

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 241-250

## I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

On the way back to my room after the meal, a sigh escaped from me without realizing it.

“Hoo.”

Regrettably, my perfect plan had been put on hold.

“I just don’t understand...”

“Perhaps others thought the same when looking at you, Cheon Hwi-da?”

Tang Sowol shook her head. Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had also been sighing deeply, suddenly brightened up as if she’d had a good idea.

Then she slowly approached me and began patting the area around my shoulder blade. Perhaps she was aiming for my shoulder but couldn't quite reach it.

"This One understands!"

"...Excuse me??"

"Even the Black Lotus Sect Master is no ordinary figure, yet he's been failing for years at recruiting other Flowering Stage experts. If the gentle approach fails, then one must take the strong approach. It may be a bit excessive, but This One believes your overall direction is not wrong."

"Oh...?"

Perhaps because it was Seo Mun-Hwarin—who, before regression, had been the most spectacular failure of the Black Lotus Sect Master's recruitment efforts—saying it, her words were strangely comforting.

It had been put on hold, but still, I hadn't been wrong.

While I was nodding, Seo Mun-Hwarin was also nodding with a look of contentment and satisfaction, as if pleased with something herself.

“Ahem. Just as you’ve acknowledged This One, so too does This One acknowledge yo—ah...”

Just as she was trying to say something cool, she glanced toward Tang Sowol.

Tang Sowol responded by slipping her arm around mine with her usual gentle smile. The soft warmth transmitted through my arm.

Seo Mun-Hwarin visibly pouted but soon brightened again at Tang Sowol’s gesture, then cautiously grasped the opposite sleeve and resumed patting my shoulder.

“Ahem! Anyway, even if the Black Lotus Sect Master and the Sword King oppose you, This One and Sowol support you, so don’t be too discouraged!”

“I wouldn’t say I’m discouraged. Besides, now that I think about it, it really was a bit too forceful.”

“Did you just say ‘a bit’...??”

I let Tang Sowol’s incredulous voice pass from one ear out the other.

From my perspective, I was sparing people who were destined to become enemies and die anyway, so using them a bit forcefully seemed like a fair trade.

But to others, it probably just looked like I was grabbing random people by the collar and threatening them.

There were also realistic concerns.

As uncooperative as they might be, they had still registered under the Black Lotus Sect's name.

If someone like me, from the Tang Clan, beat them up, it could escalate into a major conflict between orthodox and unorthodox factions.

The relationship between the Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect would need to shift before such problems could be handled cleanly.

And the most important issue after that was...To be honest, I'm still not on their level.

I had grasped the method of focusing my internal energy and willpower more aggressively while fighting the Sword Demon, but aside from that, I haven't even been at the Flowering Stage for a full year. I've only just taken the first step.

Meanwhile, those unorthodox warriors who wander freely or reign like kings in their home regions have likely been at the Flowering Stage for a long time.

Even if I don't know how much they've grown, they've likely gone far beyond the initial stage.

In an actual fight, there would be countless variables, so it's hard to say who would win.

But if the goal is to subdue them without killing them, and to do so overwhelmingly to show the difference in strength, I'm still very far from capable.

"So, I think the Black Lotus Sect Master and the Sword King had a point when they said to put my plan on hold."

"I-Is that so?"

"Yes. First, I need to be strong enough to actually carry something like that out."

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had looked like she wanted to say something, eventually nodded.

“Let’s go with that, then!”

“Yes. So for now, let’s put aside my perfect plan... What will you do next?”

“Hm? What else? I already said everything back there.”

Though everyone had been shocked by my proposal, we still discussed many things after deciding to put it on hold.

Tang Sowol planned to make a poison that could dispel demonic energy, the Black Lotus Sect would quickly take over Hao Clan operations to dig up intel on the Demonic Cult, and the Namgung Clan was preparing to mobilize not just the Sword King, but the whole clan if needed.

There were long-term plans that would take time and effort.

But the most pressing topic was—what to do right now.

“First, we should start with the Green Forest, just as the Black Lotus Sect Master originally called us for.”

“I recall that he simply suggested cooperating if a subjugation became necessary...”

“Bandits are always meant to be subjugated on sight.”

At the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting, post-Heavenly Masters sometimes casually bragged in turn, and one topic that always came up was subjugating bandits.

Most weren't actual Green Forest leaders, just third-rate dark martial artists trying to settle somewhere and getting beheaded for it.

But a few had really gone after Green Forest troops—though not the stronghold leaders, just a few squad leaders and their men.

A true stronghold leader would be a Peak Stage warrior at the least, and, as fitting for the Green Forest, those guys were masters of escape, making them difficult opponents for a post-Heavenly Master.

Anyway, the point is this—subjugating bandits isn't something you do when you stumble across them. You actively seek them out and crush them. No, more accurately, you should do exactly that.

“After all, this is a rare opportunity for the Namgung Clan, the former strongest in the world, and the Tang Clan, soon to be the new strongest, to join hands with the Black Lotus Sect. On top of that, it's a cause that everyone can support—subjugating the Green Forest.”

“That's true.”

“It's a cause everyone can agree with. The two pillars of the orthodox factions working with the Black Lotus Sect for the first time—there won't be a better chance than this... to form an Orthodox Alliance.”

“Eh? What did you just say, Cheon Hwi-da?”

“Did you just say... Orthodox Alliance?”

Both Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin looked at me in surprise. I slowly nodded.

“The Heavenly Demon is a monster. He’s growing stronger faster than we can imagine, and he’s more cunning than that, aiming for blind spots we won’t even see coming.”

This wasn’t just the mindset of a strong fighter.

An overwhelming powerhouse swings their sword when necessary and schemes when necessary.

There’s a reason the Murim Alliance in my previous life tried to form an Orthodox Alliance only after being devastated.

They were struck hardest when they were most complacent. There was no helping it.

That’s how serious the situation is. In a way, we’re lucky this time.

The question of how to alert others to the danger of the Demonic Cult and Heavenly Demon—is already halfway solved.

“Which is why we need to move quickly on this side too.”

“By forming an Orthodox Alliance?”

“Yes. At the very least, we must avoid being picked off one by one while hesitating.”

That’s the only thing I can do for now. It’s not like I have the power to move the entire Murim, let alone the imperial army.

Hearing me out, Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin let out impressed sighs.

“So... Cheon Hwi-da, are you saying you’ll form and lead the Orthodox Alliance yourself?”

“Huh. I didn’t expect you to think that far ahead. It won’t be easy. Even in Murim, where power is everything, the way you distribute that power is just as important... Still, it’s not entirely impossible.”

The two nodded to each other, then Tang Sowol tilted her head thoughtfully.

“But, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Hm?”

“There’s something I’m curious about. May I ask?”

“Go ahead.”

“There’s a common thread with those in the Demonic Cult. Their circumstances differ, but many of them were wronged by martial artists and had no one to hear their grievances, correct?”

“There are rare cases like the Sword Demon who just wanted to cut down anyone from any faction who wielded a sword, but yes, most of them are like that.”

“Wait, is that why the Sword Demon joined the Demonic Cult?! ...Then compared to him, you and the Sword King are fairly normal.”

“...?”

Tang Sowol seemed genuinely shocked. As if it were news to her.

I tilted my head as she cleared her throat and got back on track.

“Ahem. Anyway, aside from a few rare cases, most members of the Demonic Cult have a past full of resentment, right?”

“Right.”

“Then... is the Heavenly Demon like that too?”

“I don't know.”

That wasn't just a vague answer. I truly didn't know.

Before the regression, once people learned that the Heavenly Demon was the Demonic Cult Leader, the first thing they did was dig into his past.

Even the Beggar's Sect, with its feet to the fire, and the Hao Clan, realizing they'd be next if they didn't act, scrambled to uncover it.

They all wanted to know—what had driven him to turn to the Demonic Cult and commit such indiscriminate slaughter?

They thought that if they could resolve the source of his hatred, they might be able to stop him.

But after all that investigation, nothing turned up. And the conclusion they reached was: he was simply insane.

Now, I think I understand why.

The Heavenly Demon is a regressor. A much more skilled regressor than me.

He may have already resolved the original cause of his hatred before he ever became the Heavenly Demon.

Just like I managed to stop Tang Sowol's face from melting, and save Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

So the question needs to change.

Why is the Heavenly Demon regressing over and over? Why does he still seek the destruction of Murim?

Why does he seem so welcoming of my interference, even though I only get in his way?

I don't have answers to any of those questions—at least, not yet. But...

“There's one thing I do know for sure.”

“What is it?”

“No matter what his reasons are, the Heavenly Demon has long since crossed the line.”

Which means, in the end, it must be resolved with the sword.

That is the law of Murim.

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Back in the room.

Having finished all necessary discussions, I went to find Seol Lihyang to begin preparations for returning.

As she'd mentioned before, she was hosting tea for some skilled but socially marginalized female martial artists.

I thought I'd be meeting her outside, but apparently, it was just in her room.

The little faction Seol Lihyang had formed in just a few days flinched and exchanged nervous glances at my arrival, but Seol Lihyang herself simply waved cheerfully.

“Cheon Hwi! Did you finish that important discussion?”

“Just now. I came to tell you that we'll be returning to the Tang Clan tomorrow, so prepare accordingly.”

“Aha, right. We were supposed to be back long ago, weren’t we.”

Seol Lihyang nodded. Feeling that staying any longer would only make things more awkward, I turned to head back to my room—when I heard her voice behind me.

“Oh, by the way, Cheon Hwi! Did you hear? You’re about to get a new title.”

“Hm?”

...Yeah, I definitely have to hear this.

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Seol Lihyang herself didn’t seem to realize it, but whether you called it a faction or simply a circle of acquaintances, she had gathered a group around her.

At any rate, staying there longer would've only made things awkward, so I delivered what I had to say and was just about to return to my room—when something unexpected came from behind me.

“Oh, by the way, Cheon Hwi! Did you hear? It looks like you're getting a new title.”

“Hm??”

That's something I had to hear.

A title—it's a shortened phrase that sums up a martial artist's deeds.

Some exaggeration is involved, sure, but that's just part of the flair martial artists enjoy.

The reason I got the title Blood Flame Sword Demon was because, at the time, I was clinging to my pre-regression memories and murderous intent—and the one who saw me then happened to be the Black Lotus Sect Master.

Then what about this time?

Not only the Black Lotus Sect Master, but the Lord and Young Lord of the Namgung Clan had witnessed it, along with other warriors from the Black Lotus

Sect.

I had defeated the Sword Demon, and at the end, I cut the Heavenly Demon's collar, who even three Flowering Stage martial artists couldn't stop.

Thanks to that, though the Heavenly Demon had displayed his overwhelming power, he kept his promise and withdrew.

It was a vastly different outcome from when I fought the Lord of the Black Sky Sword Sect.

So this time, I should be getting a much cooler title—especially now that I've reached the Flowering Stage.

As my heart pounded with anticipation, Seol Lihyang raised the corners of her mouth with a smirk and spoke.

“White Sword Heavenly Demon.”

“Huh?”

“Because your white sword pierced the demon, White Sword Heavenly Demon. Some liked it because it sounded like you stood against the Heavenly Demon.”

Not me.

Even if the meaning is different, I absolutely detest having Heavenly Demon in my title.

“Right? I figured you’d feel that way, so I told them you might show up in the middle of the night if they called you that. They changed it right away. Luckily, they were still discussing alternatives at the time.”

Seol Lihyang shrugged. So, thanks to her, I was spared from being called White Sword Heavenly Demon.

She always looked lovely, but somehow today, she looked even more beautiful.

Unable to resist, I walked up to Seol Lihyang and tousled her hair.

“Ack! Don’t do that! Everyone’s watching...”

Despite her protests, she gradually relaxed, accepting my touch with the ease of someone lounging in their own room.

It wasn't quite public affection, but... I only got away with it because I knew her preferences well.

Seol Lihyang smiled with satisfaction, while her new companions stared at me, visibly trembling. But that wasn't anything important.

I lightly tidied up Seol Lihyang's now-messy hair and asked,

“So, what's the final title?”

“Mmm... White Moon Sword Lord.”

“White Moon Sword Lord?”

It's not always the case, but Flowering Stage martial artists often get titles with words like King or Emperor in them.

That's because a Flowering Stage warrior, surrounded by protective qi only breakable by true force, has the presence of an entire army.

But since Sword King is already Namgung Dowi's title, they couldn't reuse that.

I had expected something like Sword Emperor, but Sword Lord was a surprise.

Not that it's bad.

In fact, Sword Lord is a pretty decent title—at least it sounds more orthodox than Sword Demon.

Probably, I was called Sword Lord rather than Sword Emperor because my distribution or status is still low, regardless of skill.

Just like how Namgung Jong, though at the Flowering Stage, was called Azure Sky Sword Lord while his father Namgung Dowi remained the Sword King.

What I liked more, though, was the White Moon part. They likely added it after seeing the White Sword I created through my new insight.

That white qi resembled the full moon I'd seen with Tang Sowol the day I overdosed on a poison without an antidote. Qi is refined inner energy shaped by willpower, and willpower comes from one's inner landscape.

So it's no surprise that my qi, too, evokes the image of a pale moonlight.

And Sowol—Tang Sowol's name—means bright white moon.

The fact that my title shared a thematic word with her name... made me quietly happy.

“White Moon Sword Lord... I like that one.”

“Cheon Hwi, was that a pun just now? Saying 'Lord' over and over like that?”

That's what happens when someone is sharp.

Feeling mischievous, I pressed gently into Seol Lihyang's scalp like acupressure.

She trembled, clutching her head, while the Black Lotus Sect's post-Heavenly Masters looked on, unsure of what to do.

I waved at them.

“Anyway, enjoy yourselves—but don't forget to pack. And as for you all...”

I trailed off, and the post-Heavenly Masters tensed. To my surprise, I recognized almost seven of them. Not exactly close friends, but familiar.

That made sense.

They'd latched onto Seol Lihyang, who was an outsider—surely knowing she would leave soon.

They were people who couldn't afford to be picky, just trying to survive long enough to gain something before she left.

And such figures in the Black Lotus Sect—those without backing or stuck in awkward positions—usually ended up in Ironblood Hall.

The ones I remembered were all people I'd encountered from time to time while walking through Ironblood Hall.

As I said before, I wasn't particularly close with any of them, so I didn't know them well. But I did know this much: they were often sent on missions beyond their abilities and lost their lives quickly.

For what it's worth, even back then, Seol Lihyang had been quite popular among them. In retrospect, it was a natural outcome.

After a brief moment of thought, I spoke.

"A large-scale subjugation of the Green Forest will begin soon. If any of you are interested, come find Seol Lihyang. As for the Sect Master... let her know politely."

"Ah..."

They finally understood what I meant. They probably never expected to hear someone suggest defecting from the Black Lotus Sect and joining an orthodox faction under Seol Lihyang.

Seol Lihyang, for her part, tilted her head, as if she still didn't understand what I was saying.

She might understand the general workings of Murim now, but it seemed she hadn't realized that she could gather people under her wing.

Chuckling, I stepped out of the room.

Well, if even half of them came, that'd be more than enough.

Anyone who did could join Seol Lihyang in the subjugation of the Green Forest.

Push them hard, and their true character would emerge. If they had no major issues, they could use their participation as credentials to fully defect. If not, we could pay them and send them back.

It may just be a memory from my previous life, but since we once shared meals together, this much opportunity should be fine.

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Once back in my room, I began packing—only to realize I had more baggage than expected.

When I came, I brought only a sword, a change of clothes, a pouch, and some simple snacks.

But after staying in the Black Lotus Sect for so long, I'd received many gifts.

That's because, in the unorthodox world, giving bribes to curry favor is just common sense.

Even in my past life, I'd received plenty during my time as the Sword Demon.

In this life, I wasn't even affiliated with the Black Lotus Sect, yet I'd still been handsomely gifted.

They likely thought the Sect Master held me in high regard, so they were trying to get in good early.

Some probably respected me for defeating the Sword Demon and slicing the Heavenly Demon's collar.

Still, those gifts meant little to me now. Back then, I spent everything I had trying to find martial arts or rare medicines.

But now, with the Tang Clan behind me, I didn't need to go that far anymore.

Most of the bribes I'd received would go straight into the Tang Clan's coffers.

For me, it was just money moving from one pocket to another.

Having packed everything, I sat down cross-legged and began meditating to revisit the battle with the Heavenly Demon—

**Knock knock knock.**

The doorknob rattled, and with it came a familiar presence and voice.

“You there. Do you have a moment?”

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin? Of course. Please come in.”

As soon as I gave permission, the door creaked open, and Seo Mun-Hwarin peeked her head in, glancing around before smiling when she saw me.

She stepped in, carefully locked the door, and sat across from me.

“We just parted ways. You’ve already packed? I heard you received a fair number of gifts too.”

“There were people who tried to bribe This One... but I refused them all.”

“What??”

We stared at each other for a moment, confused.

I couldn’t help but ask again.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because... This One has resolved to live as an orthodox martial artist now. How could I accept such things—especially from Black Lotus Sect members?”

“But they weren’t trying to buy favors. If they were, they would’ve offered much more. They just wanted to leave a good impression. You didn’t need to take it so seriously.”

“What...?”

“Besides, being orthodox doesn’t mean refusing bribes. It just means trading in less obvious favors instead of gold or silver.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin trembled with the expression of someone who just realized their delicious duck had been chicken all along.

Incidentally, that had happened in my past life—due to budget cuts in Ironblood Hall.

The next day, she’d figured it out instantly.

Just because someone’s in an orthodox faction doesn’t mean they’re clean.

In fact, it was Seo Mun-Hwarin, back when she was called the Ironblood Hall Master, who explained all this to me.

Of course, the current her knew nothing of that. And that made it a little amusing—teaching Seo Mun-Hwarin something I learned from Seo Mun-Hwarin.

I chuckled briefly. But then Seo Mun-Hwarin puffed her cheeks and pouted.

“Hmph! This One came with good news, and you only mock This One!”

“Mocking? Not at all. I was just amazed that the oldest among us is also the most innocent.”

“It cannot be helped. In my youth, I was too busy fighting, and now, I’m too busy adjusting to this changed world.”

“Exactly. That’s why you can just start learning little by little now. I’ll teach you what I can, as I am now.”

“If... If you insist, then I shall forgive you this once.”

She tried to sound stern, but her expression had already softened. I waited for her to collect herself before speaking.

“So, what good news brought you here so soon?”

“Mm. It’s not news that just happened, but something I only remembered just now.”

With an awkward tone, she fiddled with her white hair, then looked me straight in the eye.

“Did the sword art I taught you from the Seo Mun Clan help?”

“Of course. It was my first time learning a proper ascension sword art, and it made me reexamine my fundamentals.”

The technique of condensing qi, forged through willpower, and merging it fully with the sword—White Sword.

And the thrust I created by blending my insight from fighting the Sword Demon with the Taesan Piercing Sword.

These were insights forged through deadly combat and extreme focus, and all of them focused on essence and fundamentals.

That was possible because I had recently been grappling with swordsmanship from the Seo Mun Clan, thanks to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

I had found my own answers.

Pleased by my sincere response, Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded.

“Then... would you like to learn the secret technique now? This One has yet to master it herself, so we’d be deciphering the manual together.”

“Eh??”

So now she was offering to teach me the Seo Mun Clan’s secret martial art, usually reserved for the head and heir?

“I appreciate it, but is that really okay?”

“As I said before, there’s no one else for This One to pass it to.”

“That’s true.”

“Besides, is it not you and This One now? I won’t ask you to become my adoptive son anymore. Instead... would you...”

She hesitated, lips twitching. Then, with great difficulty, she squeezed the words out.

“Would you... help This One restore Thunder Heaven Divine Art?”

Something I’d never heard of even before regression. I didn’t know what it meant, but it was clearly important to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

And of course, my answer was already decided.

“You said you finished packing?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Same here. In other words—we’re free to study all night.”

At that, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s face lit up like a blooming flower.

...But it didn’t take long for it to darken again.

“No, no! I told you—this is swordsmanship! You can’t swing it like that!”

“But the Seo Mun Clan’s techniques are rooted in thunder. If not lightning qi, then to honor the essence...”

“Hoo. Clearly, people who don’t use swords don’t understand swords.”

Half a jjin (about 30 minutes).

That was how long it took for Seo Mun-Hwarin to start sulking.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

There had been more than a few unexpected incidents, and as a result, worries and tasks had piled up.

Still, after wrapping up my time at the Black Lotus Sect, I was finally on the road back to the Tang Clan.

And today again, Seo Mun-Hwarin was up in arms.

She looked like a squirrel caught hiding an acorn in a tree knot and suddenly locking eyes with a person.

But her voice that followed was far more threatening—about on the level of a territorial tree squirrel.

“If you do that, it’s no longer the Strong Thunder Sword! The Thunder Heaven Divine Art draws its essence from the thunder and lightning that strikes from the

heavens! It may be noisy, but it's a martial art that makes no compromises in power!"

"That may be true. The Thunder Roar Steps I use are fundamentally different from yours, after all. But no matter how powerful a sword may be, it only matters if it actually hits, don't you think?"

While I used rapid acceleration and abrupt halts to create fast and unpredictable movements, Seo Mun-Hwarin employed those same dynamics to disrupt her opponent's rhythm, pressuring and overwhelming them.

In short, while I looked for or lured out an opening to pierce through, Seo Mun-Hwarin charged in head-on to force that opening.

This difference was partly because, before my regression, Seo Mun-Hwarin had adjusted the Thunder Roar Steps for me to match the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

But it also stemmed from how she spent her childhood in the Seo Mun Clan, seeing complete martial arts systems with her own eyes, later recovering her clan's martial arts, mastering them independently, and reaching the Flowering Stage.

Whereas I had simply picked up anything that worked, patching together martial arts stolen from here and there,

only retaining the insights I found useful, tailoring them to suit myself—that's how I reached where I am now.

So even though we agreed to restore Thunder Heaven Divine Art together, in the end, I could only do so in my own way.

Of course, one might ask—if the manual still exists, why bother “restoring” anything?

But secret techniques from famous clans like the Seo Mun Clan in their prime often had obscure chants written in deliberately difficult language, in case the manuals ever leaked.

That meant they couldn’t be mastered with just the text. You needed someone to interpret the chants orally.

Naturally, that method of interpretation was passed down not in writing, but through oral tradition.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, being a daughter of the clan who’d only learned a few self-defense techniques as a child, had recovered the manual and reclaimed the roots of her clan’s martial arts through talent and practical combat experience, reaching the Flowering Stage.

Still, if asked whether she truly understood all of the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, even she wouldn’t be certain. So restoring it held great significance for her, too.

That said... this is this, and that is that.

“Think about it, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. As you just said, swinging the sword that way might be more powerful. But the movements are too large. The enemy could easily read and counter them.”

“Hmph! That’s exactly why the Thunder Roar Steps exist! To suppress the opponent so they can neither move forward nor back, then strike at the decisive moment!”

“That sounds like clinging to a rigid technique and accepting inefficiencies. I’m not saying it’s impossible—but are you really using those wide strikes as opening forms?”

“T-That’s...”

“I may not know much, but I’ve seen far more martial arts than you, Senior. Sure, they’re mostly low-grade techniques, but I’ve studied enough to see patterns.”

I never had proper training in ascension-level martial arts before regression, and in this life, I’d only studied a few from the Tang Clan and some of the Seo Mun Clan’s sword techniques.

But when it came to third-rate or first-rate techniques, I'd absorbed them by the truckload.

While the depth varied, martial arts—being designed to deal with people—shared a common structure.

For example, very few were purely offensive with no defensive forms.

From what I'd heard from Seo Mun-Hwarin and what I'd read in the manual, Thunder Heaven Divine Art was aggressive, yes, but not to such an extreme degree.

Usually, the opening forms—those used to test an opponent's strength or to block attacks—are weaker in power but leave fewer openings.

And that's how most martial arts start—by first learning how to protect your own body.

Killing your opponent while sacrificing your own life, or a limb, doesn't suit the ideals of the orthodox sects, nor the goals of wealth and prestige pursued by the unorthodox ones.

Maybe assassins would use such tactics—those who brainwash and sacrifice people like disposable tools. But the Seo Mun Clan, in its prime, was no assassins' guild.

“That’s why I think we need to interpret this differently. The phrase ‘Heaven’s Thunder Sword—engrave the thunder’ doesn’t mean to bring down your sword with explosive force like lightning and leave a thunderous impact. Rather, it means swing swiftly like lightning, subtly reminding your opponent that thunder could come from anywhere—creating psychological pressure.”

“So like this?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin puffed up her cheeks like a pufferfish and waved her hand through the air.

At first glance, it looked like a meaningless motion, but she was simply showing it slowly for clarity.

If you looked closely, you’d find countless insights and concepts embedded in that motion.

However...

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Yes???”

She tilted her head and looked at me. Whether she realized it or not, her innocent expression didn't suit her age—yet was strangely cute.

Still, I had to say it.

“Swords don't have joints.”

“But you use your wrist and elbow to twist the sword around all the time!”

“That's a trick derived from illusion-based techniques.

Swinging like that sacrifices not just power, but speed. Are you trying to turn Thunder Heaven Divine Art into a sword dance?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin trembled with an expression like I'd just accused her of a crime.

But I had more to say.

“Did you know that the sword and body are fundamentally separate? Many fail to grasp true unity between sword and self, even at the highest levels.”

“Still, there’s a core essence to martial arts. Why do you keep trying to discard one half of it?”

“We have to look beyond forms—to the entire martial art.

Unlike fist techniques, where you can use your body directly, it’s hard to express perfect offense and defense with a sword.

Often, attempts to do both result in a clumsy middle ground.”

“B-But...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin pursed her lips, looking utterly wronged.

I shook my head firmly.

“Haa. You really can’t talk swordsmanship with someone who doesn’t use swords. You make such great points halfway through—why do you always fall apart at the end?”

Her expression instantly turned sharp. If I had to describe it, she looked like that angry squirrel again—about to drop pinecones on someone for invading its territory.

Just as she growled and opened her mouth to retort—

**Thunk.**

Something knocked on the qi barrier we’d set up to prevent our conversation from leaking.

There’s only one reason someone would tap on it directly—it meant they had business with us.

Only after verifying that Seo Mun-Hwarin had stored away the Thunder Heaven manual did I dispel the barrier. A calm voice came through.

“Do you have a moment?”

“Senior Sword King? What brings you here? Please, come in.”

I opened the door, and Namgung Dowi entered with his usual calm expression. He didn't sit down—perhaps he didn't intend to stay long.

“It's nothing major. Jong and I will be moving separately starting tomorrow, so I came to let you know.”

“Eh? All of a sudden?”

“Apologies for the short notice. I took too long thinking it over.”

“Well, it's not like it's today, so I suppose it's fine... but did something happen?”

“It’s already happening. We’re heading to the Murim Alliance. There’s something I need to discuss with the Lord.”

“Ah.”

Originally, the plan was for Namgung Dowi and Namgung Jong to accompany me until I returned to the Tang Clan,

training with me every day.

But even though we still had days of travel left—and thus more opportunities to spar—they were choosing to go to the Murim Alliance now, to discuss countermeasures.

Considering Namgung Dowi was one of the top three martial arts fanatics I knew, this choice hit differently.

Many orthodox factions had fallen into corruption, like the Hwangbo Clan, but perhaps the reason the orthodoxy still remained... was because of people like Namgung Dowi.

“I also enjoyed sparring with you, sir, so I’ll miss it. But of course, please go ahead. I hope we get another chance someday.”

“Miss it, do you? Then why not schedule our next match right now?”

...Forget what I just said.

Before I could finish my sentence, his eyes gleamed as he pressed in close. A clearly middle-aged man, both in years and appearance, closing the distance like that—was honestly overwhelming.

I subtly scooted back, gave a half-hearted response, and only after a long roundabout exchange did he finally leave.

As I let out a deep sigh and closed the door, Seo Mun-Hwarin looked strangely delighted. She patted the spot beside her with a grin.

“Now, sit here. Starting tomorrow—no, the day after tomorrow—we’ll have more time to study the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, but that doesn’t mean we can slack off today.”

“Then about the sword form we were just discussing...”

“Ah, on that—This One’s stance is clear. Even if it’s the opening form, Thunder Heaven Divine Art must never compromise its power.”

“Coming from someone who focused so much on Willpower Blades, that’s rich... But if you’re that stubborn, I have a great idea.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“Let’s just have a light sparring match.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked.

She glanced at the firmly shut door, then back at me.

“Wait... are you sick or something?”

“Please don’t make it sound like I’m contagious. I don’t mean a serious duel—I’ll swing the sword as I envision it, and you do the same. Let’s see whose method is more effective.”

“Isn’t that way too favorable to you?”

“Of course I won’t use my full strength. This is just to test the completeness of our respective forms, so I’ll match your sword skill.”

“Even so, it’s still a bit...”

She kept hesitating, so I looked at her for a moment, then asked,

“Hm. Are you afraid you’ll lose to me?”

“This One must restore Murim’s honor today!”

Puffing with indignation, Seo Mun-Hwarin rolled up her sleeves.

Not that it meant much—we were using wooden swords anyway.

The sparring match ended in my victory.

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After parting ways with Namgung Dowi, even after returning to the Tang Clan, Seo Mun-Hwarin and I often disagreed over the interpretation of Thunder Heaven Divine Art.

Each time, we settled it with a sparring match. Sometimes I won, sometimes she did. And so, Thunder Heaven Divine Art became a ruthless martial art shaped only by the victor's opinions.

Eventually, the time came for me to approach Tang Jincheon.

“I'll be traveling around the Central Plains for a while—to subjugate the Green Forest.”

“That suddenly? And do you even know where their strongholds are? It's not that others are weaker than the Green Forest—it's because our agreement with the Black Lotus Sect was to share intel and strike whichever group was nearby.”

“I have a few guesses. If I come up empty-handed, I'll return immediately, so don't worry.”

“Hmm...”

Tang Jincheon sighed deeply, then asked in a cautious voice.

“Do you, too, hold a grudge against the Green Forest like the Black Lotus Sect Master?”

“Well... I did nearly die once as a kid when they stole the first silver coin I ever held.”

“I see... So that’s—”

“But I killed them all in return, so it’s fine. Not exactly a grudge.”

“.....?”

I puffed out my chest proudly at Tang Jincheon’s bewildered look.

“Besides, the Green Forest makes for excellent real-combat opponents. And it just so happens that both I and several people around me could use some real-world experience.”

At this point, Tang Jincheon didn't even react like I was a lunatic anymore. He just looked slightly tired as he nodded.

“Do as you wish, son-in-law. Just remember to check in regularly.”

“You won't be disappointed, Father-in-law.”

He patted my shoulder with a completely untrusting expression.

...I honestly have no idea how I ended up being treated like this.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

“Is it finally starting...?”

The Green Forest had always been a headache, both in the past and present. Before my regression, they remained a problem right up until the moment the central Murim was shattered.

When the Heavenly Demon began his onslaught and threw the central plains into chaos, the Green Forest took the opportunity to get bolder, pillaging areas they would normally never dare touch.

They robbed not only the remaining prestigious sects of the Orthodox Alliance but even the imperial household from time to time.

They plundered so thoroughly that people joked their wealth, if converted entirely into gold, could buy a small country.

How could the Orthodox Alliance possibly endure, being squeezed from the front by the Heavenly Demon and from the rear by the Green Forest?

Eventually, the Orthodox Alliance, which had seemed to be holding on at first, collapsed, and the frontlines rapidly retreated.

When half of the central plains were swallowed up in the blink of an eye, the atmosphere began to shift.

The Orthodox Alliance began prioritizing survival over righteousness, and foreign Murim factions like the Potala Palace or the Southern Savage Beast Palace started to stretch out their hands.

When even the Green Forest's Grand Chief, who had once rampaged without fear of heaven, got cold feet, he took most of their wealth and fled overseas alone.

“It wasn't just chaos—it was pure bedlam.”

Naturally, the Green Forest bandits left behind were thrown into disarray. Not only had most of the fortune they'd so diligently amassed disappeared, but they were also surrounded by enemies seeking revenge.

Even if they reached out now, the Orthodox Alliance wouldn't accept them. And as for the Demonic Cult? That wasn't even a conversation worth having.

They were a group formed by those who had been wronged by martial artists. Would the Murim's most notorious thugs be forgiven just because they bowed their heads?

Even the Flowering Stage martial artists of the Black Lotus Sect who had once ruled their own territories were all slaughtered by the Heavenly Demon. There was no way those who went around the Murim, robbing everyone from martial artists to civilians, would survive.

Thus, the Green Forest naturally dispersed.

Some, like their Grand Chief, fled far from the central plains. Others, true to their mountain-raider nature, disappeared into remote, uninhabited valleys.

Still others disguised themselves as wanderers, joined the Orthodox Alliance to enjoy the benefits, then fled when things turned unfavorable.

That was the typical path for those whose faces and martial arts weren't widely known, but most of them were exposed before long.

Those who were caught were either killed or sent to the deadliest frontlines.

There was one thing they all had in common—they all met the Black Lotus Sect Master during interrogation at least once.

The Black Lotus Sect Master would dig out the locations of their mountain strongholds, which were mostly meaningless by then. But if one happened to be linked to her childhood in any way... she usually killed them during interrogation.

Otherwise, they were sent to the most dangerous places. If they survived, they would be fully pardoned.

“There wasn’t much difference, though.”

Almost none of them survived long enough for their crimes to be forgiven.

Even those lucky or capable enough to survive eventually succumbed to the relentless assaults of the Demonic Cult.

That was simply the nature of that era. Death was a given; the only question was how one would die.

At best, they could hope to fall into a slightly less hellish pit than those who died without a pardon.

Anyway, there was a reason I brought up all this old history after mentioning to Tang Jincheon that I’d be going to subjugate the Green Forest.

The reason the Green Forest couldn’t be fully eradicated lay in their decentralized, cell-like structure, their hidden mountain strongholds scattered everywhere, and their tendency to flee the moment things turned bad.

But in my previous life, I was practically a confidant of the Black Lotus Sect Master. I hadn’t seen her entire interrogation process, but I’d watched enough of it.

Naturally, I came to learn the approximate locations of many of their mountain strongholds.

Of course, to the Green Forest, a mountain stronghold was a disposable asset that could be abandoned and rebuilt at any time.

That's why the veteran Green Forest bandits had gone through countless strongholds—building and discarding them over and over—and thus knew the locations of just as many.

Back then, those were meaningless, long-abandoned places. But now that I've returned to the past, they're no longer meaningless. I may not remember all of them, but even focusing on the ones I do recall should yield results.

With those calculations finished, I brought up the Green Forest subjugation to Tang Jincheon. And now, it was time to speak to someone who would be accompanying me.

“Seol Lihyang. Want to come with me for a bit?”

“Hmm? I'm kind of busy today... but we'll be back before sunset, right? Then it's fine.”

“I think it’ll take about a month or two.”

“...?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, as if she couldn’t quite process what she’d just heard. A beat later, her eyes widened and she abruptly absorbed the lump of ice she’d been playing with in her palm, standing up straight.

It must not have been real ice, but a mass of cold energy formed through her internal energy.

“Wait, wait! Do you even know what you're saying right now?! Did you get permission from Sister Tang?!”

“Of course. She agreed without hesitation.”

“Eh? Even so... Ah, is that it? It’s been a few days since I returned to the Tang Family. Maybe something happened behind my back during that time? Mm, mm. I think I get it now.”

“Obviously. The Green Forest are enemies not just of Murim but of the imperial court as well. Saying you’re going to subjugate them would naturally earn you support.”

She narrowed her eyes like axes and glared at me. Axes, not rabbits.

Unlike Tang Sowol, who’s scarier when she smiles silently, or Seo Mun-Hwarin, who looks like an adorable small animal no matter how much she frowns, Seol Lihyang looks genuinely sharp when she scowls—sometimes enough to remind me of her past life as the Demonic Sound Ice Witch.

A faint-hearted person would probably flinch just from looking at her.

But I know better. That’s just her face when she’s waiting for an explanation.

“Didn’t I mention it before? That this operation with the Black Lotus Sect to subjugate the Green Forest is just a stepping stone to ultimately bringing together the Orthodox Alliance.”

“You did...?”

“To make that happen, we need to succeed spectacularly with this cooperation. Something that looks like it could never be done before—but was achieved through unity.”

“Like, say... wiping out the Green Forest?”

“Exactly.”

Now Seol Lihyang could understand me without needing every step spelled out. I nodded in pride, but she replied with an incredulous tone.

“I mean, the Green Forest isn’t some backyard weed. Can you really just uproot them like that?”

“A valid point. That’s what most people would think. And they’d be right, in general. But.”

“But?”

“Has a Flowering Stage martial artist ever personally moved to take down a group of bandits?”

“...Huh?”

“Those thugs flee the moment they sense someone stronger than them nearby. So typically, the people sent to handle them are no more than Peak Stage martial artists.”

“Well, that’s true...”

“But I can detect them before they even sense me. And even if I’m late, I can chase and catch them with ease.”

“I mean, sure...?”

“Do you get it now? What’s impossible for others is possible for me.”

I couldn’t reveal the source of my certainty due to the mental restrictions. So I tried to mask it with confidence.

But Seol Lihyang’s expression twisted strangely.

“...What’s with that look?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just realized again that while you’re great in many ways, you can be really annoying sometimes.”

I stayed quiet, and only then did Seol Lihyang let out a giggle and continue.

“Anyway, I get what you're saying. The sudden schedule is a bit annoying, but honestly, my ‘busy plans’ are just martial arts training. And if I go with you, I’ll get more than enough combat experience.”

“Exactly. That was one of my motives for calling you.”

“Thought so. What about Sister Tang or Seo Mun? Are they coming too?”

“No. Tang Sowol is staying in the Tang Family for a while to train directly under her father. But Seo Mun-Hwarin will be joining us.”

“Yeah, makes sense. It’s about time for Sister Tang, anyway.”

Tang Sowol, who had absorbed the Poison King's venom and accumulated a toxic energy nearing the Flowering Stage, had now adapted to it and mastered its control. It was time to move on to the next stage.

Not that she was aiming for Flowering Stage just yet—this was about her achievements in poison arts.

Didn't she say she wanted to create a poison capable of scattering demonic energy and affecting the Heavenly Demon?

That meant a poison that not only dispersed demonic qi but also eroded the Heavenly Demon's willpower, which enveloped massive space with qi formed from demonic energy.

In practical terms, it was impossible with just poison.

It was only possible after Tang Sowol, in my previous life, perfected her Extreme Poison and became known as the Empress of Poison.

Still, no matter how grand the goal, you always begin with the first step.

Tang Sowol was preparing to take that step now.

“So, this time it’s you, me, and Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“What are you saying? The three of us will be at the core, but we won’t be the only ones.”

“...Don’t tell me...”

Seol Lihyang widened her eyes and shouted in a half-panicked voice.

“Do you have another hidden woman you’re bringing along while Sister Tang’s away?!”

“...How do you even arrive at that conclusion? No. We’re bringing along talented but inexperienced Tang warriors and some people from the Black Lotus Sect who’ve grown close to you.”

“...Even them?”

Seol Lihyang muttered and fell into thought, then sighed and spoke.

“I really don’t know what you’re trying to do.”

“It’s nothing special. I just want to make a loud, but decisive, example out of this Green Forest subjugation. To show that the Orthodox and Unorthodox can achieve more together than separately.”

“Even if that works, the backlash worries me. Things are better than before, but the Unorthodox still has issues. I’m afraid you’ll be condemned for working with them, especially since you just got the proper title ‘White Moon Sword Lord’.”

She had a point. While conflicts had eased since the Black Lotus Sect’s formation, and even some unorthodox groups had begun establishing rules and territories, the stigma remained.

Especially among the older generation, those who had clashed with the Unorthodox Murim and still held real power.

But so what?

“I don’t listen to anyone weaker than me.”

“Wow. This may be the Tang Family, but that felt just like the Black Lotus Sect.”

Eyes sparkling, Seol Lihyang asked in a playful tone:

“Hey, hey. What about Sister Tang?”

“...Tang Sowol is an exception.”

“What about me?”

“You’re not. You’re coming with us to hunt Green Forest, so go get changed. I already had your gear packed.”

“Heh, is that so?”

Grinning slyly, Seol Lihyang began untying the sash of her martial robe.

“Wait, what are you doing—”

“You said I had to change, right? Since I’m weaker than you, I’d better listen. I’ll change quickly, so keep those eyes open and watch how fast I am.”

A rush of wild images flooded my mind. After much mental deliberation, I chose the only rational option—I bolted out of the room.

**Srrrk.**

The sound of cloth sliding. She really had untied it. From behind me came the mocking snort.

“Hmph. Coward.”

It’s not that I’m a coward—Seol Lihyang’s just too fearless.

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It didn’t take long to prove I was right.

Watching the backs of the bandits as they fled in panic, Seol Lihyang shouted in disbelief.

“Seriously?! They ran just because I took one down?!”

“You said it looked doable and smashed through their front gate, then turned their leader into an ice cube just because he stood out. Why wouldn’t they run?”

“That was the leader?!”

Seol Lihyang gave an awkward smile as she stood before the lump of ice.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

Before my regression, while observing the Black Lotus Sect Master interrogating captured Green Forest bandits, I happened to pick up various bits of information about their mountain strongholds.

The one I remembered that was closest happened to be astonishingly near—barely two shichen (four hours) away from the Tang Family's base in Chengdu.

"Cheon Hwi. Do you really think there's one this close? I mean, I don't mind wasting a little time, but..."

Seol Lihyang trailed off and glanced back. There stood Seo Mun-Hwarin, grinning blankly—not even chewing on sweets this time.

Lately, we had been frequently sparring to help restore the Heavenly Thunder Divine Art, and since she'd scored a win last night, she'd kept that smile on.

But that was only natural. Seo Mun-Hwarin had studied and practiced her clan's martial arts for much longer than I had. Up until now, she'd simply lacked an in-depth understanding of the sword. I imagine her win rate will keep rising steadily from now on.

Of course, that doesn't mean she'll defeat me every time. I'm helping her train to cover those rare slip-ups.

Though Seo Mun-Hwarin's glee was the most noticeable, what Seol Lihyang had actually been trying to refer to were likely the people following behind her.

Seven Tang warriors in green martial robes, keeping a short distance behind us.

However, unlike before, these seven hadn't been pulled from the Blood Venom Unit or the Dark Soul Unit.

Their divisions didn't matter—whether they belonged to the Blood Venom Unit, Dark Soul Unit, or even the internal guard that didn't usually operate outside the Tang estate.

What did matter was that they were all at least first-class martial artists. I had asked the Tang Family elders to select those who, with more real-world experience, could aim for even higher realms.

Each of them looked toward me with bright, expectant eyes, which made Seol Lihyang's voice soften slightly.

“They've all come because they heard your name, Cheon Hwi. Their expectations must be high... If they just stumble around and go back empty-handed, that'd be kind of sad.”

“Don't worry. You know the saying, 'It's darkest under the lamp.' I've heard that these bastards picked this location for exactly that reason.”

They'd sneak in disguised as guards for a merchant caravan, then poison the group subtly so that they would collapse halfway up the mountain.

Then they'd kill every last one of them and bury the bodies—making it possible for them to commit banditry right under everyone's noses without getting caught.

And since there was no one left to report the crime, it took quite a while for anyone to realize something was wrong. Once merchant groups began noticing the pattern, the bandits would simply abandon the base and disappear.

Then, once things settled down, they'd return—or do the same thing elsewhere.

Even if the one we're headed to now turns out empty, they're likely holed up somewhere nearby. I still remember the general layout and patterns of these mountain bases.

As I grow older, I've become better at making practical use of my past life's memories. So even if I don't know about all their hideouts, I'm confident I can eliminate at least this one operating in the area.

I spoke casually, trying not to make a big deal out of it.

“If they're not here, they'll be at the next one.”

“And if they're not there either?”

“Then they’ll be at the one after that.”

“Ugh...”

Seol Lihyang grimaced, clearly frustrated, but I simply shrugged.

“That won’t happen. But if it does, I’ll personally evaluate each of them one by one before we return. That should keep anyone from feeling like they wasted their time.”

“Oh, right. You’re a supreme master, aren’t you?”

Seol Lihyang widened her eyes, like she’d genuinely forgotten.

I hadn’t made a show of it around people like Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, or Seo Mun-Hwarin... but had she really forgotten? Or maybe she was just teasing me.

Seeing the mirth dancing in her eyes, I flicked her forehead and grinned as she flinched.

“Ow!”

“Anyway, we’ll see soon enough. Just be patient.”

“How long?”

Seol Lihyang pouted and rubbed her forehead. I gave her a playful smile.

“Like you said—about two shichen. In the meantime, go change into the disguise outfits so we’re not recognized.”

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Exactly two shichen later, we found a mountain stronghold on our very first try.

While there were clear signs that people had lived here recently, there wasn’t a single Green Forest bandit in sight.

Instead, we found several corpses—recent ones.

Though winter was coming to an end, the air was still cold. Yet these bodies had hardly a shred of clothing left on them.

Their skeletal frames and long-healed scars gave away their identities.

“Civilians from nearby?”

“Looks like they used to farm here. Probably slash-and-burn farmers.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin frowned and surveyed the area.

She wasn't the only one. Seol Lihyang and the Tang warriors all looked grim.

After all, who would be happy standing among corpses?

Seol Lihyang looked down at the bodies of a man and woman clinging to each other and murmured softly.

“Do you think they found out we were coming? Maybe they cleared out everything and fled in advance?”

“Unlikely. We left only two shichen ago. We changed out of Tang uniforms midway to avoid drawing attention. And after entering the mountain, we deliberately kept our distance so they wouldn’t get spooked.”

We had moved in groups of two or three, spread out to stay within my sensory range.

Those most recognizable—myself, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin—had covered our faces.

No matter how skilled the Green Forest were at fleeing, they couldn’t have gotten wind of us that fast. More importantly...

“These corpses aren’t decomposing yet, but they weren’t killed just now either. I’d say they’ve been dead less than three days.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin was right. That meant they probably hadn’t left the region entirely.

As I mentally sifted through remembered locations, I spoke.

“Let’s bury them first.”

Everyone nodded in silence.

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Those with identifiable identities were respectfully gathered and laid together. The others were buried as best as we could manage.

With martial artists doing the digging, the task didn’t take long. The problem was that no matter where we dug, old bones kept surfacing.

We buried them for now and decided to send someone back later for proper recovery.

After descending the mountain, since we were so close to Chengdu, I sent a letter to the Tang Family rather than the local authorities, requesting help retrieving the corpses, and we quickly moved on.

We weren't trying to track them by footprints or traces—we had no one capable of that.

Instead, I just followed the order of remembered hideouts from past interrogations, starting with the closest.

The first was a bust, the second had old traces, and the third—at last—we found them.

After half a day of running around, we finally located them just after sunset.

Turns out, these Green Forest bastards don't just abandon and rebuild mountain strongholds over and over.

They do abandon compromised bases without a second glance. But when they relocate proactively without being discovered, they preserve the old base as much as possible—so they can return later and reuse it with minimal effort.

Makes sense. They're a long-lived organization that's managed to root themselves in mountains all across the central plains.

Decades ago, they were known to clear paths through mountains and chase off beasts, taxing travelers modestly and keeping to themselves.

But now, they've turned into something else—people who don't hesitate to kill.

Those who weren't yet at the Peak Stage were clearly exhausted from a full day of climbing.

Still, when they sensed the Green Forest was close, their determination reignited.

I addressed the group.

“Just like I said before. You all remember, right?”

The Tang warriors nodded quietly, then began splitting up into pairs and spreading out.

Seol Lihyang and I would move together. Seo Mun-Hwarin took the opposite side. The two Flowering Stage martial artists would use our sensory perception to form a wide perimeter around the stronghold.

We couldn't issue real-time orders using voice transmission with this much distance and terrain in the way, but—

For Flowering Stage martial artists, the range of their senses equaled the range of their aura.

So we each moved into position, adjusting using prearranged signals via aura, then rapidly closed in to form a surround.

It was only after that the enemies inside finally sensed our presence and began reaching for their weapons.

But whether they stood and fought or tried to flee, the Tang warriors would intercept them.

Even if some managed to slip through, they'd soon be caught again—by me or Seo Mun-Hwarin.

With wide sensory range and fast movement, that was more than doable.

And it wasn't just one Flowering Stage martial artist—we had two.

As we prepared to launch the ambush and focused on the directions they might flee—

“Do we really need to make this so complicated?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, gathered her internal energy, and leapt out ahead of schedule.

“Wait, hold on a sec!”

“I’m telling you—it won’t take long.”

Ignoring my panicked voice, she kicked off the wall and soared into the sky.

As soon as she locked onto the Green Forest bandits’ location, her lips parted and a beautiful melody drifted out.

It wasn’t quite a song—more like a hummed tune. But the cold embedded in her voice was on an entirely different level from the lingering winds of late winter.

The temperature plummeted, as if we had been transported to the North Sea.

A faint blue energy began forming around Seol Lihyang.

Then—

The moment her feet touched the ground again, she flew straight at the largest of the Green Forest warriors.

“This little—!”

The brute, gritting his teeth, swung a massive axe at the oncoming cold.

The blade, though dull in color, was clearly infused with sword energy. As expected from Green Forest martial arts, it packed quite a punch.

But it wasn't enough to withstand Seol Lihyang's Glacial True Qi.

Slice—

The cold she unleashed cut the axe clean in two.

Then the compressed cold inside erupted outward.

**Crack!**

Though the axe's blade remained intact, the shaft instantly froze over, along with the man's hands gripping it.

No—it didn't stop there. Since he took the attack head-on, his face froze solid, frozen in a smug sneer. His upper body was soon coated in frost as well.

And the frost Seol Lihyang conjured didn't stop at freezing half his body—it kept spreading.

It didn't take long for him to become a pure-white statue of ice.

The sword energy clinging to the axe flickered once, then faded. He must've died right then and there.

“...Whoa.”

I knew Seol Lihyang had grown stronger in the North Sea. She'd properly learned cold-based internal arts, drastically boosted her energy reserves, and gained experience handling massive cold energy.

Still, I hadn't expected her to take down a Peak Stage opponent this easily.

The mountain base fell into silence. And then—

“The Chief's down! Everyone run!”

The Green Forest bandits scattered in the opposite direction from Seol Lihyang, in a panicked stampede.

Watching their retreating backs, Seol Lihyang cried out in disbelief:

“Seriously?! They’re running just because I took down one guy?!”

Well... If I were one of those bandits, I’d be running too.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

“The Chief has fallen! Everyone, run!”

Seol Lihyang scowled as she watched the bandits flee in the opposite direction, but she quickly pulled herself together and began the chase.

Given that her techniques revolve around sound, she could rapidly spread cold energy across a wide area. No matter how fast they tried to run, several were caught as their bodies stiffened in the cold.

She subdued three more Green Forest bandits whose feet were frozen to the ground, then let the others go—for now. They’d be caught soon enough anyway.

Sure enough, just as Seol Lihyang was knocking out a bandit with a blow to the head—after her still-clumsy pressure point strike failed to seal his meridians—

**—Kyaaaah!**

**—The Tang Family?! How did they—?!**

**—Damn it! Scatter!**

Screams echoed from afar. Not that scattering would do them any good. The others were surely lying in wait nearby, and Seo Mun-Hwarin was probably already closing in.

I smiled wryly at Seol Lihyang as I began tying up the unconscious bandits with prepared ropes.

“Your pressure point technique hasn’t improved much, has it?”

“Not my fault, okay? I’ve got so much to learn and not enough time.”

“I’m not criticizing. Pressure point techniques are certainly useful, but they’re a form of grappling. Prioritizing your core martial arts is the right call. I’m just saying, next time leave it to me.”

Her attempt wasn't a total failure—it had merely produced weak results. She had correctly targeted the meridian point, but the internal energy she injected had been too little to fully paralyze the target.

Still, I didn't expect her to just give up and knock the guy out instead.

“In this kind of case, your aim was correct, but you didn't inject enough energy. Next time, try using a bit more.”

“Hmm... Isn't that dangerous?”

“If you only mean to subdue them, then yes, overdoing it could leave them unable to move even after releasing the seal. But... should we really be so considerate with Green Forest scum?”

“Ah...”

Only then did she seem to understand, nodding thoughtfully.

We were keeping them alive only in case they had useful intel—and because handing them over alive to the authorities would make a stronger impression.

Dead by our hands or executed later—either way, they were as good as dead. It wasn't like they had to be spared.

After tying up the unconscious bandits, I looked over at the still-frozen Chief.

“If we thaw him out now...”

“We'd just end up with a soggy corpse.”

“In that case, let's just transport him as is.”

Not that we'd be carrying him ourselves—the captured bandits would do it.

After a bit more waiting, Seo Mun-Hwarin returned, accompanied by the other Tang warriors who had gone to chase down the fleeing bandits.

Counting heads, it seemed they had managed to recapture every last one.

Some were already dead—killed by hidden weapons or poisoned. Some were dying. Still, at least half were alive.

That should be more than enough.

“My lord, we’ve captured them all. What now? Should we descend the mountain right away?”

“We should interrogate them briefly, just in case. Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, could you summon the rest of our people who are stationed nearby?”

“A simple matter.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin focused her internal energy into her fist and struck the air toward the sky.

**Paang!**

A streak of red internal energy shot upward, cutting a line across the sky.

No martial artist worth their salt would miss that signal. Anyone who saw it would find their way here.

In the meantime, I had the Blood Venom Unit warriors prepare a special poison and administer it to the relatively uninjured bandits.

It wasn't a long interrogation—barely ten minutes. I held a faint hope, but as expected, we didn't uncover anything noteworthy.

All they knew was information about their own base. Even the Chief likely didn't know much about the others.

Still, confirming that none had escaped was good enough.

“All right, let's head down now.”

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After turning the captured Green Forest bandits over to the authorities, we rested for the remainder of the day. The next morning, we set out again to locate more hideouts.

Our hit rate wasn't particularly high. Most turned out to be empty or long abandoned.

But roughly one in every four did yield Green Forest members—and each time, we wiped them out completely.

Sometimes Seol Lihyang took the lead, as she had in the beginning. Other times, the Tang warriors stepped forward to engage.

When things got dangerous, Seo Mun-Hwarin or I would step in. But still, these warriors had ample opportunity to gain real combat experience—both one-on-one and in group battles.

Thus, we moved tirelessly, sweeping through Sichuan, then Gansu, Shaanxi, and finally Hubei Province.

We didn't destroy every Green Forest base in those regions—but we did take out a total of eight hideouts.

Separately, the Black Lotus Sect managed to subjugate one base in Zhejiang. They failed to complete a second raid, allowing most to escape...

But according to our agreement, they passed that intel to the Namgung Clan, which then successfully carried out the subjugation in Anhui Province.

Some bandits fled from Anhui all the way to Guangdong—only to be betrayed by the Hao Clan, who took their bribes but passed the information straight to the Black Lotus Sect, who promptly crushed them.

Perhaps it was because no one in Murim history had ever destroyed this many Green Forest hideouts in such a short time—

At first, people reacted coldly, but their attitudes began to change. Especially among the merchant guilds, who had suffered the most from the Green Forest—their reaction was explosive.

Whether it was the Tang Family, Namgung Clan, or the Black Lotus Sect, people flocked to them, hoping to offer help or request assistance. There were even rumors that the imperial court might send an envoy to the Tang Family specifically to commend them—likely because I, who had destroyed the most bases, was affiliated with them.

Of course, not everyone in our group made it through unscathed.

There were no fatalities, as Seo Mun-Hwarin and I were always vigilant—but some did sustain serious injuries.

Those were treated by nearby physicians and sent back to the Tang Family to recover in comfort.

Naturally, our numbers dwindled little by little... and just as we were on the verge of not having enough people to form a proper encirclement—

Some post-core disciples of the Black Lotus Sect, remembering my request, came to join us. With that, our numbers swelled again.

Seol Lihyang took charge of the new recruits while I continued the hunt for hideouts.

By the time we had wiped out three more bases and arrived in Henan Province...

We began finding only empty hideouts—and not a single Green Forest member.

“So, this is it.”

“What do you mean?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head. I glanced at her appearance—grimy from days of nonstop travel and battle.

It made sense. Besides me, she had worked the hardest throughout this entire mission.

Honestly, even making it this far was a massive accomplishment. None of this would’ve been possible without two Flowering Stage warriors actively leading the effort.

“What’s all over your face?”

“...?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head the other way, not understanding.

I reached out and cupped one of her cheeks in my hand, using my thumb to wipe her mouth, under her eyes, and her cheeks.

“Mmh... hng... mmf!”

She passively let me touch her face, tilting this way and that, blinking tightly or holding her breath in response to my movements.

Once her face looked a little cleaner, I nodded and pulled my hand away.

“Better now.”

“...That... actually felt kind of nice...”

“...Huh?”

Caught off guard by her sudden mutter, I asked for clarification, and she quickly cleared her throat and tapped her cheeks repeatedly.

Maybe because of that, her cheeks had turned bright red as she shook her head.

“Ahem! It’s nothing. Anyway, what did you mean just now?”

“Ah, just what I said. I’ve done enough damage by now. The Green Forest finally realized that their usual tactics don’t work on me.”

“Then the reason we’ve only found empty bases lately is…”

“They’ve started abandoning everything—including their established plans and resources—in favor of hiding. From now on, it won’t be easy to find them like we did before.”

The Green Forest is structured like a network of isolated cells. No one knows the other bases’ locations—except the Chief.

I had hoped that if we kept wiping them out one by one, they’d be too slow to react…

But we were publicly handing over captives to the authorities, and news of each victory was spreading.

Instead of figuring out how we were locating and wiping them out, they chose to abandon all their bases—along with a portion of their treasure—and go into deep hiding.

My memory of their locations was nearly exhausted. And now that they were actively staying hidden, we had no way to track them further.

Worse, they'd probably stop their banditry for a while out of caution—making even small clues hard to find.

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded in understanding.

“I see. Then, what will you do now?”

“No point staying out here. Time to return to the Tang Family.”

“And what about those children who follow Hyang?”

She glanced sideways at the Black Lotus Sect disciples who had formed around Seol Lihyang.

It still surprised her that they had followed Seol Lihyang all the way here—and the level of their devotion clearly bothered her a bit.

But we had already settled that matter.

“No need to worry. I received permission from the Black Lotus Sect Master. Those with strong resolve will become guest retainers of the Tang Family and return with us.”

“So I worried for nothing, hmm.”

“It’s understandable. The Black Lotus Sect Master is well known for her obsession with talent.”

The reason he poured so much gold into hosting the Black Heaven Tournament was precisely to cultivate loyal warriors—not from existing sects, but those who followed him alone.

These Black Lotus disciples may lack prestigious backgrounds, but their skills are decent, and their loyalty is the kind he values most.

In exchange for intel on Green Forest bases, we released a few to him. He nodded his approval without hesitation.

Only one of those victories had been publicly announced—one base in Zhejiang. But I'm sure he took out one or two more in secret.

He likely wanted to interrogate them himself before handing them over.

His grudge against the Green Forest runs deep.

“Well then, let's descend the mountain. We'll find a good inn, rest today—and maybe tomorrow too. Those parting ways can do so, and the rest will return to the Tang Family.”

“That sounds like a good plan. I'll go inform the others.”

Just as Seo Mun-Hwarin turned to walk toward the group—

**Thud.**

She stopped mid-step. Her face suddenly went rigid.

“Senior.”

“I didn’t expect this either...but yes. I believe you’re right.”

I drew my sword and shouted loudly:

“Everyone, get behind me! It’s the King of the Hundred Peaks—the Green Forest Chief has appeared!”

The group, startled, quickly rushed behind me. Not long after, figures clad like Green Forest bandits began surrounding us.

And then, from the front, a monstrous figure emerged—never once bothering to conceal his presence.

He was a massive brute, the kind of person whose size made you question if he was even human—typical of someone who cultivated strength through external martial arts.

He wore a robe made of tiger pelts and carried a giant axe slung over his shoulder, eyes burning with fury.

“So, you’re the brat they’ve been calling the White Moon Sword Lord.”

“Oh my. You’re about to be the first Green Forest Chief in history to get beaten by a brat.”

I snapped back reflexively, but my mind was racing.

We have two Flowering Stage martial artists on our side. Why would he come here?

Surely he didn’t come to die...

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

“I see. So you’re that brat they call the White Moon Sword Lord who’s been all the rage lately.”

“My, my. Then you’ll go down as the first Grand Stockade Master in Green Forest history to get done in by a brat.”

I shot back on reflex, but my head was a mess.

Why did that bastard come looking for us here...?

The Green Forest's Grand Stockade Master, Baekak Mountain King. Even among Flowering Stage warriors, he's an odd one in many ways.

He's the one who set the Green Forest's policy of running the moment things turn the least bit unfavorable, and the one who most zealously puts it into practice.

But we must not forget that, for whatever reason, he's survived unscathed for over a dozen years despite all the villainy he's committed.

Whatever the case, no one can deny he's an extremely seasoned warrior.

Which is precisely why this makes even less sense.

Judging by how he's surrounded us with other Green Forest bandits, he clearly tracked us down on purpose.

We have two Flowering Stage fighters on this side. I alone may be weaker than the Baekak Mountain King, but with Seo Mun-Hwarin alongside me, the story changes.

Certain defeat. Even if he had strength on par with the Murim Alliance Leader, rumored to rank among the top three in the current martial world while hiding it as he ran, he'd still take serious wounds.

The damage we've dealt the Green Forest so far is considerable, but not to the point they'd accept that level of risk.

Yet the Baekak Mountain King has shown himself and encircled us like this.

Aiming my sword and fixing my gaze on the Baekak Mountain King, I quickly sent sound transmissions to Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

*"No matter how angry he is, the fact that he showed himself means he has some move prepared."*

*"This One thinks so as well. I do not know what he has prepared, but at least in his mind, it must be enough to ensure victory against two Flowering Stage warriors."*

*"I do not know if I can handle it, but I'll be careful."*

At Seol Lihyang's taut voice, I gave a small nod and stepped forward.

“While I was busy catching bandit scum, I didn't expect the bandit boss to stick his own neck out. Let me ask first, did you come to surrender?”

“Ha! As if. I came to teach the riffraff who dared lay hands on my men the terror of the mountain!”

With that, he slammed the haft of the axe he was holding into the ground.

**KWAANG!**

With a thunderous boom, the ground cracked in a spiderweb. The shock that rolled out half a beat later shook the earth's frame, and those behind me staggered for an instant.

The Green Forest rabble are just as lacking in martial foundation, but the fact that only the Tang Clan warriors lost their stance must mean, surprisingly, that in that brute show of strength he laced in exquisite control.

Of course, it's far too early to gloat over seizing the initiative with just that much.

“Noisy.”

I knit my brow and overlay killing intent onto the Qi-sense I’d spread wide.

I may no longer cling to killing intent, but that doesn’t mean all the experience I’ve had handling it has vanished.

Now that I can wield willpower freely, my killing intent, made all the more intense, densely fills the entire reach of my Qi-sense.

**Ghk...**

**Hughk!**

A, ah...

Most of the Green Forest bandits encircling us turn deathly pale.

Some clutch at their throats, some tremble silently, and some already go weak at the knees and collapse.

No exceptions. Exposed to my killing intent, the sharpened sense of death makes them drop their weapons.

Only those who covet, or the one who has already surpassed, the supreme realm called the Flowering Stage are not neutralized by my killing intent.

The result puts the earth-tremor he made by stomping with his axe to shame. And this isn't the end.

“Baekak Mountain King. I do not know what possessed you to so brazenly stand before This One, but... did This One look so laughable to you?”

Like the Grand Stockade Master had done with his axe, Seo Mun-Hwarin stomped the ground hard with her foot.

**KUUNG!**

A shock rippled out from where Seo Mun-Hwarin set her foot.

As before, the ground for a wide area shook. This time, to all sides except our own,

Those who already couldn't gather their wits after exposure to my killing intent failed to keep their balance under the tremor Seo Mun-Hwarin raised and toppled one by one.

Most of the subordinates the Baekak Mountain King had swaggered in with ended up sprawled disgracefully on the ground.

Even for a Flowering Stage warrior, this sort of thing doesn't happen without laying a hand on them. This phenomenon stems entirely from my peculiarity.

Of course, they probably had no intention of truly doing anything to me or Seo Mun-Hwarin, at best planning to pressure my party.

Even so, whatever his original reason, the Baekak Mountain King flinched, as if he hadn't foreseen this situation.

His features twisted into a vicious scowl.

“Seems you’ve got a trick or two, but in the battles of kings, such trifles mean nothing.”

“Battles of kings? I don’t see anyone of such grand station here.”

“What do you mean, no? I’m a Mountain King, and you’re a Sword Lord. If the two of us fight here, what is that if not a battle of kings?”

“So acting like a king on a mountain really has driven you mad.”

As a courtesy, we often attach epithets containing “king” or similar words to Flowering Stage warriors.

But it’s merely convention, a mark of respect that they’re that great as a warrior, not something anyone truly believes makes them a king.

If anyone does... there’s a high chance he’s not right in the head.

But regardless of what I said, or that his subordinates were still strewn on the ground gasping, the Baekak Mountain King showed unbroken fury.

He yanked the massive double-headed axe from where it was stuck in the ground and hefted it onto his shoulder.

He adopted an extreme stance, shouldering a weapon as big as his body and leaning forward.

The posture was new to me, but that extreme bullheadedness was a common trait I'd seen in other Green Forest techniques I'd faced.

A thick, dusky blue Qi coated the Baekak Mountain King's whole body and axe. And in the next instant,

**TUNG!**

With a somewhat peculiar sound for a mere push off the ground, his hulking frame closed fast.

I also charged to meet him and swung my sword, while Seo Mun-Hwarin swung around to his flank and drove a fist, as if to support me.

In response, the Baekak Mountain King briefly hunched, then, extending his arms from that very posture, answered by spinning.

It was like a giant axe had suddenly sprung out.

Wreathed in vivid qi, the hefty axe swept horizontally, cleaving the air.

It carried the momentum to split anything it met like kindling... but the willpower imbued in my and Seo Mun-Hwarin's Qi was in no way inferior.

**KWAANG!**

A tremendous roar exploded as my blade met the axe's edge.

Though my mastery and the time were insufficient to transform it into the White Sword, the densely condensed white Qi bored into the dusky blue Qi coating the axe.

But my sword body was driven back before cutting even halfway through.

It wasn't deflected or its path bent. It was simply shoved toward me, like failing to stop a boar's charge head-on for lack of strength.

*I see. So this is what a Green Forest art feels like when it reaches the realm.*

At this rate, I'd end up cutting myself with my own sword. I calmly twisted out of the line, and at the same time, Seo Mun-Hwarin's fist struck the Baekak Mountain King's flank.

**BUH-BOOM!**

Crimson-dark Qi slammed in with ferocious force to pierce his dusky blue body-protecting qi.

The sound was closer to an explosion than a strike. From Seo Mun-Hwarin's single punch, the thick protective Qi cracked.

The Baekak Mountain King's expression twisted slightly, and so did Seo Mun-Hwarin's.

She must have been incredulous that a blow meant to smash through any body-protecting Qi had been blocked.

Conversely, the Baekak Mountain King seemed startled that he'd taken this much damage mid-charge.

Of course, neither surprise lasted. We still had an opponent before us to bring down.

**BANG! KWAANG! BANG!**

Trusting in his body-protecting qi, the Baekak Mountain King charged like an enraged boar, swinging the heavy axe without pause.

With each sweep of his axe, the ground was overturned, ancient trees that had stood for ages split in two, and even rocks that seemed eternal shattered to pieces.

Each time the slightly belated White Sword met that axe, it hewed deep into the dusky blue Qi.

Along with Qi that should have been impossible to cut, it shaved away the Baekak Mountain King's brutish momentum.

But unable to fully absorb the shock transmitted whenever our weapons met, I was forced a step back with each exchange.

Worse, the impact I felt in my hands grew with each of the Baekak Mountain King's blows.

It must be a martial art that grows in power the more the offense is pressed.

Before I could fully cut through his qi, I'd be swept up by his axe after being shoved back.

Had I been alone, that's how it would've gone.

**Hhng!**

Seo Mun-Hwarin's fists kept lancing toward the Baekak Mountain King.

Sometimes he received them with only his body-protecting qi, sometimes he blocked with the axe haft.

His Qi grew harder and heavier as he kept pressing the offensive, but Seo Mun-Hwarin's fists were anything but ordinary.

**Crackle-crack.**

They broke faster under her fists than the rate at which his headlong charge translated into power.

That didn't mean the Baekak Mountain King was an easy opponent. The aftershocks of our exchanges alone were reshaping the terrain in real time.

A battle into which not only the Green Forest rabble who'd come to their senses late, but even the Tang Clan warriors who'd been following me until now, couldn't dream of intervening.

Seol Lihyang alone kept her eyes wide and continued her song, focusing her inner power toward the Baekak Mountain King.

No matter how pure and refined the cold, it wasn't easy to hold form amid densely packed Qi clashing again and again.

Silvery ice crystals gathered and scattered, over and over.

But it wasn't without meaning. It was more than enough to disrupt the Baekak Mountain King's focus here and there.

He wasn't easy to face, but with each exchanged move we solidified our advantage, and now, with a single stroke, I could slice through the Baekak Mountain King's body-protecting Qi and drive my sword into his nape.

At the moment when Seo Mun-Hwarin and I hauled the vague sense of victory into certainty, the corner of the Baekak Mountain King's mouth twitched, when he should have been seeing his own death.

It could have been a simple spasm. He was still collapsing even as he went on the offensive, so perhaps it was my imagination.

Yet, for some reason, it felt like a smile to my eyes.

A warning bell of instinct rang. Trusting it, instead of finishing the cut through more than half his Qi, I twisted my body aside to evade.

"You?!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin raised her voice at the choice that wasted all the effort we'd put in until now.

Overlaying willpower itself beyond killing intent, my Qi-sense grew even keener. I swung my white-hot sword toward the faint discord I felt at its fringes.

**JJEONG!**

A small dagger pinged off my blade, and peculiarly, a translucent Qi was sheathing it.

Why did I only now realize such blatant killing intent?

Keeping my guard up at a situation I couldn't understand myself, I swung again.

Toward someone neither seen nor sensed, the one who held that dagger.

*Slice.*

A sensation like cutting something thin. But it felt more like slicing a barrier of Qi than clothes or flesh.

The sword path left in the air became a fissure that soon spat out a person from within.

A hazy impression. His features were utterly ordinary, and even though I was plainly looking at him, I couldn't readily be sure of his existence, like a ghost.

As those who favor concealment and ambush often do, the man before me wasn't wrapped in obvious black clothes.

From his shabby outfit and well-honed yet worn dagger, one felt nothing extraordinary.

But those eyes. So utterly affectless they felt like they were regarding a corpse, and instinctively, I knew.

*No way?*

There was no answer, but none could have been more certain than this.

The master of Sal Valley, the pinnacle of assassins, said to have no one in the Central Plains he cannot kill.

And now, one who has come under the Demonic Cult, under the Heavenly Demon, and the card the Baekak Mountain King was counting on.

The King of Assassins withdrew his dagger and took a step back.

At the same time, his translucent inner power wrapped his whole body, and before I knew it, his figure was gone without a trace.

By luck, we managed to thwart his attempt to assassinate us at the most decisive moment, when we were off guard.

Now, all we had to do was deal with the fatal unseen, unfelt blade along with the Baekak Mountain King.

*“This is insane.”*

I knew the Heavenly Demon wouldn't sit still and wait.

But I didn't expect this method.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

In the past. When I went into a cave expecting a fortuitous encounter and met the dying Ghost Shadow Thief,

I fought off the assassins who had pursued him and confirmed that Sal Valley had come completely under the Demonic Cult.

Even before regression, I did not know whether Sal Valley belonged to the Demonic Cult or not. From the start, Sal Valley was so secretive that such information was not widely known.

If there is one thing I do know... the King of Assassins was, before regression and even now, the only assassin to have reached the Flowering Stage, and the greatest assassin in the Central Plains.

And that he vanished from sight at the same time as the Demonic Cult's invasion of the Central Plains.

In any case, since in this life Sal Valley had entered under the Demonic Cult, I figured we would clash sooner or later.

The problem is, I did not expect it to be today.

At the sight of the King of Assassins melting into the air and sliding out of view, a sigh escaped me.

“This is insane.”

If Sal Valley now belongs to the Demonic Cult, the only one who could send someone like the King of Assassins is the Heavenly Demon.

After our prior face-to-face, I knew the Heavenly Demon would not sit and wait.

But I did not expect him to send the King of Assassins and have him join hands with the Baekak Mountain King, who has been especially inflamed with me lately.

I am sensitive by nature, and when it comes to killing intent, my Qi-sense is sharper still... yet now, no matter how I focus, scattering inner power and willpower, I cannot feel the King of Assassins' presence.

To begin with, stealth arts are techniques that kill one's signs, slipping outside the opponent's perception.

You still see them with your eyes, but you take them for part of the natural background and pass them by, it is not some technique where they simply vanish while you are staring wide-eyed.

Well, I can more or less guess.

Trusting my instincts and the experience I have built up, I swung a strike. The sensation at my fingertips was of cutting not flesh or hem, but a membrane, and from the rift in the air the King of Assassins briefly showed himself.

Even if my sword bears willpower that cuts what cannot be cut, I cannot tamper with space itself.

I do not even understand what space is, do I. Swinging a sword without knowing what to cut is meaningless.

What I cut was a Qi membrane (gi-mak, a thin pocket of inner power usually used to keep sound from leaking).

So that was it.

If what I cut was a Qi membrane, there is only one reason the King of Assassins revealed himself from beyond it.

He is hiding not only his sound and signs, but even his appearance, with a Qi membrane.

The moment I realized that much, what I had to do was as good as decided.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been fending off the Baekak Mountain King's offense alone with slightly more difficulty than before, I shouted loudly to her.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin! It seems you will have to handle that side alone!”

“What are you saying?! Then what do you intend to do!”

“Obviously, cut down the King of Assassins, who even now is lurking to take our heads.”

Saying that much, I stood still and focused my mind.

The odds are low... but not to the point of calling it impossible.

Whether because it was an extreme battle situation, or because the King of Assassins was a little careless, I had already pierced his stealth once.

If I can make that sensation completely mine... then I surely have a winning chance.

If I fail, I will be offering my neck, but that has always been the case.

Realizing the situation, the Baekak Mountain King, who had shifted his barrage from me wholly onto Seo Mun-Hwarin, let out a loud laugh.

“Hah-hah-hah! How laughable! You got lucky once by chance, and now you say you will counter the King of Assassins’ dagger! How do you even know whether that dagger will aim at you or someone else?!”

“Whether I win or lose, at least you will be dead for certain, so do not worry about that part.”

“You Bas...!”

Exploding with agitation, the Baekak Mountain King charged even more recklessly.

No, perhaps it was only an act. His Qi had amplified that much.

Of course, Seo Mun-Hwarin's fists still held firm.

**KWA-AANG!**

Seo Mun-Hwarin blocked the Baekak Mountain King's headlong charge head-on with a single fist.

Instead of one side's Qi clearly shattering as before, it looked nearly even.

Both Seo Mun-Hwarin and the Baekak Mountain King's brows twitched at once, as if the very fact that the other had received their full power displeased them.

In a tone sharper than usual, Seo Mun-Hwarin sneered.

“You bark savagely, but all you can do is run about to no purpose? To This One’s eyes, there is no telling you apart from a dog.”

“Do you know this? Dogs are a pack animal by nature. Green Forest men, hear me! Do not stand there gaping, go after opponents at your level!”

At the Baekak Mountain King’s shout, the Green Forest bandits who had been at a loss snapped to and began to rush at Seol Lihyang and the other Tang Clan warriors.

Stopping them would be far too simple for me as I am now.

But I could not move carelessly. The moment I moved to one side, the King of Assassins would swing his blade either toward the other side or at me, now comparatively unguarded.

It is natural that Seol Lihyang cannot respond to the King of Assassins’ blade. Her martial foundation is far too lacking.

The same goes for Seo Mun-Hwarin. Unlike me, she had not sensed the King of Assassins’ presence at all.

She could keep her life from his ambush, but she would be seriously wounded. If that happened, killing the Baekak Mountain King alone would become nigh impossible.

Perhaps guessing my situation, Seol Lihyang shouted in a calm voice.

“Cheon Hwi! Don’t worry about this side, leave it to me! I think I can make it work somehow!”

Right after, a clear singing voice rang out across the area. In an instant, a viscous cold like we were in the North Sea swept through.

A murderous blizzard that would turn anyone with insufficient inner power into a block of ice just by brushing them.

Most of the Green Forest men who had charged so boldly faltered and were stuck, unable to budge.

Even the rest, if they somehow pushed through Seol Lihyang’s cold, collapsed under the rain of hidden weapons and poisons that fell as if waiting.

Thanks to that, I could focus my mind solely on Qi-sense.

A clarity unlike ever before. Amid the hubbub I felt before and behind... no, precisely within that hubbub, a single point of discord that stood out.

There was a place where the flow of sound, which I had unconsciously learned by helping with Seol Lihyang's training, was awkwardly distorted.

If the King of Assassins is using a Qi membrane like a tent to hide his signs and appearance, it must be there.

**KWA-REUNG!**

Like thunder, inner power burst from the soles of my feet. With the Thunderclap Steps at full force, the center of that discord rushed close in an instant.

I swung my white-dyed sword in a great sweep toward it.

*Slice.*

The feel at my fingertips of cleaving a Qi membrane. Beyond the fissure, the King of Assassins, still affectless but now showing a trace of surprise, was hurling hidden weapons in a sudden ambush.

“Hnng!”

His hidden-weapon skill was outstanding as befit an assassin, but on my side, have I not seen far greater hidden-weapon arts in the Tang Clan.

And how great could the power be in hidden weapons flung in a fluster.

**TUNG! TUH-UNG! TUNG!**

A few clashing sounds as Qi struck Qi. Most of the hidden weapons pinged off my blade as I swung to meet them, and some were stopped by my body-protecting Qi.

The King of Assassins, who had not said a word until now, muttered softly.

“How...?”

“You think I’d tell you?”

With a crooked grin, I kept swinging so as not to miss the moment.

With the White Sword fully unfurled, the strong blade is inefficient. What I need are only speed that surpasses the opponent and enough variety to deceive his eyes.

I focused on the subtlety of swiftness and change and recomposed my forms.

Acceleration from waist and shoulders, then elbows, branched into several streams through the wrists.

The White Sword, condensed to excess and shining far brighter than ordinary Qi, left afterimages in the air.

The complex paths etched into the eyes along those trajectories, an average opponent would have dropped his weapon long ago and offered his neck.

But the King of Assassins was no average opponent.

Cutting the Qi membrane let me see him clearly with the naked eye, but that was all.

His sign remained faint to the extreme, and where and how he was swinging his blade was still unclear.

Often enough, I would snap my sword back at the last moment because, before I knew it, a dagger had thrust right up to my nose.

In fact, my sleeve and forearm had been nicked lightly but repeatedly by his blade.

A strange sense that if my focus slipped even a little, I would lose the King of Assassins' presence.

Wielding martial arts too high-grade to dismiss as merely an assassin's, yet more assassin-like than any assassin.

Had my sword not been able to cut his Qi membrane, I would already be a corpse rolling on the ground.

While the King of Assassins and I, with focus pushed to the limit, each tried to read the other's sword and exchanged moves seeing several steps ahead,

Seo Mun-Hwarin and the Baekak Mountain King clashed head-on again and again in a contest of strength that left nothing of the surroundings, and Seol Lihyang and the other warriors were in a melee so tangled it was hard to tell who was who against the Green Forest bandits.

If not our side, then at least Seol Lihyang's side was almost certain to clean up the Green Forest by then.

The King of Assassins, who had been pressing close and thrusting in from blind angles with perplexing swordplay, abruptly retreated far back.

Though he barely moved his legs, he opened the distance that far. I did not even hear the sound of a push off the ground.

Thinking he meant to open space and then wrap himself again in a Qi membrane, I used the Thunderclap Steps to close fast.

“Where do you think you're going!”

The moment the King of Assassins came back into sword's reach, I carried my running speed into a stamped true step.

**KUUNG!**

The force I put in was tremendous, so the rebound was tremendous as well. Using minute movements of muscles and joints, I tuned it into a single direction.

Power concentrated in the arm. Inner power swirled as I poured excessive force into a single thrust.

“Ha-at!”

In accordance with a form of the Taesan Piercing Sword, my blade shot out straight. Rather than swing his blade in answer, the King of Assassins put a hand into his bosom. And then,

**BUH-BOOM!**

Gray smoke billowed high into the sky. The blade that should have gone through his heart veered wildly and churned the empty air.

“This is...”

A sensation as if my senses were twisting against my will.

I knew what that meant, which only made it all the more incomprehensible,

“Poison? And potent enough to work on me?”

My body, remade around Tang Sowol’s poisons, possessed a capability close to immunity to all poisons.

Strictly speaking, I have absolute immunity to poisons that Tang Sowol can wield, and if a poison is weaker than hers, my body can even devour it.

For me to be poisoned, not to the point of death, but enough to throw my senses into confusion.

The poison that entered shallowly through the cuts on my forearm must have been activated when I inhaled the smoke just now.

I knew assassins liked to use hidden weapons and poison, but I looked down on it somewhat, thinking it could not compare to the Tang Clan. I should not have.

If it is a poison of this level, it is certainly no ordinary toxin. Narrowing my eyes, I raised my guard another notch against the hidden weapons and poisons the King of Assassins used.

“This is why the Tang Clan lot...”

I saw the King of Assassins click his tongue as if in disbelief. From his perspective, it must have been quite a formidable poison.

Suppressing the toxic Qi with inner power, I recalibrated my sword's measure to match my wavering senses. That was not so hard.

My senses still reeled, but my sword would not go wildly astray.

The problem is that my opponent is not a common martial artist, but the pinnacle of assassins.

Realizing my condition, he again refrained from swinging his blade and instead spread a Qi membrane, focusing on stealth once more.

He must be thinking that, with my senses dulled now, I will not be able to pierce his stealth as before. In fact, that was so.

Until now, I had held even or better against the King of Assassins only because I could break his stealth.

If I have to fight him without even knowing where he is... I will not last long.

So first, I buy time.

My judgment was quick, and I carried it out without hesitation.

I unraveled the condensed White Sword and swung wide.

At my will, a drawn-out cleaving slash stretched beyond the length of the blade and scored a great line across my vision.

**KWAANG!**

As if to separate me and Seo Mun-Hwarin from Seol Lihyang, a deep sword mark carved the ground. And it did not end there. This time, I leapt high and slashed wildly down toward the ground around us.

The terrain battered here and there and changed. At a glance, it looked like a desperate flail to catch the hidden King of Assassins by luck... but I had another aim.

**KURR-REUNG!**

The terrain had already collapsed here and there under the brutish battle between the Baekak Mountain King and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

When slashes of this scale were added, the ground began to give way with a thunderous roar.

At this, even the King of Assassins lurking nearby to take my head would surely be swept up.

Using the first slash I drew as a sort of boundary so she would not be caught in the landslide, I shouted to Seol Lihyang.

“Seol Lihyang! You lot, get down the mountain and flee for now! And...”

I gave a sheepish smile toward Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was hopping over debris in fright and even treading the air.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, come over here so you do not fall. And I must ask you to make it a bit more certain.”

“You truly...!?”

With an exasperated sigh, Seo Mun-Hwarin stopped what she was doing and, pushing herself a bit, headed my way.

The Baekak Mountain King spewed curses and fired Qi, and deciding it was not the time to stay hidden, the King of Assassins reappeared and threw hidden weapons,

but the drawn-out cleaving slashes that continued without regard for distance could bat them aside without issue.

The moment Seo Mun-Hwarin’s small hand seized my waist, with her other fist she slammed hard into the collapsing ground.

**KWAANG!**

Beyond merely flowing down, the earth dropped out. That should buy enough time.

All that remained was to survive safely through the landslide I had set off.

“But my condition is not normal right now, so I am asking you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“I will tell Tang Sowol everything later, so keep that in mind...!”

With a grim threat, Seo Mun-Hwarin hauled me close.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

A thick-grown tree trunk. Leaning my back against it as I sat, I spoke.

“It is a common thing, is it not. When you end up fighting an unexpected strong foe, getting separated from your party.”

Previously, when I faced the Bloodflame Fist Demon, something similar happened, and, though I cannot say this to Seo Mun-Hwarin, before regression, in the days I fought the Demonic Cult, defeat often led straight to every man for himself.

So compared to those times, when we have merely fallen into a brief lull, is the situation not far better now.

“You were fortunate.”

“No, is not the very fact of fighting an unexpected strong foe itself bad luck?”

I let Seo Mun-Hwarin’s reasonable question in one ear and out the other.

There was no special reason. It was simply that the toxin I took from the King of Assassins had my senses reeling and I did not hear well.

Truly.

“By the way, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. It seems I need a little more time for my condition to recover, so, where are we?”

“Ehew. We were swept up in the landslide you set off, so obviously somewhere down the mountain, no.”

“So we cannot confirm exactly where. The same likely goes for the enemy. That is fortunate.”

“Mm. Put that way, that is true.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded and let out a sigh of relief.

If we do not know our exact position, and the Baekak Mountain King and the King of Assassins likewise do not know theirs,

then the chances are high they will not be able to locate Seol Lihyang and the others I sent to flee first.

“There is no need to worry too much. The last thing This One confirmed was those two falling to the side opposite Lihyang.”

“Yes. It is probably right to worry about us first. Fortunately the two of us fell together like this, so even if we run into the Baekak Mountain King, we can handle him without issue, but...”

“That sounds like the King of Assassins would be difficult.”

“Yes. At least until my body fully recovers.”

Faced head-on, the King of Assassins was, frankly, about on par with, or slightly below, the Baekak Mountain King.

In other words, an opponent I could well take on as I am now.

But the King of Assassins is not an ordinary martial artist, he is an assassin. If he hides with stealth arts and aims for a blind spot at the most careless moment, then no matter how Flowering Stage one is, one will not escape serious injury.

He did not earn the epithet King of Assassins for nothing.

In fact, the epithet came because in the past, a Flowering Stage warrior was assassinated by his hand.

“This One is rather more surprised at you. How did you discern the stealth of someone on the level of the King of Assassins, and in the middle of focusing on battle at that.”

“It was possible because I was focused on the fight. As you know, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, my Qi-sense is quite sensitive.”

Even before, my Qi-sense was not broad but extremely keen.

When I scattered killing intent, I could grasp plainly, as if in hand, everything moving within it, especially those who bore killing intent.

And this became all the clearer upon reaching the Flowering Stage.

Killing intent is the most basic application of willpower. Now then, what happens if one comes to handle willpower itself.

Naturally, one can discern the surroundings far more keenly than before, though the range is ordinary.

“Of course, it was not easy. Unlike middling assassins, the King of Assassins hid his killing intent perfectly.”

“Then...???”

“The minute discord that arises precisely because the stealth is perfect. And noticing the flow of air change as he sets his stance with the intent to attack.”

“???”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head, as if she could not understand what she had just heard.

For her sake, I explained in slightly simpler terms.

“You know, that thing. How your nerves stand on end for no reason when you see a blade, how smelling blood makes you wary of your surroundings even when you do not realize it is blood, I trained that feeling to the extreme.”

“What sort of beast are you.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head the other way, still seeming unable to understand.

You have got to be kidding me. I cannot explain it any more clearly than this.

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head for a while, then nodded as if convinced.

“This One still does not quite understand, but understood anyway. Unlike This One, you handle energy delicately. After reaching the Flowering Stage, that tendency has only grown stronger.”

“Ah, that is true as well.”

The willpower I realized upon reaching the Flowering Stage is a sword that cuts what cannot be cut.

And to cut what cannot be cut, one must see what cannot be seen.

Naturally, as I realized willpower, my Qi-sense grew keener, making this possible.

“Well. For now, it is impossible.”

“Come to think, you said your condition was not normal. Did you suffer internal injury.”

“No. Poison.”

“Hmm? You were poisoned?”

“Surprising as it is, that is the truth. I did not expect there to be a poison that would work on me as I am now.”

“I, it must not be an ordinary poison. Are you truly all right?”

“Nothing to make a fuss about. My senses are dulled, and sometimes my vision reels. It’s just...?”

“What???”

“As you said, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, perhaps because it is not an ordinary poison, it is not easy to burn it away with inner power or gather it and flush it out.”

It is certainly an extraordinary poison, to the point that the King of Assassins was surprised. It just does not truly work on me, who thanks to Tang Sowol has something close to immunity to all poisons.

“That is at least fortunate... then, if you drive out the poison entirely, will you be able to pierce the King of Assassins’ stealth again?”

“Likely so. Perhaps even a little better. I have done it once already.”

“One of the few good tidings. How long until you naturally detoxify?”

“We will have to wait for natural recovery... it will take about a day.”

“Then we had best hide ourselves for a while. This place... is good for resting, but not suitable for hiding.”

I nodded and rose with Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Then we began walking the area carefully so as to leave as few traces as possible.

With earth and rock, and broken trees piled here and there from the landslide, it was not hard to find a place to hide.

Finding a suitable spot, we poked air holes, and only after blocking the entrance at the end did Seo Mun-Hwarin speak.

“This One says this only now, but did not expect the King of Assassins to suddenly appear. You, did you perhaps incur some grudge.”

“I have earned many grudges, but there is no need to worry.”

“Why is that???”

“Because everyone holding a grudge is no longer of this world.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked up at me as if to say, Is that really how it is, and I shrugged.

“It will be so this time as well.”

“That is not what This One meant...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin sighed once and continued.

“There may be those who bear a grudge against This One, but not to the degree of moving the King of Assassins. What on earth is going on... did the Green Forest hire him, perhaps. The price would not have been ordinary.”

“It is not because of the Green Forest. The Baekak Mountain King is not the sort to pay that kind of money just because a few subordinates died. Of course, he may have preened to his men as if he spent the money himself.”

“This One thinks so as well. Then why on earth...”

“Mm. You may not know, since I learned this before meeting Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, but in fact, Sal Valley was absorbed by the Demonic Cult long ago.”

“What?!”

“It was probably the Heavenly Demon who sent him. Telling him to help the Green Forest and kill me.”

“This is why demonic men are the way they are. An assassin, you say. Is he now taking the wound from that time as an affront. How can a master of that level act so despicably.”

“I do not know. I think a little differently.”

If the Heavenly Demon had intended to kill me, there were far better chances.

If he is a regressor more seasoned than I, he would know various methods, and even if not, he could simply come deal with me himself.

But the Heavenly Demon did not. He sent the King of Assassins, a subtle move among the methods he could take.

Someone on the level of the Heavenly Demon would know there is a chance I could pierce the King of Assassins’ stealth.

All the more so if he is a regressor.

Yet the Heavenly Demon sent the King of Assassins at me, as if tossing me a suitable opponent to hone my sharp senses, my strength.

In truth, I only retreated briefly because I was poisoned and Seol Lihyang was behind me, had I fought to the end, I am confident I could have Killed the King of Assassins somehow.

As a result, I would certainly be more advanced than before.

I have considered the Heavenly Demon my enemy thus far, a great foe to topple someday.

Yet the Heavenly Demon, knowing of my existence, was moving as if to raise me up instead.

I do not know his aim. There is only one thing I can know for certain.

That to further grow my Qi-sense, my strength, and topple the King of Assassins is the quick and sure path... but it is the path the Heavenly Demon wants.

So I need to walk a different path on purpose. If I dance to the Heavenly Demon's tune, it will be no different from before regression.

Then how do I slip past the Heavenly Demon's expectations, and overcome the immediate threats of the Baekak Mountain King and the King of Assassins.

After a brief thought, I reached an answer.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Mm? What is it all of a sudden, with such serious eyes.”

“Within a day, the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, let's complete it.”

“.”

“Even if the King of Assassins' blade is fast, how could it be faster than the lightning of the sky. Also, no matter how well he hides, how could he evade the sound of thunder.”

“Geh... This One understands what you are trying to say. Theoretically possible, but in practice...”

“Of course, I am not saying I will perfect every form.”

Not the first half we had been restoring until now, but the latter half, where the true killing forms enter.

And not perfectly restoring the forms, but understanding the core subtleties and folding them into my sword, that much should be possible somehow.

My weapon is not only sharp Qi-sense. Dismantling others' martial arts and adding them to mine is also an excellent weapon.

I do not know what the Heavenly Demon saw in me to be so pleased, nor what he seeks that he sent the King of Assassins, whom I could overcome with a bit more growth.

Whatever the reason, I must do something he does not expect, if I do not want to be led around by the Heavenly Demon going forward.

And it is also true that I felt my shortcomings while crossing blades with the King of Assassins.

No matter that he reached the Flowering Stage far earlier than I, in the end, he is still an assassin.

Against such a King of Assassins, even after cutting his Qi membrane and exchanging blades head-on a few times, I could not seize the advantage even once.

At best I fought him to a draw, and in the end fell to poison.

Had I gone to the end, perhaps with sharpened Qi-sense I would have succeeded in fully seeing through his blade...

but that would be keen eye, not overwhelming him with swordsmanship.

So this time will be different. It must be different.

I gripped Seo Mun-Hwarin's shoulders firmly and stared into her eyes.

“I, in a situation like this, suddenly what are you...”

“I cannot explain in detail, but will you help me.”

“In a situation like this, of course it is fine, but the question is whether it is possible to begin with.”

“Of course it is possible. In truth, while restoring the Thunder Heaven Divine Art with Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, I had something in mind. Only...”

Only, this is entirely different from helping Seo Mun-Hwarin restore the Thunder Heaven Divine Art as before.

It is to make the Thunder Heaven Divine Art a part of my martial arts.

What Seo Mun-Hwarin permitted was only to take hints of realization in the process of helping her restore the Thunder Heaven Divine Art.

But what I now intend to do is no different from ripping apart and refashioning the Seomun Clan’s legacy to make it mine.

If it were someone else's martial art, I would have simply taken it without a word, but in the case of Seo Mun-Hwarin's art, I cannot do that.

“If you permit it, I will grant you any one thing I can do.”

“A, any one thing, you say?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes widened for a moment. Soon, she fidgeted her fingers and nodded.

“Then it cannot be helped. This One will permit it, so go ahead and do as you please.”

“.....?”

Her face flushed red to the ears. A furtive glance. The corners of her mouth slackening and then going stiff again, as if imagining something.

Borrowing Seo Mun-Hwarin's words, one would wonder what kind of reaction this is in a situation like this.

At any rate, I had her permission.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

My understanding of the Thunder Heaven Divine Art is sufficient. Even if restoring it to its original form is difficult, dismantling it and refitting it to suit me is something I can do right now.

Normally, it would be faster to learn the given forms as they are...

But the current Thunder Heaven Divine Art is an incomplete art that requires restoration.

And that is the conclusion I reached after considering my somewhat deformed talent, learning others' arts as I please and taking them apart as I please.

“Then I will ask it of you.”

“Leave it to This One. If anything happens, This One will wake you at once.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin thumped her chest with a dependable look. Only after giving her a nod did I sit cross-legged and close my eyes.

My vision darkened. In the thick earthen cave, all that could be heard were the faint breaths of me and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

At the tip of my nose lingered the damp smell of earth and wood. Yet through that mustiness, a single current of freshness could be felt. It was probably Seo Mun-Hwarin's body scent.

A body that has undergone Rejuvenation does not become dirty easily. A flesh that has even defied time should not bow to mere mud and stench, that is only natural.

So even though many things have changed, Seo Mun-Hwarin's scent is no different from before my regression.

With my eyes closed at this close distance, at times the boundary between the two of us crumbles.

Just what I wanted.

My consciousness sinks inward. Amid senses that are settling, all kinds of memories rise like foam and burst, over and over.

From among them I pull up the memory that hurt the most, yet was the warmest.

Before regression. Back when I was still called Blood Wolf and rampaged, drunk on my own excellence, Seo Mun-Hwarin willingly became my teacher.

She taught me how to live in the world when I knew nothing but swinging a sword, taught the ignorant me how to read and write, and even handed over a portion of her own martial arts.

And in the end, she taught me through loss that I too could hold someone in my heart.

If at the time it was only a vague gratitude, as time passed its weight only grew.

What martial artist in this world puts in such effort without special recompense to teach a subordinate this and that, even supervising their martial arts?

Neither I nor Seo Mun-Hwarin said it out loud, but back then we were something like master and disciple.

And it is only natural for a disciple to follow a teacher with their eyes.

As long years passed, I forgot many of the conversations I shared with Seo Mun-Hwarin before regression...

But her end, and the fragments of martial arts Seo Mun-Hwarin showed me while alive, I remember them clearly.

Quiet breathing soon becomes a roar like thunder, and from small limbs extends a fearsome might.

Yes. At that time Seo Mun-Hwarin had already made the Seo Mun Clan's secret arts entirely her own.

I do not know whether she fully restored the sword art, the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, but at the very least there is no doubt that she had infused the Thunder Heaven Divine Art's principles into her own arts.

What I have read and understood of the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, into that vague enlightenment I melt the embodied principles that Seo Mun-Hwarin before regression showed me.

Countless combinations of forms float up over the heartscape. Among those haphazard postures, anything lacking even a little in speed or ferocity is discarded.

Even after one round of culling, there are not few forms left, but using the figure of Seo Mun-Hwarin in my memory as a signpost, I filter out the lacking ones once more.

Thus what remains at the very end is a single form. I swing it without rest within the heartscape.

Tens. Hundreds. Thousands of times, it does not matter. I simply shave away, and shave away again, the unnecessary parts.

It is a tedious and arduous task, like setting the edge of a dull blade.

What is fortunate is that, having reached the realm of Divine Sword Unity, even without swinging it in reality I can reproduce the sword within the heartscape as is.

I forget the existence of the Baekak Mountain King, of the King of Assassins, of Seo Mun-Hwarin who must be guarding me as a protector, of the Thunder Heaven Divine Art I have restored thus far, even the presence of the Heavenly Demon, who will be standing at the end of all this.

The sword in my hand. And the single ideal sword path I must draw by swinging it.

At this moment, that alone is all that exists to me.

How many times did I swing like that. Before I knew it, I realized there was nothing left to pare away from the sword I was swinging.

The moment I became aware of it.

**KRA-BOOM!**

With the familiar roar, a dazzling bolt of lightning was engraved upon the heartscape.

It is time to wake.

\*\*\*

*Hoo...*

I opened the eyes I had closed and drew in a deep breath. Because I had engaged in heartscape training rather tightly, there was a bit of dizziness, but in the meantime the poison seemed to have been completely detoxified, my body felt refreshed.

As I blinked a couple of times and adjusted to the view, Seo Mun-Hwarin's admiring voice came.

"Hoh. For a moment, divine light dwelt in your eyes. Did you come upon some enlightenment?"

"Yes. Because I had a good teacher."

"A teacher?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head, then soon realized it meant herself and shrugged her shoulders.

“What sweet words to hear. However, it seems unfortunate that we will not be able to savor this aftertaste for long.”

“No way?”

“Right. At the edge of This One’s Qi sense, This One can feel the presence of the Baekak Mountain King. We erased our traces to some degree, yet seeing how cleanly they are tracking us...”

“High chance they have joined with the King of Assassins, who excels at tracking.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s Qi sense covers a much wider range than mine, but in return its sensitivity is lower than mine.

If the King of Assassins is already in hiding, it is natural that she would not notice those traces.

I lightly loosened my shoulders and rose to my feet.

“Then we should go finish the unresolved bout.”

“So readily you say it?”

“We have come this far, there is no avoiding it by trying to avoid it. And...”

After straightening my clothes for a moment, I lightly tapped the sword at my waist and grinned.

“Right now is perfect.”

My senses are vivid, my body light, and the sword strikes I had been swinging just before feel almost within my grasp.

There will be no better time than now.

“Ah, even so, after fasting for a day, I am a bit hungry. Let us finish quickly and eat something tasty.”

At my words Seo Mun-Hwarin looked dumbfounded for a moment, then soon snorted and nodded.

“Since there is no one else, let us secretly buy something expensive and delicious just between us.”

With those words, she cleared away the debris that had been blocking the entrance.

As we headed outside, a bit of glare pricked my eyes. Right after, even my Qi sense began to feel the presence of the Baekak Mountain King.

I also felt a faint sense of disharmony approaching to our flank from much farther away, as we sensed them, over there they must have sensed us as well, for the Baekak Mountain King rapidly closed in.

Conversely, the faint presence of the King of Assassins narrowed the distance with caution. Keeping my focus so as not to miss it, I spoke.

“Please take that side.”

“Then This One will entrust This One’s back of the head to you.”

We nodded to each other and kicked off the ground toward our respective opponents.

At the same time, the thunder unique to Thunder Roar Step, the Thunderclap Step, rang out. Before I knew it, my Thunder Roar Step and Seo Mun-Hwarin's had come to resemble each other.

Leaving the Baekak Mountain King to Seo Mun-Hwarin should be fine. It will become a contest of strength against strength, but I have never seen Seo Mun-Hwarin be overpowered anywhere.

So for now I focus only on the King of Assassins.

Again, when I dashed straight toward the direction he was confident in, perhaps startled, the King of Assassins swiftly changed his trajectory.

He must have paid much more attention to concealment than before, I did not know his exact position, but I could tell his general direction.

With my Qi sense sharpened to the extreme, I swung my sword toward the intermittent breaks in the flow of the wind inside it.

**Hrrmph!**

A sword Qi that stretches long. It was a strike that reaches what cannot be reached and cuts what cannot be cut.

The ground touched by the trajectory flipped, and broken trees bared their innards with neat cross-sections.

The slashes ran out long. I unleashed them without rest, so that the lines drawn by the sword would become a plane. And,

**Shhk..**

If it were only his own body he might have avoided it, but the Qi veil he wore over his body could not escape the sword path, and the King of Assassins revealed himself.

Perhaps because it had already happened once before, even though the concealment he had so carefully taken lost all meaning in an instant, he impassively narrowed the distance.

Had he concluded that concealment using a Qi veil does not work on me?

Without even attempting to hide his body again, he focused only on footwork.

Even though I was clearly watching, his form wavered like a heat haze.

Though he stamped the ground so quickly, there was no sound, and though he drew his sword, it reflected no light.

Even without a Qi veil, his movements were sufficiently stealthy. The sinister threat that a dagger would be at my throat if I let my focus slip even for a moment, that was surely the King of Assassins' true weapon.

Drawing back the sword Qi I had inflated greatly to fire off slashes, I concentrated it to a point again and mixed Ghost Shadow Step, into my footwork as I rushed the King of Assassins.

It was not as stealthy as the King of Assassins, but it was irregular enough to rival it. An unusual light rose in that sullen fellow's eyes.

Then, with the arm that did not hold a sword, the King of Assassins flicked his sleeve broadly toward me.

Like his sword, the hidden weapons had been painted black to kill their presence, and they poured out.

*Tch!*

It was a high-level hidden weapon technique, but it cannot be compared to the Tang Family's. He too must know this much will not work.

Even so, I cannot just let the flying hidden weapons hit me, so I began to bat them all away with a sword that had somehow turned white.

The hidden weapons were all cut away, unable to endure the White Sword's edge. The moment I cleaved a dagger whose handle was especially thick.

**POOMPF!**

With a smell of something burning, smoke burst out from within.

The scent had a strangely piquant note, it must have been poison smoke with toxicity imbued. It did not even sting for me, it seems it does not work on me.

But what mattered was not that I inhaled poison smoke, but that the dense smoke obscured my vision.

Indeed.

If a Qi veil is seen through, then rather than a Qi veil, block the vision with smoke, is that it?

The King of Assassins' presence was faint as it was. If he covers his body with dense smoke, it will be far from possible to pinpoint his exact location. It is like fighting with my eyes closed.

I do not feel any pride unique to martial artists from him, but I cannot deny that it is rational.

Against the current King of Assassins, the most ideal move I could take would be to wrap myself tight in protective gangqi, and somehow endure against an enemy I cannot see or feel, advancing my Qi sense step by step.

However, that smacks of a blatant arrangement. I have already decided I will not follow it.

Far from wrapping myself in protective gangqi, I even reclaimed all the energy I had unconsciously been wearing.

So that I could pour all the energy that remained into the sword.

**Vmmmmm-**

Spewing a sword's hum, the blade grew incandescent, more violent by a degree.

There is no need to exchange several passes. There is no need to struggle to find an unseen opponent.

There is likewise no need to leave leeway with the future in mind.

One sword.

A single sword is enough.

In any case, that single sword is everything to me.

I relaxed every muscle in my body, letting the sword hang loosely. The sword that had taken root in my palm was already a part of my flesh, and the sword strike that had just been engraved upon my heartscape was something I could not forget even if I wanted to.

My senses sharpened like a single blade. My breathing stopped, and in the stillness where all I heard was my heartbeat, death pressed in.

At the edge of my vision, a sword shot through the poison smoke.

When had he changed direction in between. Though he had been coming straight on, the King of Assassins' sword appeared from the side, aiming exactly for my neck.

It was too late to react now. It was not a distance easy to avoid, and even if I blocked, I would not be able to put proper strength into it.

That is what he will think.

Only after confirming the King of Assassins' sword with my eyes as it came in did I move my body.

One foot turned to the side, toes skimming the ground as if sliding.

In time with my heartbeat, I detonated my inner energy through my whole body, like unfolding Thunder Roar Step through the whole body.

**KRA-BOOM!**

The heartbeat that should have been audible only to me had already become thunder, noisily shaking heaven and earth.

And as ever, lightning precedes thunder by a step.

The sword that had been drooping toward the ground had already been swung.

From the ground up toward the sky, the white heavenly thunder stretched, becoming a pillar that linked heaven and earth, and it cleaved the King of Assassins' body along with his sword.

It happened in the split second when the King of Assassins' sword touched my nape.