

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 281-290

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Tang Sowol, who had arrived a little late after hearing the news from Seorin, trembled at her fingertips.

“Brother Cheon?!”

She hurriedly cradled Cheon Hwi, who was lying on the ground, and quickly checked his condition.

His breathing, pulse, and qi circulation were all normal.

But for some reason, his eyes remained closed, as if in a deep sleep.

That made the situation even more serious.

It meant that Cheon Hwi's unconscious state was beyond anything she could resolve.

Tang Sowol felt as if someone had grabbed her heart—her shock was that intense.

Then she noticed someone who had already been checking on Cheon Hwi before her.

A middle-aged man holding an iron fan, deep in thought.

It was Zhuge Bu, strategist of the Murim Alliance and younger brother of the Zhuge Clan Head.

Perhaps he too had rushed over from being with the Alliance Leader—his appearance, usually tidy, was now slightly disheveled.

Cheon Hwi, a Flowering-Stage master, was perfectly fine physically yet could not regain consciousness.

This wasn't something that could be solved by medicine.

Considering the eerie energy exuded by Blood Demon even now, Tang Sowol concluded it must be sorcery—or something of equal severity—and opened her mouth to speak.

Hoping for even a single thread of hope.

“Strategist Zhuge... Is Brother Cheon alright? Just what is happening right now...?”

“I don’t know the details either. But what I do know for certain is that this elder did something to the White Moon Sword Lord. Fortunately, thanks to those three risking their lives to fight, we were at least able to retrieve his body.”

Tang Sowol gritted her teeth, forcing her emotions down.

But that alone wasn't enough—she lifted her head high.

As if refusing to let a single tear fall from her eyes.

Maybe it was thanks to raising her head that she saw Seol Lihyang approaching at high speed using light footwork, having been cultivating apart due to her martial arts.

How was she supposed to explain the situation to Seol Lihyang?

That they were already too late?

That they didn't even know what to do to save Cheon Hwi?

Grit.

The suffocating sense of helplessness struck her.

Tang Sowol bit her lip to suppress it, then looked in the opposite direction.

There stood Blood Demon, who was presumed to have caused Cheon Hwi's condition, surrounded by the Murim Alliance Leader, Seorin, and Tang Jincheon, all attacking relentlessly.

No matter how skilled Tang Sowol was with poison that could bring down even a Flowering-Stage master, this was a battlefield she couldn't hope to intervene in.

The Alliance Leader's clothes were slightly tattered—unbecoming of his position—but his well-trained muscles swelled beneath.

As if expressing his sense of betrayal with his body.

“You were hiding your strength, Elder? Then why would you commit such a monstrous act?!”

“Amitabha, monstrous? That's rather harsh, Alliance Leader.

I merely wish to help as many as possible reach the bliss of the Pure Land. The White Moon Sword Lord understood my intentions and volunteered with a joyful heart.”

“I see words are wasted on you.”

The Alliance Leader, wielding his aged cudgel like a storm, unleashed blows imbued with power enough to collapse a small pavilion with each strike.

As if to prove his title Righteous Sky Divine Staff, his relentless attacks swept through the surroundings.

As crude as it looked—like someone just beating a dog—it was the Begger Staff Style, and within its wildness lay an intricate mystery that left opponents unable to resist properly.

But Blood Demon, wearing the body of the Diamond Arhat, simply took it all.

He had been born with a superior physique, trained in Shaolin's brutal external techniques his entire life, then further refined through Esoteric Buddhist methods.

The current Blood Demon possessed a body worthy of being called Diamond Vajra Body.

Due to that unnerving durability, Seorin didn't use her usual striking-focused martial arts.

Instead, she used a grappling technique meant to entangle her opponent—Golden Binding Techniques.

This naturally led to close combat.

Unlike her usual self, Seorin's expression was cold and emotionless as she pressed Blood Demon hard.

“Reveal how to awaken Cheon Hwi. That is your only chance for a peaceful death.”

“How can one call back someone who has already departed to Paradise? And is it truly right to pull someone from the Pure Land back into this impure world? Reflect once more, White-Haired Rakshasa.”

“I cast aside that name long ago. And whether you answer or not changes nothing. I'll find out one way or another. Let's see if you can say the same once every bone in your body is broken.”

Seorin's blood-red eyes flashed sharply, and her limbs accelerated to several times their previous speed.

Thunder Heaven Divine Art.

A technique that burned everything at once with no thought for what came after—now expressed not through a sword, but her arms and legs.

In the blink of an eye, her fingers entangled and untangled six or seven times, her arms moving unpredictably in an effort to lock down her opponent.

She disrupted Blood Demon's balance by pushing at key moments using palm strikes.

Though Blood Demon responded a beat slower, Seorin always maintained the upper hand.

He was already fending off the Murim Alliance Leader, and now Seorin too.

It was only natural that he was being overwhelmed.

No matter how perfect Blood Demon's enlightenment and body were, even a Flowering-Stage master couldn't easily handle two others of the same level simultaneously.

Yet, though he was constantly pushed back, Blood Demon didn't fall.

That was due both to his hardened body and the fact that he repeatedly slipped free from Seorin's grapples using bizarre, unorthodox movements.

It was a grotesque and exhausting battle destined to continue until one side collapsed.

But the delicate balance ended here.

Tang Jincheon, who had been wary of Blood Demon's strangeness, finally began to move—using refined versions of the deadliest poisons, not just ordinary ones.

“You bastard! You dare lay a hand on a member of the Tang Clan?! You'll learn firsthand what that means! Not even a scrap of your body will remain—you'll be reduced to poisonous ash!”

From Tang Jincheon's sleeve burst clouds of toxic mist in various hues.

It was shocking enough that he could release multiple poisons at once without mixing them.

Even more shocking was the identity of the poisons:

Formless Deadly Poison: Colorless, odorless, and tasteless, known for its subtle lethality.

Seven-Step Soul-Chasing Poison: A deadly toxin that kills before one can take seven steps.

Bone-Melting Powder: Doesn't affect blood or organs, but melts flesh and skin.

Heaven-Slaying Immortal-Abolishing Poison: Said to shred the dantian into a thousand pieces.

Each of these was so rare and deadly that, under normal circumstances, they'd spark a bloodbath in the Murim if left unattended.

Yet now they floated casually in the air.

Blood Demon, unable to dodge due to fighting both the Alliance Leader and Seorin, was immediately enveloped and coughed blood.

“Kuhak! As expected of the Poison King. That's quite the potent brew.”

“Tch. Still breathing even after all that? Fine. I’ll keep spraying it until you die.”

Tang Jincheon’s sleeves fluttered again.

Having achieved complete transformation into a poison master, he could recreate any poison from memory as long as he had inner energy.

And since he manipulated poison with willpower, there was no fear of harming allies.

The ideal form of a poison arts practitioner.

Though it took a bit of time to prepare, now that he had enough, the toxic mists spread continuously.

Blood Demon didn’t die instantly only because his martial arts were fundamentally Buddhist. And—

Jingle—

He was using the Demon Bell to periodically expel the poison aura.

Even so, he couldn't completely free himself from the combined assault of three Flowering-Stage masters.

Despite his Diamond Vajra Body, his limbs were now fully bound, and he was slowly, but surely, being poisoned from within.

Blood Demon would die here.

That much was certain.

The only issue was how long it would take.

But for Blood Demon, that was enough.

The Diamond Arhat's body was exceptional, but it couldn't compare to Cheon Hwi's, whose Heavenly Martial Body shone with talent.

“At this point, I’ll just hide my identity and start over. With the Tang Clan becoming the strongest in the world, I’m lucky. I’ll just claim memory loss from the side effects of sorcery.”

Once a person falls completely under the Demon Bell’s influence, they become a vessel for Blood Demon. Part of their memories are also transferred to him.

Thanks to this, he’d been able to hide while pretending to be the Diamond Arhat for quite some time. This time would be no different.

He just needed to stall for time.

No matter how special the new body was, as long as it was already at Peak Stage, he’d recover his power within a year.

Zhuge Bu began drawing a formation around Cheon Hwi, as if making a last-ditch effort.

Blood Demon sneered inwardly at what he considered a meaningless attempt.

The Demon Bell, forged with the previous owner’s entire being, wouldn’t be disrupted by such a makeshift formation.

“By now, he should’ve completely assimilated into the Pure Land that the bell shows... Well, it doesn’t matter. No matter how great a martial artist, no one can fully detach from their own desires. It won’t take long.”

His body, inside and out, continued melting and regenerating.

While his nerves were intact, every blow snapped bones and brought searing pain.

Yet, Blood Demon wore a faint smile, like a statue of Buddha.

He had long transcended the body.

This level of pain was entirely bearable.

Zhuge Bu, as if struck by an idea, began drawing a complex line with his iron fan around Cheon Hwi.

He glanced around, then poured out ominous-looking talismans and items from his pouch.

Looking to Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, who had just arrived, he spoke in a serious tone.

“Miss Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix. If you want to save your fiancé, could you help me? You as well, Miss Pure Sound-Frostflower—I’ve heard you’re close with the White Moon Sword Lord...”

“Of course! I’ll help however I can!”

“What do you need me to do?”

The moment they realized there was something they could do, Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang snapped to attention.

Zhuge Bu pointed to the items he’d poured out.

“I need you to place these in specific locations. First, the jade qilin...”

While continuing to draw complex lines, he began listing off positions.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang moved swiftly, anchoring each item in place.

Thanks to their coordination, the formation was completed quickly.

As the surrounding flow of energy shifted, Zhuge Bu let out a short sigh.

“Phew... I can’t wake him, but this is a formation that allows me to touch his heartscape. It might fail entirely. And even if it succeeds, all I can do is convey a few words...”

“Still, we have to try.”

“A fine answer. Then lastly, we need an item with a deep connection to the White Moon Sword Lord. As his fiancée, surely you have one?”

“An item... with deep ties...”

Tang Sowol thought for a moment.

Soon, a sweet pink liquid shimmered in her palm.

“That is...”

“It’s the poison I once used to save Brother Cheon. A toxin that must still remain somewhere in his body.”

“That will do nicely. Leave the rest to me. Place it on his chest.”

Tang Sowol silently nodded and placed her hand over Cheon Hwi’s chest.

Her affection seeped into his heart.

And then—

“Ah...”

A flood of rage, despair, hatred, regret, killing intent, and self-loathing surged back into her heart.

At that moment,

Tang Sowol truly touched Cheon Hwi’s hell.

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Questions about the Heavenly Demon, and worries about the Azure-Eyed Blood Demon who had stolen the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s energy—those, I decided to set aside for the moment.

There was something more important to deal with right now.

“From the way you look, it seems you have some idea about the contents of this letter... What do you plan to do?”

“Ah, come to think of it, Venerable Gakjeong, you’re not fully informed about our situation.”

At that point, I looked to Venerable Jeong Hyeon. What came next wasn’t something I could say myself.

“White Moon Sword Lord is currently under a mental restriction, Master.”

“A mental restriction? What kind of vile thing is that...! Is this the work of the Demonic Cult? I always knew you had strong hostility toward them...”

“No. It’s presumed that the mental restriction was placed by Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva and some unknown Great Luo Immortal. He was born with it already in place.”

“What?”

Venerable Gakjeong flinched as he unknowingly called Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva ‘vile’, but only for a moment. He tapped his own lips a few times, then finally spoke again.

“Are you certain?”

“At least from what I saw, yes. Though I couldn’t precisely determine what kind of restriction it is.”

“That’s fine. I’m just surprised that you, who’s always disliked esoteric Buddhist techniques, are doing all this.”

“Well... I owe the White Moon Sword Lord a great deal. More than that... after seeing you suppress the Heaven-Slaughter Star’s murderous qi the other day, it really made me rethink things, Master.”

“Haha, I see.”

Even though Venerable Jeong Hyeon wasn’t young, in front of his master, Venerable Gakjeong, he somehow gave off a much younger impression.

Despite everything that had happened, they were still a good master and disciple, clearly.

While the two exchanged satisfied smiles, Venerable Jeong Hyeon continued to explain the details he had discovered. Then, with the help of Tang Sowol and me, we conveyed the events regarding Blood Flame.

After hearing everything, Venerable Gakjeong gave a slow nod.

“I see... I thought my role had ended with the last incident, but perhaps it’s not over yet.”

“I know this is shameless to ask, but... may I request your help again?”

“Oh dear. Young master Cheon keeps making me feel embarrassed. I’ve already received so much from you. This is no evil deed, so I’ll help however I can. Wasn’t that the reason I came in the first place?”

“Thank you.”

“However, one part still bothers me. So before attempting anything, we must first verify this method the Heavenly Demon has provided.”

“Of course. I agree with that completely.”

I folded the letter again and handed it to Venerable Gakjeong. I had already memorized the contents. The problem wasn’t remembering it—it was not understanding what any of it meant.

“Still... based on what I just heard, doesn't this require a highly skilled Taoist to test it?”

At Venerable Gakjeong's murmur, Tang Jincheon shook his head with a bitter smile.

“I did contact the Wudang Sect, but unfortunately, while they have the records, there's no one left who can fully interpret and actually perform the Daoist techniques.”

“But Wudang is the successor of the Quanzhen Sect and is known for preserving ancient techniques...”

“If it's about that part, I believe I can help.”

Interrupting the heavy sighs of Tang Jincheon and Venerable Gakjeong was none other than the Murim Alliance's strategist, Zhuge Bu.

At this unexpected claim, the Murim Alliance Leader blinked in confusion.

“You? Strategist? I'm not well-versed in this field, but I thought the Zhuge Clan had little to do with Daoist teachings?”

“Indeed, as the Alliance Leader said, our Zhuge Clan doesn’t follow Daoist teachings. Nor Buddhist, for that matter. However, we’ve often studied them academically. After all, formations themselves were born from attempts to borrow nature’s power to reproduce diluted forms of mystical techniques.”

“Oh, I believe I’ve heard something like that before.”

“Seems like you’ve researched this quite a bit for personal reasons. Yes. Our ancestor Zhuge Liang, though not a Daoist himself, was said to read the heavens and call forth the eastern wind. Discovering the principles that fill the world and slightly twisting them to achieve a desired outcome...”

As I agreed with him, Zhuge Bu’s eyes sparkled and he began pouring out a torrent of technical knowledge.

A middle-aged man getting this excited—it reminded me of someone.

Namgung Clan.

Both Namgung Dowi and his son Namgung Jong would break their usual solemn expressions and ramble on endlessly when the topic of swords came up.

As those memories overlapped in my mind for a brief moment, I noticed the Murim Alliance Leader and Venerable Gakjeong shaking their heads with weary expressions.

“The strategist is certainly a brilliant man, but... sometimes he makes your ears hurt.”

“Looks like the current Zhuge generation is no different from the last.”

Apparently, this wasn't a new thing. Previous generations of the Zhuge Clan had been just like this.

Though I'd never been to their estate, I could already imagine the atmosphere there.

Well... it's no wonder the clan continues to provide military advisors to the Murim Alliance generation after generation.

To be honest, before my regression, I assumed it was due to corruption or symbolism—like in the Black Lotus Sect.

But now I see... there's just another insane family out there.

I let out a silent laugh at the thought. Then, unable to take it any longer, Tang Jincheon interrupted.

“That’s enough. Just get to the point. Can you do it or not?”

“I can. However, since this is my first time attempting to use formations in this way, I’ll need as much reference material and preparation as possible.”

“Good. I’ll ask Wudang to send any books they can provide.”

With that, the room fell into a brief silence.

Partly because there was nothing more to say, but mostly, it felt like Zhuge Bu had drained everyone’s energy.

When I opened my mouth, all eyes naturally turned to me.

“Thank you, everyone.”

I bowed my head. Feeling awkward, the others scratched their heads or stroked their beards.

“No need to thank us. We’re simply returning what you’ve already given.”

“Namu Amitabha. This too is the result of your accumulated good karma.”

“Ahem. At the very least, this is much simpler than, say, chopping off someone’s arm out of nowhere or cleaning up after a collapsed building, so don’t worry.”

The Murim Alliance Leader’s words had a strange edge to them, but in any case, the atmosphere warmed and the day came to a close.

Half a month later.

By the time my warped willpower had stabilized and my body had caught up, a message came through the Murim Alliance Leader.

Everything was ready.

I paused what I was doing and headed to the Alliance Leader's office.

Apparently, I was the last to arrive—everyone else was already waiting.

“I came after hearing that everything's ready. Is that true?”

“Yes. We've verified it in multiple ways and even tested the grand technique itself. It works flawlessly, and surprisingly, it wasn't as dangerous as we feared.”

Zhuge Bu nodded with confidence. The others' expressions were bright as well.

“However, there's one issue—or rather, a condition.”

“A condition? What is it?”

“As you might’ve guessed... not just anyone can enter your heartscape. The connection has to be deep, and there must be sincere feelings.”

“So then...”

“That means only Lihyang, Hwarin, and I are qualified.”

While I was still trying to figure out what that meant, Tang Sowol spoke up to clarify.

“Oh, I wasn’t expecting something like that.”

“...You say that, but you don’t look surprised at all... Anyway, even then, we probably won’t be able to see everything. Still, compared to last time, when we barged in with a crude method, we’ll likely see much more and stay longer.”

“I understand. Then what about the fog-like perception Tang Sowol mentioned before?”

“That’s the most prominent thing we can’t see. It seems to be the core of the mental restriction, so it’s difficult to bypass. The same goes for the voice.”

“Then what can you see more clearly?”

“The context. Not all conversations will be audible, but we should at least be able to understand the general situation and direction of things.”

Whether they would be able to deduce the truth about my regression was unclear.

But at least one thing, I could convey with certainty.

That the person I kept seeing over the three women...

Was none other than another version of them.

That alone would be enough.

“Are we starting now?”

“If there are no other issues, yes.”

At that, Zhuge Bu turned to look at the Murim Alliance Leader. He grinned and said,

“Some of you may already know, but... please keep everything you see today a secret. It’s one of the Murim Alliance’s hidden protocols.”

“What are you trying to pull this time...”

Before I could finish that thought, the Murim Alliance Leader tapped the floor a few times with his foot, then infused internal energy into a bookshelf to the right.

Grrrk—

An entire wall rotated to reveal a hidden passage.

“This is...?”

“This is a hidden ritual chamber known only to past Alliance Leaders and a few closest confidants. It’s not fancy, but there’s no better place to perform such techniques without interference. After all, look at who’s gathered here—don’t you think too many eyes would be watching?”

As the Murim Alliance Leader said, several Flowering Stage masters were gathered, each representing their own sect.

Naturally, people would assume some kind of secret council was taking place. Many would be curious.

This hidden room was clearly prepared for such contingencies.

Zhuge Bu’s eyes went wide.

“Wow! I always suspected there was a secret exit in the office, but I never imagined it’d be here! So this is where you disappeared to whenever you dumped all your work on me!”

“I-I always came back eventually! Even if it was after sundown...”

The Alliance Leader's voice grew smaller and smaller. Well... in the Beggar's Sect, there's usually a clear split between those who specialize in intel and those who focus on martial arts.

Considering the Alliance Leader's martial prowess, he's clearly the latter.

With a faint laugh, I followed behind him.

Even with night-glow stones embedded in the walls, the passage was dim. But after a short walk, we arrived at a spacious chamber—not tall, but quite wide.

In the center, complex scripts and diagrams were drawn. Around them were several valuable-looking items arranged precisely.

“Lie in the center. The others will lie around you in a triangle.”

“Yes.”

Following instructions, I lay down, and the other three took their positions.

With a mix of anticipation and slight concern, the grand formation began.

Energy gathered toward the center, drawn into the formation. Soon after, the sound of Venerables Jeong Hyeon and Gakjeong reciting sutras filled the space.

As I continued listening, something began to stir deep in my chest. I wasn't sure what it was, but something was definitely happening.

That stirring sensation gradually intensified.

Then, at a certain moment, Tang Sowol released her pale pink poison in the form of mist, shrouding the surroundings.

And then—

Ding.

The Demon Bell in Zhuge Bu's hand rang out with a clear sound.

Lying at the center among the unconscious Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, I opened my mouth.

“Why... am I still conscious?”

“Well, that’s because it’s not you entering someone else’s heartscape—it’s others entering yours, right?”

Ah.

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Cling.

A clear bell sound, utterly pure despite the ominous aura it carried.

The moment they registered it, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin's minds began to fall, stained by something dark.

It felt like being sucked into something. While Tang Sowol had experienced this once before, the other two, unfamiliar with it, began flailing in confusion.

As the three continued falling through a black tunnel, the two waved their limbs in panic. Seeing this, Tang Sowol nodded, seemingly relieved.

So even if we're separated and see different visions, nothing goes wrong. That's a relief.

Of course, whether she was reassured or not didn't matter much to the two currently falling in real time.

Watching the two instinctively draw up their inner energy, Tang Sowol gave a wry smile and waved her hand.

“This is how it's supposed to be, so don't worry. And Hwarin unni, if you draw up your willpower too, you'll end up resisting the great art that was laid out for us, so please endure it a bit longer.”

“W-What do you mean this is how it's supposed to be, Sister Tang?!”

“Mmm? I ended up doing it before I knew it.”

Only after confirming Seo Mun-Hwarin awkwardly retracted her willpower did Tang Sowol speak again.

“Yes. It seems a bit faster than before, but it’s more or less the same. In that case, it should be ending soon.”

Just as Tang Sowol said that, a white landscape shimmered at their toes. Blinded for a moment, the three closed and opened their eyes.

Before they realized it, the scenery around them had completely changed.

Gone was the narrow, suffocating black tunnel, replaced by a wide-open field of white.

Snow piled gently atop slightly worn buildings. From a bird’s-eye view above the sky, the unfamiliar perspective sparkled in Seol Lihyang’s eyes.

“Wow. It’s beautiful.”

“Looks like it snowed quite a lot. But how do we land??”

“Ah, don’t worry. The closer we get to the ground, the slower we’ll move on our own.”

Tang Sowol reassured Seo Mun-Hwarin, but the more she looked around, the more serious her gaze became.

This place feels... familiar...

That strange sense of déjà vu only lasted a moment. Suddenly, it felt like she was resisting a fall into water.

At the same time, the once lifeless white scenery began to breathe.

Icicles formed beneath eaves as the snow slowly melted. From time to time, snow that could no longer bear its weight slid off the rooftops. And although few in number, some servants were now visible, struggling to clear the snow.

A sudden sense that the density of the world had increased. Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin widened their eyes in awe.

It was only then that Tang Sowol realized the source of her discomfort.

“This is... the Black Lotus Sect.”

Her feet stepped on the snow-covered ground, but no footprints were left behind, as if her legs simply passed through the snow.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, curious, took a few steps as if testing it, then tilted her head.

“Mmm? What do you mean by that? Most of the Black Lotus Sect’s buildings were newly constructed and decorated so extravagantly they sparkled no matter where you looked.”

“Yes, that’s true. But no matter how I look at it, the structure of the buildings is exactly like those of the Black Lotus Sect. Do you remember the banquet hall where the Heavenly Demon appeared?”

“Ah! Now that you mention it, Sister Tang, the layout from above did feel familiar!”

Seol Lihyang quickly nodded in agreement as she recalled the memory. On the other hand, Seo Mun-Hwarin pondered for a long while before finally speaking.

“The structure is certainly similar. However, when you look closely, it’s clearly strange. Look over there.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin pointed toward the nearby wall.

Not only was it cracked in places, but toward the edges, it was half-collapsed, exposing the interior.

Signs of abandonment that could only be found in homes left untouched for many years.

“I’m sure the banquet was held in the most recently built building. But this one clearly bears the marks of time. A structure this large would be better sold off than left neglected...”

“Couldn’t it be from a different time period? After all, this is Cheon Hwi-da’s Heartscape, right? It’s supposed to show his most vivid memories, so of course it’d be from a moment in the past. Maybe this place was once run-down like this, and the Black Lotus Sect only rebuilt it recently.”

“Hm. That does make sense. Then, it would mean Hwi had a connection to the Black Lotus Sect since childhood. Somehow... it suits him too well.”

A small laugh followed Seo Mun-Hwarin's comment, the corners of her mouth twitching.

It was quite a wild guess, but for those who couldn't imagine that time might literally rewind, it was the most reasonable explanation.

With that, the three confirmed their surroundings and speculated on the timeline, then began to move slowly.

Unlike the last time Tang Sowol had entered Cheon Hwi-da's Heartscape, there was almost no interaction possible with the memory.

Of course—it was because their goal this time wasn't to awaken Cheon Hwi-da and pull him out, but to quietly observe his memories.

In exchange for giving up interaction, they had been told the time they could remain was greatly extended. With that, the three began walking down the path at a leisurely pace.

The surroundings were unmanaged, with the buildings half in ruins, casting a desolate air.

However, as they walked, they eventually came across a somewhat maintained path. And then, people.

They were certainly seeing them with their own eyes, but the figures' features were blurred, as if shrouded in fog.

Still, from the clothing and their struggle to clear snow, it wasn't hard to guess they were servants.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been silently observing, finally spoke.

“Indeed. I have a hunch.”

“What is it?”

“If a once-glorious family had fallen into ruin for some reason, and now simply awaited their demise, wouldn't this be the kind of atmosphere you'd expect?”

“That's...”

“It’s true. It’s the same reason I left behind the ruined Seo Mun Clan to wander, and the fate that befell the enemies who lost their patriarch and headmaster to my revenge.”

As Seo Mun-Hwarin connected her theory to her own experience, Seol Lihyang’s eyes widened.

“Then according to you, Sister Seo Mun, Cheon Hwi-da might be from a once-famous noble family??”

“Perhaps. His swordsmanship, as he says himself, is a mix of techniques refined from various sources. But his inner art—how does it seem to you? To me, it feels crude and violent, but like a fully-formed technique from the very beginning.”

“Indeed, even when he kidnapped me at age fifteen, he was using the same inner art. It was so saturated with killing intent, I remember it vividly.”

“Then the picture becomes clearer. Hwi must have been born into a prestigious sect of the Unorthodox Faction... and after some incident, fled to a small rural village.”

“I remember seeing it in the Tang Clan’s investigation report. It said his parents were foreigners.”

“Then... was it the Demonic Cult that annihilated his family?”

The three women gradually pieced together the mystery of Cheon Hwi-da’s origin (which does not exist).

But that didn't last long. Before they knew it, Cheon Hwi-da appeared before them.

“...Huh?”

“Hmm?”

“This is...”

Was it because he was the owner of the Heartscape? Or was it because the mental restriction didn’t apply this far?

Unlike the blurred figures of everyone else, Cheon Hwi-da’s face could be clearly seen.

However, it was completely different from the Cheon Hwi-da they knew—or had imagined.

Instead of a small, cute baby version they had expected, the Cheon Hwi-da that appeared was older than the current one.

His black hair was loosely grown out and hung down, his black eyes clouded with gloom, but within them burned intense longing.

The aura around him was sharp, but closer to fangs than blades, rough and wild.

He carried the savage energy of a hungry wolf, a man that evoked the image of a typical Unorthodox martial artist.

The women, thrown off by this familiar yet unfamiliar figure, were plunged into confusion.

“Is that Cheon Hwi-da’s father?”

“Maybe... it’s his older brother?”

Trying to rationalize the scene that contradicted all their earlier theories, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin searched for reasons they could understand.

But Tang Sowol was different.

“No. That is Cheon Hwi-da.”

Her voice was full of certainty despite the confusion.

When the others stared at her silently, urging her to explain, Tang Sowol calmly began listing the reasons.

“First, his gait is exactly the same. His center of gravity is stable, but subtly leaning forward, as if ready to pounce at any moment.”

“W-Wait, that’s true! But that’s because of Thunderclap Steps. Hwi said he learned it from the only surviving member of the Seo Mun Clan besides you...”

“And look at the angle of the sword sheath on his waist. Cheon Hwi-da always tilts it slightly toward himself so he can draw and strike in one motion.”

“I’ve heard that before. He doesn’t use set techniques, so it’s more important for him to swing first than to take a stance.”

“And there’s more. Look at his eyebrows. When he’s dissatisfied, he always frowns at that exact angle. It’s not a face he shows us often, but it’s common when he’s facing others.”

“.....?”

“Also, though he seems slightly shorter than he is now, and his muscles are well-trained but not systematically, the shape of his shoulder muscles is identical to Cheon Hwi-da’s. That kind of development is usually seen in people who swing the sword the same way... and he did say he had neither teacher nor disciple.”

As Tang Sowol’s analysis dragged on, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin’s expressions stiffened.

They looked as if they couldn’t understand why she’d remember things like his muscle structure.

“Most of all, that gaze. That calculating look that sizes up everything in sight—isn’t that the gaze that judges whether he can cut it down or not? There’s no one else so obsessed with the sword who meets all these criteria.”

“Ah... yes.”

“I-Is that so.....?”

Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin answered half-heartedly, but they too had been by Cheon Hwi-da’s side for a long time.

They had no choice but to admit Tang Sowol was right. And naturally, a question arose.

If all their logical guesses were wrong, and if the man in front of them really was Cheon Hwi-da—

Then what was going on?

Why did he seem older than the current Cheon Hwi-da, yet less physically developed, and at a lower cultivation level?

Why was he still Cheon Hwi-da?

Countless questions tangled together, collapsing every theory they had.

And what they were left with was a certainty—there was a secret far beyond what they could imagine.

The three women readied themselves to accept a conclusion beyond reason.

And then, watching the young man hand a pear to a limping woman, then enter a room with her and begin taking off his clothes—

They promptly took back their resolve.

“Wh-What is this?! I can’t accept this...!”

“Cheon Hwi?! Who is this woman? She looks familiar but seriously, who is she?!”

“What does the pear mean?! Is that some modern slang only young people use these days that I don’t know about?!”

Though they stamped their feet, not one of them turned away or left.

It was winter.

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“This, this isn’t real. Yes, absolutely not...”

“So wait... it really happened? But how...?”

“I have no thoughts. Because I literally have no thoughts... Hiiyaa! I can’t unsee it!”

An utterly shocking scene in broad daylight. The three women’s faces flushed and then turned pale repeatedly as they witnessed something completely unexpected in a very different sense.

They looked like something inside had broken. And indeed, what they had seen was far too stimulating for them.

While Cheon Hwi-da, having just finished his “business,” napped with the limping woman, the three women, finally calmed down, sat huddled outside the door.

“...It seems there’s still some Blood Demon left in his systems.”

“Compose yourself, Sowol. Not just Hwi, but the Shaolin abbot, the former abbot, and even the strategist of the Murim Alliance assured us this would be safe.”

“Th-Then what we just saw... it’s a memory so intense that it’s etched into Cheon Hwi-da’s Heartscape?!”

“Mhm. Intense in a very particular way, wouldn’t you say?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, her face red from the endlessly replaying scene in her mind, turned her gaze elsewhere.

And where she turned, Seol Lihyang was—

“Hm, it was about this size, I think...”

—measuring something against her lower stomach with her hand spread wide.

“Hyan-ga! Is that really what matters right now?! And how are you so calm, Sister Hwarin?!”

“Eh? Well... there’s Sister Tang, isn’t there? For Sister Seo Mun and me, we had already... prepared ourselves emotionally, you could say.”

“Exactly. Of course, seeing it in person for the first time was still quite shocking.”

“Ah...”

Unlike Tang Sowol, who held the secure position of the main wife, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin had always known they would be concubines at best, and had accepted that.

Realizing the meaning behind their words, Tang Sowol took a few deep breaths and finally managed to calm down completely.

“...Understood. I’ll suppress my emotions for now as well. There’s something more important to address.”

“Like how to survive the rest of the day?”

Though it was clearly daytime, the sky was already tinged with twilight. Seol Lihyang looked up, and Tang Sowol pressed her temples with her fingers, shaking her head.

“No, we need to find out when exactly this Heartscape takes place—if all our previous assumptions are wrong—and most importantly, who that limping woman is.”

“In that case, I have an idea—hup! I mean, I had an idea!”

“Sister Hwarin? What were you just thinking?”

“I-I wasn’t thinking anything! Definitely not about certain... positions that suddenly came to mind on their own!”

Tang Sowol silently watched Seo Mun-Hwarin flail, her face flushed red.

She looked so small and cute she wanted to scoop her up and roll around with her... but in truth, her age was probably the same as, if not older than, Tang Sowol’s father!

To have discovered that after so long in this manner—it was far from a mild shock.

Resolving to be generous and understanding toward Seo Mun-Hwarin, Tang Sowol straightened her posture proudly.

“Alright, then please calm down. So, what was it that came to mind?”

“Ahem. It’s simple. A past life.”

“A past life—as in, like the reincarnation cycle that Buddhist monks speak of?”

“Exactly. Didn’t the Shaolin abbot mention it? One of those who placed a mental restriction on Hwi was Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva. And Kṣitigarbha is...”

“...The one who saves sentient beings from hell before they are reborn, before their next life.”

“What reason would such a being have to impose a restriction? I believe Hwi remembers events from a past life. And that limping woman earlier... was likely his lover from that previous life.”

“A past life... that would explain the dilapidated state of this place...”

“It would be before the Black Lotus Sect was even founded. So the structure being slightly different, and everything being rundown—makes sense. Maybe the Black Lotus Sect bought it cheaply later and renovated it.”

“But Cheon Hwi-da’s appearance—his height and cultivation may differ, but his face was exactly the same. As far as I know, reincarnation changes one’s appearance entirely.”

“This isn’t exactly a memory, but a Heartscape, and we are viewing it through the Heartscape. If Cheon Hwi-da perceives himself as he looks now, it’s not strange for his appearance here to resemble his current self. As for the age—well, this could just be a time when he was older than now.”

“Hmm... Of all the theories so far, that one makes the most sense. And it explains Cheon Hwi-da’s overwhelming talent as well.”

Before becoming Tang Sowol’s son-in-law, the Tang Clan’s investigation had shown that he’d only been wielding a sword for a year or two.

Yet within that short time, he reached the edge of first-class, able to faintly emit sword qi.

A few years later, he had fully reached Peak Stage, and while others were just entering martial society, he attained Sub-Perfection.

Before even turning twenty, he entered Flowering Stage, and now—past that age—he stood shoulder to shoulder with others who had trained martial arts for decades.

A level of genius on par with figures found only in the annals of murim history.

It was known to be possible, but hard to believe when witnessed firsthand.

But—if he were merely regaining the cultivation he had once reached in a past life—then it would fall within the realm of reason.

“Phew. At least it’s not the worst-case scenario I was afraid of.”

“Now we just need to determine when this moment in time is. If we compare what we see and hear here to past records, we might find what Hwi had to hide!”

Tang Sowol let out a sigh of relief, having long turned a blind eye to Cheon Hwi-da’s oddities. Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin basked in self-satisfaction (undeserved) at her deduction.

Then, Seol Lihyang cautiously raised her hand.

“T-To be honest... I think Sister Seo Mun’s theory is too forced...”

“What are you saying, Hyanga?”

“If this really isn’t a memory but something we’re seeing through the Heartscape, and even Hwi’s own face appears different because of that, then... wouldn’t the surrounding scenery be meaningless?”

“Hmm. You have a point.”

“Sister Seo Mun’s theory isn’t completely wrong, but I think we should be paying more attention not to what is visible—but to what isn’t.”

Not what appeared clearly, but what was hidden behind the mental restriction. That would be far more helpful in uncovering Cheon Hwi-da’s past.

As the others nodded in agreement, Seol Lihyang continued.

“I think your approach was a good one, Sister Seo Mun. I believe you got close to touching Hwi’s secret. But instead of focusing on Hwi himself...”

“You mean... we should focus on the limping woman he slept with?”

“Yes. Unless someone truly loves themselves, what remains in their Heartscape isn’t the self—but others.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s theory, while previously off-base, had now come surprisingly close to the truth. And Seol Lihyang’s correction brought it even closer.

Despite a few missteps, they were finally headed toward the correct answer.

“Fufu. Hyang’s point is valid. Then shall we spend the rest of our time observing Cheon Hwi-da and that woman?”

“Yes! Honestly, something about her felt strangely familiar, and it kept bugging me!”

“Mhm. Now that I think of it, didn’t you say, Sowol, that Cheon Hwi-da’s mental restriction was related to us?”

“That’s right. Right now there’s only one woman, but when I first entered Cheon Hwi-da’s Heartscape, I saw two other white-haired women besides the limping one.”

“White hair?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin idly played with her own hair and grinned.

“Maybe we’ve all been connected to Hwi since our past lives.”

With that bold claim, the three women confidently stepped back into Cheon Hwi-da’s room.

“H-He’s doing it again?!”

“That hand technique... So that’s what he used on me when he interrogated me...!”

“At this rate, they’ll keep going all day!”

It didn’t take long for their curiosity to morph into... a different kind of desire.

Of course—intellectual desire.

Quite a bit of time had passed since they decided to focus on the relationship between Cheon Hwi-da and the limping woman.

They had stayed much longer than initially expected—likely because time flowed differently inside the Heartscape.

Not as much as when the Blood Demon had interfered or when Cheon Hwi-da resisted, but still.

Regardless, thanks to that, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin had been able to observe quite a lot.

The Cheon Hwi-da within the Heartscape was far more stoic than his present self.

He didn't tease, didn't provoke, and even when affection was shown to him directly, he seemed to receive it blankly, as if he didn't understand.

A far cry from a typical romantic relationship.

Instead, it was the limping woman who approached Cheon Hwi-da.

Whenever he spent the whole day swinging his sword, she'd tease him until he got annoyed, forcing a break on him.

During his rest, when he sat there blankly, not knowing what to do, she'd sneak over and poke his side, laughing along with him.

Sometimes she'd even complain about his indifferent tone.

Not that she was particularly adept at dealing with people either.

She had a sharp tongue and often let pride get in the way of rational conversation.

Yet, despite that, the limping woman was always honest with Cheon Hwi-da.

Her affection, though clumsy like a child's, was pure and uncalculated.

And as she repeatedly confronted him head-on in her awkward way—

Even the emotionless Cheon Hwi-da began to change.

He learned to respond to jokes with jokes, started to care more for himself, and began approaching her first—initiating affection in his own way.

As if he were learning for the first time what it meant to love someone.

Awkward, and still immature—but both of them were clearly growing in a better direction.

“...Now I understand why this everyday life is etched into Cheon Hwi-da's Heartscape.”

“I once heard from the sisters at the courtesan house... A man never forgets his first love, no matter how many years pass.”

“There were a lot of embarrassing scenes, but watching Hwi slowly change was truly heartwarming.”

The relationship between Cheon Hwi-da and the limping woman was... peculiar.

They mixed bodies fiercely and often, to the point that they knew everything about each other physically.

But once off the bed, they blushed over the smallest things like innocent teenagers.

Instead of heart first, then body, it was body first, and only slowly did their hearts follow.

No matter how many times they watched, the bed scenes never became easier to bear, nor did the presence of another woman feel less uncomfortable. They couldn't explain why the limping woman felt so familiar.

But at least now, they understood why Cheon Hwi-da was so attached to this memory.

He wanted to keep seeing the version of himself that was slowly changing.

However—

Fwoosh.

Following Cheon Hwi-da's gaze, the three women saw the world consumed by flames.

And the limping woman... clutching her deeply slashed abdomen, sat slumped against the wall at the main gate.

As always, she had come out to greet Cheon Hwi-da before anyone else.

Even if it was the final moment of her life.

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The limping woman sat with her back against the outer wall of the main gate, clutching her deeply slashed abdomen.

“...This is...”

“We knew this would happen, Sister Tang. No matter what we saw, there was no way it would end well.”

“Even knowing that... it’s still sad. Maybe I’ve grown attached without realizing it.”

Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin wore downcast expressions. In contrast, Seol Lihyang remained composed.

Because she had a certainty within her that she couldn’t explain. She still didn’t know what that certainty was, but it was there.

While the three reacted in their own ways, Cheon Hwi-da, upon discovering the dying limping woman, dashed toward her like a madman.

He embraced her and shouted something.

“We still can’t hear their conversation.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. In exchange, we’re allowed to stay this long.”

While the other two reacted with regret, Seol Lihyang simply focused, silently watching the limping woman.

Just as their voices were inaudible, their features were also blurred, like shrouded in fog, making it impossible to lip-read.

And yet, Seol Lihyang stared intently at the limping woman.

As if she were trying to pierce through something, or recall something long buried.

Time continued to pass as each of them mourned in their own way.

Cheon Hwi-da kept shouting something, while the limping woman continuously shook her head in sorrowful denial.

Eventually, Cheon Hwi-da lowered his head. His trembling hand reached into his robe and took out a pear.

That moment—

Fwip.

Seol Lihyang's world expanded.

No—more precisely, the clarity of her world suddenly and inexplicably heightened.

The heat from the flames prickled her skin, every grain of sand on the ground was sharply visible...

And the smell of burning wafted into her nose.

Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin, who reflexively looked around, didn't seem to notice any change.

Which meant—this phenomenon was something only Seol Lihyang was experiencing.

Her instincts screamed at her not to let go of this moment, and she sharpened her focus, widening her eyes.

As if to memorize every detail of what was about to unfold.

And perhaps because of that, she was able to hear it.

The voice of the limping woman, who accepted the pear from Cheon Hwi-da, hugged it dearly, and whispered softly with a peaceful expression as if she had no regrets.

— “Blood Wolf... You really are a bastard.”

Yin.

Never once before had they heard a voice in this Heartscape. Even if they could circumvent the mental restriction, they couldn't break it.

But now, Seol Lihyang alone heard the limping woman's voice.

If this world was truly Cheon Hwi-da's Heartscape, then what was the meaning of this sudden phenomenon?

It didn't take long for Seol Lihyang to reach the answer.

It was engraved.

So deep and vivid that not even the mental restriction could conceal it—this scene had been etched into Cheon Hwi-da's very soul.

And the reason why only Seol Lihyang could hear it—

“...That's... my voice.”

More mature, more affectionate—but unmistakably Seol Lihyang's own voice.

The moment she realized this, Seol Lihyang touched the core of Cheon Hwi-da's mental restriction—this Heartscape's hidden truth.

What if, when she first met Cheon Hwi-da, he hadn't helped her?

What if she'd been beaten by the Hao Clan warrior and dragged away?

What if she had been forced to learn seduction techniques under the Hao Branch Leader?

What if she'd never met Cheon Hwi-da, never become a Tang Clan guest, never learned proper martial arts?

An endless chain of what-ifs. Branches that split into more branches.

Yet among those tangled possibilities, one stood out clearly.

What if Cheon Hwi-da finding her had not been a coincidence?

What if his willingness to take a risk for her had not been an impulsive whim?

What if she had never received help from anyone, and come to distrust the world?

Events that had happened, events that would happen, and events that now would never happen.

After stumbling through countless misjudgments and abandoning conventional thinking, she finally reached a single conclusion.

Cheon Hwi-da was neither a man with a secret origin nor someone reincarnated.

He had simply turned back time.

Regression.

With that one word, all of Cheon Hwi-da's anomalies and everything she had seen in the Heartscape could be explained.

“It wasn’t a past life! This is—!”

Just as Seol Lihyang gasped, on the verge of shouting—

The limping woman, nestled in Cheon Hwi-da’s arms, whispered something and lowered her head.

And the moment a single tear rolled down Cheon Hwi-da’s cheek—

Hrk...!

A flood of emotion surged up from within Seol Lihyang—emotions that were not her own.

Grief. Rage. Guilt. Hatred. Regret. And above all else, buried within those feelings—longing.

The torrent of overwhelming emotion made her head spin and her breath hitch.

How could a human being carry such feelings and still live?

Perhaps it wasn't just Seol Lihyang—Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin also clutched at their chests with stunned expressions.

At the same time, the surrounding flames felt closer and closer—not that they were actually approaching, but they felt like they were.

As if their very bodies were being burned as fuel instead of the buildings.

Just as Seol Lihyang realized this was part of the Heartscape Cheon Hwi-da often channeled into his martial arts—

The three—Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin—began to rise.

An upward pull, the opposite of the sensation they'd felt when entering the Heartscape.

“Huh? Wh-Wha...?”

“Wait! You can’t just end it here!”

“There’s still a crucial scene left!”

Cheon Hwi-da, radiating an aura of resolute determination, wiped away his tears and drew his sword. He headed into the blazing building.

It was a scene practically screaming that something dramatic was about to happen. They knew because they had shared the overflowing emotions.

Whatever came next would surely be as, or even more, important than what they’d just seen.

But the three of them wouldn’t be able to witness it. Their time in the Heartscape had come to an end.

A cruel yet precise cutoff.

As their consciousnesses rapidly resurfaced—as if propelled by momentum—Seol Lihyang trembled.

And finally, when they opened their eyes back in the real world—

“This... This is mental amputation...”

“Huh...?”

Zhuge Bu, who had been helping them physically and mentally out of sheer intellectual curiosity, had inadvertently become a demon.

“And Cheon Hwi... you really are a bastard...”

Yin.

Cheon Hwi’s face turned deathly pale.

From Seol Lihyang’s perspective, the words had been a mix of residual emotional backlash and her desire to share what she had discovered.

But to Cheon Hwi—it was a direct strike at a buried, painful memory.

“Wait—what did you just say...? Don’t tell me—was that the Blood Demon again...? No, it couldn’t be... Am I still trapped inside the Heartscape...?!”

Cheon Hwi, who’d been through a lot lately, spiraled into confusion.

Meanwhile, everyone else’s attention turned to Seol Lihyang, who had "cast out" the other two as soon as she opened her eyes.

Though Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin were also visibly shaken, Seol Lihyang’s reaction stood out even more.

Noticing the stares, Seol Lihyang flinched—then tried to speak up, wanting to share what she’d realized. But—

Ugh!

Her tongue suddenly froze. Not for any profound reason.

But because a powerful impulse told her she shouldn't speak.

It had been quite some time ago, but Seol Lihyang had grown up in a courtesan house. She had heard and seen many things.

The instincts she had built up unconsciously now stopped her words.

The reason was simple.

"If I say it... Sister Tang will be hurt, won't she?"

Tang Sowol was fundamentally generous. And to those she had accepted—especially Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin—she was exceptionally kind.

But that was based on the unspoken understanding that she was the main wife.

The reason she had been most shocked earlier, seeing Cheon Hwi with another woman, was because he had slept with someone else before her.

And now she'd learn that that woman... was actually Seol Lihyang?

That the limping woman—howling like a beast, using tools no one had ever seen before, and devoured for an entire day—was her?

This wasn't about shame.

Even someone like Tang Sowol might falter.

At worst... she might start distancing herself from Seol Lihyang.

And that was the one thing Seol Lihyang wanted to avoid.

Unable to speak the truth, she hesitated.

And those watching began to jump to their own conclusions.

“Hyanga? Why'd you suddenly stop talking?”

“Wait... doesn’t this feel like when Hwi’s mouth gets shut by the mental restriction?”

“You don’t think... just knowing something can pass the restriction on? Strategist Zhuge, is that possible?”

“It’s... not impossible. Extremely difficult, with strict conditions, and the restriction types are limited—but that’s assuming it’s cast from one person to another.”

Prompted by Tang Sowol’s question, everyone—Zhuge Bu, Abbot Jeong Hyeon, Monk Gak-jeong, the Murim Alliance Leader, and even Tang Jincheon—began murmuring.

“Well, this is a problem. If she knows her son-in-law’s secret but can’t share it, what then?”

“No need to worry, Poison King. Your daughter said it herself—White Moon Sword Lord’s restriction is deeply tied to those three. So if the ones involved know, isn’t that enough?”

“Namu Amitabul... I ask the Poison King. Does the restriction only trigger when trying to reveal the information? Not when trying to act on it without telling anyone?”

“So far, that seems to be the case.”

“Click click. Then it’s settled. The process is difficult, but the technique can be repeated. Just use the great art again until the other two realize it.”

With Monk Gak-jeong’s words, the conversation came to a conclusion.

If speaking the truth made it unspeakable, then the solution was simple—repeat the great art until everyone knows.

It was the most effective option available, and everyone nodded in agreement.

“Let’s do that. The Murim Alliance will cover the costs of the great art.”

“I’ll also set aside time once everything’s ready. When I do, could I ask to consult any reference records?”

“No issue. Shaolin’s already declined Esoteric teachings anyway.”

“Thank you all. The Tang Clan will never forget this favor.”

The discussion wrapped up smoothly. In the warm atmosphere, Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin patted Seol Lihyang on the shoulder as if to say, don't worry.

However—

“...Ah. It's over.”

Seol Lihyang herself was drenched in cold sweat.

She couldn't tell Tang Sowol.

But staying silent... would eventually lead everyone to find out anyway.

Even without the restriction, this was something that had to be addressed.

After all—Cheon Hwi-da's Heartscape didn't just contain memories of her death.

From Cheon Hwi's behavior and words, one thing was clear:

All of this was ultimately connected to the Heavenly Demon.

Steeling her resolve, Seol Lihyang looked at Tang Sowol.

Elegant appearance. Graceful demeanor. The prestige of the Sichuan Tang Clan.
Raised in luxury from a young age—an enviable beauty, even to other women.

...Though I've got yin energy on my side, so I'm not completely outclassed.

Muttering inwardly, Seol Lihyang made her decision.

There's a gap between early and mid Sub-Perfection, but if I'm also at Sub-Perfection like Sister Tang...

Then I just need to become stronger!

At least strong enough to survive Sister Tang's poison!

It was a conclusion oddly similar to Cheon Hwi's—to survive until I no longer die from Tang Jincheon's poison.

“So? Can you tell us even just a little of what you saw?”

At Tang Jincheon's question, Tang Sowol pondered for a moment, then replied.

“...Cheon Hwi-da... had an affair.”

“...huh.”

It was a ludicrous accusation.

And yet—for some reason—all three women, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, flushed bright red.

Everyone suddenly felt like they knew exactly what they had seen.

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"Cheon Hwi-da... had an affair."

"....."

An absurd accusation. The sudden loss of color, the trembling body—it was a natural response. He tried to object—

"...If you call it an affair, then I suppose it could be seen that way."

"Ahem. Not a completely wrong statement, but isn't that a bit harsh on Hwi?"

Judging by the flushed faces and averted eyes of the other women, he could roughly guess what they had seen.

It must've been something that could clearly be considered infidelity—something that embarrassed all three of them.

In other words, memories of Seol Lihyang from before the regression.

So they must've glimpsed his memories with the Demonic Sound Ice Witch.

A time when all he did was train, study, and receive treatment from her.

That period was the only time in his life he had lived happily, without major worries.

Before that, he'd been desperate to survive. Afterward, he had lived half-mad with grief over Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin's deaths.

After meeting Tang Sowol, he was constantly being hunted by the Heavenly Demon, and even now, he was anxious about needing to surpass him.

That short window was the only time he had genuinely enjoyed life for himself.

Of course, he hadn't realized it at the time—an unfortunate truth in hindsight.

As he nodded silently, a bitter feeling in his chest, Tang Jincheon's gaze suddenly sharpened.

"...Are you admitting to an affair right in front of me, son-in-law?"

"...It's a misunderstanding. I just meant that it might look that way."

"And don't you think that's the kind of thing that's easy to misunderstand?"

Tang Jincheon, donning the persona of the overprotective father for the first time in a while, glared with intensity. Everyone flinched at his sharp tone.

"...Sigh. That was half a joke, Father-in-law."

"...Hmm? Is that so?"

"Yes, and more importantly, what we saw were Cheon Hwi-da's memories. They happened before he even met me."

“I see...”

At that, Tang Jincheon finally eased up and nodded.

“If it happened before age fifteen... well, no one should be judged for childhood crushes.”

“Childhood crushes... that’s one way to put it. But what we saw wasn’t so innocent.”

“Then what exactly did you see?”

At Tang Jincheon’s question, Tang Sowol turned toward Cheon Hwi-da. Following her gaze, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin also looked at him—seeking his permission to speak.

If their vision had been what he suspected—related to the Ice Witch’s final moments—it was understandable they would tread carefully.

After all, bringing up those memories would be like reopening an old wound.

But if this was a way to convey something despite the mental restriction, then he was grateful.

With a bitter smile, he gave a small nod.

Only then did Tang Sowol open her mouth.

“We saw someone Cheon Hwi-da failed to protect. Someone who died in his arms.”

“I see...”

Tang Jincheon’s shoulders slumped at the words. When he looked at Cheon Hwi-da with apologetic eyes, the latter shook his head.

“It’s alright now.”

“Then that eases my heart.”

Tang Jincheon smiled faintly and gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. Cheon Hwi-da accepted the gesture, understanding the comfort behind it.

Then, Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke up.

“But there was one odd thing. The Cheon Hwi we saw in the memory... he was very different from now. And no, I don’t mean he was younger.”

“What do you mean by that? I’m fairly sure my formation was flawless, though...”

The first to respond was Zhuge Bu, who looked like he had just heard something incomprehensible.

“If I may, Strategist—I don’t mean your formation was flawed. It’s just that Cheon Hwi’s Heartscape... the memories within it were unlike anything we imagined.”

“I see. But I still don’t quite understand.”

Zhuce Bu blinked, confused, and the others, though silent, clearly shared his curiosity.

Feeling the attention, Seo Mun-Hwarin cleared her throat and spoke with an uncharacteristically solemn tone.

“...What I mean is, we saw snow-covered, half-collapsed buildings. And Cheon Hwi... he looked at least five years older than he is now.”

“He looked older? Couldn’t it have been his father or brother?”

“No, it was him. His height, his cultivation level, and even his presence were different, yes—but it was unmistakably Cheon Hwi.”

She began listing specific traits—habits, body shape, thought processes—all identical to the current Cheon Hwi-da, and spoke with full confidence.

She even recognized the Ironblood Hall’s building layout and tied it back to the Black Lotus Sect, though no one really cared about that detail.

Her lengthy examples, so thorough they exhausted even Cheon Hwi-da himself, were convincing enough that no one could deny it.

Faces around the room grew increasingly conflicted—blending discomfort and sympathy.

Eventually, realizing how she looked, Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head wildly.

“I-It wasn’t me! It was all Sowol who figured it out!”

“...Sure. Let’s go with that.”

“Sowol! If you say that, what do you make me out to be?! A-Anyway! The point is simple—we weren’t seeing the past. I think it might’ve been a memory from a previous life!”

“Reincarnation...?!”

“Then the reason Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva placed the mental restriction...?!”

At the mention of reincarnation, Abbot Jeong Hyeon and Monk Gak-jeong both shot to their feet—then quickly nodded in realization.

Too bad—it’s close, but not quite.

Still, if they believed he had lived a previous life, then it was more than he could have hoped for.

Perhaps they believed they had finally found someone who had truly remembered a past life.

Now the two monks were looking at Cheon Hwi-da with almost reverent awe.

Fortunately, they had missed the mark just enough that the mental restriction didn't activate.

“That’s not it.”

“We understand. You have to say that, given the circumstances.”

“No, really. It’s not that.”

“Hmm. Is that so?”

No matter how he tried to explain, it wasn't landing.

He sighed inwardly—when suddenly, a voice rang out. Seol Lihyang, who had been silent since her first outburst, finally spoke.

“We don't know anything for sure yet. Please don't push Hwi too hard, Venerable Monks. It's just a hypothesis, right, Sister Seo Mun?”

“...Eh? Ah, yes. Exactly. It's just... there were so many unexplainable things, we ended up using the word past life out of sheer confusion.”

Finally, the two monks scratched their shiny heads awkwardly.

But Seol Lihyang wasn't finished.

“What I think is far more important than the buildings or how different Cheon Hwi seemed...”

“...Yes?”

“I figured out what the flames in his Heartscape meant.”

After reaching Flowering Stage, he no longer leaked bloodlust uncontrollably—but before that, whenever he went all out, a terrifying aura of fire had erupted from him.

Everyone except Zhuge Bu remembered it, and they quickly quieted down to hear the rest.

“The entire world was burning—everything Cheon Hwi cherished. And just when he, half-mad, was about to head toward the heart of that inferno... the vision ended.”

“...You mean...”

“Yes. That’s enough for now. We just need to understand that Cheon Hwi has a painful past, and that whatever it is—it’s not a threat anymore, just an old scar. The real story... we’ll probably see it during the next great art.”

“...I see.”

The Murim Alliance Leader nodded, a faint smile on his lips.

“Understood. So, Cheon Hwi-da is from the Unorthodox Faction. He might even be older than he looks. No wonder his behavior was so eccentric, regardless of his intentions.”

He looked as if all the pieces had fallen into place. But that statement also planted the seeds for a new misunderstanding.

“...Wait, so Cheon Hwi is actually some old monster who lied about his age when he kidnapped me?”

Tang Sowol, casually bringing up the incident.

Not a monster... probably.

After leaving the Murim Alliance Leader’s private chamber, everyone returned to their own quarters.

But instead of going to their rooms, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seo Mun-Hwarin came to Cheon Hwi-da's room, just like they always did.

Normally, Tang Jincheon would have glared at them in disapproval, but this time, he quietly stepped aside as if to give them space.

The room, which should have been bustling, was still.

No one moved. They all just looked at one another.

Usually, someone else would break the silence first, but this time, Cheon Hwi-da opened his mouth.

"...Is there anything you'd like to ask? I may not be able to answer everything, but I'll tell you what I can."

"In that case, I have one question."

Tang Sowol nodded as if she had been waiting for him to speak. She hesitated a moment, then muttered,

“...Hmm. If I phrase it in a way you can answer... then yes, this is the question.”

“What is it?”

“Do you love us?”

He knew why she was asking.

They had seen memories of him with the Ice Witch—specifically, the exchange of yang and yin to replenish energy.

Having even that part of his private life exposed, and being asked to define his current feelings—it was embarrassing, but something he had to answer seriously.

“...Of course I do. If I didn’t, why would I go through so much trouble to stay with you?”

“Fufu, I see.”

Tang Sowol smiled, satisfied.

“Even if you really are an old monster in disguise, even if you only cared for us because we didn’t know... even if you’re not that much of a genius, and I wasn’t your first love... that one sentence is enough.”

Is it really?

Why did it feel like she was gently roasting him?

As he waited for more questions, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin also spoke in turn.

“Same for me. What matters is now, right?”

“I’m a thoughtful woman who can forgive a man’s small past mistakes. Just be good to me going forward.”

Seol Lihyang looked oddly proud, while Seo Mun-Hwarin casually shrugged.

They hadn’t fully uncovered the truth about his regression, but at least they seemed to understand and accept him.

Looking at the three of them, Cheon Hwi-da finally realized—

“...I see.”

He'd realized it late again.

But he was already living a happy life.

There was no need to romanticize the past, or long for it more than necessary.

Worrying about things beyond his reach was too exhausting.

What mattered—what always mattered—was protecting those who remained in his arms.

He had to live in the present.

That was the only path left to him.

As that fleeting awareness washed over him, he closed his eyes.

Then—

“...Hey, um?”

“Hm?”

“...Is it really this big?”

Seol Lihyang, with one eye closed and a dead-serious expression, held her hand out in front of his lower abdomen, fingers spread.

There was no ambiguity about what she meant.

“...You’re insane.”

“So? Is it true or not?”

“...It’s probably a bit bigger now.”

After all, he had eaten and slept well this time around.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

In some ways, there had been a terribly awkward incident... but overall, the matters at the Murim Alliance had been resolved smoothly.

Blood Demon had been completely annihilated without even a chance of revival. Although the Heavenly Demon’s unexpected intervention had occurred, they had successfully bypassed the mental restrictions through cunning methods.

Moreover, though it wasn’t intended, he had even come to an epiphany while swinging his sword for decades within the trick.

One could say that it was a conclusion in which he had attained everything he wanted.

Thanks to that, although a few doubts and concerns still remained, he was able to leave the Murim Alliance with a much lighter heart than before.

And once he found a bit of breathing room, certain thoughts began to surface.

“Gauntlets.”

“Huh? What are you talking about all of a sudden, Hwi?”

“Wouldn’t you like a pair of gauntlets made from Myriad-Year Cold Iron? If we reinforce it with the leather from the Flood Dragon we brought back last time, I think it could be quite helpful to Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“If it’s that kind of rare item, it would certainly be useful, though my aura is inherently tyrannical, so it might not make a huge difference.”

“So in other words, it *will* help. As it happens, I know the location of a pair of gauntlets made from Myriad-Year Cold Iron.”

“???”

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked rapidly, as if she couldn't follow the flow of the conversation.

However, instead of adding an explanation for her, he shifted his gaze straight to Seol Lihyang.

“What was the sound-based martial art you're learning right now?”

“Uh... It's called 'Laughter of One Heart', something I received from Jinju Yeon Clan.”

“Must be an orthodox technique.”

“Well, of course it is?”

“Seol Lihyang. You suit unorthodox sects more than orthodox ones. Would you be interested in learning a technique called 'Collapsing Heavenly Sound' as well? It'll be of great help when unleashing a tyrannical assault.”

“Of course it’s nice to learn another sound technique, but... what do you mean I suit unorthodox sects more?! Cheon Hwi, answer me properly!”

Apparently still shocked by what she had seen in the Heartscape, Seol Lihyang, who had been sneaking glances at his body these past few days, now fixed her gaze on his face for the first time in a while.

Naturally, he ignored it lightly and turned to ask Tang Sowol one last thing.

“The inner core of the Fire Centipede. Would it still be effective for you now?”

“There should still be an effect! The Fire Centipede’s poison isn’t very strong for me at this stage, but its real value shows when combined with other poisons. I’m sure some good results will come from experimenting!”

Unlike the others, who reacted ambiguously, Tang Sowol was already bouncing with excitement.

After all, wasn’t she the kind of person who mixed poisons just to see what would happen? Whether it made her stronger or not, she’d definitely enjoy it.

It wasn’t just her innate talent of Poison Spirit Constitution, but also her love for poison arts themselves that defined her.

Satisfied, he nodded, and then Tang Jincheon, who had been watching them from a short distance away with a dumbfounded look, finally spoke up.

“I don’t know why you’re suddenly talking about all that the moment we left the Murim Alliance... but is there nothing for me, son-in-law?”

“Isn’t my very existence already a blessing and a great gift to the Tang Clan?”

“The higher your realm gets, the more shameless you become, huh.”

Tang Jincheon chuckled but didn’t deny it. Though he had taken a slight misstep, the tense atmosphere brought on by learning part of his memories from before regression had eased a little.

Good. With things like this, it should be about time to bring up the main point.

“I’ll make a few quick stops to collect the things I just mentioned before returning. I’m leaving the aftermath to you, Father-in-law.”

“...Huh?”

Tang Jincheon flinched at the sudden declaration of delegation, while the others seemed relatively calm.

Perhaps it was because he'd often acted abruptly before, but more likely, it was due to their having glimpsed some of his past-life memories.

The first to step forward was Seol Lihyang, wearing a face that seemed to understand everything.

“Yeah. It’s better to have it than not. Besides, whoever picks up the thing that’s fallen to the ground first gets to keep it, right? Let’s grab it before someone else does.”

“Uh... yeah, something like that.”

Had Seol Lihyang realized something? She had said she was under the same mental restriction. Perhaps she had truly come to the conclusion of regression.

She didn’t ask any of the most crucial questions, like the basis or the source of his information, yet still grasped the key points. That was telling.

Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin also nodded a beat later, and only then did Tang Jincheon let out a deep sigh.

“Return as soon as you can. They said they’ll contact us once preparations for the next great formation are complete, but you’re essential for it.”

“Don’t worry, Father-in-law. I won’t take long.”

His mental restrictions had become known, and part of them had been bypassed through the trick.

If there was one thing that had changed the most compared to before, it was that he no longer needed to come up with plausible excuses to use his knowledge from before regression.

In that case, wouldn’t this be a good opportunity to finally gather some of the overdue fortunes he’d missed?

Regression had given him new chances and the knowledge to use them, but most of those couldn’t be applied immediately.

Think about it—if one remembered the location of a treasure uncovered by a landslide ten years later and went back twenty years in time, they'd still have to wait ten years.

In that sense, he hadn't been able to fully utilize the knowledge from his previous life until now.

Of the big rumors even someone like him, who had mostly operated among unorthodox sects, might know—how many were usable regardless of timing, or had just so happened to be timely?

But now, enough time had passed since his regression that he could finally start putting some of that knowledge to use.

How much help it would be to their now-stronger group remained to be seen, but... well, better than nothing.

And that was why, after parting ways with Tang Jincheon, he had headed for Humeum Village, a small village in the same Hubei Province.

The village itself was ordinary and unremarkable, but if one had to name a unique feature—it had once produced an exceptional blacksmith decades ago.

That blacksmith's skills were so highly praised that he rose to the position of imperial smith... yet perhaps that wasn't enough for him.

He had secretly embezzled precious materials to craft weapons and sold them to martial artists at high prices.

Eventually, he was caught and executed along with a martial artist he had tried to trade with in secret.

During that process, the whereabouts of a pair of gauntlets made from Myriad-Year Cold Iron had become unclear...

"They say it was recently rediscovered in this village."

"Hmm?"

"A newlywed couple was building a new house and tore down an abandoned plot. That's when they found it—or rather, not while digging the ground, but in the mountain, while gathering wood for their new home."

"And how do you know this?"

“Ah, foolish of me to question such a thing. Let’s go fetch it at once!”

When he awkwardly shut his mouth, Seo Mun-Hwarin, seemingly guessing it was due to the mental restriction, simply nodded.

Thanks to that, they headed to Hu-eum Village without much trouble and were able to purchase the gauntlets cheaply from the couple, who didn’t realize their true value.

Of course, ‘cheap’ meant giving them three nyang of gold—still a satisfactory trade from the couple’s perspective.

Had they not bought it, a wandering rogue would have found the gauntlets, and the news of their existence would’ve brought martial artists flocking, likely resulting in the deaths of most of the villagers.

In a way, they had saved lives.

“So please, stop looking at me like I’m some kind of legendary con artist. I just needed the gold for something else later.”

“You... Still, three nyang of gold is...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head while hugging the gauntlets.

They didn’t seem to fit her hands—perhaps the original owner had been a giant—but that could be fixed easily at the Tang Clan’s forge. While at it, they could add the Flood Dragon’s leather too.

Receiving her happy yet awkwardly conflicted gaze, they next headed through Jiangxi Province to an auction house in Fujian Province.

It wasn’t as notorious as Zhejiang Province, but it was clearly within unorthodox territory. Normally, as members of the Tang Clan, they wouldn’t be able to move so openly here...

“Gasp! Everyone, open your eyes! It’s the White Moon Sword Lord!”

“You idiot! Didn’t you hear the rumor that he’s fine as long as you don’t pick a fight first? The real one to watch out for is the Demonic Sound Ice Witch!”

“What the hell did she do?”

“They say if you look at her wrong, she’ll turn you into an ice block. Her hobby is shattering those ice blocks that used to be people.”

“...Why is someone like that even in the orthodox faction?”

Maybe it was thanks to Seorin, the Lord of the Black Lotus Sect. While some at the Murim Alliance questioned whether he truly belonged to the orthodox side, here in unorthodox territory, he was surprisingly well-regarded.

In fact, they seemed more fearful of Seol Lihyang, who had flattened every late-stage Black Lotus Sect member and left a trail of terrifying rumors.

“I’m innocent! Those were all just sparring matches!”

“But you *did* turn someone into an ice block just because you didn’t like the way they looked at you.”

“He was ogling me with gross eyes! That’s why!”

“Was he? Then you did well. But... you didn’t shatter him after freezing him, did you?”

“Why would I do that in a non-life-and-death duel?!”

“Seol Lihyang enjoys shattering her frozen opponents in real life-and-death matches... noted.”

“Don’t note it! That’s a twisted rumor!”

He listened to Seol Lihyang’s protests with one ear and let it out the other as they entered the auction house.

He didn’t know where or how it had ended up here, but in this time period, the Fujian auction house was offering the martial art “Collapsing Heavenly Sound” for sale.

Being a sound-based technique with low demand, it hadn’t sold, and its price had kept dropping. Eventually, it had been sold cheaply—but when people learned it was actually a top-tier advancement martial art, chaos briefly erupted.

People figured that even as a sound technique, there’d be something worth learning if it was that high in level.

Unfortunately, that couldn't be confirmed. The secret manual of Collapsing Heavenly Sound had been damaged during the scuffle over it.

Such things happened often in unorthodox circles. Many died or were injured over a secret manual, only for it to be destroyed in the end.

But that wouldn't happen this time.

Perhaps because it had only just arrived at the auction house, they were able to obtain it for 80 nyang of silver—not even needing gold.

“Um... Cheon Hwi? I know it's a great martial art and I'm thankful for the gift, but...”

“Is there a problem?”

“You said you'd need the gold for something else. If you're not using it now, then when *are* you going to use it?”

“That’s what was bothering you? I’m planning to use it to purchase the Fire Centipede.”

“Purchase it? A spirit beast?”

These days, it was becoming harder and harder to find spirit beasts. Unless it was a remote place like the North Sea, powerful spirit creatures were nearly extinct.

The Fire Centipede wasn’t quite on par with the Flood Dragon, but it was still a powerful creature of the Peak Stage.

And perhaps because it housed seven poisons in perfect harmony, it was also a rare specimen, even for its level of power.

If such a creature appeared in the Central Plains, it would naturally cause an uproar.

He had heard rumors about the Fire Centipede even before his regression.

And the rumor had been simple:

“There was someone who tried to raise a Fire Centipede and ended up getting kicked out of the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace.”

“Eh? Isn’t raising venomous insects, not beasts, more of the Thousand Poison Gate’s style?”

“That’s exactly why he got kicked out.”

“Aha!”

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These days, unless it was a lesser creature, it was difficult to even glimpse a proper spirit beast... but the records themselves remained quite detailed.

It made sense—after all, up until Seo Mun-Hwarin’s generation, powerful spirit beasts were still discovered quite often, so it wasn’t ancient history to live in coexistence or competition with them.

Among all these, the spirit beasts with the most surviving records were those of the serpent and centipede types.

And the reason those two were particularly infamous was simple: they were generally large and nasty in temperament, frequently invading human territories.

Well, of course, there were also rare instances where humans invaded a spirit beast's territory, like the Flood Dragon of the North Sea Ice Palace.

Still, the frequency of conflict meant they inevitably came to know a lot about each other.

Spirit beasts would diverge into many branches depending on their environments. And it didn't take long to recognize one particular, extremely unusual species among them.

The Fire Centipede.

It wasn't some terrifying giant centipede literally wreathed in seven types of fire, as the name might suggest.

Rather, each specimen carried at least seven types of poison, and each one induced an intense burning sensation when it entered the bloodstream.

When multiple poisons were contracted at once, their combined toxicity would grow even stronger, and the resulting agony—like burning alive—would lead to death. Hence the name.

Typically, poisonous creatures could only carry one type of venom due to their innate resistance to it. This applied to spirit beasts as well.

But the Fire Centipede had managed to host several poisons and somehow harmonize them within its body.

Perhaps due to this nature, the Fire Centipede's poison mixed well with almost any other, reportedly creating various effects depending on the combination.

“But, the Fire Centipede has another special trait too.”

Tang Sowol, her voice bright with excitement at the thought of acquiring the creature, lifted the corners of her mouth into a wide grin.

“Because its strong poisons are balanced in harmony, mysterious patterns appear on its carapace. They’re said to be so beautiful that a Fire Centipede caught in the past had its shell presented to the imperial court.”

“Sounds like it would fetch a high price.”

“...Is that all you have to say? Aren’t you at least a little excited or intrigued?”

“It’s still a centipede, no? Oh, but I *am* looking forward to seeing how happy *you* get.”

Unlike Seol Lihyang’s new sound-based martial art or Seo Mun-Hwarin’s gauntlets, which—while good—might not have significant practical value, the Fire Centipede’s venom could potentially provide real benefit to Tang Sowol.

Well... who could say for sure? Before his regression, the Fire Centipede had ended up in the hands of the Thousand Poison Gate, not the Tang Clan.

As he silently nodded to himself, Tang Sowol spoke again, her expression turning a bit complex.

“That reaction feels awfully dry... No, never mind. I suppose that level of emotional detachment is the best someone like you can manage, Brother Cheon? You said you’re at least looking forward to *my* reaction... So! Well done!”

...For some reason, he was being praised.

Ever since she’d glimpsed his memories, Tang Sowol’s expectations—or perhaps standards—for him seemed to have dropped significantly.

He wasn't sure whether to feel good or bad about that...

“Ahem. What bothers me more is the fact that someone from the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace is raising a venomous insect-type spirit beast. And then selling it?”

“It's nothing complicated. There's a very simple reason.”

Money, perhaps?

“No, something a little more urgent. Hunger.”

The Southern Barbarian Beast Palace was a major sect that shared rule over Yunnan with the Thousand Poison Gate. Considering it was an area where the imperial influence barely reached, they were practically like the rulers of a small country.

Because of that, the royal bloodline of the palace wielded significant power within Yunnan... and sometimes, strange individuals would emerge.

“The third or fourth daughter of the current palace lord—who had no real chance of succession—happened upon the Fire Centipede by chance, and managed to tame it.”

If she had used the Beast Palace’s own methods to tame the centipede, it would’ve been fine.

They would’ve celebrated the discovery as a new potential for their martial arts.

But she had secretly learned techniques that had leaked out during the destruction of the Five Venoms Gate, which preceded the Thousand Poison Gate, and used those to tame it instead.

Naturally, this didn’t sit well—not with the remnants of the Five Venoms Gate, nor with the Thousand Poison Gate, and certainly not with the current palace lord, who had led the Beast Palace into its golden age.

He had ordered his daughter to either leave the palace or kill the Fire Centipede.

And astonishingly, she chose to leave the palace with the Fire Centipede.

“It goes without saying, but what could a noble daughter, who left home with no preparation, hope to do alone? She should be grateful if she didn’t get kidnapped.”

“Urk!”

Tang Sowol, feeling oddly targeted, glared at him—but he only shrugged and continued.

She had left the Southern Barbarians entirely and made for the Central Plains... but in a foreign land, with no support, no money, and no experience—how long could she last?

She reportedly barely ate on the journey, and by the time she finally reached Guizhou Province, it happened.

The Fire Centipede, large and requiring a substantial diet, could no longer endure starvation—and devoured its master.

And though the Fire Centipede had been spiritually bound to its owner by the Five Venoms Gate’s secret technique, that bond was shattered in its hunger-induced madness, and it went berserk.

Worse still, this didn’t happen in some remote Yunnan jungle, but in Guizhou Province, where news spread quickly.

Many sects sent people after the rare Fire Centipede's inner core, but in the end, the one who succeeded was the Thousand Poison Gate.

That was the version of the story he'd heard before regression.

And if his memory was correct, this was around the time the girl had been cast out with the Fire Centipede.

Naturally, he couldn't say all this, so he glossed over the end.

Fortunately, they were used to his awkward explanations by now.

Anyway, it was entirely possible she was out there starving.

And if so, she might be willing to sell the Fire Centipede for a sum like this.

"Pardon? If she went so far as to leave her home, doesn't that mean she treasures the Fire Centipede like her own child? No matter how tempting the gold, who would sell their own child?"

“Plenty of people sell their kids for a single nyang of silver.”

“That’s... such a grim view of the world...! But no, I’ve decided to just accept you as you are, Brother Cheon! It’s too late to change how you live!”

Do you even realize that’s the harshest thing you’ve said so far?

That sorrowful look on her face—Tang Sowol often wore it after seeing his past.

Sometimes, he almost wished she hadn’t.

He let out a long sigh and picked up the pace. Thankfully, now that they’d all reached high levels of martial prowess, traveling quickly with light movement techniques was easy.

They set up in the largest village near the Yunnan–Guizhou border and waited for half a month.

But no matter how long they waited, neither the Fire Centipede nor the Beast Palace girl appeared.

“...Something’s gone wrong.”

“Too chilly? Want me to cool it down even more?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, reached out, and touched the back of his neck.

Her hand was so cold it sent chills down his spine. As his neck involuntarily trembled, she giggled in amusement.

She had become like a walking ice vault, exuding cold throughout the room—no wonder her hands felt like blocks of ice.

But what he meant by “something’s gone wrong” wasn’t the temperature.

“I’m fine, so go chill Tang Sowol or Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. And I wasn’t talking about the temperature—I meant the fact that there’s still no news.”

“Hmm?”

Seol Lihyang nodded, then slipped her hand into the collars of Tang Sowol, who had just finished her sweaty training for the day, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been her sparring partner.

“Urgh! Lihyang, you started it this time?!”

“Fufu. This is nothing for someone like me, who has reached the Cold-and-Heat Immunity stage—wait, how far are you putting your hand?!”

“Ah, wasn’t this your back?”

Seol Lihyang replied casually.

Tang Sowol, who had leapt up like a startled frog mid-sit, now looked disheveled and glared at her.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had smugly raised her chin in triumph, yelped and covered her chest.

A brief silence. Then came the playful bickering.

Perhaps the shared glimpse into his past had formed a new bond between them.

They definitely seemed closer now.

He continued, watching the trio with mild amusement.

“Shouldn’t we have at least heard a rumor by now? But with no news at all, something really seems off.”

“Hehe. Can you two live without me in this heat? Just give in quietly, sisters!”

“My, my! I never thought I’d see the day Lihyang threatened me! You’ve grown up! But I always knew this day would come. Now, let’s see if you can still talk big after taking the *Triple-Concentration Poison!*”

“St-stop! Don’t tickle me! And no pinching either...!”

The three of them half-ignored his words and continued their antics.

Maybe they were getting a little *too* close.

Still, what was with Seo Mun-Hwarin's strange reaction when the hand went over her *shoulder*? Was it not the shoulder?

More importantly...

“Triple-Concentration Poison? That's a thing?”

“Oh? Are you interested, Brother Cheon? Sadly, it's just an exaggeration. In reality, it barely doubles the concentration at most. It's a byproduct of making poisons meant to awaken the body.”

Now Tang Sowol finally turned her attention to him. The others looked over after a bit more bickering.

“You're saying something's not going the way you expected? Don't worry about it. Most things in life don't go as planned anyway. What matters now is what you do next.”

“Come to think of it, you did tell the Tang Clan Leader you’d be back soon. Maybe it’s not worth waiting any longer. It’s unfortunate about the Fire Centipede’s poison, but if we consider the time and effort we’re wasting on a gamble, I think returning to the Tang Clan isn’t a bad idea.”

She had a point.

But even so, he felt reluctant to give up this time.

He had gotten something for Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin—but nothing yet for Tang Sowol.

And more than that, he had been thinking that, *if possible*, the daughter of the Beast Palace Lord might be the key to establishing a relationship with the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace.

Before his regression, after the Demonic Cult’s invasion, the strongest force among the newly emergent outside factions was that very Beast Palace.

An alliance might not be feasible, but at the very least, he wanted to establish good relations in advance.

That way, if they ever took advantage of chaos to invade the Central Plains, perhaps some damage could be avoided.

At the very least, he wanted to make sure they wouldn't directly clash with the Tang Clan.

That much, he hoped for.

After listening, Tang Sowol flicked away a suspicious wisp of poison from her fingertips and smiled faintly.

“If that's what Brother Cheon believes, then it wouldn't hurt to check deeper into Yunnan for information on the Fire Centipede. And if we come up empty, it's still not too late to return.”

“There might be delays or unexpected problems. Are you all okay with that?”

When he asked for confirmation, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin simply shrugged.

“It's not like it's your first time going off on some side mission.”

“When we return, I’ll carry Lihyang on my back, and you can carry Sowol. If we use light movement at full speed, we won’t even be that late.”

“...Thanks, everyone.”

He gave a small bow and immediately began packing.

Once they entered Yunnan, they heard news sooner than expected.

Apparently, because the Thousand Poison Gate had been destroyed in this life, the girl had taken the Fire Centipede to the site of its former base, rather than to the Central Plains.

Since he’d been there once before, it didn’t take long to find.

And there—

“E-everyone run!”

“It’s the Sword Demon! The butcher’s come back!”

“Protect the Sect Leader! Protect her!”

Those who seemed to be survivors of the Thousand Poison Gate were trembling as they blocked the path of a giant centipede and a single woman standing beside it.

It felt awkward to say it about himself, but...

It was quite the dramatic scene.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After stepping a bit further in, information about the Fire Centipede was easy to come by.

“The Thousand Poison Gate, is it?”

“They’re not called that anymore. Now, it’s the Centipede Gate.”

“Still, it’s a sect founded by survivors of the Thousand Poison Gate, isn’t it?”

“That’s true, but... it seems their disposition is quite different from the Thousand Poison Gate we know.”

“Indeed. That’s a fair point.”

According to the merchants they met deep in Yunnan, Centipede Gate was a fledgling sect established by survivors of the Thousand Poison Gate, centered around the girl from the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace who had tamed the Fire Centipede.

Calling them “survivors” of the Thousand Poison Gate might be generous—in truth, they were a loose gathering of servants or martial artists of second- or third-rate level who had once worked under the sect.

Even a first-rate martial artist could start a small sect in the countryside. Once someone reached Peak Stage, they were called a master and welcomed wherever they went.

Thus, those with real ability had long since been absorbed by other sects, founded their own, or left Yunnan as wandering martial artists.

Only those who weren't skilled enough to go elsewhere, and who bore the infamy of the Thousand Poison Gate, had banded together out of desperation.

While they were hated for their past ties to the Thousand Poison Gate, Centipede Gate itself didn't have a bad reputation...

"Well, of course. They were never part of the core group to begin with."

"Exactly, right?"

In orthodox sects, even those with low martial prowess were cherished as fellow members. But in the unorthodox world, weaklings were little more than laborers.

They did what they were told, got beaten if they failed, and were grateful for whatever scraps of martial arts they were tossed...

Wasn't that just like his own childhood?

And the Thousand Poison Gate was more vicious than most unorthodox sects. Surely, not a few of its members had only joined to survive.

Centipede Gate was a sect formed by such people. While they weren't righteous enough to be called orthodox, they were undoubtedly much milder than the Thousand Poison Gate.

"That's a relief."

"Relief, you say?"

"If Centipede Gate had turned out to be another Thousand Poison Gate, we might've had to talk with our swords instead of words."

"...But didn't you say you wanted to meet the Beast Palace Lord through the Centipede Gate leader?"

"That's true, but if they're connected to those who tried to harm you, Tang Sowol, then rooting them out comes first."

“Oh my~?”

Tang Sowol giggled in satisfaction at his reply and promptly latched onto his arm with a smile.

Then Seo Mun-Hwarin, poking him in the side as if expecting something, asked:

“By the way, do you remember how to get to the Thousand Poison Gate? I’ve forgotten over time.”

“Well, of course that could happen.”

“...That tone felt a bit rude. Was that just this lady’s imagination?”

“Yes, of course. No way would I suggest something as awful as you becoming forgetful due to your age.”

“What did you say?!”

Outraged, Seo Mun-Hwarin began pinching his side. Naturally, it hurt—but the reaction gave him a strange satisfaction deep in his chest.

Why was teasing Seo Mun-Hwarin so enjoyable?

Suppressing the unanswerable mystery, he gently tapped her hand until she let go.

“In any case, I do remember the path to the Thousand Poison Gate. Don’t worry.”

“But you were in a state of qi deviation. I just asked because I was concerned your memory might be unclear, and yet you reply so cruelly...”

“How could that be cruel? Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, you're in your prime. It was just a simple jest.”

“...Do you really think so?”

Her once grumbling lips grew quiet, and she asked with a hint of hopeful anticipation.

Letting out a small laugh, he nodded.

“Of course. And precisely *because* I was in a state of qi deviation, I remember things more clearly. I think I become more sensitive in that state.”

“Ah, ahh...”

Whatever she recalled, Seo Mun-Hwarin turned blank in shock. He grinned and picked up the pace, stepping to the front.

If Centipede Gate wasn't as cruel as the Thousand Poison Gate had been, perhaps the discussion might go smoothly.

Centipede Gate itself was located near the old grounds of the Thousand Poison Gate, and they found it quickly.

It was more like a large house than a proper sect compound, though the gate bore a plaque that properly read “Centipede Gate.”

Given that martial artists required training grounds, sect buildings had to be larger than normal houses.

In that sense, Centipede Gate was no more than a back-alley shop in terms of scale.

They didn't seem to have the capacity to maintain it either—the main gate was intact, but the nearby walls were in poor condition.

For some reason, the scene reminded him of the Ironblood Hall, and a strange wave of sympathy washed over him.

With unusual care, he knocked on the gate.

“Is anyone there?”

There was a clatter from inside, and after a moment, the gate creaked open.

A skinny young man appeared. Judging by his frame, it wasn't his natural physique—he had clearly lost weight from lack of food.

With a voice full of caution, the man spoke.

“Oh. Who are you? If you’re from the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild, there’s still time before the repayment deadline, so please come back another day—”

“Cheonghwa Guild? I don’t know the details, but I’m not from them. I’m here to speak with your sect leader about the Fire Centipede.”

“You’re here to buy the Sect Leader’s poison?”

“...You could say it’s something like that.”

When he nodded, the man finally began to examine the group carefully.

Then he sighed, seemingly relieved, and swung the gate wide open.

“Apologies for the poor reception. Our sect hasn’t been doing too well lately.”

“I understand. Newly formed sects always have a lot of expenses.”

Sometimes, if there wasn't enough capital or someone skilled in administration, a new sect would go under within a year.

He chuckled lightly and waved a hand to show it was no big deal. Only then did the man give a faint smile in return.

“Thank you. You're here for the Sect Leader, right? I'll let her know right away. Please wait in the reception room.”

“No trouble at all.”

He shrugged and followed the bony youth further inside.

Due to the small size of the place, they encountered other sect members almost immediately.

One of them seemed to recognize him.

Sweaty and tired from training, the man bore a strong presence of a diligent martial artist—but the moment he saw his face...

“S-Sword Demon...!”

His face turned deathly pale.

Having already lost weight from poor nutrition, the sudden blood drain made him look like a walking corpse.

Well, this reaction made sense. He must’ve been involved with the Thousand Poison Gate in the past.

Putting on the most harmless expression he could, he raised both hands.

“Calm down. I’m just here to talk—”

“E-everyone, run!”

He fled before the sentence was even finished.

Sighing deeply, he followed in the direction the man had run, and soon found himself in a strange space that was part training ground, part vegetable patch.

It seemed they were growing some food to help survive.

As he chuckled at the unexpected poverty, the panicked man waved his arms and shouted to the other sect members in the courtyard.

And one by one, the members of Centipede Gate turned to look at him.

“It’s the Sword Demon! The butcher is back!”

“Protect the Sect Leader!”

“Who even opened the gate?!”

“Who cares?! That monster could’ve just cut it down and barged in anyway!”

The Sword Demon, was it? Perhaps because Yunnan lagged behind on news, the nickname White Moon Sword Lord hadn’t reached here yet.

...Or maybe the memory of him wiping out the Thousand Poison Gate was so vivid that no one could recall his newer title.

Fear spread like wildfire.

Yet, none of them tried to flee. Though he was blocking the entrance, the walls were low enough to leap over—if they'd wanted to.

The reason became immediately clear.

—Ssshk.

A sharp hiss, like wind leaking through clenched teeth.

From behind the crowd, a massive shadow rose up.

It was at least twice his height, its entire body clad in armor-like plates, and its bladed limbs were as sharp as swords.

But the most striking feature was the intricate pattern adorning its carapace.

Seven distinct colors blended together in a mystical harmony that was difficult to describe.

It was so beautiful that if someone claimed a piece of that shell was a jewel, you'd believe them without question.

Yet the venom dripping from its jaws warned that removing such a "gem" would be no easy task.

"The Fire Centipede."

"Yes. It's my first time seeing one, but it *is* beautiful."

"Then that must be the Centipede Gate Sect Leader."

Beside the giant centipede stood a young woman, glaring this way with wide eyes.

He didn't know her name—but the composed, otherworldly energy she emitted was far beyond the other sect members.

No doubt a result of having trained in the Beast Palace's advanced martial arts. She may have been exiled, but she *had* been the daughter of the Beast Palace Lord.

Her cultivation was only at first-rate level, but the Fire Centipede clearly harbored power at the Peak Stage or higher. So she had tamed a spirit beast stronger than herself.

Impressive, he had to admit.

But perhaps misunderstanding the direction of his gaze, the Centipede Gate members huddled closer together, shielding their Sect Leader and the Fire Centipede with their bodies.

And they cried out—

“The sins of the Thousand Poison Gate rest on us alone! The Sect Leader has nothing to do with it!”

“Not a single finger shall be laid on her!”

“W-Were you deceiving us...?!”

They all stood with grim determination, as if prepared to die.

Even the young man who had guided them here was now giving him a betrayed look, despite their brief acquaintance.

It felt odd to say it himself, but...

It was quite a solemn scene.

The half-collapsed buildings, the martial artists too frail from hunger, yet still standing up to resist overwhelming power.

Why did it remind him so strongly of the sects that had been wiped out one by one by the Heavenly Demon before his regression?

He hesitated, unsure of what to say. Then Seol Lihyang placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“Cheon Hwi. Right now, you really look like some demon lord from the unorthodox sects.”

“I haven’t even done anything.”

“Exactly. And that’s why it suits you *so well*.”

...This was getting ridiculous.

Shaking his head, he stepped forward and forced a smile at the Centipede Gate members.

Clang!

In response, they all drew their weapons.

Unbelievable. There’s a saying that you can’t spit in a smiling face, but apparently, you can draw a sword at one.

He spoke with a hint of exasperation.

“...You’ve misunderstood.”

At that, an elderly man hobbled forward with a cane. Judging by his lack of inner energy, he had likely once been a servant.

Maybe his sincerity finally got through.

“We know that the Blood Flame Sword Demon could easily slaughter all of us. But... there are things that must be protected, even so.”

...No. It clearly hadn’t gotten through.

“I’ll say it again. I didn’t come here to shed blood. I came to talk. About the Fire Centipede, and your Sect Leader.”

“If you want to touch our Sect Leader, you’ll have to cut down every last one of us first!”

That might’ve sounded heroic, but their trembling legs told a different story.

Now that he looked, he realized they were so terrified and overwhelmed that they couldn't even process what he was saying. They were just repeating the lines they had prepared in advance.

"...Guess there's no choice."

With resolve, he drew his sword.

They all clenched their eyes shut, certain that death was upon them—

Slice.

He only cut down their weapons—cleaving them cleanly in half.

With a cacophony of metallic clanging, swords and spears scattered across the floor.

As the members of Centipede Gate slowly opened their eyes in confusion, he spoke.

“If you don’t want to die, drop your weapons. Bring me some warm tea, and I’ll spare your lives.”

Thud, thud.

Finally, weapons were dropped, and resistance melted away.

Honestly, why did people only start listening when things got to this point?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The reception room was a bit cramped for four people. Still, since it was meant for receiving guests, it was well-maintained. Just as he brought a freshly brewed cup of tea to his lips, Seol Lihyang poked his side.

“Do it, Cheon Hwi. That thing.”

“Oh, come on. Just one more time? Please?”

Her poking turned into gentle tickling as she whispered, her voice unusually sweet and full of charm.

He knew this version of Seol Lihyang all too well from his pre-regression experiences. When she got like this, she wouldn't stop pestering him until she got what she wanted—even if it took days.

Eventually, he shut his eyes tightly and opened his mouth.

“If you don't want to die, drop your weapons.”

“Ahahaha!”

“If you bring out warm tea, I'll spare your life.”

“Ehehehe!”

Seol Lihyang burst into laughter, clutching her stomach. While Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin didn't laugh aloud, they turned their heads and covered their mouths, shoulders trembling.

A blissful, cheerful scene where everyone was smiling.

Everyone—except for two people.

One was the speaker—himself.

The other was the one who had heard those words—the Centipede Gate Sect Leader.

Flinching as if recalling a traumatic memory, the Sect Leader barely managed to sip her tea. Now that he looked closely, she wasn't just unable to smile—she looked like she was about to cry.

Though he'd intended it to calm the situation, it seemed the shock had been too much.

He let out a short sigh and finally drank the now lukewarm tea.

The scent lingered on his palate before disappearing down his throat. A strangely familiar taste.

“This is... you used some pretty good tea leaves.”

“D-Did it suit your taste?”

“But you brewed too much of the good stuff. Rather than using expensive tea leaves multiple times for guests, it’s better to steep decent leaves in moderation.”

“Ah...”

The Sect Leader flailed with an embarrassed expression. Watching her, he gave a wry smile and shook his head.

“I’m not criticizing. I just found the weak, fading aroma oddly nostalgic.”

“You’ve experienced poverty too, Sword Demon?”

“Before I became the Tang Clan’s son-in-law, it was my daily life.”

Strictly speaking, that was pre-regression.

At that time, the Ironblood Hall had been barely supported by the Black Lotus Sect.

If he wanted access to better martial arts from the Black Lotus's storehouse, he had to give up comfort. To keep warm and fed, he had to forgo cultivation. He and the Demonic Sound Ice Witch, whose life depended on expelling Yin energy, had little choice.

Thus began the impoverished days of Ironblood Hall—but the problem was, many still came looking for Seo Mun-Hwarin.

After all, she was a master at the Flowering Stage. Even if she didn't actively help people, many came hoping for a favor.

There were times when they had to receive guests without a coin to spare. Eventually, just like Centipede Gate now, they'd steep the same expensive leaves over and over again...

“Maybe it's because of those memories, but when I taste this kind of weak tea, I can feel the effort behind it. It's comforting in its own way.”

“Thank you...”

The Sect Leader—Meng Yubaek—bowed with a complicated expression, unsure whether to feel ashamed her little trick had been caught, or grateful for the understanding.

With a chuckle, he studied her closely.

Her short brown hair barely reached her shoulders. Her eyes were also brown, but oddly shaped—her pupils were elongated, more beast-like than human.

Likely a result of learning the Beast Palace's martial arts.

Her dark skin wasn't from martial cultivation, but simply a characteristic of those living in the Southern Barbarians.

As for her age... perhaps fifteen. She had looked young from afar, but up close, she looked even younger—her timid impression only added to that.

No wonder she had starved to the point of being eaten by the Fire Centipede before his regression.

A noble daughter with no preparation had left home with only a giant centipede. Young, inexperienced, weak, and shy—of course she struggled just to eat.

It seemed little had changed even now, after founding Centipede Gate.

Well, what could a clueless noble girl and rejected sect members do together, besides starve?

He had worried when he first heard she'd started a sect, but with this level of poverty, it looked like money would be enough to handle the Fire Centipede.

Smiling with satisfaction, he nodded—but was quickly interrupted when Tang Sowol placed a hand on his arm.

“Young Master Cheon.”

“Hm?”

“You were staring at the Centipede Gate Sect Leader, then nodded to yourself... What exactly does that mean? I don't *think* it's anything, but perhaps...”

Ever since seeing his memories via the trick, Tang Sowol had become more prone to what might be jealousy or anxiety.

He understood why, considering what she might've seen—but he hadn't expected her to act like this now.

Chuckling dryly, he shook his head.

“It's not what you think. You know me well, Sowol. Whenever I meet someone new, I always assess whether or not I could cut them down.”

“Eep!”

“She's the daughter of the Beast Palace Lord, so I was wondering if she might have hidden protection—but she doesn't. She's someone I could kill any time. Same goes for that centipede waiting outside.”

“P-please spare me...?”

The Sect Leader trembled, nearly spitting out her tea. All the wariness he had just dispelled was now back to square one—but Sowol came first.

At last, with a composed smile, Tang Sowol returned to her usual gentle demeanor.

“Oh my. If that’s the reason, I suppose it can’t be helped. Centipede Gate Sect Leader? There’s no need to be so afraid. Our Young Master Cheon won’t harm anyone without a reason.”

“...But if there *is* a reason, then...”

Meng Yubaek’s eyes started spinning as she imagined something horrifying. Her arms shook so badly she spilled half her tea on the floor.

Sighing at the pitiful sight, he asked:

“Now that I think about it, we haven’t introduced ourselves, have we? As you probably know, I’m Cheon Hwi of the Tang Clan. I’d prefer to be called by the title ‘White Moon Sword Lord,’ not Sword Demon or Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

“Y-Yes! White Moon Sword Lord!”

“And you? What’s your name?”

“Eep! My name? O-Of course, I should tell you! I’m Meng Yubaek! But how did you know about my father?”

“Someone like me has ways of knowing everything.”

“Wow...!”

He couldn’t explain regression or make up a fancy lie, so he gave a vague answer—and Meng Yubaek swallowed it completely.

She looked like someone who could be deceived with minimal effort. Hiding a hint of embarrassment, he continued.

“The reason we came all this way is simple: the Fire Centipede, and matters related to the Beast Palace.”

“To Chilgong and Father...?”

“Chilgong?”

“Oh, that’s the Fire Centipede’s name! I gave it to him after I successfully tamed him!”

“I see...”

Perhaps because it heard its name, the scraping sound outside the room grew louder. Though it didn’t poke its head in, it was clearly watching them.

Well, with a spirit beast’s intelligence, it probably understood the gist of what was happening.

“Ahem. Back to the point.”

“Y-Yes!”

He flashed Meng Yubaek the gentlest, most harmless smile he could manage.

“I want to buy the Fire Centipede. And if possible, I’d like to arrange a meeting with the Beast Palace Lord. Can you help?”

Meng Yubaek hesitated, then slowly shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can help with either.”

“Difficult, huh... From where I’m standing, living like this seems even harder. No?”

“You’re right. I feel bad saying this about the others in Centipede Gate who took me in, but... Centipede Gate has no future.”

Her voice was calm and heavy, as if accepting an inevitable fate. Her gaze grew distant, as if staring not at him, but at something far away.

“You already seem to know, but... my father couldn’t accept Chilgong. I was stubborn, and in the end, I was cast out of the Beast Palace.”

“Well... given how hostile the Beast Palace was with the Five and Thousand Poison Gates, it couldn’t be helped.”

“Yes. I don’t regret it—it was my choice. It really was something unavoidable. And it’s the same for everyone in Centipede Gate.”

“Hm?”

“The Thousand Poison Gate... used to torment civilians around them. They’d steal everything people had, force them into nests of venomous insects, use them as test subjects for new poisons, or even kill them for no reason. So it’s no surprise.”

“Even among the unorthodox sects, that kind of cruelty is rare.”

“Exactly. That’s why—those who saw the Sword Demon destroy the Thousand Poison Gate feared him, but those who only *heard* the rumors were grateful.”

At that point, Meng Yubaek slowly looked up to meet his gaze. It was the first time their eyes met.

“The Thousand Poison Gate really was that terrible. But not every member was evil.”

“Some were forced in... or had no choice but to join.”

“You knew...?”

“That kind of thing is common in the unorthodox world, though perhaps a bit crueler here.”

“That’s right. Some people joined because they had no choice. They hurt others because they were ordered to. Hurt themselves because they had no choice. And after the Thousand Poison Gate was destroyed, they had nowhere to go, so they wandered the ruins.”

“You seem to know a lot about me, White Moon Sword Lord... But do you also know this? The first time I met Chilgong... was when I was about to be killed by an assassin my brother sent.”

“...What?”

“The Beast Palace’s territory was growing, and it had encroached on Chilgong’s domain. He must’ve known—if things went on, he’d be killed or driven out.”

“...That’s...”

“Yes. Chilgong tried to prove his worth by saving someone who looked noble—me. He gave up centuries of pride and bound himself to me. He had to survive. It couldn’t be helped.”

“At this point... it seems your father didn’t expel you just because he disliked you.”

“Right. He never said it directly, but... my father gave me a choice: keep fighting for succession and live in danger, or give up everything and leave, alive.”

His regression gave him knowledge others couldn’t have—but in the end, that was limited to what was externally visible.

So this was the truth behind the Fire Centipede incident.

As he nodded silently, Meng Yubaek gave a faint smile.

A forlorn smile.

“This is where we ended up. Centipede Gate is where those with nowhere else to go, for reasons beyond their control, have gathered. If I now sell my family—again, because it ‘can’t be helped’... then how far will we be pushed?”

A flicker sparked in the haze of her eyes.

A tiny flame born in emptiness. Some would call that determination.

Meng Yubaek—though young and only first-rate in cultivation—at this moment, was undeniably a Sect Leader.

“This is our final stop. I no longer want to retreat because I have no choice, nor live the rest of my life regretting a compromise.”

And with that, Meng Yubaek bowed deeply.

“So I’m sorry. I don’t think I can help with your requests, White Moon Sword Lord.”

Looking down at her bowed head, he opened his mouth.

“Understood. Then how much for just the Fire Centipede’s venom?”

“Oh! That! It’s ten nyang of silver per type! But if you buy all seven, I’ll give you a discount—sixty silver nyang total!”

The change in tone was so fast it left him speechless.

“Hehe. With sixty silver, we can eat two meals a day for a while!”

“...I see.”

Feeding the sect members was, after all, the duty of a Sect Leader...

He felt a bit of a pang in his heart.