

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 301-310

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

### 301. Spirit Beasts and Humans

Only after thoroughly tormenting Seo Mun-Hwarin's cheeks did he finally release her.

Seo Mun-Hwarin trembled while clutching her reddened cheeks, her gaze at him noticeably sharper than usual.

At this level, she would probably forget after a single meal.

He lightly poked the tip of her nose, left defenseless as she rubbed her cheeks, and spoke.

“Let’s go eat now.”

“This One shall never forget today’s humiliation.”

“If it means I can linger a little longer in Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin’s memory, then so be it.”

“W-what nonsense! What is thy aim that thou sayest such sweet things!?”

“I just said it casually.”

He gave a light shrug, rose from the bed, and walked toward Tang Sowol—who was clutching her head alone in misery.

“Are you busy?”

“Br-Brother Cheon...”

“Hmm???”

Now that he looked properly, she wasn’t simply struggling—she was on the verge of tears.

Drooping eyes, pouty lips, and deep frustration flickering behind her green pupils.

Tang Sowol timidly tugged his sleeve and began to complain.

“Will you listen, Brother Cheon...?”

“What is it?”

“I found out what poison was used to poison the Beast Palace Lord. But... this isn't just any poison.”

“Is it hard to detoxify?”

“No. It's a poison without an antidote.”

A poison with no antidote?

He tilted his head in confusion. Tang Sowol let out a long, weary sigh and continued.

“More precisely... the antidote keeps changing.”

“What does that even...?”

He wasn't a practitioner of poison arts himself, but he had already lived five years in the Tang Clan.

In his previous life, he had traveled with Tang Sowol for quite some time, hearing all kinds of things.

Besides, after reconstructing his body around Tang Sowol's poisons and becoming something close to immune to all poisons, he had even studied from books on his own.

When it came to poisons, his knowledge far exceeded that of mediocre physicians.

Yet what he had just heard was outside anything he considered possible.

“The poison doesn’t change constantly, but the antidote does? What do you mean by that?”

“Surprisingly, the poison *does* change constantly.”

“...Huh??”

“Remember how I said there were several poisons the Poison Demon might have used?”

What followed was far beyond his expectations.

Having absorbed all poisons of the Thousand Poison Gate, Tang Sowol had already narrowed down the possible poisons the Poison Demon would have used. She had begun preparing antidotes even before arriving at the Beast Palace.

But upon checking the Beast Palace Lord’s pulse, she discovered something shocking.

He was not poisoned by any of the anticipated poisons—but by *three different deadly poisons* simultaneously.

Each one was a poison powerful enough to harm even a Flowering Stage master, so their distinct natures were clear.

And with three such poisons tangled together, something impossible under normal circumstances began to occur—

The symptoms of the three poisons appeared one after another in rotation.

“So... when one flares up, the other two quiet down, and then another flares up, and the cycle repeats?”

“Yes. And the cycle is strangely stable. In a way, it’s almost harmonious. I never imagined this could happen with three *different* poisons.”

“Then why not prepare three antidotes and detoxify whichever poison surfaces at the moment?”

“That was my first thought as well... but if even one poison’s strength is reduced, the balance breaks. Then the other two poisons would rampage simultaneously.”

“Detoxify two at once...?”

“It’s possible. But the Beast Palace Lord, already weakened, won’t survive it.”

“That is troublesome.”

“Yes, very troublesome...”

Tang Sowol, now rubbing her forehead against the back of his hand, began to whine softly.

“Honestly... the Poison Demon is a nuisance both alive and dead.”

She was distressed... but the smooth warmth of her forehead against his hand was, if anything, calming him instead.

But he was not the one who needed calm—Tang Sowol did.

So he returned it in kind.

He withdrew his hand, took her gently by the head, and pressed their foreheads together.

“E-eh!? Uh! Hh-heck!”

Tang Sowol stiffened with strange noises, but soon enough her body softened and the tension melted away.

As expected—effective.

Smiling faintly, he whispered with their foreheads still touching.

“Don’t worry too much. At the very least, you *can* make the antidotes, yes?”

“...T-that’s true?”

“If the problem is that the Beast Palace Lord cannot endure the process, then we just need to find a method that burdens him less.”

“That’s easier said than done...”

“In most cases, yes. But after observing the Beast Palace’s martial arts... I thought of something.”

The Beast Palace’s martial arts began with sharing between human and beast.

Sharing internal energy so ordinary beasts could become spirit beasts—or borrowing power from a spirit beast in return.

Sharing thoughts to move as one body, sharing senses to perceive what one normally could not.

The Beast Palace Lord had survived thus far likely because he received support from his companion, the black panther spirit beast.

Alone, he would have collapsed long ago. Even if Flowering Stage warriors can be poisoned, dying from poison is still difficult—but everything has its limit.

Not one, but *three* deadly poisons at once—normally, he should have perished quickly.

If internal energy could be shared, then could poison not also be shared?

“If detoxifying one poison causes the other two to rampage, then pass one of them to the spirit beast. It would be excruciating, but it should endure. Then before it dies, you treat it next.”

“...Whether it’s actually possible, whether the Beast Palace Lord will permit it... and whether *I* can time the treatment correctly—that’s the biggest problem.”

“I’d think the Beast Palace Lord would endure, as he has until now.”

“No, I meant the black panther spirit beast...”

“Ah.”

Right—unlike the Beast Palace Lord, who was a seasoned Flowering Stage master, the panther spirit beast’s energy was only at Sub-Perfection.

The Flowering Stage was not something easily reached.

And this was only speculation, but...

Perhaps it was harder for a spirit beast than a human to reach the Flowering Stage.

Throughout history, Flowering Stage martial artists had always existed. The leaders of the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans were all Flowering Stage.

There were former seniors and retired Murim Alliance Lords, and although fewer in number, unorthodox Flowering Stage masters existed as well.

But spirit beasts?

Even accounting for the diminishing presence of natural qi and fewer spirit beasts, there were almost no eras where Flowering Stage spirit beasts were more common than humans.

He didn't know the reason.

If it were merely the transmission and evolution of martial arts, then the Beast Palace—who *did* teach martial arts to beasts—should have had more Flowering Stage spirit beasts.

There must be another reason.

Regardless, the Beast Palace called their Flowering Stage spirit beasts *Divine Beasts* for a reason.

It was extremely difficult for a spirit beast to reach the Flowering Stage.

The black panther spirit beast becoming a Divine Beast was... unlikely.

Could a Sub-Perfection spirit beast endure poisons that tormented even absolute masters?

It had greater vitality than humans, so it might hold on better... but surviving safely was not guaranteed.

It could become crippled, die midway, or survive detoxification only to perish from exhaustion.

However—

“In that case, the solution is simple.”

“What is it?”

“A Flowering Stage master capable of resisting deadly poisons could assist the panther with internal energy circulation—similar to a divine healer.”

“It *is* simple, but that means...”

Humans and beasts had different meridian structures.

And the method the Beast Palace devised to bridge that gap was their secret art.

Meaning—his suggestion assumed learning part of the Beast Palace’s secret techniques.

Simple to say, difficult to execute.

“There might be other ways, but that’s the only one I can think of for now.”

“If it’s possible, then... it may work.”

“In the end, the decision lies with the Beast Palace Lord.”

If the Beast Palace Lord allowed their secret arts to be used for detoxification... then he might also find a way to deal with the remnants of the Azure Cold Serpent left inside himself.

They fetched Seol Lihyang—who had been training alone in the practice yard—and headed toward the dining hall.

But halfway there, a servant came running breathlessly to summon them.

The Beast Palace Lord had invited them to dine with him and his other children.

They had already discussed everything important, and Meng Yubaek had returned after leaving home—he thought they would simply share a quiet family moment, even if a bit awkward.

Apparently, there was another intention.

He realized that the moment he entered the dining hall.

The Beast Palace Lord sat at the head, still riding atop the black panther even during meals—which was expected.

But the two young men seated beside him, both resembling him, and Meng Yubaek alone on the opposite side—shaking but trying not to show it—made his motive painfully obvious.

He wanted their group to sit beside Meng Yubaek.

To make it appear as though they were her political supporters.

“I see. So this was your reason.”

“I, too, require an insurance policy.”

Though the Beast Palace Lord joked lightly, his eyes were cold.

Not toward him—but toward one of his sons, the younger-looking of the two.

A strangely shadowed impression, his gaze constantly darting to read the room—making him appear even more sinister.

Judging by the faint killing intent he kept sending toward Meng Yubaek whenever she looked down, his appearance suited him perfectly.

Ordinary people wouldn't notice such faint malice.

But to him, sensitive to killing intent—it was clear as day.

This was likely to prevent recklessness during the successor competition, and to ensure that even if the once-runaway Meng Yubaek became Beast Palace Lord, there would be no dissent.

Meng Yubaek and the Beast Palace Lord knew he had no interest in the Beast Palace, but others didn't.

After a brief thought, he shrugged and sat beside Meng Yubaek.

When he sat, the other women in his party naturally sat beside him.

Perhaps relieved to see familiar faces, Meng Yubaek's trembling eased slightly.

"Hehe... Now that I think about it, White Moon Sword Lord, this must be your first time trying Beast Palace cuisine! I guarantee it's the best food in all of Yunnan!"

"You can guarantee that without even having seen half of Yunnan?"

"W-well, according to my memories!"

"Hmph. Sounds more like you were hungry for too long and became nostalgic for good food."

"Aaah...!"

Defeated instantly, Meng Yubaek wilted in a different kind of way.

The Beast Palace Lord laughed and gestured to the dishes on the table.

“Come, eat before it cools. Though I have not toured all of Yunnan, I know at least that our head chef’s skill is exceptional. You won’t be disappointed.”

“So this is Beast Palace cuisine...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been drooling with anticipation, stared wide-eyed at the unfamiliar Southern Barbarian dishes unseen in the Central Plains.

Before picking up his utensils, he decided to speak first.

“I have a question for the Beast Palace Lord. If treatment requires revealing Beast Palace martial arts, how much are you willing to disclose?”

“For treatment? Why not empty my treasury entirely as payment instead?”

“Oh. I wouldn’t mind that either.”

“...The audacity.”

They both laughed at the Beast Palace Lord’s exasperated reaction.

“Well, the treasury’s already been emptied once, so there isn’t much to take anyway.”

“Ah.”

Right—Ghost Shadow Thief had mentioned raiding the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace once before.

He should really watch what he said.

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

## **Episode 302. Spirit Beasts and Humans (2)**

The Beast Palace Lord chuckled and casually remarked that the Southern Barbarian Beast Palace's secret vault had once been raided. It seemed he was trying to lighten the mood with an amusing story—especially since it had happened quite a while ago.

However, knowing the truth behind the incident, I couldn't help but break out in cold sweat.

After all, the only person who could've pulled off such a heist in recent years was none other than the Ghost Shadow Thief.

And of those still alive, I was the person closest to him.

I wasn't quite his disciple, but I had inherited the essence of his techniques.

I wasn't his family, but I was the one who saw him off in his final moments.

It wasn't as if the Beast Palace Lord would suddenly demand I take responsibility for the Ghost Shadow Thief's actions, but if the truth got out, things would definitely get annoying.

Especially since once the Tang Clan began mingling with the Beast Palace, they'd soon find out we were the ones who "raided" the vault.

Still, I had to be careful not to let it slip that I had a deep connection to the Ghost Shadow Thief.

"Isn't it amusing? The intruder went through all the trouble of breaking past the Beast Palace's defenses and infiltrating the vault... only to steal a single chestplate."

"I... I see."

"Of course, it wasn't an ordinary chestplate—it was made from a spirit beast's hide... but in terms of pure performance, there were plenty of better options."

"Then perhaps it was a thief without good taste."

"That might be so, but that chestplate had a rather unique story behind it."

No matter how cautious I was with my words, there was no way to calm down the Beast Palace Lord, who was clearly excited at receiving guests for the first time in

ages and hopeful that he might finally cure the poison that had eaten away at him half his life.

“As you well know, White Moon Sword Lord, here in the Beast Palace, each person lives and trains alongside a companion. Quite literally, a lifelong partner.”

“So I’ve noticed. While there are those in the Central Plains who care for animals, I’ve never seen people treat them as part of themselves—until I came here.”

“You observed correctly. To the people of the Beast Palace, their companions are as dear to them as their own selves—sometimes even more. Now and then, some even grow a little too attached.”

“Too attached? What do you mean by—”

“Ahem. I mean there are those who... wish to become family in a slightly different sense.”

Wait—could he be implying...?

Perhaps I was too flustered, but as I stammered, the Beast Palace Lord nodded as if to reassure me.

“Don’t worry. It’s not common, and even within the palace now, it’s considered shameful.”

“Yes. But still, why bring this up all of a sudden...?”

Seeing my widened eyes, the Beast Palace Lord simply shook his head with a small smile.

“It might sound similar, but the story I’m about to share is a bit different. The point is—there have been times when humans and spirit beasts truly connected. But such things were originally forbidden.”

“I can’t deny it does sound... unsettling.”

“But in the past, someone thought like this: if the problem lies in the difference of species, then why not just become the same species?”

“Are you talking about shapeshifting techniques? Like those old tales of foxes turning into humans?”

“Ah, no. The opposite. A human turned into a beast.”

For a moment, I wondered if I’d misheard. I blinked and looked around at the others.

They all had the same expression as me—just blinking in disbelief.

“Long before the Beast Palace was founded, there were many more spirit beasts—some of them even divine beasts. I heard one of them offered help.”

“Wow...”

Unlike martial artists who train in inner energy, those beings used nature’s qi and their own unique methods. As a result, some wielded strange powers.

Among them, apparently, was one who could turn a human into a beast.

In ancient times, as the Taoist priests of the Central Plains performed miracles, so too did divine beasts in the Southern Barbarian lands.

Even now, many legends about mystical animals remain in the region.

“After that, humans became beasts, beasts became humans, and they truly lived together in harmony. Of course, it’s all an ancient tale, the truth of which is uncertain... but one thing’s for sure—the Beast Palace’s martial arts have roots in that story.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The chestplate that was stolen was the relic of the first Beast Palace Lord. Inside it, the very story I just told was inscribed.”

There once was a person and a living beast.

And there was someone who married that beast.

Because in ancient times, humans and beasts were the same.

Something like that was engraved inside.

Honestly, even after hearing it, I wasn't sure I understood it... but perhaps it wasn't entirely impossible.

I mean, if a person could die and return to the past, then why couldn't one become a beast?

But combining everything I'd just heard led to one shocking conclusion.

“So basically... someone stole the relic of the first Beast Palace Lord—an item believed to hold the origin of the Beast Palace itself.”

“Exactly.”

“A very precious item, then.”

“Indeed. Even if nothing else, the symbolism alone is enormous.”

Just what the hell was the Ghost Shadow Thief thinking...?

The Beast Palace Lord was smiling, but his eyes revealed a storm of emotions.

That proved just how priceless a treasure it was to the Beast Palace.

Though it had been reduced to a rag and discarded somewhere after the Ghost Shadow Thief fled from the Heavenly Demon and battled assassins...

Still, this raised a major question.

The Ghost Shadow Thief had a showy personality and the skills to match, but... it was never about wealth. He did it all for personal satisfaction.

He'd steal rare items, yes—but always those that others deemed useless or burdensome.

That meant stealing something this important to the Beast Palace would go against his personal code.

He wasn't someone who easily broke his beliefs, so he would've thoroughly investigated beforehand...

Could he have stolen that chestplate without knowing what it was?

Just as I was lost in brief thought, the Beast Palace Lord suddenly burst out laughing.

“Ha ha! But even so, I’m glad it was stolen.”

“Pardon...?”

“I told you, didn’t I? The current Beast Palace shuns unions between man and beast. In the past, spirit beasts outnumbered humans, and divine beasts even protected us—that’s the only reason such stories were possible. But what about now?”

“We can hardly find a single spirit beast, let alone a divine one.”

“Exactly. Even here in the Southern Barbarians, spirit beasts have dwindled over generations. We’ve reached a point where we’re forcibly training normal animals in martial arts to artificially create spirit beast-like creatures. And even that might not last much longer.”

“I see...”

“The Beast Palace must change. That change could come today, tomorrow, or ten years from now... but it must come.”

The Beast Palace Lord looked at Meng Yubaek and his two sons with a blazing intensity unbecoming a man said to be ill.

In that moment, I realized everything he had said was just a prelude to what came next.

Though he was speaking to me, he was also addressing his own children.

“Under long-standing tradition, the Beast Palace has thrived to this day. But now, I think it’s time to forge a new tradition. And didn’t the Beast Palace just make a fine new friend in the Sichuan Tang Clan?”

Smiling faintly, the Beast Palace Lord continued.

“Thanks to the Centipede Lord’s introduction, I’ve made a new friend who claims they can cure my long-standing illness. For that reason, I’ll be staying at the Beast Palace for some time. So make sure you don’t offend them. Understood, Gyeom?”

Though he wore a smile, the Beast Palace Lord’s eyes were cold and sharp as he spoke to his second son... Meng Gyeom.

A warning not to cause trouble. And perhaps, a plea for me not to punish the boy—because he would handle it himself.

Meng Gyeom surely understood the message. His face flushed red and he lowered his head deeply.

Then, when he looked up again—

“I refuse to accept this!”

He shouted and stood up abruptly, eyes wide with fury.

Did he not understand the situation he was in?

Everyone, even the usually sympathetic elder brother, looked utterly appalled.

But Meng Gyeom’s madness didn’t stop there.

He suddenly pointed at me and Tang Sowol.

“O’Centipede Lord! Look at the people Meng Yubaek brought!”

Perhaps it was because no one, not even those still in the Peak Stage, ever acted this recklessly. It was honestly impressive in its own way.

I could understand that Meng Yubaek had survived and brought us back, and that it cornered him—but I didn’t expect him to spiral this badly.

“They’re from the Sichuan Tang Clan! And isn’t the Poison Demon of the Thousand Poison Gate also from the Tang Clan? You said these people could cure your poison? Of course they can! It was their own kind who inflicted it in the first place!”

“How dare you...!”

Hearing her clan being accused of colluding with the Poison Demon made Tang Sowol’s expression turn ice cold.

Having lost her mother to the Poison Demon as a child and nearly dying herself after being kidnapped, it must’ve been unbearable to listen to.

At the flick of her finger, green poison mist began to swirl around her.

She had already reached the Sub-Perfection level. There was no way she'd let any of the poison leak accidentally...

But if even a little did escape, I could guess the outcome.

Without a doubt, that Meng Gyeom would melt into a puddle of poison before he could blink.

The elder brother had reached Sub-Perfection thanks to age, but Meng Gyeom was still just at the peak of the Peak Stage.

Honestly, she didn't even need to act. Seol Lihyang, the weakest among us, could subdue him in just a few moves.

And another person who knew this well—

The Beast Palace Lord. He panicked and tried to say something to Tang Sowol, probably to apologize and calm her down.

But I was faster.

“Tang Sowol. Calm yourself.”

“Brother Cheon?!”

“Don’t you wonder?”

“Wonder what? How far his rudeness will go?”

“No. How many lives he thinks he has.”

“You already decided to kill him once?!”

Even she looked shocked. I smirked and sent a bit of killing intent toward Meng Gyeom.

Knowing how sensitive the Beast Palace folks were to bloodlust, I kept it controlled—just enough to stop him from fainting.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

His face instantly went pale, his teeth chattering as he began to tremble.

Still, perhaps it was the blood of the Beast Palace Lord running through him—

Struggling to even breathe under the pressure, Meng Gyeom spoke, haltingly.

“L-Look! He’s the one who wiped out the Thousand Poison Gate in a single night! What guarantee do we have that he won’t do the same to the Beast Palace?!”

“How amusing. And did you have any guarantee that you wouldn’t die here today?”

“Look, my lord! How can you entrust your life to someone like this?!”

The Beast Palace Lord now glared at Meng Gyeom with eyes devoid of even a shred of affection.

But Meng Gyeom wasn't done speaking yet.

“Punish me however you see fit...! But please, at least let the physician I brought treat you, my lord!”

What a fool. After acting like this, how does he expect anyone to trust him?

Was he trying to get his own father to kill him instead of Meng Yubaek?

“No! That's not it!”

Meng Gyeom shouted as if wrenching the words from his lungs, gasping as he continued.

“The physician I brought is... a Demon Physician!”

At those words, the killing intent aimed at him eased dramatically. I, too, lessened mine to hear him out.

Because—

“Well, what luck.”

If a bastard was bringing another bastard, what reason was there to stop him?

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

**Episode 303. Spirit Beasts and Humans (3)**

*Demon Physician.*

As one might guess from the epithet, he was anything but normal.

A former high-ranking expert of the Demonic Cult, he left after achieving his revenge and wandered as a physician.

However, having no fond memories of the Central Plains, he mostly roamed the outer regions of the martial world. His name was famous, but actually meeting him was rare.

Since losing his family in his youth, he suffered from bouts of madness to this day. Yet his medical skills were exceptional—enough to earn the moniker *Demon Physician*.

If properly fed and housed, he would treat patients without demanding payment...

...but only if the case was interesting to him.

If a patient failed to catch his interest, he wouldn't lift a finger even for a thousand gold.

But if it *did* interest him, he would spend a thousand gold of his own to treat them.

And he couldn't be coerced—he possessed martial skill at the Sub-Perfection level, making him a troublesome madman to handle.

It was said his criteria for “interest” were only two things:

*How urgent the case was, and how unusual the cause of the near-death state.*

This was the information about him before the Demonic Cult's invasion began.

All of it was false.

To begin with, the Demon Physician had *never* accomplished his revenge.

He was born into a physician family; his father had a decent reputation as a healer in the region.

That was likely why the Jinju Yeon Clan summoned him.

At the time, the Jinju Yeon Clan belonged to the Five Supreme Clans rather than being replaced by the Hebei Peng Clan. But as they gradually lost the techniques for undead-control—*Zombie arts*—their status began to decline.

This was because fewer and fewer people could properly use the sorcery, even though the clan possessed a large stock of crafted Zombie accumulated over generations.

With no one left who could control them, the clan found itself weakening until they stood at a crossroads:

Abandon the Zombie arts and pursue ordinary martial cultivation—or modify the arts to make them easier to use.

Today, the clan has taken the former path, and though they have stepped down from the Five Supreme Clans, they maintain dignity as a Prestigious Clan.

But this was not the choice they made at first.

Humans tend to become conservative when threatened. The Jinju Yeon Clan chose the latter path.

They would simplify the Zombie arts and streamline the creation process.

A reasonable choice on the surface, and indeed they achieved results...

...but time was too short.

They could not show outcomes before stepping down from the Five Supreme Clans, nor would future success allow them to reclaim their old position.

With fewer and fewer people capable of handling Zombie arts, the clan made a drastic decision:

They would gather those knowledgeable in human anatomy from *outside* the clan and conduct research together.

Although they risked exposing their inner secrets, the clan had no other option as they stood on the brink of collapse.

In exchange, those researchers would be bound by mental restrictions preventing them from revealing what they learned or using it themselves.

The clan offered extravagant payment—wealth, rare elixirs, or even their martial backing.

Any physician of talent received an invitation, and most accepted.

The Demon Physician's father was among them.

But the Jinju Yeon Clan broke their promise.

After making some progress and breathing a little easier, they decided mental restrictions weren't enough—and planned to eliminate every outside physician they'd summoned.

Not openly, of course. They killed them one by one, staging each death as an accident.

Who would suspect such vile acts from one of the Five Supreme Clans?

By using the knowledge accumulated from handling corpses and Zombie, they forged believable causes of death.

Most dismissed it as bad luck, curses from Zombie, or unfortunate coincidences.

No one imagined a slow and hidden massacre had taken place.

No one except one young man—the future Demon Physician.

Gifted as a physician, he sensed something wrong in the corpse of the father who returned home one day, cold and lifeless.

Realizing the Jinju Yeon Clan had killed him, he rushed to the magistrate...

...but by the time he broke free from an official who kept delaying and obstructing him, everyone else in his family was dead.

His elderly mother, who had waited endlessly for her husband.

His younger sibling.

His newly wedded wife.

And, whether as a warning or to erase all traces, the unborn child ripped from her swollen belly.

In just a few short hours, the Demon Physician lost everything.

It wasn't hard to guess who was responsible, and it was clear he would be next.

So he fled without burying his family—fled as far as possible, to Xinjiang, and then beyond... to the Demonic Cult.

He excelled in martial arts as much as medicine, and rapidly grew stronger.

After twenty years of training, he reached Sub-Perfection.

Considering he began training late in life, and that most Demonic Cult martial arts were inferior, his growth was remarkable.

Once he felt he was strong enough, he left the Demonic Cult and returned to the Central Plains.

On his way to Hebei, he displayed his medical skills, earning fame step by step.

By the time he arrived, he had even earned the title *Divine Physician*.

Back then, he concealed not only his demonic energy but also his desire for revenge.

People simply saw a brilliant, benevolent healer who had suddenly appeared.

He entered the Jinju Yeon Clan naturally, carried by his reputation, and eventually discovered the name of the one who had ordered the massacre of the physicians.

But his actions stirred backlash within the clan.

Though they had strayed due to fear for their future, the Jinju Yeon Clan still clung to the orthodox way.

They concluded their obsession with Zombie and power was the root of their downfall.

So they decided to start over.

They released the bound Zombie from their sorcery and laid them to rest with proper rites.

They sealed their manuals deep within their vaults and created a new martial art using only fragments of the old sorcery.

Thus was born the Jinju Yeon Clan as it is known today.

They did not publicize their sins, so the Demon Physician's enemy wasn't punished—but he lost all his authority and languished in a small annex, simply waiting to die.

He was far more pitiful than the Demon Physician expected, but that was not enough to quench his revenge.

He snuck into the annex at night for a life-and-death duel—

And lost.

Despite his talent, his strange martial art based on medicine, and the demonic energy he had hidden... he couldn't reach the man.

Naturally so.

Demonic Cult martial arts were vicious but crude. Their inner energy lacked purity, their heartscape tainted by madness.

Meanwhile, his enemy had grown up practicing orthodox martial arts, supported by excellent elixirs and decades of focused training—an elder of a prestigious clan.

It was the Heavenly Demon who was anomalous; most demonic practitioners could never surpass orthodox elites. Especially at higher realms.

After losing the duel, the Demon Physician barely escaped with his life, just as he had in his youth.

He stoked the flames of revenge and tried to grow stronger yet again.

But then came the twist.

The elderly elder of the Jinju Yeon Clan—though victorious in their duel—died soon afterward of natural causes.

The clan, realizing only then the depth of the Demon Physician's hatred, sent a polite letter of apology.

His enemy had died peacefully, never suffering the fate he deserved.

And the clan, which he should have hated, lowered its head before he could accuse them.

His vengeance lost its mark.

He blamed himself for throwing away his last chance.

He regretted not dying in battle, or at least leaving a fatal wound that would ensure his enemy died by his hand.

All of it became the seed of deviation into madness that consumed the Demon Physician.

Though he could restrain his rampaging qi and blood through medical skill, he could not control the madness.

He began acting strangely.

When he was still the Divine Physician, he focused on saving lives.

But once consumed by madness, he focused on killing them first.

If a rare or dying patient came to him, he didn't try to save them—instead, he conducted human experiments to satisfy his curiosity.

Clearly deranged behavior.

Thus, the Divine Physician became the Demon Physician.

Of course, none of this was widely known in the present time.

The Jinju Yeon Clan kept silent to hide their disgrace, and the Demon Physician was too lost in his failed revenge to explain himself.

Had he succeeded in avenging his family, as rumors claimed, things might have been better.

But he had not succeeded.

He was still aligned with the Demonic Cult, occasionally working for them.

And he still suffered from the delusion that he needed to personally kill his already-dead enemy.

The madness manifested in many ways, but the worst was this:

He believed he had to resurrect his dead enemy and kill him again.

To satisfy this impossible contradiction, he chose the very method his enemy had obsessed over: *Zombie arts*.

A deranged thought—that he could revive him as a Zombie and kill him afterward.

For him, this became an absolute imperative.

Using fragments of Zombie arts he had learned and counter-techniques he originally studied to defeat them, he attempted to create his own version of the art.

He failed, of course.

Even the Jinju Yeon Clan, who had developed the arts for ages, had abandoned them.

There was no way he could succeed alone.

Indeed, before my regression, he never accomplished anything close to it, and died at the hands of the Orthodox–Unorthodox Alliance.

But the *attempts* were the problem.

Some of the patients he treated went mad and rampaged during the war with the Demonic Cult.

Among them were important figures who had trusted him.

If the Beast Palace Lord had been treated by the Demon Physician before my regression, he too would've suffered complications.

The sudden alliance with the Demonic Cult.

The Beast Palace, which once rampaged wildly, settling for only Guizhou Province...

If I assumed the Demon Physician had been involved, everything about the Beast Palace Lord's "compromise" felt different.

Perhaps...

The Beast Palace Lord before my regression had already lost his sanity.

As a Flowering Stage master, he held out longer than others—long enough to seize Guizhou.

But afterward, perhaps he too succumbed to madness like the Demon Physician's other patients.

Perhaps that was why the Beast Palace expanded no further.

Perhaps they knelt because their palace lord was afflicted, and without him they couldn't fight the Heavenly Demon.

With this, their strangely docile behavior after taking Guizhou made more sense.

To prevent the predetermined downfall of an ally—

To prevent further fractures within the alliance caused by outbreaks of madness—

The Demon Physician had to die here.

Even though I understood how excruciating it was to suffer unfulfilled, unreachable vengeance.

As with most demonic practitioners, he had tragic circumstances but had long crossed the line.

So, I withdrew the killing intent I had directed at Meng Gyeom and smiled faintly.

Whether the Demon Physician came as part of a Demonic Cult scheme, or whether Meng Gyeom brought him to strengthen his influence—

Either way, our paths would soon collide.

And when they did, only one of us could continue walking forward.

Having resolved myself, I sank my intent deep into my gut, hiding it completely, and spoke calmly:

“I understand. Meng Gyeom, your argument is reasonable.”

“Then...!”

“Yes. The Demon Physician and Tang Sowol. We’ll decide which one is the superior physician—with the sword.”

“...?”

Meng Gyeom stared at me as if looking at a madman.

And now that I looked around, everyone else wore similar expressions.

But why?

It felt like the most exemplary martial-artist answer possible.

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

"Very well. Demon Physician versus Tang Sowol. Let's decide who the superior physician is—by the sword."

Meng Gyeom looked at him like he was a lunatic beyond comprehension.

It didn't matter. Meng Gyeom was the kind of man who would try to kill even his own younger sister who had surrendered and left home long ago. It was only

natural for someone like that to see a perfectly sane martial artist like him as a madman.

Still, it was slightly unsettling that even the others were giving him similar looks.

“What on earth did I just hear... Sister Tang?”

“Don’t try to understand, child. Brother Cheon’s way of thinking is just different from ours.”

“Hmm... I don’t even know where to begin correcting this. Medicine is a craft that saves lives—how can one judge its superiority through a martial duel...?”

His companions all had hollow, half-enlightened smiles on their faces.

“Y-You’re a physician, Miss Poison Phoenix?!”

“I can numb the pain enough so you don’t feel it, but actual treatment is impossible, you know.”

Meng Yubaek asked Tang Sowol in a confused tone.

“My name is Meng Ugak. Might I ask if the White Moon Sword Lord is trying to suppress the Beast Palace by force?”

“Suppress? That’s an unpleasant word. Throughout history, dueling with swords has always been the most sincere form of expression for martial artists.”

“Ah... then it will be the Demon Physician and Poison Phoenix who participate?”

“They say a couple is of one body and one mind. Whether it’s the Demon Physician or myself, wouldn’t the outcome be more or less the same?”

Meng Ugak fell silent after a few exchanges.

And finally, it was the Beast Palace Lord, who had been watching with a dry chuckle, that spoke up.

“Haha. White Moon Sword Lord, you’re truly addicted to martial arts.”

“What a joke. Calling a martial artist addicted to martial arts... Let’s judge that, too—with swords.”

“What was that?!”

Now, he burst into boisterous laughter.

To think that someone’s sincerity had become a laughingstock in this world. Clearly, righteousness and morality had hit rock bottom.

How could they not understand his intent to cut down the Demon Physician as if by mistake?

No, maybe the problem was that they understood him *too well*?

As he shook his head inwardly, Meng Gyeom, who had been frozen stiff for a long time, finally began to protest.

“What kind of nonsense is this! You say it’s a friendly exchange, but it’s obvious you intend to seize control of the Beast Palace!”

“I’ve no interest in such tedious things. Even if I were to take over the Beast Palace during your weakened state, there’s nothing for me to gain.”

“The palace’s wealth, perhaps...”

“Tang Clan has more money. I can’t use it as I please, but I earned most of it myself anyway. So getting permission to spend some shouldn’t be hard.”

“Could it be that you're trying to build your own faction, to overcome the limits of being a son-in-law...”

“Oh? You have the same suspicions as the Beast Palace Lord. Then I’ll give you the same answer—if I were going to do that, I’d have swallowed up one of the Central Plains sects, not some distant Beast Palace.”

“Perhaps you’re targeting the Beast Palace’s unique martial arts, which are rare in the Central Plains.”

“But those techniques all assume you’ve got a spiritual beast as a partner. I don’t keep pets like that—”

He glanced briefly at Seo Mun-Hwarin. Seeing the tension ease slightly, Seol Lihyang had sneakily taken the seat next to her and was stealing bites of her food.

“My pet understands human speech even without the Beast Palace’s martial arts.”

“Excuse me? You just looked this way, didn’t you?”

He feigned ignorance to Seo Mun-Hwarin’s sharp question and continued.

“I’m more inclined to suspect *your* motive for avoiding a match with the Demon Physician.”

“So why on earth do you need a sword fight to judge medical skill?!”

“If someone can heal properly, what does it matter who does it? Ah, in this case, Tang Sowol would probably do better. When it comes to poisons, no one beats her.”

“Is that so...? I suppose it makes sense. The poison that infected the Palace Lord was originally concocted by the Tang Clan’s Poison Demon.”

“You know your stuff. So why take a long, roundabout route when there’s an easy, fast, and accurate one? Also, the Poison Demon isn’t a Tang Clan member. He received the Assassin’s Command before I was even born.”

“But he’s still blood-related! I can’t trust that!”

“Ah, so you’re saying the Poison Demon’s sins are the Tang Clan’s sins as well.”

“Yes. Finally, you understand—”

“Then, the grudge of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild must be yours too, since you’re its master.”

“What...?”

Meng Gyeom flinched at the sudden mention of the Cheonghwa Merchant Guild. I grinned at the shaken man.

“The Cheonghwa Guild Master tried to kill me, so shouldn’t you share in that punishment too?”

“What are you—”

“Don’t worry. Since it wasn’t done with knowledge of who I was, I didn’t take their life—only shattered their energy center.”

Meng Gyeom finally fell silent.

Naturally, all eyes turned toward him—no, toward what he would say next. He shrugged his shoulders under the weight of their attention.

“Who treats you should not be decided by you or me, but by the Beast Palace Lord. What is your decision?”

“Hm.”

The Beast Palace Lord feigned hesitation. He clearly had already made up his mind, but seeing him act this way only confirmed his sly nature.

Perhaps he was hoping for a better offer.

“For reference, the Demon Physician was once affiliated with the Demonic Cult. One could say we’re half-enemies.”

“T-That’s all in the past! The Demon Physician has long fulfilled his revenge and now wanders the land, unaffiliated with the cult! His nickname came from his eccentric personality, not his reputation as a cultist!”

“Oh?”

If nothing else, Meng Gyeom’s boldness was commendable.

Though cornered, he dared to speak so arrogantly before a *Flowering Stage* martial artist. He must know that his supposed backing—the Beast Palace Lord—was in no shape to fight properly due to poisoning.

Meng Yubaek, the Palace Lord... Perhaps boldness was the greatest strength of the Beast Palace.

As he silently raised his internal evaluation of the Beast Palace, the Palace Lord gave a bitter smile and spoke.

“The answer was obvious from the start. If I choose the Tang Clan, the Demon Physician won’t resent me. But if I choose him, I’ll surely make enemies of you all.”

“We wouldn’t go that far. Our relationship would simply become... less intimate.”

“That’s the same thing.”

With a smirk, the Beast Palace Lord rose from his seat.

“Listen. While I admire my second son's sentiment, as previously agreed, I will receive treatment from the Tang Clan’s daughter. This matter is settled. Let there be no further discussion.”

“Understood.”

“Yes, sir.”

Meng Ugak nodded solemnly, and Meng Gyeom bowed gloomily, realizing he had no chance left.

Meng Yubaek, on the other hand, let out a sigh of relief, wrapping up the situation on a warm note.

Before the Palace Lord could sit back down, he spoke up.

“However, isn’t it a bit much to send the Demon Physician away after he’s come all this way?”

“White Moon Sword Lord, what are you getting at...?”

“It’s nothing major. We’re grateful you saved us from disgrace, but lives are at stake. Shouldn’t we examine the situation more carefully and choose the best method?”

The Palace Lord stared at him, curious to hear more. He then got to the point.

“As I said earlier—why don’t we see who the superior physician really is?”

“With swords?”

“Just a friendly exchange. Perhaps not even a competition—maybe a collaboration.”

“Weren’t you the one who just said you couldn’t trust him because he’s ex-Demonic Cult?”

“If he’s willing to destroy his energy center and abandon the Demonic Cult’s martial arts, that would certainly earn my trust.”

“So you won’t acknowledge him until he gives up his inner energy and martial arts?”

“I understand your concern. But it’ll be fine.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this won’t be a duel to the death—it’ll just be a spar.”

“How reassuring...”

The Beast Palace Lord shook his head and added,

“Just remember—the Demon Physician may have left the Demonic Cult, and this is the Beast Palace. You are a guest.”

“Yes, I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Then I’ll speak to the Demon Physician myself. If he refuses—”

“—Then I’ll withdraw cleanly.”

Satisfied with that answer, the Palace Lord gave a faint smile.

Meng Ugak whispered to Meng Yubaek, who had been watching everything unfold.

“Youngest one... I’ve lived my whole life in the Southern Barbarians, so I’m not well-versed in the Central Plains... but the unorthodox sects are truly terrifying.”

“Brother, the Sichuan Tang Clan is *Orthodox*...”

For some reason, Meng Ugak shuddered slightly—but it wasn’t really important.

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After the meal, Tang Sowol grabbed him by the collar—well, she couldn't quite reach, so she grabbed his shoulder instead and began to shake him furiously.

"Young Lord Cheon! Why on earth did you say something like that?!"

"There was a reason."

"You always have a reason! But the Demon Physician has nothing to do with the Demonic Cult anymore! Are you really trying to become an unorthodox martial artist?!"

"Come on, calm down. And listen for a moment."

He stretched out his arm and gently pulled her by the slender waist.

After a moment of resistance, Tang Sowol slid into his embrace. Using the sensation of her squirming in his arms as a cue, he began to slowly pat her back.

He could understand why she was reacting so strongly today, even though she usually let things go.

Bringing up a resolved issue again and dragging it into a spar—it must have felt like crossing the line.

Anyone would've thought the same. But—

"There's one thing we're all getting wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"In truth, the Demon Physician never succeeded in taking revenge, contrary to what the world believes. Naturally, he hasn't left the Demonic Cult either."

"...Huh?"

Tang Sowol blinked in confusion. The other women had similar expressions, so he decided to explain in more detail.

Perhaps the mental restriction didn't trigger as long as the other party found the explanation plausible.

Since showing memories through technique and directly mentioning regression or future events were restricted, the now-loosened restriction allowed him to explain more than before.

At first, the women just listened quietly. But as his story grew longer, they became more focused—and soon, they asked again with serious expressions.

"If that's true, then there's no way we can entrust the Palace Lord's body to the Demon Physician."

"I think the same. That doesn't sound like temporary fits of madness, but a constant state of insanity."

"This one is more worried about the people he's treated until now. If things are really like that, there's no way he could have offered purely medical care. At the very least, if it were this one, I would have prepared some trick in case things went south."

The three of them accurately guessed the one future incident he hadn't been able to speak of—the one that shook the Orthodox and Unorthodox Alliance from within.

Despite the mental restriction, seeing how well they followed his reasoning made him feel a bit proud.

"So what will you do now, Young Lord Cheon? No matter what, killing someone in a spar feels a bit..."

"What do you take me for...? Just coat my sword with a mild numbing poison like *Chuhyang*. A shallow cut in a spar is common, so it should be fine."

"So you plan to visit him later after things are settled here at the Beast Palace?"

"Yes."

If he thought about what the Demon Physician would eventually do, the man had to die now. But on the flip side—if he didn't go on to drive his patients into madness en masse... then there was no need to cut him down.

He hadn't always acted purely as a physician, but neither had he indiscriminately killed people in a fit of revenge.

The reason he killed demonic practitioners without hesitation—even while feeling sorry for them—was simple.

They were victims who had become perpetrators.

In that sense, the Demon Physician was still a victim who hadn't yet crossed the line.

He may not have lived an entirely righteous life, but he wasn't at the level to be called a "Demonic Head" either.

Killing someone just because it *seems* like they'll harm others in the future—was no different from the Orthodox sects' purge of the Green Forest bandits.

Even if experimenting on terminally ill patients felt repulsive... there were far more horrific things that often happened in the unorthodox side of the martial world.

When he'd half-joked that he'd trust the Demon Physician if the man gave up his martial arts by destroying his energy center—he had meant it halfway.

If the man could no longer trigger the berserk state in his former patients, then there was no need to take his life.

“After secretly visiting him later... what then?”

“Well, he’s still a physician. We talk first.”

No matter what was said, the Demon Physician had saved far more lives than he had taken. At least so far.

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“A pleasure to meet you. So, you’re the White Moon Sword Lord that everyone’s talking about these days?”

"...?"

The moment he met the Demon Physician, under the Beast Palace Lord’s mediation, he realized—

Though he had always been described as a hunchbacked old man, someone called a master of the previous generation...

The Demon Physician standing before him now looked nothing like the one in his memories.

It was as if he were a completely different person.

Or as if he had undergone some miraculous transformation.

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

Through a bit of coercion, he had managed to secure a spar with the Demon Physician.

However, this was merely a proposal, contingent on the mediation of the Beast Palace Lord and the Demon Physician's agreement.

Fortunately, the Demon Physician accepted, and before long, a date was set, and they gathered at the training grounds.

“Pleasure to meet you. So, you're the White Moon Sword Lord everyone's been talking about lately?”

“...?”

The moment he saw the Demon Physician standing opposite him, he realized something was off.

In his memory, the Demon Physician was clearly an old man—an elderly figure with snow-white hair, the very image of a master from a previous generation.

But the man before him now looked entirely different from the one in his memories.

The once-hunched back now stood tall, nearly eye level with him. The white hair had partly regained its black hue, and the beard that had once reached his chest was neatly trimmed.

He no longer appeared emaciated—instead, muscles swelled under his robe, clearly a body honed through martial training.

He carefully examined him, wondering if this might be a different person altogether... but the facial features undeniably matched the Demon Physician.

Of course they did. He had personally helped subdue the man in his previous life. There was no way he wouldn't recognize him.

Most telling of all was the peculiar energy radiating from him—the unique fusion of martial arts and medicine that defined the Demon Physician's style. An aura so strange it was unforgettable after a single encounter.

“You're... the Demon Physician?”

“Haha. Hearing that old nickname from a young martial artist like yourself brings back memories.”

The Demon Physician smiled warmly, nodding his head.

Only then did his mind finally start to process the situation.

A younger appearance than he remembered—but unchanged facial features. And above all, an aura so deep it was difficult to grasp fully, as if they were on similar footing.

He hadn't become youthful like Seo Mun-Hwarin, still appearing middle-aged, so it wasn't full rejuvenation. More like he had undergone a transformation.

Which also meant—the Demon Physician had ascended past Sub-Perfection into the Flowering Stage.

“I heard you were a Sub-Perfection master.”

“Ah, that bothered you? I had a bit of a fortunate encounter in my later years. Thanks to that, I’ve lived a little longer and been able to treat many more patients.”

His benevolent smile could fool anyone into thinking he was a true healer. Not even a hint of madness remained.

A "fortunate encounter," was it?

Perhaps, like the Sword Demon, he had been forcibly elevated to the Flowering Stage by the Heavenly Demon.

In such cases, the advancement was often unstable, unworthy of being called true Flowering Stage.

But he felt none of the instability from the Demon Physician that he had from the Sword Demon.

Had he used a different method? Or perhaps the technique had been perfected?

Though his thoughts tangled, there was a simple way to resolve these questions—

Cross swords.

Originally, he had only planned to coat his blade with a mild numbing poison like *Chuyang* as preparation for later.

But no matter what was said, martial artists understood each other best through clashing martial arts.

“Sorry to arrange this so suddenly, but I’ve been meaning to spar with you at least once.”

“Hm? Ah, you mean the whole idea of determining who’s the better physician through a sword duel?”

The Demon Physician laughed, seemingly amused.

“Haha. I’m not young, but I’ve never heard anything like that in my life. It intrigued me. Very well. I don’t know what has you so curious that you’d want to spar with this old man, but now that we’re here, I’ll give it my all. I, too, have things I’m curious about.”

“I’m glad we’re of the same mind.”

He nodded and took his position, drawing his sword. The Demon Physician mirrored him, standing at a proper distance and assuming a stance.

One hand extended forward, fingers sharply pointed like a blade; the other pulled back into a fist at shoulder height.

It was a strange guard—both seemingly full of openings and highly aggressive. But it was definitely a fist-based technique.

However, having faced the Demon Physician once before in his past life, he knew—this was no ordinary fist art.

Seeing the two ready, the Beast Palace Lord, still wearing a baffled expression, finally spoke.

“Then, let the match to determine whether the Demon Physician or the Poison Phoenix is more suited to treat me begin.”

Tang Sowol was not a physician, and she wasn't the one standing here. Moreover, medical skill had nothing to do with martial prowess.

Everyone present—from the Palace Lord's children to his own companions—wore faces that looked like they were dying to say as much.

But the Beast Palace Lord left his questions behind and stepped back with the help of the black panther.

“Then... begin.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he stomped down hard.

**Boom!**

Power exploded from his Yongcheon pressure point, propelling his body forward like a blast. In an instant, he was right in front of the Demon Physician.

He didn't mix in any evasive steps or leave room for adjustment—this was pure speed, the *Thunderclap Step*, meant solely to close distance in the shortest possible time.

Yet the Demon Physician calmly followed his every movement with his eyes, not budging an inch.

Just as his sword, wreathed in white energy, came down—

“Hm.”

With a quiet hum, the Demon Physician's hand moved—not toward the sword, but toward his own body.

**Tap, tap.**

He rapidly struck various acupuncture points on his body, injecting energy as if activating meridians.

In that moment, defensive internal energy burst from his body like an explosion.

What should have remained a human form now began to ooze like molten clay.

It was a grotesque sight, but enough to push back the sword that was about to slash into his chest.

**Clang!**

The massive surge of energy forced him back a step.

Though his strike had prioritized speed over power, he hadn't expected it to be blocked so cleanly.

But unlike the Heavenly Demon, the Demon Physician wasn't someone who could recklessly inflate defensive energy—doing so would cost him heavily in willpower and inner energy.

It was regrettable that the opening move had failed, but if it had forced such a drain, then the exchange was in his favor.

This time, he properly focused his willpower into his blade. The compressed energy turned the black steel sword white.

White Sword.

If it could cut even the Heavenly Demon's aura, then this should slice through effortlessly.

He swung the sword toward the oozing, formless mass of energy.

**Fwoosh!**

Suddenly, the dispersed energy condensed into a single point.

From within that mist, the Demon Physician emerged, cloaked in black energy like smoke.

Common sense dictated that once energy was released from the body, it would soon disperse.

But the Demon Physician was absorbing the energy back into his *danjeon*, then releasing it again in cycles.

His current form—shrouded in a mist-like aura—was the result of a continuous flow of energy.

“Impressively fast. Then allow me to show something in return.”

His shadowed fingers swept toward his forearm.

A technique resembling a claw strike—but not one meant to tear flesh. He knew this move well from his past life.

It wasn't meant to slash skin, but to shred the unseen acupuncture points beneath it.

Even if he had reached the Flowering Stage, the fundamental techniques hadn't changed.

And unlike the external flow of energy, the trajectory of that technique was familiar—easy to respond to.

“Hmph!”

Twisting his body to evade, he widened the distance. His posture was broken in the process, and he would've been vulnerable to a follow-up attack...

If he were ordinary, that is.

The Demon Physician's fist came flying next—not toward his heart, but slightly beside it.

It wasn't meant to break bones or rupture flesh, but to liquefy the organs inside—a kind of penetrative strike.

He recalled a former companion who had coughed up blood from a single blow like this, and he grounded himself.

He countered with a direct stab.

**Bang!**

Sword met fist—but there was no deadlock. The blazing blade pierced through the Demon Physician’s aura and nicked his fingers.

A shockwave burst belatedly. The rising dust was blown away, revealing the Demon Physician’s stunned expression.

“That... isn’t that a secret technique of the Zhongnan Sect? And that sword—what on earth is it?”

“Tried it, and it worked. I held back, though... care to continue?”

“Of course. Since you’ve shown something good, I should respond in kind.”

“Suit yourself.”

He answered casually, widening the gap and swinging his sword into the air.

A forced slash tore through space, hurtling toward the still-unsteady Demon Physician. Not as powerful as a direct strike, but more than enough to keep him in check.

Yet instead of backing off, the Demon Physician closed in.

His energy, once circulating around his body, now focused entirely at the front and hardened like melted iron.

Slice!

His oddly soft energy split horizontally. In return, the airborne slash also scattered.

He had seen defensive energy techniques before—but never one like this.

And it didn't stop there. The edges of the split aura bristled, launching what must've been dozens—no, *hundreds*—of black needles.

All aiming for his pressure points.

What's more, the needles curved mid-air, guided by willpower.

He'd grown used to projectile weapons from his time with the Tang Clan. He could tell—he couldn't fully dodge or block this.

But that didn't mean he'd just take it.

“Haaaah!”

He unraveled the tightly compressed sword energy, extending it like a brushstroke.

A white wave painted the air, filling most of his vision.

A defensive wall formed from pure energy.

He had to expend a significant amount of willpower, but with his defensive aura being weak, there was no better option.

**Thud! Thud! Thud!**

The black needles embedded into the wall—not bounced off, but *stuck*.

Then they began to spin and burrow in—before exploding.

**Boom!**

The explosions weren't powerful enough to break the wall, but if they had hit his body, the damage would've been severe.

It was a technique of individually weak attacks that became deadly if even one landed.

A chill ran down his spine—but he'd blocked it, so it was fine.

Just as he prepared for the next move—

**Tap.**

A soft footstep near his ear. His body reacted before his mind did, honed by countless brushes with death.

As expected, the Demon Physician had broken through the mist and was charging in with light footwork.

He struck several of his own pressure points again—a signal.

The swirling aura condensed into his fist, like all his energy was concentrated in that single blow.

It had to be blocked properly.

His senses expanded. From the hand gripping his sword, clarity spread through his body and out to the very edges of his energy.

The once-white sword now shimmered with a hazy distortion—

Formless Sword.

An intangible insight gained from an incorporeal realm fused with his blade.

The overwhelming focus warped his surroundings—and then—

*Slice.*

The massive aura that had swelled to the size of a house was cleaved in two.

Half of it melted into the air, vanishing instead of returning to the Demon Physician.

Staring blankly at his dissipating energy, and at the sword once again resting on his bruised knuckles, the Demon Physician dropped his fist.

“I concede.”

“It was an excellent match.”

He sheathed his sword and offered a light bow.

Leaving behind the crestfallen Demon Physician, he descended from the training ground, where his companions and Meng Yubaek waited with shining eyes.

Despite the victory, his thoughts were tangled.

Because—

No matter how many times they clashed, he had sensed no madness or vengeance in the Demon Physician.

The man had... cast off his inner demons and reached the Flowering Stage.

Something had changed—*too* much.

So much that it felt like he had broken free of even the Heavenly Demon's will.

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

After the duel ended, the Beast Palace Lord formally announced that Tang Sowol would be in charge of his treatment, and that from this point on, the Sichuan Tang Clan would become a close ally of the Beast Palace.

The Demon Physician, whose patient had vanished in an instant, showed no complaints. He accepted the outcome and quietly left the Beast Palace.

Meanwhile, Tang Sowol's research, now supplemented by parts of the Beast Palace's martial arts techniques, progressed smoothly.

It was an ideal result in every sense.

But precisely because of that, he found himself increasingly troubled.

“What on earth happened...”

The Demon Physician, who should have remained at the Sub-Perfection stage, had reached the Flowering Stage.

And that enlightenment wasn't some half-baked, externally imposed insight—it was complete and genuine.

There had been no trace of madness or vengeful obsession in him either.

He briefly wondered if the man had simply hidden it all—but that was practically impossible.

Creating aura required willpower, and willpower was heavily influenced by one's inner state.

Thus, martial arts always reflected the practitioner's mind, and the pure energy known as aura was essentially one's mental landscape made manifest.

How could one conceal something that was literally a part of their being?

All martial artists who reached the Flowering Stage had, at least once, faced their truest selves and come to a personal answer.

That's why he had believed it impossible for the Demon Physician—plagued by madness and unrelenting vengeance—to ever reach that realm.

But to put it another way—if the Demon Physician *had* let go of his madness and vengeance, then he was ready to grasp willpower.

Just as he himself only reached the Flowering Stage after abandoning his obsession with survival, and just as Seo Mun-Hwarin ascended only after accepting and coming to terms with her regrets.

Unless everything he had learned about martial arts was wrong—and unless his impressions during the duel were mistaken—

Then the Demon Physician had miraculously relinquished his madness and vengeance, and ascended to the Flowering Stage *on his own*.

Before regression, he had been utterly consumed by madness—unable to let anything go.

He didn't know what had changed the Demon Physician's future.

But one thing was certain—

This transformation was *not* what the Heavenly Demon wanted.

If he were the Heavenly Demon, he would have guided events according to the original plan.

The Demon Physician would still be mad, clinging to impossible zombie arts, secretly planting fail-safes in all his patients.

Eventually, the fragile Orthodoxy-Unorthodoxy Alliance would collapse from within, unable to act.

After all, the Heavenly Demon himself possessed unmatched might, but the other cultists were relatively weak—this scheme had been the most effective way to act from the shadows.

So the Demon Physician's change likely hadn't come from the Heavenly Demon.

Then what had changed him?

And more importantly—what should *he* do about the current Demon Physician?

“Haa...”

“You sigh again, my dear. Are you still troubled about the Demon Physician?”

“Yes, well...”

He was supposed to be meditating to further analyze the traces of the Azure Cold Serpent embedded in his killing intent—but his mind was fixated on something else entirely.

Given how long he had been like this since the duel, it was no wonder Seo Mun-Hwarin noticed.

“Hmm. This one doesn’t really know. You can’t possibly predict everything in the world, can you?”

“That’s true, but... this one feels too dangerous to brush off lightly.”

“Isn’t it actually a good thing? That there’s a possibility the Demon Physician won’t become an enemy?”

“But what if he becomes a stronger enemy—one I couldn’t even anticipate?”

“By that logic, I too might one day be consumed by anger I thought I had discarded, and strangle you in your sleep.”

“...Excuse me??”

“Didn’t you defeat the Black Heaven Sword Sect Leader? That left my revenge incomplete. So naturally, you should bear the weight of my fury... or so I might say. What would you do then?”

“Hmm...”

After a moment’s thought, he nodded.

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to let Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin kill me once.”

He took her hand and guided it to his neck.

Seo Mun-Hwarin reflexively grasped his throat, then flinched and paused. He grinned at her.

“It’s not like I can resist you, Senior.”

“But that doesn’t mean you should *just take it!* Put up a fight!”

“Ah, I see. So you’re saying you’d prefer if I resisted—”

“Isn’t that wording a bit off?!”

“It’s just right, considering we’re imagining the scenario where you lose your mind.”

“You... you—!”

As she stomped her feet, I let her go. Immediately, she yanked her hand away.

In the process, she must’ve scratched me with her nails. A mild heat spread along the back of his neck.

My body had undergone refinement, even a form of rejuvenation. It didn’t hurt much.

It would probably just turn a little red and fade by dinner.

I thought nothing of it and started to unfold my legs to stand up—

“Stay still.”

Perhaps feeling a bit guilty, Seo Mun-Hwarin shyly approached and sat on my lap.

Her cheeks puffed with embarrassment from earlier teasing, but her eyes had already softened.

“It doesn’t hurt that much.”

“This one knows. Still, stay put.”

Speaking curtly, she grabbed his jaw, adjusted my angle, and then leaned in.

*Lick.*

A warm, soft sensation spread across my neck.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was licking me.

“...What are you doing?”

“Hmph. If this one is going to do this much, you should just say thank you.”

“You sound like an old lady today, but... you’re not wrong.”

“O-Old lady...”

Apparently unable to ignore that, she slapped my thigh with her small hand.

There she was—sitting on my lap, licking my neck, slapping my thigh. What a bizarre moment.

Eventually, she seemed satisfied, stopped her tongue, and leaned against me, half-reclining.

“Do you know why this one is going to such lengths?”

“I’ve only thought you were troublesome one out of three times, and not this time... but it’s probably because I’ve been overthinking everything, and it shows.”

“That many times...? Hmph. In any case, you're right. You handle most things decisively, but this time you’ve been curling up and hesitating. How could I not be concerned?”

“Tch. Was it that obvious?”

“It was. So why don’t you explain more clearly? What’s different about this case that’s making you so conflicted?”

“It’s nothing big. I’m just wondering—what if the Demon Physician really did change on his own?”

“Hmm?”

Most members of the Demonic Cult, aside from exceptions like the Sword Demon, carried their own "demons" inside them.

But that didn't mean they were pure evil. These demons were the chaotic emotions inside people—and thus, they existed everywhere.

He had killed demonic cultists not because of what they were, but because their path opposed his, and because their vengeance often crossed the line.

Victims who had become perpetrators. People who became monsters to slay monsters. Warhorses who couldn't stop even when they knew it was wrong.

As someone who had lived through deep inner madness for a long time—

He pitied demonic cultists.

If he had gone through what the Demon Physician had, he doubted he'd have reached a different conclusion.

Thanks to regression, he had gained a second chance—but even so, he had to burn away the flames of his own killing intent before he could move forward.

Only by letting go of his obsession could he recognize what he truly wanted.

If he could do it, maybe others could too.

Even without regression, perhaps after a long time—or with the right push from him or the Heavenly Demon—they might arrive at a truth they never reached in their previous lives.

Take Sama Suryeon, the Demon-Eyed Witch. She didn't care about the world—just her own revenge.

Unlike her comrade, who wanted to wipe out all of Murim, she thought eradicating the Sama Clan would be enough.

But she hesitated. She never took action. That's why, when she tried to kill him and Tang Sowol under orders from the cult, she was cut down in turn.

But what if he hadn't killed her?

Not long after, Sama Yuryeon and the Lord of the Black Lotus Sect married and wiped out the Sama Clan.

If Sama Suryeon had been part of that, perhaps things would've changed.

Of course, he knew it was all just speculation.

What mattered was the present—not hypothetical outcomes.

Sama Suryeon had tried to kill him and Tang Sowol. No matter how many times he regressed, he would've made the same choice.

So his current dilemma wasn't about what-ifs from the past.

It was about the present—if the Demon Physician had arrived here after passing through countless variables and coincidences, what should he do?

Even if the man had let go of his obsession, the truth remained—he still had the ability to trigger the patients he had once treated.

Imagine top experts, both orthodox and unorthodox, suddenly going mad one day.

It would be a nightmare to contain.

In his past life, fear and tension had spread throughout the alliance long before they knew the cause was the Demon Physician.

At one point, there had even been talk of breaking apart and surviving individually.

He hadn't heard all the details back then, but rumors suggested the royal court experienced similar incidents.

Given the Demon Physician's fame, it wasn't strange that even imperial officials would seek him out.

No, things might've been even messier there, considering the level of political intrigue.

If this were years ago, he wouldn't even be thinking this hard.

He had felt it during the duel—he was now clearly stronger than the Demon Physician.

If it came down to a life-and-death duel, especially with *Killing Intent Infusion*, he would win easily.

So rather than risk the unknown, it would be better to just kill the man.

But...

He didn't want to.

What made him different from the Demon Physician? From Seo Mun-Hwarin, who, long after her revenge, was finally able to let everything go?

He had only spoken aloud the parts he could say without triggering the mental restriction.

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded solemnly and said:

“I understand now. You feel a kinship with him. Then why not just ask?”

“...Pardon?”

“Ask the Demon Physician directly. If he’s hiding something, then kill him.”

“Isn’t that... a little *too* unorthodox...?”

They both tilted their heads slightly, then Seo Mun-Hwarin stood from his lap and motioned with her chin.

“Enough. Let’s get ready. Before he gets too far, ask Sowol to track him.”

“But...”

“You’ll regret it no matter what—whether you let him go, kill him, or do nothing. So do everything you can first, then make your decision.”

Now that she said it, it was true.

Maybe, because it involved one of his major memories from before regression, he had tried to handle this *too* perfectly.

When in doubt, investigate first.

“Understood. I’ll speak to Tang Sowol.”

“Then this one will tell the Beast Palace folk that we’re taking a brief night stroll. But what about Lihyang?”

“Seol Lihyang...?”

The Demon Physician was now a Flowering Stage martial artist. Having Seo Mun-Hwarin in case of trouble would be reassuring.

Tang Sowol was essential for tracking, so she was out of the question.

After brief thought, he shook his head.

“We’ll leave Seol Lihyang behind. This’ll be over before dawn anyway.”

He refrained from saying the obvious—that Seol Lihyang was the weakest among them.

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

He decided—he would confront the Demon Physician directly and ask him.

Once the decision was made, he had to act immediately. Thought could be long, but action must be swift.

...It was absolutely not because he wanted to avoid being caught dawdling by Seol Lihyang later.

With Tang Sowol’s help, they began tracking the Demon Physician.

Since the man had injured his hand during the duel by punching into his blade, the poison applied to the sword would've naturally made its way into his system.

It wasn't a poison that caused harm, so it was hard to detect. But for someone well-versed in poisons, there were a few methods to track it.

A thought struck him, and he called out to Tang Sowol, who was running ahead with light footwork.

"Now that I think about it, don't I have something similar on me? Some kind of 'Seokcheok' poison or something?"

"It's called Twin-Headed Seokcheok poison."

"Right, that was it."

He remembered now—it was said to come from a lizard with a second head where its tail should be. As it grew, the two halves eventually split into separate creatures, but to reproduce as full adults, one had to consume the other. So they would coat themselves in a unique poison that allowed them to recognize each other no matter how far apart they were.

It had proven quite useful. The poison required advanced poison arts to apply, so he couldn't track Tang Sowol easily, but she could always find him.

Which was why she still bit his fingers regularly.

However, when he brought this up, Tang Sowol shook her head firmly.

“That poison only works when applied directly. Even if you were carrying it, I’d only be able to track the location of your sword.”

“I see. So it’s a poison that only works for me.”

Imagining Tang Sowol biting someone else annoyed him, even though it hadn't actually happened.

Was this how she felt whenever she saw him with Seol Lihyang or Seo Mun-Hwarin?

When he glanced at her, Tang Sowol giggled.

“Come now. At least be generous enough to allow Sister Hwarin and Lihyang, yes?”

“Well, if you're fine with it.”

She responded like she could see right through his thoughts, so he gave her a big smile packed with affection. As he did, Seo Mun-Hwarin crept in.

“I don't know what this conversation's about, but if you're offering, I shall accept it gladly. But I must ask—how exactly are the two poisons different?”

“Range, accuracy, and duration,” Tang Sowol explained.

“Huh?”

“The poison on Brother Cheon only gives me a general direction, but I can sense it no matter where he is in the Central Plains.”

“Wasn't it originally not that powerful?”

“Poison arts grow with proficiency. As my skills improved, so did the range.”

She shrugged and continued. She could even distinguish between poisons she applied versus others', and it could last for half a year.

“If Brother Cheon had waited a bit longer, I'd have had to put in some extra footwork.”

“So I made it just in time.”

He felt relieved, having worried that his hesitation might've cost them too much time.

“Though I have one question.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Didn't you say earlier that the poison lasts for nearly six months? But I distinctly remember you reapplying it at least once a month.”

Tang Sowol froze momentarily, then carefully opened her mouth.

“Y-Yes, it used to be about a month before...”

“So not anymore.”

“That’s...!”

“So you were biting my fingers every month for no reason—just to reapply a poison that didn’t need it. Be honest. You just wanted to leave your mark on me, didn’t you?”

“Eep—!”

She flinched instead of answering. That was a clearer reply than words.

“You’re shameless.”

“You don’t have to make excuses anymore. Just tell me outright next time.”

“Eh??”

“It’s fine. But those who bite others should be ready to be bitten in return. So don’t complain if I retaliate now and then.”

“!”

Her eyes sparkled as she swallowed hard. Watching her, Seo Mun-Hwarin puffed out her cheeks.

“I didn’t even get anything out of this...”

Tang Sowol’s eyes sharpened slightly at that.

Looks like the first person she’s going to bite next—with the Twin-Headed Seokcheok poison—is going to be Seo Mun-Hwarin.

They continued sprinting across the land with light steps.

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The early evening gloom had turned into the dead of night, and with the moon dark, the stars were especially bright.

On a plain faintly lit by starlight, a man stood quietly, gazing up at the sky.

His hair was streaked with white, his frame balanced like a martial artist reborn through transformation, and his aura was a strange mix of viciousness and serenity—pure *demonic energy*.

Slowly, the Demon Physician lowered his head and looked their way.

“You’re late. I was waiting.”

“You knew we’d come?”

“Of course. You coated your blade with a poison that reeks to high heaven. Clearly, you had something to say—whether with words or swords, I wasn’t sure.”

The Demon Physician shrugged.

It seemed Tang Sowol's poison had long since been discovered. She looked surprised, and he gently patted her shoulder.

"He was once called the Divine Physician. Don't be too surprised."

"Y-Yes..."

Though she nodded, her expression was still stiff.

He stepped forward in her stead and spoke.

"Don't worry. I intend to settle this through words first."

"That's good to hear. I honestly wasn't confident I could beat you. It's shocking enough you've reached the Flowering Stage at such a young age—and to best even other masters of the same level... By the way, when did you start speaking so formally?"

"Since after our duel."

“Ah, that’s right. Must be my age, but I felt a little offended even while thinking you’d earned it. Had some change of heart?”

“You could say that.”

Of course he had.

Before the duel, he had considered the Demon Physician someone he’d one day have to defeat.

But the duel had revealed no madness or vengeance in the man’s heart.

He’d hesitated, wondering if he could really cut down the current Demon Physician.

He now saw him not as a man who needed to be killed, but perhaps as someone who had broken free from the shackles of hatred.

He had just revealed that part of himself outwardly.

He slowly organized his thoughts—ones he had been mulling over for days—and turned them into words.

“I know you failed in your revenge and fled.”

“I also know that, as a member of the Demonic Cult, you occasionally lent them aid.”

“And I, as someone who stands opposed to the Heavenly Demon—the current Cult Leader—cannot coexist with the Demonic Cult.”

The Demon Physician nodded gravely.

“I see. That explains your initial hostility.”

“Honestly, I’m still ready to strike if needed.”

“Terrifying, really.”

The Demon Physician laughed aloud, speaking calmly despite the talk of killing.

“Seems like you already know quite a lot. What else are you curious about?”

“Are you still involved with the Demonic Cult?”

“Not anymore. Though I was until recently.”

“Could you elaborate?”

“The Heavenly Demon visited me personally. When I told him I no longer wished to serve the cult, he accepted that—and simply told me to head to the Beast Palace.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. No further instructions. He may have anticipated your arrival and sent me ahead... But to me, it just seemed like he wanted me to treat the Palace Lord.”

That explained it.

If the Demon Physician had truly reached the Flowering Stage and let go of his obsession, there would be no need for zombie arts.

Which would mean his interest in rare patients would've faded. So it had seemed strange that he followed Meng Gyeom so readily.

But if it was a condition for leaving the cult—it made sense.

“Second question, then. Have you left traces of the incomplete zombie arts in the bodies of your past patients?”

The Demon Physician widened his eyes, his mouth falling open.

It wasn't the reaction of someone caught red-handed—it was pure shock.

“I didn't expect you to know that much. To answer... yes. I am still connected to the things I left in those patients' bodies.”

“What for?”

“No purpose. Or rather, I no longer have one. I simply can’t sever the link, so I continue to carry the weight.”

They were deeply bound—but if he wanted, he could drive them all into madness.

He knew nothing about the original zombie arts, or even the version the Demon Physician recreated, so he kept silent briefly.

Perhaps misinterpreting his silence, the Demon Physician quickly added,

“I had no choice. Medical arts alone weren’t enough to recreate zombie techniques. I had to borrow the Demonic Cult’s dark arts... but I don’t know enough about them to undo the connection. I’d need the cult’s help.”

“But you’ve severed ties with them.”

“Indeed. Hard to believe, I know—but it’s the truth.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. Just one more question. Unrelated to the main topic.”

“I’ve nothing to hide. Go on.”

“The Spirit Blood Pill. You know it, don’t you? Are you involved with it?”

The Spirit Blood Pill—an elixir made by grinding up humans. The Ghost Shadow Thief had once spied on its creation and fled in horror.

Its inferior version, the High Blood Pill, had been spread through Hebei to drive a wedge between the Peng and Eon clans.

Even for the Demonic Cult, it had seemed an impossible feat of dark alchemy.

He had even thought perhaps the Heavenly Demon had perfected it through countless regressions.

But if the Demon Physician had combined medical arts and dark sorcery—

It all made sense.

After a long silence, the Demon Physician nodded.

“Yes. I was deeply involved in the creation of both the Spirit Blood and High Blood Pills. Though I only used volunteers or voiceless beasts... it was still a horrific sight.”

“Then it’s hard to believe you were let go so easily. Didn’t you have a deep grudge?”

“I did. Had things gone on, I would’ve kept calling for endless revenge against someone who no longer existed. But it was you who ended it.”

“...Me?”

He blinked, not expecting his own name to come up.

The Demon Physician’s expression softened.

“The change in the Seo Mun clan head, once known as the White-Haired Rakshasa. The daughters of the Peng and Eon clans, now cherishing one another. The fact that their clans could change...”

He looked straight at him.

Clear eyes, without a trace of cloudiness.

“Your actions showed me that people can change.”

This time, he was the one who was left speechless.

The Demon Physician—he had changed because of him.

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

It was an especially dark night. One of those nights when the starlight was brighter than the moonlight.

The Demon Physician was waiting for them.

“Your actions told me one thing—that people can change.”

Only after hearing those words did he realize.

The Demon Physician—his future had been changed by none other than himself.

As he stood frozen in place, the Demon Physician laughed cheerfully and continued.

“Heh heh. The grudges of the martial world are truly persistent and vile. They’re not something one can easily escape. You know this well, don’t you, White Moon Sword Lord? You seem to have ties to both the Thousand Poison Gate and the Beast Palace, as well as the Centipede Sect.”

He did know.

No matter how it began, gratitude was easy to forget, but hatred was etched into the bones.

If you killed your family's enemy, you had to be prepared for the enemy's family to bear a grudge in return.

But if you spared no one, claiming you would not leave any future threat, if you inflicted upon the enemy's family the same pain you'd suffered—then how were you any different from the enemy?

Every avenger knew the endless void at the end of the path. And yet, they could not stop.

Because—

“More than becoming a better person, more than a comfortable future, more than the righteousness the world demands—what one truly wants is simply for the enemy to suffer in the days to come. That is the essence of revenge, is it not?”

The Demon Physician was right.

Those blinded by hatred were irrational. No matter how much they suffered, no matter how wretched they became, as long as their enemy felt pain—that alone was enough.

The path of demons, not men. That was why the Demonic Cult members, though sometimes pitied, were also avoided.

“I was like any other vengeful ghost. My father’s death left me powerless, and in the whirlwind of unbearable rage, I lost my wife and unborn child as well. Having lost everything, I believed I could do anything.”

He himself was not so different. The only difference was that he hadn’t gone completely mad.

The infernal flames in his chest constantly scorched his mindscape, and he always dreamed of collapsing pavilions in his sleep...

But even then, he clenched his teeth and endured, grateful for the chance to meet again—so how could he not understand?

“So I joined the Demonic Cult. There was a time when this old man’s medical skills were called divine, said to touch the heavens. But no one cared how much sacrifice it took to earn that name. I’ll admit it now—there were many unspeakable things I did in the past.”

Not every member of the Demonic Cult failed in their revenge. Some succeeded, and those who did thought:

It would be a waste to simply kill.

So they carried their enemy on their backs across the vast lands of Central Plains and beyond, constantly fearing that they might die or lose their minds along the way.

When they finally arrived at the Demonic Cult, they handed over their enemy to the Demon Physician.

They asked how to inflict pain without killing, how to bring back someone driven mad by extreme torment.

Some even begged to exchange the life of their enemy to resurrect a lost loved one.

There were requests the Demon Physician could answer, and others he couldn't. But one thing was certain:

The existence of people who could be treated without restraint allowed the Demon Physician's skills to grow rapidly.

“Knowledge is built either over long years... or on a foundation of blood. I have seen more blood than any other physician. That's why I could grow so quickly.”

The early versions of the Spirit Blood Pill and High Blood Pill were born from that process.

Healing bodies with medicine and minds with sorcery naturally led to combining the two.

He had only known the Demon Physician's general past. This part was something he never could have guessed.

This man was not one who had gone mad and awakened his talent.

He was one who could awaken his talent *because* he had gone mad.

“What do you call someone who focuses more on killing than saving lives? What name suits someone who enjoys inflicting pain more than offering peace to patients? I didn't know the answer, but I knew one thing—I wasn't a physician. Yet people still called me the Divine Physician.”

Hiding his true intentions behind that title, he met many powerful figures in the Central Plains, healing their ailments and earning their trust.

All of it was to infiltrate the Jinju Yeon Clan—his enemy.

The plan worked. As a guest retainer, he received lavish treatment and entered the Jinju Yeon Clan, eventually discovering his enemy dying alone in a secluded place.

“I thought it was the perfect opportunity. The plan was flawless. The timing, just right. All that remained was resolve and execution... but there was one thing I didn’t expect.”

As he knew, the Demon Physician had once led the Elder Council of the Jinju Yeon Clan and ambushed the man who killed his father and family. The problem was—

“He was far too strong. Though we were at the same level, and I knew more about the human body than anyone—none of my attacks landed.”

It must have been a difference in fundamentals and experience.

Between one who steadily climbed from the bottom and one who reached his level through the volatile explosiveness of demonic arts, there was a bigger gap than expected.

“No matter what I tried, I couldn’t harm my enemy. That reality filled me with despair. But do you know what made me feel even more wretched?”

He had thought the Demon Physician's madness stemmed from being so close to vengeance, yet failing.

That he hadn't fought to the bitter end because he cherished his life, allowing his enemy to die peacefully.

Everything the man had said before, lost in a haze of insanity, seemed to point to that conclusion.

But the Demon Physician had spent his life hiding his true feelings.

No matter how mad he was, would he really reveal his secrets so easily?

Perhaps they had simply never cared to understand the regrets of a dead man, or the pain of someone who had cracked the foundation of justice with countless deaths.

So many things they had simply glossed over.

And now, the man before him was speaking truths he had never told anyone.

“My enemy said this—he had sinned, blinded by fear of downfall. That now, knowing the weight of his actions, he wished to atone. But for that very reason... he could not die here.”

At first glance, it sounded ridiculous. If he truly wanted to atone, then why not just die?

But thinking further, the story changed.

Had the Demon Physician succeeded in revenge, the Yeon Clan would have had to declare him a public enemy.

Because the Jinju Yeon Clan was not just a person, but a collective.

Even if they were in the wrong, they couldn't let a guest retainer who killed an elder go free.

And the Demon Physician would've spent his life on the run... creating even more chains of vengeance while fending off pursuers.

Given that he had once been promised a bright future as the Divine Physician, it would not have ended well.

The elder knew this. That's why he told the Demon Physician—precisely because he recognized his sins, he could not die for him.

And in the end, he survived without a scratch.

Later, when the Demon Physician received a symbolic apology from the Yeon Clan, it was only because the elder lived.

Even if people avoided him and his title shifted from Divine to Demon Physician, he could still wander freely between the worlds of justice and demonic ways.

Ironically, all of that was possible only because he *failed* in his revenge.

Perhaps he had just said it all because he didn't want to die.

But looking at the outcome—it was true.

“I received my future from the man who had thrown my world into hell. I couldn’t accept that. I didn’t want to.”

And so, he began researching zombie arts.

Zombies couldn’t disobey their master’s command. If he could revive the elder—

He could see what the man had truly felt when ordering the murder of his family, when saying he couldn’t die out of guilt.

Being able to kill him again with his own hands would be a bonus.

What the Demon Physician truly sought was *truth*.

But the shadow rooted in his heart was too deep to pursue it rightly.

Regret, guilt, rage, doubt, hatred, sorrow...

These emotions alone weren’t problems. But in excess, they twisted people.

A shaken heart lost its way, and the sword it bore turned toward the wrong things.

They hurt what they sought to protect, struck down the innocent, and finally carved themselves apart.

Martial artists called it heart demon.

Before he could reach a conclusion to the question his enemy left him, the Demon Physician was consumed by his own heart demon.

He wandered in and out of madness, pushing fragments of his research into his patients without even remembering what he wanted anymore.

“It was during that time... that I heard of you.”

“What news?”

“At first, it was just hype about a divine prodigy.”

“Doesn’t sound like much.”

“But that prodigy had such a murderous aura, it shocked even the Murim Lord.”

“White Moon Sword Lord. I don’t know your circumstances. I shared mine—not because I expect you to do the same. But surely, you haven’t lived an ordinary life either.”

Glancing at Seo Mun-Hwarin beside him, the Demon Physician continued.

“But you did what needed to be done instead of succumbing to your own heart demon. You saved lives, punished injustice, and resolved the long-standing rift between the Yeon and Peng Clans.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I was merely acting to protect personal ties, not some grand cause. The results just turned out well.”

“And that’s enough. You said it yourself—you acted to protect. I couldn’t do that. Born into a physician’s family, known all my life as a physician, yet all I ever thought about was how to harm.”

The Demon Physician smiled bitterly, glancing now between him and Tang Sowol.

“I’ll say this now... I actually watched what happened after you destroyed the Thousand Poison Gate. I was intrigued by the forbidden technique its leader was trying to use on the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix.”

“It must not have been a pretty sight.”

“It wasn’t. Even the corpses radiated such killing intent, someone with a weak heart might’ve fainted on the spot.”

“Anyone watching might have thought a Heaven-Slaughter Star or some legendary killer spirit had returned.”

Was it really that bad...?

As he grimaced, the Demon Physician chuckled, but his face soon turned serious.

“But at the end of it... something completely different awaited.”

The Demon Physician's eyes sparkled as he looked silently to the sky.

As if he had captured the faint starlight, or as if the night sky had finally reflected in eyes that once saw nothing...

A clear brilliance now dwelled in the Demon Physician's eyes.

Not blindingly bright—but not so dark that one would lose their way either.

Just like this night sky.

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

"But at the end of it all... something entirely different awaited."

The Demon Physician, his eyes glimmering with clear brilliance, looked up at the sky. Then, he slowly opened his mouth.

"It pained me to witness it as I ascended each step. Most of the news was about how you interfered with the plans of the Demonic Cult and myself... but your actions—I held them in high regard. People naturally admire those who walk paths they themselves could not tread."

That was why he had sighed.

Though precarious, he had always chosen the right path. But in the end, he had crossed the line.

He had gone far beyond the boundary between good and evil and walked the path of the demonic alongside him. That was why he had hastened his steps with both relief and regret.

"The higher you climbed, the more ghastly the scenes became. You raged for the sake of rage, harbored killing intent just to release it—each trace of you pushing yourself to the brink grew increasingly blatant."

It was true.

At the time, he had deliberately tried to fall into *deviation from the heart*. Already half-mad, he had struggled to completely lose himself—how horrific it must have looked.

"Even when you reached the summit, it was the same. No, at that point, it became astonishing. I couldn't understand how you could still fight while bearing such

a *heart demon*. If it were me, I would've already lost control of my inner energy, had my meridians twisted, coughed up blood, and died."

The Demon Physician shrugged lightly, as if joking. But when the mood didn't ease, he gave a bitter smile and lowered his gaze toward him.

A dark and unstable world where even the ground beneath his feet was barely visible. The Demon Physician's faintly starlit gaze was fixed sharply at a single point, as if piercing through something.

Though his eyes were pointed at him, he wasn't truly looking at him. It was the gaze of someone envisioning something that wasn't here—yet undeniably existed.

"But the moment I looked up... the moment I saw the sword marks you etched, White Moon Sword Lord... the moment I beheld the mindscape embedded in them... my narrow vision crumbled, and the fog of delusion scattered in every direction. If that isn't enlightenment, then what is?"

The Demon Physician smiled—not a formal smile, not a bitter one, but a smile of pure admiration.

"I've lived a hellish life. But while this old man still crawled upon the ground, you raised nobility from the depths. Thankfully, I wasn't so dull that I couldn't feel anything when I saw it."

Now his gaze, fully focused on him rather than something beyond, settled.

"The clouds I see through the hole in the roof, they drift by no differently than before. And yet... why do I continue to let the years pass, unable to forget the one who has drifted away?"

It sounded like something said to him, and yet also like something the Demon Physician was saying to himself.

"At the end of resentment, there is only emptiness. Unless one truly wishes for a world where nothing exists beyond killing and being killed—or desires to fill the world with people like me—then this cycle must be broken somewhere."

With that, the Demon Physician spread his arms defenselessly. As if inviting him to strike.

"White Moon Sword Lord. I understand your unease. I've held the lives of many in my hands, ignoring right and wrong. If I so choose, I could still pull their strings... or perhaps I might even lose to some unreasonable powerhouse, like the current Lord of the Demonic Cult, and be forced to pull them unwillingly."

Though he had no such intention, he spoke of the worst-case scenario. It wasn't hard to understand what the Demon Physician truly hoped for.

"I'm a fool who only realized after seeing the answer key. But now I know with certainty. What I truly longed for wasn't revenge. I just... missed them. If I could've seen them just once more, held them in my arms just one more time, that would've been enough."

Humans aren't so honest—not even with themselves. After all, if they lie to themselves, what need is there to say more?

He had cherished the desire to protect, and yet what he had shown was killing intent.

The Demon Physician had cherished longing, but it had manifested in twisted ways like vengeance and zombie arts.

Once he had reached his lowest point and realized his true nature, he could no longer live as he had before.

Just as he had broken free from obsession with killing intent, the Demon Physician had shed the madness that had long accompanied him—and now reached the Flowering Stage.

Though it had taken him long to return, he had attained clear enlightenment. With that resolve, the Demon Physician spoke in a steady voice.

"If necessary, strike me down. What remains of my life is meant to be lived as a physician, and that requires no power. I only ask—may your sword hold not vengeance against the Cult Leader... but chivalry."

The Demon Physician was offering to die by his hand.

He had finally laid down his heavy burden of hatred after a long struggle, but if that death would save more lives, he would willingly stop here.

Killing the Demon Physician would be simple. He wasn't resisting. A single strike would suffice.

But... was that truly the right thing to do? Was it something he *wanted* to do? What was the reason to kill the Demon Physician in the first place?

Those questions kept his hand still, making him merely fidget with the sword hilt.

He had thought about it before. Just as he had experienced the miracle of regression and let go of his *heart demon*, perhaps others too could find enlightenment and release their hatred.

That was why he had come to find the Demon Physician.

And now, the man before him was entirely different from the one he had known before his regression.

Even more—the change was because of *him*.

Because he had changed, the future had shifted, and in that altered future, the Demon Physician had achieved a realization that would've been impossible before.

The monk Kakjeong had once said: there are things in the world that change, and things that do not—and the two intertwine to create a vast current, making the future unpredictable.

Killing the Demon Physician would reduce the variables. The world would deliver to him a more familiar future.

But that mustn't happen. The future most familiar to him was the one where he had failed to overcome the Heavenly Demon.

And more than anything, he didn't want to kill the Demon Physician—someone so much like himself, who had wandered for far longer—just because the future was uncertain.

At least until now, the Demon Physician had never crossed the line. He remained a victim, not yet a perpetrator.

Therefore, he was not the one he needed to cut down.

After a long deliberation—long or short, depending on how you saw it—he drew his sword.

*Paaah!*

A pale white aura rose from the ink-colored blade. Like a moon in a moonless sky, it illuminated the Demon Physician's face—his perfectly serene expression.

"Thank you for thinking so highly of me. But I don't think I can let go of my hatred for the Heavenly Demon."

"Is that so?"

"Still... I'll do my best."

"That is enough."

The Demon Physician closed his eyes peacefully. With his sword pointed at him, he gathered his concentration.

He recalled the sensation of severing the link between the Blood Flame and the Demon Bell.

To cut something formless, one must first wield a formless sword.

*Uwoong—*

A translucent shape of a blade shimmered over the sword, dyed white. As the two swords overlapped, a clear sword cry rang out.

Remember—his sword was one that cut what could not be cut, one that reached where nothing else could.

The slash he released now only contained a small part of his mindscape. But in this moment, he poured out everything.

"Kgh!"

His inner energy surged, his meridians burning like fire, his willpower wrung out so hard it made his head throb like it was being pierced with a blade.

At the same time, his will—focused to the limit—distorted space around the sword.

*Slice.*

It connected.

The sword strike that cut through darkness grazed the Demon Physician's heart.

The Demon Physician collapsed limply, a satisfied smile on his face. But on his chest, there was no blood, not even a torn collar.

"Young Lord Cheon? Just now... was that...?"

"No way. How...? But if it's Hwi..."

Tang Sowol tilted her head in confusion, while Seo Mun-Hwarin, who realized what had happened, widened her eyes and muttered to herself repeatedly.

Exhausted from using too much willpower, he returned his sword—now back to its original color—to his waist with heavy movements.

"I'll explain later. For now... mind helping me up? I can barely stand."

He had done everything he could.

Now, all that remained was to leave it to the heavens.

The warm morning sun tickled his skin, and the Demon Physician opened his eyes.

"Am I alive...?"

Touching his chest with a dazed expression.

He had clearly been struck—by Cheon Hwi's sword, no less, one that radiated a terrifying presence.

It wasn't an ordinary sword. It had been condensed with pure will, reaching its extreme.

No one could survive a direct hit from that—not someone like him, whose level was at least half a step below Cheon Hwi.

"Ah..."

Even so, the Demon Physician was a martial artist at the Flowering Stage. As soon as he rose, he instinctively examined his body—and finally realized what had been cut.

His sins. The seeds of madness he had implanted in the innocent at the whim of his frenzy. The countless minor sorceries that had never even reached the level of zombie arts—all the connections tying him to them were gone.

No—that sword had traveled along those connections and severed the core sorcery embedded in his former patients.

From now on, no one would be able to trigger a rampage in those treated by the Demon Physician. The seeds had vanished.

Whether it was him or someone else, no matter how much they tried to water it—nothing would grow.

"I've been shown great mercy."

Muttering to himself, the Demon Physician looked toward the direction of the Beast Palace. Then he looked up at the sun, which he had thought he'd never see again.

A clear sky—just looking at it refreshed the spirit.

"Then someday... I must repay it."

If hatred could birth more hatred and continue the chain—then surely, gratitude should as well.

He would repay others with even more than he had received. That way, perhaps someone else would live a life of giving, just like him.

The Demon Physician decided how he would live until the day came when Cheon Hwi needed help.

A smile bloomed on his face as he took his steps.

He didn't know where he was going. He simply walked wherever his feet carried him, healing people within reach.

As a physician—just as he had once dreamed, and as the one he loved had once wished.

Perhaps because he had pushed his willpower to its limits to sever the Demon Physician's connections, it took a long time to recover.

By the time he returned, the sun had fully risen, and Seol Lihyang was waiting at the Beast Palace.

"So you all spent the night somewhere without me."

"Well..."

"Sowol and Hwarin have stars in their eyes, and you look absolutely wrecked."

"There's a reason for that."

"Yeah. I'm sure. I bet there is."

Following her flawless (not) deduction, Seol Lihyang arrived at a truth she didn't want to know (which wasn't true at all), and her eyes flipped.

"Cheon Hwi!"

"It's a misunderstanding."

"Come here, you!"

It was summer.

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

“Graaaaagh!”

Seol Lihyang, the weakest among us, let out a fierce roar. Nothing was in her line of sight—no one could stop her.

“Come here, now!”

“But I’m already here.”

Binding my limbs with hers as if enveloping me with her whole body using the Golden Silk Bind, Seol Lihyang wasn't satisfied until she sank her teeth into my nape.

She was, in every sense, a top-tier predator. Even if she was technically the weakest.

After returning to the Beast Palace, it felt like we had worked hard, given all that had happened with the Demon Physician. But most people probably thought we had just gone out to admire the moon or something.

That's what we told the gatekeeper on the way out, after all. It's not like we went shouting through the neighborhood that we were hunting down the Demon Physician. And in the end, we didn't even let him live. It was, in hindsight, the right decision.

Well—except for the one issue: we hadn't returned before Seol Lihyang woke up.

Apparently satisfied that she had left enough bite marks on my neck, Seol Lihyang gave a pleased nod and turned her gaze in search of her next prey.

**Snap!**

Seo Mun-Hwarin quickly turned her head when their eyes met—but it was already too late.

“Sister Seorin, come here too!”

“S-Stop! This One can explain everything! So please just listen for a moment—wait, when did you move like that?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin was aghast as Seol Lihyang swiftly subdued her limbs as if she were some kind of octopus.

Of course, if we truly wanted to resist, Seo Mun-Hwarin and I could have fought back.

But we didn't, knowing full well Seol Lihyang would genuinely pout if we did. This was just one of our usual staged scuffles.

Still... her movements really were no joke.

Though Seol Lihyang specialized in sound and ice arts, I was well aware that she could resort to orthodox or unorthodox martial arts when needed.

That's why she sparred more often with Seo Mun-Hwarin than with me... Her talent for sound arts was so overwhelming that it overshadowed her skill in orthodox martial arts, but clearly, she was gifted in that area as well.

In any case, after leaving some decent bite marks on Seo Mun-Hwarin, Seol Lihyang finally released her limbs.

“Ugh... I'm soaked...”

Leaving the drooling and limp Seo Mun-Hwarin behind, Seol Lihyang headed toward Tang Sowol.

Receiving her gaze, Tang Sowol seemed to steel herself and spread her arms wide, eyes closed.

And then—

“Hmmp.”

With an oddly anticlimactic scoff, Seol Lihyang plopped down with her back resting against Tang Sowol.

“Huh... Hyang?”

“Unnie gets a pass.”

Tang Sowol instinctively wrapped her arms around her in an embrace from behind, blinking in confusion as Seol Lihyang slowly lifted her head.

“There must’ve been a reason, right? A reason you couldn’t take me with you.”

“Mm. Yes, there was. I feel bad about what happened, but it really was a misunderstanding...”

“I believe you.”

“...Huh?”

“If it’s you, I believe it.”

Shrugging nonchalantly as if she hadn't just bitten two people like a wild animal, Seol Lihyang’s demeanor now was oddly refined.

Her demeanor was so different from how she acted with Seo Mun-Hwarin and me that I was left speechless for a moment. But as a wave of frustration bubbled up, I finally spoke.

“Hold on. Why is Tang Sowol getting special treatment?”

“Come on. Isn’t it obvious?”

Seol Lihyang, burying the back of her head deep into Tang Sowol’s chest, gave a little jerk of her chin.

“Cheon Hwi. You like me.”

“...What?”

“Even if I bite you without listening to your side of the story, you’ll still like me. You might even like it more. Same goes for me.”

“Don’t emphasize the weird parts.”

It was an outrageously bold declaration in many ways. But the conviction in Seol Lihyang’s eyes made it clear that she hadn’t said it on a whim.

She looked like someone who had seen definitive proof with her own eyes—utterly unshakable.

I could guess what memory she might've seen in the past shown by Yoryeong, but... just how much did she see?

Or more importantly—was it only Seol Lihyang who saw it? Did the others see it too?

I barely had time to sigh inwardly before Seol Lihyang pointed directly at Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“And you, Sister Seorin.”

“W-What is it?!”

“I bit you just because. You were all soft and squishy—it felt nice.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin collapsed in shock, treated like a plaything (?). Unfazed, Seol Lihyang looked up at Tang Sowol and added,

“And you’re always good to me, so I’ll let it go.”

“Hyang...!”

“More importantly, I need to stay on your good side if I want to be your second-in-command. Being the second or third wife isn’t about the number—it’s about whether or not you’re the bottom.”

“...Hyang?”

Tang Sowol, who had briefly thought Seol Lihyang’s warmth came from affection, froze as she realized it had all been a cold, calculated move.

Seol Lihyang, having subdued all three of us in an instant, giggled and poked my thigh with her toes.

“Anyway, we’re good now. So explain this ‘situation’ you mentioned.”

“I told you to stop emphasizing weird things...”

Shaking my head, I began explaining everything in detail—from the moment I decided to seek out the Demon Physician to the moment I chose to let him live.

Seol Lihyang, listening silently, finally smiled softly after a brief pause.

“You did good.”

“Huh?”

“You did good.”

“But...”

“Saving people is better than killing them, right? And besides, the Demon Physician turned over a new leaf, didn’t he? You even cut down all the incomplete Zombie techniques he had implanted, just in case. How did you manage that, by the way?”

Tilting her head as if baffled by her own question, Seol Lihyang truly seemed to believe I had done well, and I felt a weight lift from my chest.

I must've been unsure whether my decision had been the right one without realizing it.

I had never spared enemies before—especially those from the Demonic Cult.

Most of them deserved death, and even if I had shown mercy, they'd have returned as enemies eventually.

But not all of them.

Sama Suryeon and the Azure Cold Serpent came to mind.

Sama Suryeon had tried to kill Tang Sowol and me under orders from the Demonic Cult, yet she had felt guilt and doubt about her actions.

Maybe things could've turned out differently. I might've helped Sama Suryeon and Sama Yuryeon reform the Sama Clan, or sent them to Seorin so the Black Lotus Sect, not the Demonic Cult, could overthrow it.

The Azure Cold Serpent was similar. Its conflict with the Ice Palace had stemmed from territorial overlap and long-held grudges.

The Ice Palace had suffered because the Azure Cold Serpent and its offspring indiscriminately absorbed natural energy, disrupting local yin qi and making martial training harder.

But the serpent, too, had lost its parents and home to the founder of the Ice Palace and had merely been living quietly in a remote area when they intruded upon it again.

Their fight was between them—it wasn't my fight.

Yet I had decided on the serpent's annihilation far too easily, just to build friendly ties with the Ice Palace.

Because in the end, they were beasts who couldn't speak.

If it's between people and beasts, you side with the ones who can talk.

And I believed there was no way for beasts and humans to coexist.

But that too had changed, after what I saw and heard in the Beast Palace.

Beasts and humans could live together.

The world wasn't just black and white—not just enemies and allies.

What mattered wasn't the situation, but my will.

I didn't regret the path I'd taken. No matter how narrow or treacherous, it led me to who I was now.

But I couldn't keep walking the same way.

Because now I knew.

And once you know, you can't repeat the same mistakes.

It was then that I sensed something—something that had always eluded me—slip past my fingertips. Something I had brushed up against ever since confronting the curse the Azure Cold Serpent had left behind.

I immediately sat cross-legged and turned inward in meditation.

“Cheon Hwi? What are you suddenly—?”

Seol Lihyang’s startled voice reached me, but I let it pass in one ear and out the other.

My consciousness sank swiftly, as if bewitched. And deep within, I saw it—the lingering stream of killing intent that no longer defined me, but still existed.

Within the dark crimson current, a massive snake raised its head proudly, glaring at me—the lingering will of the Azure Cold Serpent.

I looked up at it—and slowly bowed my head.

“I’m sorry.”

“I couldn’t think of another way.”

*Shiiii...*

For the first time, a sound emerged from the Azure Cold Serpent's form that had only ever glared silently.

A unique cry—like the wind slipping through a crack, but not as soft as one would expect.

“But I can't die as you wish. I still have too much to do.”

*Shaaa!*

A threatening hiss, as if to say the same applied to it.

This was what remained of a beast that had reached the Flowering Stage. Not the beast itself, but a trace of its spirit must have lingered.

“I can't die for you... but I won't erase you either.”

I had secretly glimpsed a portion of the Beast Palace's secret arts that Tang Sowol received for treating the Beast Palace Lord.

Though I didn't fully understand it, nor could I commune with beasts like the warriors of the Beast Palace, I'd picked up a few tricks.

Right now, I believed I could sever the lingering will of the Azure Cold Serpent that had attached itself to my killing intent.

Or maybe I could find a use for it after more research.

But I decided to let both go. Hadn't I already been cruel enough to the Azure Cold Serpent?

The secret Beast Palace arts I had stolen—I would only use them to convey my will.

“So just stay there. When the day comes that I draw my last breath, watch my end from the closest place possible.”

“This is the most sincere requiem I can offer you.”

The Azure Cold Serpent said nothing, simply staring. Then, after what felt like a long contemplation, it slowly lowered its head.

That proud neck, seemingly unyielding, bent low and reached toward me.

Still submerged in the dark crimson current of killing intent, only its head emerged.

I reached out toward it.

Its scales, now partially freed from the malice and regaining their original color—white and blue—gleamed under my hand.

As soon as I touched them—

*Paaaat—*

The Azure Cold Serpent's last lingering thought unraveled in fine strands.

Not red with killing intent, but the original white-blue hue, like its scales.

Becoming threads of light, they began to blend—not with the air, but with my inner energy.

There was a faint sense of dissonance—but it quickly faded, as if it had always been a part of me.

Intent was formed by will and thought.

Most of the Azure Cold Serpent's will had been consumed by my killing intent and vanished.

What remained had let go of itself after hearing my story.

It was natural that it would now be absorbed into me.

After consolidating my energy for a long while, I slowly opened my eyes.

The scenery was much the same—but one thing had changed.

“This is...”

Something faint, a shimmering presence overlaid on my vision.

It didn’t take long to realize it was the flow of qi.

“I see.”

I instinctively understood—this was the world as seen through the Azure Cold Serpent’s eyes.

A creature that had reached the Flowering Stage through instinct, not martial arts, perceiving qi in a wholly different way.

But perhaps because this wasn’t my own enlightenment or ability, just maintaining this sight consumed significant spiritual energy.

Having already exhausted much dealing with the Demon Physician, it felt burdensome.

Blinking a few times and releasing the tension in my eyes, I gradually returned to normal vision.

As I sighed from the slight strain in my eyes—

“Wow... I saw that. Unnie, Sister Seorin? I think biting me gives people enlightenment now?”

“Hmm. This One feels differently. Perhaps it was being poked in the thigh with toes.”

“Shh! Quiet, everyone. Young Lord Cheon just opened his eyes.”

With Tang Sowol’s final word, the three women looked at me with bright, innocent eyes as if nothing had happened.

I gave them a gentle smile and nodded.

“I heard everything.”

“Th-that, you see, Cheon Hwi...”

“Enlightenment can come from anywhere, right? So there’s no need to be embarrassed.”

“Exactly! What matters is that you achieved something, right?”

Seeing them scramble to justify themselves, my smile deepened.

“You’re all absolutely right.”

Relieved, the women sighed and relaxed—until I added one more thing.

“So let’s share that enlightenment, shall we?”

“Eek!”

Seol Lihyang, catching on first, trembled—but it changed nothing.

Afterward, I bit them all thoroughly.

Unfortunately, no one else attained enlightenment.