

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 261-270

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

With the Leader of the Murim Alliance, the Lord of the Black Lotus Sect, the Head of the Sichuan Tang Clan, the Head of the Namgung Clan, and the Abbot of Shaolin all gathered together...

While the orthodox sects clearly held the majority, the key point wasn't who outnumbered whom, but that the representatives of both the orthodox and unorthodox factions were seated at the same table.

Just ten years ago, this kind of meeting would've been unthinkable.

If you went back thirty years, this very group would've likely drawn weapons on sight and started fighting.

But for me, having lived through regression, this wasn't all that special.

In fact, it was almost reassuring—like things were finally moving the way they should.

Well, for me, anyway.

“There is much to be discussed here today,” began Abbot Jeong Hyeon, who had provided the location and taken on the role of mediator between orthodox and unorthodox, “but before we begin, there’s something I must ask.”

He looked around with a solemn expression.

“Please refrain from drawing weapons for personal reasons. This is holy ground dedicated to the Buddha. I do not wish to see blood spilled here.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” said the Alliance Leader, nodding as he set down the spiked club resting on his shoulder.

In his youth, he was known as Righteous Heaven God, the former leader of the Beggar’s Sect, infamous for beating demonic cultivators to a pulp.

He had been most active during the height of the orthodox-unorthodox conflict.

And now he was agreeing to lay down arms within the temple grounds.

Different people had different roles and burdens, but as martial artists, and as elders of this era, no one objected to his gesture.

“Then what about spears instead of swords?”

“Please, Lord Sama...”

“Heh, just a joke.”

...Of course, that's if you're orthodox.

Lord Sama Yuryeon, raised in the deepest layers of the unorthodox world, didn't quite fit that mold.

But even he, perhaps not wishing to stir trouble, unfastened his twin spears and placed them on the floor.

Though I couldn't shake the feeling that Sama Yuryeon enjoyed how Sama Suryeon clung to him with a worried pout, as if drawing attention.

I shook my head, pushing thoughts of their private life aside.

Abbot Jeong Hyeon, who had been chuckling gently, smoothly moved the conversation forward.

“Thank you for honoring this humble monk's request. Then, let us begin by addressing the most recent matter.”

“The Green Forest Subjugation, I assume. The results were good, but the fact that the Tang Family and Namgung Clan joined hands with the Black Lotus Sect without consulting the Alliance—”

“The Tang Family has no reason to seek the Murim Alliance's permission, Alliance Leader.”

“Neither does the Namgung Clan.”

“Ahem. I'm not saying you needed permission. I meant that it would've been courteous to at least let us know.”

Seeing Tang Jincheon and Namgung Dowi react with faint irritation, the Alliance Leader added awkwardly. He must've only just realized how his words could've been interpreted as the Alliance trying to interfere.

Tang Jincheon, now aware of the slip, replied in a more relaxed tone.

"That's our fault, I suppose. But you see, our son-in-law here took care of everything before we could even blink."

"...Huh?"

"It's true," Namgung Dowi added. "While we were still in the process of locating a few of Green Forest's mountain bases, the White Moon Sword Lord had already wiped out most of them, including their Forest Lord."

"Is... is that even possible?"

"I don't know how he did it, but it happened, so clearly it was possible."

The Alliance Leader looked baffled. Tang Jincheon, proud, simply smirked.

Surprisingly, someone else jumped in with even greater enthusiasm.

“Hahaha! Why wouldn’t it be possible, Alliance Leader? Who understands the unorthodox better than one of their own?”

It’s no surprise that the Sword Demon... ahem, the White Moon Sword Lord, got the drop on Green Forest!”

Sama Yuryeon, why are you boasting about it? He’s clearly part of the orthodox sects.

The Alliance Leader let out a long sigh... and gave me a sidelong glance.

I met his gaze and nodded confidently.

“Indeed. I don’t know why Lord Sama is speaking as if I’m unorthodox, when I’m clearly a model of orthodox virtue.”

The room fell silent.

Everyone looked like they had something to say but weren't sure where to start.

...Well, at the very least, Tang Jincheon shouldn't be looking at me like that.

Annoyed, I decided to lean into it.

“You may call me the living conscience of the Murim world.”

Even the Alliance Leader was rendered speechless.

I shook my head with feigned regret.

“Just kidding. But I'll clarify this much—I didn't succeed because I understand the unorthodox way of thinking, as Lord Sama claims.”

“Then how did you manage it? Of course, I'm not pressing you. Subjugating Green Forest was a righteous cause, and I'm just curious for future reference.”

“It’s nothing special. I’ve just always had an interest in their methods.”

“...Hm?”

Of course, I couldn’t say that I tortured a captured Green Forest bandit during my previous life to extract information.

So I twisted the truth slightly, mixing it with just enough honesty to make it believable.

Even if Tang Sowol might call me out, I felt no guilt lying to someone I’ve only met a few times like the Alliance Leader.

“When I was younger, I had a run-in with a Green Forest bandit...”

“Aren’t you still young?”

“I mean younger. It left quite an impression. I spent years stewing over it, thinking of ways to pay them back.”

Eventually, I got a sense of how they operated.”

It was technically true.

In my previous life, I had indeed been harassed repeatedly by Green Forest while traveling.

I’d even told similar stories to others before.

As I finished, the group began blinking in surprise—like they weren’t sure whether to believe me.

The Alliance Leader was the first to voice his doubt.

“Wait, that doesn’t even... Hmm. Then again, reaching the Flowering Stage at your age doesn’t make sense either.”

He nodded to himself like it all made sense now.

Which worked in my favor. I'd rather have him make up his own conclusion than press further.

Though both Tang Jincheon and Tang Sowol, knowing about the Mental Restriction, were now giving me worried looks.

I couldn't speak about the restriction, but just having someone who understood made me feel more at ease.

Now that the matter was wrapped up, the real discussions began.

"Ahem. Everyone," said Sama Yuryeon. "I've been thinking—"

"Not bad. But isn't that shifting too much responsibility onto the Murim Alliance?"

"Then how about this—?"

"That's workable, but the Namgung Clan would bear the brunt of it."

"We'll manage, as long as there's proper support."

A variety of topics followed.

Cooperation in battles against publicly recognized threats, like the Green Forest case.

Protocols for rogue demonic cultivators who go insane.

Toll fees when passing between regions controlled by orthodox and unorthodox factions.

And more...

It had nothing to do with Heavenly Demon, but the discussions were critical for the future of the Murim world.

There was some banter, jabs, and arguments, but overall, things moved smoothly.

Thanks, in large part, to Abbot Jeong Hyeon's mediation and Sama Suryeon's tireless effort to keep things on track.

Compared to the fractured and volatile Orthodox and Unorthodox Alliance of my past life, this was a far more productive gathering.

Back then, the Demonic Cult had already reached their doorstep, and half the orthodox sects had been wiped out.

This time, even Sama Yuryeon, pleased with his revenge against his old enemy Green Forest, was cooperative.

As I quietly nodded along, Tang Sowol leaned in and whispered,

“Cheon Sohyeop, Cheon Sohyeop.”

“Hm?”

“There’s so much complicated talk going on... I can’t tell what benefits the Tang Family. How about you?”

“I’m the same. The fact that you understand even half of this is impressive.”

Like Seo Mun-Hwarin taught me: ignorance is a weakness in Murim.

That's why I'd studied hard and tried to learn how the world worked.

But to sit among those who run the world was a different experience entirely.

Some topics were completely new to me. Others familiar.

Some... were events I knew would happen in the future.

Which gave me chills.

But one thing was certain—I didn't have much to contribute right now.

So, I amused myself instead.

I poked Seo Mun-Hwarin's foot to test her focus, while Tang Sowol, seeing Seol Lihyang napping upright, ran a finger down her spine, making her flinch.

When I slipped my hand onto Sowol's waist, she subtly leaned her head against my shoulder in return.

We passed the time quietly like that.

By the time Seo Mun-Hwarin's toes curled from ticklishness, and Seol Lihyang started flinching even without being touched, the sun was setting—and the talks were finally winding down.

Originally, we had expected just a simple non-aggression pact.

But what we got was far more substantial.

It wasn't enough to be called a full-fledged Orthodox and Unorthodox Alliance, but it was still an impressive result—far beyond expectations.

As I quietly celebrated the unexpected success, the Alliance Leader spoke up in a heavier tone.

“I believe that’s enough for the topic of cooperation between orthodox and unorthodox factions. Let’s move on.”

“Move on? Be clearer, Alliance Leader.”

“You all know what I mean. It’s time to talk about Heavenly Demon. And the Demonic Cult.”

The moment Heavenly Demon’s name was mentioned, the atmosphere turned hostile.

This was because Sama Yuryeon had instinctively released a burst of killing intent.

Feeling the eyes on him, he gave a bitter smile and shook his head.

“My apologies. I’ve become overly sensitive as of late. It was a slip.”

“Hooh... For the Lord of the Black Lotus Sect to react that strongly... I had heard the rumors, but...”

It wasn't Sama Yuryeon who answered Abbot Jeong Hyeon's troubled voice—but Namgung Dowi.

“I understand. It's likely the Lord has been replaying that battle in his head countless times. Am I wrong?”

“Well spotted. Have you been spying on me? Perhaps...”

“I did the same. But no matter how many times I revisited that battle, there was only one answer. My sword, the sword of Namgung, cannot yet reach Heavenly Demon.”

With a calm voice, he admitted his total defeat. But at the end, his tone showed unwavering resolve—he would reach him eventually.

That conviction was very much in line with the Namgung Clan.

But because it came from the Sword King, one of the top five orthodox masters, his statement carried immense weight.

The Alliance Leader let out a long sigh.

“I see... Then let’s proceed with the next matter. Share what information you have about the Demonic Cult.”

“Has something new developed?” I asked.

The Alliance Leader gave a heavy nod.

“Yes. As you suspected, the cult’s movements grew suspicious, so we planted spies. All of them, save one, returned with only their heads intact.”

That one was probably someone Heavenly Demon intentionally spared.

If Heavenly Demon is a regressor, then traditional spy tactics won’t work.

“The one survivor must’ve been left alive to deliver a message.”

“That’s correct. Though he returned alive, he came back half-mad. On him, we found a letter from Heavenly Demon.”

“He sent one to you as well?”

“Wait... are you saying you received a letter from Heavenly Demon too, White Moon Sword Lord?”

“Yes. I found it on the body of the King of Assassins, who tried to kill me alongside the Green Forest Chief. It said he would keep trying to kill me, and that I should survive if I could.”

I left out the part about the Mental Restriction. After rubbing his face with both hands, the Alliance Leader finally spoke again.

“Ridiculous. The letter I received said something similar.

That we should stop wasting time—something big was coming, and we’d better get our house in order.”

Our eyes met.

We were thinking the same thing.

Just as we sent spies into the cult, someone from the cult had infiltrated the Alliance. And that spy was likely the one targeting me.

Maybe that's why I muttered under my breath without realizing it.

“Haah... If only I could just cut down every suspicious bastard.”

"...!"

“...”

“...Ah.”

The Alliance Leader's eyes narrowed sharply. I gave him a calm shrug.

“Kidding.”

“...Didn’t sound like it.”

...As expected of the Alliance Leader.

How the hell did he see through that?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A letter saying not to mess around and to manage your household well.

And another saying I’ll be targeted again, so try surviving one more time.

Though we didn’t receive them under ordinary circumstances, the letters I and the Murim Alliance Leader received ultimately carried the same message:

There’s a spy within the Murim Alliance, and that spy is after my head.

Whether I was the target from the beginning, or I've simply ended up in the crosshairs — I don't know.

Either way, what I have to do doesn't really change.

Hoo...

Haa...

Sigh...

Only sighs echoed in the silence. Well, from the perspective of martial artists of the orthodox faction, it wouldn't be easy to take such a warning about the Murim Alliance lightly.

In other words, as someone from the unorthodox side — the master of the Black Lotus Sect didn't seem too concerned, merely shrugging his shoulders.

“Oh dear. Let me express my condolences in advance.”

“Black Lotus Sect Master, aren't you being a bit too flippant just because this doesn't concern you directly? This is a matter involving many lives.”

The Murim Alliance Leader frowned. He didn't raise his aura, likely because of his promise with Master Jeong Hyeon, but his tone was sharp enough.

Of course, the Black Lotus Sect Master wasn't one to be intimidated by such things.

"It's not my matter, so why wouldn't I speak lightly of it? Have you already forgotten the Black Lotus Sect has been through something similar before? ...Ah, unless you're asking for help from the Black Lotus, in which case I'd prefer if you offered the price up front."

"That's not what I meant."

The Black Lotus Sect Master smirked, lifting the corner of his mouth. The Murim Alliance Leader started to say something, then quietly shook his head.

He'd resolved not to quarrel pointlessly with the Black Lotus Sect, but it also showed he wasn't exactly comfortable receiving help either.

After a short chuckle, the Black Lotus Sect Master turned slightly toward me and let out a soft laugh.

"Well, I don't really care what happens to the Murim Alliance, but the Bright Moon Sword Lord is a different story."

“You mean me?”

“Yes. From what I’ve seen, the Heavenly Demon seems to have quite the obsession with you.”

“Indeed. Thanks to that, I’ve found myself in quite the predicament.”

“As I said before, I won’t pry into the details. However, I’d like to know — what do you think the Heavenly Demon wants from you? Even a hunch will do.”

“There is one thing that comes to mind.”

All eyes focused on me. I gave a wry smile and slowly opened my mouth.

“I believe the Heavenly Demon wants me to become stronger.”

“Come to think of it, didn’t he say before that if you could reach him, he’d retreat?”

Namgung Dowi spoke as if he had come to a realization, and I nodded, adding what I had deduced from the most recent battle.

“Yes. And the King of Assassins was also a very compatible opponent for me. He was clearly stronger than me, but he was at a level I could reach with just a bit more growth.”

“I see. So, he was the perfect match for someone like you who has only recently stepped into the Flowering Stage. Now that you mention it, the Sword Ghost felt similar, didn’t he?”

“Yes. The Sword Ghost had forcibly entered the Flowering Stage through the demonic martial art, the ‘Saehan Grand Art’.”

That’s why he was just right – not only was he a compatible opponent, but he also had martial arts opposite to mine. To defeat him, I had to reorganize everything I had built until now.

Those listening began to wear expressions that said they couldn’t quite understand.

“What’s the point of making your enemy stronger...?”

“Well, the Alliance Leader knows, doesn’t he? Everyone who reaches the Flowering Stage has lost a bit of their mind.”

“Heh. So the Heavenly Demon is just another lunatic, is that what you’re saying, Poison King? Your refusal to suspect your son-in-law of anything... very admirable. Ah, but this one has no interest in what secrets the Bright Moon Sword Lord may have.”

“Let’s not go too far, Black Lotus Sect Master. We all agreed there would be no bloodshed here. Why keep stirring things up?”

“Amitabha...”

At Master Jeong Hyeon’s words, the Black Lotus Sect Master scratched his neck awkwardly and shut his mouth.

A brief silence followed, and then the Murim Alliance Leader nodded and spoke.

“In any case, I understand the situation now. Though it’s unpleasant to feel like we’re being toyed with by the Heavenly Demon, we can’t just sit back and watch. The Murim Alliance will establish its own countermeasures. And on that note...”

He paused briefly and looked in my direction.

“Bright Moon Sword Lord, would you be willing to stay at the Murim Alliance for a while?”

“Alliance Leader! What are you saying?! Are you suggesting using the Tang Family’s son-in-law as bait?!”

Tang Jincheon immediately shot up from his seat in anger. I quickly stood up and gently held his arm.

“It’s fine, Father-in-law. The Heavenly Demon has shown interest in me from the start. Even if I wanted to be bait, I already am.”

“But...”

“If something does happen, we’ll be in a better position to receive the Murim Alliance’s support. Wouldn’t that make things safer? That’s what the Alliance Leader meant, correct?”

I glanced at the Murim Alliance Leader, who hurriedly nodded.

“The Bright Moon Sword Lord is right. Since we’re in the Central Plains, not the Demonic Cult’s territory, staying together instead of spreading out is the better strategy.”

Tang Jincheon let out a short sigh and replied.

“Understood. In that case, I’d also like to stay at the Murim Alliance for a while. Is that alright?”

“Of course! How could I refuse help from the Poison King himself?”

Only after receiving that confirmation did Tang Jincheon sit back down.

More conversations followed, but most of them were of relatively minor importance.

After that, the slightly subdued meeting began to wrap up. As everyone slowly started to rise from their seats...

Tang Jincheon suddenly turned to Master Jeong Hyeon as if he had remembered something.

“This is unrelated to the current matter, but I have a request for you, Master. May I have a moment of your time?”

“Hmm? Of course. Poison King, would you stay a bit longer in this room? Once the others leave, we can speak freely.”

I had a good idea what this would be about. Since Tang Jincheon said he wanted to seek Shaolin’s help regarding my mental restriction, this must be it.

The Black Lotus Sect Master and Sama Yuryeon seemed curious about our discussion but ultimately left after a simple farewell without asking.

The Murim Alliance Leader, too, prepared to leave with a nod — but just as he stepped over the threshold, he paused briefly, glanced toward Master Jeong Hyeon, then exited the room.

Now, only our group and Master Jeong Hyeon remained. A sound-sealing barrier was deployed to prevent any leaks of conversation.

“Did you just send a sound transmission to the Alliance Leader?”

“I spoke a little about the Heaven-Slaughter Star. Originally, I was going to raise the matter here, but since you brought up another topic first, I had to delay it.”

“Oh.”

As I looked slightly apologetic, Master Jeong Hyeon let out a hearty laugh.

“Haha. It’s fine. I’ll visit him early tomorrow. Old men like us barely sleep anyway, so it’s nothing.”

“Thank you.”

“No need for such thanks. But tell me, what matter could you be discussing that your expressions are so mixed?”

While Tang Jincheon, Tang Sowol, and I wore serious expressions, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin (Seorin) looked completely confused.

Well, it made sense. We hadn’t explained it to them yet.

Since I couldn't say it myself due to the restriction, Tang Jincheon stepped up.

“There's a mental restriction we're trying to remove, but it seems beyond the Tang Clan's power, so we've come seeking your help.”

“A restriction?”

“My son-in-law has a particularly severe restriction upon him. It concerns the Heavenly Demon.”

He had misunderstood a bit – believing the restriction reacted to information about the Heavenly Demon, rather than the return – but aside from that, Tang Jincheon had grasped most of the picture, and he explained succinctly.

After hearing everything, Master Jeong Hyeon placed his hand on my arm and asked,

“May I channel my internal energy for a moment?”

“Of course.”

He focused for quite some time, but soon after, he let out a deep sigh and muttered in frustration.

“Hoo... Had I not been told there was a restriction, I wouldn’t even have known it existed. I’ve heard of such things, but this is beyond comprehension. Let me ask again – is this a restriction that can’t be broken even with willpower? Or is it...?”

“I can’t say more – that much is part of the restriction. But yes, even willpower doesn’t reach it.”

Master Jeong Hyeon muttered, falling deep into thought. It seemed this was beyond what even he had expected.

I couldn’t say it aloud due to the restriction, but it wasn’t that it couldn’t be broken by willpower – it was that the restriction existed on a level beyond where willpower could even reach.

Now that it was clear this wasn’t a normal restriction, it was time to get to the point.

“I heard from Master Gakjeong that Shaolin holds many secret arts – not often used, but kept nonetheless.”

“There’s no point hiding it from you, Bright Moon Sword Lord. You’ve already worked with my master to suppress the killing aura of the Heaven-Slaughter Star, so you must’ve seen various things. Yes. Shaolin possesses many esoteric techniques using dharma tools or mantras, not martial arts.”

“I knew it...!”

If all went well, we might be able to weaken or bypass the restriction without relying on the Heavenly Demon.

Naturally, the one who knows everything for sure would be the Heavenly Demon, but I’m not about to obediently let myself be used as a pawn just because of that.

“I appreciate your hope, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Pardon?”

“Esoteric methods of the Esoteric Buddhism have become semi-taboo in this era. At least, as the head of Shaolin, I cannot openly study or practice them. I’ll have to look into it separately.”

“Ah... I understand.”

Compared to Daoist sects where sorcery has waned as users diminished, the esoteric techniques still held considerable power. I had seen them first-hand during the sealing of Heaven-Slaughter Star’s aura, and far off in Potala Palace, they were still the main force of their tradition.

However, Esoteric Buddhist spells had one fatal flaw — they easily led practitioners into inner demons.

“To perform martial arts, you need internal energy. To perform spells, you need spiritual power — which is a branch of willpower.”

“Like killing aura?”

“Similar, but a bit more complex in use. Let me ask you — what would happen if a martial artist constantly emitted killing aura every time they drew their sword?”

“They’d fall into deviation nine times out of ten.”

“I’m not talking about you, I mean an average martial artist.”

Master Jeong Hyeon gave a dry laugh, and I smiled and answered.

“They’d almost certainly fall into qi deviation.”

“Exactly. Spiritual power is the same. Used for righteous purposes, it causes no issues and can help one grow. But the moment it’s used to fight or harm, the risk of inner demons grows stronger. Unless you overcome it with unshakable resolve...”

“Which is far easier said than done. Especially if one is handling more spiritual power than killing aura – the risk is enormous.”

“Right. That’s why it was banned. Too many Buddhist disciples strayed from Buddha’s teachings and succumbed to demonic influence.”

Come to think of it, Master Gakjeong once said that Potala Palace had become too immersed in Esoteric Buddhism and strayed from the Buddhist path.

In that sense, Shaolin’s decision to ban it had been the right one.

“Anyway, I’ll look into it. But don’t get your hopes up too high. There might be no solution, or the technique may exist, but no one left who can perform it.”

“That’s more than enough.”

“Understood. First, we need to properly identify the nature of the restriction placed on you. I’ll let you know when I’m ready, so rest easy until then.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I gave Master Jeong Hyeon a deep bow and left the room.

The cool night breeze greeted me, and immediately, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin bombarded me with worried questions, as if holding them back until now.

“Cheon Hwi! What’s this about a restriction?! It’s not dangerous, right? You’re not hurt or anything?!”

“Who in the world dared place a restriction on you?! Even if Shaolin can’t remove it, don’t worry. If I take them down, wouldn’t the restriction be lifted?!”

“It’s fine. And it’s not causing any immediate harm, so don’t worry.”

Since this conversation involved the restriction, I couldn’t say much, but this much was alright.

Still, maybe because I couldn’t fully explain, the conversation started drifting in a weird direction.

“Th-then... Cheon Hwi, is the reason you do Qi Circulation Dual Cultivation so, um... lewdly... I mean, strangely – is that because of the restriction?”

“Now that you mention it, you were oddly skilled at caressing and teasing me... Is that also because of the restriction...?”

Slightly off, but not entirely wrong. I fell silent unnaturally, and the two of them exchanged glances and nodded.

Then Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin both rose on tiptoe and brought their lips to each of my ears.

And whispered in unison.

“You said it’s not dangerous, right? Then... maybe it’s fine to just live with the restriction...?”

“Th-this one thinks... even with it, you’re perfect as you are...”

Everyone's heads are clearly full of impure thoughts.

It seems I’m the only sane person left here.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Brother Cheon, I have a small favor to ask."

"Go on."

Several days had passed while waiting for Master Jeong Hyeon’s preparations. I had just finished my daily training, and with some spare time, even completed a light sparring session with Tang Sowol.

Now lying sprawled on the ground, completely exhausted, Tang Sowol curled her lips up mischievously and continued speaking.

"The sun is scorching, but I don't have the strength to lift even a finger. Might Brother Cheon perhaps become my shade?"

"...Are you asking me to just stand next to you? I'm no tree."

"You're sturdier than most trees. Looking up from here, you look larger than usual. I feel like a delicate woman such as myself could be lifted up in one swoop..."

She suddenly stopped.

"Oops. Please pretend you didn't hear that."

Tang Sowol pretended to be flustered, but I knew the truth. That was no accident—she brought it up on purpose.

"Lewd girl. You can just speak plainly, you know."

"Then, please carry me without protest."

As soon as I finished speaking, she said it like she'd been waiting for it. I let out a short laugh and crouched beside her head.

"You're stretched out like a corpse, but still full of confidence, I see."

"Oh my? Could it be you're planning to do something indecent to me while I can't move? Perhaps gag me with those large hands of yours so I can't make a sound? Like in those books poking out of Hyang's bundle...!"

"Is Seol Lihyang reading books like that these days?"

"She seems pretty hooked, actually. Sneaking them into even Shaolin Temple and reading them in secret."

"Well, I suppose she's at that age."

"Hmph. Aren't you the same age as Hyang?"

"I am at that age too."

Just as Seo Mun-Hwarin's rejuvenated body was affected by her Rejuvenation, I too was influenced by the youthful body I gained after my regression.

This body at this age... is energetic in many ways.

I nodded and pulled Tang Sowol's cheek for no reason, though she couldn't move.

It wasn't as stretchy as Seo Mun-Hwarin's, but it had a softness beyond that.

And above all, seeing Tang Sowol's usually composed face all twisted up like that was oddly amusing.

As I kept poking and pulling for a while, she grinned and opened her mouth.

"Wasn't that enough enjoyment? I think I've paid you in advance."

"A little disappointing, perhaps, but I can't have my fiancée rolling on the floor all day."

Saying so, I slid my arm under her neck and knees and picked her up.

Her body naturally pressed against my chest. Still, it felt a little different than usual.

"...You're damp."

"I was sweating, so it can't be helped."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Brother Cheon likes me even when I'm all sweaty. I know that."

"That... sounded a bit off."

The damp Tang Sowol chuckled softly. I shook my head and placed her down on the floorboards a short distance away. I sat next to her.

Despite claiming she had no strength to move a finger, she squirmed her way over and rested her head on my knee with a content sigh.

"Whew. If only Hyang were here, it'd be nice and cool."

"Seol Lihyang is not a walking ice cellar."

"That's something you can only say because you've never slept holding her in summer."

Tang Sowol gave me a pitiful look, as if I were some poor starving child.

But in truth, I knew very well how useful Seol Lihyang could be in the summer.

Ever since she mastered Yin-type internal arts, I'd often gone to her for a cool breeze or cold water during the hot season.

And before my regression, I had even hugged her while sleeping a few times, just like Tang Sowol said.

...Though she kept grumbling about whether I was actually sleeping.

I shrugged and fanned Tang Sowol with my hand. It wasn't as cool as Seol Lihyang, but with a bit of internal energy guiding the air, it was at least somewhat refreshing.

While enjoying the breeze with her eyes closed, Tang Sowol suddenly spoke as if she'd remembered something.

"Oh right, lately, more people have been subtly sounding me out—asking if I have any interest in becoming the clan head."

"That's troublesome."

Right now, the Tang Clan in Sichuan was rivaling the Namgung Clan for first or second place. But given a little more time, it would become the undeniable top clan in the world.

That also meant it was growing large enough to attract parasites aiming for the spoils.

"Are these voices coming from within the clan?"

"Thankfully, no. As the Tang Clan's power has grown, there's been an increase in contact with outside groups—merchant guilds, minor sects, and such."

"I see. So it's external forces trying to stir things up."

Well, of course. Anyone trying to push Tang Sowol into the clan head position now could only be an outsider.

Unlike her older brother Tang Cheong, the current heir, who's stayed relatively quiet, Tang Sowol had been involved in many major events with me.

To someone unaware of the inside workings, Tang Cheong might seem less capable than Tang Sowol.

But that's far from the truth.

Because of the age gap, Tang Cheong had started heir training long ago, and was now gradually taking over various responsibilities.

It was natural that he focused on internal affairs and reduced his external presence.

And it wasn't as if he lacked martial ability either—he'd already reached the Sub-Perfection level, and there were whispers that he'd reach the Flowering Stage by middle age.

He might not be as innately talented as Tang Sowol, but he was more than qualified to be clan head.

Moreover, Tang Sowol had always stated she had no interest in inheriting the position, and her actions supported her claim, so no one doubted her sincerity.

If someone within the clan tried to back her for some big move, it could have caused a messy family conflict...

But if it was just some outsiders trying to test the waters, the response was simple.

"Just take what they offer and pretend you don't know anything."

"Isn't that a bit... shady?"

"The real shady ones are the ones trying to stir up trouble in a perfectly functioning household. And more than anything, they won't even be able to complain."

Who would dare openly admit they bribed the youngest sibling left out of succession, trying to start a power struggle?

Even if someone did, it wouldn't matter.

"They're just bottom-feeders who can't do anything but whine. If they want to change anything, they should reach the Flowering Stage."

"Ugh, but I'm still far from becoming an Absolute Master."

"My power is your power."

"Goodness. You're going to hit me with a line like that here...?"

Tang Sowol's voice was half-dumbfounded, but the corners of her mouth twitched up.

She gave my thigh a couple of light slaps, her energy clearly returned.

"Well then, if you say so, I guess I'll just take what they give and play dumb."

"Make sure to inform your father and brother ahead of time, so there's no misunderstanding."

"Of course, I was planning to. Hehe. For some reason, doing something a bit naughty in secret makes my heart race."

"...Is that really something to get excited about?"

"Well, it feels like I'm a bit closer to Brother Cheon, doesn't it?"

"I'm a righteous orthodox martial artist, you know..."

"No one seems to believe it, but anyway, it's true."

As I grumbled, Tang Sowol's slender finger gently pressed against my lips.

"Don't pout so much. It ruins my handsome face."

"That sounds like you're claiming my face as your own."

"Oh my, didn't you just say that what's yours is mine?"

"That's not exactly what I meant..."

"And it works both ways. I'm also yours, Brother Cheon. This time, I won't run away in the middle, so... could you spare some time for me?"

"I can spare time, sure... but here at Shaolin? With your father in the room next door?"

"Ack. Then after we return to the Tang Clan."

"Weren't we heading to the Murim Alliance right after this to deal with the Demonic Cult's schemes?"

"Ugh! Then I'll go with you to the Murim Alliance! I'm a Sub-Perfection level martial artist, so I should be of some help!"

"I believe your father is going with us to the Murim Alliance as well."

"...The world has become a cruel place."

Tang Sowol went limp again, expressing her disappointment and sadness with her whole body. I chuckled and gently brushed aside her dark green hair.

"Come now, there'll be a good opportunity soon. Besides, as you said, we're already engaged. No need to rush, is there?"

"For me, the need to rush is overflowing."

"Hm?"

"Do you remember that I'm five years older than you?"

"...Oh."

Martial artists tend to marry later than commoners, but twenty-five is about the age when people start getting married.

"Besides, Hyang and Sister Hwarin keep giving me these pitiful looks whenever they get the chance..."

"That was your condition. Accept it gracefully."

"But you said it's the right age for that sort of thing! Why are you so indifferent? Don't tell me you were born with some special constitution that gives you talent but leaves you disabled in other ways?!"

"Hey now. I'm perfectly fine. Didn't you confirm that personally last time—"

"Eeit!"

Tang Sowol twisted my face with a pout. Her hands moved with determination, as if to return the favor for what I'd done to her earlier.

The back-and-forth roughhousing lasted a while.

Then, off in the distance, a young novice monk came running toward us.

A familiar face—we'd seen him often while staying at the guest quarters, helping with errands.

Breathing hard, the novice monk blinked at our appearance, then cautiously spoke.

"Uh... the Abbot says he's ready. He asked you to come after dinner."

"Finally!"

We weren't jumping straight into removing the Restriction Seal.

First, he needed to identify what kind of seal had been placed on me. That was what these preparations were for.

For me, who didn't even know who had placed the seal, this would be valuable information.

After dinner, and only after going through a proper cleansing and purification, I finally arrived at the Main Buddha Hall.

Unlike in the daytime, the hall at night carried a strangely eerie atmosphere. Perhaps it was because of the unknown dharma instruments laid out before Master Jeong Hyeon.

Assembled with me were Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, Seo Mun-Hwarin, and even Tang Jincheon.

With everyone gathered, Master Jeong Hyeon, who had been sitting silently with eyes closed, slowly opened his mouth.

"I'll say this beforehand, but... don't get your hopes up too much. Compared to my master, I am rather unskilled when it comes to esoteric Buddhist methods."

"I'm already grateful enough that you've gone to such lengths for me."

I gave a polite bow and stepped forward. Master Jeong Hyeon, looking apologetic, averted his gaze.

“This might hurt a bit.”

“...Excuse me?”

As I blinked in confusion and tried to confirm what he meant, the ceremonial staff in his hands suddenly swung toward my head without warning.

CLANG!

I instinctively drew my sword and blocked it.

“You mustn’t block it!”

“Ah... my apologies?!”

I held back the urge to say it was his fault for not warning me earlier.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A strange silence stretched between Master Jeong Hyeon and me.

To be honest, I felt a little wronged. I mean, who wouldn't instinctively block a sudden strike with a monk's ceremonial staff, especially when he didn't explain anything beforehand?

Still, I couldn't very well lash out at someone trying to help me, so I held my tongue.

At the end of the awkward silence, it was Master Jeong Hyeon who spoke first.

"Ahem, It seems I was too hasty. Allow me to explain things briefly before we begin."

"Yes, please do."

Wearing a half-apologetic, half-awkward expression, Master Jeong Hyeon continued.

“As I mentioned before, this is a ritual to identify the nature of the restriction seal placed on you, White Moon Sword Lord. It doesn’t appear to be an ordinary seal, so it would be best to clearly understand what it is.”

“Then why did you suddenly strike me with your staff? I thought the ritual would primarily involve chanting mantras, like when Master Gakjeong performed his ceremony.”

“Of course, the mantra is important, but in this case, the ritual begins by striking your head with the staff and rebuking the impure forces.”

“That’s... rather unique.”

“My skills are limited, so it can’t be helped. After that, I will proceed based on the Diamond Heart Sutra...”

He had said he would keep it brief, but the explanation dragged on.

Still, I was able to get a better idea of what he was trying to do.

Apparently, it was a ritual that fused elements of Buddhist mantras meant to sever attachments and worldly desires with the tale of how the Buddha repelled demons beneath the Bodhi tree — all stitched together somehow into a single process.

I don't know much about Buddhist teachings, so I couldn't fully grasp it, but one thing was clear:

It's forced.

It felt like he had cobbled the ritual together to make it seem plausible, but if someone looked closely, all the seams and patches would be obvious.

“That is the essence of esoteric Buddhism — and also its limitation. Enlightenment must be attained on one's own. Even if someone helps from the side, they can't achieve it for you.”

“But in order to exercise direct power, esoteric Buddhism has distorted those teachings, hasn't it?”

“Exactly. It allows you to accomplish things that would otherwise be impossible, but the moment your mind strays, everything collapses. You end up consumed by your own delusions.”

I recall hearing that any technique intended to harm others, regardless of its purpose, leads the user into qi deviation.

Even if your enemy is a vicious demon and killing him would save thousands of lives – in the end, killing is still killing. Once you decide to attack, murderous intent is bound to arise.

If there's one thing I'm confident in, it's my ability to sense killing intent.

You can hide it, but no one can commit murder without harboring it.

Except for someone like Heaven-Slaughter Star.

When I fought him, even without ill intent, every path still led to death – a truly strange existence.

I nodded to myself as I recalled it, and at that moment, Master Jeong Hyeon paused to catch his breath, then asked,

“Any further questions?”

“None.”

“Then let’s begin again. This time, do not block it.”

He emphasized the point as he raised the ceremonial staff once more, then brought it down toward my head.

Now that I looked closely, the strike was imbued with internal energy, but it wasn’t focused outward to amplify its power — it simply lingered inside the staff.

Its descent wasn’t very fast either. No wonder I had deflected it easily before.

I closed my eyes with mild tension, and the moment the staff touched my head—

THOOM!

The impact was entirely different from what I had expected. A shockwave reverberated from my head through my entire body.

It didn’t feel like being struck with a staff — more like getting hit by a massive bell.

Yet, there was no pain. Just pure shock that spread to the far ends of my body.

Strange. Uncanny.

But my body – that of a Flowering Stage martial artist, one who had unified their Soul, Qi, and Body and harmonized all three dantians – whispered to me.

That impact hadn't struck my body, but my mind. My soul, perhaps.

It was swift and powerful, like a bolt of lightning – but it bore no hostility.

It merely swirled through my inner self, searching for something.

I had a good idea of what.

Just as Master Jeong Hyeon had said, it was looking for the Restriction Seal embedded within me.

The chants I'd heard since the staff struck began to fade. It felt as though the sound was growing distant, and then, it vanished completely.

As if confirming my suspicions, the energy that had wandered through me now focused on my head. And then—

“...Ah.”

A short breath escaped me involuntarily, overwhelmed by an unknown but all-encompassing sense of comfort.

I recognized this sensation.

It was the same comfort I had felt after failing to control my anger, charging at the Heavenly Demon, and collapsing. My body had grown cold, my breath faint, and yet in that moment, a strange tranquility had bloomed.

I had thought it was the sensation of death.

After all, many people in their final moments show peace, even if they had been in agony just seconds before.

It could be the inner peace one gains from letting go at the end... or simply a dulling of pain from excessive blood loss.

At least, that's how I interpreted it shortly after my regression.

But I was wrong.

Right now, my senses were completely focused inward. I had sealed off the world and concentrated solely on myself.

That's how I could be sure.

My heartbeat was steady, just like always, and my mind was astonishingly clear.

In other words, my body and mind were in perfect condition.

Which meant this sensation — this comfort — wasn't the feeling of death.

It was... the Restriction Seal.

The noose driven into my mind after regression. The blade that had cut me off from past and present. The thing that forced me to keep others at a distance.

And possibly, the force that might cause me to endlessly regress even after defeating the Heavenly Demon — just as he had.

I had only bad memories of it. Yet the energy the seal emitted now was impossibly, blissfully peaceful.

What a contradiction.

The moment I realized that this comfort was the seal itself, my heart wavered, unable to find solid ground.

But it didn't last long.

Not because I regained my composure on my own.

But because Master Jeong Hyeon struck me again with the staff and woke me up.

Thunk!

This time, it was a normal, physical blow. The pain brought my awareness back to the surface.

It felt like I had only briefly closed my eyes, but when I opened them again, they were dry, as if I'd slept for a long time.

No — it really had been a long time. Faint sunlight now peeked in through the cracks in the door.

Master Jeong Hyeon looked visibly exhausted, and the faces of the others who had watched the ritual were filled with anxiety.

“How long was I out?”

“A day and half, give or take.”

“...What?”

“You look like you thought it had only been a single night.”

“Well, yes. It felt like I merely blinked.”

No wonder he looked so worn out, even though he was a Flowering Stage master. No wonder the others looked so worried.

If they had stayed up the entire time, it made sense.

I didn't know exactly what techniques he had used, but after gently pushing aside the scattered dharma instruments, Master Jeong Hyeon let out a deep sigh and opened his mouth.

“Whew... please understand. I used a good deal of internal energy, and at this age, no matter your cultivation, the body wears down. I honestly don't know how my master keeps moving the way he does, even without any inner energy.”

“They say Master Gakjeong was unmatched even in external martial arts. Maybe even if his dantian is gone, his body remains strong.”

“Then I suppose I should begin training my external arts more seriously.”

He chuckled softly, and his face looked visibly lighter.

“So, how are you feeling? This was the first time I’ve performed such a ritual, and it took much longer than expected. Any discomfort?”

“None at all. Actually... I feel refreshed.”

Perhaps it was the lingering comfort of the seal’s energy, but my condition was exceptional – as if my body had been completely reset.

“That’s good. While it wasn’t a dangerous ritual, please let me know if anything strange happens later.”

“And then you’ll fix it?”

“I’ll beg my master to handle it personally.”

He smiled wryly and shook his head. Then, he straightened his posture and said,

“Well then... now comes the most important part.”

“You discovered the true nature of the seal?”

“I don’t know exactly what kind of restriction it is. But I do have a guess as to who placed it.”

“...!”

Without meaning to, my eyes widened. I leaned forward slightly to listen.

Meeting my gaze, Master Jeong Hyeon brought his palms together in prayer and smiled faintly.

“Amitabha. The seal upon you... bears the power of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva.”

“...Excuse me?”

Even I, who knew little about Buddhism, recognized the name. Kṣitigarbha was a famous bodhisattva.

Although I’d only heard the name – I didn’t actually know what kind of figure he was.

Sensing my ignorance, Master Jeong Hyeon explained further.

“You’ve heard of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, yes?”

“Oh, of course.”

Even commoners revered Avalokiteśvara. The Bodhisattva of Compassion who saves those in suffering.

Naturally, the masses would turn to such a being in their daily struggles.

Hearing my reply, Master Jeong Hyeon nodded.

“Exactly. If Avalokiteśvara saves the suffering in this life, and Maitreya Bodhisattva saves those in the next life, then Kṣitigarbha saves the beings of the past life—specifically, those in hell before their reincarnation.”

“Re...incarnation?”

In Buddhist belief, after death, people are judged in hell, pay the price for their sins, and are then reborn.

But I hadn't been sent to hell after death — I had gone back in time.

In other words, reincarnation was denied to me.

...Or perhaps this life is my reincarnation.

Still, since I had long suspected that my regression was the work of transcendent beings — perhaps immortals or Buddhas — I wasn't shaken by this.

“If it's something left behind by Kṣitigarbha, it's likely innate. As it has so far, the seal may restrict your actions, but it will never harm you.”

“I see...”

If this seal was the work of such a being, then maybe it shouldn't be removed entirely.

Not that I knew how to remove it. Even if I did, I'd have to be extremely cautious.

That's why it's all the more important to find a way to work around it while keeping it intact.

As I organized my thoughts, Master Jeong Hyeon let out a deep sigh.

“But... I don't think Kṣitigarbha was the only one involved.”

“...What do you mean?”

“The core of the seal definitely carried Kṣitigarbha's energy. One of the few dharma tools in Shaolin also resonated with it, so I couldn't have been mistaken. But...”

“There’s something else?”

“The energy surrounding the seal wasn’t Buddhist — it was Daoist. Unfortunately, I lack the insight to determine whose power it was... but it was undoubtedly from someone of very high standing.”

“...Surely not...”

“I’ll look into how to unravel the central part of the seal, but... if both the Buddhist and Daoist elements must be addressed together, then Shaolin alone won’t be enough.”

I was too stunned to respond.

I never expected a Daoist influence here.

Master Jeong Hyeon let out a hollow laugh and shook his head.

“White Moon Sword Lord... just what did you do in your past life?”

...I did kill quite a few people.

But that was due to the war with the Demonic Cult. Before that, I was just an average member of the orthodox sects.

No matter how much I think about it, I can't recall anything that would explain this.

Then again, I couldn't answer that even if I wanted to — the seal prevented it.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After hearing an explanation about my mental restrictions from Abbot Jeong Hyeon, I was leaving the Great Hero Hall with a blank expression, still dazed by the unexpected contents.

As if trying to change the mood, Tang Sowol sidled up next to me with a bashful smile.

Following her lead, the other women likewise took their places one by one—on my other side and behind me.

“Brother Cheon. Just what on earth did you do in your past life?”

“That’s right, that’s right. Cheon Hwi, what kind of karma are you even paying back?”

“In this One’s opinion, perhaps you saved a nation. Is that not why your fortune with women overflows so?”

Saying that, Seo Mun-Hwarin swept her white hair back once and tucked it behind her ear.

Her flippant tone and self-assured attitude. I knew it was said half in jest, but even so, it was the sort of remark that inevitably drew attention to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

More precisely, my gaze ended up focusing on one particular part of Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Shashak.

Seo Mun-Hwarin hurriedly covered her chest. Where had her earlier confidence gone? Her face flushed bright red as she shouted,

“T-this One shall grow from now on...!”

“Is that so.”

“This One is not merely saying it! Truly, even if only little by little, This One is growing!”

“If Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin says so, then of course I must believe it.”

“...Iik!”

I nodded with as much kindness as I could muster, yet for some reason Seo Mun-Hwarin grew angry and began smacking my back repeatedly.

Needless to say, her hands were small and she wasn't putting any inner energy into it, so it didn't really hurt.

Well.

What Seo Mun-Hwarin said about growing little by little was probably true.

Before the regression, Seo Mun-Hwarin had been half a span taller than now... no, half of half a span... yes, to be honest, about one finger joint taller than she was now.

This stemmed from the peculiar nature of rejuvenation.

If ordinary body refinement was about remodeling the flesh to suit martial arts, then rejuvenation was a phenomenon focused on becoming younger.

The mind being influenced by the younger body, the need to readjust one's senses to shortened limbs, lagging slightly behind peers in the smooth operation of inner energy...

Compared to body refinement, it had a number of minor drawbacks, but in exchange, one gained a much longer lifespan and the possibility of growth.

That was right. Setting aside Seo Mun-Hwarin's actual age, her body matched its outward appearance, so naturally not only her height but other parts could grow as well.

...Of course, that was only in theory.

Just because everyone goes through childhood doesn't mean they all grow tall.

Some are born small-framed, and others fail to grow properly due to poor nourishment.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was precisely that case.

She was simply short and slender, so no matter how much she grew, there would be little difference.

She was probably similar even before rejuvenation.

Moreover, growth itself was a form of aging, so for someone like Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had reached a high realm, even her rate of growth was slow.

Perhaps because only a few years had passed since she achieved rejuvenation, Seo Mun-Hwarin firmly believed in her own potential without a shred of doubt. Watching her for a moment, I quietly patted the top of her head.

“W-what is it! Why are you looking at This One with such eyes?!”

“It’s nothing.”

“Nothing, you say?! You look like you’re consoling a child chasing a futile dream!”

“So you noticed.”

“Mmph! Just you wait! One day This One will make you regret this!”

“I’ll be cheering you on.”

When I nodded vaguely, Seo Mun-Hwarin snorted, rose onto her tiptoes, and began smacking my shoulders instead of my back.

It felt a bit refreshing.

And so, while receiving Seo Mun-Hwarin's massage (not really), we were on our way back to the guest quarters when—

Tang Jincheon, who had been lost in thought and expertly ignoring our bickering since we left the Great Hero Hall, opened his mouth.

“By the way, son-in-law. What do you plan to do from here on?”

“Pardon? What do you mean?”

“The mental restrictions. To be honest, I never imagined it would be to this extent, so I think your thoughts are the most important here.”

“Hm. First, I should learn more. Since Daoist power is also involved, I think it might be good to seek help from Daoist sects.”

“I'll look into it separately. Among places you have ties with, Zhongnan Sect and Jeomchang Sect come to mind... but if the Tang Family acts directly, we could also put out feelers to Mount Hua and Wudang.”

“I'd rather not let too many people know, so if possible, I'd like to entrust this to the single most reliable place.”

“If it’s a Daoist sect skilled in heterodox arts, then Mosan Sect would be the first choice, but...”

“That place was exterminated quite a long time ago.”

“Indeed. Since Mosan Sect’s legacy was divided among various sects, it would be best to discreetly find out, through someone tight-lipped, which sect inherited anything related to mental restrictions or the Great Luo Immortal.”

“Then you’ll contact Zhongnan Sect first.”

“Most likely. I do have a connection with that fellow, the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal.”

Back when Tang Jincheon roamed the martial world in his youth, one of the people he traveled with had supposedly become the sect leader of Zhongnan Sect.

I hadn’t spoken with him directly for very long, but I could tell he was someone reliable.

If he was also Tang Jincheon's longtime friend, there was no better choice than the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal.

As I nodded inwardly, Tang Jincheon let out a deep sigh.

"This is getting more and more complicated. Before we proceed, let's clarify one thing. Son-in-law, do you want to have the mental restrictions lifted?"

"...That was too direct. Let's see... Right. What do you think of Daoist and Buddhist sects? Those who were originally meant to cultivate the Dao and seek enlightenment are now taking up weapons and deeply involving themselves in worldly affairs, are they not?"

It was a somewhat abrupt topic, but what mattered here wasn't what answer I gave.

If I answered positively, he would take it as me wanting the restrictions lifted. If I answered negatively, he would understand that I had no such intention for now.

After choosing my words for a moment, I slowly opened my mouth.

"I..."

At that instant, my words caught in my throat. The mental restriction had activated, but the sensation was slightly different from before.

My mouth stiffened, yet rather than an overwhelming paralysis, it was more like a strong resistance.

I could roughly guess why. The topic itself was sensitive, but I wasn't directly mentioning the mental restrictions.

Moreover, Tang Jincheon had already obtained considerable information about them from Abbot Jeong Hyeon.

Drawing up my willpower, I forcibly moved my uncooperative tongue and continued speaking.

"I... think there is a bit of a problem. It seems to stray from the essence, after all."

The sentence came out with some stuttering, but it was completed nonetheless.

Tang Jincheon, realizing that not only what was said but the intention behind it was also subject to the mental restrictions, let out a hollow chuckle.

“You must have suffered quite a bit until now, son-in-law. I understand. In any case, we’ll investigate first and decide afterward.”

“Thank you, Father-in-law.”

“For what? Considering what you’ve done for the Tang Family, this is nothing.”

“It’s not just this incident. You trusted and accepted me as your son-in-law even though I was quite suspicious, even if I did save Tang Sowol’s life.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tang Jincheon lifted the corners of his mouth in a faint smile and shook his head.

“It seems you’re mistaken about something. How much do you think I really knew about you back then, to immediately trust you?”

“However...”

“The reason I made that decision was half my own judgment, and half my belief that Sowol wouldn’t bring home a strange man.”

“...”

“Do you remember? Even before you came to the Tang Family, you were already half living together with Sowol in that cave.”

“Well, of course.”

“If you’d been a worthless fellow, Sowol wouldn’t have opened her heart like that. In the end, all I did was support what my daughter wanted to do. So direct all your thanks to Sowol.”

Saying that, Tang Jincheon pointed toward Tang Sowol.

Receiving my gaze, Tang Sowol puffed out her chest and lifted her chin, the very picture of smug pride.

As if that wasn't enough, she even pulled Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin over from both sides and wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders, as though the three of them were a single bundle.

A moment of silence flowed between Tang Jincheon and me.

No matter how used to it he'd become, was this still too much to bear?

Tang Jincheon squeezed his eyes shut as if he'd seen something he shouldn't have and muttered softly,

"At times, I wonder if I trusted too much."

"At this point, it's already too late for regrets. Stay strong."

"That's coming from you?"

Tang Jincheon shook his head in disbelief. It was a curious reaction. If not me, who else would say such a thing?

I shrugged once and changed the subject.

“With today, everything at Shaolin is finished. When do you plan to return?”

“Hoo. With no one else around, there’s no reason to stay longer. Everyone’s exhausted from not sleeping for a day, so let’s rest well tomorrow and pack our things, then depart the day after.”

“That works for me.”

As Tang Jincheon said, we were the last guests remaining at Shaolin.

Sangwan Geuk and Sama Yuryeon had apparently had no intention of lingering long at Shaolin, known as the pinnacle of orthodox sects, and left the very next day after exchanging greetings.

Namgung Dowi also returned with regret-laden sighs, saying he’d been away from home too often lately and work had piled up.

As for the Murim Alliance Leader, the moment he heard that suspicious figures were gathering around Abbot Jeong Hyeon and Jeomchang Sect, he headed straight back to the Murim Alliance to deal with it.

Well, I would be meeting the Murim Alliance Leader again soon enough.

After this matter concluded, we had agreed that I would settle urgent affairs and then stay at the Murim Alliance for a while.

I had no idea what scheme the Heavenly Demon would use to turn the Murim Alliance upside down, but to counter it, sticking together would be advantageous.

“Then I’ll mention it to the Divine Monk while we prepare tomorrow.”

Tang Jincheon, who had grown visibly more fatigued in this short time, nodded.

Two days later.

After finishing preparations to depart, I headed to the Great Hero Hall to give my final farewell to Abbot Jeong Hyeon.

“Thank you, Abbot.”

“Compared to what Benefactor White Moon Sword Lord has done, this is nothing at all.”

Abbot Jeong Hyeon spoke lightly, but it was also true that thanks to him, my plans had been drastically shortened.

He created a place where the Murim Alliance and the Black Lotus Sect could gather in trust and mediated between the two.

He also uncovered considerable information about my mental restrictions, which I had half given up on after even the Heavenly Demon failed to unravel them.

Only after exchanging brief words of mutual gratitude did I bow deeply.

“I’ll be taking my leave now.”

“Go in peace. I hope we can meet again with good news next time.”

A brief farewell in a warm atmosphere. With a somewhat lighter heart, I was descending Mount Song along the long staircase when—

“Ah.”

A memory from before the regression suddenly surfaced.

I didn't know whether it was something the Heavenly Demon orchestrated, but an incident that had occurred in the Murim Alliance around this time came to mind.

It had been an incident kept tightly under wraps, something I only heard about from surviving orthodox sect members after the Murim Alliance had fallen. Because it was already past by then, I'd dismissed it as an interesting anecdote, which was why it only now came back to me.

I hurriedly ran back up the stairs I'd just descended, and Abbot Jeong Hyeon turned toward me with a startled expression.

“What is it? Why are you running back in such a hurry? Did you forget something?”

“Yes. Could you perhaps tell me the weakness of the Diamond Vajra Body?”

“...Did Shaolin do something wrong to the benefactor?”

Abbot Jeong Hyeon’s complexion paled.

It was a misunderstanding.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Could you perhaps tell me the weakness of the Diamond Vajra Body?”

“...Did Shaolin do something wrong to the benefactor??”

Abbot Jeong Hyeon’s complexion turned deathly pale. I couldn’t tell exactly what he was thinking, but I could roughly guess.

He must have imagined me swinging my sword at a Shaolin warrior or something.

“It’s a misunderstanding.”

“Then why are you suddenly asking about something like the weakness of the Diamond Vajra Body?”

“Well...”

The reason was simple. I might soon have to cut down a martial artist who had achieved the Diamond Vajra Body.

But I couldn’t say that outright.

Shaolin was also a member of the Murim Alliance, so they had sent several warriors there, and among them, a powerful martial artist—strong enough to hold an elder’s seat—would one day suddenly achieve the Diamond Vajra Body, then, as if becoming a different person, spew curses at everyone around him and unleash indiscriminate slaughter...

How was I supposed to say something like that?

It hadn’t even happened yet, and it was too unbelievable to persuade anyone.

And the moment I brought up the time before the regression, I would be caught by the mental restrictions and wouldn't be able to so much as part my lips.

Still, I couldn't just let it go.

I didn't know exactly what had happened or why he had suddenly gone mad.

He was someone with an excellent reputation in ordinary times, and the Murim Alliance had hushed it up, saying it wasn't a case of qi deviation and that there had been a plausible reason.

In fact, it was only when even the Orthodox and Unorthodox Alliance was half-collapsed that I heard it secondhand from surviving Murim Alliance members. That said it all.

There had to have been a reason they'd needed to bury it so thoroughly.

But what mattered to me wasn't what circumstances lay behind it.

What mattered was only that it might happen around this time.

The Heavenly Demon had implied that some kind of incident would erupt inside the Murim Alliance. Naturally, I'd assumed it meant an infiltrator from the Demonic Cult was hidden within.

Normally, that would be the correct response.

The problem was that the Heavenly Demon was also a regressor.

I knew well from having navigated many events using knowledge from before the regression.

A regressor's moves didn't have convincing cause and effect. They already knew the answer and then forced the process to fit it, so it inevitably looked contrived.

If I were the Heavenly Demon, planting an infiltrator inside the Murim Alliance would be a last resort.

It could be exposed, might fail to rise to a high position, or one day change its mind and stand with the Murim Alliance instead.

It was risky, full of variables, and impossible to control. You didn't call that a plan—it was closer to a wish.

So if it were me, rather than directly causing an incident, I'd use an incident that was going to happen anyway.

I'd take a disturbance that should end small and blow it up, or strike amid the confusion.

No—considering the schemes the Heavenly Demon had shown so far, maybe it could be both.

In any case, the important thing was that I might soon have to cross blades with someone who had achieved the Diamond Vajra Body.

I chose only what I could say and spoke slowly, careful not to trigger the mental restrictions.

“I think I may have to cut something that doesn't break.”

“Hoh.”

Perhaps because he already knew about my mental restrictions, Abbot Jeong Hyeon realized this was the best answer I could give. After some deliberation, he spoke.

“I truly have no idea what Benefactor White Moon Sword Lord has realized, nor what you are planning.”

“I won’t ask you to trust me.”

“Are you going to tell me to trust Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, who placed the mental restrictions upon you? You have a rather audacious side.”

With a hollow chuckle, Abbot Jeong Hyeon toyed with his prayer beads, then nodded.

“Very well. I will tell you the weakness of the Diamond Vajra Body. However, it is neither because I blindly trust Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, nor because I find it troublesome that your sword might turn toward Shaolin. I am simply trusting the deeds of the man called Cheon Hwi that I have seen until now... and the way you did not become ruled by the killing intent within you, even though it rivaled Heaven-Slaughter Star.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed deeply to Abbot Jeong Hyeon.

I had met many martial artists who, even after reaching the Flowering Stage, had diligently trained their external arts.

Not only the Red Sand Gang's fortress lord I had faced recently, but even Sangwan Geuk had achieved considerable attainment in external arts, and among the orthodox sects, the head of the Hebei Peng Family was also famous for exceptional bones and muscles and for external arts that had perfectly blossomed from them.

At the time, I had been a Sub-Perfection master, so I couldn't precisely gauge how strong the Saber King's external arts were, but compared to the Red Sand Gang's fortress lord or Sangwan Geuk, it wouldn't have been lacking.

There were quite a few who had achieved great things not only in inner energy but also in external arts, yet among them none had truly reached the Diamond Vajra Body.

And for good reason. The Diamond Vajra Body referred to those who could block sword energy even without protective energy—never a realm to be taken lightly.

In the history of Murim, there had been a handful who achieved the Diamond Vajra Body, but most of them were from Shaolin.

And the one who would run rampant after achieving the Diamond Vajra Body this time was also from Shaolin, so Shaolin must know something.

With my eyes sharpened to miss not a single word, I watched Abbot Jeong Hyeon slowly open his mouth.

“The Diamond Vajra Body certainly has a weakness. That is...”

“That is?”

“That the Diamond Vajra Body has only not broken yet.”

...What?

I blinked in confusion, and Abbot Jeong Hyeon continued with an awkward expression.

“It is the truth. The Diamond Vajra Body is not invincible as the rumors in Murim claim. It is simply that one has attained external arts so hard that no one of the current age can easily pierce it.”

“So... you mean if I just hit harder, it breaks?”

“Yes. To begin with, do you know that not all Diamond Vajra Bodies are the same? This is not a realm.”

“No. Until now, I thought the Diamond Vajra Body was a kind of realm. Just as there are realms defined by the unity of mind, energy, and body—like first-rate or Peak Stage—and realms reached through enlightenment—like Divine Sword Unity—wasn’t the realm reached through physical tempering the Diamond Vajra Body?”

“The knack of moving the body can change with a single insight, but pure physical strength can only advance through long and grueling training. The only thing that suddenly strengthens the flesh as if stepping over a stair is, at most, body refinement. And even that, strictly speaking, is not a realm of the flesh.”

That was right. Body refinement was when mind, energy, and body became one, and the body was recalibrated so it could fully contain lofty enlightenment and inner energy.

It didn’t make one stronger—it made one able to wield the strength one already possessed better.

“You look flustered.”

“It’s just... it’s not what I expected, so my mind is still spinning.”

“Heh heh. Then I will give you an easier example. Last time, it seemed Sangwan Geuk took quite a liking to you... did you know? If it were three hundred years ago, Sangwan Geuk’s external arts would have been called the Diamond Vajra Body.”

“...Pardon?”

“Just as those living today can build a taller tower than those three hundred years ago, martial arts have naturally developed with the passage of time.”

“I suppose so, but... to that extent?”

“You must look at the larger picture. Not only external arts—martial arts overall have risen in level.”

“Ah.”

If the Diamond Vajra Body meant external arts so difficult to deal with by the standards of the era, then the Diamond Vajra Body of the past wouldn’t have needed to be as hard as what I imagined now.

“Think of it. When describing the amount of inner energy, people speak in terms of years, do they not? Once it exceeds sixty years, they call it a ‘gapja.’ But is that truly inner energy built by training a heart method for exactly those years?”

“Not at all.”

In my case, upon reaching the Flowering Stage, I had become capable of holding more than three gapja of inner energy in my dantian.

But that didn’t mean I had truly accumulated one hundred eighty-odd years of training.

Even excluding the inner energy I had filled with spirit medicines along the way, it was an amount that would require nearly a hundred years of heart-method cultivation alone.

This inflated measure of inner energy wasn’t just a martial artist’s bravado—it was because the standard was based on the Three Talents Heart Method.

The most widely spread heart method, and the first martial art to be distributed.

Now it was basic practice hardly worth calling a third-rate art, sold for a few coins in the marketplace, but in the distant past, countless martial artists would have devoted their lives to the Three Talents Heart Method alone, because there weren't many kinds of martial arts at all.

As those martial artists endured trial and error and began organizing various things, a custom naturally took root: defining inner-energy quantity using the Three Talents Heart Method as the baseline.

“To give another example, there is Tai Chi Fist and Six Harmonies Fist. Both long predate the Daoist sects of today. In the past, when Quanzhen Sect still stood strong, they were judged as peerless, world-class martial arts. But what are they considered now?”

“Not as poorly treated as the Three Talents Heart Method, but they're regarded as third-rate to second-rate martial arts—things you learn before moving on to the next art.”

“Exactly. And this applies to external arts as well... even to the Diamond Vajra Body that people so revere.”

As time passed, the energy of heaven and earth diminished, yet the martial arts of those who handled it advanced beyond that.

So perhaps today's Diamond Vajra Body, too, might in the future be no more than a decent external art.

"I understand. But can this really be called the Diamond Vajra Body's weakness?"

"The swift is easy to break, the heavy is easy to avoid, and the dazzling is easy to scatter. But is there any way to deal with one who is merely ordinary and solid?"

Unlike the subtle principles of speed, weight, and change, a body made hard through simple time and conditioning had no particular weakness.

Honestly, it made sense. If it had no distinctive feature, where would the weakness be?

I was about to feel disappointed, but Abbot Jeong Hyeon wasn't finished.

"Therefore, benefactor, you should face it in an ordinary way as well."

"Ordinary... you say?"

“How do you usually break something hard?”

“By striking harder, of course.”

“We have returned to the beginning. Not bad. But if striking harder doesn’t work, what then?”

“Then I strike again.”

“And if it still does not break??”

“If there’s any method other than striking until it breaks, I don’t know it.”

At my words, Abbot Jeong Hyeon pulled the corner of his mouth into a grin.

“That is the correct answer.”

Only then did I understand what he had been getting at.

The weakness of the Diamond Vajra Body: not panicking just because it was called the Diamond Vajra Body and searching for some other path, but swinging one's sword with the belief that it could be broken.

It sounded like mere mindset, as though changing one's heart wouldn't change anything, yet surprisingly, it changed quite a lot.

Willpower was the force that dragged the impossible into the realm of the possible. The moment my willpower surpassed the accumulated history of training that the Diamond Vajra Body's flesh had built, the Diamond Vajra Body would no longer be the Diamond Vajra Body.

“Thank you for the teaching.”

When I bowed again, Abbot Jeong Hyeon shook his head with a bitter smile.

“I spoke grandly, but in the end, as Benefactor White Moon Sword Lord said, it's not truly something you'd call a 'weakness.' Still, if you feel grateful, will you grant me one request?”

“Please, speak.”

“Do you truly have no particular feelings toward Shaolin? If not, then at least for today’s sake, I would like you to speak first before you draw your sword.”

“Just what do you take me for, Abbot...???”

“If you had not met a young lady of the Tang Family, a once-in-an-age talent who would have seized the position of next leader of the Black Lotus Sect by now?”

Since, before the regression, I had received similar treatment, I had nothing to say.

To read people this well...

It seemed not just anyone could become Shaolin’s abbot.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After returning from hearing about the Diamond Vajra Body from Abbot Jeong Hyeon, I rejoined the group that had been waiting for me beneath Mount Song.

“Was everything resolved well with the matter that reminded you of Brother Cheon?”

“Yes. Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Oh my. We’ve already grown used to waiting for Brother Cheon, so there’s no need to worry.”

“You didn’t storm off without any explanation and get sulky, did you?”

“Of course not. I merely thought this would be a good opportunity to engrave my importance into Brother Cheon’s heart.”

“Heo.”

Before me, utterly dumbfounded, Tang Sowol lifted her chin brazenly and placed a hand over her chest. Then she urged me for an answer.

“Well? If there’s something you’d like to say to me, now would be the time.”

“I’m always grateful.”

“That’s far too ordinary.”

“Then how about this—because you were here, I didn’t lose my way back.”

“Mm. That was fairly touching, but still a bit lacking.”

“This isn’t easy. I’m not exactly eloquent with words... Then how about this?”

With a grin tugging at the corner of my lips, I reached out and took Tang Sowol’s hand. Warm flesh settled snugly into my palm.

She hadn’t undergone rebirth through bone transformation, nor had she been lax in her training, yet her hands were smooth and slender without a single callus.

Hadn’t she said that after reaching the Sub-Perfection stage, she learned a martial art that removed calluses? I’d heard it was a type of body-manipulation art, quite popular among female martial artists.

Thinking that there truly were all kinds of martial arts in the world, I brought my hand closer.

Palm upon palm. Our fingertips teased one another, sharing warmth, and before long, the angle shifted.

Fingers slid past each other, brushing lightly, and naturally interlaced. I asked again,

“I won’t tell you not to wait. I’ll always return to clasp hands like this, so for my sake, leave one hand free.”

Tang Sowol stared blankly at her hand and then at my face, before nodding with an expression of complete satisfaction.

“Pass! That was excellent, Brother Cheon! Just keep doing that from now on!”

“I’ll try.”

Fortunately, it seemed to please her.

I let out a sigh of relief—but only briefly. As if refusing to look directly at us, Tang Jincheon’s eyes, which had been chasing empty space with a hazy gaze, regained focus.

He wasn’t broad-minded enough to completely ignore Tang Sowol and me flirting, but reacting to every little thing was exhausting—something he’d surely learned over the past few years.

“So? What exactly did my son-in-law rush up there for?”

“Oh, it was nothing. I merely went to ask Abbot Jeong Hyeon to teach me a method to counter the Diamond Vajra Body.”

“Son-in-law. How did you come back looking so intact? Don’t tell me—!”

“I don’t know why both the Abbot and Father-in-law harbor such ominous preconceptions about me, but I simply received instruction in an ordinary, peaceful manner.”

“Are you sure that’s not just how it felt to you?”

“Tsk. Can’t you even take a joke? Wipe that pitiful expression off your face. Isn’t it creepy?”

“I learned it from Tang Sowol.”

“Now that I look again, you do seem a bit pitiful.”

Tang Jincheon solemnly retracted his own words. The Tang Family really was harmonious.

Watching our exchange, Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head and spoke up.

“That aside, it’s surprising to hear you say you received instruction after asking for help in breaking a sect’s secret art. Did you perhaps make some sort of deal?”

“Well. If you call it a deal, then yes. The Abbot burdened me with a debt of the heart.”

“To these ears, it sounds like you went and acted like a bandit.”

“It turns out the Diamond Vajra Body itself isn’t some Shaolin-exclusive secret art, but rather a term referring to the highest attainment of external body cultivation

of the era. It's just that many Shaolin warrior monks achieved it and were called such, leading to the misunderstanding.”

In simple terms, there was no such thing as an Diamond Vajra Divine Art like people commonly imagined as Shaolin's secret technique.

After I explained it clearly, Seo Mun-Hwarin finally nodded.

“Ah. If that's the case, it makes sense. You went to ask because you already knew this.”

“No? I only learned it just now from the Abbot. Until then, I also believed something like an Diamond Vajra Divine Art truly existed—at least some realm known only to Shaolin.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin stared at me silently with an expression that clearly said, Then you really did go up there with the mindset of a bandit, didn't you?

It was truly narrow-minded and full of malice, but since she didn't say it aloud, I decided to let it slide with just a few presses on her crown.

I had Seol Lihyang press down firmly on Seo Mun-Hwarin's head and then slowly started walking.

Behind me came Seol Lihyang's giggling, Seo Mun-Hwarin's embarrassed yet pleased voice, and the lingering warmth in my hand as I organized my thoughts.

I'd brushed it off half-jokingly, but it was true that I felt a debt of the heart toward Abbot Jeong Hyeon for his help.

Grateful, yet with no suitable way to repay it—thus, a debt of the heart. But what was the Tang Family's motto?

Repay kindness twofold, repay grudges tenfold.

Now that I was part of the Tang Family, I should follow its creed.

A Shaolin elder was scheduled to suddenly commit mass slaughter at the Murim Alliance.

I didn't know what circumstances drove him to it, nor the exact point when he would snap... but I knew it would happen before long.

Before my regression, his Shaolin background, his usual reputation, and rumors heard secondhand combined to bury the incident somehow.

In fact, it almost succeeded. Whether coincidence or not, from after the incident until the Demonic Cult invaded, Shaolin's external activities noticeably decreased.

It wasn't to the point of sealing their gates, but they stayed holed up on Mount Song to the extent that anyone could sense something was off—almost as if in self-reflection.

I intended to stop it.

And while I was at it, I planned to repay the debt owed to Abbot Jeong Hyeon... to Shaolin.

The best course was to remove the reason the elder went berserk in the first place.

Failing that, I could subdue him without killing him and hand him over to Shaolin.

It was the moment I added a clear line to a schedule that had previously held only vague goals.

After finishing matters at Shaolin, we decided to head to the Murim Alliance—but that didn't mean leaving immediately.

At the very least, shouldn't we explain the outcome of this meeting to the Tang Family's retainers before departing?

Tang Sowol and I were often away from home, so it might be fine for us, but it wasn't easy for Tang Jincheon, the clan head, to leave the Tang Family indefinitely.

The present Sichuan Tang Family was being spoken of as the greatest family under heaven and was in the midst of rapid expansion.

The absence of the final decision-maker would inevitably put the brakes on many of the family's moves.

Thus, I cautiously asked Tang Jincheon, who was walking ahead.

“Thank you for your concern, Father-in-law, but is this really all right? I have Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin with me, so I’ll manage somehow.”

“That’s enough. If I can’t protect what must be protected before profit, how could I stand proudly as clan head, as a father, and as a father-in-law? Don’t overthink it. I’ll simply entrust full authority to Cheong for a while.”

Tang Cheong wasn’t young. Naturally, his successor training was nearing its final stage.

Though his martial prowess was somewhat lacking, he was said to be more than capable as the young clan head—handling internal affairs and building his own power base.

If so, things would work out somehow.

“I’m worried that the Heavenly Demon might be plotting something. Just as with the Four Dark Alliances, I fear he might send someone to the Tang Family as well.”

The Demonic Cult’s martial artists were comparatively weak. It wasn’t that they were strong—rather, the Heavenly Demon was abnormal. Others lacked either skill or talent.

Thus, even the strongest besides the Heavenly Demon were only at the Sub-Perfection stage... yet hadn't the Heavenly Demon already elevated the Sword Demon, if only halfway, into the Flowering Stage?

He wasn't a complete Flowering Stage master, but he was clearly on a different level from Sub-Perfection martial artists.

If even a half-Flowering Stage opponent attacked the Tang Family, the clan—having no absolute master left to oppose them—would be overwhelmed unilaterally.

Hearing this, Tang Jincheon let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

“The Tang Family isn't as easy a place as my son-in-law thinks.”

“I've never thought it was easy.”

“Then answer me. Why do you think poison is dangerous?”

“Because it's insidious and lethal?”

“Not wrong, but there’s a bigger reason. Once made, if one knows how to handle it properly, most poisons can be used by anyone.”

“Ah.”

Tang Sowol and Tang Jincheon, born with poison-spirit constitutions or transformed through rebirth into complete poison beings, could emit poison as naturally as using martial arts.

Ordinary Tang Family martial artists, however, carried poison with them and applied it through various methods.

Thus, poison arts were closer to techniques of how to spread poison more effectively.

If one set aside the premise of surely poisoning the opponent and considered only whether poison could be used at all, then even a third-rate martial artist—if they knew the handling well—could wield terrifyingly lethal toxins.

Well. There might be the minor side effect of one’s own body melting after a single use, but still.

“The poisons the Tang Family has accumulated over time are far from few. And thanks to you annihilating the Thousand Poison Gate, we also brought back all the poisons and knowledge left there.”

“Come to think of it, the Poison Demon was a Sub-Perfection master and yet handled poison that even worked on Flowering Stage martial artists.”

“As the Tang Family stands now, assuming the battle is fought within our grounds, even the Murim Alliance Lord wouldn’t deal with us easily.”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to invite the Murim Alliance Lord one day, poison him, and then swallow the Alliance whole—!”

“I’ve never even considered such a thing. Do you think I’m you?”

“I was joking.”

“Please don’t joke like that elsewhere. Thanks to you, my heart flutters every single day at my age.”

“But I have Tang Sowol.”

“That was sarcasm!”

Tang Jincheon shouted in alarm, then soon let out a deep sigh with a weary expression.

“Anyway, don’t worry. As you said, if it’s only a half-Flowering Stage opponent, they won’t even cross half our threshold. Of course, if the Heavenly Demon himself comes, that’s another story.”

“In that case, even if we’re all here, it would be hard to predict victory.”

“Perhaps because I’ve never seen it myself, I just can’t believe it.”

Scratching his head once, Tang Jincheon continued.

“Still, even if we leave things to Cheong, it’ll be hard to proceed as before. It can’t be helped. For a while, we’ll halt business expansion and focus on solidifying our foundation.”

“Oh. The Chief Steward will be delighted. Less work, after all.”

“What nonsense is that?”

“Oh?”

“Strengthening our foundation involves just as much work as expansion. We’ve started more projects than I can count...”

“Uh... I know I’m not one to say this, but isn’t that being a bit too harsh on the Chief Steward?”

“Hmph. We’re continually increasing manpower, and this time I’ll appoint those I’ve been watching closely as Deputy Stewards to assist him, so it’ll be better than before.”

“Oh?”

“Though they’ll also take on the additional work created by the Orthodox-Unorthodox Pact.”

“Oh...?”

After arriving at the Tang Family, Tang Jincheon entrusted full authority to Tang Cheong as planned.

Upon hearing the policy of focusing on internal consolidation and the details of the Orthodox-Unorthodox Pact, the Chief Steward wore a smile of utter enlightenment.

It was astonishingly similar to the smiles of the eminent monks I'd seen at Shaolin. Looking closer, he was actually standing unconscious.

Fortunately, he came back to his senses upon hearing that Deputy Stewards would be appointed.

Anyway, after wrapping up matters at the Tang Family, we headed to the Murim Alliance.

After greeting the waiting Alliance Lord, I decided to put the plan I'd been mulling over into action.

“By the way, Alliance Lord. I heard that among the Murim Alliance elders, there’s one from Shaolin. Do you know where he is?”

“Hmm? If you mean that elder, he’s probably in his office. Why? Is there something you need to convey from Shaolin?”

“No. I just wanted to request a spar.”

“A s-spar?”

The Murim Alliance Lord made a baffled expression at the idea of someone requesting a spar with a person of higher cultivation than themselves.

Taking a cue from the Chief Steward’s recent expression, I put on the most harmless smile I could muster.

“By the way, are incidents where an arm flies off due to a mistake during a spar common in the Murim Alliance?”

“You lunatic! Are you really going to carry out that insane plan of cutting down suspicious people one by one?!”

The Murim Alliance Lord shrieked and reflexively grabbed his cudgel.

How unfair.

It all came from the best of intentions.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The horrified Lord of the Murim Alliance grabbed his staff, *The Tagubong*.

"You madman! Are you really planning to carry out that insane plan of cutting down every suspicious person one by one?!"

Panic and anguish. And a hint of anger, overshadowed by sorrow, clearly revealed in his eyes. Seeing that, I understood.

The Lord of the Murim Alliance. The old beggar who once burned everything for righteousness, he must see me as a young man with talent but who has gone astray.

It feels unjust.

All my words came from good intentions.

I hastily shook my head and spoke, trying to calm the Murim Alliance Lord.

“It’s a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding... Fine, I’ll hear you out first. Since the last conference, have you come into conflict with Shaolin? Or is it a personal grudge with that elder, the Diamond Arhat?”

Though he said he’d listen, he still gripped the Tagubong tightly.

"Aren't you being a bit too wary of me? I bear no ill will toward Shaolin or that elder. In fact, today was the first time I even heard of the title Diamond Arhat."

"Wouldn't it be stranger not to be cautious of someone who asks if it's okay to cut off a man's arm? Think about your own past actions."

My past actions, he says. At most, I killed an entire group of warriors, including a Peak Stage expert who targeted Tang Sowol when I was fifteen. I overturned a Hao Clan branch that tried to forcefully take Seol Lihyang.

On my way to visit the Wudang Sect, I rescued the Ghost Shadow Thief but ended up annihilating the assassins targeting him. After several years of focused cultivation, I went to the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering and, radiating intense killing intent, was publicly kidnapped by Seo Mun-Hwarin.

While others searched for me, I wiped out the Black Heaven Gate, and the Master of the Black Lotus Sect gave me the title Blood Flame Sword Demon.

I suddenly kidnapped the heirs of the Peng and Eon Clans, claiming they were in danger, and killed Bloodflame Fist Demon, one of the few famous martial artists in the Demonic Cult.

Later, when Tang Sowol was kidnapped, I single-handedly wiped out the Thousand Poison Gate, and when I declared that I would subjugate the Green Forest Bandits, I truly cut down the majority of them, including the Chief.

I tried imagining things from the Lord of the Murim Alliance's perspective, who must have received reports on all of this.

"Of course."

"Yes. Do you understand now? I'm sorry to say this, but do you see now why I'm so wary of you...?"

"Aren't I a flawless orthodox martial artist? I really don't get it."

The Lord of the Murim Alliance tightly shut his eyes. He stopped talking and took a few deep breaths. Then, with a trembling voice, he asked,

"W-Which part made you think that?"

"Didn't I kill all those people to protect someone else? And every single one of them deserved to die anyway."

No matter how you dress it up, a martial artist is no more than a butcher. If someone spends their life finding better ways to kill, what else would you call them but a butcher?

However, when the sword is needed and others turn away, those who step forward and wield it willingly for a greater cause—we call them orthodox warriors.

Just as I view the sword as a tool despite liking it, martial arts are also a tool to kill, and killing itself is only a means to protect more precious things.

A killing intent not for the sake of killing, but to protect something.

Therefore, one must only swing the sword when necessary, avoid meaningless slaughter, and once the sword is drawn, decisively cut down the enemy before them.

What truly matters is not the power in one's hand, but the small warmth held in the *heartscape*.

As I explained this fragment of enlightenment—one that spanned both my previous life and present, and led me to the Flowering Stage—the rigid brows of the Lord of the Murim Alliance slightly eased.

“I see. I apologize. You are indeed an orthodox martial artist, White Moon Sword Lord. Though a bit extreme.”

“I'm relieved to be acknowledged, even now.”

“But that’s why I’m even more curious. Why exactly did you challenge that elder to a duel, and even considered cutting off his arm?”

“Well...”

Unlike before, this was difficult to explain properly.

After all, this was a plan based on the assumption that the Heavenly Demon would act as a regressor.

What if this Diamond Arhat attained Diamond Invincibility through relentless training, but due to some reason, lost his mind and went on a killing spree?

What if the Heavenly Demon merely added a little push to escalate the situation?

From a regressor’s perspective, there aren’t many ways to achieve such significant outcomes with so little effort.

Looking back at the Heavenly Demon’s plans thus far, most of them were like that.

He incited those dissatisfied with the Tang Clan to attack Tang Sowol, or used the secret affair between the heirs of the Peng and Eon Clans to secretly spread a dangerous elixir and fuel conflict.

When the Green Forest Chief was losing influence and looked like he would run away, he sent the King of Assassins to give him a hand, forcing him to make a desperate counterattack.

I don't know the exact circumstances, but the Soul Reapers joining the Demonic Cult probably happened in a similar way.

Knowing that something is bound to happen, and then adding a small weight to tip the outcome in your favor—that was the Heavenly Demon's method. Weakening and dividing the martial world of Murim until his own power was fully grown.

All while thoroughly hiding his own presence... In a sense, it's an incredibly efficient method.

In contrast, I've been struggling to prevent things from happening.

The difference in our approaches, despite both foreseeing the future, is simple.

The number of regressions.

The Heavenly Demon has undoubtedly regressed far more times than I have, and thus knows far more.

Because of that, what might have ended as coincidence turned into a part of his grand scheme, and I only joined in later, desperately trying to overturn the board.

The real issue is that I only realized this structure after meeting the Heavenly Demon through the Black Lotus Sect.

The Heavenly Demon could likely have hidden the fact that he was a regressor until the very end if he had wanted to.

But he didn't.

Even now, I don't know what his true goal is. Unlike other Demonic Cultists, he doesn't seem to bear personal grudges against martial artists. So why does he want to destroy the martial world?

Not only that, he revealed his regression to me and even tried to help me grow stronger.

Twisted though it may be, that was undeniably a show of goodwill.

And the experience of cutting down a man who had achieved Diamond Invincibility might become a stepping stone to an even higher realm.

Of course, I have no intention of playing along with the Heavenly Demon's plans.

I don't know what lies in the direction he's headed, but what's clear is that it involves destroying the martial world of Murim.

The people I've formed bonds with, the Tang Clan of Sichuan, and Tang Sowol.

That's why I must find a path of my own, one that isn't swayed by the Heavenly Demon.

To give an example using this case... perhaps I could eliminate the cause of the Diamond Arhat's madness, or if it's already too late, cut off one of his arms to prevent him from achieving Diamond Invincibility.

That would protect the prestige of Shaolin, and although damaged, the Diamond Arhat would still survive—perfect to repay the favor I owe to Master Jeong Hyeon.

However, to properly explain this, I'd have to mention events from before the regression.

Naturally, that would trigger the mental restriction.

Unlike my party members or Master Jeong Hyeon, the Lord of the Murim Alliance doesn't know about my mental restriction, and I have no intention of revealing that vulnerability to him.

So I had no choice.

I quickly sorted through my thoughts and separated what to say and what to keep.

Then, with the most nonchalant voice I could muster, I spoke.

“People don't die just because they lose one arm.”

“If losing one arm means saving many others, I'm sure even the Diamond Arhat would be pleased.”

“A duel is not permitted. Not just with that elder, but with anyone inside the Murim Alliance!”

“Excuse me?”

“I beg you, until the infiltrator is uncovered, please just stay still and don’t do anything...”

The request of the Murim Alliance Lord, who despite reaching the Flowering Stage and having slowed aging, looked like he had aged a decade in just a few moments.

Feigning hesitation, I sighed.

“Phew. Fine. Then I’ll truly do nothing but talk.”

“Can’t you just not meet him at all?”

“Haven’t I compromised enough already? I made a solemn promise to my fiancée, and I intend to keep it.”

“If you’re going that far... very well. Just to be clear, swinging with the sword still in its sheath or using your fists instead also isn’t allowed.”

“Yes.”

“Look me in the eyes. Do I look like someone who would twist words and pull something like that in front of the Alliance Lord?”

The Murim Alliance Lord looked like he had more to say, but in the end, he simply nodded.

Unfortunately, by the time my conversation with the Murim Alliance Lord ended, it was already late, and the surroundings had darkened.

Instead of barging in, I decided to wait until tomorrow and headed to the guest room provided by the Alliance.

It was a place I had stayed before, so the path was familiar.

When I opened the door to my room—

As always, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin were gathered inside.

They treated my room like their own and gathered here often, so that was nothing new. However...

The problem was that it wasn't just the three of them.

Tang Jincheon. For some reason, he too was quietly seated in my room.

Unlike his daughter, he had a rather grim expression. His mouth was tightly shut, and his dark green eyes, like Sowol's, were glaring as if interrogating me.

Tang Jincheon was radiating the full weight of the Tang Clan Lord, and the three women gathered before him also wore serious expressions.

Something... Something was going on.

“I’ve returned. Why is the atmosphere so heavy? It feels like you were having a fun conversation without me.”

“Oh, you’re back, Brother Cheon? You said you had something to do—did it go well?”

“It took longer than expected, but I managed. But things seem serious over here.”

After finishing my greeting with the Murim Alliance Lord, I stayed behind to talk while the others dispersed to rest. Seems like something happened in the meantime.

As soon as our eyes met, Tang Sowol’s frozen expression melted into a smile and she nodded.

“Yes, it was an important conversation.”

“What kind of conversation?”

“It started with whether Father would be happy if you brought a dowry.”

“Hold on, dowry? I don’t recall hearing anything like that. What are you talking about?”

“Hm? What kind of dowry would a live-in son-in-law bring? Obviously, a grandchild.”

...Good heavens. So they asked Tang Jincheon if he’d be happy to receive a grandchild as dowry?

“Why on earth would you do that...?”

“Well, because your full conquest isn’t far off, is it? I’ve already heard all sorts of things from Hyang and Hwarin unni.”

...I’m being conquered?

“Fufu. Just realizing it now? But even if you’ve caught on, it’s too late. Brother Cheon, you’re already someone who can’t live without not only me but also Hyang and Hwarin unni.”

“That kind of phrasing might cause misunderstandings since nothing’s happened yet... but I suppose you’re not wrong.”

I said that while glancing at Tang Jincheon, and Tang Sowol proudly tilted her chin.

Looking back, I’ve changed a lot compared to when I first entered the Tang Clan.

Even though I joined as a son-in-law, I firmly resolved to keep Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin by my side too.

Now that I think about it, it does feel like I was slowly drawn in by Tang Sowol... but it wasn’t unpleasant.

After all, as much as I adjusted to her, she adjusted to me too.

That’s what living together is, isn’t it?

So I nodded and carefully asked.

“So? What did Father-in-law say?”

“He got angry.”

“We were in the middle of being scolded.”

“Brother Cheon, I think you need to come here and get scolded with us.”

Tang Sowol quietly slid over and made space for me to sit.

Yeah... This is right.

What kind of father would smile and nod after hearing his daughter is planning to have a child before marriage and even bring in other wives?

Tang Jincheon, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke. His tone was low and calm, but laced with complex emotion.

“Son-in-law.”

“Yes.”

I quietly knelt down.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

No martial artist can truly have a normal mindset.

Whether orthodox or unorthodox, there are no exceptions. No matter what anyone says, martial arts are a form of power that can harm others. Simply holding such power already places you outside the bounds of ordinary.

In life, people constantly face large and small problems, and every time, they are forced to choose how to deal with them.

And for martial artists, there is an additional choice—overturning the situation with force.

Naturally, such a mindset drifts further and further from what is considered normal, and inevitably, some people will start to lose their sanity.

Moreover, martial artists often fight for their lives. After experiencing near-death situations or the deaths of those around them, staying mentally stable becomes almost impossible.

Whether it's just a matter of degree or manner, none of them are truly sane.

Of course, if you search hard enough, you might find someone still in their right mind.

Most likely, they're people who haven't been training in martial arts for very long.

That's why I dare say that all martial artists are a little insane in their own way.

All the more so if they're high-level experts who think spending every day training is perfectly normal.

“In that sense, Tang Sowol, you're not exactly ordinary either...”

“Ehh, isn't asking my one and only father how many grandchildren he wants more an act of filial piety?”

“If we weren’t unmarried yet, and you didn’t have two other women by your side, maybe.”

Just moments ago, Tang Jincheon had finished a long speech—full of scolding, sighing, and a touch of concern—before he left.

Even with a body that’s reached the Flowering Stage, I could still feel extreme fatigue, yet for some reason, Tang Sowol looked as carefree as always.

“Sigh. I don’t know what you were thinking. Not that I’m blaming you.”

“Mm. I’m sorry?”

“No, I’m not blaming you. It was just... so sudden. I just thought, maybe you could have picked a better method or timing.”

“I’ve thought a bit about that too... But Hyang already made up her mind a long time ago, and though she was a bit late, Sister Hwarin has finally become honest with herself. So I figured it would be best to say things as soon as possible.”

“Is there a reason behind that?”

“Yes. Do you remember what I told you about those outsiders who keep trying to set me up with others?”

“I remember...”

As the Tang Clan of Sichuan began to be spoken of as the strongest of the Five Supreme Clans, and my fame was rising, more people started asking if Tang Sowol had ambitions to become the next clan leader by pushing out Tang Cheong.

“I still don’t see what that has to do with this situation.”

“I brought up the matter of children so I could tie up the successor issue in one go.”

Saying that with a bright smile, Tang Sowol pulled Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was sitting beside her, onto her lap.

“Huh?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, dazed from being relaxed, was pulled over like a doll. She briefly glanced around to assess the situation, then spaced out again, seemingly lost in thought.

“Look. Sister Hwarin may be the head of the Seo Mun Clan, but she’s currently a guest of the Tang Clan—and getting smothered with my affection.”

“Putting aside whether that’s the proper way to treat someone older, if you’re asking whether it suits the position of a clan head... it really doesn’t.”

“Yes, but what if she had a child? Then she’d stop wandering around to fight, and even if we’re close, she’d stop living as a guest in someone else’s household.”

That’s true. Even if it’s small and humble, she’d probably move out and try to properly re-establish her clan.

“And Hyang?”

“I don’t care where I live. What matters is who’s beside me... My legs are numb.”

Seol Lihyang shrugged as she spoke. Fair enough. She’d been kneeling for quite a while.

I pulled her stiff legs onto my lap and began gently massaging them, starting from the soles of her feet up to her calves.

“Hnngh...?”

Seol Lihyang flinched at first from my touch, but her expression quickly relaxed.

Seeing that, Tang Sowol giggled and spoke.

“Fufu. Well, that’s Hyang. What about me?”

“Ah...”

It must look like she intends to give up the successor position and focus on raising children. But—

Tang Jincheon is no fool. He should have understood Tang Sowol’s intentions by now.

“Indeed. There’s probably no clearer way to show your father you have no interest in being the next head.”

“Yes, and I’m sure Father will let some of this information leak out as well. Maybe he’ll grumble to close friends, or ask someone to find land for rebuilding the Seo Mun Clan, or start buying childcare items.”

That would naturally reach the ears of outsiders watching the Tang Clan and discourage anyone thinking of tempting Tang Sowol with ambition.

“I get the gist of it. Still, I don’t know about this method...”

“Oh my, that’s just one of the reasons. Just one of many. More than anything, even without all that, I needed to make it clear to Father. That although Brother Cheon is a son-in-law, he will take in other wives, and I’ve given my permission—so don’t complain later.”

“Then why did you keep it a secret from me...?”

“Ah, well, half of it was because I wanted to tease you, like I just did.”

“Half?!”

I let out a stunned chuckle and shook my head as I started massaging Seol Lihyang’s other leg.

“And the other half is because I was embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed, huh.”

“Yes. Even I can’t bring myself to ask you how many kids you’d like each of us to have.”

That would be... quite awkward indeed.

My face flushed with heat, and Tang Sowol’s did too.

While the two of us sat there flustered, Seo Mun-Hwarin was still deep in thought, and Seol Lihyang... had no thoughts at all. Because she simply didn’t have any.

For a while, silence fell over the room.

Then, as if she had a sudden realization, Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes widened.

Clap!

She clapped her small hands together and buried the back of her head deep into Tang Sowol's chest. It looked fluffy.

People always crave what they don't have...

“This one was overthinking things far too much!”

“What do you mean?”

“If we have multiple children, one can carry on the Seo Mun Clan's line, and the others can choose where they want to belong! Why did I think it had to be one or the other!”

You were thinking about that?

It made me feel a bit dizzy, but... it was an important matter nonetheless.

I am, after all, the Tang Clan's son-in-law. That means my children will fundamentally be part of a Tang Clan branch family.

Unlike Seol Lihyang, who has no issue fully becoming part of the Tang Clan, Seo Mun-Hwarin has the duty of reviving her clan. Naturally, she'd have complicated thoughts.

Well, be that as it may.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, what are you blurting out all of a sudden...?”

“Oh dear, just what were you imagining while thinking that...”

I can't help but tease Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“W-What?!”

Realizing she'd been misunderstood, Seo Mun-Hwarin flailed her arms and legs, while Tang Sowol and I burst into laughter.

To talk and laugh about our future together like this—what a joyful thing it is.

But in the end, if the path toward that future is blocked, then the priority is to clear the path.

The satisfaction of having happiness within reach—something I'd chased all my life.

And the weight of anxiety, that everything might be shattered once again by the Heavenly Demon, as it was before the regression.

I forced a smile to conceal the heaviness pressing on my heart and brought the day to a close.

The next morning, as soon as it was light, I headed to the place where the Murim Alliance's Elder Yi—the Diamond Arhat—was said to be.

Though I've visited the Murim Alliance a few times before, I don't know every path in this vast manor, so I first decided to find a suitable guide.

“Do you have a moment?”

“Who's calling this early in the... W-Wait, are you the White Moon Sword Lord?!”

A young man with a face full of fatigue. His uniform was blue, with a large character for wind written on his back for easy identification.

He was clearly a member of the Clear Wind Unit, one of the Murim Alliance's core combat divisions.

One odd thing, though—he recognized me the moment he saw my face.

The Clear Wind Unit mainly consists of collateral lineages from renowned clans or talented late-stage juniors who performed well at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. Their overall level is high, and they often participate in real missions.

Since they usually interact with people who recognize them, not the other way around, I didn't expect him to know my face so easily.

The way he sighed deeply despite the good weather—like he'd rather be doing anything but working—probably tied into that.

Anyway, they're always running around busy, so I figured they'd know my alias and feats, but not my face...

So I decided to just ask directly.

“You know me?”

“Of course! Our unit leader is Yeon Sahu from the Jinju Yeon Clan! Not only do we hear stories from him often, he even made us memorize your face in case we ever needed to recognize you, so there's no way we wouldn't know.”

“Ahh, from the Yeon Clan...”

After rescuing Eon Sosu from Bloodflame Fist Demon along with Peng Woojin, both clans had continued showing goodwill toward me.

If the Clear Wind Unit's leader was from the Yeon Clan, then it made sense.

“Hah, now I'm embarrassed. I must've gotten gilded without even knowing it.”

“Gilded'? Not at all! You've accomplished more than enough to deserve it! Do you know how famous you are among us junior martial artists nowadays...? Ah, wait, now's not the time. What can I help you with? Do you need something?”

His excitement made his words speed up, but he soon got back to the point.

I gave him a shrug.

“I want to go to where the Diamond Arhat is staying. Could you point me in the right direction?”

“At this time of day... he's probably overseeing training at the martial yard. It's a bit complicated to explain, so I'll just take you there myself!”

“I’d appreciate it, but are you sure? You looked pretty busy.”

“If I say I was late because I was helping the White Moon Sword Lord, even our unit leader won’t complain.”

With a grin, the Clear Wind member took the lead.

On the way, still full of excitement, he began to tell me stories about the Diamond Arhat.

How he helps train junior martial artists every morning, or visits nearby villages every few days to aid commoners—and more and more praises kept spilling out.

A martial artist with excellent skills and character, one who doesn’t forget the duties of a disciple of Buddha.

That was the Diamond Arhat, according to the Clear Wind member.

“They say back when he was at Shaolin, he was considered a candidate to become the next Diamond Guardian Monk. But because that position would prevent him from leaving Shaolin, he turned it down and came to the Murim Alliance instead.”

“He sounds like a truly admirable person.”

It seems he really is someone with a stellar reputation.

Diamond Guardian Monk, huh. I remember sparring with a few of them during my visit to Shaolin. They were as skilled as the rumors said.

So he was nearly one of them...

Even now, I clearly remember the unique nature of the Immovable Wisdom King Steps, performed with a body honed to the extreme.

It was a martial art worthy of envy.

Nodding, I followed the Clear Wind member. It didn't take long before we arrived at the bustling martial yard.

“Forgive me, but aren’t you frustrated that you never mastered the Immovable Wisdom King Steps?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, don’t you wake up angry in the middle of the night, want to beat people who praise you without thinking... that sort of thing.”

“Pardon me, benefactor, but I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about...”

“In simpler terms: are you sure you haven’t been consumed by inner demons?”

The Diamond Arhat looked at me as if I were possessed by demons.

Tsk.

Maybe that wasn’t the right approach.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The Diamond Arhat's appearance was like that of a monk drawn in a painting.

Though he had left Shaolin and now served in the Murim Alliance, his neatly shaven head, glowing faintly blue, seemed to testify that he was still a disciple of Buddha.

His expression, filled with composure and compassion, wore a faint smile reminiscent of a Buddha statue.

Perhaps he was trying to conceal the oppressive aura naturally exuding from a body honed to its limits—his robe was quite loose, hiding the shape of his physique.

Though the robe appeared somewhat worn, it was well-maintained, spotless and unwrinkled, as if cared for daily.

If I had to compare, he felt like a man who combined Monk Gakjeong's external martial arts and Master Jeong Hyeon's compassionate heart.

There's a reason he had once been considered the next Diamond Guardian Monk.

But even someone like the Diamond Arhat furrowed his brows deeply at my next remark.

“In simpler terms, I'm asking whether you've been possessed by inner demons.”

The Diamond Arhat looked at me as if I were the one possessed by demons.

Tsk.

Guess that wasn't the right approach.

Even I felt a bit guilty seeing that expression. But it was a necessary move. At the very least, now I knew that there was nothing currently wrong with him.

That's the best outcome for me. It meant he wasn't secretly harboring resentment over some past incident, but that he would be consumed by killing intent due to something that will happen in the future.

Though my reputation seemed to be plummeting in real time, it was a price worth paying.

Clearly flustered and slightly offended, the Diamond Arhat pressed his palms together and spoke.

“Namo Amitabha... I do not know why the White Moon Sword Lord would ask such a thing, but I assure you, I feel no shame before Buddha, nor before myself.”

“Is that so? Then I must have been mistaken.”

With a straight face, I nodded as if it had been nothing important. The Diamond Arhat let out a hollow chuckle.

He sighed and continued.

“If that is all you needed, may I return now? It seems the other benefactors are waiting.”

“Ah, you mean the ones gathered in the martial yard?”

“Yes. Though it may be undeserved, many have come to see me early in the morning. I’d rather not have them leave disappointed.”

“Undeserved? Among martial artists who’ve reached a high realm, few look down to those below, and even fewer reach out to those following behind. You are doing admirable work.”

That was sincere.

Whether orthodox or unorthodox, the higher one’s level, the more arrogance tends to develop. This isn’t unique to martial artists, but a reflection of human nature seen in all kinds of fields.

Even so, being able to reach beyond one’s circle to help others, even strangers—that’s certainly admirable.

It’s no wonder the Diamond Arhat had such a good reputation.

Perhaps my sincerity came through, because his expression softened slightly as he nodded, palms still pressed together.

Given the size of his body, honed through external arts, even a small gesture looked large.

“Thank you. Then I shall take my leave.”

With a brief bow, he returned to the martial yard. I followed behind and joined the martial artists already training hard without guidance, drawing my sword.

“...?”

The Diamond Arhat blinked.

I shrugged at his puzzled look.

“I just happened to feel a little restless, so I thought I’d swing lightly. Am I not allowed to use this martial yard?”

“N-No, that’s not it...”

His expression twisted again, only just having returned to calm. A moment later, he stood with his mouth agape.

And then, he began to look at me as if I were pitiful.

...I wonder what conclusion he's come to. Not that I really care.

Still, this was likely just his reaction to being asked moments ago whether he was possessed by inner demons.

As for the other martial artists gathered here—they were welcoming me.

“Huh... a newcomer? Or maybe a guest from the Tang Clan. Judging from his sword use, he's not a direct Tang bloodline.”

“Not even close! I get that you've been in closed-door training for a while, but still—how can you not know?!”

“Fine, fine. Just tell me who he is already.”

“Come on! A man in Tang green robes, wielding a sword, and being addressed respectfully by Elder Yi—that's obviously the White Moon Sword Lord, isn't it?!”

“...Hurk!”

Though they tried to whisper, to someone with my honed senses, it sounded as clear as if they were speaking right next to me.

And indeed, it soon spread through those standing nearby.

Even if an expert of the Sub-Perfection level helps with training, it's rare for them to oversee many people at once like a full instructor.

Most of those gathered here hadn't yet found their path.

Some were late-stage juniors, others were older but still in desperate need of learning.

Maybe that's why, once they realized who I was, their eyes began to sparkle.

“Do you think the White Moon Sword Lord is here to learn martial arts from the elder?”

“Don't be ridiculous. They use different weapons, and his martial level is way higher.”

“Then why is he here...?”

“If you ask me, maybe he’s just like Elder Yi, trying to give us a bit of guidance.”

Their growing anticipation was obvious. Eventually, one of them, unable to resist, stepped forward.

A young woman, looking to be about my age or a little younger. Her sweat-soaked training uniform marked her as a member of the Murim Alliance, but bore no symbol of any specific unit.

She was likely someone not yet officially assigned or just recently accepted—someone not yet recognized as a full member.

“U-Um. You’re the White Moon Sword Lord, right?”

“I am.”

“Are you... perhaps here to train us alongside the elder?”

“Hmm. If it’s just a little, I suppose that’s fine.”

I glanced toward the woman who had approached me.

Her build was average, but the calluses and blisters on her fists showed she had trained hard—more than most.

Fists, huh.

“Do you primarily use fist and kick techniques?”

“Eh? Y-Yes!”

“Sorry, but I don’t know much besides the sword.”

“Oh...”

“But, if you promise to transfer to the Seo Mun Clan, I might teach you a few things. If you’re lucky, you might even get to learn directly from Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“...Not the Tang Clan, but the Seo Mun Clan?”

“Correct. Right now, you could probably get the vice-commander... or maybe even the commander position, depending on how things go.”

She looked a bit intrigued, then hesitantly asked in a restrained voice,

“What commander...?”

“Hasn’t been decided yet. I’ll come up with a name soon.”

“Oh, and the Seo Mun Clan doesn’t have a building yet, so once we construct one, I’ll contact you.”

“...No thanks.”

She flatly refused and returned to her spot.

I had thought, since Seo Mun-Hwarin was beginning to rebuild her clan, I'd lend a hand by recruiting in advance... but I failed immediately. Seems I shouldn't try things I'm not used to.

I felt a little sulky inside, but not for long. Since the Diamond Arhat used fist techniques, a few of the rare sword-users began to cautiously approach.

“Um, excuse me...”

“Your stance is off. You're too wary of your opponent's attacks, which is causing your shoulders to stiffen when you swing. Naturally, your waist rotation becomes slanted, and your legs lose balance. Am I wrong?”

“Y-You're right! But how... I haven't even finished explaining, let alone shown you anything...”

“If you can't even see something this simple, you'd be dead.”

“Is Sichuan really that deadly...?”

“No. I was talking about Zhejiang Province.”

“...?”

He tilted his head, confused. I cleared my throat and continued.

“Ahem. In any case, this is a matter of mindset, so the solution is simple. You can either gradually fix it through long-term sparring and training, or you can overcome it in a single, intense moment—after which most dangers won’t seem so threatening. Which do you prefer?”

“The latter, please.”

The puzzled look vanished, replaced by seriousness. He must’ve steeled himself, considering this a heaven-sent opportunity.

I’m no open-minded leader like the Namgung Clan who tells people to grow stronger and come back, nor someone like the Diamond Arhat who trains dozens daily.

But giving guidance to a passionate junior once in a while—I can manage that much.

Feeling a bit proud, I smiled slyly.

“I won’t ask you to swing recklessly. Just withstand my killing intent.”

“Uh... Wait, just a moment...”

For some reason, his complexion turned pale. And then—

Thud!

I only focused a small amount of killing intent, but he immediately collapsed, foaming at the mouth.

Looks like he had the spirit but not the strength...

Still, once he wakes up, he’ll be better than before.

Feeling awkward under the shocked stares around me, I moved him into the shade. I even used Object-Grasping Through Empty Air to pluck nearby leaves and cover his eyes.

Even though it's not midday, prolonged sun exposure could lead to dehydration.

Looking around at the stiffened juniors, I asked,

“Anyone else here a swordsman hitting a wall?”

Suffocating silence.

A few more eventually stepped up, but... whether they went flying from light contact or lost confidence after a few comments, none of them lasted long.

Before I knew it, no one was approaching me anymore.

In the end, I had to swing my sword alone until the morning session ended.

After others left for a late meal or went about their business, I also bid farewell to the Diamond Arhat and returned to my room.

There, having just finished her own morning training and lightly washed up, was a slightly more radiant Seol Lihyang.

“Hey, you're already back, Cheon Hwi?”

“I told you it wouldn't take long. Where are Tang Sowol and Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“They were talking about something complicated with the clan head, I think?”

“Ahh...”

Judging by yesterday's conversation, they were probably talking with Tang Jincheon about rebuilding the Seo Mun Clan and what support it would receive.

A guest typically stays in a household, receiving hospitality, and offers their strength when needed.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin had done far more than any ordinary guest during her time with the Tang Clan.

They must be trying to give her something—whether it's compensation or to smooth future relations.

As I nodded in understanding, Seol Lihyang crept up beside me and whispered.

“Hey, Cheon Hwi. So... it's just the two of us now?”

“Looks that way.”

“Then...”

Trailing off, she nuzzled her forehead against my shoulder. Even without saying it, I knew what she wanted.

“If I'm being honest, I'd like to fool around with you too. But... there's something I need to think about.”

“Tsk. What a shame. What’s so serious that you’re being all solemn? Did something go wrong with your plan?”

“No. Not at all.”

If anything, the Diamond Arhat seemed grateful that I helped guide the juniors.

Now that we’ve gotten closer through this event, I’ll have a reason to visit again.

If something is going to happen that drastically twists the Diamond Arhat’s mindset, I need to stay close and intervene.

In that sense, today was a fairly successful day. But—

“Don’t take this the wrong way, just listen.”

“Mmhm. I know you say things that sound bad sometimes, so just say it.”

Seol Lihyang, brushing it off as usual.

To her, I finally shared the thought I'd been carrying since I left the martial yard.

“I think... I just don't understand people who lack talent.”

“Even when I hit the wall before the Flowering Stage, I didn't feel this helpless.”

“...Die.”

Seol Lihyang, who had only just entered the Sub-Perfection realm, said with a dead serious expression. Her eyes looked at me like I was the most insufferable creature in the world.

Am I seeing her through rose-tinted glasses?

...Well, even so, I kind of liked it.