

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 81-90

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"The camellia flower, when it withers, does not shed its petals one by one. Instead, it falls as a whole blossom. Fascinating, isn't it?"

"It's a little unsettling—it reminds me of a severed head."

"...Blood Wolf, you are likely the only person who would see it that way."

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a deep sigh.

Despite her youthful appearance, the weight of her burdens was evident—perhaps made even more jarring by her long, cascading white hair.

I knew that her body had simply reverted to a younger state through Rejuvenation Arts, but it still felt strange every time I looked at her.

She must have noticed that my gaze had shifted from the camellias to her, because she shook her head.

"Even if you look at me like that, today's sparring session is over."

"Saying it like that makes it sound like all I ever do is ask you to spar with me. That hurts, you know."

"...Isn't that exactly what you do?"

"Well, I have been pestering the Ironblood Hall Master for sparring sessions every day, but this time, I was just watching because you seemed to be in a good mood."

"Hmm. That sounds like a flimsy excuse, but since I am in a good mood today, I'll let it slide."

With that, Seo Mun-Hwarin turned her gaze back to the camellia tree in front of her.

It had grown massive—so large that even I had to crane my neck to look up at it.

Standing before it, Seo Mun-Hwarin looked so small that I blurted out,

"Do you want me to carry you?"

"Blood Wolf. Do you realize how insolent you are toward me at times?"

"It's not just toward you, Ironblood Hall Master. I'm apparently rude to most people. That's probably why I ended up locked away in Ironblood Hall in the first place."

I shrugged.

"It wasn't meant as an insult—I just thought it'd give you a better view."

"...I appreciate the thought, but I'll pass. At least for now. Look closely—the buds have just begun to form. Soon, they'll bloom. When that happens, let's invite the Demonic Sound Witch and watch together."

"You're talking about flower viewing? In the middle of winter?"

"Camellias bloom in winter. You probably wouldn't know that since you care about nothing but the sword."

"Well... I only just learned that this tree is a camellia."

"I figured as much. Haven't I told you time and again? Even as a martial artist, you can't live your life only looking at your sword. There are people whose tongues are sharper than swords, and even the strongest hand cannot always handle ten weaker ones."

"If my sword is sharper than any tongue, then it doesn't matter. And if my one hand is stronger than ten combined, then what's the issue?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin, still gazing at the camellia tree, let out a light laugh.

A laugh so pure, it was hard to believe she had witnessed the depths of the murim's darkness.

"Hehe. You talk big, Blood Wolf. Do you realize what you're actually claiming?"

"...Is it that significant?"

"Of course it is. Wielding a single sword to cut through every problem in the world—that is a dream even I, the narrow-minded Black Lotus Sect Leader, and even the Murim Alliance Leader cannot achieve."

"...Even the Imperial Family?"

"Hah..."

The names she had just spoken still felt distant to me.

And yet, even they weren't enough?

I stood there, stunned, mouth slightly open.

Seo Mun-Hwarin continued, her voice carrying a hint of bitterness.

"You don't have to be discouraged. If anything, there are more things you can do than things you cannot."

"...Then what matters is what I want to do?"

"Exactly. No matter how many things I can do, if the one thing I want is impossible, then what meaning is there?"

I already knew what Seo Mun-Hwarin truly wanted.

She had revealed it during a drunken conversation on a particularly lonely night.

But I couldn't understand it.

What was so wrong about taking revenge on those who had wronged her?

If someone who held a grudge against her sought vengeance, she could simply cut them down.

That was the nature of the murim—or at least, the accursed unorthodox murim.

In the end, whether you were orthodox or unorthodox, survival always came down to a simple choice: Kill, or be killed.

Wasn't that just the natural order of things?

Perhaps Seo Mun-Hwarin sensed my unspoken thoughts, because she suddenly turned toward me.

As she moved, her long white hair fanned out before settling back down.

I found my gaze following the movement unconsciously.

Seo Mun-Hwarin shrugged and stepped closer, now standing directly in front of me.

She wasn't as tall as the camellia tree behind her, but the difference in our height was still considerable.

The old master in a young girl's body looked up at me, her faded smile as enigmatic as ever.

"Let's head inside. The sparring session is over, which means it's time to study."

"...Do I really have to?"

"I've lost count of how many times you've asked me that. We already settled this, didn't we? I agreed to mentor your martial arts in exchange for you studying things outside of martial arts."

"I know, I know. I'm not saying I won't do it—I just want to skip today and make up for it tomorrow."

"Hmm? And why, all of a sudden...? Ah."

Seo Mun-Hwarin paused, then her face turned red.

For the first time in a long while, she actually looked her age.

"T-Today is... with the Demonic Sound Witch...?"

"...Yeah. Pretty much."

I nodded, recalling the white pear I had received that morning.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's face flickered through a range of emotions—embarrassment, relief, envy, curiosity, and even a hint of resignation.

So many emotions passed in an instant before she settled on a forced calmness.

"Ahem. Well, if that's the case, I suppose I have no choice. Since I was the one who originally suggested it, I'll allow you to postpone today's lesson until tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"But you won't be postponing it again. In two days, you have a mission to carry out."

"I keep my promises, don't worry."

"That's all I needed to hear."

With a small nod, Seo Mun-Hwarin turned and walked away.

I watched her retreating figure for a moment before calling out,

"By the way, Ironblood Hall Master, you never told me—why were you in such a good mood today?"

"Oh, that? It's nothing special."

She glanced back at the camellia tree she had been admiring earlier.

"The first snow is coming soon, and the buds have already begun to form. If we're lucky, we'll get to see camellias blooming amidst the snow."

"...Ah. So when you said we should watch them with Seol Lihyang, this is what you meant?"

"Indeed. So don't take too long with your mission—return before it's too late."

"...It's a long way out, but I'll do my best."

I gave a small nod and made my way to Seol Lihyang's room, while Seo Mun-Hwarin headed to hers.

But that promise would never be kept.

By the time I returned from my mission, it was already too late.

The halls of Ironblood Hall, now blanketed in snow from the past few days, were consumed by raging flames.

And Seol Lihyang, who had once said we would watch the blooming flowers together, lay lifeless in my arms.

I gently set her down, unable to complete the final words she had left unfinished.

She leaned against the wall as if peacefully asleep.

I memorized that expression—staring at her face for what felt like an eternity before I finally stood up.

I looked up at the burning halls, then drew my sword.

Srrrng.

Seol Lihyang was right.

Apart from being able to wield a sword, I was good for nothing.

So, I would fight alongside Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was still battling Black Sky Sword Emperor inside.

And I would take revenge in Seol Lihyang's place.

My emotions burned hotter than I had expected, forging my fury into killing intent as I stepped forward.

The once-white snow had melted beneath the flames, mixing with the blood of the fallen, turning the ground into a filthy mire.

I ran, pushing off the blood-soaked earth.

I didn't know how far I had gone before a warrior from Black Sky Sword Sect blocked my path.

I cut him down.

Others came—some drawn by the commotion, some fleeing, some foolish enough to stand and fight, and others begging for their lives.

I cut them all down.

Was it because this sect had already been annihilated once before?

Or was there another reason?

The warriors I encountered were only second-rate or first-rate at best.

None were difficult to deal with.

I pressed forward, slashing through them one by one, until—

At some point, I noticed something different about the corpses littering the ground.

They were no longer the bodies of Ironblood Hall members.

More and more, the corpses belonged to Black Sky Sword Sect warriors instead.

That should have been good news.

But instead, an uneasy feeling crept up my spine.

A battle had clearly taken place—so why was it so quiet?

Even Black Sky Sword Emperor was said to have reached the Flowering Stage.

If two warriors of such caliber had clashed, this place should have been echoing with their battle.

But instead, there was only silence.

I gritted my teeth and forced more internal energy into my legs, launching myself forward.

The corpses grew so dense that it became difficult to find a place to step.

Then, suddenly—

They stopped.

A clear boundary.

As if a massive boulder had crashed down, the entire Ironblood Hall stood in ruins, shattered beyond recognition.

Except for one place.

Amidst the wreckage, one courtyard remained untouched.

Snow lay undisturbed, as if the fire had never touched it.

The camellia tree stood there, its red blossoms in full bloom.

And beneath it—

Seo Mun-Hwarin knelt, gazing up at the flowers.

“...Ah.”

My breath caught in my throat.

She was alive.

But only barely.

Five swords were embedded in her small frame.

One of her arms was gone.

Her legs twisted at unnatural angles.

“Ironblood Hall Master!”

The fire I had barely contained flared up all at once, setting my blood ablaze.

No.

I couldn't lose her too.

Not after Seol Lihyang.

Fueled by that single thought, I dashed toward her with everything I had.

Snow scattered in my wake.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, struggling for breath, turned her head toward me.

Our eyes met.

Her fading gaze flickered with warmth.

“You've come.”

“Yes. Please hold on—I'll treat you right away.”

“It’s no use. This... isn’t something that can be healed.”

“Don’t say that. I have to do something.”

I pulled out the sword lodged in her back and immediately sealed the pressure points around the wound to stop the bleeding.

One after another, I continued pulling them out—

Until I saw it.

A gaping hole in her chest.

The place where her heart should have been—completely hollow.

She was right.

This wasn’t something I could heal.

The only reason she was still breathing was because of her immense internal energy as a Flowering Stage master.

But even that was reaching its limit.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, seeing my expression, forced a faint smile.

“Blood Wolf... What of the Demonic Sound Witch?”

“I saw her off.”

“...I see. That’s a relief. I’ll be joining her soon. But... I’m glad I got to see your face one last time.”

“...I’m sorry.”

"Hm? For what?"

"I was too late."

"Hah... So that's what you meant..."

She shook her head with an exasperated expression.

"Blood Wolf. You weren't late. If anything, you arrived right on time."

"...Is that so?"

"Yes. Look."

Seo Mun-Hwarin lifted her gaze.

I followed her line of sight.

There, amidst the white snow, red camellias had fully bloomed.

Just as she had said.

For a moment, I simply stared in a daze.

Then—

A single camellia fell.

Not petal by petal, but the entire flower—just as she had described.

It landed at her feet.

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked down at it and spoke softly.

“Blood Wolf.”

“...Yes.”

“I will die soon. But you will survive.”

Even in this state, her voice carried certainty.

She must have known—Black Sky Sword Emperor was dead.

I glanced at the corpses strewn across the ground.

Among them, one stood out—a body clad in particularly ornate robes.

His head had been crushed beyond recognition, but based on his attire, there was no doubt.

That was Black Sky Sword Emperor’s corpse.

“All that remains are those as strong as you—or weaker.”

Her voice softened.

“So run. Save yourself.”

"You know better than anyone how much I value my life. And yet, you're telling me to flee?"

"Heh... I suppose that's true."

Her voice had weakened.

She was still staring at the fallen camellia.

That was good.

It meant she hadn't noticed my lie.

I had no intention of running.

Even if Black Sky Sword Emperor was dead, there were still plenty of his sect's warriors left.

I would not leave until I had cut down every last one of them.

"...Just one last thing," she murmured. "Do not seek revenge. Black Sky Sword Emperor is dead. There is no one left for you to take revenge on."

"I never sought revenge in the first place."

A lie.

I had already inherited Seol Lihyang's revenge.

And I would make them pay for Seo Mun-Hwarin's blood as well.

Not just the warriors here.

Anyone who had ties to them.

Unlike the young Seo Mun-Hwarin, I would make sure no one slipped through the cracks.

“...Then my last request.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin picked up the fallen camellia flower with one hand and continued speaking.

"It is called Blossoming Years. It means..."

"The time we bloom like a flower. The most beautiful moment in life, isn't it?" I whispered.

She smiled faintly.

“That’s right... You remembered.”

How could one ever forget? Seo Mun-Hwarin had taken on the appearance of her younger self through 'Reversal of Age' because she longed for the time when she lived without knowing vengeance.

"Blood Wolf. No, Cheon Hwi. Do not remember my death. Instead, I wish for you to remember only the joyful memories we shared together."

"I shall do so. Forever and always, the Iron-Blooded Master... No, my teacher, you will remain in my memory as a single camellia blossom."

"A teacher, you say? That's... a little disappointing, but not bad. Yes, not bad at all..."

Seo Mun-Hwarin murmured softly, turning her head to look at me. Her voice gradually faded away. And then—

Thud.

Like the moment a flower falls, her head drooped powerlessly. From her hand, the camellia she had been holding slipped away, rolling across the snow.

With acupoint sealing undone, blood began to flow from her body, pooling around her.

A vivid crimson stain bloomed over the pure white snow—just like a camellia in full bloom.

I etched that sight into my heart.

I burned into my memory the sight of our shared hall engulfed in flames, the lingering scent of Seol Lihyang left behind, the flower painted in her blood, and the pain of losing everything.

And with that, I carved my own personal hell into my soul.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had told me not to remember, but I could not forget. I did not want to forget. So instead, I carved it into my mind—so deep that it would remain forever, even if it became a scar that could never fade.

The acrid scent of burning flesh and the metallic tang of blood filled my nostrils. My vision twisted, dyed in red.

The overwhelming killing intent surging within me was a clear precursor to Demonic Deviation... but it didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that the remnants of the Black Heaven Sword Sect, having confirmed Seo Mun-Hwarin's death, were now rushing toward me.

Staggering, I rose to my feet and pointed my sword at them.

"Come."

Thus, half-mad and consumed by Demonic Deviation, I carried out my revenge.

By the time I had finished, I had ascended to the pinnacle.

And people had begun to call me the Sword Demon.

When I opened my eyes, the acrid smell of something burning filled my nose, and I felt an intense wave of heat.

"Are you insane? In such a small cave, and blocking the entrance with bushes—what were you thinking starting a fire here? Put it out immediately!"

"Hing. Alright, alright."

A clumsy kidnapper—Seo Mun-Hwarin—pouted as she sullenly put out the campfire.

I had barely regained consciousness, and I had already almost died.

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The cave was thick with smoke. Seo Mun-Hwarin and I, eyes brimming with tears (the smoke was quite acrid), had no choice but to step outside. Naturally, the grass that had been placed to conceal the entrance was cleared away.

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, I did ask you to kidnap me, but if you're going to take my life along with it, that's a bit too much."

"O-Oh, this is a misunderstanding! I merely wished to warm your body because the cave floor was cold!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin frantically shook her head. Perhaps it was because she had dreamed of the past after so long, but seeing her white hair flutter left and right felt oddly nostalgic.

Had I been staring at her without realizing it? Seo Mun-Hwarin began shifting her feet restlessly, an anxious look on her face.

"Don't misunderstand, alright? This one did not even the slightest intention of harming you!"

"I know. More importantly, you don't even bother hiding the fact that you refer to yourself as 'This One' anymore."

"There is no point in hiding it when you already know everything. But tell me, how did you know that I refer to myself as 'This One'?"

"I'm from Zhejiang Province. I heard plenty of rumors about the White-Haired Rakshasa when I was young."

Even before reaching the Flowering Stage, during her time as a Peak Stage martial artist, she had sent countless enemies to their graves with that arrogant way of speaking. It was only natural that she became famous.

However, it seemed that Seo Mun-Hwarin was taken aback by something else entirely.

"When you were young... It still feels like just a few years ago, but you're telling me that much time has passed already?"

"It's been well over a decade. Also, I'm not even twenty yet."

Seo Mun-Hwarin stiffened. She looked like someone being forced to confront a truth she didn't want to face.

Of course, her shock didn't last long.

"Now that I think about it, there's a lot I need to ask you."

She erased her previous flustered demeanor and looked up at me with a serious expression.

Her face, having undergone both Rebirth and Reverse Aging, looked youthful and adorable... but the overwhelming presence of a Flowering Stage martial artist and the atmosphere that allowed no deceit drastically altered her impression.

She wasn't displaying hostility. It was simply that her sheer presence was overpowering.

Though the degree and nature varied, every Flowering Stage martial artist I had encountered so far possessed something inhuman, making it difficult to resist their aura.

I swallowed dryly without realizing it, and at last, Seo Mun-Hwarin's small lips parted.

"Reaching the peak of the Peak Stage before even turning twenty is something that even I find astonishing. But it's not entirely incomprehensible. Murim is vast, and geniuses are plentiful. And besides, one must be at least that strong to become the Tang Clan's son-in-law."

She could say this because she herself had started her martial arts training late yet still reached the Flowering Stage.

"However, there is something I simply cannot understand. Until now, I thought it was just a feeling, but seeing it firsthand has confirmed it."

Seo Mun-Hwarin locked eyes with me, as if trying to peer into something beyond them.

"That familiar aura. Though altered, the footwork is undoubtedly from the Thunderclap Phantom Steps. And while it wasn't directed at me, the bloodlust I sensed was strong enough to make me frown."

Seo Mun-Hwarin listed out the inconsistencies she had noticed one by one before taking a step closer.

She was now so close that, if I wanted, I could probably count the strands of her eyelashes. In this distance of fists rather than swords, she continued speaking.

"Cheon Hwi, what connection do you have with the Seo Mun Clan?"

I couldn't say anything.

No, more accurately, I was deciding what to say.

Due to certain restrictions, I couldn't reveal anything about my regression. So, I couldn't claim that I had learned to fight and mastered the Thunderclap Phantom Steps from Seo Mun-Hwarin herself.

But for Seo Mun-Hwarin, anything related to the Seo Mun Clan wasn't a topic she could simply overlook. If she wasn't satisfied with my explanation, she wouldn't let it go easily.

After a brief deliberation, I slowly opened my mouth.

"I can't explain in detail."

"What?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's brows twitched, revealing her displeasure.

If she were the type to let things slide, she wouldn't be so fixated on this matter despite her suspicions.

In the end, I had no choice but to answer as honestly as possible, even if it wasn't entirely convincing.

"I have my own circumstances, so I can't explain everything. However, I can assure you that I did not learn these techniques through any dishonorable means, as you might fear."

Seo Mun-Hwarin narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing me. Though she was a head shorter than me and looking up from below, the pressure she exuded was immense.

As I met her gaze without avoiding it, she eventually let out a deep sigh.

Then, as if trying to maintain a threatening stance, she shifted her weight onto one hip and spoke again.

"Haa... This will never end at this rate. Fine, at least show me again, slowly this time. I'll decide after seeing for myself."

"Should I just demonstrate as usual?"

"I want you to display it with full strength."

"Understood."

The reason behind Seo Mun-Hwarin's reaction was simple—Seo Mun Clan's martial arts had already fallen into the hands of unorthodox sects once before.

No matter how talented one might be, unless they had regressed like me, they would need time to grow stronger.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had also taken a long time to exact her revenge, and during that period, there was no way she would have left the famed martial arts of the Seo Mun Clan unattended.

The clan's techniques had been scattered across various unorthodox sects and thoroughly analyzed.

To the point where, back then, there were those more proficient in Seo Mun Clan's martial arts than Seo Mun-Hwarin herself, who had only learned the clan's basic self-defense techniques as a child.

So now, anyone using Seo Mun Clan's martial arts could only be one of two things—either a surviving member of the Seo Mun Clan or someone affiliated with the sects that had annihilated them.

That was likely what Seo Mun-Hwarin sought to determine.

Having modified the basic martial arts and reached a higher realm before reclaiming all of the Seo Mun Clan's techniques to advance to the Flowering Stage, Seo Mun-Hwarin undoubtedly had a discerning eye for identifying where and how someone had learned these techniques.

Since we had already stepped outside the cave, I took some distance and assumed my stance.

I stepped forward with one foot and bent my knee slightly, my heel hovering just above the ground.

A stance designed to maximize the Thunderclap Phantom Steps' greatest strength—explosive acceleration.

There were many footwork techniques that focused internal energy into the Yongcheon acupoint, but most served as supplementary movements to create unexpected shifts in motion.

After all, blindly bursting internal energy was simply wasteful, and if the recoil was strong enough to send one's body flying, one's feet wouldn't remain intact either.

However, the Thunderclap Phantom Steps skillfully regulated this, ensuring minimal strain on the body, maintaining a reasonable level of internal energy consumption, and utilizing recoil to enhance acceleration effectively.

Other footwork techniques dazzle the eyes with elaborate movements or use mystical steps to evade an opponent's sword.

But Thunderclap Phantom Steps didn't rely on such tricks.

It was simply a direct, linear movement, striking the moment doubt crept into the opponent's mind.

Or so I had thought. But after seeing Seo Mun-Hwarin's execution of it, my perspective changed.

Perhaps it was because my level had increased since my regression, allowing me to perceive things differently. Or maybe it was because I had learned the true meaning of this technique's name from the Ghost Shadow Thief.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's Thunderclap Phantom Steps weren't just fast—they were an overwhelming, relentless assault. A footwork technique as dazzling as it was oppressive.

However, since she had asked me to demonstrate it the way I usually used it, I would do just that.

Though I appeared motionless, my stance was set to launch forward at any moment.

For me, the sword had always been my primary weapon. I gained the upper hand little by little with precise strikes, and when my opponent faltered, I ended it in a single decisive slash—beheading them or piercing their heart.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's version, however, was more aggressive and reckless... rather than continuously pressuring the opponent, it was designed to stake everything on a single step.

"Sss... hoo..."

I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with scorching air.

At the same time, the faint natural energy I had absorbed blended into the flow of Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, rushing through my meridians.

In an instant, my internal energy, tinged with the killing intent inherent in the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, surged toward my dantian.

And at the moment it reached the peak—

Kwaang!

With a thunderous boom, the energy exploded from the Yongcheon acupoint in my soles, tracing an intricate trajectory.

It felt as though an invisible force had propelled me forward. The world blurred into streaks of light at the edges of my vision, and a violent gust of wind battered against me from the front.

In that instant, my body shot toward Seo Mun-Hwarin at extreme speed.

—But.

"—."

Seo Mun-Hwarin merely waved her hand lightly toward my incoming form.

The moment her small hand made contact with my shoulder, my body spun midair.

In the blink of an eye, I had come to a halt—standing right next to her.

Just as I could redirect throwing daggers mid-flight by entwining them with my sword technique, Seo Mun-Hwarin had redirected my momentum, stopping me with a controlled rotation.

Originally, I had intended to pass right by her.

I blinked rapidly, shaking off the brief dizziness.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had maintained a serious expression since the topic of footwork had been brought up, suddenly relaxed.

"The way your aggression has grown to match the brief burst of killing intent you just showed... but there are no traces of vengeance in it. In fact, it feels quite familiar."

"Is that so?"

Well, of course it did—Seo Mun-Hwarin had personally modified and passed down this technique.

Not that I could tell her that.

So, I simply nodded without much reaction.

"More than anything, I don't get the sense that you're in the middle of adapting the technique to suit yourself. It feels as if a highly skilled martial artist had already refined it for a single person from the very beginning. Am I right?"

"More or less."

"Then that's a relief. That means another survivor of the Seo Mun Clan exists aside from me. Just the fact that they are alive is something to be grateful for."

Seo Mun-Hwarin's voice softened slightly, and she looked at me expectantly.

"May I ask who it is? I might even know them."

"That would be difficult. As I said before, I have my own circumstances."

"...I see."

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded, looking a little disappointed.

But that disappointment quickly transformed into a mischievous smile.

"If you refuse to tell me about your master, so be it. But regardless, the fact remains that you have learned the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts. And I am the rightful heir of the Seo Mun Clan, am I not?"

"That is true... but what are you getting at?"

Experience had taught me that whenever she smiled like that, trouble was about to follow.

Feeling a learned sense of unease, I involuntarily shivered.

Seeing this, Seo Mun-Hwarin placed her hands on her hips with a confident expression.

Then, puffing out her chest—which, due to her Reverse Aging, wasn't all that imposing—she proudly declared:

"Then, why don't you try calling me 'Mother'?"

???

...Shouldn't 'Clan Leader' come first in this situation?!

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The martial world was in an uproar over the sudden abduction that had taken place during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

And understandably so.

After all, a supreme martial artist who had achieved Reverse Aging had kidnapped the Tang Clan's future son-in-law.

There was no more sensational story than that.

Of course, within the Murim Alliance, things had completely turned upside down.

"How can this even be possible?! During an event hosted by the Murim Alliance! Right in the heart of the Alliance! A member of the Five Supreme Clans, kidnapped by some lowly unorthodox scum?!"

A middle-aged man leaped to his feet, livid.

His hair, streaked with gray, and his neatly groomed beard trembled as if reflecting the sheer intensity of his rage.

Watching him, a woman dressed in monastic robes spoke in a calm voice.

"Namu Amitabha... Lord Yeon, perhaps it would be best if you composed yourself. Everyone here understands the gravity of the situation, and we have gathered to discuss a solution. More importantly, there is someone here who is even more distressed than you or me."

"That is...!"

Yeon Sahu, a middle-aged man born of a collateral branch of the Jinju Yeon Clan, and now the leader of Cheongpung Unit, one of the Murim Alliance's armed divisions, hesitated and fell silent.

Although he was known for his righteous character, his fiery temper and strong sense of pride—along with his actual martial prowess—had allowed him to live without ever having to consider others' opinions.

But this time was an exception.

And for good reason—among the gathered warriors, all of whom were at least vice-leader rank in the Murim Alliance, there was one clear outlier.

Tang Sowol, who had just lost her fiancé.

Yeon Sahu, who wasn't completely oblivious to social cues, softened his tone and pounded his chest in reassurance.

"Do not worry! The Murim Alliance will mobilize all its forces to find your fiancé. We will have news soon! Right, everyone?"

Looking around for agreement, Yeon Sahu sought confirmation.

Everyone responded with either quiet nods or murmurs of agreement.

They didn't openly express it because Yeon Sahu was already reacting strongly enough, but the abduction had enraged them all.

After all, this had happened in the Murim Alliance's own territory, during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, in front of countless witnesses.

It was an unforgivable humiliation.

Moreover, the culprit was none other than the infamous White-Haired Rakshasa, Seo Mun-Hwarin, an unorthodox martial artist whose name struck a nerve with many.

The enmity between the orthodox and unorthodox factions was as ancient as it was inevitable.

Tang Sowol, feeling the pitying gazes directed at her and the determined atmosphere in the room, offered a faint smile and cupped her fists in a polite gesture.

"Lord Yeon, and everyone gathered here, I sincerely appreciate your concern. Thank you for taking action on my behalf."

"Huh..."

Some warriors exchanged glances at her unexpectedly calm demeanor.

After all, the person who should have been the most distraught was the one acting the most composed.

But there was a simple reason for Tang Sowol's attitude.

'Didn't he say he'd return within a month at the latest? What is he even planning, stirring up all this trouble first...'

She was internally sighing in exasperation, but ultimately, she had been forewarned by Cheon Hwi that he would be "abducted" for a while.

For someone who trusted Cheon Hwi completely, this incident was absurd and tiring—but not dangerous.

'I told Seol last night... but what am I supposed to tell Father this time...?'

"Haa..."

She couldn't hold back a quiet sigh.

Noticing this, an older man in white robes slowly rose to his feet.

He was short and lean, his graying hair making him appear elderly.

But his eyes were sharp, his body packed with taut muscle, and his skin, surprisingly, was smooth—free of even the faintest wrinkles.

This was Gwak Hu, the Divine Sky.

Once the Leader of the Beggar's Sect, he had been renowned for his chivalry.

After passing his position to a successor, he had retired—only to later assume the mantle of Murim Alliance Leader, making him a towering figure of the orthodox world.

As Tang Sowol instinctively swallowed nervously under his gaze, the Divine Sky finally spoke.

"Do not worry too much. The White-Haired Rakshasa is not inherently cruel—her infamy comes from the brutality of her vengeance, not her temperament. From what I observed, she seemed more startled than hostile when taking him. She may have suspicions, but she isn't certain yet. Let me ask—does your fiancé have any connection to the annihilation of the Seo Mun Clan?"

"No. None at all. Though he is from Zhejiang Province, the only sects he was ever affiliated with were small unorthodox clans from rural areas. And even those... he dealt with himself."

The Divine Sky pondered Tang Sowol's words before letting out a wry smile.

"Born in Zhejiang, tangled with minor unorthodox sects... I can imagine the situation without even seeing it. But that alone is not enough. Do you know anything else? That surge of killing intent from him earlier—it has been on my mind."

"That must be due to the nature of his martial art. He never explained it in detail, but he has mentioned having a master. It may be related to that."

"Could you share whatever you do know? Capturing a Flowering Stage martial artist who is determined to flee is nearly impossible. But if the White-Haired Rakshasa is still uncertain, we might be able to manipulate the situation to draw her back willingly."

"Understood."

Tang Sowol carefully began recounting what she could remember from her conversations with Cheon Hwi.

Thus, while Tang Sowol worked to keep their staged abduction under wraps and the Murim Alliance mobilized under the banner of righteousness, tirelessly devising ways to pursue the culprit...

What were the most important figures in all of this—Cheon Hwi and Seo Mun-Hwarin—doing at that moment?

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, the smell is really strong."

"H-How rude! I bathed properly this morning!"

The two were arguing over whether or not Seo Mun-Hwarin smelled as Cheon Hwi hovered his face near the top of her head.

Perhaps due to the height difference, when Cheon Hwi leaned in, his nose naturally ended up near Seo Mun-Hwarin's crown.

Startled, she quickly stepped back, shielding the top of her head with her hands.

"I am clean! The problem is not with me but with you, getting so close and sniffing around!"

"Being clean doesn't change the fact that there's a smell."

"Nnghh!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin stomped her foot in frustration, unable to bring herself to actually hit him.

It lacked any real force—about as threatening as a cat hissing.

Cheon Hwi observed her for a moment before shaking his head.

"Perhaps I misspoke. It's not a smell... it's a fragrance."

"That's the same thing!"

"I've heard that those who achieve Rebirth undergo a physical transformation based on their deepest desires."

Tang Jincheon, who had mastered poison arts, had undergone Rebirth to become a being of pure poison—allowing him to generate and manipulate toxins within his body, much like Tang Sowol.

Through Rebirth, Seo Mun-Hwarin had achieved Reverse Aging. Her desire had been to return to her childhood.

A complete reconstruction of the body—capable of transforming an ordinary person into a poison-human, and in some cases, even regrowing lost limbs with ease.

Given that, it wasn't strange for her rejuvenated body to carry the natural scent of an infant.

"It's not an unpleasant smell. In fact, it's a rather calming fragrance. But regardless of whether it's a scent or a fragrance, it's far too strong. This makes you an easy target for tracking, doesn't it?"

"Was that what you meant? Well, now that you mention it, those who specialize in tracking techniques don't just sharpen their energy senses—they enhance all five of their senses to extreme levels."

Seo Mun-Hwarin sighed in relief, running a hand over her chest, but soon tilted her head in thought.

"But how do you erase a scent that naturally emanates from the body? It's not like it's due to not washing properly."

"There is a way to remove scents. Let's give it a try."

I pulled out an odor-neutralizing poison that I had received in advance from Tang Sowol.

As far as I knew, it was the most effective solution available—if this didn't work, then we'd just have to accept being tracked.

I sprinkled a bit of the poison around the cave entrance and then placed a few drops onto Seo Mun-Hwarin's hand.

"It's safe as long as you don't ingest it, so don't worry."

"Not that it matters—I'm already immune to most poisons."

"Was that another effect of Reverse Aging?"

"No. That is simply because my internal energy is deep and profound."

Seo Mun-Hwarin scratched her head awkwardly, then surveyed the area around us.

By now, the trackers would have started moving.

We couldn't stay in this cave for long anyway, so I was looking around to decide on our next destination...

But no matter where I looked, all I saw was an empty mountain range.

Even after climbing to a high vantage point, there wasn't a single village in sight.

"Where the hell are we?"

"I do not know either. I merely ran until I sensed a suitable cave."

"???"

I blinked in disbelief, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, noticing my reaction, hastily added,

"B-But I do know that we're in Anhui Province!"

"...Excuse me???"

Wait. We had already crossed into another province?

"How many days was I unconscious?"

"A little over a day."

And yet we were already in Anhui Province?

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Even a Peak Stage martial artist could run faster than a horse—it was just that humans tired easily.

However, at the Supreme Peak Stage, stamina ceased to be much of an issue.

Back in my previous life, when I was fleeing from the Demonic Cult, I had once run for an entire day without stopping.

If that was the case, then how fast could a Flowering Stage martial artist travel?

Even while carrying someone, crossing an entire province overnight seemed entirely possible.

"It's not that the pursuit squad can't find us... it's that they physically can't catch up, isn't it?"

"Most likely."

"Hah."

All my earlier concerns—about erasing our scent, leaving quickly—suddenly felt foolish.

Right. Tricks like that were useless in the face of overwhelming strength.

I nodded in resignation, and Seo Mun-Hwarin chuckled.

"I thought you were just messing with me, but you were actually serious about it."

"I'm always serious."

"Then will you answer me now?"

"About what?"

"About why you asked me to kidnap you? If it's that, then, as I told you before—it was to help you transition to the orthodox side."

"No, not that. I meant why you won't call me 'Mother.'"

...I had let that comment slide earlier, but she was actually bringing it up again?

I hesitated for a moment, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, wearing a serious expression, continued speaking.

"During our time together, I've learned a bit about you. You lost your parents at a young age, did you not?"

"...That's true."

"And I lost my entire family. Not just those related to me by blood, but everyone I shared meals with—all of them."

"That's also true."

Hearing this, I began to understand what she was getting at.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had always searched for a place she could belong.

In my previous life, she had chosen Ironblood Hall as that place.

I knew this well—after all, I had lived under her command for a time.

This was likely an extension of that same desire.

"The only two people who have properly inherited the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts are you and me."

"..."

"So tell me—what issue is there with me officially adopting you as my son?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin wanted to rebuild the Seo Mun Clan.

Or, more precisely, she wanted to restore the home she had once lost.

And she hoped that I would help her do it.

After a long moment of contemplation, I finally opened my mouth.

"That would be... difficult."

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After rejecting Seo Mun-Hwarin's proposal for the second time, something about her demeanor changed.

Thanks to the unexpected distance she had covered while carrying me, we had some breathing room. Instead of immediately leaving the cave, we decided to explore further, hoping to locate a village.

We couldn't live in the mountains forever.

I had brought some Fasting Pills, given that this whole abduction was somewhat pre-planned, but...

There was nothing in the way of basic necessities.

That was why we were retracing Seo Mun-Hwarin's path, relying on her memory.

"Ah!"

Suddenly, Seo Mun-Hwarin spotted something, her short legs carrying her swiftly toward the bushes. A moment later, she returned with a handful of red berries.

"Look at this!"

"What is it?"

"Raspberries! They usually ripen until early summer, so they should be hard to find by now... but it looks like some were still clinging on a little longer!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin beamed, delighted at the unexpected find. She extended her hand, offering some of the berries.

"It's not much, but let's share."

"Thank you."

I gave her a small nod before taking turns eating the berries with her.

"You seem to know quite a lot about wild berries. I recognize raspberries when I see them, but finding them in the mountains is a different matter entirely."

"Hmm... Perhaps it's because I used to eat them often."

"You mean back when you were still in the Seo Mun Clan?"

"Indeed. Whenever I wanted to avoid martial arts training—or studying—I would sneak away to a small hill behind our estate. I'd snack on these to stave off hunger."

So it wasn't just about the taste; it was a food tied to her memories.

We continued chatting as we walked along the mountain path. Eventually, only one raspberry remained, and since it was Seo Mun-Hwarin's turn, it should have been hers.

However, she hesitated, staring intently at the lone berry. Then, as if making some grand decision, she squeezed her eyes shut and thrust it toward me.

"T-This one is for you!"

"Huh? But don't you like these?"

"I've already had plenty! And besides..."

She paused for a moment before continuing with a solemn expression.

"A mother should always want her child to have more to eat, should she not?"

...She still hadn't given up on this.

I stared at her in disbelief, but she smirked and began waving the raspberry in front of me.

"This is the last one. If you miss it now, you won't get another until next year. However, if you agree to become my son, I just might give it to you. Well? Would you like to become Seo Mun-Hwi?"

"No thanks. You should just eat it, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin."

"Ah! How heartless! But... if you insist, I suppose I have no choice. I shall eat the last raspberry myself."

She pouted for a moment but ultimately popped the berry into her mouth, a satisfied smile forming on her lips.

Despite what she had said, she must have felt a little reluctant to give it up, knowing it was her last one for the year.

I simply shook my head and continued walking.

At the time, I didn't know.

That this was only the beginning.

We had to walk quite a bit, but we finally managed to spot a village in the distance.

It was small, and there was no way rumors about Seo Mun-Hwarin and me had spread this far yet.

The plan was simple—hide her distinctive white hair, enter the village, and rent a room.

But...

"I wasn't expecting an inn, but I didn't think there wouldn't be a single spare house or room either."

"Even in a small village, there's usually at least one empty place. Unfortunate."

With nowhere to stay, and since it was too late to return to the cave, we ended up borrowing a barn and some bedding instead.

A handful of copper coins was all it took to convince the owner.

After sweeping out the dust and spreading out our bedding, I decided to loosen up my stiff body before bed by swinging my sword in an open clearing behind the barn.

That was when—

"Ahem, ahem."

"?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly appeared, clearing her throat conspicuously.

She gazed off into the distance, speaking to herself as if she weren't really talking to me.

"Haa... I suppose that since I focused on fist techniques, the Seo Mun Clan's swordsmanship will be lost with me."

"...What are you going on about?"

"Ah... To think that the renowned sword techniques of the Seo Mun Clan will fade into obscurity like this... As the last true heir of the clan, as a martial artist, this is truly lamentable."

"If you're bored, just go to sleep."

Seo Mun-Hwarin flinched at my blunt remark but quickly pretended nothing had happened and continued her exaggerated monologue.

"It would be nice if someone could inherit it, but I can't just pass it to anyone... Maybe if it were my adopted son."

...Was she seriously using martial arts to bribe me into becoming her adoptive son?

I unconsciously made a strange expression and paused mid-swing.

Sensing an opportunity, Seo Mun-Hwarin began speaking faster.

"Sigh... Even though you're impressive for your age, watching you practice those techniques... sometimes it's frustrating. I might not use a sword, but I certainly know how to fight better than you. I'd love to give you some advice, but... it's improper to do so for someone who isn't my child."

"..."

...And now she was offering personal martial guidance as an extra incentive.

The funny part was that I had already experienced all of this before in my past life.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had personally taught me martial arts, and I had learned the Seo Mun Clan's techniques under her guidance.

Back then, I knew she held Ironblood Hall, and especially Seol Lihyang and me, in high regard...

But I hadn't realized she saw us as family-level close.

I smirked slightly and resumed swinging my sword.

"Maybe I'll consider it if I ever hit a wall. But for now, I don't think it's necessary."

"Grrr...!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a strange, frustrated growl, clearly irritated that things weren't going her way.

Her not-so-subtle attempts at persuasion continued.

The next morning, as we traveled further away from the Murim Alliance, she would rush over whenever she saw something nice and offer it to me as a gift—most of the time, they were nothing more than smoothly polished stones.

In the next village, when we found an inn, she would "coincidentally" appear during my training sessions, offering advice—but only up to a crucial point before stopping.

And when I was meditating, focusing on my breathing techniques, she would creep up behind me and whisper in an ominously hushed tone,

"Do you desire power...?"

Eventually, I had enough.

I firmly tapped Seo Mun-Hwarin on the shoulder, meeting her expectant gaze with a serious expression.

"Sit down."

"At last...!?"

The hopeful look in Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes made me sigh deeply.

"This is the third time I'm telling you. I have no intention of becoming your adoptive son."

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes trembled slightly at my unexpected words.

"W-Why not?! I give you the best of what I have, I offer to guide your martial arts, and though I haven't said it outright, I fully intend to be a strong backing for you. You do understand what it means to have a Flowering Stage martial artist supporting you, don't you?"

"Of course, I do. And I still stand by my decision."

Seo Mun-Hwarin's expression flickered with disbelief, as if she had just heard something incomprehensible.

In the end, the emotion that settled on her face was disappointment.

"...Don't tell me you're rejecting me because I look too young?"

"That's not it. I know your real age—why would your appearance matter?"

"...That makes it worse. Then what reason do you have to refuse?"

"Because I can't be bound by the name Seo Mun."

"Bound? Are you afraid of being tied to my reputation? I—I won't deny that I have a fair number of infamy attached to my name. If I were to revive the Seo Mun Clan, perhaps it would tarnish the honor of a once-proud orthodox lineage... Perhaps even bring trouble upon you."

She wasn't wrong.

If word spread that Seo Mun-Hwarin was rebuilding the Seo Mun Clan, the world would remember it as a sect of the unorthodox path.

In my previous life, Seo Mun-Hwarin despised that idea.

That's why she never taught the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts to anyone.

That's why she never claimed the title of clan leader.

To her, the Seo Mun Clan had perished, and she was merely the last remnant of a name that would fade into history.

But now... it seemed she had started longing for it once again.

As I stared at her in silence, Seo Mun-Hwarin trembled slightly before speaking again.

"But don't misunderstand. I'm not trying to use you or the Tang Clan's name to wash away my infamy. If that is the problem, we can keep the adoption a secret."

"I never once thought you were trying to use me."

"Y-You already understand what I want, don't you? You were right. I've already seen more blood than one lifetime should allow... What meaning is there in seeking more? Even if it isn't immediate, if I take my time and prove I've changed, then... things will surely get better."

"That would take far too long, and I don't think it would make much of a difference."

"It would be good for you as well, wouldn't it? Becoming the Tang Clan's son-in-law as an orphan must be difficult. Even though you seem to get along with Sowol... ehem, with Sowol, surely the rest of the Tang Clan isn't so welcoming?"

It seemed she was used to calling Tang Sowol "Unni," as she quickly corrected herself mid-sentence.

I simply shook my head.

"I get along well with my father-in-law. And while the Tang Clan is indeed insular and wary of outsiders, once someone is accepted into the family, they don't impose the same harsh standards on them."

"Guh...! T-Then what about martial arts?! If you become my adoptive son, I'll grant you the entirety of the Seo Mun Clan's techniques! It might not be on the same level as the Five Supreme Clans, but the Seo Mun Clan's swordsmanship was once regarded as just beneath them!"

...That was honestly tempting.

Before its downfall, the Seo Mun Clan had been a renowned sword sect.

Seo Mun-Hwarin herself had never learned swordsmanship, as she hadn't been interested in martial arts as a child.

But that didn't diminish the power of the clan's techniques.

They weren't divine arts, but at the very least, they were top-tier martial techniques—especially their swordsmanship.

Still, no was no.

I swallowed once, as if severing any lingering attachment, and shook my head again.

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you so stubborn about rejecting me?! At least explain yourself properly!"

"Because even if you rebuild the Seo Mun Clan, you won't achieve what you truly want."

"...What?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked in confusion.

I met her gaze steadily and continued.

"What you desire isn't simply to restore the Seo Mun Clan. Nor is it just about escaping the unorthodox path you became entangled in."

"That's..."

She knew it too.

She had likely struggled with that realization countless times—through the agonizing self-reflection that had pushed her to reach the Flowering Stage, through the trials of Rebirth and Reverse Aging.

I had learned this about her in my past life—both from what she told me and from the time I had spent under her command.

But for Seo Mun-Hwarin, this wasn't some new revelation.

She had merely lost herself in the sudden discovery that another had inherited her clan's martial arts.

"Even without wealth or luxury, even if life is sometimes difficult, you want a life where you can find happiness in small things. You want to surround yourself with good people and enjoy meaningful relationships."

"You want to live not as a warrior, not as a seeker of vengeance, but simply as a person—a woman."

Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her lips shut, her gaze trembling as she stared at me.

Her expression was different, yet somehow, I saw the Seo Mun-Hwarin from my past life overlapping with her.

Maybe that's why—

I couldn't help but relax my brow and smile faintly.

"The reason I want to help you is simple."

"It's because if my master were in my place, he would have done the same."

I paused, then reached out and gently grasped her trembling hand.

"And the reason I understand your desires so well..."

"..."

"Is because you and I... are the same."

—

In my past life, I had once asked Seo Mun-Hwarin,

'Why do you keep teaching me? Why do you treat me so well?'

She had responded with a bitter smile.

'Because you remind me of myself. That's why my eyes keep following you. That's why I keep reaching out to you.'

Back then, I had only received her words.

Now, at last, I was able to return them.

A life forced into bloodshed. A path consumed by vengeance, so much so that one forgets what lies beyond it.

But still... despite everything, we long for something more.

I smiled.

"Let's be happy, together."

"Nngh?!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's face instantly turned bright red.

...Maybe I worded that poorly.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Since that day, Seo Mun-Hwarin's demeanor had become strange.

Before, she would take every opportunity to treat me well, urging me to hurry up and become her adoptive disciple.

But now, whenever our eyes met, she would stiffen like a board and scuttle away sideways. Sometimes, she would sit curled up in a corner, clutching her head while mumbling to herself.

What was she saying? I could only catch fragments—"that night," "Tang Sowol," "shh"—but the meaning eluded me.

If I got too close, she would scurry away again, making it difficult to hear clearly.

It was amusing to watch in its own way, but we couldn't go on like this forever.

For now, it wasn't a problem, but even at this moment, the Murim Alliance's pursuit was slowly closing in.

It was time to discuss our plans. We needed to bring Seo Mun-Hwarin into the Tang Clan, clear my name from the kidnapping incident, and reverse any notoriety that had arisen.

Thus, I approached her guestroom door and made my presence known. We needed to have a proper conversation about what to do next.

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. Could you please open the door? I'd like to talk for a moment."

"Hik?! Y-you want me to open the door?!"

Crash!

There was a loud clattering sound, followed by a voice cracking in distress.

Even a master at the Flowering Stage was still human, it seemed. She likely hadn't fallen herself, but it sounded like she had accidentally knocked over something nearby.

After a moment of frantic rustling, the room fell silent, and then, cautiously, the door creaked open—just slightly.

Through the narrow gap, Seo Mun-Hwarin's small head peeked out.

"What business do you have, seeking this one's chamber at such a late hour?"

"I wish to discuss our future plans."

"Our... future plans?!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin jolted as if she had stepped on a needle. Her head, which protruded through the gap, bobbed up and down in an odd motion.

"A-absolutely not! That kind of future can only bring disaster! You mustn't even think of it! More importantly, don't you feel guilty towards your fiancée?!"

"I've already spoken to Tang Sowol about it."

"W-what?! H-Heuk! D-don't tell me... that night... was it meant to imply that...?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly flailed in a panic.

Something felt off—like our conversation wasn't quite aligning. She was probably imagining something ridiculous again. It wouldn't be the first time, even before my regression.

While she was busy overreacting, I took advantage of the half-opened door, pushing it wide open and stepping inside.

"Excuse me for a moment."

“T-this one did not give permission!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin grunted as she struggled to push me out with her small hands.

However, the force behind it was pitiful—clearly, she wasn’t putting any real effort into it.

Ignoring her half-hearted resistance, I locked the door behind me and deployed an energy barrier around the room to prevent our conversation from leaking out.

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s face turned bright red, and she trembled visibly.

“H-h-hah! With this, no one outside will know what happens inside...!”

“Yes? That was the whole point.”

“W-what exactly do you intend to do?! You... you haven’t forgotten that this one is a warrior at the Flowering Stage, have you?!”

“Did I not already say? We need to align our stories regarding what comes next.”

“A-align our st—... Hmm? Wait. Are you seriously just here to talk?”

“What else would I be here for?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a sigh of relief, waving a hand to cover my energy barrier with her own.

Then, she wrapped her long silver hair around her face and spoke in an oddly composed tone.

“This conversation might take a while. This one has just returned from training and is exhausted, so this one shall maintain the energy barrier.”

“...Why are you suddenly covering your face?”

“Enough about that. So? By ‘what comes next,’ are you referring to this absurd kidnapping incident?”

“Why are your words so sharp all of a sudden? Covering your face doesn’t hide your embarrassment, just as lacing your words with thorns doesn’t erase your shame.”

“If you understand, then be silent!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin screeched, letting her hair fall loose again before crossing her arms with an indignant scowl.

“Hmph! You must have thought of something if you came to me first. Speak. After all, this entire situation arose because this one fell for your schemes.”

“Throwing all the blame onto me makes my shoulders heavy... but you’re not wrong, so I suppose I have no choice.”

I shrugged and began to explain the plan I had formulated.

“For starters, we should mix truth and lies appropriately.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean we should reveal some things while concealing others. For example, we could say that you kidnapped me after recognizing Seo Mun Clan's martial arts in my skills. As for why you participated in the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, instead of saying it was to toy with young warriors or mock the Murim Alliance, we could claim that you were simply disillusioned with the ways of the Unorthodox Faction.”

“You thought that’s why this one was hiding her identity to attend the gathering?”

“Not me, but that’s how the world will interpret it.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s expression darkened, and she fidgeted with her toes in silence.

It seemed the idea had struck a nerve.

I smirked slightly and continued.

“The point is, we need to craft a narrative that people will accept. For now, I believe the best explanation is that you kidnapped me because you couldn’t control your emotions after seeing Seo Mun Clan's techniques in my skills.”

“...It’s not entirely false. And if my identity is already exposed, then the rumors about my time as the White-Haired Rakshasa must have spread as well. That part will be easily believed.”

“Exactly. But what’s important is what comes next—why you joined the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, and what happened while I was kidnapped.”

“N-nothing happened! This one is completely innocent, so there is nothing to explain...!”

“I don’t know what you’re imagining again, but simply saying ‘nothing happened’ isn’t enough. At the very least, we need to show that you’ve changed since your time as the White-Haired Rakshasa.”

“That is no easy task. Even though this one remained in seclusion for some time, the reputation of the White-Haired Rakshasa was built over twenty years. It will not be undone with mere words.”

"So, we must show it through actions rather than words. The most straightforward way would be chivalrous deeds..."

"If I seriously commit to performing chivalrous deeds, simply driving out minor Unorthodox Faction groups won't suffice. I'll end up making a lot of enemies."

"Yes. And if things go wrong, there will be significant bloodshed. I doubt that aligns with what you want, senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, so I wouldn't recommend it."

"This one has no intention of going that far either. Then what do you suggest?"

"I honestly don't know."

"???"

"I just figured that since your identity was bound to be exposed, instead of being disgracefully chased away, it would be better to cause some kind of commotion and secure another opportunity."

"Ugh... Are you saying that you got yourself kidnapped without a proper plan?"

"Without a plan? Please. I prefer to say I overturned the board before things got worse."

"That's the same thing! No, wait... Now that I think about it, you've kidnapped Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang before, haven't you?! I should've known you'd turn the tables when brute force wasn't an option... Is kidnapping the only thing in your head?!"

"But isn't it the most efficient method?"

"Most people would call it the craziest method! Surely there were other ways!"

"There were, but senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, you kicked them away. I did subtly warn you that having the leader of the Murim Alliance participate in the preliminary rounds was too risky."

"Ahem. What's done is done. Let's focus on making a plan. Let's see... The key point is proving change without antagonizing either the Orthodox or Unorthodox factions, correct?"

"Correct. However, it's difficult to prove change without taking extreme measures."

"Ugh. This one agrees... but finding a suitable method is difficult."

Seo Mun-Hwarin pouted, her eyes drooping.

I had heard in my previous life that one of the side effects of her rejuvenation technique was an inability to fully control her expressions.

Because of that, she sometimes seemed as though her mind had regressed along with her body.

At times, though, I wondered if this was simply how she had always been.

"Actually, after hearing your story the other day, I came up with an idea. Would you like to hear it?"

"Mm? What is it? This one has no clear solution, so speak freely."

"I may not be able to become your adoptive child, but wouldn't it be fine if we framed it as me learning martial arts under you?"

"Huh???"

Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head, her mouth slightly open in confusion.

I then proceeded to explain my rather improvised plan.

She originally kidnapped me under the mistaken belief that I was connected to her enemies. However, after realizing it was a misunderstanding, she couldn't just let me go—especially since I had indeed learned Seo Mun Clan's martial arts, even if I had obtained them legitimately.

Thus, instead of making a show of change, she would simply do nothing at all.

By remaining within the Tang Clan and overseeing my training, she could gradually allow public perception to shift.

"Instead of struggling to prove anything, you just avoid showing anything at all. As you said, people will be watching at first, but the Tang Clan's influence should shield you somewhat."

"So you're saying that if this one stays within the Tang Clan for a long time, doing nothing, people's wariness will eventually fade?"

"Exactly. Even if you are never fully accepted by the Orthodox faction, it would allow you to live quietly, at peace."

"You're suggesting using the Tang Clan as a shield to temporarily bury this one's past. It sounds sweet, but the Poison King (Tang Jincheon) would never allow it.

"To bring a Flowering Stage warrior, one who has actually incited massacres before, into his household? Even if this one were the Tang Clan's patriarch, this one would never permit it."

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a bitter chuckle, shaking her head.

But she was overlooking one crucial point.

"Convincing Tang Jincheon isn't your responsibility. That's my job."

"...What?"

"I'll handle it. Tang Sowol, Tang Jincheon, and the elders of the Tang Clan—I'll persuade them. If necessary, I'll take responsibility for the consequences."

"Why are you going this far for this one? Just to learn some martial arts? That seems like too steep a price."

"I know it won't be easy."

"More importantly, your martial arts aren't lacking. You might have room for improvement, but you're already progressing toward mastery at an astonishing pace for your age. There isn't much this one can teach you."

"I know. But in the end, I have to walk my own path, don't I?"

"Then...!"

"The only reason I was able to escape my past was because of Tang Sowol. And if I was able to change... then so can you, senior Seo Mun-Hwarin."

I closed my eyes for a moment.

A memory surfaced—Tang Sowol reaching out her hand to me, and Seo Mun-Hwarin gazing at the camellia tree with a bitter expression.

I opened my eyes again and looked directly into hers.

"I want to be that person for you, too."

"Ah..."

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked in a daze, her mouth slightly open.

She didn't avert her gaze but tilted her head slightly.

"However... If that's your goal, wouldn't it be most effective to simply become this one's adoptive son, as this one originally suggested?"

...Damn it. That was actually a good point.

But I didn't want to admit it, so I kept my mouth shut.

This required more thought. I needed time to consider it properly.

Unfortunately, time was not on our side.

Despite all our efforts to evade pursuit, it only took a few days before we were finally tracked down.

But the ones who found us weren't from the Murim Alliance.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After roughly establishing our course of action, Seo Mun-Hwarin and I spent several days arguing over whether I should become her adoptive son.

Even today, she had been trying her hardest to tempt me by listing the benefits of accepting her offer. But suddenly, her mood darkened.

"They're faster than I expected."

"If you needed the restroom, you should have gone before we set out."

"Hey! That's not what I meant! I was talking about the pursuers!"

"Ah. In that case, yes, they're quicker than expected."

Seo Mun-Hwarin pressed down hard on the back of my hand, though she refrained from pinching me outright.

I couldn't sense anything yet, but her perception was far keener than mine—she must have picked up on something.

It was earlier than expected, but perhaps it was time to leave.

As I silently nodded to myself, Seo Mun-Hwarin's usually composed face suddenly stiffened.

"How...?"

"Now what?"

"...We must leave at once. No—it's already too late. Get behind me, now."

Her words came out of nowhere.

But unlike the slightly careless demeanor she usually displayed, she now exuded the sharp presence of a true master at the Flowering Stage.

I didn't know what was happening, but it was clear that this wasn't the time for jokes.

And then, I felt it—a presence both familiar and utterly impossible to get used to.

"...Ah."

My sensory perception was precise, but its range wasn't particularly wide.

Yet, I could feel it from this far away for a simple reason.

Because they were deliberately spreading their aura across such an enormous distance.

Even among top-tier warriors, most would either suppress their presence or at least maintain a certain level of restraint.

It wasn't just to hide their true power but also a basic courtesy to those weaker than them.

But this person was different.

Rather than concealing it, they were recklessly scattering their overwhelming, oppressive presence in every direction.

There was only one martial artist I knew who would be this desperate to flaunt their existence.

The Lord of the Black Lotus Society—Sangwan Geuk.

Also known by the moniker "Twin Tyrant Spear King", he was a notorious tyrant who subjugated the entire Unorthodox Faction with his two spears and founded the Black Lotus Society, the first large-scale organization in unorthodox martial history.

And knowing that only made this situation even more shocking.

What the hell was he doing here?

Even if we were at the outskirts, this was still within the Nangong Clan's territory in Anhui Province.

While I reeled in disbelief, Sangwan Geuk must have noticed that we had sensed him.

His distant presence began closing in rapidly.

The small speck visible at the horizon grew larger and larger—until it took the form of a massive middle-aged man.

Standing before me now, he looked exactly like I remembered—no, even younger and fiercer than in my last memory of him.

Well, it made sense. The last time I saw him was over a decade later in my previous life.

I hadn't expected to encounter him so soon, and I let out a quiet sigh as I observed the uninvited guest.

He stood well over seven feet tall, his entire body packed with massive, swollen muscles.

Strapped across his back were two spears—one long, one short—and even though they remained sheathed, their sharp presence was palpable.

His sheer size alone was intimidating, but the true source of his oppressive aura lay elsewhere.

His wild, unkempt mane of hair, his thick and pointed beard, and—above all—his eyes, burning with unrestrained ambition.

A raw, blatant hunger to devour everything in his path.

That insatiable greed—that was the true essence of Sangwan Geuk.

Just standing within his line of sight felt like sticking my head into the jaws of a predator.

It had been a while since I last felt this kind of pressure.

And honestly... I'd kind of missed it.

However, Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed to mistake my stillness for being overwhelmed, and she immediately stepped in front of me.

Her stance was clear—she was shielding me from Sangwan Geuk.

A flicker of interest passed through his gaze at her reaction.

But before he could say anything, I gently pushed Seo Mun-Hwarin aside and stepped forward.

Even as his violent aura bore down on me, demanding submission, I remained composed and greeted him properly.

"I, a humble junior of the Tang Clan, greet the Lord of the Black Lotus Society. My name is Cheon Hwi-da."

"Oh? You know of me?"

"I have never seen your face before, but... how could I fail to recognize your presence after sensing this overwhelming aura?"

"Heh. This is interesting."

Sangwan Geuk stroked his beard, the corners of his lips curling into a smirk.

It was a playful expression, strangely at odds with the savage aura radiating from him—as if he had just found an entertaining new toy.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, clearly alarmed, jabbed at my back as if urging me to fall back.

But of all people, Sangwan Geuk was not someone to be timid around.

A warrior who walked the Path of Tyranny—one of the strongest in the Flowering Stage, even among his peers.

He was a man who followed the brutal laws of the Unorthodox Faction to the letter.

He despised the weak and revered the strong.

A person who expected those weaker than him to kneel—but also hated those who submitted too easily.

He was a twisted kind of warrior.

In my past life, after Seo Mun-Hwarin and Seol Lihyang had died, I had become infamous as the Sword Demon.

And Sangwan Geuk had liked that version of me.

Because back then, I had been utterly fearless—even toward him.

Regardless of my past life, dealing with him now required a delicate balance.

I had to show respect without being crushed beneath his authority.

After all, this was a man who exuded his oppressive aura even in his sleep, and he found amusement in those who refused to cower before him.

If I thought about it, he was completely insane.

Then again... most warriors of the Unorthodox Faction were insane.

And if that was the case, then it was only natural that the most powerful among them—Sangwan Geuk—was the most insane of all.

Predictably, he let out a booming laugh, clearly pleased.

"Hahahaha! So, the White-Haired Rakshasa kidnapped a mere brat, and I wondered what that was all about... But now I see. A young warrior already standing at the pinnacle of the Peak Stage, possessing this much presence...! I can understand why she'd want to devour you!"

"W-what nonsense are you spouting?! Devour?! What do you mean by that?!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's face flushed red as she shouted in protest, but Sangwan Geuk simply waved a hand dismissively, unfazed.

"Whoa, whoa. Calm down. No need to be embarrassed. This Lord of the Black Lotus Society isn't the type to judge someone else's tastes."

"I already told you it's not like that!"

"So, are you planning to fatten him up a little before devouring him?"

"You bastard...!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's energy surged as she stepped in front of me once again.

The two auras clashed violently.

Before my regression, Tang Sowol had told me that the Flowering Stage was a realm where a martial artist achieved complete mastery over themselves.

That was why each master exuded a unique presence.

Right now, the clashing auras of Seo Mun-Hwarin's bloodstained past and Sangwan Geuk's tyrannical might filled the air with suffocating intensity.

It would have been strange if the atmosphere wasn't so lethal.

However, the standoff did not last long.

To my surprise, Sangwan Geuk stepped back, ending the confrontation.

"Let's stop here. I didn't come to fight."

"Hah! Then why did you come all this way? More importantly—how did you even find me?"

"I arrived first because you were too damn slow. But someone else gave me your location. And as for why I'm here... I came to hear your answer regarding my previous proposal."

"You mean your offer to join the Black Lotus Society? I already refused."

"That was then. Things are different now. Don't tell me you still don't realize that your pathetic little dream is over?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's lips pressed tightly together.

I turned to her and asked,

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin... you know the Lord of the Black Lotus Society?"

"Don't misunderstand. We've only met once before."

"By 'before'...?"

Before she could answer, Sangwan Geuk spoke first.

"When I was considering extending my reach from Zhejiang Province into Jiangxi Province, I recalled the rumors of the White-Haired Rakshasa and sent my men to find her.

"By the time I arrived, however, she had already undergone her rejuvenation technique.

"So I didn't force her. I simply made an offer. I asked if she wanted to join the Black Lotus Society."

...So that's why Seo Mun-Hwarin immediately joined the Black Lotus Society after her identity was exposed during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering in my past life.

And in the end, Sangwan Geuk did establish a Black Lotus Society branch in Jiangxi Province.

Though due to resistance from the Nangong Clan in Anhui and the Zhuge Clan in Hubei, he only managed to take half the region.

That much, I understood.

But that led to another question—why did he turn on Seo Mun-Hwarin after she joined?

Even after her death, he never openly insulted her, but while she was alive, he constantly kept her in check.

I had no intention of voicing my thoughts, but perhaps my expression gave me away.

Sangwan Geuk smirked.

"You look like you don't understand something."

"Indeed. Wouldn't having another Flowering Stage master in the Black Lotus Society be an asset?"

"It would. But because she wasn't the kind of Rakshasa I expected, it would also be inconvenient."

"Then—"

"But even so, the Black Lotus Society must be able to accommodate her."

"That's the reason I created the Black Lotus Society in the first place.

"Even if I were to stick her in some insignificant position, I need to at least put on the appearance of accepting her. Otherwise, the fools who follow me wouldn't trust me."

"...So you never actually planned to make her a real part of the organization. It was just for show."

"Correct. But that doesn't mean it's a bad deal for the White-Haired Rakshasa either, does it?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin sighed and nodded.

"Since my identity has already been exposed, all I need now is a quiet place to live.

"I have no interest in power struggles, so if the Black Lotus Society can act as my shield, I don't see why I should refuse."

"But—!"

"Exactly. This is essentially the same thing that Cheon Hwi-da proposed to me."

"What?"

Sangwan Geuk's face, which had been relatively amicable despite his overwhelming presence, twisted into a deep scowl.

Then, suddenly—an unbearable pressure wrapped around my throat.

"Are you trying to interfere with my plans? Don't think that just because you're in Orthodox territory, or because you belong to the Tang Clan, that you're safe. I wouldn't count on that."

It was a death-laced threat.

Any ordinary warrior—even a top-tier martial artist—would have instinctively recoiled.

Not because of weak resolve, but because their body would refuse to move in the face of such an overwhelming gap in strength.

But I was someone far too familiar with killing intent.

Would it be a lie to say it wasn't burdensome? Yes.

But was it enough to make me bow my head? No.

I looked up at Sangwan Geuk and responded in a calm voice.

"Neither I nor you have the right to decide where Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin goes. She decides that herself. Isn't that right?"

"That is correct."

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded and gathered her own aura to shield me.

Then, she narrowed her eyes at Sangwan Geuk and added a subtle edge of killing intent to her voice.

"He is my hostage. I would appreciate it if you didn't touch him without my permission."

"Hah."

Sangwan Geuk let out a dry chuckle before finally withdrawing his murderous aura.

He shrugged, his usual smirk returning.

"There really is something going on here, huh? All I did was poke the kid a little, and you're already baring your fangs at me twice. Well, like I said, I didn't come here to fight."

"Then let me give you my answer one more time—I will not join the Black Lotus Society. Now, get lost and return to Zhejiang."

"Heh. You must be mistaken if you think I came back just to offer again."

Sangwan Geuk raised his thumb and gestured behind him.

Because of the overwhelming pressure of his aura, I hadn't even noticed.

But now, I saw them—dozens of warriors clad in black robes standing in formation behind him.

The ones he had left behind earlier for being too slow.

Each of them wore swords at their waists, and on their sleeves, the embroidered characters—"Black Sky"—stood out clearly.

Every single one of them was at least first-rate, with a few even having reached the Peak Stage.

But their strength didn't matter to me.

What mattered was...I recognized their faces.

A visceral rage surged up inside me.

I could never forget them.

Because in my past life, they were the ones who...

Took the lives of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“Black Sky Sword Sect...”

I clenched my fists, barely containing my fury.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"The Black Sky Sword Sect."

Just speaking their name made the killing intent in my core boil over.

These were the ones who had taken the lives of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin in my past life.

My hand instinctively tightened around my sword hilt.

The urge to cut them down immediately surged within me.

Just as I was struggling to suppress my rising bloodlust, a cold voice came from Seo Mun-Hwarin's small back.

"So, if you're not here to fight or make another offer... are you saying you came to threaten me? With a bunch of vermin I didn't finish off?"

"Hah! Don't be ridiculous. This isn't a threat—it's a negotiation, White-Haired Rakshasa."

Thunk!

Sangwan Geuk pulled the two spears from his back and slammed them into the ground.

"If you agree to join the Black Lotus Society right here and now, I will spare you. I will also spare that little one you're so desperate to protect. And as a bonus, I have a gift prepared just for you."

With a wide grin, he gestured towards the Black Sky Sword Sect.

They, too, glared at Seo Mun-Hwarin with undisguised hatred.

Yet despite Sangwan Geuk blatantly offering them up as a bargaining chip, none of them so much as flinched.

No—one man at the front of their ranks was even openly exuding killing intent.

I didn't recognize his face.

But the moment I saw him, I knew.

A warrior at the Sub-Perfection Stage.

A sword—its hilt, scabbard, and likely even the blade itself dyed in pure black.

And those eyes, filled with nothing but vengeance, just like mine and Seo Mun-Hwarin's had been once before.

The Black Sky Sword Lord.

He probably wasn't famous enough to be called that yet.

But in my past life, I had only seen him with his skull crushed by Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Even so, I recognized him.

This was the man who had pierced Seo Mun-Hwarin's heart.

The one who had died before I could exact my revenge.

Tch.

I clenched my teeth unconsciously.

Sangwan Geuk chuckled.

"But if you refuse my generosity... well, then I have no choice.

"The gift will have to become a dagger instead."

"Hah! Negotiation? Please—this is nothing but a threat.

"Did you really think I would fear you?"

"Of course not. But if you refuse me, then I will have no choice but to side with the Black Sky Sword Sect, who are now my new subordinates."

His smirk deepened as he pointed toward me.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes wavered slightly.

"If you had truly wanted him dead, you would have killed him already. You could have done it during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, or after you kidnapped him. But you didn't. Instead, you two have been running around like star-crossed lovers, hiding together. Because of that, it wasn't hard for these vengeful bastards to track you down."

"...Tch!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin clicked her tongue and glared at the Black Sky Sword Sect.

Their leader trembled slightly under her sheer presence but still turned toward me with a mocking smile.

"At the very least, you should suffer the same pain as us."

"...Have you already forgotten that the Black Sky Sword Sect attacked first?"

"Maybe. But in the end, my father died by your hands, White-Haired Rakhasa. I refuse to let you walk away and live happily."

His voice dripped with hatred.

I see.

So that's how it was.

The incident of Seo Mun-Hwarin kidnapping me had undoubtedly spread.

And the Black Sky Sword Sect, consumed by revenge, must have caught wind of it.

But when they heard that Seo Mun-Hwarin had ascended to the Flowering Stage, they must have despaired.

Their leader might have reached Sub-Perfection, but Flowering Stage was an entirely different realm.

I knew that one day, this man would ascend to the Flowering Stage himself and be called the Black Sky Sword Lord.

But neither he nor anyone else knew that now.

Even he couldn't be certain of his future breakthrough.

In my past life, Seo Mun-Hwarin had immediately joined the Black Lotus Society after being exposed at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

That had given no time for this situation to unfold.

But this time, she had been on the run with me.

And in that window of time, the Black Sky Sword Sect had made a gamble.

If they couldn't kill Seo Mun-Hwarin, they would at least make her feel their pain.

They must have approached Sangwan Geuk with an offer—

Let us join the Black Lotus Society, and in return, we'll give you Seo Mun-Hwarin's whereabouts.

All we ask is one thing—the chance to kill the one she holds dear.

For Sangwan Geuk, it was a convenient deal.

He needed Seo Mun-Hwarin in the Black Lotus Society, so he had agreed to use the Black Sky Sword Sect to pressure her.

If she accepted his proposal, then that was the end of it.

The Black Sky Sword Sect would lose their chance at revenge, but they would likely fight to the death here, unwilling to let things end quietly.

But if Seo Mun-Hwarin refused... then things would change.

Sangwan Geuk would restrain Seo Mun-Hwarin—

And the Black Sky Sword Sect would take that opportunity to attack me.

They probably assumed that no matter how strong I was, I couldn't handle a Sub-Perfection master, several Peak-level warriors, and dozens of elite fighters all at once.

In other words—

If Seo Mun-Hwarin didn't want to watch me die right in front of her, she had no choice but to join the Black Lotus Society.

This way, the Black Sky Sword Sect would get their revenge in some form, even if they couldn't kill me.

And Sangwan Geuk would get exactly what he wanted.

The only real losers in this scenario were the Black Sky Sword Sect themselves.

Because in either outcome...

Seo Mun-Hwarin would slaughter them all.

And yet, they knew this.

They knew, and they still threw themselves into the fire.

Fools driven by nothing but vengeance.

It was difficult to understand.

But I had to remember—this wasn't the same Black Sky Sword Sect that Seo Mun-Hwarin had annihilated in the past.

Their leader was merely the son of the former master.

The warriors here were survivors—those who had lost everything to Seo Mun-Hwarin's revenge.

They had no future, no purpose beyond their hatred.

To them, it didn't matter if they lived or died.

All they wanted was to strike Seo Mun-Hwarin down, no matter the cost.

If they could kill me, it would be the perfect outcome.

But even if they failed, as long as they could brand her with the Black Lotus Society's name, it would be enough.

Even if she spent the rest of her life living virtuously, Seo Mun-Hwarin would never escape the brand of the Unorthodox Faction.

And now, the Black Sky Sword Sect sought to shackle her to the Black Lotus Society, ensuring that she would never break free.

All because they wanted her to be miserable.

In my past life, Seo Mun-Hwarin had lived in endless regret and remorse.

That was why she had taught me everything she could—so that I would never walk the same path she did.

But this time... I wouldn't let it happen.

"Lord of the Black Lotus Society."

"Hm?"

"From what you just said, you're only stopping Seo Mun-Hwarin from interfering—you don't actually plan to kill me. Am I correct?"

"Oh? You're sharper than I thought. That's right. My goal is to bring the White-Haired Rakshasa into the Black Lotus Society, not make an enemy of her."

"Then what if... I kill every single member of the Black Sky Sword Sect?"

"...What?"

For a moment, Sangwan Geuk looked completely baffled.

Then, he threw his head back and let out a loud, boisterous laugh.

"Hah! You crazy bastard! You might be talented, but there's a limit to recklessness. Are you actually serious?"

"If I don't want Seo Mun-Hwarin to leave, then there's only one path left. This fight is inevitable. If my plan fails, then I only ask that you step aside peacefully."

"Hah... Well, I can't say you're wrong."

Sangwan Geuk's grin widened as he crossed his arms.

"Fine. If you really manage to kill every last one of them, I'll keep my word. I'll walk away from this fight. Sticking around any longer would just lead to a battle to the death with the White-Haired Rakshasa."

"Thank you."

Sangwan Geuk was violent and ruthless, a warrior who worshiped strength yet had no qualms about deception.

He acted magnanimous but was narrow-minded to the core.

Yet despite all that, he had still reigned as the supreme ruler of the Unorthodox Faction until the day he died.

He protected those within his sphere of influence and, for the most part, honored his own words.

That was why so many Unorthodox warriors followed him—because he was consistent.

I nodded lightly in his direction and turned to Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been standing protectively in front of me the entire time.

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin."

Her body tensed.

"W-wait! This is too dangerous!"

"If it means keeping you safe, then I will join the Black Lotus Society, so just—!"

"Anyone listening to you would think I'm walking to my death."

I smirked as I pulled her behind me.

"I wouldn't do this if I wasn't confident. Just trust me and watch. Don't waste your strength fighting the Lord of the Black Lotus Society over nothing."

"How dare you talk nonsense! Do you really expect me to stand here and watch another Seo Mun Clan member die right before my eyes?!"

"...I haven't even accepted your offer to be my adoptive parent yet."

"That's not the point—!"

I grinned, deliberately repeating the words that had caused a misunderstanding before.

This time, however, I meant them with all my heart.

"Didn't we promise?"

"That we would be happy together? I'll make sure it happens."

".....!"

Schiing.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes widened as I slowly unsheathed my sword in front of her.

"Besides..."

I angled the blade toward the Black Sky Sword Sect.

"...I have my own debts to settle with them."

Vengeance wasn't their privilege alone.

It had only been buried beneath the surface—buried because of Tang Sowol, who had helped me suppress it.

But I still remembered.

I remembered Seol Lihyang's dying words, left unfinished.

I remembered Seo Mun-Hwarin's crimson blood, spilling across the white snow.

She had told me to forget.

But I never could.

I had engraved the memory into my very soul, branding it deep with the edge of my own blade.

I had done it once before.

So there was no reason I couldn't do it again.

The Black Sky Sword Sect had faced extinction at Seo Mun-Hwarin's hands once before.

And in my past life, I had destroyed them a second time.

This life would be no different.

Ignoring Seo Mun-Hwarin's desperate resistance, I stepped forward and pointed my sword straight ahead.

The rough hilt pressed into my palm.

The slightly heavier weight settled into my grip.

And before me—stood my enemies.

The clarity of the situation dispelled all doubts.

This was a problem I could solve with my sword.

Which meant...It was simple.

I just had to cut down every last one of them.

The Sub-Perfection Stage sect master, the six Peak Stage warriors, and the dozens of first-rate fighters—

Even the obstacle standing before me now.

I would cut through them all.

As I settled into my stance, the Black Sky Sword Sect's leader scoffed.

"Unbelievable. Did you come here to commit suicide?"

"Did you know?"

I tilted my head and smirked.

"I'm actually engaged to Tang Sowol."

"...Hah! And why should I care? From the moment we heard that the White-Haired Rakshasa had undergone rejuvenation, we were already prepared to die. Did you really think we'd back down because of the Tang Clan?"

"Of course not. But since I'm part of the Tang Clan now...Wouldn't it be appropriate to uphold their family motto?"

I took a deep breath.

Then, I let go.

I released the killing intent I had been suppressing for so long—

And along with it, the hell I had forced myself to ignore.

My inner world turned blood-red, filled with the sights and scents of that day.

The stench of burning flesh stung my nose.

The metallic tang of blood clung to my tongue.

Beyond the inferno engulfing the halls, I could see the corpses scattered across the blood-soaked ground.

And at the very depths of my mind, buried within my oldest, deepest scar—

A single camellia flower bloomed.

Its delicate petals swayed gently in the wind, carrying a faint, lingering fragrance.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Shiver.

An uncontrollable chill ran down Seo Mun-Hwarin's spine.

"What is this...?"

Cheon Hwi stood with his sword drawn.

The killing intent radiating from him did not touch Seo Mun-Hwarin, yet she could still sense it.

And she knew.

This was not something ordinary.

Killing intent was not supposed to have substance, yet his aura dragged the surroundings into a murky swamp, making the very air feel heavy and suffocating.

Of course, as a master at the Flowering Stage, Seo Mun-Hwarin would not be affected even if she stood directly beneath his aura.

A martial artist who had achieved self-completion and awakened their willpower had near-absolute resistance to mental influences like killing intent or bewitching techniques.

But if that was true...

Then that also meant anyone below the Flowering Stage would not be free from Cheon Hwi's killing intent.

That was utterly absurd.

Killing intent was merely a rudimentary expression of one's will.

Everyone was born with jing, qi, and shen—mind, energy, and body, but most could not fully utilize them due to an imbalance of power.

Even those who had not reached a high level of martial arts could wield killing intent to a degree—proving that willpower could be exercised at lower levels.

But killing intent always required sincerity.

And it always had limits.

Because the human mind is not inherently cruel.

The stronger one's intent to kill, the closer one came to deviation.

If one's killing intent grew too deep, they would inevitably fall into inner demons.

And if they succumbed to inner demons, their will would lose clarity, thus weakening their killing intent in return.

That was how it should have been.

Yet, Cheon Hwi stood there, perfectly composed.

He hadn't even swung his sword, yet dozens of first-rate warriors were clutching their throats, gasping for air.

Even among the Peak Stage warriors, many had trembling fingers.

Only the Sub-Perfection-ranked sect master of the Black Sky Sword Sect remained standing, though even his forehead was drenched in sweat as he drew his jet-black sword.

During the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, Seo Mun-Hwarin had sensed that Cheon Hwi wielded a remarkable Killing Sword.

But she had never imagined it would be like this.

Even if he was on the verge of breaking through the Peak Stage—

No, even if he had already reached Sub-Perfection—

This was far too thick of a killing aura.

It was as if he was a demon star born to kill.

Unless...

"Aaah."

Seo Mun-Hwarin stared blankly at Cheon Hwi's eyes.

His gaze was heavy—as if it carried the weight of the world.

And within those depths, an unmistakable crimson glow flickered—the very mark of inner demons.

At that moment, Seo Mun-Hwarin instinctively understood.

It was brutal.

There was nothing else to describe it.

Cheon Hwi's killing aura was monstrous, and the sword he wielded was even worse.

How could a human possibly contain such immense bloodlust?

It was horrifying.

But that wasn't all.

Willpower was the manifestation of one's mind.

Every martial artist who had reached a high realm possessed a personal inner world—a Heartscape.

That meant that with willpower alone, one could glimpse into another's mind.

And so, Seo Mun-Hwarin saw it.

The deep sorrow buried beneath Cheon Hwi's overwhelming bloodlust.

"Now I understand."

The acrid scent of burning wood.

The lingering fragrance of camellia blossoms.

A single red flower, drifting in a pool of blood.

And beyond that—

An emptiness.

And an unbearable sense of guilt.

Cheon Hwi did not carry murderous intent.

He carried grief.

His killing aura was not bloodthirst—it was mourning.

"Did you say we were alike?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin did not know what he had lost or what haunted him so deeply.

But she did understand why he wept in such a violent way.

"That was true, after all."

Because he knew no other way.

Tears meant weakness.

And weakness meant death.

The warriors of the Unorthodox Faction were like starving wolves—if they found an opening, they would tear it apart without hesitation.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had lived that way.

And Cheon Hwi had surely lived the same.

A life like a precarious dance atop a blade's edge.

It had taken Seo Mun-Hwarin a long time to come to terms with her own weakness and regrets.

But in the end, she had accepted them—

And through that acceptance, she had reached the Flowering Stage and her Rejuvenation Technique.

But Cheon Hwi was different.

He refused to accept it.

Even though his blade only wounded himself, he still clung to it.

He held onto the pain, buried it deep inside, and refused to let go.

It was a foolish act—one that would only fester his wounds further.

But Cheon Hwi did not yield.

"...Then I shall also make up my mind."

When Cheon Hwi was with Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, he was capable of smiling freely.

Seo Mun-Hwarin wanted to smile like that, too.

And since Cheon Hwi had promised they would find happiness together—

She would hold him to that promise.

Seo Mun-Hwarin rolled the words she had never spoken aloud on her tongue.

Then, she clenched her fists.

One day, when the time was right—

She would say them.

A surge of inner energy spread through her fists, condensed to an impossible degree, then solidified through sheer willpower.

White hair whipped through the air as she opened her eyes.

"Lord of the Black Lotus Society. I am taking Cheon Hwi with me. If you wish to stop me, then try. I will gladly smash your skull in."

"Hah. I've made many concessions, but I've also given many opportunities. Accepting another Flowering Stage master would have elevated the Black Lotus Society. But defeating a warrior of equal rank would elevate my personal status even more. Your Path of Tyranny nonsense does not interest me. I have spoken, and I shall act. If you wish to stop me—draw your spear."

"...Heh. I had heard your personality was different. But now, I see your true self."

Sangwan Geuk let out a low chuckle, amused.

Yet despite his words, his eyes never left Cheon Hwi.

Even at his advanced age, like an excited young boy, he sat down on the ground—

And made no move to draw his spear.

"I've changed my mind. I won't stop you, so if you want to go, then go. But don't you want to see just how far that guy can go?"

"The longer one remains in a state of Qi Deviation, the more dangerous it becomes."

"Qi Deviation?"

Hearing the words as if they were absurd nonsense, Sangwan-geuk slapped his knee and laughed.

"Hahaha! Did you just say Qi Deviation, White-Haired Rakshasa? Where in the world does that look like a martial artist suffering from Qi Deviation?"

Excited, Sangwan-geuk pointed his thick arm forward. There, Cheon Hwi was wielding his sword with eyes that blazed like bloodied flames.

A single sweeping sword strike, its energy stretched long and deadly, severed the necks of five or six first-class martial artists, whose inner strength had already been half neutralized.

Perhaps out of fear, or perhaps in a last desperate struggle, the warriors of the Black Sky Sword Sect charged at him all at once.

Cheon Hwi calmly shut his eyes for a moment, then began to respond with measured precision.

Wherever strength was needed, his sword energy flared like roaring flames, pressing down with overwhelming force. When enemies grouped together in an attempt to encircle him, he slipped between their gaps and performed a fierce dance of blades. Even when swords thrust at him from blind spots, he parried them effortlessly, as if he had foreseen their attacks.

A first-class martial artist was someone acknowledged as a skilled swordsman in any part of the world. They were individuals who had reached the threshold of being recognized as true masters in Murim.

And yet, these first-class warriors were falling far too easily.

No, it wasn't just the first-class warriors.

Even those at the Peak Stage, who had steadied their trembling hands and summoned their sword energy, found their stances crumbling within just a few exchanges before their hearts were pierced.

It was overwhelming martial prowess.

However, what truly astonished Seo Mun-Hwarin was something else entirely.

Not even for a single moment had Cheon Hwi lost his composure. His responses were calm, unwavering.

"So he isn't in Qi Deviation? No... he is. Cheon Hwi has definitely fallen into Qi Deviation. But—"

He had succumbed to Qi Deviation... and yet, he had regained his reason.

A contradiction—madness, yet complete clarity.

However, for Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had glimpsed even a fragment of Cheon Hwi's mental state, it somehow felt natural.

Cheon Hwi must have fallen into Qi Deviation a long time ago.

Only now, he had already overcome it.

Instead of casting aside the demon he had conquered, he continued to embrace it.

Sangwan-geuk chuckled slyly and spoke.

"Isn't it fascinating? To see just how broken a person can become... and how strong they can grow in such a broken state? It drives me mad with curiosity."

"There is nothing amusing about this."

"Even so, we should watch for now. You feel it too, don't you?"

"That he is standing at a crucial turning point."

Seo Mun-Hwarin pressed her lips together tightly.

Once a martial artist's mindset was set, the intent that flowed from it was not something that could be easily changed.

If it were something that could shift so easily, it would never hold such power in the first place.

So then—what about Cheon Hwi right now?

His momentum as he fought against the Black Sky Sword Sect was beginning to waver.

Not in the sense that he was about to collapse, but rather... that he was shaken.

"Did he say I wasn't the only one who had a grudge against the Black Sky Sword Sect?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin didn't know what had happened in Cheon Hwi's past.

Whenever she subtly probed, he either sealed his lips shut or blatantly steered the topic elsewhere.

But from the fragmented stories he occasionally let slip, from the subtle expressions he unconsciously revealed—she could at least make a few guesses.

To Cheon Hwi, the Black Sky Sword Sect must be an irreconcilable enemy.

Perhaps even the very reason why he had come to possess such a twisted will.

Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her small brow tightly.

She understood, at least in her mind.

Even if he weren't in Qi Deviation, Cheon Hwi was pushing himself beyond his limits.

At this very moment, his reckless inner energy manipulation, coupled with the strain of wielding a willpower beyond his current level, must be throwing his blood pathways into chaos and draining his upper dantian dry.

If not for the interference of the Black Lotus Sect Master, she should be stopping him immediately.

"However..."

If this moment was when Cheon Hwi would finally confront the festering wound buried in the deepest part of his heart...

Then she must not interfere.

A martial artist, in the end, could only surpass themselves—no one else could do it for them.

If Cheon Hwi truly wished to let go of his own personal hell, then he must first face it.

And he must overcome it. Alone, without anyone's help.

Cheon Hwi had once extended his hand to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

And yet, she had nothing to offer him in return.

All she could do was watch from afar and rush in only if he reached the very brink of danger.

Because ultimately, this was a battle only Cheon Hwi could resolve.

That bitter truth made Seo Mun-Hwarin clench at her own chest in frustration.

However, unlike the Black Lotus Sect Master, who merely sat back to spectate, she leaned forward, prepared to rush in at any moment.

In a voice so small that no one could hear, Seo Mun-Hwarin whispered to herself.

"This one shall be watching over you."

His vision was dyed in endless red.

Was it fire? Was it blood? Or was it merely the light of his own sword energy?

He could no longer tell.

In this cursed world, there was only himself and his sword.

Nothing else remained.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

His senses were hazy.

His mind was dazed, as if he were trapped in a dream. His ears were filled with the pounding sound of his own heart, and in his vision, there was only what needed to be cut down and what had already been cut down.

"Huu..."

A deep exhale. But the air he inhaled was thick with the stench of burning and blood.

I simply swung my sword, chasing the faint echoes of the past—the trajectory of the most beautiful moment I had ever known.

Ssskuk.

Unable to clearly distinguish between illusion and reality, I relied on my qi senses instead of my dull, half-useless five senses.

What is the difference between inner energy infused with killing intent and killing intent infused with inner energy?

In the end, there is no difference.

Those who tremble at my killing intent cannot escape my perception. Not a single one among the Black Sky Sword Sect could elude my awareness.

Some collapsed to the ground, shaking in fear. Some clenched their teeth, brandishing their swords. Others screamed wildly, as if trying to deny their own terror.

But I could feel it all.

I knew what they were doing, what they were aiming for—even if I couldn't see them, I could sense it.

Especially those who harbored killing intent toward me.

The only thing left to do was to slip my sword into the already dismantled sword techniques of the Black Sky Sword Sect.

By severing the flow of their swordplay, I severed their lives.

Ssskuk...

"How...!"

A man, addressed as an elder, yet barely at the Peak Stage, clutched his blood-soaked abdomen, his face twisted in shock.

"You! You wretched spawn of our enemy! Where did you steal the Black Sky Sword Sect's techniques from?!"

"Spawn?"

Did they think they had seen us hiding together? It seemed Seo Mun-Hwarin's efforts hadn't been entirely in vain if that was how they perceived us.

But there was something far more important right now.

"I see. So to you, I am the spawn of an enemy. But to me, the Black Sky Sword Sect is the enemy itself."

To speak something aloud gives it power.

Black Sky Sword Sect. Enemy.

Just uttering those words caused my vision to reflect a scene from my mind.

The boundary between past and present collapsed, and before I knew it, I was standing in the heart of the crumbling Ironblood Hall.

Seo Mun-Hwarin told me to forget.

But how could I possibly forget?

I know this is Qi Deviation.

I am fully aware that I am forcefully recalling and clinging to a demon of my past.

But even knowing that—there are some things one simply cannot control.

My time had been frozen in this moment for far too long.

Tang Sowol had pushed my back, urging me forward, yet she too had crumbled before my eyes.

Nothing had changed.

I had always lost the things most precious to me.

Even when I swore I would never let go again—I lost them.

My birth parents, my newfound family, my lover, my future...

Even the life they wished for me to preserve in their final moments.

Nothing remained.

Everything slipped through my fingers like grains of sand.

And those losses had accumulated, layer by layer, at the bottom of my heart.

Resentment that had nowhere to go.

Regret.

Wailing grief.

Killing intent.

How could I possibly deny the existence of the Demonic Cult within me?

I could insult them as foolish, ridicule them for heading in the wrong direction, but I could never bring myself to tell them to abandon their vengeance.

Not when I had built up such a towering demon within myself.

And now, the dam I had barely been holding together was crumbling.

Once a dam bursts, it does not stop until every last drop is spilled.

Before I realized it, a low growl rumbled from my throat.

"Today, all of you will die."

The warriors of the Black Sky Sword Sect trembled violently under the suffocating pressure of my killing intent.

"Struggle all you want—you will die. Beg for your lives—you will die. Run away—you will die. Do nothing—you will still die."

Most of the first-class warriors who had accompanied them had already breathed their last.

Only two Peak Stage warriors remained, their resistance futile.

Grinding his teeth, the Sect Master of the Black Sky Sword Sect stood before me, having lost nearly all his subordinates before he could even make a move.

I pointed my sword at him.

"The Black Sky Sword Sect will be annihilated once more today."

"You bastard...!"

The Sect Master, consumed by rage, surged forward, black sword energy streaming from his blade.

His momentum was fitting for someone at the Sub-Perfection Stage.

His force was intimidating enough to slightly dull my movements.

But that was all.

He was still a master above my current level, and one day, he would likely reach the Flowering Stage.

He had the talent and the tenacity.

But what of it?

What mattered was that this man had once cut down Seol Lihyang.

That he had pierced Seo Mun-Hwarin's heart.

Though those events had not yet happened, his blind thirst for vengeance would inevitably reach her someday.

The endless cycle of resentment.

If I didn't sever it here, I would lose again.

And so, I had no choice but to end it now.

By ensuring there was nothing left to fester.

Grit.

I clenched my teeth and pushed the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art to its peak.

A dark red aura surged over my blade, enshrouding it completely.

The violent sword energy pulsed with thick, tangible killing intent, its potency beyond comparison to ordinary sword qi.

But it was still not enough.

I squeezed the very core of my dantian, not just drawing out my mindscape, but layering it onto myself.

Remember.

What had I thought about as I swallowed the blood of countless foes?

Swinging a sword simply because I was hungry wasn't enough.

Pride alone, the refusal to be disregarded, was not enough.

I cut.

Because I must.

Because I want to.

Because even if it is something I cannot cut—I will cut it nonetheless.

My dantian twisted, my energy channels contorted.

But in exchange, my inner energy erupted with even greater ferocity.

A sharp pain spread through me, and my narrowing vision was stained red.

So red that I could no longer distinguish whether it was fire, blood, or sword energy.

But there was one thing I knew with absolute certainty.

In this cursed world, there was only myself and my sword.

Only myself and my sword remained.

"Ah."

Gripping my sword's hilt, I felt a peculiar sensation, as if its roots had embedded into my palm.

As if my arm had elongated, seamlessly becoming the sword itself.

Or perhaps, the sword had become a part of me.

Every swordsman carries a blade within their heart.

But what do you call someone who has nothing left but their sword?

Before my regression, the Black Lotus Sect Master had called such a being—

A Sword Demon.

Even if the path I took was twisted, this was the greatest enlightenment I had grasped after devoting my entire life to the sword.

A state infused with my very existence—the culmination of a life where I had lost everything except the sword in my hand.

The Unity of Body and Sword.

"Aaaaaaahhh!!!"

Letting out a fierce battle cry, I swung my sword at the Black Sky Sword Sect Master.

The blood-red sword energy that had been rising like smoke coalesced, merging upon itself until it took on an entirely different form—

Sword Flame.

A pure manifestation of technique, refined to its densest form without the aid of willpower.

A flame of inner energy so intense that only those who had reached the Sub-Perfection Stage could barely ignite it—

And now, it blazed from my hand.

Then—

Kwaaaang!

A deafening explosion, too powerful to be the mere clash of two swords.

The first to be pushed back was the Black Sky Sword Sect Master.

Perhaps because he sought a swift conclusion, he had shrouded himself in nothing but raw, overwhelming sword energy, rather than the more delicate yet consuming nature of Sword Flame, which required precise concentration.

"Sub-Perfection?! How in the world...?"

The Sect Master's face twisted in disbelief as he hastily widened the distance.

But I had no time to waste answering such meaningless questions.

My body had not yet broken through the wall of the Sub-Perfection Stage.

I had partially cracked it, but I had not crossed it.

And yet, I was forcing my body to wield the enlightenment of my past life—

It was a miracle I had not shattered under the strain already.

To make matters worse, I had just directly exchanged blows in a head-on clash.

There were no shortcuts in external martial arts training.

Even if I had improved significantly, my body was still not fully matured.

It was not prepared to withstand the recoil of such collisions.

"Kuulk!"

I tried to suppress it, but in the end, blood seeped through my tightly clenched lips.

Whether it was due to my reckless energy manipulation or an internal injury from the last exchange, I couldn't be certain.

Upon seeing the thin trail of blood, the Black Sky Sword Sect Master's expression brightened.

"Hahaha! Yes! I knew it! There's no way a mere late-stage prodigy could reach such a level!"

"Tch. You talk too much."

Spitting out the blood that pooled in my mouth, I raised my sword once more.

My inner energy consumption was extreme, meaning I wouldn't be able to maintain this for long.

Every clash of swords inflicted small and large injuries due to the recoil.

My senses flickered unpredictably under the lingering effects of Qi Deviation.

But—

As long as I was enveloped in Sword Flame, I could cross swords with a Sub-Perfection martial artist.

That was enough.

If I could match swords, I would not lose to anyone.

Yes—anyone.

To say that nothing remained but my sword—

Was also to say that my sword had never once left my grasp.

I reined in the rampant killing intent that had been too wild to control.

The inferno raging within me continued to burn black, but it was not to indiscriminately consume everything around me.

That was the way of the Demonic Cult—

Not mine.

Only one thing mattered.

To fix my gaze solely on the enemy I had to cut down.

The distorted vision where past and present overlapped began to clear.

The stench of burning and blood that had clouded my senses faded.

The one facing me now was not the Black Sky Sword Sect of my past,

But the Black Sky Sword Sect Master of the present.

"As I said earlier—you will die today."

The suffocating killing intent that had enveloped the entire battlefield—

That had even left first-class warriors gasping for breath—

Now focused entirely on a single man.

Even for a Sub-Perfection martial artist, bearing the weight of such killing intent alone was no easy feat.

The Sect Master involuntarily swallowed dryly.

I spoke to him with unshaken certainty.

"Because I have decided so."

The moment I finished my words, I launched forward.

Puhwoong!

The explosive force from my Yongcheon Acupoint propelled my body forward.

A thunderous roar echoed as I slid across the battlefield with unnatural speed.

For those who had never seen it before, my Thunderclap Steps would have been utterly disorienting.

But perhaps it was ineffective against those who had once annihilated the Seo Mun Clan and stolen its techniques.

The Sect Master's eyes flashed with sharp intent as he calmly swung his sword.

Not merely sword energy—

But Sword Flame, burning fiercely.

The black flames flickering from his sword were menacing—

But I would not waver.

Because I had seen something far greater.

Before my regression, in the final moments of my life—

I had witnessed the overwhelming sword aura of Heavenly Demon Divine Art.

Compared to the endless darkness that had swallowed the world,

A mere black flame covering a single sword was insignificant.

I pressed forward without hesitation, closing the distance into the Sect Master's range before twisting my upper body.

Ssskuk.

The sound of flesh being cut.

Along with the fluttering of his robes, a part of the Sect Master's upper body was sliced away.

Perhaps due to the searing Sword Flame, the wound was jagged, like the trail of a serpent slithering across his flesh.

Yet, though the strike had cut through fabric and flesh—

It had failed to reach muscle and bone.

A shallow wound alone would not stop me.

"Haaaap!"

Using the momentum from my twisting motion, I spun my entire body—

A horizontal slash aimed to sever the Sect Master at the waist.

Perhaps he hadn't expected me to forgo defense entirely—

His eyes widened in alarm as he hastily retreated.

My sword strike cut through empty air.

But that was fine.

I had never expected to end it with a single stroke.

I launched forward once again, the deafening thunder of Thunderclap Steps roaring louder than before.

The Sect Master tried to counter as he had earlier—timing his swing at just the right moment.

But this time, he was too early.

Mixed within my movement was the footwork of Ghost Shadow Steps, deceiving both distance and speed.

His sword swung into empty space.

A miscalculation—

And that was all I needed.

Seizing the opening, I struck his sword head-on.

Kkaang!

The clash of Sword Flame against Sword Flame sent shockwaves rippling through the battlefield.

My entire body groaned under the impact, my organs churning violently.

But—

This was the opportunity I had been waiting for.

Even in this battle, my Sword Flame held greater purity.

And now, his attack had lost its strength due to his mistimed strike.

The moment his posture faltered and his body recoiled instinctively—

I drove my sword forward.

"You...! Are you looking down on me?!"

The Sect Master bared his teeth in fury and unleashed a relentless flurry of techniques.

Precise thrusts aimed at vital points.

Sweeping slashes infused with vortex-like force.

Crushing overhead swings meant to cleave me apart.

His movements were refined and heavy, fitting for one who had once ruled Jiangxi.

But—

I had already dismantled these techniques long ago.

Ching! Chaaang! Kadeuk!

Each thrust was dodged with subtle shifts in my stance.

The vortexing slashes lost their power when I pierced through their core.

And the overhead strike—too simple to block conventionally—was crushed before it could even begin.

I, too, had overexerted myself, my form breaking slightly under the strain—

But it didn't matter.

Because even as my stance wavered, my sword never stopped.

This was the culmination of my teachings from Wudang—

And the power of Unity of Body and Sword.

The duel reached its conclusion in a blur of clashing steel and raw hatred.

In the end—

Only I remained.

Kkaang!

With a final, resounding clash, the Sect Master's sword was sent flying.

His defenseless form staggered, shaking his head in disbelief.

"No... This can't be... This mustn't be!"

"It's not for you to decide."

I thrust my sword toward his head—

A spiraling thrust of Sword Flame.

Puhk!

His lifeless body collapsed.

The vengeance I once thought unattainable had, at last, been realized.

And in that moment—

I knew.

My long, endless mourning had finally come to an end.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Just because the Black Sky Sword Sect Master had fallen did not mean the battle was over.

There were still survivors of the Black Sky Sword Sect remaining.

But the problem was that I had expended far too much strength fighting him.

I could still swing my sword a few more times, but cutting down two Peak Stage warriors would be difficult.

Perhaps realizing this, the warriors—who had been paralyzed in shock by the battle and frozen at the sight of their master's death—once again raised their swords.

"N-Now! Avenge the Sect Master!"

"Don't let him catch his breath! Even if you die, don't die alone!"

"Tch. What a damn mess."

With a deep sigh, I quickly assessed the approaching enemies.

Two Peak Stage warriors at the front—slightly fatigued but still with plenty of fight left in them.

If this continued, it would turn into a grueling brawl.

But since I had already cut down the Sect Master with my sword, there was no need to engage them honorably.

Planting my sword into the ground, I reached into my robe and pulled out a small cylindrical container.

And then—

Puhwoong!

A loud explosion erupted, followed by a rain of countless black needle-like projectiles, engulfing the face of the nearest Peak Stage warrior.

The Ink-Smoke Needle Barrel—a hidden weapon launcher that used a small amount of gunpowder to fire a spread of deadly needles.

It was one of the self-defense tools I had received from Tang Jincheon before leaving the Tang Clan.

"W-What?!"

Panicked, the warrior swung his sword desperately, trying to deflect the oncoming projectiles—

But how could he possibly block so many of them with mere sword energy?

To counter something like the Ink-Smoke Needle Barrel, one had to either anticipate it and dodge preemptively or create a broad, extended sword energy barrier.

Unfortunately, he managed neither.

Needles embedded themselves into his flesh, and within moments, he collapsed, coughing up blood.

"Kuhuk!"

His complexion quickly turned a sickly shade of purple.

Of course, the needles alone had little killing power.

That's why they were always coated in lethal poison.

The others stood frozen, watching him convulse.

Even though he was Peak Stage, it seemed he wouldn't die instantly.

Perhaps, given time, he could expel the poison.

But for now, he wouldn't be able to move, completely focused on circulating his energy to suppress the venom.

That left me with only one Peak Stage opponent to deal with.

I could likely handle one in my current state—

But if there was an easier way, why not take it?

Gripping my sword with one hand, I reached into my robes with the other and pulled out a fist-sized glass orb.

No need for precise throwing techniques—

I simply hurled it.

The moment it shattered, the toxic mist trapped inside would spread.

The poison inside was extremely potent, and due to its nature, it did not discriminate between friend and foe.

But thanks to Tang Sowol, I had developed an immunity to plant-based poisons through years of consuming Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass.

I had nothing to worry about.

With this, even the remaining first-class warriors would collapse.

Realizing that he was the only one left to face me, the last elder of the Black Sky Sword Sect clenched his jaw, veins bulging in his neck.

"Y-You...! How dare you call yourself a warrior, a swordsman, when you fight so disgracefully?!"

"And what's so wrong with someone from the Tang Clan using hidden weapons and poison?"

I wasn't even using any real assassination techniques or poison arts—

Just relying on external tools.

But those were still techniques of the Tang Clan.

And I was the Tang Clan's son-in-law.

"If you have a problem with it, you should have prepared for it beforehand."

I smirked.

His trembling eyes were filled with fury—

But perhaps realizing that there was no way out of this alive, his gaze hardened with grim determination.

"Fine. Then bear witness to the final sword of the Black Sky Sword Sect—"

Puhk!

Before he could finish, something struck him like a hammerblow.

His body was flung backward, rolling across the ground.

His chest was caved in with a clear imprint of a fist.

A fatal strike.

I turned around in disbelief—

And there stood Seo Mun-Hwarin, fist clenched, lips tightly pressed together.

That last attack had been her Fist Wind.

For some reason, her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

I tilted my head in confusion.

"Weren't you supposed to stay out of this?"

"This one changed her mind again."

"???"

Wait...

Could the Ironblood Hall Master really afford to be this fickle?

Though this worked in my favor, it was still baffling.

I turned to Sangwan-geuk, seeking an explanation.

He had already slung his twin spears back onto his back and was now walking toward us, chuckling.

"The only promise this one made was to let you go peacefully if you defeated the Black Sky Sword Sect."

"Lies! You promised to help our Sect Master and stop the White-Haired Rakshasa!"

A surviving first-class warrior from the Black Sky Sword Sect shouted in despair.

But Sangwan-geuk merely shrugged.

"And your Sect Master is dead. Why should I honor a deal with a dead man?"

Then, with a smirk, his lips curled in mockery.

A sneer, filled with contempt for the weak.

"Did you really think anything would change just because the White-Haired Rakshasa stood aside?"

The warrior fell silent, lips trembling.

Because deep down, he knew.

Even if she hadn't interfered—

The outcome wouldn't have changed.

His shoulders slumped—

Yet his eyes burned with seething resentment.

"My brother... was killed by the White-Haired Rakshasa."

"And this one's brother also perished at the hands of the Black Sky Sword Sect."

"Even knowing it is meaningless... I cannot stop myself."

"Do you think this one is any different?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a scoff, lowering her stance as if ready to unleash another Fist Wind.

Sensing what she was about to do, I quickly stepped between her and the surviving warriors.

"Ah! Move aside! Don't tell me you're trying to protect them?!"

She stomped her foot in frustration, but I simply shook my head.

"Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

"I was the one who said I would annihilate the Black Sky Sword Sect."

"That's—"

Before she could argue, I threw the glass orb in my left hand.

Crash!

The toxic mist spread instantly.

Some of the remaining warriors tried to resist by covering their mouths and circulating their inner energy—

But none of them fled.

Even as blood dripped from their eyes, noses, and mouths, they charged at me.

Most collapsed before they could even reach me—

But a few managed to swing their swords.

Their attacks lacked strength, lacked even proper weight.

I easily dodged and deflected them, swiftly ending their suffering.

The last warrior, even in his dying moments, clutched my blade with his bare hands, his grip tightening as blood dripped from his palms.

Between ragged breaths, he coughed up blood—

And with his final ounce of strength, he spoke.

"Curse you..."

"Do as you wish."

"But... I understand why you hate us."

"What?"

That was unexpected.

My body tensed involuntarily.

His fading eyes met mine as he continued.

"I saw your hatred. I felt its weight. I always knew that those we wronged could hate us as much as we hated them... but only in theory."

"And now? Are you seeking forgiveness?"

"Hardly. I only hope... that one day, your own sins will crush you."

"Hah."

With those final words, his head slumped forward.

I scoffed.

What nonsense.

"I've known that for a long time."

Before my regression, as the Sword Demon, I had cut down every last member of the Black Sky Sword Sect.

How many people must have considered me their mortal enemy?

Perhaps one day, just as that dying man had cursed, I too would fall victim to the endless cycle of vengeance.

But in the end, the force that had come for me had not been my own karma—

It had been something else entirely.

A monster that turned all the grudges of Murim into nothing more than ancient, petty feuds.

The greatest being of all time—

The Heavenly Demon.

"I wonder if such a day will ever truly come."

If I were to die at the Heavenly Demon's hands again in this life, then all the grudges I had accumulated would scatter into meaninglessness.

And if I were to defeat the Heavenly Demon, I would stand as the greatest under the heavens—

In which case, there would be no one left to enact their vengeance upon me.

Either way, my grudge against the Black Sky Sword Sect ended today.

For now, that was enough.

"Huu..."

Turning back one last time, I looked toward the warrior who had been struck by my Ink-Smoke Needle Barrel.

But all that remained was a lifeless corpse, its head bowed in silent defeat.

It seemed that, while trying to expel the poison from the needles, he had been overwhelmed by the additional toxins in the Poison Mist—

His insides had likely melted from within.

"Is it truly over?"

Seo Mun-Hwarin approached, speaking cautiously.

I nodded.

"For now, it seems so."

"Then stand still."

With a self-assigned 'permission to approach,' she moved closer, struggling to support me with her small frame.

It was only a slight improvement—

But standing became just a little bit easier.

I glanced at her in mild surprise, but she was too focused on assessing my injuries, sweat beading on her brow.

"Your external wounds are severe, but your internal injuries are even worse. Your blood pathways are in shambles, and your dantian is twisted... You'll need a long time to recover."

"Well, as long as I have time, I'll heal."

"Do you even know how many years that might take?!"

"It won't take years."

Although I had modified it extensively, the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was fundamentally a flawed technique.

Its foundation was unstable—

It sacrificed the stability that came from pure refinement in favor of sheer destructive power, incorporating elements of Explosive Blood Technique.

Every change I made had been tested on my own body.

Naturally, over time, I had learned the least deadly ways to injure myself—

And, more importantly, the quickest ways to recover.

I wasn't sure about the external wounds, but the internal damage?

Three months, at most.

I was debating whether to explain this to Seo Mun-Hwarin—

When suddenly, Sangwan-geuk, who had been watching the battle with satisfaction, tossed a small pouch toward me.

"Catch."

"This is...?"

I opened the pouch to find it filled with small medicinal pills.

A strong herbal scent wafted out as I loosened the drawstrings.

"It's a special internal injury remedy used by the Black Lotus Sect. It has almost no effect on boosting inner energy, but it's excellent for healing. Made by Golden Venom Physician himself, so you can trust it."

"Golden Venom Physician?!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes widened in shock.

Well, it made sense.

The Golden Venom Physician was infamous—

A man who always wore extravagant golden robes to hide his protruding belly.

A peculiar healer who treated anyone, regardless of righteousness or villainy—

As long as they had the money.

His fees were outrageously high, and his refusal to treat those who couldn't pay made him a controversial figure—

But no one doubted his skill.

Still...

"I appreciate it, but why are you giving this to me?"

"Shouldn't you check if it's actually from the Golden Venom Physician first?"

"They say even a village dog can recite poetry after three years in a school. I've lived in the Tang Clan for three years—so at the very least, I can tell the difference between medicine and poison."

"Oh?"

In truth, I wasn't suspicious because I had seen Sangwan-geuk purchase medicine from the Golden Venom Physician in my past life.

He often handed out medicine to those he favored, using it to win over promising individuals.

And even if he did try to poison me—

I had the best antidotes from the Tang Clan.

As I stared at Sangwan-geuk, my body weary yet steady, his expression shifted.

A glimmer of goodwill—

And beneath it, a persistent, calculating greed.

"You really are something. What was your name again? Cheon... Cheon Ho?"

"Cheon Hwi."

"Right, Cheon Hwi. Here, take this too."

From his robes, he pulled out an ornate token—

Black lacquered ivory with golden engravings.

Prominently etched in red were the characters: (Black Lotus Sect Master).

...Wait, what?

I knew Sangwan-geuk was always looking for talent, but I never expected him to hand me a Lotus Lord's Token—

Especially when I was someone from the orthodox faction.

"That's a Lotus Lord's Token. If you present it at the main headquarters of the Black Lotus Sect, they'll treat you as an honored guest. You can visit whenever you like... though you won't be able to leave again."

"...Excuse me?"

"Just once. If you bring that token to the Black Lotus Sect, I'll grant you any request within my power. But after that day, you'll belong to my sect—you'll be my subordinate."

It was a bold offer.

One that clearly displeased Seo Mun-Hwarin.

"No! Throw it away immediately! This one will grant you anything you ask—so throw that token away at once! It reeks!"

She slapped my wrist as if I were holding something filthy.

But I knew exactly how valuable this was.

I had no intention of joining the Black Lotus Sect—

But one could never predict the future.

It was always wise to have a backup plan.

Avoiding her flailing hands, I tucked the token into my robes and clasped my hands in a respectful salute.

"Thank you for the token and the medicine. I can't promise I'll ever accept your offer—but I do appreciate the gesture."

"Heh. That's enough for now. I have a feeling I'll be seeing you for a long time to come."

With that, Sangwan-geuk turned and began retracing his steps.

"I have other gifts for you... but let's save those for later. For now, enjoy your victory."

Without a backward glance, he left.

Seo Mun-Hwarin watched him go, her expression sour—

But she quickly sighed and softened her tone.

"This one has much to say about you accepting that token... but I shall postpone it for now. First, we need to find a place to rest and recover."

"If we check into an inn and wait, the Murim Alliance will come find us eventually. I'll let them handle the rest of my treatment."

I leaned slightly against her for support, preparing to head toward the nearest village.

But then—

I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

"What is it now?"

"We should take what's worth taking."

Lying on the ground was the Black Sky Sword Sect Master's sword—

Its sleek, black blade completely unscathed, despite the intense battle.

"Solid Black Iron?"

I didn't care for the man—

But a fine sword had done no wrong.