

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 251-260

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Seo Mun-Hwarin saw it.

The white heavenly thunder that stretched from the ground toward the sky, thus becoming a pillar that linked heaven and earth.

It was a fair distance away, but it was possible because the strike was that intense.

Even the Baekak Mountain King, who had been locked in a life-and-death battle with her, flinched for a moment and looked over, as did Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Everyone here knows. That is not real lightning, but merely the afterimage of gangqi.

Yet the heartscape contained within, the intense willpower, made them feel that simple afterimage as lightning.

It is fast and strong.

I do not speak of the subtleties of speed or force. To express it, a slightly different name is needed.

Yes. If one had to define it, Hegemonic Dominance.

A sword swung with one's everything on the line, a sword that, if blocked, means the opponent is one you cannot defeat no matter what you do, so you do not think of what comes after.

It may seem a demonic sort of resolve, but because one willingly stakes oneself upon a single sword, in essence it belongs to the Righteous.

Such an extreme yet pure resolve is of the same grain as that wielded by overlords in regions where Righteous and Demonic mingle.

For example, the Jeomchang Sect's Sa-il Sword Art.

Or like the Seomun Clan's Thunder Heaven Divine Art.

“Ah.”

What escaped Seo Mun-Hwarin’s lips was a single-syllable sigh, but in her mind countless words rose and vanished on repeat.

Truly... did he truly do it.

Even if it is not restoration, even if it is layering in his own way, even that was far off for This One...

From the moment I showed the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, I hoped for this, but this is too fast, far too fast.

Wait. Has he already killed the King of Assassins?

If so...

There were many things she wanted to say to Cheon Hwi, many things she wanted to ask, and she wanted to wildly praise him, saying he did well,

but before that, is there not something that should take priority right now.

On that side, which had grown still as if there would be no further battle. The white heavenly thunder wrought by Cheon Hwi could no longer be seen, but the sight was etched into her eyes.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had studied the Seomun Clan's secret art for a long time, and had striven to reproduce it and infuse it into her own martial arts.

And to such a woman, a model answer had suddenly been thrust before her.

It did not take long for one who had wandered for so long to find an answer of her own.

“Damn it. Nothing ever goes my way.”

Having grasped the situation, the Baekak Mountain King began to turn and flee without a moment's hesitation.

The King of Assassins was dead, Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed to have gained some enlightenment, and soon Cheon Hwi would be joining.

That he had no chance of victory had already been proven in the previous fight, so there was no reason to fret, no leeway to weigh this and that.

A swift and reasonable judgment.

Even after becoming a Flowering Stage martial artist, he strictly kept to striking the weak and fearing the strong, befitting his position as the overall chieftain of the Green Forest Bandits, yet, that alone was not enough.

As if bewitched by something, Seo Mun-Hwarin set her stance. Unlike usual, she put strength not into her fists but into her legs.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's foot swept the ground in a semicircle once. And then,

Poook.

One foot dug into the ground up to the ankle. To brace something firmly.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's body, which had been aiming at the Baekak Mountain King's back that had gotten fairly far in the blink of an eye, began to move.

KRA-BOOM!

With a sound familiar to her, yet louder than ever before, Seo Mun-Hwarin's form vanished.

“What the...!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin closed the distance that had opened. At that figure, as if the middle step had been omitted, the Baekak Mountain King's mouth fell wide open.

The last scene engraved in his eyes, trembling finely with anxiety, was, a red lightning bolt crashing down toward his crown.

A trickle of blood ran from my nape. As the blood that flowed down soaked my collar, the King of Assassins' bisected body rolled across the ground.

Hah!

My breath surged belatedly. The blood I shed was at most a couple of drops, yet my strength drained as if I had poured out all the blood in my body.

Concentration and willpower raised excessively high. Movements that were taxing even for a body that had undergone reincarnation and remolding. The chill that if I had been a little slower, my neck would have been cut.

And the realization that I overcame all this and finally toppled the King of Assassins.

So it works...

I knew it would. And I knew that so long as I executed it properly, I could win.

But why does it feel so dazed now that I have actually done it.

It must surely be because I went through too many things in far too short a time, leaving me blank for a moment.

However, it is not yet time to rest easy. Things ended here somehow, but Seo Mun-Hwarin should still be in the middle of fighting.

I shook my head hard to clear it and tightened my grip, which had loosened at some point.

crack.

Clutching a single sword, I headed to where Seo Mun-Hwarin was.

And I saw it.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who burst out like red lightning and brought her fully raised leg crashing down.

PUH-UD!

The Baekak Mountain King's head, as he fled, smashed outright, and his body, having lost its owner, collapsed limply.

“Hoh...”

Among Flowering Stage martial artists, the Baekak Mountain King is particularly sturdy. True to a Green Forest man, he had trained external arts to the extreme, and the more recklessly he fought, the thicker his protective gangqi became.

But his opponent was not favorable, and the situation was not favorable.

The leg art Seo Mun-Hwarin showed, astonishingly, is a figure within my memory.

Before regression. That is the past by my standard, but by Seo Mun-Hwarin’s standpoint, it is a form she only learns roughly seven or eight years from now.

It carries a large opening, but the power of that single strike brooks no comparison.

It is probably stronger than the single strike I swung to fell the King of Assassins.

Having taken head-on a leg art that you must absolutely avoid, for blocking is meaningless, it is no wonder the Baekak Mountain King’s crown became concave to the point of vanishing.

All the more when he had trained a martial art that grows stronger the more you fight, yet he had stopped fighting and was in flight.

It feels a bit empty, having struggled to run all the way here only for it to already be over.

“By the way, have you already gotten the feel for it.”

The strike that killed the Baekak Mountain King is a form that the far more seasoned and skillful Seo Mun-Hwarin before regression unhesitatingly called her clan’s peerless secret.

I only saw it a few times, but I remember even martial artists of the same Flowering Stage recoiling in fright each time she executed it.

Thanks to that, aside from Sangwan Geuk, the Lord of the Black Lotus Sect, there were no other Flowering Stage martial artists of the Black Lotus who showed interest in Ironblood Hall.

Yet to think she would learn such a form this quickly.

As for me, I am gifted in this direction and even had a model answer to reference, but Seo Mun-Hwarin did not, did she.

Or did she. Could she have gotten a clue from watching the sword I executed just before?

Even after pondering, no sharp answer came.

If you do not know, is it not enough to simply ask.

Ordinarily, prying into another's martial arts and enlightenment like this is quite rude, but we have already restored the Thunder Heaven Divine Art together and succeeded in unfolding its subtleties in our own ways.

A question of this degree should be within bounds.

As I nodded and sheathed my sword, my gaze met Seo Mun-Hwarin's, who had been staring blankly down at the Baekak Mountain King's corpse.

Mm. I know that feeling well. I myself was feeling it just now, how could I not know.

I curled my lips into a crooked grin and waved to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“I was faster, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“You!”

Perhaps my gesture snapped her out of it, for Seo Mun-Hwarin called out to me and toddled over.

No. She was indeed toddling over, but before I knew it, it turned into a rapid patter. In other words, she had started to sprint at near full speed instead of slowing down.

“F, first calm yourself, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. I understand you are happy, but...”

“You...!”

Far from slowing down, Seo Mun-Hwarin now poured inner energy into her run. Before I could finish speaking, she arrived right in front of me and leaped.

A grotesque posture with arms and legs flung wide in midair. Like a flying squirrel, and I could not help admiring it for a moment.

Thud!

With a rather savage collision sound, Seo Mun-Hwarin hugged my face with her whole body from midair.

Arms hugging so tightly it suffocated me. Her legs constricted my upper body like a snake eyeing prey, and with her soft cheeks she pressed my head down firmly.

A figure who, to anyone's eyes, seemed unable to contain her emotions and was bouncing about.

Seo Mun-Hwarin crashing into me with such favor is something I am grateful for and pleased by, in any case it is certainly a good thing.

So much so that Tang Sowol, who dotes on Seo Mun-Hwarin like a younger sister despite her being well over twice her age, would have been a little jealous.

However, there is one serious problem here.

Unlike Tang Sowol, Seo Mun-Hwarin's chest is, how to put it... a little lacking in shock absorption.

To put it more plainly, it is not very plush.

In other words.

If you collide at this speed, it hurts. A lot.

“You! Did you see it?! Thanks to you, the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, the Seomun Clan's secret art will soon see the light again!”

“Mm...”

“It is still far from a complete restoration of the Thunder Heaven Divine Art, but thanks to you I could grasp the core principle, so it is only a matter of time!”

“I appreciate the evaluation, however...”

“Ah! I did not know such a day would come! This One, This One truly believed I would be alone without fail, and that I would have to toil for ten more years to complete the foundation for rebuilding the Seomun Clan!”

“Would you please let go for a moment.”

“Thanks to you, it is no exaggeration to say that This One’s life has changed... hm? Let go, you say. Do not suddenly say such a saddening thing. Will you not rejoice with me a little longer? Is this not the achievement you and This One accomplished together.”

“That is true, but.”

A bit of embarrassment. And considering Seo Mun-Hwarin, who would be even more embarrassed than I, I continued as gently as I could.

“I overexerted myself, so I have a nosebleed. I worry that Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin’s clothes will get dirty.”

“Ah...”

Though I had gone out of my way to put it roundabout, at times like this she understood perfectly.

In the saddest voice in the world, she let go of my head she had been hugging.

“I am sorry... let us stop the bleeding first...”

“Yes...?”

All the positive air that had been overflowing just moments ago, joy, pride, gratitude and so on, disappeared somewhere, and what remained was only Seo Mun-Hwarin looking down at her own chest with a gloomy expression.

Even though we had won against opponents as hard to meet, and even harder to topple, as the overall chieftain of the Green Forest Bandits and the King of Assassins, is this not too dreary a mood.

So, to shift the mood, I patted Seo Mun-Hwarin’s shoulder as brightly as I could.

“Your ribs are remarkably sturdy.”

“Be silent.”

I was scolded.

Why though...

Although for a trifling reason Seo Mun-Hwarin’s mood had dipped a little, in any case, if you won a fight there is something you should of course do after.

Rifling the bodies.

If it is the likes of the Baekak Mountain King and the King of Assassins, might we not learn some important information. It is a bit unseemly, but necessary.

Thus, I found the Heavenly Demon’s letter on the King of Assassins’ person.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After killing the King of Assassins, then the Baekak Mountain King, the very first thing we did was rummage through their corpses.

It was a bit unseemly, but it was necessary to learn why the King of Assassins had suddenly joined hands with the Green Forest Bandits.

The first one I searched was, of course, the Baekak Mountain King. You deal with what is right in front of you first, do you not.

Even headless, his bulk was unchanged. Thinking that Seo Mun-Hwarin had fought a contest of strength against such a frame without yielding an inch, I found myself surprised anew.

It is natural for a martial artist who has reached a realm to overcome the limits of flesh, and for a Flowering Stage master it goes without saying...

But it is not easy to entirely ignore the impression seen with the eyes.

I shrugged and searched the Baekak Mountain King's clothing from top to bottom. And,

“Huh.”

“Why so, you. Did you find something?”

“I found plenty. How about you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“Mm. This One recovered no more than his emergency stash.”

In a regretful voice, Seo Mun-Hwarin showed me a rosary made only of large gemstones.

No, calling it a rosary is wrong. It was closer to merely tying together big beads of gems so they would not be lost.

If you converted gems that size into gold notes, would it not fill several chests.

Since entering the Tang Family, I had not felt the lack of money, but that much was enough to draw my gaze anyway.

Regrettably, what we wanted was not money but information from which to infer circumstances.

With another sigh, I shrugged my shoulders.

“Mine is similar. Will you take a look at this?”

“Similar, you say. Could it be...?”

I showed Seo Mun-Hwarin what I had found as she blinked.

Some unknown land deed, accessories where beauty or propriety were thrown to the dogs and only expense had been poured in, and even a money pouch stuffed to bursting with gold notes.

“Everything is just things that can be turned into money.”

“Is there any reason to carry this much money on him?”

“Well. It seems there was, for him. If I sprinkle in a bit of conjecture, perhaps he meant to kill us then run off alone somewhere.”

The Tang Family’s motto says, favors are repaid twice over, grudges tenfold. Except for a few special cases, it is a rule that has always been kept.

Tang Sowol would gladly devote her whole life to avenge me and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

In fact, before regression, she was so stubborn that, to avenge the annihilation of her clan, she set out to face the Heavenly Demon, Cheonma, despite my earnest pleas.

And the other members of the Tang Family would gladly join Tang Sowol's vengeance.

No matter how confident the Baekak Mountain King was in his own skill, he could not face the entire Tang Family.

As during the Demonic Cult's invasion before regression, he must have planned to take his property and flee once the deed was done.

What he carried on his body was part of that.

It is a pity these are not what we expected, but there is no harm in a lot of money. I will hold onto it for now.”

“Half!”

“Pardon?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly raised her arm high and shouted that. Wondering what it was, I turned to see her slowly lowering that hand and pointing her index finger at me... no, at the Baekak Mountain King’s goods I was holding.

“Was it not This One who killed him while you dealt with the King of Assassins. Therefore, it is right to split evenly in fairness.”

“I meant to do that from the start, so it does not matter. Are you short on money these days, by any chance?”

“That is not it. Only...”

Trailing off, Seo Mun-Hwarin pursed her lips. After choosing and swallowing her words, what she chose was an awkward smile.

“Ah, we may have much to go out and do. This is to prepare for later. If one is not alone, it will surely cost a lot of money.”

“...?”

I did not catch the last part well, but I had heard the earlier parts enough to understand what she meant.

She must be trying to save in advance for the costs of rebuilding the Seomun Clan.

Even if not at the level of the Five Supreme Clans, if you want to go around calling yourself some Clan, a merely decent house will not suffice.

“Indeed. You are already preparing the Seomun Clan’s future.”

“Future... y, yes, that is exactly it!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded vigorously. For some reason she seemed eager to move on, so I turned my palm up toward the sky.

What she found on the Baekak Mountain King was a single gemstone rosary. It was probably the priciest item, but it was also the smallest and lightest.

Since we would split things after selling and disposing of this and that anyway, right now it was simply baggage.

So rather than adding to my load, it was more efficient to add her load to mine.

Hence I held out my hand.

“Mm???”

With a strange little sound and a tilt of her head, Seo Mun-Hwarin set her hand on top of mine.

It was small and squishy.

“What are you doing?”

“Was it not that you told me to hold out my hand?”

“I meant that I will keep it for now, then later sell or whatever and split it in half, so please entrust me with that rosary for a moment...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s face quietly flushed. Squeezing her eyes shut, she put the rosary in my hand and then whipped her head away.

“Y, you would not cheat This One, so This One will trust and leave it with you! More importantly, the King of Assassins is still left, so let us go quickly. Unlike the Baekak Mountain King, something will surely come out of him!”

“Ah, yes.”

By anyone’s eyes, it was a desperate flail to erase what had just happened and switch the subject.

Seo Mun-Hwarin trotted off, but not knowing the exact location of the King of Assassins’ corpse, she returned to me before long.

I gave a wry smile and led the way for a bit. In front of the bisected corpse of the King of Assassins, Seo Mun-Hwarin let out an exclamation.

“You cut him down without even giving a chance to react.”

“If I had given even the slightest opening, there would be a wind hole in my neck, so of course I had to.”

I shrugged, squatted before the corpse, and began to search his clothing.

Unlike the Baekak Mountain King, whose head had simply been blown off clean, the King of Assassins’ corpse was in no shape to look at, so I meant to search it myself, but,

before I knew it, Seo Mun-Hwarin was examining the other half with unhesitating hands.

“Hmph. Did you think that at this point This One would hesitate this much, or say something to you?”

“You caught me. But it is also true that I want to do a bit more of the dirty work for your share too, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Why is that? Do you perhaps not want even a drop of water to touch This One’s hands?”

“There is the difference that it is not water but blood, but it is roughly similar.

Whether we rejoin Seol Lihyang’s group or the two of us return to the Tang Family, either way we will need to rent an inn in a nearby village for the day, and it would be a bit much if we were both caked in blood.

“But since it is already late for that, it would not be bad to wash up simply before heading down.”

“T..Together, you say! Men and women have distinctions, how could you already...”

“I meant washing faces and hands. What exactly are you thinking?”

“N, nothing at all, so hurry and finish what you were doing.”

By anyone’s eyes, Seo Mun-Hwarin had been full of improper imaginings, but what she said was reasonable, so I examined the King of Assassins’ body more closely.

What I found were well-maintained hidden weapons, even lacquered, poisons of unknown types arranged by kind that I had never seen, and besides those, only miscellaneous items that helped the irregular movements the King of Assassins had shown kept coming out.

“You. It seems This One has found something.”

“What is it?”

“A letter from the Heavenly Demon, Cheonma, to the King of Assassins.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin held out a letter to me, its edge stained with blood.

I unfolded the letter passed to me by Seo Mun-Hwarin, whose face was solemn.

The content itself was concise. Approach the overall chieftain of the Green Forest Bandits, persuade him that if he is paid an appropriate price he will gladly join forces to kill me.

And when the job is done, assassinate the overall chieftain of the Green Forest Bandits, who had grown fat sucking the lifeblood of the innocent, then take as much of his property as desired and return. That was all.

There was nothing written about how Sal Valley had come to bend the knee to the Demonic Cult, or that, befitting one who showed terrifying prowess, he had some other secret intent.

“This is...”

On the surface, that is.

As I read, a pattern overlapped upon the page.

Before regression. In the days when the Righteous Alliance somehow held on against the Demonic Cult, a code phrase, an Ameo, had been made.

When sending secret letters to allies, guard against discovery by the enemy, that was the basic rule, and the Zhuge Clan and Sama Yuryeon had put their heads together and made it.

That does not mean it was known to all. Only those in positions within the Righteous Alliance who would exchange secret letters could know it.

Even I, who was doing fairly well at the time, only learned of it much later, so security must have been maintained thoroughly to the last moment.

Even so, that the Heavenly Demon knows this...

“Was it a meaningless struggle from the start.”

“Mm. If the King of Assassins had set his mind to kill, no matter how much the Baekak Mountain King tried to flee, he would have lost his life in the end.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded, interpreting my words a bit differently. Meanwhile, the more I thought, the more a chill rose up.

I had thought that the Righteous Alliance had, bit by bit, held out against the Heavenly Demon.

But perhaps... the Heavenly Demon had simply cracked a small breathing hole for the Righteous Alliance. For reasons unknown.

At any rate, there is only one reason to send such a letter to the King of Assassins, who did not know the code of that time.

Because this letter was in fact sent not to the King of Assassins, but to me.

Tracing back my slightly blurred memory, I interpreted the code sent by the Heavenly Demon.

- Do you like this One's gift. I do not doubt we will meet again soon, but just in case, I have sent something that may help.

As it was decoded and the moment we hid ourselves for a time while waiting for detoxification, the faint sense of discord I had felt proved true.

- You seem to be making efforts to face this One. That is pleasing, so how could I simply watch. From time to time I will send something. At the most desperate moments.

As before regression, he knows that I am aiming for the Righteous Alliance, and whether by sending assassins or using other means, he says he will interfere at several crucial moments like this time.

For a martial artist as great as the Heavenly Demon, it was an awfully petty declaration. But he is one who scatters agents through the Central Plains long before a full invasion. Above all,

- I hope it will be of help to you, Sword Demon. Do not disappoint this One.

If his true aim is not to hinder the Righteous Alliance and kill me, but to foster growth on this side, then all of it makes sense.

I do not know what he is thinking to the extent of trying to make me grow.

“You? Your complexion is not good. Was there something else written?”

“No. It is nothing.”

Due to the mental restrictions, I could not speak of related information, so this was the best excuse. So I thought, as I read the final sentence.

- If you, Sword Demon, accept all of this One's gifts... I vow this. A way to loosen, if only for a time, the rope of heaven that hangs about our necks.

“...”

The Heavenly Demon spoke to me of a way around the Mental restriction.

After taking the Baekak Mountain King's axe as additional proof of subjugating the Green Forest's overall chieftain and coming down the mountain, we rented a suitable inn, and from midday Seo Mun-Hwarin and I holed up in our respective rooms.

Say what you will, we had overexerted today, so we needed proper rest.

But I could not sleep at all.

A notice that he would continue to send dangers on par with the King of Assassins. And the Heavenly Demon's inexplicable favor.

Those two tangled my head, and I do not know how many times I lay on the bed and only sighed.

When the scenery outside the window grew dark, and the people who had bustled about returned home one by one and silence settled,

RRattle.

The door of my room opened, and Seo Mun-Hwarin poked her head in.

“Y, you. Are you asleep?”

“I am not asleep yet.”

“Do you perhaps remember?”

“Remember what?”

“That you promised that if This One allowed you to take the Thunder Heaven Divine Art as you pleased, you would grant This One one wish.”

“Ah.”

Now that she mentioned it, I had said that.

As I nodded blankly, Seo Mun-Hwarin stepped fully into my room past the door and continued.

“I intend to use that wish voucher now.”

Hesitating as she spoke, Seo Mun-Hwarin was not in her usual martial garb, but wore somewhat thinner clothes.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“I intend to use that wish token now.”

So said Seo Mun-Hwarin as she entered my room, not in her usual martial attire, but dressed in something thinner.

Her outfit was strikingly provocative, leaving me momentarily speechless.

Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed no different, as a heavy silence wrapped around the room. Yet it was not an awkward quietude, but rather an atmosphere laden with tension, as though something were about to happen.

They say that when you lose your sight, your other senses become sharper. I don't know if it was the same principle, but both Seo Mun-Hwarin and I began to feel our five senses heighten to the extreme in the absence of words.

A subtle fragrance lingered at the tip of my nose. It wasn't from any flower, but likely from Seo Mun-Hwarin herself, whose body had undergone a near-rebirth.

The scent was unchanged from before my regression, yet the same—it brought both tension and a strange sense of comfort. Within it, I could hear faint breathing.

Her breathing was irregular, perhaps from nerves. That slight panting sound had to be Seo Mun-Hwarin's.

It wasn't as though she was close enough for me to hear her breath, but... I had reached the Flowering Stage, and my sharpened senses made it feel like it was right by my ear.

My mental guard began to loosen. Trying to regain my composure, I deliberately ignored the scent and sound. I shouldn't have.

With those senses suppressed, my vision became even more focused.

Though it wasn't martial attire, her clothes were loose and easy to move in. They looked like something meant for sleeping, highlighting comfort, yet... the fabric was far too thin to be called mere sleepwear.

The sun had set, and the world was dark. The red glow of the lantern inside was brighter than the pale moonlight seeping in through the window.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, standing relatively close to the light, had her silhouette faintly revealed through her clothes.

It wasn't enough to show skin, but the shape of her body, previously hidden by loose garments, was now clearly outlined.

Of course, Tang Sowol's poison sac or Seol Lihyang's dense yin energy made them seem far more prominent in comparison. Still, looking at her now, Seo Mun-Hwarin wasn't lacking either. At the very least, it was clear she was very much a woman.

“Ah.”

...It would probably hurt if she were hit with force.

The feel of Seo Mun-Hwarin's ribcage flashed through my mind. So much had happened, but it hadn't even been a full day, so the memory was vivid.

Snapping back to reality, I shook my head. Seo Mun-Hwarin, as if going through the same thought process, shook her head with a dazed expression.

Glancing down, I realized I was in a relaxed state myself, having loosened my clothes while lounging in the corner of the room.

I straightened the collar that had slipped down to my shoulders and opened my mouth.

"Where are you looking?"

"Ah, I wasn't looking at anything! And you—what exactly were you looking at?!"

"I was obviously looking at you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin."

"Ugh! You mean this one...?"

“What do you think when you look at this one?”

A light, seemingly innocent question. But seeing her solemn expression and the way she swallowed nervously, I realized it.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had made up her mind.

I shrugged, masking my internal unease, and replied.

“You look cold. It may be spring, but the weather hasn't fully warmed yet. I think you should wear something thicker. You're not young anymore, and you might catch something.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin flinched at the mention of her age but said nothing. Instead of reacting with her usual dramatic outburst, she quietly took a step closer.

Then, placing one hand gently on her chest, she spoke.

“Then, you can warm this one up.”

She closed the distance so I couldn't simply laugh it off. There was nowhere left to retreat.

Letting out a short sigh, I asked,

“Huuh. Is that your wish, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“And if it is, what will you do?”

“I'm sorry to say this, but... do you not have any other wishes?”

My roundabout refusal made Seo Mun-Hwarin flinch slightly.

Frozen in place for a moment, she slowly looked up at me.

“Eh...? Have I become repulsive to you?”

Just moments ago she had been confidently approaching, but now she was dejected.

Perhaps her courage, which she had mustered up for this, was depleted. Her voice grew smaller.

“You already have a fiancée, and now here I am throwing myself at you. And though not formal yet, Hyang is to become your concubine, too... I must seem ridiculous.”

“Well, yes.”

“Besides, as you just said, this one is not young. Do you remember? Originally, this one even considered taking you in as an adopted son.”

“That... did happen, yes.”

My tepid response, coupled with the earlier refusal, seemed to break her spirit. Shoulders drooping, she wore a heartbreakingly sorrowful expression.

“Yes. It’s only natural you'd be repulsed by this one. Sorry for everything. This one will leave now, so get some rest.”

After finally taking a step forward, Seo Mun-Hwarin turned and began to walk away, shoulders heavy.

Unlike Tang Sowol, who naturally occupied the space beside me, or Seol Lihyang, who gritted her teeth and forced her way in, Seo Mun-Hwarin gave up quickly. I could guess why.

She must have often wondered if she was even allowed to feel this way.

Using the wish token as an excuse, she had finally mustered the courage, but with my vague reaction, she resigned herself.

Foolish.

I sprang up and embraced Seo Mun-Hwarin from behind, lightly, just enough to wrap my arms around her small shoulders and the nape of her neck.

“Uheh...???”

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“W-Well, anyone would make a sound like that if suddenly hugged like this!”

“No, I wasn’t talking about that.”

I slowly stepped back, pulling Seo Mun-Hwarin away from the door. Then I released her and turned her toward me, holding her by the shoulders.

“I meant—why would you say something as foolish as me being repulsed by you?”

“Hmm?”

Blinking, Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head slightly.

“But didn’t you say you couldn’t grant this one’s wish?”

“I did.”

“Does that not mean you refuse to hold this one?”

“You understood correctly.”

“Then it seems this one misunderstood nothing.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin had boldly misread things but firmly so. I shook my head.

“Who in the world says yes when someone comes at them out of nowhere like that? There’s a proper order to everything.”

“B-But didn’t you say so yourself?! That you’d grant this one any wish she desired! And yet now you take it back—was it because you hated the idea that much?!”

“What are you saying? There’s no way I could hate you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. I was surprised, yes, but...”

Before my regression, Seo Mun-Hwarin had been my benefactor and teacher. But I also remember her words.

When I called her my teacher, she mumbled that it wasn't so bad, even though a hint of disappointment laced her voice.

And in this life, Seo Mun-Hwarin sometimes failed to hide her emotions, letting them slip out.

There was no one around me as easy to read as Seo Mun-Hwarin. Of course I knew how she saw me.

I just hadn't approached or acknowledged it first.

After all, I am engaged.

Even though I sensed that Tang Sowol wouldn't mind if I included Seol Lihyang and even Seo Mun-Hwarin, I had yet to get her explicit approval.

"More than anything, I didn't want you to feel forced to pursue me."

“What kind of nonsense is that now?”

“It’s simple.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin had returned to the martial world in secret, seeking a new life and to reclaim her lost happiness.

And not long after, she was discovered—by me.

From then on, she’d been with me.

I don’t regret getting involved. I know too well how despondent she had become before my regression, how even her resignation was filled with sorrow.

So I think things are much better now.

However—

“Maybe... maybe your feelings for me are like a newborn chick imprinting on its mother. Perhaps there’s a better choice out there for you. That thought...”

“That, now that is the real nonsense.”

Her tone turned cold and firm, as if slightly angry.

Unlike earlier, Seo Mun-Hwarin now began pushing me back step by step. And with every step I retreated, she followed, until my heel caught the edge of the bed and I stopped.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin didn’t stop. She pushed me back onto the bed and climbed atop me.

Her eyes narrowed with determination. It wasn’t intimidating, but her sincerity was undeniable.

“It’s true that this one met you too soon. Almost everything this one has done since returning to the world has involved you. But I do not wear clothes like this and come in the dead of night to just anyone for that reason alone.”

“That’s...”

“That’s enough. Answer me again.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked straight at me.

Her transparent gaze revealed her affection clearly.

“This one’s wish is to rebuild the Seo Mun Clan with you. Will you grant it?”

Panting slightly, she posed the question sincerely.

I closed my mouth for a moment, and old memories began to flicker in my mind.

The time I had just joined the Black Lotus Sect and, shortly after, was demoted to Ironblood Hall.

Despite my stubbornness and rough demeanor, Seo Mun-Hwarin was the first to reach out to me.

Though I was more beast than man, having learned nothing, she taught me decency, how not to hate the world, and even shared her martial arts with me.

Even in her final moments, she only wanted to remain as a flower in my memory.

Though I couldn't accept it then, her kindness and lessons were deeply etched in my heart.

And in this life, it was much the same.

I kept turning away with excuses, but deep down, the answer was always clear.

I want flowers to bloom once more on a tree long thought dead.

I want green shoots to sprout from the ashes.

I want Seo Mun-Hwarin to be happy, just as she desires.

And—

I hope that I can be the one to make that happen.

After gathering my thoughts, I spoke carefully.

“You can’t.”

The light in Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes vanished in an instant. I quickly wrapped my arms around her waist and continued.

“At least, not right now.”

“Does that mean later is okay?”

“Yes. I already have two prior commitments.”

“Oh.”

Then, as if realizing something, Seo Mun-Hwarin leaned in and whispered near my ear.

“Have you... with Sowol or Hyang...?”

“That hasn’t happened yet.”

“Th-Then it can’t be helped. In that case... how far can we go?”

“Hmm. A kiss, perhaps.”

Gulp.

Seo Mun-Hwarin swallowed once, then asked with a voice full of hopeful anticipation:

“Where will you let me kiss you...?”

“I’ll leave that up to your discretion, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

A sly smile formed on her lips.

And Seo Mun-Hwarin moved just a bit closer.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“What urgency drives you to push yourself so harshly?”

So spoke Seo Mun-Hwarin as she sat at my bedside, where I had collapsed from exhaustion after training with my sword.

When I had first drawn my blade, it had been bright daylight, yet before I knew it, the sun had set, and now the night sky was obscured by Seo Mun-Hwarin’s face.

White hair spilling downward. Crimson eyes filled with both worry and strictness. That was the sky I looked up at.

A sky that could be covered with just the span of a hand.

I don't remember what I said in reply to Seo Mun-Hwarin. It was a long time ago, and memories that aren't especially vivid are often pushed aside by stronger ones.

So I must've said something meaningless. Something like... life is supposed to be harsh.

That's the kind of person I was back then. Rather than being consumed by rage, it was more accurate to say I was twisted.

I had confidence that my sword could cut through every problem in the world, yet I was plagued by anxiety because I didn't know what to swing it at.

Confidence and anxiety—concepts that shouldn't mix—blended into a dull, tasteless poison.

If I didn't swing my sword, I felt like I wasn't improving. If I didn't train myself to death, if I slowed down even a little—

The thought began to creep into my mind that I might be cut down just like those who had fallen to my sword.

That's likely why I could only fall asleep after swinging my sword in a way closer to self-abuse than training.

Of course, Seo Mun-Hwarin probably saw straight through that side of me.

“Hmph. That may be true. But not all lives are like that.”

“Come with this one for a bit, won’t you? The timing happens to be right. There’s something this one wants to show you.”

“Eii! No more complaints, get up already!”

Even though I didn’t want to lift a single finger, she forced me to my feet, infusing me with inner energy.

She grabbed my wrist firmly and started pulling me somewhere.

To a secluded stone wall in the corner of Ironblood Hall. Unlike the carefully maintained living quarters, this place was entirely neglected, the stone partially collapsed.

Weeds had begun to grow through the cracks, and when it rained, puddles formed, drawing in all sorts of insects and wild animals.

A place that, every time I saw it, made me grumble more about the stingy master of the Black Lotus Sect. That is, until now.

The outer wall at night looked completely different.

Though the weeds growing between the rubble remained the same, countless tiny lights flickered above them.

Tiny insects flashing somewhere between green and yellow.

Fireflies.

“What do you think? Beautiful, is it not? Those mere day-flying bugs shine like this at night.”

“Surely your life will also, someday... huh? But why are these things, normally found deep in the mountains, appearing in a place where people live?”

“That’s not the point. But if you must know, it’s because no one does live around here.”

“Ahem. So? I’d like to hear your thoughts now.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin pressed me for an answer in her usual unbothered tone, as though she already knew what I’d say.

I probably gave a half-hearted response. No matter how beautiful a scene may be, it’s hard to appreciate it sincerely if your heart is not at ease.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin was my direct superior, a martial master at the Flowering Stage, and someone who always taught me something whenever she had the chance.

Even if it didn’t move my heart, I could at least recognize it with my mind as something beautiful and nodded in response.

Well, even now I’m no good at lying, but I was even worse at it back then—so she probably saw right through me.

“You don’t seem too impressed. Feels like you’re just saying that to please this one.”

Yet Seo Mun-Hwarin smiled gently at me.

From when I lay in the training yard to this moment now, this was why I couldn't remember what I had said.

Because strong memories naturally overshadow the small ones.

“Still, this one is truly pleased by your heart.”

“If this one is thinking of you, and you are thinking of this one—what could be more beautiful than that?”

She nodded proudly, as though she had just said something meaningful.

Bathed in the dreamy light of the fireflies, Seo Mun-Hwarin said those words.

And, amusingly enough, that scene stepped deeper into my heart than any landscape ever had.

Yes, Seo Mun-Hwarin was that kind of person.

Someone who could make flowers bloom in winter, who drew fireflies to abandoned places, and who needed just a hint of emotional connection to be content.

Despite her high martial level, she could genuinely rejoice over small things.

The light of the fireflies still failed to move me.

Her impressive-sounding words, likely prepared with care, didn't either.

But the warmth of the small hand that had pulled me from the cold ground, the pure smile she wore, the memory of that night—Seo Mun-Hwarin herself—

Those, I would never forget.

Because, as she said, I had seen something beautiful.

“Ah.”

Perhaps because I had dreamed of the past for the first time in a while, my head was hazy, and the boundary between past and present felt blurry for a moment.

Of course, like any long dream, a few blinks later and it quickly faded.

“Mmnh...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin was moving her lips, as if dreaming of eating something.

Sleeping soundly beside me, Seo Mun-Hwarin was in the same thin sleepwear as yesterday, but somehow it didn't seem so provocative now.

Maybe it was because the morning sun was streaming in through the window, or maybe it was because of the faint trail of drool at the corner of her lips, or maybe it was because her cheeks looked particularly soft today.

Whatever the reason, the difference between this sleepy Seo Mun-Hwarin and the one from my dream was stark.

As I recalled what happened the night before, a wry smile formed at the edge of my lips.

“I didn’t expect it to still be this visible.”

I glanced down at my arm.

Red marks bloomed here and there. To the casual eye, it might look like a rash or a nasty case of insect bites.

And surely it wasn’t just my arms—my entire body likely looked the same.

Of course, I hadn’t actually caught a disease or been bitten by bugs.

They were all traces left by Seo Mun-Hwarin’s lips.

No, to be exact, marks left by her relentlessly sucking on my skin with those lips.

“Huu...”

Letting out a deep sigh, I looked at Seo Mun-Hwarin again. I really shouldn't have told her to do as she pleased.

“Muhuhu...”

Murmuring in her sleep with a wicked smile—now that I looked closely, it seemed different.

Wasn't she dreaming of eating something... but actually in the middle of leaving more marks on my body?

A sudden chill ran down my spine.

Though I hadn't gone further than what I had promised Tang Sowol, I still wondered if this was really okay.

Shaking off the complicated thoughts with a shake of my head, I poked Seo Mun-Hwarin's cheek and spoke.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, wake up.”

“We’ve got a lot to do. We need to report the subjugation of the White Mountain King, meet up with Seol Lihyang and the others who went ahead, and—most importantly—we need breakfast.”

After several pokes, Seo Mun-Hwarin slowly sat up.

Yawning once, she rubbed her eyes and nodded.

“Awake, this one is...”

Still looking groggy, Seo Mun-Hwarin glanced at my face—and then at the red marks left uncovered by my clothes—and her eyes widened.

“H-Huhp!”

Covering her mouth, she tried to hold in her breath. Her eyes darted around wildly before she suddenly gave a cheeky smile.

“You said we have a lot to do?”

“Then it’s important to prioritize. Shall we eat first? Go to the authorities? Or... continue what we started last night?”

“Let’s eat first.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked momentarily stunned by my firm answer. Her lips pouted slightly, though she obediently nodded.

After eating breakfast at the inn we stayed at overnight, we asked the innkeeper for directions to the nearest city.

The place we had stayed in was a small village at the foot of the mountain. Though patrol soldiers passed through occasionally, there was no proper government office.

I planned to use the massive axe of the White Mountain King, which I had prepared in advance, as evidence of the Red Forest Gang Leader’s death, and also borrow some paper and manpower to notify the Tang Clan of our safety.

“Cheon... Hwi??”

“Looks like we’re in luck.”

On the way, we encountered Seol Lihyang and the others, looking ragged.

They must have had a similar idea and were heading to the nearest city. Though their purpose was probably to ask for help, not to report a subjugation.

“Cheon Hwi...!”

Tears welled in Seol Lihyang’s eyes as she rushed toward me. I handed the cumbersome axe to Seo Mun-Hwarin and opened my arms wide.

Squeeze.

It wasn’t so much a hug as it was a death grip. It felt like she was trying to choke me out.

As I gently patted her back, I quickly scanned the rest of the group.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like anyone had died, but more people were injured than I expected. Something must have happened on the way down the mountain.

Seol Lihyang could barely speak, gasping for breath, but finally loosened her grip after calming down a bit.

“Are you alright now? Don't worry. As you can see, both I and Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin are fine.”

“Fine?! You call this fine when you've got red blotches all over your skin?!”

“...Ah.”

Seol Lihyang mistook the marks Seo Mun-Hwarin left for some kind of affliction. Not without reason.

“I saw it. Right before you brought down the mountain—you couldn’t see properly, right? The King of Assassins’ hidden weapon was coated in poison! And for a poison to affect you, it must have been serious!”

“Well, that’s true.”

My vision had blurred, and my focus broke. The weapon was poisoned.

It’s just that... these marks weren’t caused by the poison.

“Let’s hurry... Hurry to the Tang Clan. You’ll be treated quickly there.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“What? What do you mean? No time to find a doctor—we need to go now. Here, I’ll carry you! Relax your body, Cheon Hwi!”

Seol Lihyang, whose limbs were longer than Seo Mun-Hwarin’s but still shorter than mine, tried to lift me onto her back.

I chuckled awkwardly and shook my head.

“I’m saying this because it really isn’t necessary. The poison’s already been neutralized. These marks... are just from mosquito bites.”

“It’s not even summer—it’s still chilly! How could it be mosquitoes?”

“Exactly.”

“Mosquitoes strong enough to bite through the skin of a Flowering Stage martial artist?!”

“Must’ve been a mosquito at the Flowering Stage too.”

I gave a small laugh and looked toward Seo Mun-Hwarin. She awkwardly turned her gaze to a distant mountain.

Then Seol Lihyang, watching us with a sidelong glance, suddenly opened her eyes wide in realization.

“Don’t tell me, Cheon Hwi, you...”

“Wait.”

I quickly covered her mouth with my palm and spoke in a quiet voice.

“A lot’s happened, but the White Mountain King and the King of Assassins are both down. It’s truly over now.”

“Mmff!”

“More importantly, I hear things didn’t go smoothly on your end either. Care to explain what happened?”

“Puhah!”

After I removed my hand, Seol Lihyang gasped for breath and looked between me and Seo Mun-Hwarin with an exasperated expression before letting out a deep sigh.

“The surviving members of the Red Forest Gang attacked us as we escaped. They knew the mountain paths better than we did, so we couldn’t shake them.”

“Makes sense. We’ve been climbing these mountains a lot lately, but still, we can’t outmatch bandits when it comes to terrain knowledge.”

“Yeah. So we had no choice but to fight. But then assassins joined the fray too.”

“...Huh?”

Since the King of Assassins was here, some of Sal Valley’s assassins must’ve accompanied him. But that would mean they were outnumbered even if their overall level was similar.

And if they were assassins, they would’ve ambushed, so casualties must have been high...

Yet somehow, there hadn’t been a single death.

Someone must’ve pushed themselves too far.

As I reached out to check if she was truly unhurt, Seol Lihyang raised a hand to stop me.

She wiped away her lingering tears, then lifted her chin proudly.

“So I took them all down.”

“...?”

“I’ve reached Sub-Perfection, after all.”

“...?”

Seol Lihyang said this as she puffed out her chest.

At a glance, her posture looked even more assertive than Seo Mun-Hwarin’s.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“I’ve reached Sub-Perfection.”

“...?”

So said Seol Lihyang as she puffed out her chest.

Though it was the same posture Seo Mun-Hwarin had struck before, the way a certain part of Seol Lihyang’s body was emphasized made it undeniably aggressive—but that wasn’t the important part right now.

“You’ve already reached it...? Or maybe not? I mean, I’m not entirely sure what the Sub-Perfection level is supposed to feel like, so I could be mistaken.”

With that, about half of the confidence that had just swelled within her deflated, and Seol Lihyang returned to a more normal stance.

I drew in my qi and examined her closely.

Her internal energy was certainly much greater than when I last saw her. But with Seol Lihyang, internal energy alone couldn't be used as a metric to determine her level.

After all, she was born with immense talent in internal cultivation, and most of the energy from the elixirs she consumed like water at the Northern Sea Ice Palace still lay dormant in her veins.

Over the past few months, her internal energy had surged overnight more than once, and with the slightest trigger, it had skyrocketed as if she had attained some profound enlightenment.

Judging by that precedent, her current level of increase was still within the realm of possibility. So it was too early to make a judgment.

The way her aura had settled also fit within that same context.

Unlike most martial artists, Seol Lihyang was an unusual case—it was hard to determine her level based on her qi or aura alone.

If that was the case, then there was a more direct way to test it.

“The biggest difference between Peak Stage and Sub-Perfection is the ability to manipulate your inner energy as if it were part of your own body. You could already control it well before, but true unification is something else entirely. Perhaps...”

“Like this, you mean?”

As Seol Lihyang tilted her head, a cold energy began gathering around me. It wasn't just the atmosphere becoming chilly—it was concentrated to the point where it became visible to the naked eye.

“...Heh.”

I couldn't help but doubt my own eyes for a moment.

Materializing internal energy in a space away from one's body was an extremely difficult feat.

To project qi into empty air with nothing but will as the medium... This was what martial artists referred to as Object-Grasping Through Empty Air.

Even with Seol Lihyang's absurd gift for internal cultivation, this seemed almost too impossible. I rubbed my eyes and looked again.

Only then did I fully grasp what Seol Lihyang had done.

“I see. So you’ve managed to do this using just your regular voice, without even utilizing your sound-based arts.”

“Mm-hm. This is about the limit for now, though. If I want to do more, I’ll have to use my sound techniques.”

It must feel something like swinging a sword freely, without having to prepare with focus and tension every time—as if a once-rarely-executed strike had become as natural as breathing.

The end result was similar to my Divine Sword Unity, but it wasn’t the sound technique itself—rather, it was the ability to freely manipulate the internal energy infused within the sound.

Once she becomes more attuned to her enlightenment and level, she’ll be able to do even more.

“Congratulations. I figured you’d ascend quickly after everything that happened in the Northern Sea, but... I didn’t expect it to be this soon.”

“Hehe. I guess I just got carried away fighting and it happened.”

Seol Lihyang replied shyly.

At the same time, a martial artist who had followed her around since the Black Lotus Sect days—one whose name I didn't know, but whose face I remembered—spoke up.

“White Moon Sword Lord, may I say something?”

“Mm? Go ahead.”

“The Pure Sound-Frostflower sister was absolutely amazing back then!”

“...Sister??”

She definitely looked older than Seol Lihyang, but I let it slide.

After all, in the orthodox or unorthodox world, the strongest is always the elder—sister or brother.

“Can you tell me in more detail?”

“Of course!”

At my request, the woman from the Black Lotus Sect lit up and launched into her account, eyes sparkling every time she recalled the moment.

It was clear she was entirely taken with Seol Lihyang.

After listening for quite a while, I finally summarized:

“So... you were following my orders and heading down the mountain to ask for help. But the Red Forest Gang cut you off by taking a shortcut, and a battle broke out. And then assassins joined in midway as well?”

“Yes!”

“In the chaos, injuries mounted, and the group started falling behind. You were on the verge of a complete wipeout, and then Seol Lihyang had a sudden breakthrough?”

“That’s right!”

“But the reason wasn’t that she thought she might die, or that her comrades might die—but because she thought that if she got held back here, I might be in danger?”

“Isn’t that the coolest?!”

I’d never seen someone speak so happily about almost dying.

Seol Lihyang must’ve left quite the impression at the time.

Now that I think about it, Seol Lihyang got along with almost every female martial artist—Tang Sowol, Seo Mun-Hwarin, her instructor from the Dark Soul Unit, her sparring partner from the Blood Venom Unit, and many others.

At this point, it’s clear there’s something about her that I just don’t understand.

Whether it’s due to her Pure Yin Physique or her natural personality, I can’t say.

Regardless, most of the people dispatched from the Black Lotus Sect seemed entirely enamored with Seol Lihyang—which worked out well for me.

It meant that I could probably recruit most of them into the Tang Clan.

They were talented martial artists lacking only a proper backing, so in time, they'd become a great asset.

As Seol Lihyang trembled with embarrassment, burying her face in her hands, and Seo Mun-Hwarin smirked and nudged her in the side, I spoke.

“So, you had that realization because you were worried I might be in danger?”

“Ugh...!”

“Well. I've been in similar situations myself, so I understand. Don't be too embarrassed. I see now—we share the same sentiment.”

“Hyaaaah!”

Seol Lihyang grabbed her head in utter mortification, suddenly exposed.

I chuckled at the oddly heartwarming atmosphere.

“In any case, it’s a relief that no one died. And don’t worry too much about the injured. You were assisting with something started by the Tang Clan, so even if you’re from the Black Lotus Sect, we’ll make sure you’re treated.”

At those words, sighs of relief echoed around me.

They must’ve been worried—even if no one died, their conditions were rough.

Some had internal injuries, and others could barely move one arm.

“Oh, right. Let me tell you what’s next. With the Red Forest Gang Leader defeated, this ends the campaign against the Red Forest. We’ll report this at the next government office and return to the Tang Clan immediately.”

“W-We’re finally going back?!”

“That’s right. While I handle things at the office, prepare whatever we’ll need for the journey. It’ll take some time to reach Sichuan Province. Or... maybe we take a day to enjoy ourselves here first.”

Even the Tang Clan’s warriors cheered at that.

They were clearly worn out after chasing and fighting through countless Red Forest strongholds. This last battle had been particularly dangerous.

After handing a pouch of gold coins to Seol Lihyang, I headed toward the government office with Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Even when we showed them the massive axe the White Mountain King used, the officials couldn’t believe we had taken down the Red Forest’s leader.

So I also told them we had slain the King of Assassins and where to find the body.

Only after confirming it did the officials finally believe us—and then they went wild, showering us with praise to the point it was overwhelming.

It really was over the top, so we brushed it off and enjoyed a restful day before beginning the journey back to Sichuan.

Due to the injured, we couldn't use light-foot techniques and had to rent a carriage, taking a full 20 days to reach the Tang Clan.

And less than a month later, the rumors had spread across all the Central Plains.

“My dear son-in-law! Do you hold a grudge against me or something? Trying to work your future father-in-law to death—is that what this is?!”

“This is a misunderstanding...”

Despite his words, Tang Jincheon was grinning from ear to ear.

Of course he was. The name of the Tang Clan, already being talked about as a future contender for the greatest sect under heaven, had soared even higher.

Those investing in the future came flocking. Even merchants concerned only with the present rushed to establish ties with the Tang Clan.

The Red Forest was a group officially condemned by both the martial world and the Imperial Court.

Not only did the Murim Alliance send the bounty placed on the gang leader's head, but the Imperial Court generously granted a three-year tax exemption and various other rights.

Even the Black Lotus Sect's master sent a personal letter, saying that if we needed anything, we need only ask—they'd find a way to help. Clearly, their grudge against the Red Forest ran deep.

Of course, just because the leader was slain didn't mean the Red Forest was gone.

Though the White Mountain King had gathered several leaders for the ambush, it hadn't been all of them.

Some must have survived and were now lying low, planning for the future.

Just like after past deaths of Red Forest leaders throughout its unnecessarily long history.

Still, for now, the Red Forest would remain quiet. Even if another leader rose, they wouldn't be as aggressive as the White Mountain King.

He was a madman. The Red Forest, in its original form, was not as violent—just as Seo Mun-Hwarin often described in her old tales.

The violent ones never lasted long.

Ah, and for the record—the head administrator passed out.

He had been thrilled at Tang Jincheon's support doubling his manpower, saying he could finally get three hours of sleep, only to be hit with even more paperwork.

Tragic, really.

I was shaking my head, praying for the administrator's soul (he was still alive), when someone knocked on my door.

“Cheon Hwi? May I come in for a moment?”

“When have you ever asked permission before? It’s not locked, just open it.”

“My, how reckless you are.”

So said Tang Sowol as she stepped in.

She looked as she usually did—relaxed yet properly dressed.

Except this time, she was holding a bottle of wine.

“Quite rare. For you to suggest a drink.”

“I never said I dislike alcohol. I simply don’t indulge without reason.”

“I’ve had enough praise. I’d rather not hear more, even from you.”

“Hehe. I’ve known you a long time now, Cheon Hwi, and yet some things remain hard to understand. You seek reputation, yet seem burdened by the attention it brings. Most people seek fame precisely for that attention, you know?”

“Unfortunately, your fiancé is not most people.”

I shrugged, and she chuckled softly, taking a seat across from me.

Pulling out some light snacks from her sleeve, she completed a simple little drinking setup and handed me a cup.

As I accepted it reflexively, she poured and asked casually,

“Then, if attention is burdensome, what have you been doing locked away in your room all this time?”

“Nothing special. Just organizing the insights I gained recently.”

“Oh! I heard from Sister Hwarin. You remodeled the Seo Mun Clan’s martial arts into something of your own?”

“I did—with proper permission, of course.”

“Of course. You’re someone who never breaks his word.”

She handed me the bottle and held out her cup. As I gently poured, I noticed her gaze.

Not on my face or the wine—but darting quickly over my neck and forearms.

As if searching for something.

I flinched slightly, and she smirked, then spoke—softly, but unmistakably serious.

“I heard from Sister Hwarin. While it technically ended at a kiss... it sounds like you did more with her than you did with me.”

“...Ah.”

A chill ran down my spine.

Tang Sowol was, at her core, generous. Partly because her physique made pregnancy difficult, and partly because she genuinely liked Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

But that generosity always came with one condition—that she be respected as the official wife.

“No need to look so lost and terrified. It’s fine—for now.”

“...Really?”

“Yes. Because starting now... you’ll just have to do much more with me than with anyone else.”

As she spoke, Tang Sowol licked her lips.

She looked every bit like a serpent eyeing its prey.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“From now on, shouldn’t we be doing something even more incredible together?”

Tang Sowol licked her lips as she spoke.

Her gaze was like that of a snake staring at its prey. Anyone on the receiving end of that gaze would inevitably flinch.

Tang Sowol herself, however, only sipped the liquor she had brought with a perfectly calm expression.

The fragrant scent of the liquor wafted up—not from the still-full cup in front of me that I hadn’t touched yet.

No, it was the aroma mixed in with the breath of admiration she exhaled after taking a sip.

“I brought this because it’s one of Father’s cherished liquors... I can see why he treasures it.”

“I see.”

Satisfied, Tang Sowol took another sip.

If it's a drink treasured by none other than the head of the Sichuan Tang Clan, it must not be ordinary liquor.

Still, what held my gaze was not the liquor, but Tang Sowol herself.

In my experience, liquor is like swallowing flowing fire. A properly measured fire filling your stomach can bring a pleasant warmth, even making you smile,

But get swallowed by those flames, and you'll fall into disgrace and ruin yourself.

So then, exhaling unnecessary heat each time one drinks is only natural.

Likewise, inhaling the heat Tang Sowol exhaled would naturally make me intoxicated.

Tang Sowol's cheeks were slightly flushed from the unfamiliar liquor.

Her crescent-shaped eyes curved as she spoke again in a gentle voice.

“So? What will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. I’m saying, why don’t we try something far more incredible than what you did with Sister Hwarin?”

With that, Tang Sowol emptied the remaining liquor in her cup in one gulp.

“Phew. Whatever we do, I can’t do it alone. So, if you desire it too... won’t you empty the cup you’ re holding?”

“Hmph.”

Is she giving me the choice? No. Look at that confident face, as if she already knows what I’ll say.

Tang Sowol simply wanted to hear me confirm it with my own mouth. And the truth was, my answer had always been predetermined.

“Tang Sowol. I always think this, but sometimes, you can be a little devious.”

“Oh? So, does that mean you dislike devious women like me?”

“Of course not. That’s why I like you.”

By nature, Tang Sowol is the one who first expresses affection toward me. When she speaks in this roundabout way, there’s only one reason.

It’s when she wants to hear me say I like her with my own mouth.

Perhaps that was the correct answer, because Tang Sowol subtly turned her gaze away. Right in front of her, I boldly emptied my full cup in one go.

A rather strong liquor—its heat trailed down my throat. Now that I’ve tasted it myself, I can tell. This is truly fine liquor.

As the blazing scent lingered inside me, my mouth opened naturally.

“Hoo...”

Like Tang Sowol earlier, I let out a faint sigh laced with the heat.

And then, for a brief moment, Tang Sowol and I exchanged each other’s warmth in silence.

Then, Tang Sowol slid the bottle and cup aside and leaned her body toward me.

Starting from her head, she leaned her upper body forward without getting up. Naturally, she used both hands to support herself on the floor.

The slight distance between us created by the drink setup narrowed as Tang Sowol slowly crawled closer on all fours.

Her green hair flowed down as she approached, giving off a strange air of taboo. She placed her hands on my thighs and lifted herself up, resting her hands on my shoulders, then clasped her fingers behind my neck.

Clinging to me as if hanging on, our breaths grazed each other's faces, and I could see my reflection in her deep green eyes—she was that close.

The scent of Tang Sowol's skin, mixed with the liquor's aroma, made my heart pound uncontrollably, even though I had remained calm while facing formidable enemies.

“To do something greater than with Sister Hwarin, don't you think you should know exactly what you did with her?”

“Is that so?”

“That's right. So, will you please tell me in detail what you did with Sister Hwarin?”

I thought she already knew from Seo Mun-Hwarin herself.

“Of course I know roughly what happened. I heard she kissed you all over. So deeply that it left marks, no less.”

Seeing me fall silent, Tang Sowol chuckled and wore a feigned benevolent expression.

“As I said before, it’s not like you broke our promise. So it’s fine. I’m only asking again because... I want to know exactly where she kissed you.”

“If I tell you...?”

“Then, naturally, I’ll overwrite it. Ah, and don’t forget to kiss again afterward.”

With a casual shrug, Tang Sowol acted as if she needed to outdo Seo Mun-Hwarin just slightly.

I stared at her liquor-dampened, glistening lips for a moment before I spoke.

“Well... we kissed, normally.”

“Like this?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Tang Sowol lowered her head.

The soft sensation of her lips, and the warmth—slightly hot—transferred.

But that wasn't the end. While I hesitated for a moment and carefully placed my hand on her waist,

Tang Sowol's tongue slipped between my lips. With forceful movements, she wrapped around my tongue and teased my palate, only pulling away after thoroughly playing with it.

“Pffha!”

A long, silver thread trailed between our mouths.

“What the...?”

I was momentarily stunned by the intensity of Tang Sowol's tongue.

Lick.

Now openly licking her lips, her eyes sparkled.

“What was next?”

“The nape of the neck.”

As I slightly tilted my head to expose the left side of my neck, Tang Sowol buried her face there. A soft, slightly damp sensation followed.

But oddly, she furrowed her brow as if something was wrong, tilting her head.

“It’s not leaving a mark.”

“Well, my body’s pretty tough.”

“Hmm. Flowering Stage is cheating. But I have my ways too.”

Tang Sowol grinned, then brought her lips once again to where she had just kissed.

And then—

Suck.

A distinct sensation from the nape of my neck. A feeling somewhere between pain and ticklishness.

But the clarity of that sensation told me immediately what had happened.

“Isn’t biting against the rules?”

“I can’t help it. It’s hard for me to leave a mark otherwise.”

“I guess that’s true...”

As I named each place Seo Mun-Hwarin had kissed, Tang Sowol left her own bite marks.

She kissed and bit me all over for quite a while, but everything must come to an end.

Once Tang Sowol had finally left bite marks equal to those of Seo Mun-Hwarin, she kept her word and bit my lips one more time.

A drop of blood seeped out from the slightly torn lip. It wouldn't leave an obvious mark because of the spot, but...

I would never forget this moment. Nor the taste of blood lingering in my mouth.

In that sense, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Tang Sowol had carved her mark not on my body, but on my heart.

It had definitely been evening when this started, but by the time we finished—long past the time even the insects had stopped chirping—it was the deep of night.

Tang Sowol, sounding a bit tired but proud, spoke.

“This was more exhausting than I thought.”

“I just sat still, so I can’t really say.”

“Ah. Would you like to leave a mark on me too? If so, I’m fine with it.”

Tang Sowol spread her arms wide and beckoned with her fingers.

“A kiss, a bite, or maybe a light scratch with your nails. Where would you like to start? Anywhere’s fine...”

As she spoke, she gave me a meaningful look, glancing between me and her chest.

I quietly adjusted my collar to hide the clear bite marks on my muscles and shook my head.

“No. But I do have one question.”

“A question?”

“You said we’d do something greater... but it feels like all we did was bite a little harder and in a few more places.”

“Oh my, I didn’t know you were looking forward to spending time with me that much. Though your words say otherwise, your actions have always been rather passive.”

“That’s because, if I messed up, I might get beaten half to death by your father.”

“And now that we’re both in the Flowering Stage?”

After running a quick calculation in my head, I spoke.

“I don’t think I’d go down easily, at least.”

“Then the answer is clear.”

Tang Sowol smiled sweetly and reached out to gently stroke the back of my head. Her gaze, as if she were admiring something precious, was an added bonus.

“What are you hesitating for? Just go for it.”

“Go for what, exactly?”

“Whatever you want, of course.”

Still completely defenseless, Tang Sowol offered herself to me. Her posture said she was ready to accept whatever I did.

Feeling a rising impulse, I reached out and gently cupped one side of her face.

Her right cheek—burned before my regression. But now, all I felt was smooth skin.

“Ah...”

As if doused in cold water, the heat that had built up suddenly cooled.

I love Tang Sowol. That’s an unquestionable truth, an absolute standard unaffected by time.

But I've never once thought that the Tang Sowol before my regression and the one now were the same person. I simply couldn't.

As her head rested quietly in my hand, memories of the past overlapped.

The night before I died at the hands of the Heavenly Demon—Cheonma. Tang Sowol shook her head when I asked her to run away with me.

Instead, she invited me to her room, promising we'd watch the moon together once the Tang Clan was rebuilt.

And even then, I had cradled her face just like this.

Whichever version of Tang Sowol it is, she's still Tang Sowol. That's natural.

No matter how precious, the memories that can never return must be let go.

Just as I was about to do so and continue what I'd started—

“That expression again.”

Tang Sowol furrowed her brow deeply, as if displeased.

Then, she opened her mouth wide and bit down on my nearby thumb.

She teased it a few times with her tongue, then bit down hard.

“Guh!”

This wasn't like before, where she bit gently to leave a mark. She did it to hurt.

Startled, I withdrew my hand, and Tang Sowol stood up.

“Sorry, Brother Cheon.”

“W-wait a minute!”

“I thought I could understand, even if I didn’t know the full story... I guess I was wrong.”

“That’s not it!”

I jumped up and grabbed her, shaking my head, but she only stepped back with a sorrowful expression.

“I’ll be fine soon, so don’t worry.”

“I... I mean...”

“There will be other days. No matter what, we’re still betrothed, aren’t we?”

Saying that, Tang Sowol gave me a faint smile, kissed me briefly, and left the room.

I stood frozen for a long while, unable to stop her or follow, then finally slumped my shoulders.

I have to do something about the mental restriction.

Otherwise, I might keep seeing that expression on Tang Sowol's face for the rest of my life.

Fortunately, the Heavenly Demon said he knew the method.

A few days later.

Whether I lay sprawled on the floor like the most depressed man in the world or not, the world continued on just fine.

To put it simply, the Green Forest subjugation case had become a model example, leading the Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect to agree on holding a peace summit.

And of course, I, caught between the two, was expected to attend.

“I don’t want to do anything.”

Even though I was already doing nothing, I wanted to do even less.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Before the regression.

The night before the final battle with the Heavenly Demon.

It was the night Tang Sowol invited me to her room.

Just as she let her long hair fall over one side of her face, Tang Sowol pulled the thick blanket up high to cover her naked body, and looked at me intently.

Her deep green eyes shone particularly bright in the dim room.

It was hard to believe such a blatant gaze could come from just one eye.

And with her lying right next to me, at a distance so close—of course I couldn't help but be conscious of it.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's nothing. I was just trying to imprint the Sword Demon in my eyes."

"And yet you're the one wrapped up tight in a blanket? That's incredibly unfair."

I shrugged my shoulders, but Tang Sowol simply continued to gaze at me with a serious expression.

Normally, she would chuckle at a joke like that, or at least give a dry retort.

Feeling something off, I not only turned my head but shifted my body to face her. Then—

Srrk.

I reached out and cupped the side of her face. The skin, as if melted from a burn.

Tang Sowol considered it an ugly part of her and was ashamed of it, but to me, it was more like a special scar.

It was a place she never showed to others, never let anyone touch.

If I think of it as something only allowed for me, then no matter how terrible the wound may look, it never seemed hideous.

Tang Sowol quietly rested her face in my hand. Only then did her expression soften, her deep green eyes curving like a crescent moon.

“Sword Demon.”

“Hm?”

“Would you promise me one thing?”

“What is it?”

Tang Sowol placed her hand over mine, the one cupping her cheek, and smiled faintly.

As if to say she would never let go, or as if she were begging me not to leave.

“Please, never die before I do.”

"Why do you say such ominous things?"

At dawn, the Heavenly Demon would arrive here. There was nowhere left to retreat to, and Tang Sowol had no intention of running away.

Which meant that all that remained for us was inevitable defeat.

Both I and Tang Sowol knew this all too well. Even so, we were throwing ourselves into the jaws of death.

Tang Sowol could not forget the massacre of her clan, and I couldn't bear to let her face that hell alone.

I never expected we could defeat the Heavenly Demon. That wasn't even realistic.

I just wished that by some stroke of fortune, Tang Sowol and I could survive.

It would be even better if we could return together to the old site of the Tang Clan, as we had promised.

Of course, Tang Sowol understood this as well. Which is why I couldn't quite grasp why she was saying such things at this moment.

Tang Sowol gave me a soft smile, as if reading my thoughts.

“Hehe. Don’t look at me like that. You know as well as I do, don’t you? That someone might die...or perhaps we might both be buried here together.”

"Even now, we could still run. North Sea’s an option, or maybe we get on a boat and go somewhere far away. We wouldn’t understand the language, but with our strength, we could live comfortably even in the Western Regions.”

“Yes, I’m sure we could. Traveling with you would certainly be fun. Trying unfamiliar food together, wandering endlessly down pathless roads, lying on the dirt and staring up at the sky... And if we found a nice place with good people, we could settle down.”

“Then—”

“But we both know we can’t do that.”

That’s right.

Like I said earlier, we all understood too well what it meant to wait here for the Heavenly Demon.

And we chose to do so. If we were going to change our minds, we wouldn't have endured this long in Hebei.

Even so, the reason Tang Sowol said those things—

“It's simply because I don't have the resolve to watch you die first. And if I survive, I lack the courage to live in a world without you.”

“Huh...”

“The day the Sword Demon breathes his last will be the day my heart stops beating. ...How was that? That wasn't bad, was it?”

“If you hadn't said that last part, it might've been a pretty cool line.”

“Oh my. Can't you just compliment me honestly?”

Tang Sowol tilted her chin up in mock pride. Her playful act made me let out a small chuckle.

But. Truly...

That goes for me too, Tang Sowol.

I was too embarrassed to say it aloud, but how could my feelings for you be any less than your feelings for me?

I too don't know how to go on living without you.

Yes. To borrow your earlier words, your breath is my breath, your heart is my heart.

Life is always important, but now, only the time I share with you holds meaning.

No matter how dark or painful the time may be, it doesn't matter. As long as I can be dyed in the same color as you, that is enough.

But I suppose for you, Tang Sowol, that wasn't enough.

“But I really meant it when I said don't die before me.

If the worst happens, even if it's just you, Sword Demon, I hope you survive.”

“What?”

“Oh, of course, I wouldn't dare tell you to live happily. You can meet other women, live a new life... but, just don't forget me. If you think of me now and then and feel a bit of pain, that would be enough.”

Is she being spiteful or pretending to be kind...?

“Of course I'm being spiteful.”

With a flawless smile, Tang Sowol continued.

“Even though I dragged you into my reckless revenge, I wish for your safe return and happiness... But this is the selfish spite of a woman who wants to live forever in your heart.”

“But Sword Demon—or rather, Cheon Hwi—you’ll still care for even a woman like me, won’t you?”

Tang Sowol spoke in a mischievous tone, but the small tremble in her fingers couldn’t be hidden.

I let out a short sigh and pressed my lips to hers.

A brief kiss. Followed by a teasing comment.

“I’ve never been one to listen to others, so I can’t promise anything. Wasn’t our vow to rebuild the Tang Clan the first promise we made anyway?”

“Oh my. Right, you were always so straightforward and twisted.”

Tang Sowol chuckled aloud and nodded.

“Then I have another request. Please forget everything I just said. Just remember the promise.”

“I’ll think about it.”

When I answered gruffly for no reason, Tang Sowol laughed even more.

To cut to the point, I failed to keep any of the promises I made with Tang Sowol.

We never returned together to the Tang Clan. I couldn’t keep my promise not to die before her. And I failed to forget those vulnerable words she asked me to.

The reason I keep seeing her past self in my mind whenever I look at Tang Sowol...

The reason I instinctively pulled away when she approached with courage...

Must be because of that.

Giggle.

Seol Lihyang laughed at the sight of me, sprawled on the floor like one with the blanket.

But when I still didn't move while she teased me, she eventually asked in a slightly concerned voice,

“So? Why are you so limp like this? Doesn't seem like you're sick.”

“Something happened, that's all.”

Tang Sowol had come in the night and left just like that.

Because of the mental restriction, I couldn't explain what happened, and I couldn't throw away the memories already etched in me.

So all that remained was overwhelming sadness.

“That’s strange. I mean, of all people, Cheon Hwi is the one sulking like this?”

“I’m still human. Human.”

Facing a powerful enemy or a desperate situation doesn’t scare me.

But being hated by Tang Sowol—or by Seol Lihyang or Seo Mun-Hwarin—is a different story altogether.

“Well, I doubt Sister Tang would really come to hate you for that. She said she’d be fine soon, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, probably. But still, it’s something that nags at me.”

“Hm. Is that so?”

“It is.”

Though I said that to Seol Lihyang, it was actually a more complicated problem.

I was worried Tang Sowol had been disappointed in me last night.

Memories of the pre-regression past stabbed at my heart.

And as long as the mental restriction remained, things like this would keep happening.

All of it was intertwined.

Though Seol Lihyang wouldn't know all that.

“Tsk. So after Sister Tang finally worked up the nerve, who told you to get distracted? Hey, Cheon Hwi. Be honest. Who were you thinking about? Me? Or Sister Hwarin?”

“...Hmph. That's a secret.”

“Oooh. If it's a secret, I'll have to interrogate you.”

Grinning, Seol Lihyang plopped her butt down right on my back.

“Ohh.”

I could clearly feel her warmth and weight through my back.

The sensation made it obvious there was a whole person sitting on top of me.

But with a trained body like mine, this weight didn't feel heavy.

Maybe she knew that?

Because Seol Lihyang didn't just sit—she started to wiggle her hips and press down harder on me.

“Even now? Huh? You still won't talk?”

Grk.

Due to her unique constitution, Seol Lihyang overflowed with yin energy. And now that she was grown, her body had matured.

It was only natural that her body emphasized femininity.

A larger surface area than expected. Softer than I imagined. I was briefly flustered.

While still straddling my back, Seol Lihyang suddenly spoke.

“Oh right! I actually came to tell you something and totally forgot.”

“Mm? What is it?”

“Let’s see...”

Seol Lihyang changed positions slightly while thinking. Now lying completely on top of me, she brought her mouth to my ear.

“I remember now! The Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect agreed to reconcile because of this whole incident!

They’re having a meeting, and apparently you have to attend too!”

“What?”

That’s exactly what I was aiming for.

I wanted to show them that when orthodoxy and unorthodoxy joined hands, even the Green Forest could be successfully subdued—something they once thought impossible.

But I didn’t expect them to organize the meeting this quickly.

Or maybe... it was because of the Heavenly Demon.

If it had just been about setting aside old grudges and starting over, they would’ve taken it slower.

After all, the Orthodox and Unorthodox Sects had fiercely fought during Seo Mun-Hwarin's generation.

And many who remember that era are still alive—mostly occupying high positions in their sects—so caution was inevitable.

But thanks to the information I steadily leaked, the Murim Alliance had maintained vigilance against the Demonic Cult, gathering intelligence.

And now, the Heavenly Demon had personally appeared under the Black Lotus Sect's banner.

Sensing the crisis, they probably wanted to prevent internal conflict first—hence, the outstretched hand.

It wasn't full-fledged cooperation, but likely more of a non-aggression pact.

Still, that was a faster result than I expected. And it was true I needed to be there.

“No helping it. If it's something like that, I'll have to get up.”

Still carrying Seol Lihyang on my back, I stood up.

Though I thought she'd naturally slide off, she instead shifted her position and clung to me even tighter.

“Huh?”

Seol Lihyang, clinging to my back like a cicada, tilted her head curiously. I gave her a soft smile and said,

“Where are we headed? Since it sounds like something Father-in-law mentioned, we should probably go to the office first—”

“Nope. Let's go to Sister Tang first. I heard about it from her, and she told me to come get you. Though I guess we'll probably head to the clan leader's place afterward...”

Seol Lihyang shrugged nonchalantly. But I couldn't do the same.

Plop.

I collapsed again, sprawled out, and muttered blankly.

“...I really don’t want to do anything.”

“You’re already not doing anything.”

Yeah. But I feel like doing even less.

No, after how we parted yesterday, how am I even supposed to talk to her?

“If you just bow your head and pin her down, I think Sister Tang will act like she’s giving in and go along with it.”

“Really?”

“Probably?”

Seol Lihyang and I tilted our heads at each other.

With no better idea, I decided to follow her advice for now.

Clack! Slam!

I threw open the door boldly and shouted,

“Tang Sowol!”

“Oh? My son-in-law is here. Have a seat.”

“...Yes, sir.”

And I obediently took a seat.

...Though I didn't expect Tang Jincheon to be there too.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

With a bit of resolve, I boldly threw open the door.

“Tang Sowol!”

“Oh? My son-in-law is here. Have a seat.”

“Yes, sir.”

And so, I quietly took a seat.

Good grief. I didn't expect Tang Jincheon to be in Tang Sowol's room.

Of course, considering the purpose, it wasn't that strange.

Still, I felt deflated, like I had to set aside my hastily-formed plan to smooth things over with Tang Sowol.

I glanced over at Tang Jincheon, who was the biggest obstacle(?) to my plan.

Fortunately, it seemed he hadn't caught on to my true purpose, as he sipped his tea with the same mild blend of friendliness and authority he always wore.

"Hm. Tea tastes better today, maybe because it's been a while since my daughter brewed it."

"Oh, Father. I didn't expect you to ask for a gathering in my room instead of the office just for tea."

Tang Sowol chuckled softly in a low voice. She reached out to the teapot and filled another cup to the brim.

Then she extended it toward me.

"Brother Cheon, here you go."

"Mm. Thank you."

Although her face was turned toward me, our eyes didn't quite meet.

She was probably focusing somewhere next to my head or off into empty space.

In other words, she was pretending nothing happened since Tang Jincheon was here, but she hadn't forgiven me yet.

It was enough to make my heart falter.

Well, once Tang Jincheon leaves, I can talk to her again. It's not too late.

Doing my best to act natural, I accepted the cup and took a sip.

"It really is good."

"Thank you. Tea ceremony is part of bride training. I'm glad it suits your taste."

After the formal engagement ceremony, I'd heard Tang Sowol was slowly beginning some bride training alongside her martial arts.

Normally, this would be taught by her mother, but Tang Sowol's mother had lost her life to a poison demon when she was young.

So she was learning through books and guidance from the other women of the Tang Clan.

Up to this point, nothing was strange. The problem was what happened yesterday.

As I carefully observed Tang Sowol's mood, I caught a strangely cold look in her eyes.

She hadn't even sent me a voice transmission, yet I could almost hear her voice:

"I go this far for you, Brother Cheon, and yet you were busy thinking about other women."

A cold sweat trickled down my back.

Tang Sowol was generally generous with me and responded positively to almost anything.

But when she got upset like this... she really got upset.

I was sighing repeatedly in my head, but it was only for a moment.

Not noticing the subtle tension between Tang Sowol and me, Tang Jincheon suddenly adopted a more serious tone.

“We shouldn't drag things out from the morning, so let's get to the point. Son-in-law, and you too, Sowol, you've probably heard already—Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect are planning to hold a reconciliation meeting.”

“Yes. I understand I'll be expected to participate.”

“Exactly. It was possible thanks to you, after all. You can't just skip out. That said, we also can't send you alone.”

“What do you mean—?”

“It’s an important occasion. The Tang Clan intends to show our sincerity as well.”

According to what followed, not only would my fiancée Tang Sowol be attending, but also Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, who were central figures in the Red Forest subjugation.

Even Tang Jincheon, the head of the Tang Clan, would participate.

It wasn’t just to celebrate the successful operation, but also to discuss future matters.

It made sense.

It seemed the other parties involved were thinking similarly.

The Murim Alliance would send its leader and strategist, the head of the Zhuge Clan.

The Black Lotus Sect would be represented by its lord and general manager—his wife, Sama Yuryeon.

From the Namgung Clan, the head Namgung Dowi would personally attend as well.

The location? None other than Shaolin Temple, famed across the Murim for its fairness.

“I see. I understand now. This is a much bigger and more important gathering than I expected.”

“That’s how it turned out.”

Tang Jincheon paused briefly, then asked:

“Let me ask plainly. Was this your intention from the start?”

“What do you mean, my intention?”

“Ah, I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m not blaming you either. But now that the situation is what it is, I need to know so I can act accordingly.”

“Son-in-law, you’re already part of the Tang Clan.”

His tone was gentle, yet firm. I met his gaze for a moment before opening my mouth.

Careful not to trigger the restriction. Now that much of the information had already spread, I could speak as far as I was allowed.

“As I reported earlier, I can’t share the details, but I’ve long been aware of the Heavenly Demon’s existence and have felt that he must be stopped at all costs.”

“Hm. Now that you mention it, you’ve always been oddly knowledgeable about the Demonic Cult. You even predicted Sowol would be ambushed when she first entered the Murim, and knew someone was behind it.”

In truth, while I knew about the ambush, I hadn’t known the Demonic Cult was behind it.

Still, I nodded.

With the restriction in mind, this explanation would be easier to give.

Having come this far, I decided to go a bit deeper.

“Yes. When interrogating a captured Demonic Cultist, I was able to identify a method to bypass the restriction and the poison-induced core. That’s why.”

“Hmm. I suspected as much. So it wasn’t just a grudge against the Demonic Cult—it was something closer to enmity with the Heavenly Demon himself.”

Back then, Tang Jincheon had found my interrogation of the cultist suspicious, but had kept silent out of consideration.

Now, I began to carefully lay out all the oddities he and Tang Sowol must have noticed over time.

The way I immediately deduced the identity of the Demonic Explosive Pills upon seeing the rampaging assassins of Sal Valley, Or how I quickly saw through the orchestrated conflict between the Peng and Eon Clans and warned of the danger to their heirs.

How I prevented the spread of Youngblood Pills and Oldblood Pills across the Central Plains.

Some things I'd known from the start were part of the Demonic Cult's schemes. Others I realized only after getting involved.

But in every case, thanks to the memories from before my regression, I was able to resolve the crises before they escalated.

Previously, I couldn't go into detail due to the restriction and simply asked others to trust me.

But now that the Heavenly Demon's existence was public, the restriction had loosened slightly, allowing me to explain a bit more—albeit indirectly.

At first, Tang Jincheon listened and nodded, but his expression soon turned incredulous.

Then, he spoke with a hardened face.

“Son-in-law. Let me ask...Were you unable to tell us even if you wanted to?”

This implied the existence of the restriction itself. My mouth closed automatically.

Tang Jincheon, however, was both a veteran martial master and the leader of the Sichuan Tang Clan. Having pieced things together, he let out a deep sigh.

“Hoo... So it’s like that.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let this trouble you.”

“Um... Father? What are you talking about?”

Tang Sowol, who hadn’t quite followed everything, asked with a puzzled tone.

Tang Jincheon scratched his head and replied,

“I’m saying that this son-in-law of mine has been under a restriction that kept him from speaking about certain matters.”

“...What?!”

At the word restriction, Tang Sowol looked at me in shock.

The chill in her eyes from earlier was gone, replaced by deep concern.

To reassure her, Tang Jincheon added,

“There’s no need to worry too much. From what I can tell, it doesn’t seem life-threatening. However, it’s clear this isn’t an ordinary restriction.”

“What do you mean, not ordinary?”

“The basic principle of a restriction is to suppress the mind and limit willpower. But martial artists at the Flowering Stage can freely use their willpower and easily break such bindings.

While this one seems slightly loosened... our son-in-law is still affected.”

“Oh...”

Tang Sowol, now seeming to understand, fell silent with her mouth slightly agape.

Tang Jincheon, being a Flowering Stage martial artist himself, knew exactly what it meant that I was still under restriction.

If anything, his only misjudgment was thinking the restriction had loosened when I reached the Flowering Stage.

Strictly speaking, the restriction had never once loosened.

Depending on what others already knew, it just changed what I was permitted to say.

Thanks to that, I could now circle around and explain some things more openly.

Though technically a misunderstanding, Tang Jincheon had reached a similar conclusion. He stroked his chin with a troubled look.

“Even if it’s not fatal, a restriction that can’t be undone even with the willpower of a Flowering Stage master... Frankly, I can’t even guess what kind it is.”

“W-what should we do...? I didn’t even know, and I—”

Tang Sowol looked ready to cry, gripping my hand in guilt and confusion.

She must have realized that all the things I'd been unable to explain, the things I'd awkwardly avoided, were due to this restriction.

She may have assumed that even last night's events were affected by it, and blamed herself for misunderstanding.

That's only half true.

It's true that I couldn't tell her about her pre-regression self, or that I've always loved her—all because of the restriction.

But the moment I faltered when my memories resurfaced?

That was my own fault. The restriction had nothing to do with it.

Still, since the topic was directly related to the restriction, I found I still couldn't speak.

Apparently, if the topic itself involves the restriction, I can't say a word, even if others are already aware of it.

Well, if the purpose of the restriction is to keep the regression itself a secret, Then it's natural that the restriction itself—being evidence of the regression—would be the most tightly guarded secret.

With my mouth sealed shut, I simply held Tang Sowol's hand and gently patted the back of it.

She wasn't under any restriction, and yet she too suddenly fell silent.

Before long, her expression hardened with resolve as she turned to Tang Jincheon.

“Father. Then how can we undo Brother Cheon's restriction?”

“I don't know. Like I said, since it still affects him even now, it's clearly no ordinary restriction. To override the will of a Flowering Stage martial artist... Yes. Perhaps the Heavenly Demon himself placed it. As you know, the Demonic Cult may lack in martial prowess, but their dark arts are on par with any sect in the Central Plains.”

“...The Heavenly Demon.”

Tang Sowol’s eyes briefly wavered, as if picturing something, then filled with the Tang Clan’s signature venomous aura.

I don’t know exactly what she imagined, but it likely involved something between me and the Heavenly Demon—along with growing hostility.

“If we defeat the Heavenly Demon, will Brother Cheon’s restriction be lifted?”

“I don’t know. Some restrictions persist even after the caster dies. Still, we can’t just do nothing. Since we’ll be going to Shaolin Temple, let’s ask for help there.”

“Shaolin...?”

“Yes. No matter how powerful the restriction, it’s still sorcery.

And if it’s the Demonic Cult’s technique, it should be vulnerable to Shaolin’s signature exorcism arts.”

I'm not so sure.

This restriction didn't originate from the Heavenly Demon, but from some transcendent being—immortal, divine, who knows.

Even the Heavenly Demon couldn't undo it. No matter how skilled Shaolin may be, I doubt they'll be able to break it.

Still, since I couldn't interrupt due to the restriction still being active, I stayed silent.

Well, if nothing else, now that the restriction itself has been revealed, there shouldn't be any more serious misunderstandings.

Tang Sowol looked heartbroken. Tang Jincheon gently patted his daughter's shoulder and continued.

“For now, let's just do what we can. If your fiancé ever clams up unnaturally, try to change the subject first.”

“Yes. I will.”

Tang Sowol looked at me with deep affection. It was a bit overwhelming, but far better than the cold, indifferent gaze from just half a day ago.

After the unexpected reveal of my restriction—

Seol Lihyang, who had been waiting, looked me over briefly, then tiptoed over and whispered in my ear.

“Sister Tang seems warm to you again, so I guess it worked out?”

“Well... I guess, judging by the result.”

“But why was the clan head coming out of her room too?”

“Mm. Well, about that—”

“Wait, don’t tell me... the clan head secretly—”

The restriction didn’t even activate, and yet I was rendered speechless.

Seriously, what kind of things does Seol Lihyang usually imagine?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

We had allowed ourselves a rather generous schedule as we made our way to Shaolin.

Tang Sowol clung tightly to my side, her hand firmly grasping mine.

It wasn't quite the heart-fluttering act of lovers, and there was far too much warmth for that.

To put it simply, it felt more like a mother tending to her child.

“Brother Cheon, is there anything uncomfortable? If there’s anything you need, please let me know anytime.”

“Ah, right. I’ll take care of it for you.”

With a strange mix of guilt and eagerness on her face, Tang Sowol straightened my collar and lightly brushed my hair into shape.

Needless to say, there was no real need for her to do that. I'm not the type to fuss over appearances, but given where we were going, I had at least made myself presentable.

And now, she even pulled out a canteen, trying to hold it up to my mouth. I slowly turned my head away.

A clear expression of refusal.

“That’s enough.”

“B-Brother Cheon.....?”

She looked as if her world had just collapsed. My once-firm resolve softened a little, and I answered her in a gentler tone.

“It’s fine. You really don’t have to do anything. Just now... I stayed silent because that was the seventh time today you've asked the same question. I wasn’t sure where to begin answering.”

“Whew... So that’s what it was. I’m glad it wasn’t a mental restriction.”

“What do you even think a mental restriction is? Just act like you normally would. Like usual...”

Maybe I mentioned the restriction too carelessly, or perhaps I was skirting too close to its boundary.

Before I knew it, my lips clamped shut—I'd triggered the restriction for real.

It’s not usually this sensitive, but now that Tang Sowol knows about it, her overreactions seem to be making it trigger more often.

Taking care to avoid activating it again, I organized my thoughts and spoke carefully.

“If you’re feeling guilty about how cold you were to me before, really, there’s no need. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“How could I not feel guilty? Even if I didn’t know the circumstances, I hurt you deeply, didn’t I?”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“I heard everything from Lihyang. That you stayed shut in your room like dried fish left out on a sunny day.”

“Ah.”

Seol Lihyang...!

I shot her a glare, and—perhaps realizing her betrayal—she quickly averted her eyes.

We’ll talk later.

But my inner grumbling was interrupted as Tang Jincheon, who had been walking ahead, clicked his tongue in disapproval.

“Tch. Making my Sowol flustered like that in front of me, isn’t that going too far?”

“I told her I’m fine, but she keeps doing this...”

“I know, which is why I’ll leave it at that. But if it turns out you did that on purpose, you'd be sparring with your future father-in-law by now.”

“Oh. If it’s a spar, is poison banned?”

“You little...! You sulking just because I scolded you—isn’t that the real problem?”

Now that I’m also a martial artist at the Flowering Stage, I suppose he’s not confident about a poison-free match. Tang Jincheon shook his head and changed the topic.

He probably didn’t know the full details, but he had picked up on the general mood.

Still, seeing his beloved daughter practically offering up her liver and gallbladder to someone must not sit well with him.

I get it. I do. But honestly, I'm a little aggrieved myself.

How was I supposed to know he'd start acting so overprotective overnight?

Muttering quietly to Tang Sowol, I asked,

“Could you maybe repeat the things you said to your father... about ten years ago?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, the kind of rebellious stuff kids your age usually say.”

“Oh? I do remember a few things, but... why all of a sudden?”

“Just say a few of them for me. Do that, and I’ll completely forget everything that happened that night. Wipe the slate clean.”

“If that’s all it takes.”

Tang Sowol nodded with a determined look and turned toward Tang Jincheon.

“Um. Father??”

“Hmm? What is it, Sowol?”

Tang Jincheon’s face instantly melted with affection. Practically beaming.

And then it cracked.

“Could you please stop opening my room door without warning!”

Yelp!

“I’m not saying I hate you, but I’m a bit too old for morning hugs every day... and your beard is scratchy.”

“Geh!”

“Hmph! I don’t care about you anymore! I’m not speaking to you for the rest of the day!”

“Guooaagh!”

So that’s how long her rebellion lasts—until dinnertime.

As I nodded at this new bit of knowledge, Tang Sowol ran back over to me, leaving Tang Jincheon clutching his chest like he’d just suffered an inner demon attack.

“How was that?! I did well, didn’t I, Brother Cheon?”

She looked up at me with sparkling eyes, just like a puppy expecting praise.

It was hard to believe this sunny face belonged to the same person who'd just stabbed a metaphorical knife into her father.

Watching her for a moment, I reached out and gently squished her cheeks with both hands.

“Yeah. Good job. With this, nothing ever happened between us, and we’re still the loving, engaged couple we’ve always been.”

“Yay~!”

She jumped with joy. As I watched her fondly, I felt a sharp glare from nearby.

When I smirked at Tang Jincheon, who was staring daggers, a vein bulged in his temple.

“You... Make sure to have a daughter just like Sowol. I pray she gives you the same grief!”

“Thank you for your blessing. But if she takes after Tang Sowol, she’ll surely like me, so I doubt your wish will come true. My condolences.”

“You little—!!”

Tang Jincheon leapt forward, but there wasn’t much he could do with me already hiding behind Tang Sowol.

As the chaos unfolded, Seol Lihyang, who had been watching from a short distance away, suddenly spoke.

“Sister Hwarin... you're not going to say things like that to Cheon Hwi, right?”

“What do you take this one for?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin sprang up in outrage, but her reaction was as harmless as Tang Jincheon’s behind his daughter-shield.

While a lot went on between us, the journey to Songshan itself was uneventful.

Perhaps the troublemakers of the martial world were keeping their heads down after my successful subjugation of the Green Forest Bandits.

Whatever the reason, our journey was peaceful in a good way—and we finally arrived at Songshan.

Despite not having seen it for a long while, the ridiculously long and steep staircase remained just as imposing.

At the top, standing at the main gate, were monks with cleanly shaven heads waiting for us.

Two monks stood guard on either side of the gate.

Once they confirmed our faces and the uniforms of the Tang family escorts with us, they immediately bowed respectfully.

“Namo Amitabha. Are you perhaps from the Tang Family?”

“That’s right. We were invited by the Abbot for a meeting.”

“Just as I thought! We were informed. Please, come inside.”

The monk, having exchanged a few words with Tang Jincheon, stepped aside to make way.

Well, for a place like Shaolin, it's only natural that gatekeepers would recognize well-known faces.

And I’m sure they had been notified in advance.

It’s a stark contrast from back then, when I was carrying the unconscious Monk Gakjeong and holding a Tang family badge, yet still got delayed at the gate.

Smirking slightly at the memory, I walked past the gatekeepers—only for one of them to suddenly suck in a sharp breath.

“Hhuh!”

“Hm? Something wrong?”

“N-No, nothing at all!”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing to me.”

“Um... by any chance...”

He hesitated, then carefully asked.

“Are you the White Moon Sword Lord?”

“I am.”

“I knew it!”

The monk’s eyes sparkled as he respectfully cupped his fists.

“It is an honor to meet you!”

“Hm.”

Slightly taken aback, I returned the gesture with a light nod.

The monk started trembling with emotion.

What’s going on?

But the strange behavior didn’t end there.

After entering Shaolin, I began to notice more and more things.

Little novice monks peeked around corners like they had come just to see me, only to be scolded back to their duties by older monks.

Other monks—still sweating from training—or even elderly monks who appeared to hold high positions, were also clearly showing interest in me.

Some more openly than others.

Sensing all this attention, I turned to Tang Sowol, who still hadn't left my side.

"All these stares... it's getting a bit uncomfortable. Do you know what's going on?"

"Oh my. Have you really not noticed, Brother Cheon?"

"Noticed what?"

"All those people came out hoping to catch a glimpse of the famed White Moon Sword Lord."

"...Huh??"

"Fufu. You've been busy meeting with the likes of the Black Lotus Sect Master, the Ironblood Hall Master, and others of their rank, so you haven't had a chance to notice—but the praise has been pouring in for some time now."

For some reason, Tang Sowol looked even more proud than I felt.

Wondering if she was right, I focused my internal energy and listened to the surrounding sounds.

The hum of bugs became louder. The crunch of dirt underfoot grew more distinct.

And among the noise, I heard clear whispers.

“Is that really the White Moon Sword Lord?”

“He looks young, just like the rumors said... and to think he took down the Forest Chief of Green Forest...”

“Hey, it’s just that the monks look old. He’s probably around our age.”

“Maybe, but his martial level is on a different plane entirely.”

Similar conversations were happening all around.

Before regression, I was well-known in certain circles and had heard my share of flattery, but this felt different.

Even compared to how the Tang family treated me, it was noticeably distinct.

In the Tang family, the eyes I received were full of warmth and gratitude—as the benefactor who saved Tang Sowol and brought prosperity to the family.

Here, it was admiration, awe, and just a hint of envy.

“In truth, it was the same after you defeated the Poison King.”

“Well, back then, as you said, I was too busy moving around. And while people were surprised by my martial prowess, I never got looks of admiration like this.”

“To add a little more context, while the Poison King is unforgettable to us, he’s a fading figure of a bygone era in the Central Plains.”

“But the King of Assassin is someone currently spreading his infamous reputation, huh.”

Since information about the Sword Ghost or the Heavenly Demon was being suppressed to avoid public panic, it probably hadn't been widely reported.

Still, knowing the reason made me feel a bit more at ease.

“Fufu. In that sense, I'm glad it's Shaolin we're visiting.”

“Wouldn't have mattered either way.”

“Oh, but it does. Unless there's a special reason, women aren't allowed in Shaolin—it's a male-only sect.”

“Huh?”

“If this were the Murim Alliance, you'd be swarmed by annoying flies. I trust you, Brother Cheon, but imagine how tedious it would be to shoo them all away.”

“...So that’s the reason? Then what about Seol Lihyang and Senior Seorin?”

“I gave them permission. Besides, they’re good people.”

Calling Seo Mun-Hwarin a “girl” still felt wrong somehow, but that thought quickly faded as I remembered how both she and I had collapsed like dried fish from a single conversation with Tang Jincheon.

Honestly...

Maybe the real power behind the Tang Family of Sichuan was Tang Sowol all along.

Casting a sideways glance at her, I followed her lead toward the Great Hall, where the Shaolin Abbot awaited.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

When we arrived at the Great Hall, an old, familiar monk was waiting for us as if he had been expecting it.

He was none other than Great Monk Jeong Hyeon, the current abbot of Shaolin and a man known by the honorific title Divine Monk.

“Hoho, there are faces I haven’t seen in a long time, and others I saw more recently. All of them are welcome.”

“Are you calling me out for being the only one who hasn’t visited in a while?”

“Surely not, Poison King. It's just that, naturally, this old monk finds the younger ones more delightful than ancient acquaintances.”

Tang Jincheon and Jeong Hyeon exchanged lighthearted jabs.

They hadn’t seemed close enough for banter before, so they must have developed a rapport while dealing with the Heaven-Slaughter Star incident.

Given Shaolin’s commitment to Buddhist teachings and the Tang Clan’s sensitivity to both resentment and gratitude, it made sense.

Nodding internally, I respectfully offered a martial salute.

“It’s been a while, Abbot.”

The rest of our group followed my lead and offered greetings.

Jeong Hyeon returned our gesture with a soft smile and a prayerful clasp of his hands.

“Namo Amitabha. You all look well. I didn’t witness your feats firsthand, but I’ve heard many tales.”

“All those tales... honestly, they’re a bit overwhelming.”

“Oh? And here I thought the White Moon Sword Lord, who brought down the chaotic Green Forest and even slew the infamous King of Assassin, would be above such modesty.”

His tone was deliberately teasing.

I didn’t expect the Abbot of Shaolin to talk like this, so I was momentarily at a loss for words.

Seeing my expression, Jeong Hyeon let out a hearty laugh and waved his hand.

“Just an old man’s joke, don’t mind it. I was simply reminded of my master’s old tales from my youth and got a bit carried away.”

His master... must be Great Monk Gakjeong.

Though he now lives quietly as a scholarly monk, he once went by the fearsome title Punisher Asura, and traveled the land bringing justice to the wicked.

“Since we’re on the topic, may I ask how Great Monk Gakjeong has been doing?”

“He’s doing well over at the Jeomchang Sect. He seems to have found something meaningful to devote himself to, and every time I visit, his expression is brighter. All thanks to you.”

“You flatter me. I’ve received much help from him as well.”

Without his obsession with the Heaven-Slaughter Star, we likely wouldn’t have discovered the solution to that problem.

If not for that, just like in my previous life, the Jeomchang Sect and the surrounding region would've been obliterated by the awakened Heaven-Slaughter Star.

One of my few treasured connections from my hometown, Jang Inam, would've died too.

As I nodded quietly at the memory, Jeong Hyeon seemed to recall something and added,

“Now that I think of it, my master sent me a letter not long ago... the contents were troubling.”

“Troubling? In what way?”

Could something have gone wrong with Heaven-Slaughter Star?

Reading the seriousness in my expression, Jeong Hyeon shook his head.

“Fortunately, there's no issue on the Heaven-Slaughter Star's side. She remains stable, so you need not worry. However... it seems that some unidentified people have been loitering near the Jeomchang Sect and fled when confronted.”

Any information related to Heaven-Slaughter Star is top secret.

If word were to get out, someone with ill intent could try to exploit her.

There are plenty of lunatics in the martial world who would love to watch the world burn.

Only a handful of people directly involved should know the truth.

So how did the information leak?

The first suspect that came to mind was the Heavenly Demon.

I don't know how many regressions he's been through, but considering he knows what I know, it's hard to imagine he's unaware of Heaven-Slaughter Star's existence.

And hadn't he said something through the King of Assassins, something like "Try to overcome it, if you can"?

Honestly, it's offensive how he throws these "trials" at me like some self-appointed judge of my growth.

Not that there's anything I can do about it.

At best, I can continue to grow in ways he doesn't expect—just as I did last time.

If he noticed Heaven-Slaughter Star not awakening when she should have, he might try to force her to awaken again.

That would be his next "trial."

Worst case scenario.

Best case? It's just some curious members of another sect noticing how strangely the sect leader's daughter is being treated.

Maybe it's the Hao Clan trying to reverse their situation, now that they're being pressured by the Black Lotus Sect.

Either way, these are groups that wouldn't dare act openly against the Jeomchang Sect, which is under the protection of the Murim Alliance.

Still, assuming the worst is wise.

“Abbot, there's something I should tell you about this matter...”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Everyone present already knew the circumstances.

So I openly shared my suspicions.

As I explained, Jeong Hyeon's expression gradually hardened.

“I've already heard about the strength of Heavenly Demon from the Sword King who arrived earlier. It sounded unbelievable... but if the Sword King himself said it, I doubt it was a lie.”

“Wait, the Sword King arrived before us?”

“Unlike you all, he traveled alone and swiftly. He didn’t take long.”

Typical Namgung Dowi.

I gave a wry smile, but Jeong Hyeon simply nodded gravely.

“Thank you for telling me. I’ll discuss this with the Leader of the Murim Alliance and take immediate action.”

No doubt, the matter weighed on him more heavily because it involved his master.

After a brief farewell, we followed our guide to the guest quarters where we would be staying.

There, amidst the Shaolin monks either training or spectating, I locked eyes with Namgung Dowi—who was calmly practicing his sword alone.

He paused mid-swing. A moment of silence passed between us.

Lowering his sword, Namgung Dowi blinked and asked,

“Good to see you. Shall we have a spar?”

“Unlike you, Sword King, I don’t enjoy sparring in front of an audience.”

“Hmm. A shame. I brought these promising disciples specifically for this reason. A good match might inspire at least one of them to grow into a future rival.”

“...Wait, you didn’t just let people watch—you handpicked capable monks to observe?”

He wasn’t hiding his techniques—he wanted them seen.

I knew this kind of openness was part of what made the Namgung Clan strong...

But knowing it and experiencing it are two different things. It still gave me a headache.

“If you’re unwilling, I won’t force you.”

“I don’t mind, but let’s do it somewhere private.”

“Hmm. I’ll remember that.”

Only then did he shift his attention away from me.

“Poison King, how have you—”

“Not even if we’re alone, I’m not sparring with you.”

“Hmm...”

Namgung Dowi’s mood visibly dropped.

He might be stone-faced, but his emotions were oddly easy to read.

Eventually, he turned to the final Flowering Stage master among us: Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“Greetings, Leader of the Seo Mun Clan. If there’s an opportunity, would you be willing to spar during your stay here?”

He asked, but without much hope in his voice.

After all, Seo Mun-Hwarin had always avoided sparring with him—and had just coldly rejected Tang Jincheon.

But her response was... unexpected.

“I suppose I could.”

“...What.”

Shock. And pure joy.

Namgung Dowi's eyes shone with childlike eagerness.

I've trained with a sword for years, even through regression, but I can't say I still love the blade as much as he does after sixty years.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, on the other hand, pointed a finger and stated coolly,

"But! There are conditions."

"What are they?"

"Treat my Fist-and-Kick Martial Arts as if it were swordsmanship and offer your critique. Oh, and Cheon Hwi must be present to watch during the duel."

"That's easy. But why call it swordsmanship? Are you referring to the Seo Mun Clan's techniques?"

“That’s right. But I don’t plan to show the techniques themselves. I’ve created new forms based on them and want your feedback.”

Namgung Dowi trembled. At this point, he wasn’t hearing anything else.

After a long moment of struggling to contain his excitement, he nodded vigorously.

“Let’s do it now!”

“...Not now.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin gave him a tired look and quickly hid behind me, shaking her head.

I also shot Namgung Dowi a warning glance. That finally snapped him out of it. He coughed and averted his eyes.

“Ahem. Understood. I’ll be training nearby as usual. Come whenever it’s convenient.”

Even after that, he greeted Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang—but in a distracted, half-hearted manner.

Still, everyone understood it wasn't out of malice. The man simply had no thoughts beyond the sword.

In both good and bad ways, Namgung Dowi was incredibly consistent.

As we waited for others to arrive, we stayed at Shaolin for a few days.

During that time, quite a lot happened.

I got nicked by a new sword technique Namgung Dowi had developed by modifying the Thunder Heaven Divine Art.

Thanks to his keen observations, both I and Seo Mun-Hwarin were able to improve our own techniques.

Seol Lihyang, bored at night, came to ask for energy circulation assistance... only to get caught by Tang Sowol.

Which led to the two of them having nightly duels to decide who'd get treatment—until they were drenched in sweat.

Tang Jincheon eventually found out and furiously challenged us to spar, shouting something about “No daughter...!”

The only real difference was the setting—Shaolin instead of the Tang residence.

But even that peace lasted no more than four days.

Once the remaining guests arrived, the peaceful days were over.

“Hahaha! Long time no see, Sword Demon! I think you've gotten stronger. Still, why not join me?”

“Ugh, Lord Sama. He's the White Moon Sword Lord now, not just the Sword Demon. And you're saying this right in front of the Poison King, asking him to 'join

you'? This is Shaolin, not the Black Lotus Sect. It sounds like you're picking a fight."

"Oh? So if I beat the Poison King, I can take him?"

"Lord Sama!?"

"Gahaha! Just a joke! Didn't that kid already steal a few of my promising recruits? Just evening the score. But really, Poison King, won't you let me borrow your son-in-law?"

"You madman."

As soon as Sama Yuryeon, Lord of the Black Lotus Sect, arrived, he immediately started provoking Tang Jincheon.

Then the Murim Alliance Leader joined in, teasing,

"Tch tch. Sama, you're not so young anymore, but you're still full of fire."

“You’re just old, Alliance Leader.”

“Of course. After all, I used to beat demonic cultists of your father’s generation like dogs.”

Apparently, they had run into each other earlier. The Murim Lord stroked his old spiked club as he provoked Sama Yuryeon further.

Watching them needle each other like this, it began to sink in.

The leaders of the orthodox and unorthodox factions were gathering in one place.

Wasn’t this exactly how it felt just before the Orthodox and Unorthodox Alliance was annihilated by Heavenly Demon?

In a way... it was a nostalgic sight.