeous decorations. Attendants bustling back and forth. The delicious aroma of food wafting from all directions, alongside stacks of wine jars piled like mountains.

It reminded me of the shock I'd felt when I first entered the Tang Clan, wandering around hand-in-hand with Tang Sowol, marveling at everything.

“...My god.”

“You’ve had that astonished look for a while now. Is something wrong, Young Lord Cheon?”

“A-ah, it’s nothing.”

Wasn’t this proof that even such a desolate building could become like this?

Back then, with barely anyone around, it was usually just Seo Mun-Hwarin handling everything alone. If anyone went out on a mission, others would wait like baby birds with their necks craned, wondering when they’d return.

And even when everyone had returned, there wasn’t much to do other than training or helping Seol Lihyang improve her constitution. A dreary, gray place filled with cold memories.

No... thinking back, maybe it wasn’t so gray and dreary after all.

Anyway, while I had liked the people I’d lived with, life outside that circle had been filled with hardship. Yet here we were—proof that even such a space could change so completely.

Despite my respect for the Black Lotus Sect Leader—who, until the moment of his death at the hands of the Heavenly Demon, embodied the dignity of one who ruled the unorthodox world—his evaluation in my mind was now plunging sharply.

“Phew...”

“Cheon Hwi? Are you feeling unwell?”

“You don’t look so good. If you need to, you could just make an appearance and go rest.”

After a few sighs, even Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin began looking at me with concern.

I quietly reflected on the contrast between the memories of Ironblood Hall and the bustling liveliness around me now, then shook my head.

Yeah. Whatever happened in the past, both of them were now safe and sound by my side. That was enough.

Besides, the Tang Clan where we were currently staying was far more comfortable than Ironblood Hall, now repurposed as a banquet hall.

Finally, I regained some composure and smiled faintly.

“It’s truly nothing. I just had something on my mind... but that’s all settled now.”

Though they tilted their heads slightly, seeing that I looked genuinely fine, no one pressed the issue further.

Together with them, I moved to the center of the banquet hall, where the Black Lotus Sect Leader and Sama Yuryun were already present, along with the father and son of the Namgung Clan.

“Bloodfire Sword Demon! What took you so long??”

“We were just debating whether to start drinking without you.”

True to his fondness for drinking, the Black Lotus Sect Leader looked already impatient. In contrast, Namgung Dowi maintained his usual calm demeanor.

At a glance, it looked like nothing had happened, but both of them had added more minor wounds to their bodies.

And considering the areas hidden beneath their clothing, there were likely many more.

I shrugged and spoke.

“There’s still time before the appointed hour. Besides, with three women needing to prepare, we hope for a little leniency.”

“Huahaha! That’s true! Even I only have one wife, and it still takes her forever to get ready. With three, it’s inevitable!”

“My lord...!”

Sama Yuryun bashfully slapped his arm in protest.

Of course, with his achievements in external martial arts, a slap like that wouldn’t feel like more than a massage.

Still, he laughed heartily, clearly enjoying himself, while gently calming her down. Their display of affection made me smile inwardly—until I felt something on my own back.

Turning slightly, I saw I was in no position to laugh at others.

Tang Sowol nodded serenely, as expected, but Seol Lihyang was awkwardly smiling while thumping my back with increasing force. And Seo Mun-Hwarin stood frozen, as if time itself had stopped.

Truly, such obvious reactions. Thankfully, the solution was simple.

I gently grabbed Seol Lihyang's hand to stop her, and leaned toward Seo Mun-Hwarin so our shoulders and elbows touched, jolting her back to awareness.

Before either of them could break down again, I changed the topic to something I had been thinking about.

“By the way, it looks like the two of you were sparring again today.”

“Hm. Is it that obvious?”

“The Black Lotus Sect Leader is easier to talk to than I thought.”

The Sect Leader glanced away awkwardly, while Namgung Dowi nodded with satisfaction.

Perhaps after sparring once, the Sect Leader had come to understand the Namgung Clan’s infamous straightforwardness?

Although he had initially been reluctant, he now frequently sought out Namgung Dowi himself for duels.

Thanks to that, Dowi had been in a noticeably good mood lately. And his son, Namgung Jong, who often received pointers, was no different.

Come to think of it, I only realized after reaching the Flowering Stage myself—there really weren’t many people you could freely spar with at that level.

The Sect Leader had reached the Flowering Stage long before me and was too high-ranking to move freely. It must’ve been frustrating.

At least I had Seo Mun-Hwarin. But those two had no such sparring partners.

No wonder Namgung Dowi would go out of his way to pester anyone who seemed like a good match.

But—

“If you have time, could we spar before you leave—”

“That would be difficult.”

The problem was that the Sect Leader refused to spar with me.

I shot him a mildly annoyed look, but he simply smirked with that familiar wild air about him.

“I know your type well. Oh yes. You love martial arts, but unlike the Sword King, you’re not obsessed with them for their own sake. For you, martial arts are a means. You’ve got your eye on something else entirely.”

“Well, I am technically orthodox.”

“Sure, sure. Picking and choosing who you kill is impressive. At least for someone like me, that’s not easy—which is why I’m doing this job in Zhejiang Province as Black Lotus Sect Leader.”

With that, he extended his hand using Object-Grasping Through Empty Air and laid out cups in front of me, Namgung Dowi, and Seo Mun-Hwarin. He even poured the wine himself and continued speaking.

“I don’t know exactly why you want to spar with me. Since taking my current position, I’ve gained a few tricks, but I’ve yet to master reading hearts. Still, one thing I do know for sure.”

“What is it?”

“The way you look at me... it’s not like you’re seeing a senior martial artist, a successful elder from your hometown, or even some unprincipled scoundrel from the unorthodox world.”

“Then how do you see it?”

“It’s the look of a wolf eyeing its prey—prey it’ll devour someday. You’ve looked at me that way from the beginning.”

I was momentarily speechless.

Because he was right.

I had always planned to defeat him one day and absorb the Black Lotus Sect into the Murim Alliance.

Seeing me fall silent, the Sect Leader raised his cup.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll admit something—people with ambition like yours? I love them. I’m that kind of person too.”

“So, the ominous nickname and the elixir you gave me—that was all part of that?”

“Exactly. Most young wolves come find me on their own once they grow up. We have our grand duel, and no matter the outcome, we accept it. Isn’t that how it should be?”

“Well... depending on the terms, maybe. But as you said, unless it’s something I absolutely can’t give up, I might go along with it. I’d demand compensation, of course.”

“Look at you! You’ve already grown too big to be called a young wolf, yet your goal hasn’t changed. And clearly, I still have a part to play in it.”

“You see through me well.”

“When young wolves grow up, they become old wolves like me. Of course I’d understand.”

He chuckled deeply.

Now it made sense—why he’d shown me unexplainable kindness in the past. It was because even in my previous life, he knew I would eventually point my blade at him and the Black Lotus Sect. So he valued me early on.

In this life, with my intention to join the Murim Alliance obvious from the start, it had been even easier to tell.

“It seems you also want something from me.”

“It’s nothing special. I just want an excellent sword—one that, if possible, listens only to me.”

“What a coincidence. I want something similar from you. The only difference is that I don’t want it for life.”

“What an amusing coincidence. In that case, I’ll try to use you gently too.”

He clinked his cup against mine.

Thud.

The full wine made for a heavy toast. Without a word, we all drained our cups, grinning at each other—until we realized we were being stared at.

I blinked and looked around. Everyone, even Namgung Dowi, was staring at us like we were insane.

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

Just as I was starting to feel a little hurt, the Black Lotus Sect Leader, now in a good mood, raised his voice and prematurely declared the banquet open.

The banquet that followed was perhaps a bit too free-spirited, but overall, it felt similar to the engagement ceremony between Tang Sowol and me.

Some congratulations, a few blessings for a good life, laughter and gift-giving afterward...

The relationship between the orthodox and unorthodox worlds still wasn't great, but the current martial world had entered a strangely peaceful era, thanks to their separation.

Most people here had never experienced direct conflict between the two sides.

Seeing us and the Black Lotus Sect Leader chatting amiably sparked just the reaction we'd hoped for.

Even if true trust was difficult, perhaps we could still join hands in shared pursuits... That kind of talk was starting to spread.

At this rate, both I and the Black Lotus Sect Leader would achieve our goals for this banquet.

But I must truly be cursed when it comes to this building.

From afar, a sharp surge of energy presence swept through the hall. Laughter and chatter gave way to silence as people began to sense it.

I was one of the first to notice—but rather than resolving, the pressure only grew closer, more aggressive.

At the same time, unknown screams began to approach.

Perhaps thinking leaving it to subordinates would only worsen the damage, the Black Lotus Sect Leader drew his twin sabers and swore.

“Damn it!”

It was the sound marking the end of the banquet.

As people quickly used their inner energy to sober up, likely trying to minimize the damage, the Black Lotus Sect Leader bolted outside, with me and the others following right behind.

And then—

Ssskuk.

One wall collapsed, sheared clean at an angle. Atop the rubble lay a corpse—slashed at the same slanted angle.

Beyond the broken wall, a figure stepped into view.

Hair left wild and unkempt. A deathly pallor and expressionless face. Eyes devoid of emotion, like those of a dead fish.

But beneath the ragged exterior surged a lethal killing aura that seemed like it could cut through anything.

A man who looked less like a human being and more like a living sword.

That gloom. That faintly familiar face, younger than I remembered. That unmistakable atmosphere.

It wasn't hard to recognize him.

Sword Ghost.

The one causing trouble across Zhejiang Province had finally shown up at the Black Lotus Sect.

That much made sense, given his behavioral patterns.

But there was one thing I absolutely couldn't understand.

His sword—chipped, worn, and clearly overused—was now glowing faintly with sword energy.

Even after looking several times, it didn't change.

In my previous life, he had reached Sub-Perfection long before I did, yet never crossed the wall to the Flowering Stage.

But now, he had drawn forth sword energy.

It wavered and was unstable, clearly unrefined... but there was no doubt—it was real.

At that moment, I realized something was seriously wrong.

And as if to confirm that thought, a voice echoed out.

“So it was you... Sword Demon.”

“...No way—!”

It was like my heart had been seized.

Instinctively, I drew my sword and stepped in front of Tang Sowol.

And from behind the Sword Ghost, another figure appeared.

Wearing an unforgettable expression of weariness.

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Emotionless eyes and a gloomy demeanor. A man like a sword, exuding an unchecked, razor-sharp aura.

Though his level appeared somewhat unstable, the Sword Ghost had reached the Flowering Stage. His rate of growth was vastly different from my previous life.

But what truly shocked me was something else entirely.

“So it was you, Sword Demon.”

“You can’t mean...!”

A shock like having my heart snatched away. I instinctively drew my sword and stepped in front of Tang Sowol, just as a figure emerged from behind the Sword Ghost.

Long black hair, jet-black martial robes fluttering in the wind, and hollow black eyes fixed on us.

If the Sword Ghost had a gloomy presence like his ashen qi, then the man who had just appeared was simply black—utterly and completely.

Just meeting those bottomless eyes gave one the sensation of being endlessly drawn in, or plummeting downward.

Everything became muddled, meaningless. And in the end, all was dyed black.

I knew this damned sensation all too well.

Judging from the unease in the air, it wasn't just me who felt it. All eyes were now focused on the man who had appeared.

Four warriors at the Flowering Stage were present. On top of that, several Sub-Perfection level elders from the Black Lotus Sect had gathered for the banquet.

A force even an emperor would be wary of. And yet, the one drawing their shock and hostility was this black-clad man.

He wore an expression beyond calm—bordering on boredom.

How could I possibly forget that face?

“Heavenly Demon.”

The word escaped my mouth before I realized it. The Heavenly Demon tilted his head slightly, as if acknowledging me.

“So, you do know who I am.”

“What the hell are you talking about...!”

I almost shouted reflexively at the nonsense, but paused.

The Heavenly Demon had called me Sword Demon—not the Bloodflower Sword Demon, just Sword Demon.

And now, he asked whether I knew who he was.

Could it be that he too—

“Yes. How could you destroy all of my plans without knowing me? Of course, you must know.”

Ah.

Well, it was true.

I had destroyed no small number of the Demonic Cult's schemes. If I were him, I'd want to see the face of the one who'd foiled me too.

Now that I looked closer, the Heavenly Demon wasn't as overwhelming as he had been before my regression.

His aura was powerful—far stronger than mine, certainly—but not to the point where he seemed untouchable.

When I discovered the Demonic Cult was behind Tang Sowol's attack, I had interrogated a captured cultist. From him, I'd heard that the Heavenly Demon had reached the Extreme Demon Realm, which meant the Flowering Stage.

So, the current Heavenly Demon had only reached the Flowering Stage a few years ago.

To reach this level in just a few years was astounding, but... it might be an opportunity.

A chance to defeat the Heavenly Demon right here.

Alone, I couldn't do it—but here, there were four warriors at the Flowering Stage. If we all worked together...

I forced out a deep breath to dispel the fear accumulated from my past death and lingering trauma.

“Huu.”

What I needed to do was clear, and cutting through hesitation was easy. In the void left behind, I filled it with resolve.

Uuung—

My sword responded with a low hum, then became cloaked in pale qi.

Lowering my blade slightly, preparing to lunge, I bent one leg and braced my stance—

“That’s enough.”

A broad back blocked my view. It was the Black Lotus Sect Leader.

“I don’t know what grudge lies between you. I don’t care. But this much is certain.”

He had long since drawn twin spears, now in both hands. Even through his robes, I could tell his back had swelled with power.

“Those two dared to ruin a banquet I prepared. And that Sword Ghost even harmed members of my sect.”

“P-please wait a moment! Let me also—!”

“No matter how I think about it, I see no reason to hold back.”

With those words, the Black Lotus Leader kicked off the ground.

Boom!

A thunderous roar. The earth shook. And where he'd stood, only a gust of wind remained.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Loud, clear steps left indents in the ground, his movement so blatant that no one could miss his location.

It wasn't because he didn't know silent footwork. This was his footwork.

With every stomp, the Black Lotus Leader's aura swelled exponentially.

An overwhelming presence shook the area, and deep crimson qi erupted from his body and twin spears.

It was as if he had lit himself like firewood, burning alive. And in the next instant, that enormous figure came barreling forward with a deafening roar.

Those who disliked the Black Lotus Leader often compared him to a flaming boar—but no one could deny his strength.

His martial path, one of burning himself for victory and domination, mirrored his own life.

That was why it was so unrelentingly demonic.

A clear longing appeared in the eyes of all Black Lotus martial artists present. Regardless of age, they all believed in his victory.

However—

“Huuurgh!”

A towering figure easily over seven cheek tall, muscles rippling, swung his twin spears at the man before him.

Empowered qi. Spear techniques that never missed.

Before the two, the Sword Ghost calmly took a step back. The Heavenly Demon, by contrast, stepped forward.

Yes. Just one step.

Boom!

A blast of force radiated out from the Heavenly Demon, bearing down on the surroundings like gravity.

Heavenly Demon Lord's Step.

An arrogant gait meant to make all but oneself kneel, or perhaps a strange martial art that combined qi techniques with footwork.

Whatever it was, it didn't matter. Even in this incomplete state, the Heavenly Demon had earned the right to be arrogant.

Everyone who hadn't reached the Flowering Stage began to stagger.

Those lacking in cultivation were forced to one knee, and those who hadn't trained martial arts at all simply collapsed, gasping for breath.

But the one who bore the brunt of the Heavenly Demon's pressure was the Black Lotus Leader.

“Kh! You damned—!”

His movements clearly dulled. Yet he rammed his internal energy into his limbs and burned his willpower to force his body to move faster.

It was still enough to trouble a fellow warrior at the Flowering Stage.

The Heavenly Demon moved his hand.

His hand, cloaked in blackened qi, danced through the air, repeatedly clashing with the Black Lotus Leader's twin spears.

Explosions burst out. Qi collided with qi, devastating the area.

The earth split open, carefully decorated buildings collapsed like sandcastles. The Black Lotus Leader's eyes widened in disbelief.

"You... how?!"

"Twin Extreme Tyrant Spears. A fine martial art. Strong, dazzling. But in truth, a sly technique meant to toy with your foe."

The Heavenly Demon calmly spoke the name of the Black Lotus Leader's ultimate martial art. Astonishingly, his movements began to mimic it.

A hyper-focused internal energy use that left no reserves.

A sinister, snake-like strike that slipped through the smallest opening in complex trajectories.

At first, it seemed merely similar. But then, not only did the flow match—the very forms began to align.

After just a few exchanges, his strikes mirrored the Black Lotus Leader's like a reflection in a mirror.

If he had used his own Heavenly Demon Divine Art, it wouldn't have been so shocking.

But he didn't. He met the twin spears head-on and returned the technique after such a short time.

Of course, he couldn't have copied the full method, like the secret formulas.

But the visible movements were perfect.

No, even more refined.

With every clash, the crimson qi of the Black Lotus Leader began to falter under the inky-black qi.

And then, the Heavenly Demon tapped the man lightly in the chest.

Thwoomp!

The Black Lotus Leader was thrown backward and crashed to the ground in front of me.

The moment his back hit the earth, he sprang to his feet. His defensive qi was intact. His body, forged like steel, was unscathed.

But his eyes trembled like a quake.

He realized it too.

If the Heavenly Demon had wanted, he could have shattered his defensive qi and landed a killing blow.

But he didn't. He merely pushed him aside.

Gasps escaped from the Black Lotus martial artists, who had revered him like a god.

Seo Mun-Hwarin and Namgung Dowi stepped up beside me, igniting their qi.

The Heavenly Demon wasn't as overwhelming as before? That maybe we could beat him now?

Bullshit.

A monster is a monster, even in youth. Even without world-shaking internal energy or strange, overpowering techniques—he was still the Heavenly Demon.

This was life or death. I didn't want to lose everything again, like before my regression.

I forcibly steadied my ragged breathing and spoke.

“You can’t win alone.”

“...So, that’s why you suggested coordinated attacks.”

A brief silence. Seo Mun-Hwarin was the first to speak.

“You seem to know that man well. You called him the Heavenly Demon. Could it be...”

“Yes. He’s the current leader of the Demonic Cult.”

“I see. Now I understand why you’ve always been so wary of them.”

Namgung Dowi, in his usual calm tone, added:

“The Demonic Cult, was it?”

He looked over at the Sword Ghost.

“And that one too?”

“Yes.”

“They only know their own wounds and never hesitate to harm others. Leaving them alone will only lead to catastrophe.”

“That seems likely. The Sword Ghost has already caused plenty of damage.”

I flinched, wondering if even now, someone had gone mad with admiration for his swordsmanship.

“You’ll take on the Sword Ghost.”

“Pardon?”

The unexpected command surprised me. Namgung Dowi gave a faint chuckle.

“You didn’t think I’d be that stubborn in a situation like this, did you?”

“...Maybe a little.”

“Namgung Clan may be obsessed with the sword, but we are also pillars of justice. When duty stands before us, how can we prioritize desire?”

Saying this, Namgung Dowi turned to the Heavenly Demon and casually pointed his sword.

“Besides, aren’t you the weakest among us?”

“...?”

“From the looks of it, that Sword Ghost has just reached the Flowering Stage. You should be able to handle him alone.”

He was right.

I was the weakest among the Flowering Stage warriors here, and the Sword Ghost, still unstable, was someone I could handle alone.

It was logical that the remaining three should focus on the Heavenly Demon.

Everything he said was right...

But still, just a little... I felt choked up.

“I’ll join you shortly.”

And I meant it.

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“I’ll join you shortly.”

As I gripped my sword tightly and stepped toward the Sword Ghost, the remaining three naturally turned their stances toward the Heavenly Demon.

In truth, this was an incredibly rare sight. Though the Heavenly Demon was clearly stronger than the Black Lotus Leader, who was currently considered the greatest force among the demonic factions, warriors don't ally with others simply because an opponent is strong. Especially those who have reached the Flowering Stage, let alone any lesser realm.

But at this very moment, Seo Mun-Hwarin, Namgung Dowi, and the Black Lotus Leader began coordinating their attacks without hesitation.

The biggest reason was certainly that the Heavenly Demon was too powerful. But beneath that was a mutual understanding.

The Black Lotus Leader, for the sake of his pride. Namgung Dowi, for the sake of justice. And Seo Mun-Hwarin, to protect me and our group from the Heavenly Demon.

They discarded their competitive spirit as martial artists, let go of any remaining discomfort toward one another, even their pride. The alignment of these factors allowed for such unspoken cooperation.

Even if the Heavenly Demon was a monster, in this situation he should've felt at least a little tension... yet he only looked at me with those same bored eyes.

No, he glanced briefly at the other three, then spoke as if tossing out a remark.

“This one did not come here to fight. If I had, Black Lotus Leader, you would not still be alive.”

“After all this provocation, you're claiming you didn't come to fight?!”

The Black Lotus Leader, dressed in luxurious silk in anticipation of being today's banquet host, now had his garments torn.

A clear handprint was visible on his chest.

A mark showing that the Heavenly Demon had not only read and unraveled his martial arts in an instant, but had shown mercy.

To him, that was as good as humiliation, and he tore at the ruined clothes in anger.

His growling like a furious beast was truly threatening, but the Heavenly Demon remained unreadable.

Until the corner of his mouth twitched upward.

“I’ll say it again. I didn’t come here to fight. I only wanted to confirm something. But... I’ve changed my mind.”

“Hah! Too late for that! Now that it’s come to this, I’ll make sure—!”

Even after being soundly defeated once, the Black Lotus Leader was still full of fighting spirit. Qi surged down his twin spears like streams.

The Heavenly Demon cut him off and spoke.

“Sword Demon. Surpass the Sword Ghost and reach me. If you’re too slow, or if you can’t even do that...

...I promise you. I will kill everyone here.”

Not just the three warriors at the Flowering Stage, but even the dozen or so Sub-Perfection level experts—all would be slaughtered.

Even the word “arrogant” doesn’t suffice to describe such a declaration. Likely no one here truly believed his threat—

Except for me.

I watched the three leap toward the Heavenly Demon, then turned my head.

There stood the Sword Ghost, silently watching this way since the beginning.

The rare sight of multiple Flowering Stage warriors coordinating, the Heavenly Demon receiving their attacks with ease—

None of it mattered to him. He simply stared this way with his gloomy expression, as though he had no emotions.

Well, that was always the kind of man the Sword Ghost was. I didn’t know how he had reached the Flowering Stage, but at his core, nothing had changed since before my regression.

If his swordsmanship was the same as back then, he might be easier to handle.

I erased all carelessness, drew the sword path to overwhelm him at once, and as I stepped to initiate it—

The Sword Ghost, who had been silent until now, spoke.

“You’ve reached Divine Sword Unity.”

“I have.”

“Then how...?”

“Because yours and mine are different.”

A conversation with many omitted words, yet enough was said. Though the paths we took were different, we had reached similar heights.

I dashed forward at full power, as if to fulfill my promise to rejoin the others quickly.

Kwaaang!

My erupting internal energy burst out through my Yongcheon Acupoint. Accompanied by thunder, Lightning Step launched me forward. And it wasn't just once.

Kwaaang! Kwaarang! Kwaaang!

With each step, I slammed into the ground, releasing bursts of inner energy from beneath my feet.

Though my body, already at top speed, wouldn't get faster by doing so, what mattered was that I could freely control my momentum with each step.

By weaving in the subtlety of Ghost Shadow Steps, I distorted his sense of distance. Maybe it was because I was so focused, but I could even see the Sword Ghost's pupils shifting.

Seems his sense of distance was slightly off. If he watched me a few more times, he might figure it out, but for this first attempt—it would definitely be effective.

Boom!

As soon as I reached the perfect one-chi distance for my blade, I struck. Channeling all my power into the sword, I delivered a diagonal upward slash.

My sword, glowing with moonlight-like energy even in daylight, surged upward in an arc.

And finally, the Sword Ghost moved.

Or rather—his sword moved first, and his body followed.

A minimal movement to block the sword rushing toward his nape.

Ka-ga-gak!

White and ashen sword qi collided, scraping against each other with a grating noise as shards scattered like sparks.

The Sword Ghost staggered backward under the force—so it seemed—but he used it instead to spin his body. All while keeping his sword locked against mine.

It was like shifting energy from one hand to the other during Palm Deflection. He absorbed the shock through his entire body and redirected it.

Normally, that would have broken his stance, and his sword would have lost strength. But not for him.

To the Sword Ghost, his sword path was fixed, and his body was just a tool to execute it.

For him, losing balance didn't disrupt the sword path—that would be nonsensical.

I expected this. So I pushed forward with the one-chi of imbalance I had created.

“Hrrk!”

Using Threaded Edge, I dug in deeper without letting our blades disengage.

Our swords tangled messily, locked tightly together.

At one moment it seemed like a contest of strength, then suddenly it turned into a contest of technique—then back again to brute force.

Dozens of sword paths emerged and vanished, unable to be completed due to interference from each other.

And with every exchange, the Sword Ghost began losing ground.

Without time to recover, without even a proper swing, I pressed on.

Only then did his eyes widen, realizing my intent.

Kaduduk!

His unstable ashen qi, continuously clashing with mine, began to be devoured.

Qi is internal energy refined by willpower. It might shatter, but it shouldn't melt away like this.

Anyone with such weak will would never reach the Flowering Stage in the first place.

But the Sword Ghost was different.

If my Divine Sword Unity meant wielding the sword as part of my body,

his meant becoming the sword itself.

That was why he didn't speak unnecessarily, showed no emotion, and barely reacted to anything.

Because swords had no such features.

He had hammered himself into shape, shaved away his humanity in a mold, becoming a perfected weapon.

All he pursued was the ideal sword path within his mind, elevating it to greater heights.

Whatever happened around him, even if his body twisted and broke—it didn't matter.

The Sword Ghost simply swung the sword that he must swing. A swordsmith severed from the world.

If I could force the wrong start, perhaps he'd destroy himself.

But it wasn't going to be that easy.

If willpower is the mind, then someone like him, with barely any heart, should never have reached the Flowering Stage—but here he was.

And now, the Sword Ghost began to prove his level.

“So, it was a predetermined sword path from the beginning.”

Just as my blade reached his guard, threatening his throat—

The Sword Ghost nodded, and ashen qi swelled massively along his sword. Then it quivered once.

Chaaeng!

“Huh?”

His qi shattered his own sword, exploding the fragments in my direction.

Each shard was like a concealed weapon imbued with qi. I quickly raised my defensive qi and leapt back.

I swung my sword in a panic, deflecting the flying debris.

I managed to block most of it, but a few cut through, scraping away part of my defensive qi.

One even pierced deep—but was blocked by the Heartguard Plate I’d received from the North Sea Ice Palace.

Barely, I had survived the explosion at close range.

Now, all that remained was to take the Sword Ghost's head before he could recover.

Or so I thought—until the Sword Ghost lunged at me, clutching his Empty Blade Grip.

“What the hell?!”

From his extended fingers, translucent qi flickered—like he held an invisible sword. Startled, I swung my blade.

Kaang!

And when my sword met the empty air and flickering qi—there was weight. It truly felt like I was clashing with a real sword.

“Invisible Sword...”

“No. It’s not that.”

Just like I had once dismissed the term “Invisible Sword” when facing Namgung Dowi, the Sword Ghost casually nodded.

“The sword’s right here. Clear as day.”

“...You're insane.”

He pointed his chin at himself.

He claimed that he was the sword, and thus could swing it even with empty hands.

It was absurd—but seeing it in action made it hard to deny.

I steadied my breath and repositioned. My attempt to force a mistake had failed.

That meant I had no choice but to settle it the ordinary way—with steel against steel.

I charged again, unleashing every technique I knew.

My black sword cloaked in pale sword qi clashed endlessly with the flickering ashen energy.

Kaang! Kaang! Ka-gak!

It was clearly qi versus qi, and blade against nothing—but it still sounded like swords colliding.

Improvised techniques drawn from every principle I had learned surged forward.

The Sword Ghost met them all head-on with textbook swordsmanship.

His body twisted and bent in unnatural ways, but he wore a calm expression, as if nothing was amiss.

A brutal fight. A scramble to drag the other down and drive in a blade.

In a way, perhaps this was the purest form of swordsmanship.

Or so one might think.

Amid the exchange of endless strikes, I subtly pulled in my arm.

As if I'd misjudged the range out of urgency. As if I was trying again to force a misstep.

"Hm."

The Sword Ghost thrust forward unfazed, maintaining his original distance.

I stared at the translucent qi blade on his hand, focusing my mind.

For a moment, my breath caught. The world around me slowed.

My perception sharpened to the extreme, and I began to sense the natural energy of the world—nature’s essence—as if I could grasp it.

Sharpened will became my blade, slicing the natural energy, while my real sword drove into the gap.

Ssskuk—

A space-tearing slash brushed past the Sword Ghost’s neck.

I had meant to sever it completely—but he sensed something at the last second and twisted his body at a bizarre angle.

“Tch.”

A click of the tongue escaped me. The Sword Ghost, uncharacteristically showing emotion, spoke in anger.

“You let go of the sword?”

“No. I’ve only gained the ability to wield a sword unbound by it.”

He looked at me with a confused, unreadable face.

I felt the same.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Kwaggagak!

As the sword qi rising from the Empty Blade Grip deflected the formless slash, a deep trench was carved into the ground beside the Sword Ghost.

Bursting out from the swirling dust, the man with the gloomy expression swung his arm.

In the empty air, his ashen qi wavered in the form of a sword.

As that force grew sharper, I responded in kind, surging my own sword qi to meet it.

Kaang!

Though my sword was blocked in midair by nothing, the sound that rang out was unmistakably steel against steel.

Then came the shockwave from the clash of qi, scattering the dust cloud instantly.

Was it because the Sword Ghost's realm was still unstable? The qi that should have been unwavering trembled, and slowly began to be shaved away by my sword qi.

But that was all.

No matter how much of his qi I cut down, the sword in his grip—his fingers extended like a blade—remained untouched.

I had hoped that, unlike in my past life, my sword could now reach places it once could not, and cut through things it could not before.

That will, embodied in willpower, allowed my slash to cut space and sever the formless.

The Sword Ghost's Empty Blade Grip was likely the same.

He was the one who wished to become a sword. Unless he died, or his spirit broke, that sword would never shatter.

I knew it in my head—willpower is the strength that forces the impossible into reality.

All warriors of the Flowering Stage could perform miracles without heaven's help, and the same was true for both myself and the Sword Ghost.

But knowing something and understanding it are two different things.

Surprisingly, the Sword Ghost seemed to feel the same. As I opened my mouth, so did he.

“Sword Demon. You're not wielding the sword, you're wielding your realm.”

“Sword Ghost. You’re not wielding the sword, you're being wielded by it.”

We glared at each other in silence. As the strength in our blades intensified, both of us swung widely, knocking the other back and creating distance.

It was partly reflexive, and partly by design.

Normally, creating distance like this would mean resetting our stance and clashing again—

But for me, this range was still well within striking distance.

“Hrrk!”

Another formless slash sliced through the air, this time aimed straight at the Sword Ghost’s neck, and rather than adjust his posture, he swung first.

Kwaaang!

Driven back by the impact, the Sword Ghost slid backward. His posture was unsteady, but to him, that meant little.

Though his stance twisted and he seemed to suffer minor internal injury, his sword remained unwavering.

That was what made the Sword Ghost terrifying. Unlike me, who sought out and exploited openings, he could continue to swing no matter how exposed he was.

That's why, even after many duels in my past life, we could never reach a conclusion.

Our martial philosophies, and even our levels at the edge of Sub-Perfection, had always opposed one another.

But this time was different.

In truth, I wanted to settle what we left unfinished. I wanted to prove my sword was right—but now wasn't the time.

A glance nearby showed a battle far beyond ours.

Twin spears blazing with crimson qi pierced the air like red dragons, fists carrying world-shattering power struck with enough force to shake the heavens, and countless sword auras rained down like a storm.

And the Heavenly Demon, watching it all with a listless expression, simply reached out a hand.

Sometimes using orthodox techniques, sometimes using strange qi techniques, or even mimicking his opponent's martial arts as he had done with the Black Lotus Leader, he deflected every fatal blow that came his way.

His reactions changed fluidly with each moment—not like someone cornered, but like someone toying out of boredom.

True to his word that he hadn't come to fight, he minimized his own attacks and focused on receiving his opponents' moves.

Which also meant that if I failed to reach him... he would indeed kill everyone here.

Could the Heavenly Demon truly kill all three of them if he tried?

Even for a monster like him, it wouldn't be easy at this stage. But it wasn't impossible.

Even if he sustained wounds, he would make good on his word.

I couldn't allow that.

“Huu.”

I inhaled, watching the Sword Ghost charge at me, indifferent to the fatigue and injuries accumulating in my body.

He was right in front of me now, lunging forward with his Empty Blade Grip. The flickering ashen qi pierced the air—

And I exhaled.

Breath.

Breathing is the foundation of all martial arts. Through breath, one distinguishes self from other.

Through breath, one absorbs the natural energy of the world, making it one's own, and connects movements fluidly.

My task was simple—disrupt his breath while maintaining mine.

But if his breathing couldn't be disrupted—

Then I would just have to get rough.

The moment I resolved myself, my breath changed.

The turbulent current of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art grew more violent. I felt like I was about to lose control of the internal energy held tight through willpower.

The energy racing through my blood vessels surged so fast it felt like it would spill out.

I gave myself over to it, and swung my sword toward the flickering ashen qi before me.

Kwaaang!

A thunderous explosion distorted the Sword Ghost's brow for the first time.

“Fool. You're courting deviation from qi—internal fire—just from being impatient?”

“Not yet.”

He wasn't wrong. My energy was beginning to spiral out of control. Though it grew stronger, my senses dulled, and my body felt weightless.

But it was fine.

Before regression, I had experienced internal deviation in the burning ruins of the Ironblood Hall, and again before the towering pavilions of the Heavenly Poison Sect in this life.

If I'd experienced it twice, then not putting it to use now would be the real mistake.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

In time with my wildly pounding heart, the energy of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art tore through my meridians.

It was fine. This martial art was designed to be like this from the start.

Even if I had reached the Flowering Stage, even if I'd freed myself from the obsession of slaughter, its roots had not changed.

“It seems you can still control it—for now. But without perfection, you'll lose everything. Sword Ghost, surely you know that.”

“You only find out by trying.”

Grinning, I readjusted my grip on the sword.

I used the grip I'd employed in the North Sea against the Qing-White Flood Dragon—optimized purely for unleashing overwhelming force.

It was fine. Even if my senses were slipping out of control, my sword qi still resembled that moonlight I saw that night.

Stronger than before, brighter than ever, I swung it again.

My sole thought engraved in my mind: cut down the opponent.

Once more, the Sword Ghost thrust his Empty Blade Grip at me, seeking to meet my strike head-on.

Kwaaang!

Fragments of sword qi burst forth. The thunderous roar rattled my ears, and the Sword Ghost's figure visibly wavered.

But his sword did not.

His body, protected by defensive qi, dispersed the impact as much as possible.

He even slipped into the gap exposed by my wide motion. But—

Ssskuk.

“What the...?!”

A slash extended from the Sword Ghost’s Empty Blade Grip grazed his own neck.

It barely broke the skin—just a trickle of blood—but he stared wide-eyed in disbelief.

As if wondering how a strike he was sure he had blocked had reached him.

But this was only the beginning.

I poured even the internal energy fueling my defensive qi into my sword.

The now almost doubled sword qi surged again.

Kaang! Kakak! Kwadeudeuk!

Clashes of steel resounded without pause. Though the Sword Ghost's posture wavered, his sword remained steady, defending against every attack and occasionally countering.

Our tangled sword paths hadn't changed—but the outcome slowly had.

Strikes that should have been blocked were now followed by slashes a beat later.

It wasn't that I had pierced the unbreakable sword.

Rather, I had applied a concept I gained after seeing the Immovable Wisdom King Steps at Shaolin.

Embedding sword intent into sword wind.

If I could imbue power into wind, why not into the extended slash itself?

Even if he blocked my sword, he couldn't block the slash that followed.

Tiny cuts began appearing on his face and torso.

Of course, it was my first time trying this. With my raging energy, I couldn't aim precisely at vital points.

The stray slashes that followed our collisions devastated the area.

Walls toppled at slanted angles, and claw-like sword marks gouged the ground.

A faint trace of shock and disbelief finally surfaced on the Sword Ghost's usually expressionless face.

His sword, which neither broke nor wavered, always pursued the ideal sword path he envisioned.

Even now, he was doing the same.

But no matter how perfectly he blocked my attacks—he couldn't stop the sword that came afterward.

Only slightly wiser now, he had begun noticing the follow-up slashes and avoided them.

If this continued, I'd tire first. But I wasn't the only one learning.

“Three cheek, six cun.”

“That's the length of your sword. Quite a standard length.”

“Heh.”

As I muttered, the Sword Ghost flinched—and I kicked off the ground.

Now that I knew the length of his sword, even if I couldn't see it, or even if the ashen qi wavered oddly—I no longer feared it.

No matter how sharp, no matter how sturdy—a sword means nothing if it cannot reach the target.

The Sword Ghost slashed. I twisted my upper body and let it pass, dodging instead of blocking.

As always, his form was textbook-perfect. He gave no opening and forced me to defend.

But I made the slight overextension myself.

I may be similar, but I am not the same.

I am still in control of myself. I simply now understand—what matters is the unbroken flow.

I let my sword erupt as I hurled it from one angle to the next.

At times, I released bursts of qi from my elbow following the principles of Lightning Step, and at others, created minute time lags using Ghost Shadow Step, further obscuring my strikes.

What mattered most—was the continuous, unending flow of attacks.

The Sword Ghost's sword still did not waver.

With his bizarre method of moving the sword first and letting his body follow, he dismantled all of my strikes step by step.

My extended slashes sometimes bounced off his blade, sometimes missed, and continued destroying the wrecked surroundings.

A small storm of swords.

And the Sword Ghost, weathering it with just a single sword—was, without a doubt, a formidable swordsman.

But that was all.

I now condensed the overinflated sword qi into a single point.

Qi is refined internal energy, condensed beyond its limits by willpower.

Which meant—with even stronger willpower, it could be compressed further.

The Heavenly Demon was right nearby. And though he had granted me a brief grace period, he still intended to kill those dear to me.

Just the desire to cut was not enough. I had to press into it the will to protect.

This—this was why I wielded a sword.

My wild storm of strikes began to shrink.

The sword qi surrounding my blade visibly thinned.

But the thinner it became, the brighter it shone, and the sharper the strikes became.

And the moment that thin layer of qi fully enveloped my blade—

The deep black of the black iron vanished. All that remained was a sword resembling moonlight.

This time, I didn't dodge.

I clashed head-on with the Sword Ghost's blade.

Ssskuk—

And I cut down the sword that was never supposed to break.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 235. Sword Ghost (6)

Ssskt—

A translucent sword rose above the Sword Ghost's sword seal, cloaked in an ashen aura of condensed sword force. The blade, appearing white as if it had been so from the start due to its extreme concentration, not only cut through everything, but even sliced halfway into the Sword Ghost himself.

The Sword Ghost stared blankly at my sword that had slashed diagonally across his upper body.

He vomited a mouthful of blood, then barely clung to life with the last of his inner energy as he asked,

“How...?”

The martial arts of the Sword Ghost and I were similar yet opposite, and while our cultivated techniques differed little, even our realms were roughly on par.

Even if I had the upper hand, it shouldn't have been enough to crush him head-on like this.

To begin with, the Sword Ghost's unbreakable sword was a manifestation of his own willpower.

That was why he couldn't understand. His will had not yet been broken. However—

“The weight carried by our swords is different.”

“Weight...is it?”

Willpower is heart. Then what filled the Sword Ghost's sword must be infinite confidence in himself.

I am right. This path is the truest sword path. By becoming the sword, one can reach a higher realm, and so on.

Whether that belief is right or wrong, it's not something easily judged. After all, the Sword Ghost had reached the Flowering Stage. As much as I hate to admit it, perhaps his path was not mistaken after all.

But in the end, isn't that a sword meant only for himself?

“My sword is not meant for me alone.”

“Sword Demon. For someone like you, is that even possible?”

Of course, it is.

No doubt, before my regression—back when I was still called Blood Wolf—I might have been no different from the Sword Ghost. I was a martial artist at the Peak Stage then.

But even then, there were always good people around me... and that's where things began to change.

The fragrance of a single pear blossom. A falling camellia flower. And a pavilion engulfed in flames.

My sword was ultimately forged in blood and fire.

And in the end, it faded in the bitterness of a broken promise I couldn't keep.

Then I was given a second chance. At some point, my sword stopped being mine alone.

I do not swing it to perfect it, nor for personal glory.

I simply wanted to protect. I had lost too much. That resentment ran deep.

“People’s hearts are all different, and understanding one another completely is impossible. That’s why I sought an unchanging sword.”

“As you said, Sword Ghost, maybe that’s true. I won’t deny the desire for an unwavering standard. Especially when it comes to the sword.”

“Then—”

“But there is one thing you’re wrong about. Maybe living as a sword rather than as a person is easier...but what can I do about those who’ve already made their way deep into my heart without me realizing?”

My heartscape is mine alone. But as one lives, others naturally find their way into it.

At some point, a sword meant only for oneself becomes a sword for others as well.

“There are people who simply cannot become the sword.”

The Sword Ghost was silent for a while, then shook his head with a gloomy voice.

“No. Even so, I believe I was right.”

“...I feel the same.”

“Hmph. I thought so.”

Though he tried to force a smile, the Sword Ghost soon lost strength and slumped forward.

His dying eyes dimmed as he muttered faintly,

“I should never have accepted the Heavenly Demon’s help... What meaning was there in reaching the next realm using someone else’s power...?”

“What? What do you mean by that?”

No response.

I slowly pulled my sword from his unmoving chest.

The Sword Ghost’s body collapsed to the ground, lifeless. I let out a short sigh as I looked down at him.

“I have no idea what’s going on anymore.”

Pain and exhaustion surged as I spoke aloud.

My inner energy was already near rampage. Gathering my entire willpower to unleash that desperate strike had triggered a brutal backlash.

But the battle was not yet over.

I felt a fiery sensation pulsing along my blood vessels. I forced down a headache so sharp it felt like my skull was splitting and aimed my sword at the next opponent.

The Heavenly Demon struck down the Black Lotus Sect Master's spear with sword aura, met Seo Mun-Hwarin's fist with his own, and blocked Namgung Dowi's sword with a knife-hand.

Just from the shockwaves of colliding massive inner energies, weaker martial artists collapsed bleeding from their ears.

The confrontation of will versus will exuded such pressure that even seasoned fighters found themselves frozen in place.

I kicked off the ground toward him, who still wore a bored expression while facing three warriors at the Flowering Stage.

Crash!

The roar of the Thunderous Footstep Art filled my ears as the scenery around me blurred.

It was incomparably faster than any Thunderous Footstep I had performed until now—only possible due to my current rampaging energy.

In an instant, I was right in front of the Heavenly Demon.

His sword aura was tied up with the Black Lotus Sect Master, both arms fending off Seo Mun-Hwarin and Namgung Dowi.

Still gripping my sword, now glowing with moonlight, I drew it back behind my shoulder, like pulling a bowstring taut. And then—

Boom!

Instead of slowing, I pushed off the ground with full force.

All the strength of my body flowed into my sword through flexible movement of joints and muscles.

Then, a simple thrust followed.

It was the first form of the Taesan Piercing Sword, capturing the essence of the Hwangbo Clan's Taesan Crushing Fist—a straightforward sword strike that pierced through any obstacle in its way.

But that alone wouldn't be enough.

Even if the Taesan Piercing Sword was a top-tier technique, the Heavenly Demon was fending off three equally powerful attacks with ease.

So I added more.

The Sword Ghost's path was vastly different from mine, but I did acknowledge one thing:

His sword was true to its nature as a sword.

Despite his cryptic remarks about newfound enlightenment with the Heavenly Demon's help, one thing was clear—

The translucent sword he wielded, formed from sword and will united, was sturdier and sharper than any vague sword aura.

A sword only needs to be hard and sharp. That, I agree with.

So I took what I could from him.

My sword, aimed at the Heavenly Demon's heart, became enveloped in a thin film of tightly condensed aura, glowing like moonlight...

At that moment, I ceased making distinctions.

The black iron sword, the thin aura coating it—I saw them all as part of the sword.

A sword exists to kill.

The reasons for wielding it may vary, but its value as a tool lies in the kill.

If what I held was truly a sword, then it should pierce the opponent's vital point no matter the situation.

It would neither break nor dull before then.

That is the ideal sword I believe in.

Whummmm!

The half-drawn sword howled fiercely before quieting.

Was it because the will I had infused shared the same nature—one that pierced through all obstacles to reach its goal?

As expected, the two wills blended naturally, adding even more force to my sword.

Maybe it was because, along with my own heartscape, I had awkwardly mimicked the ultimate techniques of others and fused them into this one strike.

For a moment, I felt as though the world warped around my sword—my overflowing will distorting the very laws of reality.

Soon, the others' eyes turned toward me.

The Black Lotus Sect Master, Seo Mun-Hwarin, Namgung Dowi—all three had expressions filled with shock, awe, and conviction.

They truly believed that my sword would pierce the Heavenly Demon's heart.

But what I saw in the Heavenly Demon's eyes was... joy.

While facing three warriors of the Flowering Stage, the one who had kept a bored expression now clearly smiled.

It was the look of someone who had found an unexpected treasure—like picking up a pearl on the seashore.

Clenching my teeth, I pushed the sword in deeper toward that smiling Heavenly Demon. And then—

A massive black aura surged around his body and halted my sword.

“What the...”

I hadn't expected it to be blocked so easily, but I couldn't let it end here.

I poured every last drop of inner energy and will into my sword, forcing it forward.

It worked.

The incandescent blade trembled and slowly pierced into the black aura, finally brushing against the Heavenly Demon's collar.

That was as far as it went.

Protective Aura

A power that makes a Flowering Stage martial artist nearly invincible.

Between equals, this technique could be shattered, but...

The Heavenly Demon's Protective Aura was on another level. That he could block even a strike like this—

I was stunned.

Then I heard his voice near my ear.

“Excellent. And don’t worry. I always keep the promises I speak aloud.”

His tone was falsely benevolent.

At the same time, his Protective Aura began to twist, forming a distinct shape.

Sharp claws. A giant clenched fist. Its height rivaled the tallest building in the Black Lotus Sect, and atop its crown was a wicked grin.

“What...?”

A demon rose high into the sky. The moment I looked up, I realized—

The essence of the Heavenly Demon Divine Art was sword aura, and this was its ultimate form.

Heavenly Demon Ruler's Steps were the demon's footsteps in the Heavenly Demon's heartscape. The aura blocking the Black Lotus Sect Master's spear had been the demon's gesture.

The illusion of the sky darkening each time he used it—it had always been because this demon was watching from above.

Now, the Heavenly Demon had revealed everything.

Forced back by the sheer aura, I stood at a distance and stared at him with the others.

Was he even a fellow Flowering Stage warrior? The pressure was overwhelming.

Thankfully, he wasn't truly invincible.

The minor wounds left by the other three. The thin line my sword had carved through his aura.

Like water droplets hollowing stone, someday, someone would cut through his sword aura and behead him.

...If we were at full strength.

But we were all exhausted. Only the Heavenly Demon remained calm and unbothered.

“As promised, I will withdraw now. That is, if you will let me go.”

Even the temperamental Black Lotus Sect Master or sword-obsessed Namgung Dowi couldn't say let's fight more in this situation.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who wasn't even that combative, said nothing.

The Heavenly Demon looked around at them, then nodded in satisfaction.

“Good. Then hear me.”

Boom!

As he stomped, a vortex of energy exploded from his body.

As the storm of aura gradually engulfed the demon's form, his voice echoed—

Or rather, it wasn't sound, but something that resonated throughout space like a spiritual transmission.

—I am the leader of the Heavenly Demon Cult, the master of ten thousand demons.

—I claim to be the executor of heaven's punishment, and those who blaspheme the heavens shall remember my name.

—You shall call me, without hesitation—Heavenly Demon.

With that declaration, the immense demonic aura storm dissipated, and the spot where the Heavenly Demon had stood was now empty.

The colossal demon was gone. So was the crushing pressure.

As if it had never existed to begin with.

Only the Sword Ghost's corpse remained on the ground. And the lingering demonic aura—proof that it hadn't been a hallucination.

I remained alert for a while longer, but when I finally realized the Heavenly Demon had truly left, I let out a deep sigh.

Then, from the residue of the lingering demonic aura, I heard a whisper—one only I could hear.

—Heaven no longer watches over us, yet their gifts and chains remain.

—Sword Ghost. You and I are not so different.

“...”

Words meant only for me.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 236. Change (1)

Four days had passed since the Heavenly Demon left. Unsurprisingly, the Black Lotus Sect was in shock.

The reason they were able to unite at all was ultimately because of the Sect Master. One by one, people had gathered, drawn by his capability and strength.

But that very Sect Master had been thoroughly defeated by the Heavenly Demon.

Naturally, this led to internal chaos and distrust.

And soon, this would spread throughout the entire Murim.

It was one thing for Seo Mun-Hwarin, who didn't belong to any particular faction, but even the Sword King—head of the Namgung Clan and one of the righteous faction's pillars—had effectively lost to the Heavenly Demon.

Even more so, the three of them had attacked together, yet failed to land a single decisive blow.

This wasn't a rumor that could be contained, no matter how hard one tried.

Sigh.

I had hoped to warn others in advance about the threat of the Demonic Cult and the Heavenly Demon's strength...but not like this.

As I sat letting out deep sighs, Tang Sowol quietly approached, sat beside me, and patted my shoulder.

“Are you all right? You should still be lying down...”

“Don't worry. I'm a bit tired, but it's not that bad.”

Tang Sowol was right. I wasn't in a normal state.

I had forcefully drawn upon my willpower, driven my inner energy to near rampage, and even mimicked and fused another's ultimate techniques.

Thanks to my reborn body, now as strong as if it had been reborn from the bones up, only a few meridians had been strained, and they'd already mostly healed.

But the real problem was with my willpower.

Unlike inner energy, which had a measurable amount stored in the dantian, willpower relied on focus, clarity of intent, and a bit of sincerity—something that seemed to rise from nowhere as long as those were present. I had assumed the only limit was familiarity.

Apparently, that familiarity was my limit.

Though the headache had subsided after several days of rest, my mind still felt foggy.

Still, I was recovering, albeit slowly. Given time, I should be fine.

And more importantly, once fully recovered, I should be able to handle even more willpower than before.

“That sigh just now wasn’t from pain—it came from the overwhelming frustration I felt as I replayed the last battle.”

“Ah...”

Even now, the Heavenly Demon was strong. Far too strong.

It hadn’t even been five years since he’d reached the Extreme Demon Realm, yet he had attained such martial prowess.

I now understood the true nature of the massive demon figure that had blanketed the sky in the final moment before my regression.

It was the aura born of the Heavenly Demon Divine Art. The overwhelming image of that demonic figure had become so enormous that it darkened the sky itself.

Was that truly a level of martial strength a human could achieve? Could a single person truly contain such inner energy, and condense it all into sword aura?

While resting, I kept questioning the Heavenly Demon's strength—but now I thought I might have the answer.

I could be wrong... but it's highly likely the Heavenly Demon had experienced regression like I had—or something similar.

In the worst case, it may not have been just once or twice.

Thinking along those lines, everything started to make sense.

His overwhelming martial strength?

Just as I was able to rapidly regain my strength up to Sub-Perfection Mastery thanks to my memories, the Heavenly Demon likely recovered his former skills and pushed even further.

The intricate schemes of the Demonic Cult, deeply rooted throughout the Central Plains?

Would someone locked away in Xinjiang Province have access to such information and be able to deploy flawless plans without detection? He probably already knew the answers from experience.

His ability to absorb unknown martial arts at first glance and improve upon them?

Sure, talent played a role—but not even a Heavenly Martial Body could perform such feats without prior knowledge.

But if it wasn't his first time seeing them—if he had studied and practiced them before, only to reveal them slowly to avoid suspicion—then everything became plausible.

And then, the final message he left me before departing:

—Heaven no longer watches over us, yet their gifts and chains remain.

—Sword Ghost. You and I are not so different.

A whisper heard only by me. At first, it sounded like vague nonsense, but I knew better.

If someone wanted to pass on a message without triggering a mental restriction, they had to speak like that.

Even someone like the Heavenly Demon couldn't escape such restrictions. That in itself was shocking—but if I considered who he referred to as “heaven,” it became understandable.

Combining what I'd heard at Shaolin and what I learned at Zhongnan Mountain, I could deduce that regression-like phenomena had occurred in the past, though rarely. And while no one spoke of it openly, there were those who knew it existed.

At the time, I thought it was caused by the power left behind by immortals or a ritual by skilled Taoists and sorcerers.

But the Heavenly Demon had directly referred to “heaven,” confirming it.

So it really was the power left behind by divine beings, like immortals or Buddhas.

The problem was, according to the Heavenly Demon, those beings no longer watched over this world—but their gifts and constraints still remained.

In other words, no one could lift the mental restriction placed on me.

If not even the Heavenly Demon could break it, then it surely wasn't a restriction that could be lifted by sheer strength.

As if the Heavenly Demon's overwhelming strength wasn't enough of a headache—now I had to consider the possibility that he was also a regressor, and that the restriction might never be broken.

Haaa...

“You say you're not in pain, but you certainly look tired,” Tang Sowol murmured.

“Am I sighing too much in front of you, Tang Sowol?”

“Fufu. It's all right to show weakness in front of me. In fact, I prefer it. It's a side of you that only I get to see.”

“I'd rather only show you my cool side.”

“Oh my, you really don’t get it. I do like the dashing version of Young Master Cheon, but...I like it even more when you show me this cute side of yours.”

“Cute...?”

It wasn’t the first time Tang Sowol had called me cute, but no matter how many times I heard it, it still felt strange.

As I stared at her with a dazed expression, she covered her mouth with her sleeve and giggled.

“This whole incident isn’t just some minor affair. The fact that such a monstrous martial artist was hidden within the Demonic Cult, desperate to devour Murim... The mysterious connection between you and the Heavenly Demon... The disgrace the orthodox factions suffered—all of it is a big deal.”

“You’re right. Things are going to get noisy for a while.”

“But that’s not what’s really weighing on your mind right now, is it? You’re overwhelmed by how vast the gap still is between you and the Heavenly Demon—and how far you have left to go.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s okay. From where I stand, you’re already quite formidable. Even if it’s hard now, with time, I know you’ll become even stronger. So I’m not all that worried.”

That unwavering confidence left me speechless.

But then her next words made me tilt my head.

“That’s why I can’t help but find you adorable when you’re moping around like this. If I only get to see this side of you now, I’ll make sure to take it in until I’m sick of it.”

“I wasn’t moping...”

All I’d done was stare blankly at the sky and sigh a few times.

This slander was as natural as breathing. I tugged and stretched her cheek in retaliation.

“Heehee. You can keep doing that if you want,” she said, offering the other cheek with a grin.

In the end, I gave up and squished both cheeks before finally getting up. No matter how many times it happens, I can never win against Tang Sowol in this kind of thing.

As I stood and stretched my stiff body, Tang Sowol, still rubbing her cheek, asked,

“Fufu. Feeling a little better now? Are you headed to the training hall?”

“I should. I still need to wrap things up with the Sect Master and the Sword King, but... they both seem tied up handling the aftermath, so I might be here a bit longer. I can’t just lie around the whole time.”

“True. We just need to send word to Father, but those two are in positions of responsibility, so they’ll have to make decisions right away.”

She was right. While I could rest as soon as I recovered, the Sect Master and Namgung Dowi had to figure out how to lead the Black Lotus Sect and the Namgung Clan after facing a monster like the Heavenly Demon.

As I nodded inwardly, Tang Sowol stood up and helped straighten my clothes, her voice soft.

“This time, I only watched as you and Sister Hwarin fought... but next time will be different.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Actually, I didn’t just sit there last time. I secretly tried releasing various poisons... but I got caught every time, and the poison just burned away in the aura.”

“That was dangerous.”

“Well, just being there was dangerous, wasn’t it? Just because the enemy was stronger than me doesn’t mean I could just sit back and watch.”

That’s not true. Most martial artists could do nothing but watch.

More accurately, they had no choice. Any attempt to act was crushed by the Heavenly Demon’s pressure—or the overwhelming weight of his Heavenly Demon Ruler’s Steps.

It wasn't that they didn't do anything. They simply couldn't.

At least Tang Sowol didn't need to engage in close combat. As a poison user, she had options.

Satisfied with straightening my clothes, Tang Sowol tapped her hand against my clavicle with pride.

“Demonic energy is such a peculiar force. Especially when used as sword aura. That's why I've been researching a poison that can disperse it—something like a dispersal poison cloud.”

“Huh?”

“From what I saw, he's a close-combat powerhouse, yes—but his true specialty is sword aura. If we can scatter that demonic energy, he'll be much easier to fight.”

“Well... that's true.”

“My poison now is based on the one I reverse-engineered from the Poison Demon's venom—the one that could poison even Flowering Stage masters. It should work to some extent on the Heavenly Demon, too. Though of course, I can't defeat him alone. I'll still need your help.”

“I know that well.”

Before regression, Tang Sowol had survived until the very end and even stood against the Heavenly Demon.

Her poison was effective even against someone of his transcendent martial prowess. That’s why, even as others fell on the battlefield, Tang Sowol had been kept alive long enough to escape.

In fact, in that final moment, the Heavenly Demon’s hand had burned from her will-infused poison.

Perhaps that’s why the Demonic Cult had tried so hard to kill her—because her poison worked on the Heavenly Demon himself.

Despite her cheerful smile, I could now see the fire burning deep in her jade-green eyes.

I couldn’t help but let out a faint laugh and nod.

“I believe in you, Tang Sowol—just as you believe in me.”

“Oh my, such sweet words out of nowhere. You say you're heading to the training hall, but are you trying to seduce me instead?”

“What the...”

“Too late! I’ve already fallen for you completely, so it won’t work anymore!”

Beaming like a fool, Tang Sowol gave my cheeks a playful squeeze as if to return the favor.

“Ah, and when you’re done at the training hall, would you mind visiting Sister Hwarin?”

“Huh?”

“She seems really shaken up. I think your presence would help more than mine.”

“I’m not really good at comforting people.”

“Just sitting beside her will be enough.”

With that, she began patting my back, gently urging me forward.

“Go on now, Young Master Cheon. For the peace of the household.”

“...”

I flinched at the unexpected choice of words.

But with her persistent pats on my back, I had no choice but to leave—without asking what she meant by “peace of the household.”

...Seriously, what did she mean?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 237. Change (2)

“Hoo...”

After finally stretching my body at the training hall for the first time in a while, I let out a light sigh and sheathed my sword.

Maybe moving around without thinking had helped more than expected. The fog that had hung over my head all day—likely a side effect from overusing my willpower—felt a little lighter.

As the sky began turning red and gold with the setting sun, I murmured,

“Guess I should head out.”

I quickly washed up and wiped away the sweat, then made my way straight to Seo Mun-Hwarin’s room.

Standing before the tightly closed door, I revealed my presence and spoke up.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. May I come in for a moment?”

“It’s open. Come in.”

A strangely listless voice.

When I opened the door and entered, I saw something like a cocoon wrapped in blankets, blended into the floor.

To be more accurate, it was Seo Mun-Hwarin, sprawled out in a daze and wrapped up in blankets to the point that she resembled a caterpillar.

“...What are you doing?”

“Nothing at all.”

“No, that’s not true. I’ve been thinking about a lot of things.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

I nodded and sat down beside her, her face barely poking out from between the rolled-up blankets.

A brief silence passed between us.

Eventually, Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke first.

“What brings you here?”

“Tang Sowol mentioned you’ve been feeling down lately, so I came to check in.”

“Sowol said that...”

“Well, I was going to visit at some point anyway. This just moved up the schedule.”

“Hmm?”

She tilted her head, but since she was lying down, only her neck moved, and her white hair fell over her eyes.

Uncomfortable, she squirmed to fix it—but obviously couldn't tidy her hair without using her hands.

I chuckled softly and gently swept her bangs aside. For some reason, her expression stiffened the moment I did.

“You're still bothered, aren't you?”

“Nghuh?! O-Of course I'm bothered!”

“What's bothering you so much?”

“What do you mean 'what'? You sat right beside me, who couldn't even move, and then you messed with my hair however you pleased! And you even came after washing...!”

“I was talking about the Sword Demon's journal.”

Silence returned.

Seo Mun-Hwarin rolled her eyes, then pulled the blanket over her head entirely.

She was now just a bundle of fluff.

I started gently rolling the blanket-wrapped Seo Mun-Hwarin across the floor.

“What exactly were you thinking?”

“Hyaaak! D-Don’t! It’s making me dizzy! Dizzy...!”

“Your mind is clearly filled with wicked thoughts.”

“I-I still say this is your fault— No, wait! I’m joking! Stop rolling me up and down vertically too—it’s so much worse!”

She was half-begging now, but I didn’t listen to someone with a head full of nonsense.

After rolling her around a good while, until all she could say was “Ugh, ack, blaargh,” I carefully unwrapped the blanket.

Inside, Seo Mun-Hwarin was curled up tight, resembling a pill bug—except that...

Poke.

When I poked her side as if to say get a grip, she uncurled and stretched out instead.

Still keeping her eyes shut tight, she lay with her arms and legs spread wide. After a moment, she peeked open one eye and glanced my way.

Then, without a word, she scuttled away and leaned her back against the opposite wall, wrapping herself in the blanket again for good measure.

“...Why are you so obsessed with blankets today?”

“Because I know you’ll torment me again.”

“Torment? That’s harsh. You know full well that I’ve now reached the Flowering Stage and undergone a body transformation, so I’d never overdo it.”

I hadn’t used inner energy or willpower—just rolled her around a bit. It wasn’t enough to throw off her sense of balance, and even if it had, one circulation of inner energy would clear it up.

In a calm tone, I remarked that she was being overly dramatic.

In response, Seo Mun-Hwarin thumped the floor through the blanket, sounding deeply aggrieved.

“Is that the issue here?! The problem is that you, of all people, disturbed me while I was resting peacefully!”

“Disturbed is a strong word. I think your slander came first, didn’t it?”

“Wh-what?! How dare you accuse me of obscenity?!”

“I said slander...”

Only one syllable was different, yet she'd wildly misheard.

I shook my head and pulled out some light snacks I had prepared beforehand.

As soon as I opened the neatly wrapped confections, Seo Mun-Hwarin's nose twitched, her eyes locking onto my hand.

After a moment of hesitation, she threw off her blanket, crawled over on all fours, and snatched one from my hand.

Now squatting beside me, she slowly nibbled on the sweet, looking satisfied.

I gave a dry laugh and pulled out another.

"I brought plenty. Eat as much as you'd like."

"Ahem. What's the occasion for all this?"

She clearly looked in a better mood than when she'd been in her caterpillar state.

I let her snack in silence for a bit. Then, as she picked up the second confection, I finally spoke.

“You’re worried about the Sword Demon’s journal, aren’t you?”

“That’s not the only reason... but yes, it’s one of them.”

Her voice was heavy.

Following her gaze, I saw a tattered book lying in the corner.

It had been discovered while we were cleaning up after the Heavenly Demon vanished—tucked into the Sword Demon’s belongings, the journal he had written while still alive.

It began with a note that simply replaying things in his head wasn’t enough, so he had started writing.

Naturally, since he was completely obsessed with the sword, most of it was about swords and martial arts.

At first, he wrote about how to grip a sword and how to swing it. Later, he analyzed what made certain sword techniques excellent and recorded his own thoughts.

Toward the end, it evolved into deeper insights.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin wasn't a swordswoman—she was a fist-user. And she had reached the Flowering Stage long before the Sword Demon and had already stabilized her cultivation.

She wasn't someone who'd be shaken by such things.

No—the part that had driven her into the blankets was something else entirely.

Near the journal's end was the story of how the Sword Demon reached the Flowering Stage.

In it, he wrote of his despair at his lack of talent.

He had thrown himself into life-or-death duels with any strong swordsman he could find, trying to gain real combat experience—but he couldn't glimpse the realm beyond Sub-Perfection.

In fact, before my regression, he had remained at that level for over ten years.

He blamed his lack of talent, his poor foundation in cultivating pure inner energy...

To me, someone who believed the Sword Demon's ideology—that one had to become the sword—was flawed, it was hard to feel anything but detachment.

Still, when he was in despair, the Heavenly Demon appeared.

He tempted the Sword Demon with a shortcut—an unorthodox way to reach the Flowering Stage.

At first, the Sword Demon was skeptical, but eventually he accepted the offer and received a secret manual and a technique.

The manual described the “completed” version of the Sword Demon's sword techniques—as if it had been written by his future self.

And maybe it really had.

Both the Sword Demon who learned the manual, and Seo Mun-Hwarin who read the journal, probably assumed the Heavenly Demon was a genius who developed the Sword Demon's techniques to perfection.

But from my perspective—knowing the Heavenly Demon is likely a regressor or something similar—it seemed different.

Given what the Heavenly Demon had shown so far, and the context, it seemed very likely he had simply copied down the future version of the Sword Demon's martial arts.

Still, that wasn't what weighed on Seo Mun-Hwarin's mind.

The real problem was the other technique the Sword Demon had received.

“I... I thought everything was over. That I could just live peacefully if I did my part.”

“This isn’t your fault, Senior.”

“No. My hands are already stained with blood. Maybe things would’ve been better if I’d been more ruthless.”

“Then you wouldn’t be the Seo Mun-Hwarin I know. Besides, even without the Sword Demon, the Heavenly Demon would’ve come on his own. Nothing would’ve changed.”

The technique the Sword Demon received resembled the elixirs the Demonic Cult had recently begun producing.

Things like the Blood Core Pills, made by torturing beasts to death and extracting their blood essence.

Or the Blood Elixirs, crafted by grinding up humans consumed by vengeance and hatred—supposedly volunteers, but horrific nonetheless.

To create these, the Heavenly Demon gathered followers willing to die for revenge and subjected them to brutal deaths.

Their unrefined blood was consumed as-is, and their lingering grudges—normally too dangerous to ingest—were absorbed directly into the Sword Demon’s upper dantian.

The Sword Demon had wanted to become the sword so completely that he couldn’t even grasp the concept of willpower.

So the Heavenly Demon forcibly infused him with the most intense will imaginable.

Normally, absorbing foreign inner energy or others’ grudges would drive one mad.

But the Heavenly Demon had noted in the journal that the Sword Demon, having hollowed himself out to become a sword, would probably be fine.

That’s why he used people who held similar grudges—specifically, survivors of the Jiangxi unorthodox sects who had learned the same martial arts and resented Seo Mun-Hwarin.

There weren’t many.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had spared the innocent—but that also meant she killed anyone with even a trace of guilt.

And the most powerful group, the Black Heaven Sword Sect, had sided with the Black Lotus Sect, not the Demonic Cult.

When our escape made waves in the martial world, they paid the Sect Master a price and came to challenge us.

I defeated them all myself.

And even among the survivors, not all sought revenge.

Some felt shame for having destroyed the Seo Mun Clan first. Others just wanted to live quietly.

At most, thirty were eligible. Two gave up during the torturous process and wished for peace, leaving twenty-eight.

Using those twenty-eight, the Heavenly Demon forcefully pushed the Sword Demon into the Flowering Stage.

The Sword Demon had wanted to become the sword, but the hilt of that sword was handed to those who wanted revenge against Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Unlike his refined and razor-sharp former techniques, his aura now felt unstable—oddly soft.

That was surely the reason.

His enlightenment had not been genuine. His breakthrough had been a shortcut.

The fact that such a shortcut could even lead to the Flowering Stage was insane in itself—

But for Seo Mun-Hwarin, what hurt most was that her past mercy had returned like a blade to haunt her.

Though she still held a sweet in her mouth, her expression darkened as she let out a long sigh.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know anymore.”

“Don’t know what?”

“If I continue living as a martial artist—and a righteous one at that—then I’ll need a clear line.”

“Yeah. If a thug with a sword wants to be called a hero, that line matters.”

“But I don’t know where to draw it. I was never taught this. From the Black Heaven Sword Sect incident to this... all I’ve learned is that half-hearted mercy turns into poison. But if I want to fight someone like the Heavenly Demon...”

She trailed off and sighed again.

So that’s why she’d turned into a burrito today.

I nodded and stood up.

“Let’s sneak out together. Just the two of us.”

“Hmm? Go where?”

“Somewhere nice.”

Her face flushed red for some reason, and she froze.

I grabbed her hand and opened the door.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

White hair swayed over a stiffly frozen neck. Her short limbs moved awkwardly with a creaking motion, and her erratic breathing occasionally confused the order of inhale and exhale, making her stop breathing for a moment.

She hardly looked like a Flowering Stage martial artist... No, not even a proper person. More like a wooden puppet.

Dragging the completely broken Seo Mun-Hwarin as if hauling her along, I crossed the corridor.

Perhaps it was because the sun had already begun to set when I left the training hall. While we exchanged a few words, the surroundings had already grown fairly dark.

Though it wasn't completely nighttime yet, it had that dim, dusky feeling. On top of that, ever since the Heavenly Demon's assault, Black Lotus Sect Leader Seorin had heightened security, so lanterns were lit all around.

It was clearly night, yet the scenery wasn't dark at all. It was bright.

The sky was indigo, the earth bathed in a burning crimson hue—a beauty too profound to express in words.

Even a puppet-like Seo Mun-Hwarin must have been moved by such a sight. Her tense shoulders relaxed as a murmur of admiration slipped out.

“Hooh... Even if it's not for a good reason, this view is honestly quite magnificent.”

“It truly is.”

“Did you bring this One out to see this? Hmm, it certainly seems effective as a change of mood.”

Her voice had become more natural, her expression more relaxed.

I felt a little sorry that Seo Mun-Hwarin had finally returned to being human from a puppet, only for me to ruin the mood with what I said next.

“This happened by chance, but the reason I brought you out here wasn’t to see the night view.”

“Hm??”

“It's probably fine now since there aren’t many people around. We’re almost there.”

“A-Are you taking this One to some secluded place to do something untoward?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin bounced in place nervously, but the moment we arrived at our destination, she froze stiff again.

This was the place where the Heavenly Demon and Sword Ghost had launched their assault. Originally meant to be a meaningful gathering spot for both orthodox and unorthodox sects. And to me, a place like a second home.

Ironblood Hall.

Now, it was known by a completely different name, a building at the outskirts of the Black Lotus Sect.

As we entered, what greeted us first were remnants that vividly preserved the past.

Deep sword scars, traces of destruction and piercing impacts. And, visible only from a distance, a massive footprint.

Perhaps what came to mind was the overwhelming martial prowess of the Heavenly Demon, and the Sword Ghost returning with karma forged by a life of killing.

Though she appeared half-broken, Seo Mun-Hwarin's buoyant demeanor weighed down with heaviness.

With a hollow gaze, she quietly examined the lingering traces.

Why did her eyes look like a child lost in the world?

Even if her behavior and speech had become childish due to the side effects of Rejuvenation, her core self couldn't have regressed.

She may hesitate, but she never doubts herself. She may regret, but she never stops moving forward.

That's the Seo Mun-Hwarin I know. Her willpower was what let her fists, unlike other Flowering Stage martial artists, strike purely and directly, without complex techniques.

Whether it was when she abandoned lifelong revenge without hesitation, when she corrected her past mistakes, or when she pursued the happiness she had lost.

Even in the moment she died, blossoming crimson flowers over the snow.

Seo Mun-Hwarin always knew clearly where she was going.

I gave her arm a stronger tug as she paused for a moment.

“Gyeeek??”

Lost in thought, Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a strange noise as she was pulled toward me with such force that she ended up half-buried in my side.

“Mmmp? Mmmph!”

“Stop saying weird things. It tickles.”

“Mmgh...”

“And stop thinking unnecessary thoughts too. Just follow me. We're almost there.”

With Seo Mun-Hwarin tucked against my side, I walked a little farther.

We passed a spacious banquet hall perfect for entertaining guests, then went deeper, reaching a building that seemed like people might once have lived in it.

Of course, it looked quite different from my memories.

Gone were the peeling walls and faded paint from poor maintenance. The spot where the training ground used to be now held a shabby warehouse.

But the overall structure hadn't changed.

As I followed the paths I remembered, familiar spaces appeared one by one. If that were the case, then just around this corner—

There it was. Just as I expected—a small garden.

“We've arrived.”

“May this One raise her head now?”

“You were free to before, but... yes, you may look up now.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin slowly lifted her head from my side. Was it just my imagination? Her lips moved as if reluctantly parting from the comfort. She looked around.

“Where is this?”

“It’s a small garden tucked away in the back.”

“I thought it would feel eerie at this hour, but it’s surprisingly pleasant.”

Perhaps because lanterns lit the entire Black Lotus Sect brightly.

The garden, otherwise somber in darkness, now bloomed with light and color.

Though no one lived here anymore, and the space was now used only for occasional events, it was minimally maintained.

Still, the surrounding light gave it a dreamlike atmosphere, making it quite a sight.

But what I wanted to show Seo Mun-Hwarin wasn’t the garden itself.

“Could you look at the center?”

“The center?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin raised her head. Her eyes landed on a large tree.

The weather was still chilly, but winter was already coming to an end.

Soon, spring would arrive, and the greenery that had waited in silence would rise once more.

But even before that, there were blooms.

The camellia tree, which flowers at the end of winter, was just such a bloom.

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked up at the camellia tree, ablaze with red blossoms, her mouth slightly agape.

After a long moment, she spoke in a low voice.

“Did you know this One likes camellias?”

“No. I simply showed it to you because I like them.”

“Is that so.”

She quietly repeated my words, then extended her small hand to gently touch the camellia tree.

Even in the previous life, it was a massive tree worthy of being called majestic. Though it had slightly shrunk, it was still large compared to my memories.

Her expression seemed deep in thought, but unlike before, it didn't carry the same shadow.

I didn't lovingly tend to it every day as she had in her previous life, nor did I constantly check when it might bloom.

But perhaps because it was a flower she cherished so much, or perhaps swayed by the atmosphere created by the lanterns around us, Seo Mun-Hwarin quietly stroked the tree bark, lost in thought.

She seemed on the verge of saying something several times, only to tremble her lips and fall silent.

So I spoke up first.

“It’s an old memory, but... do you remember what I said when you kidnapped me?”

“Should we truly call it kidnapping when you begged this One to take you? If you mean the moment I resolved to entrust myself to the Tang Clan... of course I remember. You said we would be happy together, starting then.”

“Hearing it out of context makes it sound odd, but yes. That’s what I said.”

In my past life, I learned many things from Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Not just martial arts. How to understand the flow of Murim, how to read, proper etiquette, and how to accept people with the heart.

To me back then, who had neither knowledge nor possessions, her teachings felt tedious. But looking back now, every one of them became the foundation of who I am.

After my regression, becoming the son-in-law of the Tang Clan, and reaching the Flowering Stage—it would not be an exaggeration to say that Seo Mun-Hwarin made it possible.

Even if she no longer remembers, I cannot disregard the life and breath her teachings gave me.

She is a teacher I can never mention aloud. But I owe a part of my life to her.

“Why do you like camellias, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“Because... isn't it beautiful how they bloom after enduring the harsh winter?”

“I feel the same. The chill has eased a bit now, but back when we were in the Northern Sea, these camellias would've bloomed amidst the white snow.”

There were many flowers still clinging to the branches, but just as many had already fallen to the ground.

Camellias fall in whole blooms, not in scattered petals. Even as they roll on the ground, they retain their vivid red.

That sight brought back memories of the past, and my voice quivered slightly.

“You’ll be the same, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“W-What do you mean by that?”

“Are you afraid of the karma of the past returning to you? Do you hesitate, wondering if what you're doing now is truly right?”

“How could I not be? This One knows that her sins have now come back as a threat to you all.”

“If you continue living as a martial artist, this sort of thing will keep happening. Whether it’s orthodox or unorthodox.”

The karma Seo Mun-Hwarin accumulated in her pursuit of revenge may end now, but in the future, as she continues to live as a martial artist, she’ll have to kill again. And each time, regardless of justification, someone will bear a grudge.

Tang Sowol also nearly died because of a grudge she never even created, merely inherited from her clan, although the Demonic Cult stirred it up.

Such is the path of a martial artist. No matter how much one claims righteousness, in the end, it is a life of taking others' lives.

As long as one doesn't lay down the sword, the bloodstains on their body will never truly dry.

Seo Mun-Hwarin surely knew this. What weighed on her was not ignorance but guilt—that her past sins had endangered me, Tang Sowol, and Seol Lihyang.

That's why a clear standard is necessary.

And once it's set, a stubborn resolve not to compromise.

So...

“That's why I'll be by your side.”

“Huh??”

Startled, Seo Mun-Hwarin looked up as I placed my hand over hers on the camellia tree.

“We're in similar positions. We'll worry together, bear the burden together, and at the end, smile together.”

“You, with me...??”

“Yes.”

Her generous teachings had led me this far.

Now, the time had come for a change. I might not be able to lead her yet... but at least I could walk beside her.

“Camellias don't scatter petal by petal. They fall whole.”

“So they do.”

“Even if they’re not flashy, there’s nothing to fear at the moment of falling.”

I slowly drew Seo Mun-Hwarin’s hand into mine. Then I grasped it tightly with both hands.

She blankly stared at me. I gave her a sly grin.

“You’re the most powerful among us, Senior. Not to mention the oldest and the most well-versed.”

“Hic!”

At the mention of her age, Seo Mun-Hwarin visibly deflated, but I continued.

“I’m not that weak either.”

“Hm? You mean yourself?”

“Yes. You saw it the other day. I’m no longer weak, and soon the new year will come. I won’t stay a child forever.”

“Well, the first part is true, but the second is a bit..”

“The point is, you don’t have to be afraid of being a burden to me or the others.”

She looked briefly taken aback, but nodded at my words.

“I understand. It seems this One's worries troubled you deeply. Thank you. You need not worry anymore.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Of course. You may even confiscate this One’s blanket for a day if you wish.”

“What would I even do with your blanket...?”

I shook my head in disbelief, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, now back to her usual self, giggled.

She laughed for a while, then softly wiggled the hand still held in mine.

Her fingers brushed against my palm in a ticklish way, making me wonder if I should let go.

But then, Seo Mun-Hwarin gave a small nod and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Yes. I’ll remember. You and the others aren’t so fragile that I need to protect you from everything. Look—your hand is truly reassuring, isn’t it?”

“Your way of putting it is kind of creepy, but... yes. That’s enough for me.”

“You know, sometimes I think you’ve gotten too brazen with me lately!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin pouted and stomped, and just then, a camellia flower gently fell in front of her.

She had once asked me to remember her as a single camellia flower at the end.

Now, I finally felt I could keep that promise.

“Cheon So-hyeop, Cheon So-hyeop! So, how far did you and Sister Hwarin go?”

“Just to the camellia tree in the garden.”

“No, not that! I mean... hmm. Did you get closer? Any physical contact or something?”

“We held hands.”

“And??”

“Just held hands.”

As Tang Sowol stared at me with a sulky expression, I hurriedly added,

“Don’t worry. It really was just hand-holding.”

“Sigh... you’re going to get punished for being so innocent, you know?”

Tang Sowol shook her head and sighed.

I didn’t understand at all.

Just as I was silently grumbling about life’s unfairness—

A messenger appeared at the door and politely spoke.

It was an invitation to dinner from the Black Lotus Sect Leader.

In other words, the urgent matters were mostly resolved, and it was time to talk about what comes next.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“You’re... You’re leaving me behind again?!”

Seol Lihyang cried out with a desperate voice, looking up at me.

As she tilted her head back, her bangs naturally parted to both sides. Pale skin peeked out between her black hair, making her expression all the more vivid.

Her eyes, normally sharp, drooped limply. At their corners, clear droplets welled up. Her lips were tightly sealed, as if suppressing something. But her breathing had grown slightly rough, betraying her composure.

She looked like she would burst into tears at the slightest touch. And as her cultivation deepened, the Yin energy she accumulated gave rise to a natural allure, creating a subtle, indescribable atmosphere around her.

A sight that would shake the heart of any man. But—

“Enough with the act. Get out so I can change.”

“Tch! You didn’t fall for it.”

With a click of her tongue, Seol Lihyang immediately dropped the act and returned to her usual self.

Yeah. It was a joke from the start. She probably thought her performance was flawless, and if it had been someone else, they might have fallen for it. But not me.

I let out a deep sigh and shook my head.

“You don’t usually complain about being left out. Didn’t you always say it’s better to avoid annoying things?”

“Well, that’s true. Even if I sat in on some meeting, I wouldn’t understand a thing they’re saying anyway.”

With a mischievous grin, she wiped away the forced tears and casually tidied up the hair she had deliberately let fall to look pitiful.

As I looked at her, I noticed something different.

“Hm? That accessory... I haven’t seen it before. Did you go out to the market and buy it?”

“Nope. I got it from someone I got close to recently.”

I blinked, trying to process what I just heard, but it didn’t quite register.

Seeing my confusion, Seol Lihyang smirked and puffed out her chest so I could see the ornament clearly.

Very different behavior from Seo Mun-Hwarin. Well, with her Yin-drenched constitution, it made sense.

It was just a fancy accessory attached to a plain martial robe, which should have looked mismatched. But perhaps because of how well she carried herself, it had a unique charm in its own way. Seol Lihyang continued speaking.

“You know how I had a string of sparring matches with some of the promising younger disciples from the Black Lotus Sect because of you?”

“Ah, you mean when you mercilessly beat down those kids who got overconfident after doing well in the Black Heaven Tournament?”

“Most of them were older than us, you know?! Anyway, after the sparring matches, a few of them came to talk to me and started asking all sorts of things.”

“Like what?”

“‘How did you get so strong at your age?’, ‘What sect are you from?’, ‘Who’s your master?’, ‘What’s your relationship with Cheon Hwi-da?’, ‘Can you teach me martial arts?’... stuff like that.”

Seol Lihyang shrugged. Having completely returned to her usual self, she began poking my arm for no reason as she continued.

“They were all girls, so don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

Still, knowing they were female martial artists helped make sense of it.

At that age, girls tend to group together. Sometimes they even form cliques. It's not unusual.

As they grow older and gain strength and status, those groups naturally dissolve—something that applies equally to men and women.

“But just so you know, I doubt they approached you with purely innocent intentions.”

“Of course not. Most of them were either half-abandoned by their clans or were desperate for martial progress and wanted to grab any clue they could.”

Why would someone who just lost in a sparring match willingly humble themselves?

Especially a martial artist from an unorthodox sect, known for their pride and arrogance.

They must've wanted something—connections, insights, anything they could get.

If they were content with mere crumbs, it wouldn't be a problem. But if they started trying to take bites of flesh...

That would be a different matter.

Still, Seol Lihyang, who grew up surviving in the undercurrents of the Hao Clan, surely understood that.

She shrugged again and continued in a nonchalant tone.

“So I just took what I could from them and gave some light words of advice. I learned a bit from the Ice Palace, after all, so I handled it well enough.”

“It wasn’t exactly deep or insightful, but I guess they were just hungry for any kind of kindness. They loved it.”

“Huh... I see.”

The Ice Palace trained Seol Lihyang as its heir, giving her suitable teachings.

She had access to nearly all the sect’s martial arts, as well as most of their elixirs.

What she learned there about dealing with people was likely political etiquette—a ruler’s education.

So when she acted like a superior, and they responded with joy... they had effectively acknowledged her as such.

Come to think of it, the younger generation from the Black Lotus Sect may be young, but they were proper martial artists of the unorthodox path.

Naturally drawn to strength, willingly submitting to someone stronger. And if that person was kind when approached humbly, even better.

That’s right. Seol Lihyang, who hadn’t been here long, had already built a faction within the Black Lotus Sect and was even receiving tribute.

She probably wasn’t aware of it herself, but she was perfectly optimized for the unorthodox world.

I looked at her with a complicated expression and lightly patted the crown of her head.

“Anyway, I’ll be back later. Try not to get bored while I’m gone.”

“Got it. I think I had a tea date today... Yeah, one of the merchant girls said she brought snacks. I’ll go mooch off her!”

With that bold declaration of freeloading, Seol Lihyang left the room.

Once she was gone, I quickly changed clothes and stepped out, finding Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin also ready.

Tang Sowol wasn’t a Flowering Stage martial artist, but she was here as the Tang Clan’s representative.

Seeing the two of them composed and calm, as if they had sorted out their thoughts, I gave a nod.

“Well then, shall we go hear what everyone else is thinking?”

After placing the final dish on the table, the Black Lotus Sect Leader dismissed all the servers and attendants, even the chefs who would normally replenish the food as needed.

He slowly looked around the room.

Black Lotus Sect Leader, Sama Yuryeon, Namgung Dowi, myself, Tang Sowol, and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Everyone summoned had arrived. Confirming this, the Black Lotus Sect Leader dramatically cut a piece of meat and popped it into his mouth.

He looked more tired than usual, perhaps from dealing with the unrest in the sect.

“There’s no one watching, so eat and speak freely. That’s what this meeting is for.”

“In that case, I won’t hold back.”

I picked up some food and took a bite before speaking.

“Has the internal cleanup of the Black Lotus Sect been completed?”

“Yes. I made sure to beat down every last arrogant fool who dared to raise their head. Things are stable now.”

The Black Lotus Sect survives on the strength and skill of its leader. With doubts cast on that strength during the recent events, he must've personally reminded everyone.

Unlike me and the Sect Leader, who were stuffing our mouths with meat, Tang Sowol took a more refined approach, tasting bits at a time as she spoke.

“I received a reply from my father. While I still don't have decision-making authority, I can relay the Tang Clan's stance.”

“Perfect timing. And what about the Sword King?”

Namgung Dowi, who for some reason was neatly cutting all the already bite-sized meat into perfect squares, looked up.

“I'm against launching an attack on the Demonic Cult first. It's too far, and we don't know what preparations they've made. However, I agree that we must prepare for the Heavenly Demon. If needed, I'm open to cooperating with the Black Lotus Sect. But in that case, the standards of the Namgung Clan will be applied to the Black Lotus as well.”

“No need to worry. The Black Lotus Sect might be a gathering of unorthodox riffraff, but we’ve never crossed the line. If we had, we’d already be declared enemies of Murim, and the royal court would’ve come down on us. By the way, what about the Green Forest matter we discussed?”

“We already reached a conclusion—cooperate, as long as they don’t play tricks.”

“I just asked again to confirm. What about the rest of you? Let’s go over things one at a time.”

Everyone exchanged looks briefly before Tang Sowol spoke first.

“The Tang Clan will cooperate regarding the Green Forest.”

“And regarding the Heavenly Demon?”

“We’ll be working with the Murim Alliance for that, not the Black Lotus Sect.”

“Well, considering the Murim Alliance is still functioning, it’d look odd if the Tang Clan—recently dubbed the greatest clan under heaven—joined hands with the Black Lotus Sect.”

The Black Lotus Sect Leader nodded and turned to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“What about the Seo Mun Clan?”

“This One still intends to rebuild the clan someday... but for now, I am a guest of the Tang Clan.”

She indirectly stated she would follow the Tang Clan’s decision, yet for some reason, she looked at me instead of Tang Sowol.

As attention turned to me, I was about to speak—but the Black Lotus Sect Leader raised his palm to stop me.

“Hold on a moment.”

“Yes?”

“Before that, there’s something I want to say, and something I want to hear.”

“I see...”

I had a vague idea of what was coming. As expected, the Black Lotus Sect Leader spoke, his eyes gleaming like a wounded beast.

“I climbed from the lowest depths to the peak of the unorthodox world. Do you know what that means?”

“It means you’re willing to discard pride whenever necessary.”

“As expected of the Sword Demon. That’s correct. This wasn’t my first loss. I’ve crawled through the dirt many times just to survive—and I probably will again.”

He said this without the slightest shame, a stark contrast to the orthodox factions who treat even temporary retreats as disgraceful.

“But it’s all for the sake of leaping forward—a step back to take two forward. I’ve never given up on reaching higher.”

“You seem the type.”

He seemed bold, but he could be petty. He seemed simple, but could be cunning. He had an eye for people but didn't trust them easily.

These were things gossips often said about the man who founded the Black Lotus Sect.

But having observed him up close, I knew there was a much simpler explanation.

Ambition.

He always wanted to climb higher, to become someone greater.

Whether it was inborn, shaped by childhood, or due to something no one else knew—it didn't matter.

The Black Lotus Sect Leader moved for ambition, and for that ambition, he was willing to shoulder any disgrace.

So when he spoke next, it was as a declaration.

“To me, the Heavenly Demon will eventually become a massive obstacle. No... calling him an obstacle doesn’t do it justice. He will be a towering cliff standing in my path.”

“You’re the leader of the Black Lotus Sect, and he’s the leader of the Demonic Cult. Naturally, a confrontation is inevitable.”

I didn’t know if the Heavenly Demon bore personal grudges against martial artists like other demons.

His tired expression made it more likely that he had already taken revenge during a past regression or that his thirst for vengeance had dulled.

Which is why I couldn’t understand his invasion of the Central Plains, or the rivers of blood he spilled.

Still, whatever his motives, the Heavenly Demon clearly followed the Demonic Cult’s doctrines.

He would raise his sword to destroy Murim.

I didn't know what exactly the Black Lotus Sect Leader had seen in him, but he spoke with unwavering conviction.

“If he's an unmovable wall, then we must break him down. I'll prepare to take the Heavenly Demon down. Like the Sword King said, I won't march into Xinjiang to strike first—but the moment he steps into the Central Plains, I'll kill him where he stands.”

“That's the most rational course.”

“Getting bigger isn't always a good thing, after all.”

He shrugged lightly, but his tone grew serious again.

“And what comes next is even more important. To defeat the enemy, you must understand the enemy. I figured many of you were curious but hesitant to ask—so I'm asking now. This isn't an interrogation, so don't misunderstand.”

With that, the Black Lotus Sect Leader looked straight at me.

“Blood Flame Sword Demon. Are you...by any chance, acquainted with the Heavenly Demon from before?”

Well, someone was bound to ask.

I hadn't expected it this soon, but I had always known a time would come when I had to talk about the Heavenly Demon.

Taking a breath, I carefully organized my thoughts, making sure not to trigger any mental restrictions.

Then, I opened my mouth.

“Yes. I knew him. To put it simply, he's the one who took someone precious from me. He's my mortal enemy.”

“Then...”

“But I'll refrain from giving further details.”

“???”

Everyone at the table blinked blankly at my words.

So cold. But really, that was the best I could give.

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“Blood Flame Sword Demon. Are you, by any chance, someone who knew the Heavenly Demon from before?”

It was clear the Black Lotus Sect Leader wasn’t asking out of ignorance. He was really asking whether I could share any more details.

I carefully chose my words to avoid triggering the mental restriction and finally spoke.

“Yes. I knew him. To put it simply, he’s the one who took someone precious from me. He’s my mortal enemy.”

“Then...!”

“But I will refrain from giving any detailed explanation.”

“???”

Everyone at the table blinked blankly.

Come on now. That was the best I could do.

If I could tell them what they really wanted to know—like how, in my past life, Tang Sowol was killed by the Heavenly Demon—how great would that be?

But due to the mental restriction, it was basically impossible.

Which is why I could only vaguely frame it as a grudge from the past.

Maybe it's true that some things are so dumbfounding that they leave people speechless. The Black Lotus Sect Leader and Sama Yuryeon were left with their mouths hanging open, and even Namgung Dowi's fingertips twitched slightly.

On the other hand, Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin remained composed. As expected.

Tang Sowol had long sensed that I was hiding something, but she had never pried. Her stance was always: “Just be true to your current self.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin had her own dark past, so perhaps she chose not to dig into others’ wounds either.

Of course, yesterday’s events were part of the reason too. Under the camellia tree, the trust in Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes had been clear.

Encouraged by that, I decided to shamelessly push forward.

Instead of explaining myself to the stunned trio, I calmly moved on as though nothing had happened.

“I do know a little about the Heavenly Demon’s martial arts, but what I know is probably about the same as anyone who’s fought him directly.”

“W-Wait a moment! You’re really just moving on like that? Just ‘no further comment,’ really, Blood Flame Sword Demon?!”

“Yes, well... it’s my personal matter, and it won’t help much in dealing with the Heavenly Demon anyway.”

“That may be true. But still...”

With a face that said, “This can’t be right,” the Black Lotus Sect Leader looked to the side at Sama Yuryeon, likely instinctively trying to delegate the thinking.

After tilting her head in confusion for a while, Sama Yuryeon caught the Sect Leader’s glance and quickly cleared her throat.

“Ahem. Don’t worry too much, My Lord. Although Blood Flame Sword Demon’s words were cut off abruptly, leaving us curious and a bit deflated... it’s also true that this information might not be necessary in dealing with the Heavenly Demon.”

“If my wife says so, then I’ll accept that. Very well. We won’t pry, Blood Flame Sword Demon. Please continue with what you were saying.”

“Understood. We were discussing the Heavenly Demon’s martial arts, correct? As you may have guessed, his true martial art—what the Demonic Cult calls the Heavenly Demon Divine Art—is a powerful internal energy-based technique.”

“I’ve reviewed it several times in my head, but it’s still hard to believe. He didn’t surpass Namgung’s sword, but to think that his footwork and strikes were just secondary support techniques...”

Namgung Dowi, who had been especially quiet today, let out a sigh. The blow to his pride must’ve been significant.

Well, he hadn’t been humiliated like the Black Lotus Sect Leader, whose spear technique was broken down and returned in an improved form. But Namgung Dowi’s swordsmanship had been fully analyzed by the Heavenly Demon and mimicked on the spot.

Or rather, it was worse because the Heavenly Demon didn’t even bother showing what came after.

The Namgung Clan’s sword art is the crystallization of generations of effort and insight, built up over hundreds of years by martial geniuses.

That’s why they don’t mind being open with it—they believe no one can replicate it just by seeing it a few times.

And even if someone could imitate it, that person would be a genius capable of advancing it further.

It's a "sword-lover's logic": if someone learns from us and grows stronger, that's a good thing.

But the Heavenly Demon simply mirrored Namgung Dowi's sword technique with his own strikes. No more, no less.

He must've known that if he made the mistake of showing more, Namgung Dowi would grow even stronger.

In the end, Namgung Dowi was completely outplayed. So it was no surprise to hear his quiet frustration.

"That the Heavenly Demon is adept at fighting physically is certainly true... but you all saw it, didn't you? That massive demonic creature."

Namgung Dowi went silent for a moment, recalling the event. Then, after some time, he finally spoke.

“To be honest... I don’t think I could cut down that demon.”

“No, you probably couldn’t. I doubt anyone here could defeat it alone.”

“No. Not quite. There’s one person I think might have a chance.”

“Really? Who...? Could it be the Murim Alliance Leader? Or maybe some elder master who still has an interest in Murim affairs?”

“Huh.”

Namgung Dowi let out a faint laugh as if to say you don’t get it, and pointed his hand toward me.

“You.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Blood Flame Sword Demon. Your sword, I believe, could cut through the Heavenly Demon’s qi. Didn’t you already prove that?”

I hadn't expected that answer. Surprised, I looked around—only to see everyone nodding in agreement.

“I hate to admit it, but I agree with the Sword King. If it were a real fight to the death, things would be different... but the power of those hundred swords was honestly extraordinary.”

“I feel the same. I'm confident in my strength, but even I could only match the Heavenly Demon's qi. Yet your sword pierced through it—even if it was just grazing his robe, it still broke through.”

“Well, that may be true, but...”

“If anyone is going to drive a sword into the Heavenly Demon's neck, I believe it will be you.”

Genuine praise and admiration. And coming from Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been overflowing with trust since yesterday, it made my face flush.

“Ahem. Thank you for thinking so highly of me, but my sword is still lacking. Let's return to the matter at hand.”

“Hm? Did your face just turn red...?”

Cutting off Seo Mun-Hwarin, I continued.

“The foundation of the Heavenly Demon Divine Art is in his internal energy. And since the Demonic Cult has no issue grinding up people into elixirs, he’ll only grow stronger... Perhaps to the point where the demonic creature we saw that day becomes so enormous, we won’t even be able to see it all at once.”

“Ha! Blood Flame Sword Demon, you worry too much! You’ve reached the Flowering Stage, so you should know. No matter how powerful, the Heavenly Demon is still human.”

Was that meant to be a comforting truth?

The Black Lotus Sect Leader, who met my eyes as he shrugged, froze slightly.

It was a speculative assertion, but one said with conviction. That’s all I could reveal under the mental restriction. Whether they believed me or not... that was up to them.

As if imagining how strong the Heavenly Demon might become, the table fell silent. I quietly chewed a cooling piece of pork.

Eventually, Sama Yuryeon, who had been quiet until now, spoke.

“So to summarize, the Heavenly Demon can already fight on par with or beyond other Flowering Stage martial artists using just strikes and footwork, but his true power lies in his internal energy—and he’s only going to get stronger?”

“That’s right.”

“And just like past Demonic Cult leaders, he’ll eventually rise up to burn Murim to the ground?”

“You summarized it well.”

“Tch. It’s terrifying when you put it all together like that. This is supposed to be the time in my life when I’m enjoying newlywed bliss...”

Clicking her tongue irritably, Sama Yuryeon began biting her nails.

It wasn't a pleasant sight, but as someone who used to serve under her, I knew this behavior often preceded a brilliant idea—so it was actually somewhat reassuring.

The Black Lotus Sect Leader must've known that too, as he simply watched her in silence. Namgung Dowi and Seo Mun-Hwarin didn't seem particularly interested.

Letting her thoughts spin for a while, Sama Yuryeon finally swallowed her meat and added cautiously,

“We're not in immediate danger, right? So we can take our time?”

“Hm? What makes you say that?”

“Because, aside from the Heavenly Demon, the rest of the Demonic Cult is weak.”

“Ah.”

Now she understood.

This time, the Sword Ghost only reached the Flowering Stage because of the Heavenly Demon's help... Meaning he'd have been stuck at Sub-Perfection Master if left alone.

Including the Bloodflame Fist Demon I took down earlier, that's two top-level martial artists from the Demonic Cult we've eliminated.

In essence, we've already halved their elite strength—if you exclude the Heavenly Demon.

Why do you think he brought the Sword Ghost along instead of coming alone?

Because even the Heavenly Demon knew he couldn't take on Murim alone, and that the Demonic Cult's so-called top warriors were useless without being forcibly elevated.

Without the Heavenly Demon, the Cult is barely on par with a single mid-tier clan—or weaker.

Even the Zhuge Clan, considered the weakest among the Five Supreme Clans in pure strength, could likely defeat the Heavenly Demon-less Demonic Cult.

Well, that's assuming there's no external interference.

Like how the Heavenly Demon used all sorts of methods to elevate the Sword Ghost to Flowering Stage, he could do the same with others. Who knows?

But even that takes time.

I've been actively disrupting the Demonic Cult for years, and only now did they get one person to Flowering Stage.

I couldn't explain this in detail, but Sama Yuryeon seemed to pick up on it and nodded in relief.

“Phew. Then we have a bit more room to act. First, we should strengthen internal unity within the Black Lotus Sect. And if possible, get the other Flowering Stage martial artists to at least be willing to fight beside you, My Lord... no, direct subordinates would be ideal, but that's not realistic. Just allies who will fight when it counts.”

She murmured continuously in a low voice.

Unlike the Murim Alliance, which could unify under the banner of justice, the Black Lotus Sect could only pacify people with personal gain. Real unity was nearly impossible—an endemic weakness.

It's worth noting that even in my past life, when both the Murim Alliance and Black Lotus Sect were shattered, this problem had never been solved.

So I casually voiced something I'd long been thinking.

“Can't we just beat them down and feed them some Poison-Induced Cores or something?”

“???”

Sama Yuryeon blinked at me like she didn't understand what she just heard.

I shrugged at her.

“Unorthodox martial artists are too prideful and temperamental to unite. I know the other Flowering Stage members of the Black Lotus Sect are lukewarm at best. If they're going to ignore orders anyway, there's no reason to treat them kindly.”

Surprisingly, in my past life, there were some Flowering Stage martial artists who tried to defect to the Demonic Cult because they feared the Heavenly Demon.

All of them were from unorthodox backgrounds.

And they were such notorious scum that the Heavenly Demon personally killed them on behalf of his own cult members, who still held grudges.

If they were going to die meaninglessly anyway, wouldn't it be better to put a sword to their throat and use them for something useful?

We'd be saving their lives, technically—they'd be grateful, surely.

Admiring my own generosity, I continued.

“They're still in the unorthodox world, which means they're unorthodox to the core. Break them with force and collar them so they can't rebel. I've got the sword, and the Tang Clan has the poison.”

Silence.

Tang Sowol shut her eyes tightly, Namgung Dowi turned away, and Sama Yuryeon scratched her ear and tilted her head.

Only the Black Lotus Sect Leader opened his mouth, looking half-exasperated.

“Well... putting aside your natural-born hatred of the unorthodox that flows as easily as your breath... Are you really from the orthodox sects?”

“???”

“If you ever decide to join the Black Lotus Sect, I’ll seriously consider making you the Vice Sect Leader.”

...That was a compliment, right?