

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 291-300

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 291. Centipede Gate (2)

Originally, the plan had been to stay at Centipede Gate. Even if they gave up on acquiring the Seven-Flame Five Poisons, it seemed like they could at least establish a relationship with the Beast Palace Lord if they played their cards right.

If they stayed like a guest and helped take care of urgent matters, it would be hard for the other side to refuse any requests.

That had been the plan.

But the building was far too small, and there simply weren't any rooms to offer to guests. So they decided to stay at a nearby inn instead.

They had somewhat expected it after seeing the small vegetable garden in the corner of the training grounds, but they hadn't expected it to this extent.

Some of the disciples had said they'd be fine sleeping in the hallway with just a blanket, but honestly, as a guest, they couldn't just kick out the host.

While looking around the inn room—which looked far better than the Centipede Gate Lord's office—a deep sigh escaped.

“Hoo.”

“Oh my? Are you worried about something, Brother Cheon?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, looking satisfied as she held seven small vials, each a different color.

Perhaps it meant she now truly was part of the Tang Clan. There was something strangely touching in how she looked at him before absorbing the poison she'd been eagerly expecting.

With a small chuckle, he nodded.

“It's not really a worry. I was just thinking about Centipede Gate and its Lord. Just in case you're wondering, it's only a concern for the future.”

“I understand. Actually, I’ve been having similar thoughts. After seeing what we did, how could we not think anything?”

“Fair enough. I suppose that makes sense.”

“I just came up with an idea. Would you like to hear it?”

“Now? I’m curious.”

“Hehe.”

With a sly grin, Tang Sowol placed the poison-filled vials down on the nearby desk, then continued speaking.

“It’s a thought I had after seeing the Centipede Gate Lord. Wouldn’t it be fun if we both shared what came to mind and saw if they matched?”

“What if we had the same idea?”

“Then we should act on it without hesitation.”

They exchanged glances for a moment. Then, without anyone prompting them, they both opened their mouths at the same time—

“She definitely seems to have talent.”

“She seemed to have talent.”

Their responses overlapped. At that, the smiles on both their faces deepened.

“How about sending her to the Black Lotus Sect?”

“What if we introduced her to the Murim Alliance?”

Completely diverging follow-up statements.

A brief awkward silence followed, though it didn't last long.

“The Black Lotus Sect?! She’s a kid who’s drawn her own line, even when no one else set one for her, and tries to uphold it no matter how hard it is! How could you say something so harsh?!”

“You saw the look in the Centipede Gate Lord’s eyes too, Tang Sowol. She might not fall into demonic arts since her hatred hasn’t taken over, but she’s someone who lives with a shadow over her life. And if someone must live in the shadows, then they should learn how to survive there.”

“No, no. If someone’s life is filled with shadows, if they’re already living in darkness, then they must reach toward the sunlight even more. To never back down, to never compromise—that’s the very spirit of the Orthodox sects.”

“To never back down and never compromise... Yes, that does suit the Orthodox path. It’s precisely because there are people who can uphold that spirit that we call them Orthodox... But the most important thing is *how* one arrived at that conclusion.”

“How? Isn’t it realizing that what they’ve been doing until now was wrong, and deciding to become a better person from now on?”

“And what do you think was that wrongdoing? That he did bad things? Hmm. I don’t think so. What the Centipede Gate Lord calls a mistake is that she kept being

swayed by others and made choices she didn't want to make. It's the misery of not even being able to live her own life."

"Kh... Even if what you say is true, the life she chose for himself aligns with the values of the Orthodox path, doesn't it?"

"That's right. Not harming others recklessly, working honestly to feed oneself even when hungry, and protecting the people precious to her to the end. Even without some grand cause, that alone is enough to be called Orthodox. And *that's* the problem."

"Huh? How is that a problem?"

"Just as you said, if she joins the Murim Alliance, her life will improve. And maybe one day Centipede Gate will become a firm pillar of the Orthodox sects. But she's someone who's lived all her life by other people's words. One day, she'll begin to question."

"Question what?"

"Whether her decisions truly came from her own will, or whether they were forced out of her by the unspoken pressure of *'what the Orthodox should be.'*"

“That's...”

“Someone who’s looked into the depths of their soul becomes stronger. And someone who chooses to bear others’ burdens also becomes strong. The Centipede Gate Lord fits both. That’s why I said she has talent.”

“So that’s why you suggested the Black Lotus Sect?”

“Yes. While Thousand Poison Gate and Beast Palace lean more toward the Unorthodox than the Orthodox, the loosely connected structure of the Black Lotus Sect is also a big reason.”

Unlike the Murim Alliance, which would swarm to any incident and had rather strict rules, the Black Lotus Sect was more of a laissez-faire group.

You were free to do whatever you wanted, but you were responsible for most of it yourself. However, in certain situations—such as when a sect faced destruction or in disputes over territory—they would receive help from or be summoned by the Black Lotus Sect.

After listening to all this, Tang Sowol fell into thought, then let out a deep sigh.

“Phew... Still, if I had to connect him to somewhere, I think the Murim Alliance would be better.”

“Why?”

“They all gathered under the name of Centipede Gate because they wanted to live better lives. It’s good to find their own way, but if they don’t even know how, I think it’s fine to learn from someone else. Wasn’t it the same for you too, Brother Cheon?”

This time, it was my turn to fall silent.

She hadn’t reached the conclusion of regression yet, but hadn’t she already combed through his memories once using the technique?

That meant Tang Sowol wasn’t just speaking abstractly—she was referring to how *he* had changed after meeting Seol Lihyang in his previous life.

In truth, he had changed significantly between his time before joining Ironblood Hall and after.

He had learned how to live from Seorin, and how to love from Seol Lihyang.

Though they had all met in the Black Lotus Sect, that was merely the result of their fates being twisted.

If they had met in the Murim Alliance, perhaps things would have turned out better.

Because he knew this all too well as someone who had experienced it firsthand, his confidence in his own judgment faltered.

As he sat there, Seol Lihyang, having unpacked and changed into something comfortable, shook her head.

“What’s the point of you and Sister Tang going on and on when the person in question isn’t even here? You can make suggestions, sure, but it’s their decision in the end.”

“You’re right, Seol Lihyang. But just to be clear, this isn’t just out of pity.”

“Oh? It’s not? I thought it was about helping a poor, ill-fated young head of household.”

He *did* have such a thought, but at the root of it was a plan to use that as leverage to gain favor in their meeting with the Beast Palace Lord.

“You said that’d be difficult, didn’t you?”

“Well, if we want to continue making a living in Yunnan, we’ll have to be mindful of the Beast Palace, who are essentially the overlords of this region. If we were planning to leave Yunnan altogether, we could afford to be shameless once.”

“So that’s what it’s about?”

“If we can present the Centipede Gate Lord and his people with a clearly better future, I’m sure he’ll help.”

“Then... couldn’t the Tang Clan just take them in? Like you did with me?”

“Hm?”

The Tang Clan had grown a lot recently, but in the end, it was still just one family.

Even if it was the greatest individual force in the world, compared to alliances like the Murim Alliance or the Black Lotus Sect, it was still lacking in many ways.

More importantly, Centipede Gate, even if small, was still a legitimate sect. Being absorbed into the Tang Clan would be far too humiliating.

“I never considered that option seriously, because I thought they’d obviously refuse...”

“Well, that’s something we’d have to ask them directly, isn’t it? If Centipede Gate agrees, then it’s doable, isn’t it?”

“It’s not so simple. Even if we’d be fine with it after seeing them for ourselves, there are many elders in the Tang Clan who would reject them just because Centipede Gate is made up of survivors from Thousand Poison Gate. Don’t forget what the former Thousand Poison Gate Master, the Poison Demon, did to my mother...”

“Ah. I hadn’t considered that, Sister Tang. But I don’t think persuading them would be too hard.”

Having said that, Seorin shrugged and pointed at herself as she rolled around on the bed.

“Weren’t you the infamous White-Haired Rakshasa of the Unorthodox? Things are fine now, but I heard there used to be a lot of gossip even within the Tang Clan.”

“Infamous...?”

She used one pillow for her head, hugged another, and stuffed the third between her legs, selfishly monopolizing all three pillows—showing the ruthless side of Seorin.

She truly had been a fearsome demonic figure.

“Besides, Sister Seorin herself is at the Flowering Stage. She’s got more pride than most middling sects.”

“Pride?”

Seorin, having found the most comfortable position, used her high-level skill of Object-Grasping Through Empty Air to sneak snacks from his bundle.

If she used her willpower even for something as trivial as stealing snacks, she really did have an extraordinary pride as a martial artist.

Yes, extraordinary indeed...

He turned to Tang Sowol, who was staring blankly at Seorin.

“How about we suggest all three options and see what he says?”

“Yes. That sounds good. If he chooses the Tang Clan, leave the persuasion to me. With the Seven-Flame Five Poisons in hand, I’ll figure something out.”

Grateful for the peace in their group (family?) once again preserved by Seorin, though only briefly—

Tang Sowol smiled sweetly, picked up one of the poison vials she had set aside, and said cheerfully:

“Well, now that our talk is over, shall we drink some poison?!”

“You seem awfully excited.”

“Well, the Seven-Flame Five Poisons are rare to begin with, but they’re also nearly impossible to get these days!”

“But once you absorb them, you can use the power of the Poison Spirit Constitution to call upon them again, right?”

“Correct! They say the true value of the Seven-Flame Five Poisons shines when mixed with other poisons... I’m already excited thinking about which ones to combine!”

With a rare wicked grin, Tang Sowol began drinking the poisons from the vials one by one.

After drinking all seven, she sat cross-legged and began concentrating to absorb them.

Poison energy rose around her closed eyes.

It shifted through gray, purple, blue, red, black, and so on—changing and mixing over and over.

This was likely due to the reactive nature of the Seven-Flame Five Poisons with other toxins.

Most would panic at the unpredictable transformations, but Tang Sowol had learned the *Ten Thousand Origin Poison Divine Art*, a skill that allowed her to masterfully control all forms of poison, no matter how different.

As time passed, the poison mist swirling around her gradually unified into a deep green hue.

When the last trace had finally turned green, the poison energy suddenly got sucked into her body.

With a final deep breath, Tang Sowol opened her eyes and said:

“Brother Cheon. While I was organizing the energy, I think I stumbled upon an incredible poison. One I think you’d especially like.”

“Hm? If I’d like it... is it something helpful in combat?”

“Hmm. In a way, it *is* helpful in battle.”

Tang Sowol cast a sly sidelong glance at Seorin, who was still rolling on the bed, and whispered quietly:

“It’s a poison that makes certain parts of a woman’s body grow. I don’t know how effective it is though.”

“...What.”

So *Plump Jade Pill* really did exist after all.

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Episode 292. Centipede Gate (3)

Poison, depending on how it was used, could become medicine.

That was why the Tang Clan, as famous for their poison arts as they were, was also renowned for their medical expertise...

“Is that... really possible?”

“Yes. Strictly speaking, it’s not the main effect, but rather a side effect. Still, it *is* possible.”

Perhaps because she wasn’t entirely confident yet, Tang Sowol continued the explanation using sound transmission so Seorin wouldn’t hear and get her hopes up for nothing.

—If you mix one of the poisons extracted from the Seven-Flame Five Poisons with a Yin-type poison, the yin energy carried by the poison can freeze not just the meridians, but also amplify the yin energy within the body.

—It already *sounds* dangerous.

—Indeed. Unless one has trained in a high-level yin-based internal energy technique like Hyangi, or mastered a yang-based energy cultivation art to offset it, it would be extremely difficult to resist. It’s a deadly poison.

—And you want to give that to Senior Seorin?

—Of course not. I’d have to mix in several other poisons as well. First, I’d add poisons that would slow the effects, turning it into a delayed-acting type. Then I’d include two more of the Seven-Flame Five Poisons to localize the yin energy's effects...

—So it wouldn't be fatal?

—Exactly. But even then, it's still a poison. So I'd also prepare an antidote tailored to it, to neutralize the toxicity while leaving only the desired side effects.

In summary, the idea was to use a poison that stimulated yin energy rampantly, slow its onset, neutralize it, and then direct it to a specific part of the body to induce growth.

Sounded complicated. Was it really safe?

—I can't guarantee its effectiveness because I'm still unsure about that part. But it won't be dangerous.

—Why's that?

—Because it's not potent enough to poison Senior Seorin.

—I thought you said it was a deadly poison...

—That’s why I’ll neutralize it. And more importantly, a warrior at the Flowering Stage can expel most poisons with a few days of effort.

That was true. The higher one’s martial level, the more exponentially resistant they became to disease and poison. Likely because internal energy could accomplish much more.

Even a Sub-Perfection master might suffer and weaken if poisoned, but it was rare for them to die immediately. A warrior at the Flowering Stage?

As Tang Sowol said, it wasn’t surprising if they could resist poisons labeled as “deadly.”

That was why the Tang Clan’s poison arts were so revered.

They dealt in poisons so potent they could kill even those at the Flowering Stage—poisons beyond ordinary limits.

Still, he felt uneasy.

—Are you *sure* it's okay?

—Sigh. Brother Cheon, don't you trust me a bit more? Besides, this method requires an antidote, so if anything goes wrong, we just administer it and everything's fine.

“Sowol is right. There's no way I wouldn't be able to handle a poison she has already neutralized. More than that, I am ready to face any danger to attain what I desire.”

—Even Senior Seorin?!

He and Tang Sowol stopped whispering and looked down.

There was Seorin, having silently rolled over and popped her head up with a sly grin.

“Hehe. Did you really think *I* hadn't grown at all? I've faced many Flowering Stage opponents, so while I may not match you two, I've achieved quite a bit myself!”

“Hmm. So what you're saying is...”

“Exactly! My senses are now sharp enough to pick up on your sound transmissions at this distance!”

Bragging even while lying down—only Seorin could pull that off. He and Tang Sowol fell into silence.

Wait. She *heard* all that?

As they sat stunned, Seorin curled herself into a sitting position, her expression gradually becoming solemn.

Gone was her usual playful self. What emerged was the dignified air of a seasoned martial master, a veteran of countless battles.

It was a rare sight—an adult, mature Seorin who only showed herself in times of war.

She spoke.

“I have a dream.”

What kind of dream?

“To live a life filled with the happiness of a woman—an ordinary life that I had to give up, one that everyone else takes for granted.”

He already knew.

Those sighs she let out when staring into the sky, the way she looked at him and the Demonic Sound Ice Witch as though they were something dazzling—those moments had long been etched deep into his heartscape.

Seorin smiled gently and continued.

“To do that... I must first win your heart.”

“I already like the current Senior Seorin.”

“Hmph. Do you *really* mean that?”

With a tilt of her chin, she gestured toward Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang one after the other.

Both were walking poison vessels and yin energy vessels—among the finest in all of the Central Plains.

Then she lightly patted her own chest.

That unwavering tranquility soothed the heart.

“Hmph! That is why *I* need that poison.”

She abruptly turned away, sending a desperate gaze toward Tang Sowol.

“That’s my reason. Can you help me, Sowol?”

—Of course. That was the plan from the beginning. But it won’t be right away. Just as Brother Cheon said, it’s not dangerous, but it *is* complicated and has many variables. I need proper time to research and test it. And I can’t guarantee how effective it will be.

“I see. Then I’ll wait. I leave it to you.”

“Yes, please leave it to me.”

Tang Sowol and Seorin exchanged intense looks and clasped hands. Who knew what kind of understanding passed between them, but it looked like things had been resolved.

Just as they were finally letting out a sigh of relief, Seol Lihyang approached with a casual question.

“Hey, Cheon Hwi. I’ve been thinking lately...”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Don’t you think we’ve all gotten a lot stronger? Me and Sister Tang, and Seorin was already strong to begin with—but you seem more anxious than before. Sometimes it feels excessive.”

“That’s...”

“It doesn’t seem like it’s just because of the Heavenly Demon. Right?”

She was right.

The Heavenly Demon had become aware of him, and the pressure from their inevitable confrontation loomed closer and closer. But that fear had been with him ever since before his regression—it had only intensified.

What had really been weighing on his mind lately was the regression itself.

He had died and returned. The Heavenly Demon had experienced regression multiple times, even before him.

So... did that mean there was some being even more powerful than the monstrous Heavenly Demon—someone he couldn’t defeat?

And if he *did* manage to defeat the Heavenly Demon, what would he do if *that* being appeared?

What if *he* also failed, and ended up repeating regressions like the Heavenly Demon?

Could he truly maintain his sanity then? Wouldn't he eventually turn into another Heavenly Demon?

He had already experienced a form of that despair—trapped by the Blood Demons's trickery, repeating his most hopeless moment again and again.

Inadvertently, such fear had become imprinted on him.

Even now, though he couldn't speak of it, he was using his pre-regression memories to change the future—perhaps that was why he kept thinking about it more often.

But life had always been full of uncertainties.

There had been a time he believed that just wielding a sword made him capable of anything. That reaching the Flowering Stage would make him fearless.

And yet, now that he wielded the sword and had reached the Flowering Stage... what had changed?

Nothing. He still couldn't do everything with his sword. He still feared those stronger than himself.

So what he *could* do—what he *must* do—was live his present to the fullest.

After a moment of thought, he spoke.

“When this is over, how about we look for a nice estate?”

“Huh? All of a sudden?”

“We can't stay at the Tang Clan forever.”

The Tang Clan wouldn't kick them out, but that wasn't a reason to grow complacent.

“If we're going to restore the Seo Mun Clan, we should start scouting locations.”

“That’s quite sudden. It’s certainly a good thing for me, but... you seem to be rushing. Is there some reason?”

“No. I’m not saying we’ll move out right away. Just that I want to dream about what comes next.”

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

What? Did I say something strange?

“No way! We’re just surprised you could say something so positive, Brother Cheon!”

“Mhm. Environment really *is* important, huh? If you’d been raised in the Black Lotus Sect, you’d never be saying something like that.”

“Oh-ho. A rougher Cheon Hwi might’ve been fun, but I think I prefer this version.”

Tang Sowol sounded like he was naturally a pessimistic and cynical person.

Seol Lihyang, likely having realized something deeply tied to regression during their time in Yo-ryeong, said something profound.

And Seorin, after straining her mind, nodded in satisfaction.

Their responses were so unexpected, he couldn't help but let out a hollow chuckle.

“Haa... Well, since no one objects, we'll proceed with both the matter of Seorin's poison and finding an estate... Now, let's handle the more pressing issue.”

“If you mean the pressing matter, I assume you mean finalizing the proposal for the Centipede Gate Lord?”

“And also discussing the meeting with the Beast Palace Lord.”

If it were just a matter of visiting, they could head to the Beast Palace immediately.

It was a place very different from the Central Plains in culture and norms, but if they all showed up with this kind of force and knocked politely, the door *would* open.

But they weren't going to fight. They were going to build an amicable relationship. It would go much more smoothly if they prepared something the Beast Palace Lord needed.

“But I'm not good at this kind of thing. So I'll leave it to you, Tang Sowol.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, Sister Tang. I'm clueless too...”

“Hyanga?”

“Th-the best I can do is cheer from the side!”

Tang Sowol's eyes dimmed.

Tang Sowol, with dark circles under her eyes from working all night, had managed to put together a fairly solid proposal.

Now, all that was left was for the Centipede Gate Lord to decide.

However—

“Huh?? Th-this is suspicious!”

Despite trembling in fear, Meng Yubaek still said everything she wanted in front of Tang Sowol.

With an expression of disbelief, she continued.

“These are all good proposals... But I’m not going to fall for sweet words anymore! You’re definitely hiding something, right?!”

“If you must know, I *am* eyeing the Seven-Flame Five Poisons.”

“Then... please let’s just arrange a regular transaction for Chilgong’s poison! I-I don’t want to repeat the same mistake. If I do, it’ll only make things harder for my disciples...”

Clearly, something had happened.

Good proposal. Not falling for it. A mistake. Hurting disciples.

Each word made her thoughts easy to infer. That clarity only strengthened his conviction.

“Ah! Brother Cheon—could it be?!”

“Hmm. As expected.”

A scam.

The classic rite of passage for young martial artists just starting their journey.

If Centipede Gate was stuck in this situation because they’d been scammed...

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

As he tried to recall more, the sound of knocking echoed all the way to the office—likely because the house was so small.

And—

“Hey, Centipede Gate Lord! You borrowed money, now pay it back!”

“Th-the Cheonghwa Merchant Group...!”

Meng Yubaek, holding the bundle of silver ingots she had received yesterday, began to panic.

Ah, right. The gatekeeper had mistaken them for someone from Cheonghwa Merchant Group at first.

A good idea came to mind.

He smiled brightly and pointed outside.

“Centipede Gate Lord. I think those guys are the reason our goodwill is being misunderstood. Let me deal with it quickly. And then, perhaps you can reconsider our offer.”

After much hesitation, Meng Yubaek shut her eyes tight.

“C-can we at least get out of Yunnan? Alright. In that case...”

Her expression was full of desperate resolve—like someone leaping into the mouth of a tiger to escape a wolf.

That’s harsh.

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For some reason, Meng Yubaek acted as if she had avoided a wolf only to dive into the jaws of a tiger... so solemnly.

In any case, hadn't she promised to grant our request if we resolved the issue with the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild?

Then we had to take care of it swiftly and precisely.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

“Centipede Sect Lord! The Merchant Guild Master showed you kindness—how dare you repay it like this?!”

The rickety front gate, which looked ready to collapse at any moment, was shaking violently.

And there was a man desperately holding it shut. He was a member of the sect who had been on guard against us previously.

I wondered what he was doing, and it turned out the latch had been smashed. Since it had already been broken through once, he was now using his body to block it.

“How many times must I tell you the Sect Lord isn’t here! Come back another time, another time!”

“Not here, my ass! I heard yesterday that someone came to buy poison from the Centipede Sect Lord! Since then, people have come in, but no one’s come out! I know everything, so step aside!”

So that was it. They had been pretending no one was here all this time.

A makeshift measure that solved nothing... but considering how little the Centipede Sect could do to begin with, it was an understandable choice.

“You bastard! I figured you’d be stubborn, so I brought the elders! Just because you’ve got some strength doesn’t mean you can defy us... Elders, please.”

“Wh-What...”

A confident voice outside the gate, and a flustered one inside.

It felt oddly familiar—back when I used to handle miscellaneous tasks in the Black Lotus Sect before regression.

The task I did most often back then was protecting small sects or merchant groups affiliated with the Black Lotus Sect.

Surprisingly, there were plenty of Unorthodox scum who, thinking they could get away with it, caused trouble even knowing a place was under Black Lotus protection, thinking, “Surely they won’t send anyone this far.”

Those kinds typically knocked on gates like this, demanding money, and when it didn’t go their way, hired decent vagabonds to force their way in.

The memories brought a small smile to my face. In that slightly lightened mood, I tapped the shoulder of the man guarding the gate.

“Wait a moment.”

“Hey! What are you doing here?! Go hide the Sect Lor— Huh??”

Perhaps mistaking me for another sect member, he had whispered urgently, but then blinked in confusion.

His blank expression amused me, so I chuckled and nudged his shoulder aside.

“It’s fine, just step aside. I’ll take care of it from here.”

“Y-Yes...?”

Still looking unsure of the situation, he shuffled behind me.

With no one blocking it now, one would think the door would open at once... but maybe because those ‘elders’ were still on the way?

The door didn’t open right away. Instead, I sensed a powerful presence approaching from the other side.

Three people. From the pressure they gave off, they were all Peak Stage masters—closer to mastery than just the threshold.

Looks like they were really serious about this.

“Duchil, you rascal. You couldn’t handle a place like this, so you called us three brothers?”

“Brother, don’t be too harsh. Duchil’s just doing what he’s told.”

“The youngest is right. Let’s deal with this quickly and go have a drink.”

“Ha ha! Since my brothers want it so badly, I suppose I have no choice.”

They laughed among themselves, and then their internal energy began concentrating beyond the gate.

Looks like they were planning to strike in one go and blow the door off entirely.

So I, too, drew in my energy, carefully ensuring none of it leaked out for them to sense.

And just as their energy surged to strike, I extended my palm in perfect synchronization.

Thoom!

The gate, pushed by my palm, tore cleanly from its frame and flew far away.

“Gaaah! My arm!”

“What the hell?!”

“B-Brothers...!”

The three vagabond brothers each let out a different scream as they were flung away with the door.

After a long flight, they hit the ground and rolled, only to be pinned beneath the heavy wooden gate.

They must be fairly skilled, though, as they quickly tried to rise.

So I gave them a small dose of killing intent.

“Stay down. Get up, and you die.”

They understood me well enough—instantly they stopped struggling and lay still.

“Sw-Sword Demon... no, Sword Lord... Y-You’re the White Moon Sword Lord?!”

“Hm?”

I smiled awkwardly at the gatekeeper, who now looked like his jaw might fall off.

“Apologies. Guess I got a bit too excited from old memories. Don’t worry—the door’s still intact. You can just reattach the hinges and it’ll be fine.”

“But you hit it so hard... and it’s still whole... that’s even weirder...”

He was from the Thousand Poison Gate, wasn’t he? Surprised he hadn’t seen a technique like that before. Then again, despite being a sect member, he had probably been treated more like a grunt.

I brushed some dust from his shoulder from the earlier scuffle and said,

“If you train hard, you’ll get there too.”

“R-Really?”

“Not really. Just kidding.”

“???”

I walked past the confused man, heading through the now gaping entrance.

If he reached the Sub-Perfection level one day, it might be possible—but it’s not exactly easy.

I looked toward a stunned middle-aged man.

“Let’s see... your name was Duchil?”

“W-White Moon Sword Lord?!”

Had he heard our earlier conversation? Or did he already know who I was?

The slightly chubby middle-aged man, Duchil, stepped back with a trembling voice.

“W-Why are you here...? Ah, wait! Do you know that the Centipede Sect are descendants of the Thousand Poison Gate?!”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why are you siding with them and offering your strength?!”

“Hm? Are you trying to sway me with that slick tongue of yours?”

“N-No! Not at all...!”

Duchil shriveled instantly. I patted his back to reassure him—though not with my hand, but with my sword sheath.

Once I saw that Duchil was practically on the verge of passing out, I finally spoke.

“I have a lot of business with the Centipede Sect. But I saw they had visitors. Was it the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild?”

“Y-Yes...”

“Take me to your Guild Master. From the looks of it, there seems to be a bit of a misunderstanding between the Centipede Sect and your guild.”

“A misunderstanding, you say?”

“Yes. A misunderstanding that can be cleared up with words—before it turns into something worse.”

In other words, if needed, it could turn into something worse.

Duchil’s face turned pale as he bowed his head in a hurry.

“O-Of course! We must settle this peacefully! Our Guild Master will be overjoyed to see you, White Moon Sword Lord!”

“Good. Bring my companions, and wait a moment.”

As I turned around, leaving the stiffened Duchil behind, I spotted the Centipede Sect Lord and the others who had come out to watch.

“What, you were all watching? That saves time.”

“Of course. We wouldn’t want to miss this unusual side of Brother Cheon.”

“Wow... Cheon Hwi. That wasn’t your first time doing that, was it?”

“Why are you so good at threatening people with brute force, I wonder?”

Because I’m experienced.

That's what I wanted to say, but that would've breached my mental restriction, so I said nothing of the sort.

Instead, I pointed at the three brothers still lying under the gate.

“See? That's who they brought with them.”

Tang Sowol narrowed her eyes to assess the vagabonds' skill, then nodded.

“Hmm. Even if they're vagabonds, hiring three Peak Stage experts at once isn't easy... Sect Lord, I haven't heard of them before. Is the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild a major force?”

“Huh? Well... they do dominate a few villages around here, but across all of Yunnan, they're nothing special.”

“Then why...”

Tilting her head, Tang Sowol looked even more beautiful in that moment—perhaps because she had been among gloomy men until now.

I spoke, watching her side profile.

“It’s simple. Their goal wasn’t just to extort money. It was to swallow the Centipede Sect whole.”

The Sect Lord himself was barely first-class. The other members ranged from second to third-class... but the Fire Centipede was a Peak Stage spirit beast.

A clear difference between humans and spirit beasts. Factor in poison as a weapon, and they must have gathered enough power to subdue the Centipede Sect by force.

Naturally, that must’ve cost them.

Too irrational to believe they just wanted to intimidate them for money.

Which meant money wasn’t their objective to begin with.

A bit harsh to say, but the sect members weren’t valuable enough to justify such efforts... so it had to be Meng Yubaek. Or the Fire Centipede.

Hearing my explanation, Meng Yubaek asked, her expression shocked,

“T-Then that outrageous debt... from the beginning, they were after me...?”

“No, that part was just your mistake, Sect Lord.”

“Ah...”

“But everything after that was likely orchestrated by the Merchant Guild. You said no one gave you work despite your efforts?”

“Yes. I bought a house with the borrowed money, but couldn’t repay it. Had to borrow more. No one would hire us. I didn’t know resentment against the Thousand Poison Gate ran that deep...”

“That’s the strange part. The Thousand Poison Gate’s infamy is widespread across Yunnan, so people avoiding its survivors is understandable. But this is the village where the Thousand Poison Gate once stood. They’d know best that some people had no choice but to join.”

Yet no one gave the Centipede Sect members any jobs—not even small ones. It wasn’t that they earned little; they were completely ignored.

Second and third-rate martial artists may lack skill and value, but they should at least be cheap to hire.

“So after weakening the Centipede Sect, they finally sent someone to tighten the leash. Isn’t that right?”

“...!”

Duchil, still awkwardly standing with nowhere to run, turned pale.

Meng Yubaek’s expression twisted for a moment but she soon asked calmly,

“Then what should I do?”

“Normally I’d say figure it out yourself. But I did say I’d help with this one. It’s simple.”

I stretched out my hand and pointed toward the Fire Centipede, who had been hiding in the shadows, waiting for a cue.

“Bring Chilgong and follow me. Ah, Tang Sowol, would you come too?”

“Hehe. Of course. Anywhere you go, Brother Cheon.”

“Cheon Hwi. What should Sister Seorin and I do?”

“Just in case, please stay and guard this place.”

“Okay!”

Confirming Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin’s nods, I turned to the now nearly fainting Duchil.

“Lead the way.”

“Y-Yes, understood...”

We followed Duchil to the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild. It wasn't long before we arrived, and the building was quite large.

The area was spacious enough to house four Centipede Sects, and the structure rose three stories high.

A stark contrast to the crumbling Centipede Sect—perhaps intimidated, Meng Yubaek spoke awkwardly while riding atop the Fire Centipede.

“White Moon Sword Lord... thank you for helping, but is this really going to work? After all, I did sign the contract.”

“Don't worry. If money can solve it, I'll solve it with money.”

It was originally meant to buy the Fire Centipede anyway, but I had ended up saving it.

“But if money can't solve it... then I'll solve it with the sword.”

“Oh.”

“Hmm. I sliced sideways during the Thousand Poison Gate incident, so maybe I’ll go vertical this time.”

“Whaaa...?”

“Brother Cheon?!”

For some reason, both Tang Sowol and Meng Yubaek stared at me, horrified.

I shrugged.

“Just joking.”

They didn’t look like they believed me at all.

The Merchant Guild Master gave off internal energy very similar to Meng Yubaek’s. She likely hadn’t noticed yet, since she was still only first-class.

But it was clearly a trace of martial arts from the Beast Palace.

“Aha. Congratulations, Centipede Sect Lord. Even after leaving the family, you’re still a candidate for the Young Clan Head, it seems.”

“Why...?”

It seemed this wouldn’t be settled with money alone.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Led by Duchil, we arrived at the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild. I suppose they were relatively successful in the region.

Even before Duchil could explain who I was, the gatekeeper recognized me and immediately rushed off to report.

In the meantime, they prepared a guest room for us to rest in...

“No need. I’ll just stay here.”

“Pardon? B-But the Guild Master—”

“Look at the room’s size. Sure, people can fit comfortably, but don’t you think it’s a bit small for a centipede?”

When I said that, pointing to the Fire Centipede—Chilgong—the gatekeeper stepped back, seemingly convinced.

I wondered if Chilgong understood. He lowered his broad head and let out a different cry than usual.

—*Tssrrr...*

“Hm. Not sure what that means.”

“Chilgong’s saying thank you.”

“Really?”

“Yes! Since he’s so big, he often has to stay behind when we go out. That made him anxious a lot, but thanks to you, White Moon Sword Lord, he doesn’t have to be separated anymore. I think he likes that.”

“I see.”

His head carapace was patterned with a mix of colors, looking like fire or heat haze.

I gently stroked the surface. Cold, but firm. Maybe because of his unusually gentle behavior—very unlike the image one usually had of centipedes—he even seemed... kind of cute.

He also deliberately hid any fierce features. His fangs were retracted, and he kept his body low to appear smaller.

Rather than showing friendliness, it felt more like... he was seriously frightened. But even spirit beasts were still beasts. It couldn’t be helped.

Besides, Meng Yubaek had said Chilgong chose to live under someone’s wing and coexist with people rather than fight for survival.

If someone was cooperative toward me, I couldn't help but feel goodwill—be it a person or a centipede the size of a cottage.

“Not bad.”

“Ah! You've noticed Chilgong's charm, haven't you, White Moon Sword Lord?!”

“Hm?”

I had only said a single word, but Meng Yubaek leapt with joy.

“Most people don't like Chilgong! They say he's creepy because he's a centipede, or scary because he's poisonous—or they don't like him because he's an insect-type spirit beast. But you don't seem to care about any of that!”

“Of course. Why would I fear or avoid someone weaker than me?”

“Uh.....???”

Meng Yubaek blinked, frozen in place. I wasn't sure why, but I decided to show a bit more sincerity.

“I've touched plenty of furry beasts, but never a carapace like this. It's interesting. Come to think of it, wasn't it said that the Fire Centipede's carapace is beautifully patterned and fetches a high price?”

—*Tss, Tss...*

Meng Yubaek shut her mouth entirely, and Chilgong curled his body even tighter.

I had meant it as a compliment, but their reactions were disappointing, which made me sulk a little—until Tang Sowol covered her mouth with her sleeve and chuckled softly.

“Hehe. Don't be too shocked, Centipede Sect Lord. Brother Cheon meant nothing by it. That's just how he is.”

“Ah...”

At her words, Meng Yubaek gave me a sidelong glance, then nodded.

This time, Tang Sowol held her palm up in front of Chilgong's face.

“You don't need to be so nervous. Your spirit core holds no special value to me or Brother Cheon. Same with your poison. Want to see for yourself?”

—Tssrr?

Perhaps soothed by her gentle tone, Chilgong slowly raised his head. Droplets began to form on Tang Sowol's palm—it was poison.

Seven different-colored poison drops. They mixed and separated, shifting through a kaleidoscope of hues. Chilgong widened his relatively small eyes.

—Tss! Tssrr...!

“Yes. I can use your poison. And any poison I can use can never affect Brother Cheon. That's why I said you have nothing to fear. So don't be scared.”

—Tsszt!

Seemingly pleased to meet someone who used the same poison, Chilgong gently rubbed his wide head against Tang Sowol's hand. She lightly tapped his head.

Bonk!

A light flick. With that hard carapace, he'd surely felt it, but it couldn't have hurt.

Still, maybe he didn't understand why he'd been hit—he looked up at her with aggrieved eyes.

I spoke to him in a serious tone.

“Don't get clingy with someone's fiancée.”

“Oh my, that was sudden—but sweet,” Tang Sowol said, smiling brightly.

The others looked momentarily speechless. Meng Yubaek added with a resolute look,

“Um... White Moon Sword Lord.”

“What is it?”

“Chilgong is female.”

After a short pause, I gently stroked the spot I’d flicked.

“I’ll let it slide just this once.”

—*Tssrr...*

Chilgong nodded feebly.

Was it because the only other spirit beasts I’d met were the Azure Cold Serpent and Azure Ice Dragon? Seeing one I could communicate with like this made me reconsider spirit beasts a little.

“Tang Sowol. If I get the chance someday, raising a spirit beast might not be a bad idea. What do you think?”

“My father and I can create poison ourselves, but most can’t. So raising a rare poisonous beast would greatly benefit the Tang Clan. I’d support it.”

There was already a facility in the Tang Clan for raising venomous creatures, though naturally it didn’t house spirit beasts.

The typical venomous spirit beasts would be centipedes or snakes, but some birds or lizards could also gain poison and evolve into spirit beasts.

We idly chatted about which beast would be best to raise, until—

The gatekeeper, now half-running, arrived out of breath from what must have been a full sprint.

“Apologies for the wait! The Guild Master sent away their current visitor. You may come up at once.”

“That was fast.”

“Of course! After all, it’s none other than the White Moon Sword Lord visiting!”

Unlike the rough welcome from Duchil, this gatekeeper greeted me with respectful admiration. Perhaps it was because I’d come in a relatively normal way.

I’d heard there were people in Yunnan who appreciated me for annihilating the Thousand Poison Gate.

Feeling a bit awkward, I followed him up to the top floor of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild.

Chilgong, climbing along the ceiling to avoid obstructing anyone, ended up startling a few guild staff instead.

Still, we reached the Guild Master’s office without any problems.

It was the largest room, so Chilgong could fit without issue.

Everything had gone smoothly—up to this point.

“My word! It really *is* the White Moon Sword Lord! I was utterly shocked when I first heard! I deeply respect you, personally!”

“Hm.”

“And you’ve come with the Centipede Sect Lord... I take it this means something about our handling of affairs displeased you?”

“Hm.”

“White Moon Sword Lord... do you have some kind of problem with us?”

“Oh, there’s a problem, alright. A big one.”

“Would you be so kind as to tell me what it is? I’m all ears.”

The Guild Master, who had welcomed us warmly, now looked puzzled. I drew in my internal energy and swiftly sealed her acupoints.

Ttack! Ttadat!

In an instant, the Guild Master's meridians were locked, and she stiffened like a wooden doll.

Meng Yubaek panicked at the sudden turn of events, while Tang Sowol, having seen this before, simply nodded calmly.

“Is the Guild Master a cultist?”

“No.”

“Then is she being blackmailed by the cult, or in some comparable danger?”

“Neither.”

So their guesses were off, but not without reason.

I smiled slightly toward the puzzled Tang Sowol and said,

“I wasn’t sure at first glance, but up close I could tell. The Guild Master exudes an aura similar to the Centipede Sect Lord.”

“Similar aura... could it be?”

Tang Sowol widened her eyes and examined the Guild Master closely. Before long, she nodded.

“Yes, it really is similar.”

“Indeed. I plan to begin interrogation now—can you lock the door? I’ve already sealed off the energy flow, so don’t worry.”

“Of course.”

Clack.

With the door locked, no one could enter or leave easily. And with the energy barrier in place, nothing inside could be sensed from the outside.

The sound of the door locking brought Meng Yubaek to her senses.

“W-Wait! You can’t just do this out of nowhere!”

“Hm?”

“I’m grateful you’re helping me. And I now know the Guild did swindle me. But even so, restraining and interrogating her like this... That’s going too far. White Moon Sword Lord!”

Even trembling, Meng Yubaek looked me straight in the eye.

Setting aside her martial skill or circumstances—she would make a fine Sect Lord.

How many could still voice their beliefs in a situation like this?

I smiled and shook my head.

“It’s a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding...?”

Still only first-class, Meng Yubaek couldn’t have noticed—but the Guild Master gave off the same energy signature as Meng Yubaek. Traces of martial arts from the Beast Palace.

And she was at Peak Stage.

Even if she were a top-tier merchant, this was far beyond what a guild master’s strength should be.

Meng Yubaek, still trembling, grabbed the Guild Master’s arm and sent a small flow of internal energy.

“...Ah.”

“Now do you understand?”

“Yes. This is... a martial art my second brother teaches his close aides. It’s an excellent advancement technique, but it comes with a catch: once you’ve mastered it, it’s hard to disobey orders from someone who knows the higher-tier matching technique.”

To control group-dwelling spirit beasts, one had to instill in them that you were the alpha. Based on that, a paired martial art was developed—for humans. To etch loyalty into one’s instincts.

That second brother had reportedly received this martial art as a reward from the Beast Palace Lord. At the time, only the Lord and the second brother knew it.

Thanks to this detailed info, we could skip the full interrogation.

“Aha. Congratulations, Centipede Sect Lord. Even after leaving, you’re still a candidate for heir, it seems.”

“But why...”

“You already know the reason. Simply leaving home wasn’t enough—they didn’t feel secure. Especially when you’re leading your own faction now.”

If only this could be settled with money... but that didn't seem likely.

I sighed and turned to the Guild Master, whose eyes rolled with nervous dread.

“I'm going to unseal your mouth now. Think carefully before you speak. I've got truth serums potent enough to leave you a drooling husk, poisons that amplify sensation by several times, and torture techniques that flay flesh from bone. And I'm prepared to *listen* to your honest confession.”

“Even if you've lost your sponsor and all you have left is a torn contract—whether you live a peaceful retirement, or lose everything today—that's your choice, Guild Master.”

The Guild Master's trembling gaze finally refocused. Seemed she'd made her decision.

I adjusted the internal energy I'd sent to unseal her throat acupoint.

And as if she'd been waiting:

“M-My martial arts are bound by a mental restriction! You won’t get any answers from me!”

“Really?”

Mental restrictions couldn’t be helped.

I, too, was bound by them—so I understood.

Thud!

“Guah!”

So I shattered her dantian.

“The restriction should be gone now. Can you answer me?”

“Y-Yes...”

She nodded, blood dribbling from her lips.

Maybe it was a bit too much, but didn't the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild send those three vagabond brothers first?

At first I thought they just meant to threaten or subdue her... but if it was to monopolize the Fire Centipede, or worse, part of a Beast Palace succession struggle—that was a whole different matter.

Considering their forces, they probably didn't intend to kill Meng Yubaek... but her sect members, or even Chilgong? They were expendable.

If we hadn't had the strength to fight back, we would've been swept up in it too.

Given that, this was still quite merciful, wasn't it?

That was what I thought, until I made eye contact with Chilgong.

—Tssrr...

He didn't just bow—he sprawled flat on the floor.

It was an act of complete submission. Worship, even.

...Was this really okay?

Strictly speaking, I'd saved his life, but... this didn't feel like the gaze of someone looking at their savior.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Although the gaze of the Seven-Flame Five Poisons was exceedingly insolent, what mattered right now was not how she viewed me.

“Everyone heard, right, Cheonghwa Merchant Guild Master???”

“Yes.”

The Guild Master of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild answered in a fatigued tone, as though the inner injuries that had surged the moment his dantian was destroyed had finally settled.

I picked up one of the documents strewn across the desk. A report summarizing a plan to quietly ruin a rival merchant guild. Nothing particularly important.

With the paper loosely crumpled so it fit easily in my hand, I personally wiped the blood from the corner of the Guild Master's mouth.

“I already know who's backing you. I have a general idea of your intentions as well, all thanks to our Centipede Lord.”

“Hehe. That much is.....”

Meng Yubaek grew shy at the rather sudden compliment.

Judging from the past she had told me of, she must have been unused to receiving praise, even empty flattery, and reacted without realizing it.

Naturally, in the eyes of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild Master, she must have looked completely insane.

She had refused to fight to the point of running away to become a monk, only to be emotionally wounded by the older brother who tried to cut her down anyway.

And yet she instantly forgot such a trivial matter and beamed foolishly. How absurd it must have looked.

Well.

Of course, I had no intention of correcting the Guild Master's misunderstanding. If he considered us beings he could not understand, that would actually work in my favor.

Shoving the blood-soaked stack of documents into the Guild Master's arms, I continued speaking.

"Then you must know exactly what you should be saying now."

"You wish to know the Second Young Master's weakness, do you not?"

"No."

“...”

“Cheonghwa Merchant Guild Master. You seem not to realize it because you’ve given your loyalty to that second brat, but..... someone who hasn’t even become a Sub-Palace Lord yet is nothing to me.”

Only then did the Guild Master’s complexion stiffen as he recalled that I had annihilated the Thousand Poison Gate alone.

Though the mood didn’t last long due to someone ruining it.

“Ah. Wasn’t the White Moon Sword Lord twenty this year? Then the Second Young Master should be three years older.....”

“Shh! Young Master Cheon always speaks informally unless he considers someone important or stronger than him! He even spoke down to the North Sea Ice Palace Lord last time!”

“Hieek! So strength really is everything in the world.....!”

A scene of vicious slander.

“Tang Sowol. Stop teaching the child strange things. The reason I spoke down to the North Sea Ice Palace Lord wasn’t because he was weaker than me, but because he kept trying to make Seol Lihyang the Sub-Palace Lord.”

“Then, if you were to meet that Second Young Master who’s older than you, what would you do?”

“He was twenty-three, wasn’t he. Younger than you, Tang Sowol. And since my fiancée and I might as well share one body, speaking down would actually feel more natural.”

“Do you understand, Centipede Lord? Young Master Cheon is that sort of person. You will likely be accompanying him to the Beast Palace, so you should get used to it.”

“Yes!”

Meng Yubaek nodded vigorously.

I had once been a fake child warped by regression. Though I had improved somewhat, I was still different from Seol Lihyang, whose childhood had been filled with venom, or Seo Mun-Hwarin, who merely looked young while possessing a matured disposition.

This was the genuinely innocent reaction of a child her age.

Perhaps that was why Tang Sowol, finding it fresh, kept trying to teach her strange things. I sighed, shaking my head.

“Hoo. Anyway, I have no interest in the Beast Palace’s family feud. Cheonghwa Merchant Guild Master, I wish to know only one thing.”

“W-what is it?”

“The current state of the Beast Palace. And the disposition and strength of the Beast Palace Lord. Yes. Put extremely, what would happen if I were to suddenly march straight into the Beast Palace?”

“...”

“Would he rage that his son prevented him from killing his runaway daughter? Or is he the sort who would smile and share a drink with a guest? If we fought, how would he fight? What is his martial essence? Has he defeated any strong foes recently? If not, what about before?”

I gently patted the shoulder of the Guild Master, who stared blankly with his mouth shut.

“I’ve given you plenty of examples, so answering should be easy. Tell me slowly, one by one.”

“Oh dear. Come to think of it, you spat blood earlier. If your throat feels dry, I can at least give you water.”

After a long silence, the Guild Master finally opened his mouth slowly.

“White Moon Sword Lord... do you intend to exterminate the Beast Palace this time?”

“What??”

“If the problem was sending an assassin, then I apologize. If you wish, I will smash my head against the floor and even take my own life. So please, please reconsider.”

The Guild Master pleaded in a solemn voice. He had misunderstood—thoroughly.

I gestured lightly toward Meng Yubaek. For some reason, Chilgong stuck her head in and acted cute first.

When I pushed the centipede away firmly, Meng Yubaek finally realized I was beckoning her and approached.

After a moment's hesitation, Meng Yubaek squeezed her eyes shut and, as Chilgong often did, tried to press her forehead into my hand. I recoiled in shock and pulled away.

Instead, I grabbed her by both shoulders and drew her forward so the Guild Master could see clearly.

“It seems there’s been a misunderstanding. I simply wish to establish a good relationship with the Beast Palace. If possible, I’d like this talented junior to have a better future.”

“Ah.”

Only then did the Guild Master nod as if understanding something.

“I see. If the lineage of the Beast Palace can continue even in that form...”

He looked as if imagining me using Meng Yubaek as a puppet Beast Palace Lord to control everything from the shadows.

How do I know this? Because in the early days of the Demonic Cult’s invasion, when the heads of prestigious clans and sects were killed by the Heavenly Demon, similar things happened frequently.

Well, at this point a misunderstanding is hardly worth fixing. At least it loosened the Guild Master’s tongue.

As though resigning himself to everything or sacrificing something to uphold a sliver of loyalty, he recounted various stories.

That the Beast Palace Lord, though a Flowering Stage master, had his martial ability eaten away by a poison inflicted by the Poison Demon long ago.

That his mother had died in battle against the Five Poison Gate, causing him to loathe everything related to it.

That as the Poison Demon founded the Thousand Poison Gate and expanded his territory, frequent clashes with the Beast Palace made most people resent the Thousand Poison Gate.

That despite all that, he united the Beast Palace and led it into its greatest golden age.

That after I exterminated the Thousand Poison Gate, removing the common enemy, internal competition for Sub-Palace Lord grew intense.

Some stories were new, some roughly as I expected, and some I had known before regression—though changed because of me.

But there was one thing that especially caught my attention.

That the Beast Palace Lord's condition was critical because the poison afflicting him had yet to be neutralized.

This was something I had never heard before regression.

The Beast Palace Lord I knew had brought the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace into prosperity, but was still unable to contend with the forces of the Central Plains and simply bided his time, building strength.

Later, he rampaged across parts of the Central Plains during the chaos caused by the Demonic Cult's invasion.

Though he clashed with the Demonic Cult a few times, some sort of agreement must have been reached, as he quieted down after occupying Guizhou City.

There had never been a rumor about him being feeble from a poison suffered long ago.

If anything, he had been extremely vigorous.

Now I understood: when something makes no sense, suspecting the Demonic Cult often leads to the correct answer.

The Heavenly Demon must have cured the Beast Palace Lord's poison in exchange for having him rampage according to the Demonic Cult's invasion plans.

After all, before regression, Meng Yubaek eventually left home anyway.

Even though the fall of the Thousand Poison Gate caused the Beast Palace's attention to turn inward... the fundamental reason for the Sub-Palace Lord succession battle must have been that the current Beast Palace Lord was nearing his end.

Meaning our task was practically decided.

After gathering my thoughts, I turned to Tang Sowol.

"You said you reached Sub-Perfection by absorbing all of the Poison Demon's toxins, correct."

"Strictly speaking, I reached Sub-Perfection because I absorbed all of his toxins..... Yes. At the time, I absorbed every single poison left in the Thousand Poison Gate. Even the poison dissolved in the Poison Demon's blood and inner energy."

"Then can you detoxify the poison afflicting the Beast Palace Lord?"

"Not all poisons have antidotes, and poisons that linger long in the body can sometimes transform, so I cannot be certain. But I can at least neutralize the poison energy."

“If we resolve the Beast Palace Lord’s issue, we’d be earning a favor.”

“Hehe, the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace may be rough, but it is famous for never committing acts beneath even beasts. Even beasts know gratitude. There is nothing to worry about there, is there?”

“Good. Then let’s proceed at once.”

“Yes. I’ll begin researching the poison that afflicted the Beast Palace Lord.”

“Hm? You know what poison it is?”

“No? But there aren’t many poisons that can incapacitate a Flowering Stage master and persist this long, so I’ll focus on those. I can think of two possibilities already.....”

As Tang Sowol muttered increasingly complex thoughts and concentrated, I felt someone tugging at my sleeve.

It was Meng Yubaek, still held by the shoulders in front of me.

“U-um..... White Moon Sword Lord? Are you really going to treat my father.....??”

“Yes. If possible.”

“Why??”

“..”

“I’m grateful. Truly grateful, but..... it feels too much. Even in the short time since I left home, I’ve learned that there’s no goodwill without a price.”

“You’ve learned well. As you said, this isn’t goodwill without cost.”

When I curled my lips into a sly smile, Meng Yubaek began trembling.

“S-so you really intend to use me as a foothold to control the Beast Palace from behind?!”

“I have no interest in such troublesome things.”

“Then you’re looking at me with those eyes.....!”

“Please stop saying scary things.”

Tang Sowol was smiling brightly right beside us.

“C-could it be that you look at Chilgong that way? You did try to buy her at first.”

“I’m going crazy.”

Doing my best to ignore a centipede twisting its body nearby, I continued.

“You showed potential.”

“...”

“Didn’t you say yesterday that you didn’t want to run away or compromise anymore? If you live by your own words, you’ll either grow stronger or break along the way. Then what if I help you so you don’t break?”

“Well..... if things go as you say, I would become stronger?”

“Yes. That’s what I meant by saying you had potential, Centipede Lord. If you don’t lose your current attitude, one day more people will know the name of the Centipede Gate. At least, that’s how it was for me.”

This was an investment. No matter how strong I became, one cannot live alone in this world.

If I could turn someone into an ally, I should. All the more if that person was certain to become someone noteworthy later.

And that was merely judging by Meng Yubaek’s attitude. In reality, the fact that she could command the Seven-Flame Five Poisons after a single glance showed extraordinary talent.

Even if it wasn’t the kind of talent the Beast Palace wanted, her inherent brilliance would not fade.

“Of course, it’s not that I expect nothing in return.”

“Please tell me. What do you want me to do?”

“Repeat after me. The Demonic Cult cannot be associated with.”

“What???”

“I said repeat it.”

“Th-the Demonic Cult cannot be associated with!”

Meng Yubaek repeated it tentatively, visibly confused. I smiled in satisfaction and continued.

“Good. Next, ‘The Heavenly Demon is our enemy.’ Repeat it.”

“The Heavenly Demon.....is our enemy?”

“Louder.”

“The Heavenly Demon is our enemy!”

“Mm. Don’t forget what you just said. That’s enough.”

“Yes.....”

Meng Yubaek looked at me as though I were some pitiable madman, but that was surely my imagination.

After sending Meng Yubaek back to Tang Sowol, I turned to the Guild Master of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild, whose neck still remained stiff.

What should I do with him...

Perhaps he sensed my thoughts, for the Guild Master, who had been listening to our conversation with a dazed expression, quickly shouted:

“Th-the contract! I will void the contract with the Centipede Gate! And I will arrange a carriage heading to the Beast Palace!”

“Hm. And??”

“Uh.....”

“How could I trust and spare someone who already tried to stab me once. At the very least, show sincerity by disarming.”

A merchant guild’s strength lay in its treasury.

Understanding my meaning, he nodded with a tearful look.

“I will give you all the gold resources I can provide at once.....”

“Oh dear. You didn’t have to go that far, but if you insist, I suppose there’s no helping it. I’ll put it all to good use, so don’t worry.”

The Guild Master, who managed to keep his life, let out a sigh of relief.

It seemed things had concluded well without a single death.

See? I was such a merciful person.

“You seem to be in high spirits, Young Master Cheon?”

“Yes. I feel like I’ve become a better person than before.....”

“As expected, one must do work suited to one’s nature.”

Anyway, I was certainly more merciful than before regression!

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After wrapping up the matters at the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild, I returned to the Centipede Gate with a somewhat heavier pouch—only to find that the trio of wandering warriors was still lying neatly in a row before the gate.

Even though the door that had crushed them earlier had long since been cleared away.

I turned toward the gatekeeper, who was repeatedly opening and closing the newly attached door to “check whether it had been properly reattached.”

“I have something to ask.”

“Who..... ah! You’ve already returned, Master of the Gate. And Great Hero. As you instructed, once I adjusted only the connecting joints, it was fixed in no time!”

“Good. By the way, why are those still lying there like that?”

They might be wanderers, but they were Peak Stage martial artists—men who inspired both fear and admiration wherever they went.

Yet now they lay on the ground like mud-covered rags. Even passing children shook their heads in pity at the sight.

Unless all three shared some sort of peculiar taste, this made no sense.

However, the gatekeeper simply answered with a face that seemed to ask what I was talking about.

“Well, didn’t the White Moon Sword Lord tell them not to move and to stay still?”

“Ah...”

Come to think of it, I *had* told them to stay put before leaving for the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild.

After a moment of thought, I organized my mind and approached the three, who were staring up at me with desperate expressions.

“You’re more obedient than I expected.”

“Th-thank you!”

“How could we possibly disobey the White Moon Sword Lord?!”

“We only moved because we were paid! We have nothing to do with the Centipede Gate!”

“At least one of you must have considered slipping away while I was gone, no?”

“Were... were we allowed to do that?”

“Of course not, elder brother. If he chased us, we’d just die.”

“I only stayed because the other two didn’t move. I couldn’t run away alone.”

I see.

So one was stupid, one was cowardly, and the last was simply loyal.

Having lived a short while as a wanderer myself, I knew the rules:

Don't get swindled.

Don't stick your head into dangerous business.

Don't let misplaced sentiment drag you into bad decisions.

Those who kept these rules survived long as wanderers.

For the record, I failed all three, so I quit quickly.

As for these three... it felt like whenever they gathered, they managed to break *every* rule.

“Stand up.”

The moment I granted permission, they leapt up. In the past I might have cut them down immediately, but I had spared the Guild Master earlier; there was no point harming wanderers hired simply for money.

“As you likely guessed, the task from the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild has ended. You no longer need to concern yourselves with them.”

“...”

For some reason, their faces went pale. I saw them misunderstanding something, but correcting them would be tiresome, so I let it pass.

“So, I intend to assign you a task. Wandering warriors take whatever work they can, don’t they?”

“Uh.....”

“What are you hesitating for, elder brother? Say we’ll take it no matter what!”

“Then our pay would be..... right. We take it for free, little brother. I understand perfectly.”

Watching them drum up enthusiasm among themselves made me chuckle as I called Tang Sowol.

Perhaps she already guessed what I intended, for she flashed a rather sinister smile—unusual for her—and spoke.

“It’s that, isn’t it, Young Master Cheon?”

“Yes. It’s the best for people we can’t fully trust.”

Tang Sowol flicked her wrist, sending slender feather needles flying toward the three.

They instinctively tried to avoid them, being Peak masters, but of course it was pointless.

Tang Sowol’s martial skill was far superior, and deflecting a surprise strike from such a close distance was no easy task regardless.

The trio yelled and scrambled to pull the needles embedded in their necks.

I released a faint murderous aura to quiet their fussing.

“Enough. As you’ve guessed, the needles were laced with poison. You may feel fine now, but after a month your entire body’s muscles and internal energy will begin to stiffen, and before two months pass, you will die.”

“You said you were giving us a job, so why……!”

“So if we finish the job, you’ll give us the antidote?”

“Well, at least we’ll die together, elder brothers.”

“Hm. You do at least understand one thing. Yes. Complete the mission successfully, and I will give you the antidote along with your payment.”

“Hah! How can we believe that! If we’re to die anyway, then before that I might as well—!”

“For reference, the reward is ten liang of gold apiece.”

“What job shall we do for you?”

The eldest, who had been glaring fiercely, immediately folded. The other two stared at him in disbelief, but that was that.

I had purposely named a high price thanks to the *donation* I received from the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild, but I hadn't expected *this* reaction.

Chuckling dryly, I pointed toward the Centipede Gate.

"A bodyguard mission. You will protect the people of the Centipede Gate until we reach the Tang Clan in Sichuan."

"That's all?"

"After we arrive, remain on standby until I return. That will be enough."

"I understand....."

Watching him bow his head with a confused expression, I asked:

"Come to think of it, what should I call you three? Do you have titles?"

“Eh? Y-yes..”

He hesitated, then gestured to his brothers as he spoke.

“We each have nicknames, but..... people usually call the three of us together the Nine Bend Three Extremes.”

“I can guess what the ‘Three Extremes’ part means, but what’s ‘Nine Bend’?”

“The name of our home village.”

Three Peak masters moving as one would normally be a formidable force, yet their nickname sounded rather shabby.

Shaking my head, I continued.

“Anyway, your work starts today. If you want to live longer than a month, behave accordingly.”

Leaving their rigid response behind, I headed into the Centipede Gate building and whispered to Tang Sowol.

“Thanks for playing along. Poisons like that aren’t something you just pull out at whim, but... I suppose the Thousand Poison Gate’s old reputation makes people fear poison greatly.”

“Yes.”

“Hm???”

Sowol and I stared at each other, tilting our heads.

“Wasn’t it just a bluff?”

“The poison is real.”

Good grief.

Could she really have produced something so potent in such a short time—and in an amount small enough to fit into feather needles?

“No. It isn’t the kind of poison that kills in a month as you claimed.”

“Then?”

“It only causes stomach pain—just enough to keep them from dying. The diarrhea is a bonus.”

Ah. So *that’s* why the Nine Bend Three Extremes became obedient as soon as they were hit.

If even someone from the Tang Clan like Tang Sowol handled poison this casually, imagine how fearsome the Thousand Poison Gate must have been.

Receiving my admiring gaze, Tang Sowol blushed.

“Hehe. I learned it all from you, Young Master Cheon.”

“Good.”

At least she had the sense not to elaborate further.

After hearing the details I had obtained from the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild and the plan ahead, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded.

“Sounds good. It makes achieving your goal a lot easier, Cheon Hwi.”

“I am concerned that you’ll be away longer than originally stated, but aside from that, this One also agrees.”

“Ah, you don’t need to worry about that part, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. I’ve arranged for people to come.”

On the way back, I had discussed various things with Meng Yubaek, most of them concerning what she intended to do once this matter was resolved.

If we cured the Beast Palace Lord of his poison, we'd earn a great favor. If Meng Yubaek wished, she could return to compete for the position of Sub-Palace Lord.

Unlike before, she would start from a position where seriously aiming for the title was possible.

However, Meng Yubaek chose to sever herself completely from the Beast Palace's affairs and accompany Tang Sowol and me to the Tang Clan.

She said she would learn more from us than from the Murim Alliance or the Black Sky Lotus.

"So, I plan to send the sect members ahead first. The Centipede Lord should be explaining things well right about now. And we've secured decent escorts."

"Hm. Escorts... you mean the wandering warriors who tried to invade earlier and were crushed by you?"

"Yes. They fear me enough, and with Tang Sowol's help, we've prepared countermeasures, so there's nothing to worry about."

“If you say so... Well, bringing them to the Beast Palace would take too much time and leaving them here would be worrying, so I suppose this is best.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded. Seol Lihyang also nodded along, though she didn't look like she fully understood.

“Do you have any questions? If not, I intend for us to depart immediately.”

“Hm. If I had to name one... I'm curious what you intend to do with all the money you wrung out of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild.”

“It wasn't wrung out—it was a donation. Anyway, I don't have much use for it, so I plan to use it to help Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin acquire her estate.”

“My dear...!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes sparkled with emotion, but Seol Lihyang wasn't finished.

“That's it?”

“Hmm??”

“I mean—what about *me*?”

“Do you need a house?”

“All I need is you, Cheon Hwi?”

Seol Lihyang shook her head, saying something embarrassingly bold. When I stared silently in confusion, she let out a sigh.

“Ugh. Forget it. I guess getting fruit in summer isn’t easy anyway.”

Was she asking for pears? Ever since glimpsing my memories, Lihyang often said enigmatic things. It was very possible.

Startled, I must have revealed my thoughts, because she nodded in satisfaction.

“Mm. For now, I’m satisfied with that reaction. Anyway, going to the Beast Palace is fine, but how exactly are we entering?”

“I plan on entering openly, revealing our identities.”

“But the Palace Lord is sick, right? That’s why the children are running wild. Bringing back the runaway youngest daughter now would look like you’re interfering in their family feud.”

“The Cheonghwa Guild Master had a similar misunderstanding.”

“Anyone would. At worst, even if they’re fine fighting each other, they won’t tolerate an outside force meddling. The entire Beast Palace might become hostile toward you. So I’m curious how you intend to handle that.”

“Don’t worry. I have a perfect plan.”

“Really?”

“Just trust me.”

“Hm. If you say so.”

Though she looked uneasy, Seol Lihyang nodded.

The Southern Barbarian Beast Palace was brutal.

That was the common belief throughout the Central Plains, and in truth, such tendencies existed.

But it was a bit inaccurate. Strictly speaking, the Beast Palace was not *brutal*—it merely adhered to the law of survival of the fittest.

The strong rule above. In exchange, they bear responsibility and authority over the weak.

The weak obey the strong. If they don't like it, they are to bring down the one above and become the strong.

It was similar to how animals behaved. The alpha gained food and mates but also had to protect the pack and repel challengers.

Those unaware of this might view the people of the Beast Palace as savage at first glance.

Before regression, after the Demonic Cult's invasion, the clashes between the Beast Palace and the Central Plains grew frequent, and that was how I learned this.

Knowledge was meant not only to be known but to be used.

So I decided to apply it—by engraving the logic of strength in a way that was easy to understand.

KWAANG!

“Come out!”

Releasing killing intent in a steady stream, I kicked open the main gate of the Beast Palace.

Everyone became very polite afterward.

It was truly a flawless plan.

“Ah, aaah...”

For some reason, Meng Yubaek squeezed her eyes shut.

As though she had betrayed her homeland or something.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

When counting both my previous life and this one, I could proudly say I had lived as a martial artist for quite a long time.

I had immersed myself deeply in both the Orthodox and Unorthodox worlds; exaggerated as it might sound, there weren't many in the Central Plains as familiar with its martial society as I.

Thus, if I were to sum up the Central Plains in one phrase based on everything I had seen and experienced...

People who think too highly of themselves, living in their own greatness.

The Orthodox looked down on the Unorthodox, the Unorthodox looked down on the Orthodox, and everyone regarded the Outsider Martial World as intriguing yet inferior, as though that were only natural.

The problem was that their arrogance had some basis.

The Orthodox had reasons to despise the Unorthodox; the Unorthodox enjoyed wealth and luxury surpassing the Orthodox; and while the Outsider Martial World was impressive, it still could not compare to the entirety of the Central Plains.

And that was just within the martial world. If one included the Imperial Court, always hands clasped behind its back in the shadows, the gap between the Central Plains and the outside grew even larger.

Not only in martial prowess, but in craft, art, commerce—nearly all fields.

Thus, the Central Plains believed itself the center of the world, and people beyond its borders were naturally considered inferior. It had become a kind of common sense.

Well... that was only until they got beaten bloody.

The Heavenly Demon was nothing short of a calamity.

Half of the prestigious Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects were wiped out, the Imperial Court—supposed bulwark against invasion—rushed its armies only for them to be massacred, and even when all surviving forces united, all they accomplished was defeat after defeat.

Their pride and arrogance melted away like snow under the sun.

Only after losing everything did the people of the Central Plains finally look at each other—and those outside the Central Plains—properly.

The Orthodox realized the Unorthodox simply knew no other way to live.

The Unorthodox realized the Orthodox's grand ideals were not empty talk.

And they learned that the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace was not merely a nest of savages.

They had stormed in, seized Guizhou City, and enforced rule through sheer strength while forcing humans and beasts to live together. At first, resentment had been enormous.

People feared they would be treated as beasts and become livestock barely surviving under their rule.

But after living there for a few years, it turned out life was far more tolerable than expected.

Whatever agreement they had with the Demonic Cult, aside from a few initial clashes, they no longer fought, making the Beast Palace one of the safer places in the Central Plains.

They learned that the strong ruled over the weak but carried equal responsibility for them.

And that the weak could challenge the strong whenever they gained enough strength.

Days neither chaotic nor humiliating.

Only then did people realize the Outsider Martial World was still a place where humans lived—its governance was simply something they had never bothered to understand.

I myself had fled north and avoided entanglement with the Beast Palace, but given their location, I heard plenty indirectly.

I could confidently say I was among the people of this era who understood the Beast Palace best.

“So everything I’m about to do respects the customs of the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace. Don’t misunderstand.”

“Yes?”

Meng Yubaek, half dazed from my long explanation, tilted her head.

Meanwhile, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, sensing something instinctively, patted Meng Yubaek’s shoulders from both sides.

“Well, that’s how it is.”

“Mm. Do not fret too much. No one will die. No one will.....”

“W-why are both of you saying such scary things?!”

Meng Yubaek finally recognized the ominous mood and panicked, but it was far too late. Preparations were already complete.

In the distance, the strange palace-like structure of the Beast Palace came into view. As I stared ahead, Tang Sowol approached me.

“Hehe, you’re using that method again, aren’t you.”

“It’s simply the most convenient. Are you tired of seeing me do this?”

If she said yes, I would have been willing to use a slower, gentler method.

That was why I asked, but Tang Sowol merely shook her head with a soft smile.

“Of course not. I know well that you always use your strength appropriately to the situation, Young Master Cheon. How could I complain?”

“Hm???”

“Am I wrong? If this weren’t the Beast Palace but an Orthodox clan or sect, you would begin with polite greetings, relying on name and reputation.”

Probably.

“You chose this method because it’s the most effective with the Beast Palace. In the future, when persuading the Demonic Cult, you will show them things that are even more shocking. If I’m startled already, how could I stay at your side?”

“Also true.”

The Beast Palace moved by pure strength.

The Demonic Cult by strength *and* interests.

Naturally the approach differed—slightly harsher for the Cult.

“Of course, whether you use reputation or raw strength is the same to me.....”

“But what can I do? This is the kind of person you are, Young Master Cheon. Since you keep your own lines well, all I have to do is follow.”

“Thanks for believing in me. Then let’s do this properly so I don’t disappoint.”

I straightened my back and expanded my chest. Then I circulated my inner energy—same speed as usual, but with a slightly looser flow.

This created a body that appeared larger and sturdier, and pressure naturally diffused into the surroundings from my internal energy.

Perhaps sensing my aura even from afar, the two gatekeepers at the entrance raised their weapons.

By their sides, a wolf and a fox—pressing close and growling. Their bodies radiated strong qi—not quite spiritual beasts, but close.

Certainly not ordinary animals. Likely companions trained through the Beast Palace's secret arts.

As we drew closer, and even Meng Yubaek trailing behind became visible, the gatekeepers shouted:

“Halt, Central Plains warrior! Do you know where you are?!”

“Young Lady?! Why have you returned?! Surely you didn't.....?”

Perhaps imagining something grim, both straightened as though ready to die at their posts.

I didn't dislike people who took their roles seriously.

So I decided to subdue them quickly.

Not only did I release my inner energy more openly, I enveloped the surroundings entirely. Killing intent followed naturally.

The beasts reacted first—their senses were sharper.

“Kyain!”

“Kyaeng!”

With pitiful cries, the two beasts collapsed. Before the gatekeepers could even register the shock, they were struck by my killing intent.

“Guehk!”

Their faces drained of color as they staggered and fell to their knees. I had only meant to frighten them, but the effect was stronger than expected.

Passing by as they struggled desperately to stand, I smiled lightly.

“Well done. This won’t take long, so rest.”

Evading their trembling hands, I kicked the gate.

KWAANG!

With a thunderous crash, the door swung open. The broken bar clattered onto the ground.

“Come forth!”

My voice, imbued with inner energy, rang through the Beast Palace.

Instantly, the entire space responded like a living organism.

Scattered patches of powerful qi began pairing off and drawing near. The scent of beasts, clear to a Flowering Stage martial artist’s nose, grew thicker.

Before long, after stepping past the gate, a long line of Beast Palace warriors and beasts gathered before me.

Each bore an aura similar to Meng Yubaek’s. Strangely, this applied not only to the people but to the beasts as well.

It was as if the beasts themselves had trained in martial arts.

So *that's* why they felt almost like spiritual beasts.

Seeing it in person for the first time was fascinating. And it was clearly different from how Meng Yubaek controlled the Seven-Flame Five Poisons.

As I observed with interest, a middle-aged man with the strongest aura among them stepped forward as a representative.

“The green attire... and that dreadful killing intent. Might you be the Blood Flame Sword Demon?”

“No. Call me the White Moon Sword Lord now.”

“Understood.”

He nodded reluctantly, pushing aside a bull-sized beast that kept trying to step forward.

“However, I do not understand why you have behaved so rudely upon entering our Beast Palace. Is this related to the Young Lady behind you?”

“Hm. It could be said so. Seeing a young girl trying to live independently so earnestly, I wanted to help her... but your second young master sent assassins.”

“...Eh???”

The middle-aged man snapped his gaze toward Meng Yubaek in alarm. She looked utterly lost, like someone accused of betraying her country, but nodded slowly.

“Th-that’s right, Great Elder. They used the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild to keep me from leaving home or earning money, starving me for a long time—and once I somehow survived, they tried to kill me with those wanderers!”

Remembering everything, Meng Yubaek lifted her sleeve, showing her frail, thin arm.

The Great Elder stared at her arm with shaken eyes.

Since they valued honesty before strength, hunting down someone who had curled their tail and withdrawn was disgraceful.

And instead of challenging her openly, they had starved her and tried to kill her using others.

It was a shameful stain on the Beast Palace.

Sensing this would not end easily, the Great Elder spoke solemnly.

“I understand. However, since the Young Lady left the Beast Palace, she no longer has authority to pressure us. I will report this to the Palace Lord and have the Second Young Master disciplined. There will be no such incident again, so please withdraw for today.”

“What.....!”

Hearing that because she had left the Beast Palace she had no right to demand anything, Meng Yubaek widened her eyes in outrage.

She had nearly died, yet they expected her to go home quietly because they would “handle it.”

But from their perspective, this was natural.

Once she left, she was no longer the Palace Lord's child—just another martial artist.

Trying to kill someone who left was wrong, and doing it in such a cowardly way was shameful, but the mighty Beast Palace could not bow its head to a lone wanderer.

As a Central Plains native, I found it difficult to understand their stubborn insistence on principle over benefit, but the reverse was surely true as well.

Thus, it was right to follow *their* way of doing things here.

I spread even denser killing intent over the surroundings and spoke.

“The Beast Palace may ignore the Centipede Lord's words, but I wonder if it can ignore *mine*.”

“What is the meaning of this?!”

The weak fainted instantly, and even the competent staggered with choking groans.

The beasts suffered more—most foamed at the mouth, and the ones nearing the level of spiritual beasts barely held onto consciousness.

Completely broken in spirit, they either bowed their heads to me or stuck their heads between their tails while trembling violently.

Tang Sowol, startled, rose on her toes to whisper.

“Young Master Cheon! Isn’t this too much? You’re not showing a difference in strength—you’re trying to *crush* them!”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

I had meant only to frighten them—not unleash enough killing intent to knock people unconscious.

Even the gatekeepers earlier had reacted strangely strongly. For some reason, Beast Palace warriors seemed overly sensitive to killing intent...

Whether they were cowardly or simply had acute senses, I didn't know.

Maintaining a cold expression while inwardly perplexed, I saw an old man approaching—riding a massive black panther.

His complexion was pale with obvious signs of illness, his body gaunt, but his presence unmistakable.

I knew at once—this was the Beast Palace Lord.

“Would you withdraw your killing intent? Yours is unusually harsh for us.”

“Beast Palace Lord?”

“Indeed.”

Despite his ailing body, he looked straight at me with dignity.

“For what purpose have you come? Slayer of the Divine Beast.”

What in the world was this now—

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

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“Why have you come? Slayer of the Divine Beast.”

“???”

What in the world was that supposed to mean?

He had withdrawn his killing intent for now, but I only blinked dumbly at the incomprehensible title. The Beast Palace Lord noticed my bewilderment and let out a dry laugh.

“You seem not to understand. Well, a Central Plains man wouldn’t. Come along for now. Before I hear what business you have, I’ll explain a few things.”

Saying so, the Beast Palace Lord gently stroked the head of the black panther he rode.

The black panther—who, along with its master, had been the only one unshaken by my killing intent—glanced at me briefly, then turned and began retracing its steps.

Its lightly swaying tail was clearly telling us to follow. I shrugged.

“Well, looks like things turned out well enough. Let’s go.”

“Tu-turned out well?! And what do you mean you defeated a Divine Beast...?! Hyaa!”

Meng Yubaek jumped up, but before she could continue, Chilgong grabbed her and plopped her onto his back, instantly silencing her.

Judging by her teary eyes and the hand clamped over her mouth, she must have bitten her tongue.

Feeling that he should apologize on behalf of his forcibly quiet master, Chilgong looked at me earnestly, so I tapped his head-armor lightly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

—*Tsrut*.

Come to think of it, the only reason the Centipede Lord wasn’t especially afraid of me—aside from our first meeting—was likely because he had never directly experienced my killing intent.

But Chilgong had always been terrified and wary of me... Perhaps it really was because of that “Slayer of Divine Beast” matter.

As his antennae twitched in something like gratitude, I chuckled and walked ahead.

The black panther waited leisurely as if expecting us, so catching up didn’t take long.

Contrary to my expectation that we were heading to a reception hall or office, the Beast Palace Lord brought us to his bedchamber.

“My apologies. My body is not in good shape, so if we are to talk at length, this is unavoidable.”

“That’s fine. I’m not so heartless as to demand decorum from the sick.”

The Beast Palace Lord smiled faintly at my words and slowly dismounted from the panther. When he staggered toward the bed and lay down, the panther supported his back and helped him sit upright in a leaning posture.

“Thank you, as always, Heukjo.”

—Grrng.

The black panther responded lightly as if it were nothing. Now that I looked closely, its claws were the same black as its fur. So that was the origin of the name “Heukjo”—Black Claw.

Meanwhile, Meng Yubaek, familiar with her father’s room, bustled about and brought chairs for us with Chilgong’s help.

Once we were all seated, the Beast Palace Lord finally spoke.

“Let me begin by introducing myself. You likely know, but I am Meng Oh, the Beast Palace Lord.”

“Cheon Hwi-da of the Sichuan Tang Clan. I’m known as the White Moon Sword Lord... though I imagine the title Blood Flame Sword Demon is more familiar to you.”

Everyone gave simple introductions in turn. But for some reason, Meng Yubaek fidgeted before deciding to introduce herself as well.

“I—I am...”

“Yubaek. Strictly speaking, you can no longer be my daughter, but the memories remain. You don’t need to—”

“I am the Centipede Lord.”

“I’ve come to expose and warn you of the crimes committed by my second brother... no, this Young Master who tried to kill me through vile means.”

“Good grief, Yubaek. What kind of warning do you think that tiny sect of yours can issue to the Beast Palace?”

“One day, the Beast Palace will face my challenge.”

Meng Yubaek declared boldly, and the Beast Palace Lord’s expression twisted in complicated emotion.

“But I’ll spare Father and Eldest Brother. As for Second Brother and his followers—I will shatter their dantians and sever their meridians!”

“...”

She wrinkled her nose as if she were speaking of something terrifying, but the actual content was surprisingly gentle.

Seeing his daughter’s demeanor, the Beast Palace Lord spoke with concern.

“Yubaek. I will punish that second brat myself. As for your kind heart, that’s well and good, but you must never show mercy to those who sought your life. Even if they are family.”

“Hmph! Isn’t the right to decide life and death reserved for the victor here in the Beast Palace? Mercy or no mercy is up to me! ...Well, once I win.”

Meng Yubaek, who had scoffed boldly, quickly shrank down again.

Understandable. After all, she was the one who nearly died at her family’s hands. She must have thought long and hard about all this.

If someone tries to kill you, you have no choice but to kill them first.

And she rejected that logic—not because it was wrong, but because she wanted to act according to her own heart.

People who refuse to listen to reason and insist on following their own conviction... strangely enough, I find them endearing.

Perhaps that’s why the Black Lotus Sect Master took a liking to me as well.

While I nodded inwardly, the Beast Palace Lord, who had been staring blankly at his daughter, suddenly burst into hearty laughter—so hearty that one would never suspect he was ill.

“Hahaha! Yes! You’re absolutely right. Rights belong to the strong. The defeated can only obey, flee, or challenge again! Whatever the outcome!”

Meng Yubaek, however, was terrified by her father laughing at what she considered a serious declaration. She immediately hid behind Chilgong.

We watched the reunion of father and daughter for a while before the Beast Palace Lord’s laughter subsided, and I finally spoke.

“Well, now that that’s settled, let’s get to the main topic.”

“Yes, yes. I brought you here to talk, yet we’ve done nothing but digress. Let me explain what I mentioned earlier.”

Looking pleased, the Beast Palace Lord stroked the black panther lightly as he continued.

“First—how much do you know about spirit beasts?”

“Animals that contain an inner core. Their power is on a different level from ordinary beasts, some gain special abilities, and once captured, every part of them can be put to use. That much, at least.”

“Mm. Central Plains folk truly think first of killing and harvesting. Ah, I do not mean to blame you—just surprised at how different our customs are.”

He coughed, looking paler as he leaned more heavily against Heukjo.

“When we say Divine Beast, we refer to beasts so powerful that they approach the realm of gods.”

“Gods? As in the Primal Heavenly Immortals or Buddha?”

“Not quite. They inspire awe beyond fear, and their power rivals natural disasters—that is why they are called such. To put it in terms a Central Plains warrior would understand: a spirit beast that has reached the Flowering Stage.”

“Oh.”

Yunnan Province, with its ancient vast jungles, often nurtured spirit beasts born from strong natural energies. Naturally, beasts reaching the Flowering Stage appeared more frequently than in the Central Plains—thus, the term “Divine Beast” emerged.

Hearing this, something clicked.

The Azure Cold Serpent Dragon.

It controlled blizzards infused with internal energy, and its massive body could alter terrain with a single movement.

To ordinary people, it would indeed seem no different from a godlike monster.

The only reason we defeated it was due to favorable circumstances and luck.

The blizzard filled with powerful internal energy made even my Sword Qi unable to properly cut through its body. Even when Seorin and I attacked together, we couldn't land a decisive blow and were slowly pushed back.

Only when Seol Lihyang combined the Ice Essence's power with the strength of the North Sea Ice Palace warriors and threw it forward did the blizzard weaken for a moment.

We seized that fleeting moment and struck with full force. Had Seol Lihyang failed to create that opening, we could never have brought the Azure Cold Serpent Dragon down.

At best, we would have gathered the people and fled as far as possible.

“You seem to have something in mind.”

“Yes. I once defeated a spirit beast called the Azure Cold Serpent Dragon in the North Sea.”

“The Azure... Cold Serpent Dragon?”

“It was originally a serpent called the Azure Cold Serpent, infused with frigid qi. After accumulating energy over many years, it grew strong enough to manipulate the surrounding climate like a Dragon.”

“That must have been a sight to behold. I wished to witness a Divine Beast once before death, but the number of spirit beasts dwindles as years pass... and so does my remaining lifespan.”

“Well, sight or not, it was a near-death nightmare for me, so I’d rather not recall it.”

It had devoured its own young—killed by Frost Serpent Poison—and gone berserk. The shock came from realizing that even two Flowering Stage warriors could not subdue it.

“Heh. One can always resolve things through conversation instead of fighting.”

—**Kreung.**

The Beast Palace Lord stroked his spirit beast’s fur with his thin arm, and Heukjo accepted it contentedly.

After a moment, the Beast Palace Lord began coughing again—one of countless times already.

“Kuh! I digress. In any case, since you faced one yourself, you know well: a Divine Beast differs greatly from ordinary spirit beasts. Their strength is overwhelming,

their abilities extraordinary... and even in death, they do not die easily. They leave behind resentment and a lingering presence.”

“Resentment? Presence? I haven’t sensed anything.”

“Ordinary people would not. But spirit beasts with sharp senses, and warriors of the Beast Palace who share those senses, feel it clearly. The blood you are drenched in... tells them how strong the Azure Cold Serpent Dragon was. And how bitterly it died.”

“Hmm.”

“You still don’t quite understand. Then think of people. A demon who has killed all his life gives off a different aura than a righteous hero who has saved lives. Judging from that killing intent you displayed earlier, you should understand well.”

“Oh.”

He was right.

Those who kill too many people unconsciously leak killing intent, and without control, they fall into qi deviation. Conversely, Daoists who cultivate virtue exude a clear, refreshing aura just by being present.

It doesn't mean one is stronger or weaker—it's simply something soaked into their being.

Spirit beasts are the same. I haven't slaughtered many beasts, but the Azure Cold Serpent Dragon was overwhelmingly powerful and died with immense resentment—thus, beasts instinctively perceive me as dangerous.

“To explain more simply—it's like how village dogs tuck their tails and flee when a dog butcher visits.”

“I understand. No need for further explanation. I'll study the rest myself.”

If things went well, I could refine my aura further and make more efficient use of my killing intent. Even if I no longer relied on it exclusively, it was still one of my sharpest weapons. If there was a chance to hone it, I would seize it.

“Very well.”

“Then now, I shall explain the reason we came.”

“I understand. If it concerns a marriage arrangement with the Centipede Lord, that is no longer my place to—she has already left the household, so if the parties agree—”

“I have absolutely not come for that reason, what are you even talking about.”

The rebuttal burst out of me without a breath of pause. Embarrassed, the Beast Palace Lord hesitated, then asked carefully:

“Was your intention not to use my bloodline as leverage to swallow the entire Beast Palace?”

“F-Father... is that what you’ve thought of me this whole time...??”

Meng Yubaek stared at him with wide, shocked eyes.

But what concerned me was only one thing:

Tang Sowol, smiling silently since earlier.

After glimpsing my memories, Tang Sowol had become strangely possessive in matters like this. To reassure her, I spoke firmly:

“I have no interest in children.”

Her expression eased slightly, but she still looked unsatisfied.

So I made it even clearer:

“Unlike my fiancée, whom I fell in love with at fifteen and held an engagement ceremony with, I have no interest whatsoever in children.”

“Huh.”

For some reason, Tang Sowol froze this time.

It seemed my sincerity had finally gotten through.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

299. Southern Barbarian Beast Palace (4)

For some reason, Tang Sowol froze stiff, but at least the misunderstanding was resolved.

The Beast Palace Lord nodded with a complicated expression.

“Very well. At least I understand now that you have no intention of seizing the Beast Palace.”

“I truly don’t know why you assumed that. Others seemed to think the same as well.”

“Well, you *are* the Tang Clan’s son-in-law, are you not?”

“That’s true, but how does that lead to such a conclusion?”

“Your martial strength is exceptional, but you will never stand at the center of the Tang Clan. And since the current Clan Head firmly intends for your fiancée not to take the position of Young Clan Head, it is certain that she—and thus you—will be relegated to a branch line.”

“...Yes, that is correct.”

“Then you would at least need support from behind to exert influence within the Tang Clan. The Beast Palace, though distant, is not a negligible force... or so I thought. It seems I was mistaken.”

“Huh...”

“Oh, and one more thing—your having a woman other than your fiancée at your side also played a part. Since your fiancée is a daughter who will not inherit the clan, I assumed such arrangements were possible. And if two were possible, so would three.”

It was such a plausible line of reasoning that it startled me.

For someone who didn't know our circumstances, it was an entirely reasonable misunderstanding.

So this is how it appeared from the outside...

I let out a faint laugh—then Seorin suddenly spoke with a serious face.

“There is also the Seo Mun Clan.”

“...Hm??”

“My Seo Mun Clan shall stand as Hwi’s backing. What is this talk of the Beast Palace?”

“The Seo Mun Clan? I’ve never heard of such a clan...”

“Ghhk!”

Seorin collapsed inside at the Beast Palace Lord’s words.

Well, this was Yunnan Province—an even more remote region at that, called the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace, outside the mainstream of the martial world.

Unless it was one of the Five Supreme Clans or Nine Great Sects, a provincial prestigious family would never be known here.

And after declaring she would rebuild the Seo Mun Clan, Seorin hadn't done much about it.

She had made promises during the Dragon-Phoenix Assembly, then spent most of her time afterward earning money. Though she made achievements here and there, most were alongside me, so the attention naturally drifted away.

As her small shoulders hunched further, I gently patted her back. Then Seol Lihyang spoke up with equal seriousness.

“Hwi. Should I accept the position of Ice Palace Lord even now?”

“No need. I have no interest in backers. And besides, if you become Palace Lord, you would have to live in the North Sea.”

“Hmph! If Hwi wants me by his side so badly, I suppose I must relent!”

Unlike Seorin, Seol Lihyang brightened and hummed happily.

I watched them for a moment, then leaned back in my chair and shook my head.

“Sigh... If I truly wanted wealth and power, there are far more efficient ways. Why would I bother with marriage alliances?”

“Eh? I’m curious—Young Hero Cheon. You’ve focused solely on martial arts and fighting the Demonic Cult until now. If you *did* pursue riches and influence, what would you do?”

“That’s simple. I would go to the Black Lotus Sect.”

“Ah... Even if Lady Sama refuses, the Black Lotus Sect Master would gladly accept you as an adopted son...”

“What nonsense. I’d simply take the Deputy Sect Master’s position.”

“???”

Seeing Tang Sowol tilt her head, I elaborated.

“The Sect Master would welcome me at first, but his mind might change once he bears his own child. And becoming his adopted son means spending my entire life under his authority.”

“W-wait. Don’t tell me—”

“Yes. I would begin as Deputy Sect Master, then slowly gather power from the bottom up. Of course, the Sect Master wouldn’t tolerate that. Eventually, he’d discover my movements and try to suppress me. At that moment, I defeat him, and the entire Black Lotus Sect falls into my hands.”

“...Is that actually possible...?”

“I don’t know yet. But if I can’t surpass even the Black Lotus Sect Master, how could I ever face the Heavenly Demon? And just to be clear—I don’t mean I’ll kill him. He’s given me a lot, and regardless of everything, he is the one who built the Black Lotus. I only intend to... beat him up a little.”

“...Wouldn’t there be backlash?”

“It’s treacherous for a son to beat his father, but for a subordinate to beat their superior—well, that’s everyday life in the unorthodox world.”

Tang Sowol was speechless.

And now I realized—everyone else, even the Beast Palace Lord and Meng Yubaek, were staring at me with the same look.

Why? Why were they looking at me like that?

Before I could think further, the Beast Palace Lord spoke in the quiet room.

“I see. You are someone who could seize things purely through strength, without needing anyone to stand in front of you. Then there is no reason to doubt you.”

“That is a misunderstanding.”

Anyone overhearing would think I was the head of some notorious unorthodox faction.

“A misunderstanding, yes. Let us call it that. Then, can you now explain? If you do not covet the Beast Palace, why have you come?”

“Hm? Ah. First, it concerns what the Centipede Lord said.”

“We intend for the Centipede Sect and its Sect Master to remain under the Tang Clan’s care for the time being. Eventually she will, as she said, challenge the Beast Palace—but until then, she will be under our protection.”

“I see. You won’t allow the Beast Palace to strike first until she is grown... yet when she comes to challenge you, that will be her business. Truly shameless.”

“I won’t deny that. However, once you hear the second reason, your thoughts may change.”

“Do not worry. I will be long dead by then. My useless children must handle what follows—whether they defend or lose what they inherited depends on their own ability.”

“Well... perhaps not. Because the second matter is that we intend to cure the poison afflicting you.”

The Beast Palace Lord froze, then quietly looked at me, as if trying to determine whether I truly meant what I had said.

“...What?”

“Why?”

“...”

“White Moon Sword Lord. Whatever your ultimate goal, things would be far easier for you if I were gone. Why go out of your way to save me?”

“You don’t doubt that I *can* cure you?”

“The Thousand Poison Gate’s poisons have never surpassed the Tang Clan’s. And here is the Poison King’s daughter herself. Naturally, you came because you are confident. What matters is what you want in return.”

“It’s nothing complicated. We simply want to become... friendly.”

“...”

“Shall I explain?”

“Please do.”

“Exactly as I said. Let us open official trade, lend each other help when needed... and if we share a common enemy, let us stand back-to-back.”

“A common enemy, hm.”

Realizing the key point, the Beast Palace Lord stroked Heukjo’s fur, thinking deeply before speaking.

“Not bad. Our only enemy has been the Thousand Poison Gate—and since you’ve already exterminated it, I suppose I owe you this time. Very well. Who is this enemy?”

“The Demonic Cult.”

“I vaguely heard something earlier. So you are not on good terms with them.”

“More precisely, the problem is the current Cult Leader—the Heavenly Demon.”

I briefly explained: the emergence of the Heavenly Demon, his intent to invade the Central Plains, and his inexplicable interest in me.

The Beast Palace Lord nodded after listening.

“Then I understand. But even with the Beast Palace’s strength, if what you say is true, we cannot hope to stop the Heavenly Demon.”

“I do not expect that. I only ask that you do not ally with the Demonic Cult, and even if you do, that you not become hostile toward the Tang Clan.”

The Southern Barbarian Beast Palace was outside the Central Plains—but still close to Sichuan. Yunnan bordered Sichuan, after all.

Now understanding my intention, the Beast Palace Lord nodded slowly.

“Very well. If you cure the poison eating at my body, then for as long as I live, the Beast Palace shall remain a steadfast friend to the Tang Clan.”

“For as long as you live?”

“How can I speak for after my death? When that time comes, speak to the Beast Palace Lord of that era—whether son or daughter.”

He looked toward Meng Yubaek as he said this.

It wasn't the gaze of a man who cast his daughter out for bonding with an insect, but something far gentler.

As I suspected, the competition for succession had grown fierce, and Meng Yubaek—who seemed uninterested in the position—was sent away.

He could not have foreseen that his penniless daughter would nearly be killed by her own sibling.

I patted Tang Sowol's shoulder, as she had been oddly quiet for a while.

“Then I leave it to you.”

“Y-yes. Please rely on me. Since I snatched Young Hero Cheon away when he was five years younger, doing at least this much is only proper.”

“Why are you sulking?”

“Me? Sulking? Why? There is absolutely no reason for that?”

...She was definitely sulking.

Muttering under her breath, Tang Sowol began examining the Beast Palace Lord’s pulse. As she worked, I whispered softly to her.

“In truth, it was only natural you would become my fiancée.”

“...What are you suddenly—”

“Even if I had not been fifteen... even if our first meeting had been ordinary... even if my abilities were a bit lacking... I still would have stayed near you, helping you, trying to win your attention.”

“That is—”

“Understand? You did not snatch me—I courted *you*.”

Tang Sowol’s face flushed bright red. She opened and closed her mouth with no sound coming out.

I grinned.

“Then I leave it to you. Will it take long?”

“N-no. I just need to identify the poison first, so half a shichen will be enough.”

“Good. Then we’ll wait. Beast Palace Lord, we may need to stay for a while. Could you prepare a room?”

“Of course. How many rooms do you need?”

“Four would be fine... but if there is one large enough for four people, one is enough.”

“Heeeek!”

What on earth did she imagine? Meng Yubaek covered her eyes with both hands and let out a strange sound.

After Tang Sowol finished examining him, we followed a servant to a vacant room.

As mentioned earlier, it was spacious enough for four people to stay comfortably. Later, I learned that the Beast Palace’s rooms were all large, since everyone kept at least one sizeable beast companion.

After roughly unpacking and changing into comfortable clothes, Tang Sowol sidled up to me with an expectant gaze.

“Brother Cheon, Brother Cheon. What do you plan to do now? It will take some time before I begin formulating the antidote...”

“Good. Then get some sleep. You must be exhausted from walking nonstop all the way here.”

“...Haa. As if I’m living some luxurious life.”

Tang Sowol sighed deeply, muttered something, then smiled sweetly.

“Then... how about a nap together? You must be tired too.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to spend some time cultivating.”

Still smiling, Tang Sowol froze solid.

Ignoring her, I sat cross-legged in a quiet corner.

As I sank into meditation, I faintly heard Tang Sowol’s voice beyond the darkening consciousness:

'He said he was courting me! He said he was courting me!'

But that faded quickly.

It was drowned out by the visions of Beast Palace warriors and beasts collapsing under killing intent, and the strange flow of inner energy between the Beast Palace Lord and Heukjo.

He said my killing intent carried the Azure Cold Serpent Dragon's smell of blood and resentment, heightening the beasts' fear.

Something about my energy had changed without my notice.

Now that I knew, I couldn't ignore it.

How long did I gaze into the killing intent itself—not its origin, but the killing intent as a force?

Somewhere within the dark-red currents, a shape seemed to flicker.

A long, scaled body. A gigantic form that required looking up for ages. And vertically slit, razor-sharp pupils...

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300. Southern Barbarian Beast Palace (5)

When he contemplated inwardly, he saw the shape of a massive serpent hidden within the buried killing intent.

The Azure Cold Serpent.

Just as the Beast Palace Lord had said, it was surely the remnant left behind by that creature moments before death.

However, its form merely *existed*. It didn't react to his willpower; it only glared at him.

“Well, it'd be stranger if it meekly obeyed the one who killed it.”

It wasn't as though he had simply killed the Azure Cold Serpent alone. During the process of weakening it with the Killing Despair Poison, its children—the Azure Cold Serpentlings—had also been wiped out.

He didn't think a dead creature would retain actual will... and it wasn't something left behind with any positive intention, so naturally it was difficult to handle.

It didn't harm him in any way, and although it came with a few conditions, it was practically no different from strengthening his killing intent—so it was actually helpful. He could just leave it be.

“What a waste, though.”

Seeing it directly, he understood why the spirit beasts and the Beast Palace martial artists found his killing intent overwhelming.

What the Azure Cold Serpent had left him was its presence.

A marker attached to the one who had killed it—its immense might was something beasts would instinctively sense and fear.

Even if no real power remained, this level of presence alone was practically a supernatural function.

If he could make use of it somehow, it would help. He could already think of half a dozen ways to incorporate it into martial arts.

The simplest use was the same as in the Beast Palace—subduing those weaker than he with greater efficiency.

A bit more advanced application: firing off pure momentum first to disrupt the opponent's sensory perception.

And perhaps...

Perhaps something even beyond that was possible.

Willpower was intent and thought. In that sense, what the Azure Cold Serpent had left him was a simple thought without will. A half-formed willpower.

Even if not a martial artist, it had reached the Flowering Stage as a spirit beast. It wasn't strange for it to have handled willpower, even incompletely.

What mattered here was that no matter how immense the serpent's lingering thought was, it lacked will.

Normally, it should have burst out and scattered emotions or memories not his own, disordering his heartscape.

But no such thing had happened because his killing intent had suppressed it completely.

Thought was powerful energy by itself, but without the direction of will, it dispersed meaninglessly.

And killing intent was itself a form of willpower most heavily infused with the intent to harm.

The mere fact that he had felt no abnormalities was proof that his own killing intent—and the will within it—completely overwhelmed the serpent's residual thought.

If he used this properly, he could overlay his own will atop the Azure Cold Serpent's thought and direct its strength however he wished.

“No... not quite.”

Directionless power was like a phantom. If it were truly just a simple thought, it would have been swept away and erased when he heightened his killing intent.

But the serpent's form appeared *when* he heightened his killing intent, and vanished *when* he dispelled it.

As if it were melted into his killing intent itself.

Meaning... it was melted into the uniquely exclusive nature of killing will...

“Calling it *half-formed* may have been unfair.”

It had lacked volume compared to its thought—but it *had* contained will.

Likely because the Azure Cold Serpent had died while rampaging in a state of qi deviation.

If so, a question naturally followed.

Even if the ratio of will to thought was imbalanced, willpower was still willpower. A power capable of the impossible wouldn't be used simply to leave behind a marker.

So, why had it embedded itself in killing intent...?

“Ah. So that's what it is.”

What the Azure Cold Serpent desired was, naturally, his death.

Since it originated from killing will, it was obvious that it would sharpen whenever he raised his killing intent, then scatter.

Wasn't that a common saying? “Even as a ghost, I'll kill you.”

Normally a mere threat that only made the listener uncomfortable.

But the Azure Cold Serpent had truly infused power into that sentiment.

If he guessed correctly, something bad should have happened every time he heightened his killing intent or harmed someone.

Impurities in his willpower causing deviation... or, as he initially feared, the serpent's emotions or memories trying to erode him.

How such a thing was possible, he didn't know. But it wasn't entirely unthinkable.

He had already personally experienced forces beyond martial arts—mental restrictions and the Demon Bell, among others.

And above all, the Azure Cold Serpent was a spirit beast that wielded the power of nature itself, reaching the Flowering Stage through means he could not understand.

In the Murim, the common sense was that only internal energy could block internal energy.

But the serpent's snowstorm distorted even the energy he sent forth, and its icy scales casually blocked sharp blade-qi.

Just because he didn't understand it didn't mean it was impossible.

However, the reason the serpent's final curse had no effect on him was...

"Lucky, I suppose."

Because the serpent's embedded will was based on killing intent.

Its qi had already been in chaos, it couldn't properly wield willpower—and of all things, it was *killing intent*, his specialty.

He had even reached the Flowering Stage by overcoming killing intent.

Since he no longer needed to cling to killing intent, killing intent also held no sway over him.

Thus, the Azure Cold Serpent's final struggle amounted to nothing.

"I'm finally starting to understand everything."

Whether it harmed him or not, willpower was willpower. Someone else using half-baked methods could never handle it.

Yes—if they were half-baked methods.

He recalled the only ones who reacted to the remnants of the Azure Cold Serpent: the Beast Palace martial artists and their beast companions.

It made sense that sensitive beasts would fear it. Before a stronger predator, fear was a survival instinct.

But why did the Beast Palace martial artists, unlike ordinary people, react to his killing intent?

Meng Yubaek and the Seven-Flame Five Poisons centipede—neither had been directly exposed to his killing intent, yet Meng Yubaek was comfortable around him while the Fire Centipede found him difficult.

Above all—the Beast Palace Lord. His qi and the black panther's qi circulated between their bodies as if they were one.

Yes, they were touching physically... but that he, long since poisoned, was still alive and able to go outside while riding the panther's back was surely related.

“Do they share?”

Senses, internal energy—and at times, thoughts shared back and forth.

Perhaps that was the fundamental principle behind the Beast Palace's martial arts.

Unlike the Thousand Poison Gate, which treated venomous creatures as disposable, the Beast Palace cherished beasts as family for this very reason.

If so, then Meng Yubaek remained unaffected because she had tamed the Fire Centipede with the secret arts of the Five Poisons Sect, so it did *not* share senses with her like the Beast Palace method.

And perhaps the answer lay there.

“Should I give it a try?”

With the restoration of Thunder Heaven Divine Art mostly complete, this was the first clear direction he'd encountered in a while during his otherwise aimless training.

In conclusion, he failed.

“This is ridiculously difficult.”

A sigh escaped him the moment he finished contemplation and opened his eyes.

It was only natural—he was trying to use a martial art principle he had never practiced before, to swallow someone else's willpower for the first time.

If he succeeded in a single day, that would be stranger.

He loosened his slightly stiff body from sitting cross-legged and looked at Seo Mun-Hwarin sprawled across the enormous bed.

Surprisingly, Seo Mun-Hwarin was training in that posture.

Her eyelids twitched faintly, and the subtle tremors across her body suggested she was sparring within her heartscape.

Indeed, unless one needed deep contemplation like earlier, there was no real need to sit cross-legged.

After reaching the Flowering Stage, the efficiency of physical training dropped sharply except when loosening the body or testing a completed sword technique.

Even when he refined Thunder Heaven Divine Art to create the Roaring Thunder Sword, he had done all of it within his heartscape without swinging a blade.

He had sat cross-legged out of habit—but next time, he would try relaxing like Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Glancing around, Tang Sowol was struggling alone at her desk, combining various poisons.

Seol Lihyang was not in sight, but extending his sensory perception slightly, he felt her training not far away—probably in the training yard.

As for Meng Yubaek... well, she'd handle herself.

It wasn't as though she would get assassinated after coming all the way to the Beast Palace, especially now that even the second child had been exposed as a killer beast.

He nodded and carefully sat on the edge of the main bed.

At that moment, Seo Mun-Hwarin, previously lying spread-eagle at the center, slowly opened her eyes.

“Oh dear. Did I interrupt you, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“That is not so. This One was just about to pause, for hunger had begun to stir when thou arrived.”

“That's fortunate. I'm starting to get hungry as well—shall we ask for a meal together?”

“Mm-mm. This One anticipates the cuisine of the Beast Palace greatly. Even within Sichuan, the culinary culture differs vastly from the Central Plains, and Southern Barbarian lands have entirely different vegetation—this One cannot even imagine the taste.”

“I don’t know what they’ll serve, but since it’s from the Beast Palace, the flavor should be guaranteed.”

“Oho! Thou knowest well!”

“We’ve traveled together long enough, haven’t we? You really do have a hearty appetite.”

“Mmm. ‘Tis because This One is still growing.”

“?”

He looked at her still lying down. Maybe it was because the bed was large, but she seemed smaller than usual.

“Thy gaze is impure. Unlike thee, whose growth hath ceased, This One is still growing taller!”

“Yes, well.”

She *would* grow. Before regression, Seo Mun-Hwarin had been longer by about a finger joint or two.

Meaning, she would grow only a finger joint or two more from now.

He looked at her with brief pity—then suddenly remembered something and spoke.

“This is a bit sudden, but I have something to ask, Senior.”

“Fear not. Did not Sowol recently find a method? Even if thy height remains the same, this part shall grow splendidly—thou need only look forward to it.”

Proudly thumping her chest, Seo Mun-Hwarin earned a slow shake of his head.

“That’s not it. Since you also helped defeat the Azure Cold Serpent, I wondered if it left anything behind in you, like it did in me.”

He was fine—he had handled killing intent among the greatest in the Central Plains, and he had even reached the Flowering Stage by overcoming it.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin was not the same. He worried that she might unknowingly be affected by the serpent's will, her heartscape in disorder.

“In truth, This One also became curious after hearing the Beast Palace Lord's words, so This One checked immediately.”

“And?”

“Clean. This One felt nothing. To be certain, This One even asked other Beast Palace warriors to test their killing intent upon This One—but it was no different.”

“We defeated it together, so why was only *I* cursed while you're perfectly fine?”

It was good news, but somehow irritating—his complaint slipped out.

Seo Mun-Hwarin curled her lips in amusement.

“’Tis because thou didst slice off its neck at the end, is it not?”

“Well... yes, but...”

“And unlike the adorable This One, art thou not rather frightening in battle? ‘Tis natural thou wouldst be hated more!”

He tugged at her cheek for spouting such nonsense.

“Nnaaat!”

Her cheek stretched like rice cake. Annoyed, he tugged the other cheek as well.

Swwwip!

“S-stop! The adorable This One’s cheeks shall tear!”

He looked down at Seo Mun-Hwarin, helpless beneath his grip, her legs kicking uselessly.

Hm.

She was cute.