

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 91-100

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“Is the Black Sky Sword Sect’s sword really that good?”

Lying on the bed, I was carefully inspecting my new sword when Seorin, standing with her hands on her hips, puffed out her cheeks in mild annoyance.

Suppressing the urge to poke her slightly puffed cheeks, I lifted the newly acquired sword for her to see.

“Look at this. Not only the blade but even the hilt and guard are entirely made of black iron. Except for the leather wrapped around the grip, it’s essentially a single solid chunk of metal.”

“Is that really such a big deal?”

“There are many swords that maintain structural integrity whether through interlocking designs or other methods. However, one forged entirely from solid black iron like this is probably the only one in existence.”

“I don’t even understand why black iron swords are supposed to be so special in the first place.”

“Huu. This is why martial artists...”

“What was that?!”

Seorin’s eyes flared with irritation. Letting out a sigh at her unreasonable anger, I continued my explanation.

“First of all, black iron is magnificent by nature. High-purity black iron absorbs all light, giving it a pure, jet-black appearance, yet when polished, it can shine like a mirror, reflecting one's face. Isn’t that already impressive?”

“...I-I suppose, but...”

Seorin wavered as if she had accidentally stirred a hornet’s nest and was now terrified by the swarm rushing out at her.

Poor thing.

For someone who doesn't understand the greatness of black iron swords, I figured I should explain further. But first, I made sure she couldn't escape by firmly gripping her wrist.

“Huaah?!“

“And that's not all. Black iron is much heavier than other metals, but in return, it's far more durable. –For someone who hasn't fully mastered both external and internal cultivation, it might seem cumbersome. But once one reaches the Peak Stage, a black iron sword undergoes a complete transformation.”

“H-However, aren't weapons made of cold iron generally considered superior? I just don't understand why you're so excited about this, Cheon Hwi-da, especially when it's a weapon from an enemy sect...!”

A surge of heat boiled deep in my stomach.

I could no longer hold back.

The moment I spoke, Seorin jumped in place, startled like a cat that had its tail stepped on.

Her expression was a mixture of shock and indignation, and I couldn't help but put on a stern tone.

“Senior Seorin. Have you never encountered bandits while traveling, defeated them, and looted their corpses for valuables?”

“T-This One has never done such a thing.”

Well, that was expected.

Unlike the Five Supreme Clans or the Nine Great Sects, Seorin didn't wield overwhelming influence. However, if she wished, she could have easily dominated an entire region.

Even if she hadn't, simply defeating sects like the Black Sky Sword Sect and other unorthodox factions and looting their wealth could have made her family rich for three generations.

But Seorin never did.

She only took what she needed, her sole focus being revenge, with no interest beyond that.

The only thing she took entirely for herself was the martial arts of the Seo Mun Clan.

A single-minded obsession. Perhaps that was what had allowed her to reach her current level.

Well, that was that, and this was this.

“If you don’t understand, just accept it. Normally, people take what they can use. It’s not the object that is guilty, but the person who misuses it.”

“That... is true.”

Seorin gave a small nod.

Good. At least I had managed to get her to accept that much.

Lightly pulling on her wrist, which I was still holding, I continued.

“Now, let’s get back to the point. The world considers swords made of ten-thousand-year cold iron to be the best. I agree. Other than its extreme rarity, it has nothing but advantages.”

A sword made from ten-thousand-year cold iron was so durable that it could withstand sword energy without breaking.

It wouldn’t be completely impervious—eventually, it would get chipped or bent—but the fact that it could endure such power was already remarkable.

Moreover, it had the ability to amplify internal energy, allowing one to unleash stronger sword qi or sword energy with the same amount of force.

In Murim, the only known sword made of ten-thousand-year cold iron was the Righteous Heaven Sword, a symbol of the Murim Alliance and an heirloom passed down among its successive leaders.

Since that was the extent of publicly available information, the sword might be even more extraordinary than people realized.

“But since ten-thousand-year cold iron is so rare, in reality, famed swords are usually made of either cold iron or black iron. I already explained about black iron, so let’s move on. How much do you know about cold iron?”

“Its defining traits are that it retains Yin energy, always feels cold to the touch, is resistant to rust, and shines with a silver hue. It’s also lightweight yet durable. Those should be its main characteristics.”

“Other than its resistance to rust, I consider all of those traits inferior to black iron.”

“...Huh?”

Seorin tilted her head in confusion, as if asking what nonsense I was spouting.

Seeing that, I began explaining in more detail, keeping my voice calm.

“Being lightweight is an advantage, but once a martial artist gains strength through external training and supports it with accumulated internal energy, all swords become relatively easy to handle. If you can wield your sword comfortably with one hand, any further reduction in weight becomes meaningless. On the other hand, heaviness is different.”

“That makes sense. As long as one can handle it, a heavier weapon can be an advantage. For swift swords, a lighter weapon is obviously beneficial, but as you said, beyond a certain point, weight ceases to matter.”

“Exactly. The essence of speed lies in how explosively one can concentrate power in a short moment. Of course, things change when considering flexible swords or illusionary sword techniques that rely on the blade’s elasticity.”

“But those weapons have specific purposes and are often custom-made, so we can set them aside. What about durability?”

“There’s no need to explain. The reason they use black iron blocks instead of cold iron blocks in the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting preliminaries is because black iron is stronger. That’s all there is to it. More importantly, black iron is capable of withstanding even rough internal energy use without issues.”

“Hah. When you put it that way, it does sound convincing.”

Right now, I was using the White Lotus Steel Sword that had been crafted for me by the Tang Clan, so I had no issues.

But before my regression, there were times when I had no money or couldn’t find a decent craftsman, forcing me to use cheap swords.

The heart-dropping moment when my sword suddenly snapped in battle...

Anyone who had experienced that would naturally become obsessed with obtaining a good sword.

After listening to my explanation, Seorin let out a deep sigh.

“Huu. I understand now. If a black iron sword is that important to you, then even if it belonged to an enemy, it’s only right that you continue using it...”

Seorin gazed at the black sword in my hand with a slightly regretful expression. At that moment, I realized—there was a misunderstanding.

“Senior Seorin, I need to correct one thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I do plan to make use of this sword, but I won’t be using it as it is.”

“...Huh???”

Seorin blinked in confusion, her face blank. I chuckled at her reaction and continued.

“It’s a solid piece of black iron, isn’t it? That means if I melt it down, I’ll have this much black iron to work with. I plan to take it to the Tang Clan, have it reforged, and request a new sword to be made.”

“C-Can you really do that?”

“It seems like it was crafted by a skilled blacksmith... but I’d say the Tang Clan’s artisans are a step ahead.”

Just as martial arts evolve over time, so too does the art of blacksmithing.

And the Tang Clan was a family where the most talented blacksmiths gathered. Given the exchange of techniques among them, it was only natural that their craftsmanship had progressed.

If this sword had been made by a truly legendary blacksmith, then perhaps age wouldn’t matter, but... I didn’t get the impression that this was such a masterpiece.

Hearing this, Seorin, who had been slightly downcast, immediately brightened and began nodding enthusiastically.

“Hm, hm! In that case, This One has no objections. No—This One wholeheartedly supports it! Do as you wish.”

“I planned to.”

Seorin and I exchanged amused smiles.

But our lighthearted moment was short-lived, as she quickly shifted to a more serious topic.

“By the way, how is your body? It seems you’ve taken half of the Golden Boar Physician’s medicine... Is it working well?”

“Yes. Haven’t I been bedridden for a week now? Most of my external wounds have healed, and the internal injuries—some of the torn meridians—have started to mend.”

The medicine was remarkably effective.

Originally, I had expected my recovery to take three months, but at this rate, it would be reduced to just one.

Of course, I was still far from a full recovery. But once I did heal completely, I would undoubtedly be much stronger than before.

Though it had been reckless, I had wielded an insight that touched the realm of the Transcendent Peak—it was only natural that my body would evolve.

At this point, my condition was practically halfway into the Transcendent Peak Stage.

By achieving Sword-Heart Unity, I had merged my qi and spirit, two of the three fundamental energies—jing, qi, and shen. Now, the only thing left was to cultivate more internal energy to reach full mastery.

...Though, to be honest, the amount of qi I needed to accumulate was quite a lot.

Still, expanding one's vessel was always harder than filling it.

This time had been a bit risky, and perhaps a bit too aggressive, but in the long run, it would certainly prove beneficial.

As I nodded to myself in thought, I noticed Seorin watching me with a firm expression.

Sensing that she had something important to say, I straightened my posture.

Her delicate lips parted slowly.

“This One has been thinking.”

“About what?”

“You claim that this happened as a result of your own choices, but to This One... it seems as though you were injured because of This One.”

“...Now, that’s quite the narcissistic assumption. I do feel a sense of kinship with you, Senior Seorin, and I do wish for your success, but it’s not to the extent that I—
mmph!”

Suddenly, a soft, warm sensation pressed against my lips.

Seorin, her brows slightly furrowed, had clamped her small palm over my mouth.

“Shhh. If This One says so, then it is so. Be quiet and just nod.”

Nod, nod.

As I slowly bobbed my head, Seorin finally flashed a faint smile, seemingly satisfied.

Satisfied she might be, but... she still wasn't letting go of my mouth.

“Regardless, after much thought, This One believes that This One bears significant responsibility for your injuries.”

If—

If Seorin had carried out her revenge thoroughly and left no loose ends.

If Seorin had listened to my words and refrained from participating in the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting.

If Seorin had not wavered at Sangwan Geuk's words and had stayed true to her path from the beginning.

As I quietly listened to the countless "ifs" she muttered, our gazes met.

Gulp.

For some reason, Seorin swallowed once before resolutely patting the bed beside her.

"L-Lie down. This One will personally use Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy to aid your recovery."

"...?"

Was it just my imagination...

Or did the way she said Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy sound just a little bit... sinister?

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Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy was something that was usually only done between those who shared a close relationship.

First, because of its difficulty. It required the practitioner to continuously infuse precise amounts of internal energy into the correct acupoints, which meant that both the giver and receiver had to be completely at ease.

More than simply allowing someone into your personal space, it meant letting them directly inject their qi into your meridians.

That was why Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy was something only entrusted to those who were both skillful and trustworthy.

Similarly, those who could perform it often hesitated to offer it. Unlike Bone Cleansing Acupressure, which purified one's meridians, or Qi Transfer Technique, which directly passed on internal energy, this technique simply accelerated healing and promoted general well-being—hardly an ability that was deemed necessary.

I had performed it for Seol Lihyang multiple times, but that was a special case.

Back before my regression, various circumstances had led to it, and besides, the current Seol Lihyang was unfamiliar with many of Murim's unspoken rules. More importantly, she trusted me completely, making it an easy decision.

From that perspective, it was quite surprising that Seorin—who was well aware of such conventions—was offering to do this for me.

Even before my regression, when we had spent far more time together, she had never made such a suggestion.

Had something changed?

“...You mean Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy? I must say, this is quite unexpected.”

“Why so? Don't tell This One that you don't trust—”

“Of course, I trust you, Senior Seorin. But is there really a need to go that far? It’s just a month of recovery. Besides, we’ve left traces everywhere, not to mention the fact that we’re practically announcing our presence to the world. It won’t be long before the Murim Alliance sends people our way.”

“...So you’re saying you won’t accept it?”

Seorin’s face fell slightly, looking a little dejected. I chuckled and shook my head.

“Of course not. If it’s your Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy, I’ll gladly accept it. I was just curious about the sudden offer.”

“Hmph. As This One said before, it is because This One feels responsible for your injuries. More than that, is it not a parent’s duty to care for their sick child?”

“...You’re still holding on to that? Look, I acknowledge that I’ve learned the Seo Mun Clan’s martial arts, and I don’t mind considering you my teacher. But suddenly gaining a foster mother at my age is a bit...”

I carried all my memories from before my regression. Even if I added up my past life and this one, I was still younger than Seorin, sure.

But that didn’t mean my sense of age had changed.

Perhaps she wasn't too pleased with my stubbornness. Seorin frowned slightly and tapped the bed again.

"We shall discuss that later. For now, lie down."

"...Fine."

I nodded and slowly turned onto my stomach. If I moved too roughly, something might tear open again, but as long as I was careful, it should be fine.

Shortly after settling in, I felt a slight weight press down on my lower back—Seorin had climbed on top of me.

"...Huu. A-Alright, let us begin."

"Why are you trembling...? Oh."

I had been concerned at the tremor in her voice, but—

The moment her small hands settled onto my shoulders, followed by a gentle pressure and the flow of qi into my meridians, any lingering doubts faded away.

Now that I thought about it, I had performed Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy for others before, but I had never been on the receiving end.

The warmth entering through my shoulders spread throughout my body, intensifying with each touch as Seorin's hands slowly moved downward.

Unlike when I performed my own qi circulation, this sensation was different—almost like a languid, comfortable energy filling me from within.

Yes, it was similar to... lying on a wooden porch on a sunny day, a cool breeze blowing, dozing off under the warm rays of the sun.

Even as I thought it, I found the comparison absurd—but it really did feel like that.

No wonder Seol Lihyang would turn into a puddle of mush every time I did this for her.

...Or was it a bit different for her?

Regardless, even though Seorin had only just begun, the effects were already apparent.

The flow of my internal energy had become smoother, and the damaged areas of my meridians were gently wrapped in warmth, accelerating their healing.

I wasn't sure exactly how much of a difference it would make, but it was clearly far more effective than simply circulating my own qi.

Squish, squish.

Seorin's hands, which had reached my lower back, slowly glided up again to my shoulders.

The flow of qi momentarily paused. Taking advantage of the break, I let out a slow, contented sigh.

“...Huu.”

“Ah! Was that alright?”

“Yes. This is my first time receiving Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy, but it feels better than I expected.”

“Fufu. This One was slightly nervous since it is also This One’s first time performing it, but seeing your satisfied expression, it seems This One is doing well. However... there is one problem.”

“...What is it?”

Seorin hesitated for a moment before taking a deep breath and speaking.

“...This One cannot reach.”

“...Pardon?”

“This One is too small. Sitting on your back, This One struggles to extend her arms all the way to your shoulders.”

“I never thought you were that small, though.”

“W-Well, of course, if This One really tries, it is possible! But... This One had hoped to replicate something seen before, yet it seems to be quite difficult for This One.”

Was it because my body wasn't fully healed yet?

She mumbled softly, her last words almost inaudible.

Instead of answering me directly, Seorin simply leaned in closer and reached forward.

Her soft palms pressed against the back of my shoulders.

Her breath—warm, almost ticklish—brushed against my ear.

“...Ah.”

Now I understood.

She could reach, but doing so meant she had to press in too closely.

It wasn't quite full contact, but considering her actual age despite appearances, she was probably somewhat conservative about such things.

Just as I was feeling a bit disheartened at the thought that she might stop after just one attempt—

“I-Insolence! Do not look at This One that way! There is a solution!”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“O-Of course! For swordsmen, only after reaching higher realms and achieving Sword-Heart Unity can they wield their blades with true mastery. However, for martial artists like This One, the body is the foundation, and thus, such techniques can be learned much earlier.”

“That makes sense.”

“But This One is capable of something even more impressive.”

“...More impressive?”

“Yes! Beyond simply utilizing the body to its utmost limits... This One can, to some extent, surpass the very restrictions of the physical form itself!”

“...And what exactly does that mean?”

"Fist techniques must be executed with fists, palm techniques with the palm, and kicking techniques with the legs—that's just a conventional notion that does not truly bind martial arts."

“Ah.”

In the end, both arms and legs were part of the body. So was there really any meaning in the distinction between punches and kicks?

Seorin's answer was clear—no, there wasn't.

At first glance, it seemed trivial. But when considered deeply, it was an incredible realization—an integration of martial disciplines.

A singular, unwavering insight that connected all of one's martial arts—an understanding that became more profound the higher one's mastery grew.

I was still absorbing the weight of her words when she suddenly added something that made me freeze.

“In other words, This One can use her feet just as well as her hands!”

“...Surely not.”

“Indeed! Would it not be simple to perform Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy with my feet instead?”

...Was this really correct?

A storm of doubts raged in my mind, but before I could voice them, Seorin abruptly stood up and placed her foot on my back.

Somehow, she had taken off her socks, and I could clearly feel the soft, smooth texture of her small foot pressing against me.

“Well then, let us begin once more.”

“W-Wait a moment—”

Press.

With just the right amount of pressure, Seorin's foot pressed down on my shoulder.

It seemed she wasn't just boasting—because surprisingly, the effect was excellent.

Though the point of contact had changed, the force of the pressure was nearly the same, and the qi she infused into my acupoints was just as steady as before.

“...Huh? What was that?”

“...Nothing. I was just saying thank you.”

“Hearing it out loud makes This One a little embarrassed.”

With a light chuckle, Seorin began pressing and kneading my back with her feet.

As the drowsy relaxation set in and her qi guided a smooth circulation through my meridians, I closed my eyes and let myself drift.

It looked a bit odd, but the effectiveness was undeniable.

The Dragon and Phoenix Gathering Had Been Temporarily Halted.

The legendary grandmaster, the White-Haired Rakshasa, had appeared in her rejuvenated state—only to kidnap the Tang Clan’s prospective son-in-law and vanish.

And she had even traveled alongside him for a brief while.

What an incredible tale.

The Murim gossipmongers found this far more intriguing than the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering itself.

Of course, the real reason the Murim Alliance had suspended the tournament was their desperate need to salvage their plummeting reputation.

After all, wasn't it a member of the Five Supreme Clans, the Tang Clan no less, whose kin had been abducted?

Considering the Tang Clan's extreme sensitivity to matters of vengeance, the Alliance had to tread carefully.

Still, outright canceling the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering would have been a humiliating defeat.

Thus, they settled on a temporary suspension while secretly directing all their efforts into tracking down Cheon Hwi-da—just as I had predicted when I spoke to Tang Sowol.

Finally, their patience bore fruit.

“So that is why we have come.”

“It is an honor that the Alliance Leader himself is showing such concern.”

“Hah! There is no need for gratitude. Though we have found another trail and are pursuing it, I suspect we will soon receive the same frustrating reports as before.”

Gwak Hu, the Divine Fist of Righteousness—Leader of the Murim Alliance. Few dared to speak to him so bluntly.

Unless it was someone like Tang Jincheon, the Poison King, a master of the Flowering Stage and the leader of a Supreme Clan, who had also just lost his future son-in-law.

Tang Jincheon stood with his arms crossed, seemingly restraining his temper... or at least giving that impression.

When he first heard in Wuhuan City that Cheon Hwi had been kidnapped, he had erupted in fury, nearly summoning both the Blood Venom Unit and the Dark Soul Unit on the spot.

But Tang Sowol had stopped him, secretly informing him that Cheon Hwi had been taken intentionally.

So he knew the situation wasn't as dire as it seemed.

Even now, his sharp demeanor was mostly an act, reinforced by Sowol's words.

But the Murim Alliance Leader, unaware of this, continued speaking with firm conviction.

"This time, it is not just a trail—we have confirmed information. He has been staying in a small village in Anhui Province."

"...What?"

Tang Sowol's eyes widened.

Cheon Hwi had assured her that he would return on his own.

If he successfully escaped and returned of his own will, it would strengthen their argument that Seorin was not a monstrous demon but a victim of circumstance.

But now he was staying somewhere?

Something must have gone wrong.

A grave look crossed Sowol's face. Seeing his daughter's concern, Tang Jincheon spoke up.

“Alliance Leader. You know as well as I do that with the White-Haired Rakshasa involved, a mere tracking unit won't be enough. You were already planning to go yourself, weren't you?”

“That is precisely why I brought it up.”

The Alliance Leader nodded without hesitation.

Thus, Tang Jincheon, Tang Sowol, and even Seol Lihyang joined the expedition to Anhui Province—where Cheon Hwi was supposedly staying.

And when they arrived, they were met with an unexpected sight.

“Eiht! Eiht! Is that still not enough?”

“No. Please step a little harder.”

There, lying face down, was Cheon Hwi.

And on top of him, pressing her feet into his back, was Seorin.

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People must constantly prove themselves in life.

Or rather, everyone already does—the only difference is whether they are aware of it or not.

But among all people, martial artists have an even greater burden of proof.

They must prove that, despite wielding a blade, they are not mere butchers.

They must prove that they are still strong, unyielding, and not to be challenged lightly.

A martial artist carries countless proofs on their shoulders.

If one who wields a sword wishes to coexist with those who do not, and if they wish to stand tall among their fellow swordsmen, then proving themselves is unavoidable.

And now, at this moment, I too was faced with a moment of proof.

“This is a misunderstanding.”

Tang Sowol looked down at me, her eyes cold as I lay on the bed.

Beside her, clinging closely, was Seol Lihyang, wearing a similar expression.

They didn't believe me at all.

Still, I had to prove it.

I had to prove that what had just happened was not something indecent...!

“Senior Seorin, could you please step aside for a moment?”

“Hiccup!”

Startled beyond measure, Seorin let out a hiccup as she scrambled off of me.

Perhaps it was thanks to the Golden Boar Physician’s medicine, Seorin’s Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy, and my focused qi circulation training, but my body was now almost back to normal in terms of basic movement.

I would still need more time before I could handle internal energy as smoothly as before, but at least I could move without issue.

Rising from the bed beside the now-barefoot Seorin, who stood there awkwardly, I spread my arms lightly and approached Tang Sowol.

It was best to ease the tension first before trying to explain anything.

“It’s good to see you again. How have you been? On my end, I’ve had some experiences that are almost too unbelievable to—”

“Stop. Do not take another step.”

Tang Sowol extended a single finger, halting me mid-motion.

Her gaze held distrust, unease, and... a hint of reluctant understanding.

Understanding what, exactly?

As I hesitated, she spoke in a trembling voice.

“Brother Cheon. Do you realize? Everyone here has come searching for you. Both Lihyang and I have been overwhelmed with worry, and yet we stand here now.”

“...I’m sorry.”

Tang Sowol had already heard my explanation before.

And precisely because she had, seeing me suddenly holed up in one place like this must have made her even more anxious.

“I am not looking for an apology. After all, had I been in your position, you would have done the same for me.”

“Of course. Even if you were at the very edge of the Central Plains, or even in the outer lands, I would find you.”

“Yes, I know that well. That’s why, after these past few days of torment, just seeing your face safe and sound has turned all that anxiety into relief.”

“...A few days?”

A middle-aged man, dressed in fine clothes yet giving off an oddly disheveled aura—likely the Murim Alliance Leader—raised an eyebrow in confusion.

Tang Sowol ignored him and pressed on with her words.

“However, there is something else that is troubling me right now.”

I had a bad feeling about what was coming next.

Before I could brace myself, she lifted the same finger and pointed between me and Seorin.

“The two of you. Just how did you become so close? And Brother Cheon... do you actually have... such a peculiar taste—”

“No.”

“Absolutely not!”

Seorin and I denied it in unison, reacting with such urgency that we nearly tripped over our own words.

“That was not anything strange! It was purely a medical procedure.”

“T-That is correct! I was using my feet, yes, but it was still Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy! Nothing more!”

Seorin flailed her arms dramatically, as if trying to physically convey her innocence.

But then, Seol Lihyang’s eyes widened, and she let out a startled cry.

“Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy?!”

“Y-Yes. Is... is there something wrong with that?”

“Of course, there’s something wrong!”

Tang Sowol’s voice dropped to a calm yet firm tone.

“Take your time adjusting to new titles, but for now, speak freely and explain. What exactly is so problematic about this?”

“What’s wrong?! The problem is that Seorin—no, Lady Seorin herself performed Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy for Cheon Hwi!”

“Lady...?”

Seorin’s eyes widened in shock, her mouth left hanging open.

She had only recently regained her youth, but she had long been used to being addressed with titles of respect.

So she wasn’t reacting to that.

No, what likely stunned her was that Seol Lihyang, who had always treated her like an equal, had just addressed her with such formal reverence.

Even if their bonds had been forged while her identity was hidden, Seorin had clearly cherished her relationship with Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang.

Seorin, still stunned, could only blink as Seol Lihyang’s face turned red.

“Qi Circulation Acupoint Therapy... That’s... that’s...!”

Unable to finish her sentence, Seol Lihyang seemed lost in a spiral of thoughts.

Perhaps she had imagined something far beyond reality.

Seorin tilted her head, looking puzzled, and took a step forward—

But before she could move any closer, a weathered wooden staff quietly intervened between her and the rest of us.

“We have a more pressing matter to settle first, do we not?”

The Murim Alliance Leader had finally made his move.

Tang Jincheon, observing from the side, took a step forward as well, positioning himself naturally in front of Tang Sowol and me.

The scene had shifted.

It was now clear—the Murim Alliance Leader and Tang Jincheon were containing Seorin while ensuring we remained behind them.

The situation was just as tense as before, but now, the focus had changed.

The air grew sharper, teetering on the edge of violence.

Seorin recognized this and took a step back before speaking in a calm voice.

“First, This One apologizes for concealing my identity and entering the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. Additionally, I apologize for causing a disturbance by taking Cheon Hwi with me.”

“Destroying half the tournament grounds and escaping leisurely with a hostage—that seems like too much to dismiss with a simple apology.”

“You are not wrong. Then how about this? Since This One has disrupted the Murim Alliance’s affairs once, I shall now assist the Murim Alliance—on the condition that it is a just and honorable cause.”

“...The Murim Alliance is not always purely righteous, but we strive to be. I did not expect to hear such words from the White-Haired Rakshasa of all people.”

“I rejected the Black Lotus Sect’s invitation. That alone should tell you where I stand.”

“The Black Lotus Sect? This situation seems more complex than I expected. Explain in detail.”

“That was my intention from the start.”

Shrugging, Seorin took a few steps back and sat down on the very bed I had been lying on.

“The reason I took Cheon Hwi... No, before that, I should first explain why I chose to participate in the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.”

She let out a small sigh before turning her gaze toward me.

I gave her a small nod.

Only then did she finally begin.

“When one reaches the Flowering Stage, they undergo a profound transformation. But do you know why so few reach the level of Rejuvenation?”

Seorin explained everything—

Everything except for a few key details.

She omitted the part where I had asked her to kidnap me.

She left out the overwhelming killing intent I had unleashed against the Black Sky Sword Sect.

But aside from those, she told them everything.

Her days as the White-Haired Rakshasa, consumed by revenge.

Her self-imposed exile, tormented by guilt over the excessive blood on her hands.

Her rise to the Flowering Stage while mastering the Seo Mun Clan's recovered martial arts.

How her regrets and lingering attachments influenced her transformation, allowing her to achieve Rejuvenation.

How she descended the mountain, now bearing the forgotten face of her childhood, and encountered us.

How she impulsively took me after recognizing traces of Seo Mun techniques in my swordsmanship, interrogating me for answers.

How she met the Black Lotus Sect Master due to the unfinished remnants of her past.

And finally, how I had wiped out the Black Sky Sword Sect.

By the time she finished, Seorin nodded slightly, a trace of exhaustion visible in her expression.

“...That is how it happened.”

“Honestly, it’s difficult to believe.”

The Murim Alliance Leader turned his gaze toward me and spoke.

“But... thinking it through, it’s not entirely unreasonable.”

He continued, his voice calm but calculating.

“It is not uncommon for survivors of supposedly annihilated clans or sects to exist. Nor is it unheard of for a dying master to pass their martial arts onto a fated successor.”

As the leader of the Murim Alliance, he was privy to the fates of many sects.

He had undoubtedly heard countless tales—of sects falling, of their martial legacies being passed down and resurrected.

“It also makes sense that the Black Lotus Sect Master would approach you personally upon hearing that the White-Haired Rakshasa had reached the Flowering Stage.”

The Black Lotus Sect Master was a man utterly consumed by ambition.

A man who sought greater power, more wealth, higher status, a vast army—one who desired to bring the world itself under his heel.

His natural talent aside, it was that insatiable greed that had driven him to reach his current level.

Though the Alliance Leader had lowered his staff, the sharp glint in his eyes showed he was still wary.

“However, there is one part I simply cannot believe. You expect me to accept that this young man—this lone individual—annihilated an entire sect? A sect led by a Sub-Perfection Stage martial artist?”

His words carried skepticism.

“Frankly, it is easier to assume that the White-Haired Rakshasa is hiding something and using this poor boy as a cover.”

Seorin let out a sigh, clearly troubled by how absurd it sounded.

But before she could respond, Tang Jincheon, the Poison King, spoke up.

“Alliance Leader. I don’t think she’s lying.”

“Tang Clan Leader. No matter how highly you regard your future son-in-law, there are limits to what one can believe. At the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, his strength was undoubtedly impressive—astonishingly so for his age. But Sub-Perfection Stage is an entirely different level.”

Tang Jincheon smirked, his arms crossed.

“Even when he was merely a first-rate martial artist, my son-in-law took down four Peak Stage experts.”

“...What?”

The Alliance Leader's brow furrowed.

Tang Jincheon nodded and continued.

“It was some time ago. A group with a grudge against the Tang Clan attempted to assassinate my daughter, Sowol. My son-in-law killed them. The leader of the assassins had already entered the Sub-Perfection Stage, though just barely.”

“Hoooh.”

A flicker of interest crossed the Alliance Leader's face.

Tang Jincheon smirked.

“Then there's the time he avenged us against a demon cultist. He was unstable at the time due to demonic influence, but he still took down two fully-matured Peak Stage masters back-to-back. In the end, he even briefly manifested sword energy.”

The Alliance Leader let out a slow exhale.

“That... is remarkable indeed. I know that martial prowess alone does not always determine victory, but sword energy is no trivial matter.”

Then, as if something had just occurred to him, he asked,

“By the way, who was the last one?”

“The branch leader of the Hao Clan.”

“Ah.”

“That fight was slightly different. The man was suffering from an internal cultivation backlash and was unable to utilize his full strength.”

Even after hearing the full story, the Murim Alliance Leader still looked unconvinced.

I smiled slightly and offered a respectful gesture.

“It seems I’ve delayed my introduction. I am Cheon Hwi-da.”

Then, I straightened my posture and met his gaze head-on.

“I understand that my internal injuries have dampened my presence, but... if you will permit me to draw my sword, I will prove myself.”

The Alliance Leader studied me for a moment.

Then, he nodded.

“If you are that insistent—go ahead. Draw your blade.”

At his approval, I reached for my sword.

Not the Tang Clan’s blade, which had been dulled and chipped from my last battle.

Instead, I drew the newly forged black iron sword.

I wasn't fully recovered yet, so my capabilities were limited.

But—

Revealing a glimpse of my presence was still well within my ability.

Focusing my mind, I gripped the cold hilt, my fingers wrapping around the metal like roots digging into the earth.

Somewhere deep inside, something clicked into place.

Like roots merging with the soil.

Like branches extending from a trunk.

A singular connection, uninterrupted and absolute.

—Wuuung.

Though I had infused no qi, the blade trembled, letting out a low, resonant hum.

A sound not of steel, but of something far greater.

The sound of a sword narrowing the gap between itself and its wielder.

The sound of Sword-Heart Unity.

A sound that proved my worth.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The body moves as the heart desires, and for one who has survived countless brushes with death, the sword has become an extension of the body itself.

The state of truly wielding a sword with absolute freedom is called Divine Sword Unity.

However, this is not a realm that can be naturally reached simply by increasing one's martial prowess.

Ultimately, martial prowess depends on how well one has unified their Mind, Energy, and Body and how skillfully they can control them.

To achieve Divine Sword Unity, one must not only unite their energy and spirit but also possess a profound understanding of the sword itself.

The Murim Alliance Leader, who had been watching with skeptical eyes, was stunned. Even Tang Jincheon, who had been wondering how to intervene, widened his eyes in shock.

The only ones in this place who were not surprised were Seo Mun-Hwarin, who already knew, and Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, who, despite sensing something unusual, had yet to grasp what it was.

Receiving the collective gaze of those around, he slowly raised his sword. And then, a vertical slash followed.

Even though it was swung slowly, the tip of the sword did not waver in the slightest. The clean, singular line that traced through the air showed no hesitation.

Heavenly Mountain Press—a technique from the Three Talents Sword Art that is too simple to even be called swordsmanship. It is nothing more than the most fundamental method of swinging a sword.

Because of this, there is no room for any refined techniques, nor is there an opportunity to showcase the strength of a trained body.

What it contained was pure enlightenment, nothing more.

In the past, he had been able to imitate something similar. But after achieving Divine Sword Unity, the level had completely changed.

No matter how much a movement is ingrained through repetitive training, it can never perfectly align with the ideal image drawn in one's mind.

But now, it was different. The sword moved exactly as he thought.

As long as his heart remained unwavering, the sword would not waver.

As long as his will remained unbroken, the sword would not break—no matter what it faced.

Of course, this was only in theory. Against a greater force, it could still be deflected or even shattered.

However, that would merely be the outcome. It did not mean there would be any flaw in the process.

Each strike was his absolute best—the most perfect blow he could currently deliver.

For someone like him, who wielded a style that relied on drawing forth whatever was needed in the moment rather than overwhelming an opponent with predetermined forms, Divine Sword Unity was an invaluable enlightenment.

Or perhaps, it was the other way around. After all, it was only after achieving Divine Sword Unity in his past life that he began wielding such an unconventional sword style.

With a faint chuckle, he retrieved his sword.

His body, not yet fully healed, was already beginning to feel the strain from exerting his mental strength.

Maintaining his stance, he sheathed his sword, took a steady breath, and turned toward the Murim Alliance Leader.

"Would this be sufficient proof?"

"It is. It most certainly is."

The Murim Alliance Leader let out a deep sigh, his voice drained of energy. Shaking his head in disbelief, he muttered,

"I'm nearing sixty now—I've lived long enough, experienced enough, and though I was born a beggar, I managed to rise to the position of the Murim Alliance Leader. I thought I'd seen it all... And yet, here I am, astonished once more."

"I have only grasped the beginning of enlightenment. I have not yet fully reached the Sub-Perfection."

"Bah! Modesty taken too far is just arrogance. Divine Sword Unity, of all things... Haah. No matter how I think about it, this isn't an enlightenment that someone barely past twenty should have achieved."

The Murim Alliance Leader tilted his head repeatedly, as if he still couldn't comprehend it.

And that was only natural.

The most crucial aspect of Divine Sword Unity was how one understood the sword.

Even those who had wielded the blade for a lifetime—those at the very pinnacle of the martial world—often failed to reach this state.

And even among those who had achieved Divine Sword Unity, the way they integrated it into their martial arts differed vastly.

For instance, his approach was to place the sword entirely under his will, manifesting the ideal swordplay he envisioned within his Heartscape.

But in his past life...

Cheon Hwi-da—the Sword Demon—one of the few true masters of the Unorthodox Sect, had a completely different perspective.

Rather than making the sword a part of himself, he sought to become the sword.

Thus, he wielded swordsmanship not with a blade, but with his hands and feet.

Frankly speaking, whether he was strong or at a level beyond measure was beside the point—what mattered was that, from his own standpoint, it was nothing short of bizarre.

Of course, most of the Unorthodox Sect's masters were eccentric, but the Sword Demon was particularly unsettling.

Perhaps it was because his enlightenment was the complete opposite of my own.

Shaking his head, he cast aside the memories that had surfaced.

Meanwhile, the Murim Alliance Leader also seemed lost in some strange thought, for he, too, began shaking his head.

"Surely, you're not another old monster who has reversed aging, are you?"

“Huk!”

At those words, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes widened in shock.

Her expression was strangely serious.

Well... technically speaking, I had experienced something similar.

The only difference was that it wasn’t just my body that regressed, but everything except for my memories.

"Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, the Alliance Leader was only joking. Don’t take it too seriously."

"But... but if you, like This One, had reversed your aging... And if you were simply far better at concealing it than This One... Wouldn’t that explain everything?"

“Do you really think the Tang Clan would take me in as a son-in-law without verifying something like that?"

“Ah.”

Caught off guard, Seo Mun-Hwarin turned to look at Tang Sowol, her mouth slightly open.

Tang Sowol, meeting her gaze, hesitated before shaking her head with an awkward expression.

"Um... White-Haired Rakshasa senior, at first, I also thought that Cheon Hwi-da might be an old monster disguising himself after reversing his aging, but—"

"Huweok!"

Seo Mun-Hwarin clutched her chest as if she had suffered a fatal blow.

Perhaps, unconsciously, she had been comparing herself to Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang.

It was an amusingly innocent scene.

Tang Sowol, having unknowingly stabbed Seo Mun-Hwarin with her words, flashed a bright smile and continued,

"But in the end, it turned out he was just ridiculously talented!"

"...I... I see..."

Seo Mun-Hwarin barely managed to force out a response, slowly gathering herself.

"Kuhum-hum. Ahem. I understand now that you can no longer address This One as you did before. But... could you at least refrain from calling This One by that title?"

"Ah."

Perhaps because she had heard a bit of Seo Mun-Hwarin's story before, Tang Sowol recalled that she did not particularly like her epithet. She nodded in understanding.

“Very well. Up until now, I have called you Lady Seo, so... hmm, how about Lady Seo Mun?”

“This One is not so shameless as to insist on such formalities.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed a little downcast, but she made an effort not to show it.

Well, considering her age, it had been a long time since she could be called Lady.

Tang Sowol pondered briefly before clapping her hands together as if she had come up with a good idea.

Clap!

“Ah! Then I’ll just call you Sister Hwarin!”

“S... Sister?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked in confusion. Tang Sowol, still smiling brightly, nodded her head.

“Yes! If using your title is out of the question, then that leaves only your name. We’ve traveled together for some time now, and judging by your appearance, there’s no way I could call you an elder... Besides, you did oversee Cheon Hwi-da’s martial arts, didn’t you?”

“That... is true.”

Now that she thought about it, Seo Mun-Hwarin had mentioned sparring with him when she explained what had happened after his abduction.

Of course, it was all just an act—an attempt to gain his favor so she could adopt him as her son. But knowing that such an explanation was a convenient distortion of the truth, Seo Mun-Hwarin awkwardly fidgeted with her hair.

For a brief moment, she remained silent—until Tang Sowol, still smiling, lowered her voice and whispered softly.

“And besides... there are quite a few things I’d like to discuss with Sister Hwarin. Mostly about Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Hiccup!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out an involuntary hiccup, glancing warily at Tang Sowol. After a moment of hesitation, she nodded cautiously.

For some reason, even Seol Lihyang flinched and started eyeing Tang Sowol nervously.

I had no idea what this was about, but I hoped it would resolve itself smoothly.

As I took a step back to distance myself, the Murim Alliance Leader, who had been watching the exchange with interest, nodded in understanding.

“Hmmm... Hmm... Well, I see how things are. While the reputation of the Murim Alliance has taken a hit, no one was killed or gravely injured. Given the circumstances, if we have received a pledge of assistance from a Flowering Stage master like... ehem, Seo Mun-Hwarin, then there is no need to escalate matters further.”

“Is that... truly the case?!”

“Of course, it is not a final decision. Even though I am the Alliance Leader, I cannot unilaterally decide everything within the Murim Alliance. However, I can suggest that we put an end to this here. And...”

The Murim Alliance Leader paused for a moment.

Then, he straightened his posture, raising his head high.

But in his stance, there was no arrogance—only unwavering righteousness.

Steady and firm.

A presence that could only be exuded by a man who had upheld his principles through the relentless trials of the world.

At this moment, he was not merely the leader of the Murim Alliance—he was Gwak Hu, the Righteous Celestial Blade, a renowned chivalrous warrior of the orthodox sects.

“After this incident, I conducted my own investigation into you. I found that, during the destruction of the Seo Mun Clan, you did not indiscriminately slaughter those who were uninvolved.”

The Black Sky Sword Sect, which I had annihilated, was not famous enough to be called a prestigious sect, but it was a sizable martial school.

They had one Sub-Perfection Stage master, three Peak Stage masters, and numerous first-rate martial artists.

The reason they had been able to produce so many skilled warriors in just a few decades, despite being a sect rebuilt from the ashes of the Seo Mun Clan, was simple.

It was because of Seo Mun-Hwarin's standards.

Although she had been consumed by vengeance in the past, she had still made an effort to avoid crossing the line as a human being.

During her rampage against the Seo Mun Clan's enemies, she had only slaughtered those directly involved and those who had actively tried to stop her.

In other words, if someone had been a mere child or a youth back then, she had let them flee.

Because of that, the Black Sky Sword Sect had been able to flourish. And Seo Mun-Hwarin had no choice but to watch as the grudges she had spared grew stronger and returned to haunt her.

In the end, it had all been settled by my hand.

“Because of this, many fear you for your ruthless methods and the blood you have spilled... but not a single person has denied that your vengeance was justified. That is... except for you.”

The Murim Alliance Leader smirked slightly, lifting the corner of his mouth. His voice was filled with certainty.

“It is infuriating that you concealed your identity and caused a disturbance at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, pretending to be a mere junior...

But wanting to escape the brand of the unorthodox and live a proper life—no matter how you went about it—I cannot bring myself to say that desire was wrong.”

The man who had spent his entire life chasing righteousness, who had devoted himself to the ideals of chivalry, now looked Seo Mun-Hwarin in the eyes and spoke words of unreserved encouragement.

“So prove it. Prove that your wish is not misguided.”

“This One....”

Seo Mun-Hwarin opened her mouth, as if she had something to say, but in the end, she could not bring herself to voice it.

Her lips moved silently.

She was clearly shaken by the unexpected support from the Murim Alliance Leader.

But if it was Seo Mun-Hwarin, she would do well.

And if needed, I could help her.

I still remembered the words she had spoken to me before her death—her final wish.

She did not want to be remembered as the flames that had consumed a manor, nor as the blood that had stained the white snow.

She wished only to be a single, crimson flower.

And when the winter-blooming camellia finally withered, spring would come at last.

Seo Mun-Hwarin would find her spring, too.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"By the way, you mentioned you sustained internal injuries—are you alright, Cheon Hwi-da?"

"Well, the medicine worked well. And Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin's Acupuncture Blood Release helped, too."

As I shrugged, Seo Mun-Hwarin flinched and glanced nervously at Tang Sowol. Seol Lihyang, who had been shrinking back at the mere mention of Acupuncture Blood Release since earlier, did the same.

Despite their awkward reactions, Tang Sowol paid no mind. She placed her hands on her hips and urged me forward.

"Don't just say you're fine—explain your condition in detail."

"Would you like to check for yourself?"

I casually extended my arm. Without hesitation, Tang Sowol grasped my forearm and ran her fingers over it, nodding in satisfaction before releasing it.

"Your arm is quite firm. I rather like that."

"...Weren't you supposed to be checking my internal injuries?"

"How could I examine someone else's body properly while we're walking, let alone my own?"

"Then why did you touch my arm?"

"Because I wanted to. Is there a problem?"

She said it so boldly that I had no response.

After all, she was my fiancée, and it wasn't as if I particularly disliked it.

However, her behavior must have been quite the sight, as Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin leaned in and whispered to each other.

"It's good that they seem to have a strong relationship as an engaged couple, but... watching them is a little much."

"Tang Sowol and Cheon Hwi-da have always been like this. Haven't you seen it a few times, Elder?"

"E-Elder?!"

No, it seemed like Seol Lihyang was just using the opportunity to tease Seo Mun-Hwarin out of sheer pettiness.

As I glanced at Seo Mun-Hwarin, who looked dispirited by Seol Lihyang's oddly cold remark, another request for my arm came from a different direction.

"Son-in-law, let me see your arm for a moment."

"...All of a sudden?"

I instinctively looked at Tang Jincheon with wary eyes, but he merely shrugged.

"Now, now. Is that how you look at your father-in-law, who rushed all this way out of concern for your safety? Unlike Sowol, I can at least perform a basic pulse diagnosis while moving, so just hold out your arm."

"Yes, sir."

He must have already heard about my condition from Tang Sowol, but he had likely been deeply worried before that.

For the past three years, I had been a part of the Tang Clan, and Tang Jincheon was someone who cherished his family.

With an awkward smile, I extended my arm. Tang Jincheon checked my pulse, sending a faint trace of internal energy into my body to assess my condition.

After a thorough examination, he let out a relieved sigh and nodded.

"From the way you wielded your sword earlier, I could tell your condition wasn't too severe, but I see now that your internal injuries were worse than I thought. You're much better now, but still."

"Yes. I was lucky."

I had known that the Golden Venom Physician had taken a liking to me. But I hadn't expected him to go as far as to provide me with such a rare and valuable remedy.

And then there was Acupuncture Blood Release—something even Seo Mun-Hwarin hadn't done for me in my past life.

With all these miraculous treatments, it would have been strange if my recovery had been slow.

"Still, you need to rest for a while. Unfortunately, it looks like you'll have to sit out the rest of the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering."

"The Dragon and Phoenix Gathering isn't over yet?"

"It was temporarily suspended, but now that the situation has settled, it'll resume soon."

"...Huh."

I had assumed they would push forward with the competition, even if it wasn't outright canceled, and that a winner would have been decided by now. I had already given up on obtaining the Great Return Pill...

But now, things were different.

"Tsk tsk. Don't get any funny ideas."

"And what idea would that be, exactly?"

"What else? You're probably thinking it's worth giving it a shot. I've spent enough time observing you to know."

"Is it not possible? I think I could manage even without using internal energy."

"Don't talk nonsense. If you push yourself unnecessarily and reopen your wounds, it'll be a much bigger hassle."

I let out a long sigh of disappointment.

Tang Sowol, noticing my reaction, crept closer and asked,

"Why do you suddenly look so down, Cheon Hwi-da? Did Father scold you again?"

She shot a playful glare at Tang Jincheon. In response, he simply chuckled and shook his head.

"I was scolded by my father-in-law, but I also gave him reason to."

"Hmm. Then let me take a guess."

"Go ahead."

"You were thinking that since the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering isn't over yet, you might as well participate, weren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"I was standing right behind you, listening the entire time."

Tang Sowol smirked, shrugging her shoulders. Then, as if scolding a stubborn child, she lightly patted my back and continued.

"If your injuries are bad enough that you can't even sense someone this close, you should really just rest. Given your age, you can always aim for the next gathering."

"Five years is too long."

"If you're only worried about missing out on the chance to observe high-level martial arts, you don't need to fret. Even after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering ends, many participants stay in Wuhuan City to hold private sparring matches. Some do it to fight opponents they didn't get to face during the tournament, while others challenge those they already fought for a rematch."

"That is good news. But that's not my only reason."

"Then why push yourself despite knowing you're not in the best condition?"

"It's because of the Great Return Pill."

"...Ah. No, more precisely, it's because of internal energy, isn't it?"

"That's right."

As a child, I had never doubted that I was a genius.

I had even suspected that I possessed a special constitution.

But in truth, the only thing I was born with was sword talent.

Since I started learning martial arts late, my meridians had already hardened, my muscles and bones were nothing exceptional, and my foundation was built on unorthodox techniques, making my internal energy impure.

Of course, thanks to the insights I gained from my past life and the numerous elixirs I received from the Tang Clan, my meridians had expanded significantly.

But compared to those who had undergone Bone Cleansing and Marrow Washing from childhood and consumed all sorts of rare elixirs, I was still lacking.

I had refined my internal energy by tempering it with my killing intent, making it more obedient to my will and significantly increasing its potency.

However...

In the end, I would have to keep wielding my killing intent, and the more I fought at full strength, the greater the strain on my mental energy.

In a short battle, it wouldn't be an issue. But in a prolonged fight, I would quickly find myself at a disadvantage.

That said, I wasn't in a bad situation.

Even though I had started receiving support late, the Tang Clan's backing was something I couldn't have even imagined in my past life.

And above all, my greatest strength was how quickly I could elevate my martial realm through enlightenment.

If I could just replenish my internal energy, I could step into the early Peak Stage. That would be enough to handle most opponents.

The problem, however, was that my ultimate enemy was the Heavenly Demon.

To surpass not just the strongest under the heavens, but the greatest across all ages, I needed to push myself harder and move faster.

"I... I must become stronger."

"Aren't you already growing stronger at an incredible pace?"

"It's not enough."

It only seems like I'm advancing rapidly because I'm regaining my past strength.

Once I reach the Sub-Perfection Stage and face the wall I couldn't break even in my past life, I will struggle just like everyone else.

Or worse... I might never break through it at all.

For a while, I had only been facing warriors my own age.

But when I witnessed the clash of auras between the Black Lotus Sect Master and Seo Mun-Hwarin, I realized something.

Even if I regained all my past martial prowess, the realm of Flowering Stage masters was still an unfathomable peak.

And even those Flowering Stage masters had been slaughtered like insects before the Heavenly Demon.

The image of the world engulfed in demonic energy, with that man standing at its center—expressionless and unmoving—flashed through my mind.

My brow furrowed involuntarily.

Watching me in silence, Tang Sowol suddenly reached out.

Press, press.

She gently pressed on my creased brow, smoothing it out before speaking in a calm voice.

“There’s no need to be so impatient.”

“But...”

“I may not fully understand, but I can see that you’re frustrated with yourself, Cheon Hwi-da. If that frustration doesn’t turn into obsession, it can be a powerful drive for growth. Even so, I will still say this—there’s no need to rush.”

“Why? If you’re worried about Qi Deviation, you don’t have to be. I’m always cautious, and... my obsession isn’t anywhere near the level that would lead to inner demons.”

“That’s good to hear. But that’s not what I meant.”

Saying that, Tang Sowol suddenly pulled Seol Lihyang—who had been eavesdropping while pretending not to—closer.

“T-Tang Sowol?!”

Seol Lihyang flailed in surprise, but Tang Sowol held her firmly, pressing their shoulders together.

Then she spoke.

“It was a while ago, but do you still remember? Just as you are my strength, I promised that I would also be your strength.”

“Of course, I remember.”

“There’s no need for you to do everything alone.

Where you lack, we will make up for it.”

“Uh... Me too?”

Seol Lihyang looked around anxiously, uncertain, but Tang Sowol merely tilted her head as if it were obvious.

“Isn’t that right? Lihyang, didn’t you say you wanted to become someone who could one day repay Cheon Hwi-da for his help?”

“Kyaaah! W-why are you saying that out loud, Tang Sowol?!”

Seol Lihyang hastily clamped her hands over Tang Sowol’s mouth and darted a glance in my direction.

So she had been thinking that way.

The two of them bickered back and forth for a moment until Tang Sowol bit Seol Lihyang’s fingers lightly, making her pull away with a defeated huff.

Finally free, Tang Sowol took a deep breath and continued.

“Hoo... Anyway, if you remember that promise, then just watch us this time. See how strong Lihyang and I have become. See if we are still just people you need to protect.”

I felt like I had been struck on the back of the head.

Tang Sowol was right.

I knew that both she and Seol Lihyang had talent equal to or greater than mine.

And yet, I had been thinking only of how I needed to handle everything alone—even after she had scolded me for this exact mindset before.

I understood why.

Their deaths had left the deepest scars in my memories.

Tang Sowol had been slain by the Heavenly Demon before I was.

And Seol Lihyang had died in my arms.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was different. She was already an absolute master at the Flowering Stage, and in my past life, she had been like a mentor to me.

But for Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, my failure to protect them had left behind an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

However...

That wasn't the case anymore.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang were still alive.

They weren't injured or suffering like they had been in my past life.

"...Fine. I'll just watch quietly this time."

“Fufu. A wise decision, Cheon Hwi-da. I... might struggle a bit, but Lihyang here will definitely win and bring back the Great Return Pill!”

“Wha—?! Me?!”

Seol Lihyang, still trapped in Tang Sowol’s grasp, practically jumped in shock.

“H-how?! You do realize I’m still just a first-rate warrior, right, Tang Sowol?!”

Tang Sowol chuckled and teased her.

“But you can’t use poison techniques in the competition.”

“...That’s true, but... that’s true, but—!”

Seol Lihyang looked utterly overwhelmed as she struggled to break free.

At that moment, our eyes met.

I clenched my fist slightly and gave her a nod.

“I’ll be cheering for you.”

“Cheon Hwi—you too?! Ugh, fine! Fine! I’ll do it! I don’t know about winning, but I’ll make sure to shock everyone, so just you wait!”

“Alright. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

I smirked and nodded, and a warm atmosphere settled around us.

I could feel it in the air.

Tang Jincheon and the Murim Alliance Leader were both watching with satisfied expressions, nodding to themselves.

Well, I could understand why.

It was the kind of youthful, innocent scene that could only be witnessed at this age.

Perhaps because the mood had relaxed too much...

Or perhaps because she thought it was the perfect moment...

Seo Mun-Hwarin suddenly dropped a bombshell.

“Hmm-hmm. That is all correct. And do not forget—Cheon Hwi-da, you have This One, your mother. Should the need arise, you may rely on This One as well.”

...This is going to drive me insane.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Hmm-hmm. That is all correct. Cheon Hwi-da, you have This One as your mother. Should the need arise, you may rely on This One as well.”

At Seo Mun-Hwarin's words, everyone except for her froze in place.

Even Tang Jincheon and the Murim Alliance Leader, who had intentionally stayed out of the conversation and simply laughed along, stopped in their tracks and turned to look back.

Tang Jincheon's expression, in particular, was priceless.

His eyes were wide open, his mouth hung agape, and for a brief moment, he even forgot to breathe.

The Tang Clan had a rule that, if possible, family members had to share at least one meal together daily. Since I had been part of the clan for quite some time, Tang Jincheon and I had spent plenty of time together.

And yet, I had never seen him this shocked—except for that one time when Tang Sowol, feeling bloated after a night out at the capital's night market, rubbed her stomach while looking at me.

For the record, that was only because we had overeaten.

We hadn't done anything beyond holding hands, but I still had to spend the entire night defending myself from baseless accusations.

Anyway, Tang Jincheon, who was currently experiencing a shock of similar magnitude, turned to look between Seo Mun-Hwarin and me before hesitantly asking in a trembling voice,

“W-what did you just say? Are you telling me my son-in-law is actually your long-lost son?!”

“That is not the case. This One was consumed by revenge, and afterward, This One lived buried in regret. There was never any room for romance.”

“Then what in the world is with this mother talk?”

“No matter how you look at it, Cheon Hwi-da has learned the martial arts of the Seo Mun Clan. It seems he learned it through a proper source and by legitimate means, so This One does not intend to challenge that fact. However, it is not something This One can simply ignore, either.”

Perhaps because he understood Seo Mun-Hwarin’s circumstances, Tang Jincheon carefully chose his words before speaking.

“...Are you planning to restore the Seo Mun Clan? By adopting my son-in-law as your heir?”

“If Cheon Hwi-da were to accept This One’s wishes, then yes.”

“That sounds like you intend to respect my son-in-law’s decision above all else.”

“That is correct. In the end, this is merely This One’s selfishness. This One has already been rejected multiple times.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin slumped her shoulders.

She shot a glance my way before continuing.

“Even so, This One cannot simply give up. Aside from This One, Cheon Hwi-da is the last remaining trace of the Seo Mun Clan in this world. How could This One turn a blind eye to that?”

“...I understand. But you must also understand that, from the Tang Clan’s perspective, this is an extremely delicate matter.”

“Of course, This One knows. If Cheon Hwi-da were to suddenly gain the name of the Seo Mun Clan, it would be one thing. But if word spread that the infamous White-Haired Rakshasa was his adoptive mother, his reputation would undoubtedly suffer.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked at me and spoke in a careful voice.

“That is why This One intends to prioritize Cheon Hwi-da’s opinion above all else. That does not mean This One will give up, however.”

“...Ah.”

The moment I saw her eyes, I understood.

I finally realized why she had chosen to bring this up now.

Much of our recent conversations had revolved around Seo Mun-Hwarin’s future.

Unlike in my past life, she had not joined the Black Lotus Sect.

But that didn’t mean she was welcomed among the orthodox factions, either.

For now, she had resolved the situation at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering by assisting the Murim Alliance.

But that didn't mean she could just join the Murim Alliance either.

There were too many eyes on her, too much doubt weighing on her shoulders.

And she had no allies in that world.

That was why I had quietly suggested an alternative.

A path that could benefit both her and myself.

She could take refuge with the Tang Clan.

Everything she had said up until now had been building up to this.

She was silently pleading with me to handle the situation well.

Acknowledging her desperate gaze, I gave a small nod before speaking.

"Father-in-law, I have a suggestion. Would you be willing to hear me out?"

"What is it?"

"To be honest, the idea of becoming Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin's adopted son is a bit difficult to imagine. However, it is also true that the martial arts of the Seo Mun Clan form a significant part of my foundation. So, what if..."

I paused for a moment before lowering my voice slightly.

"...What if Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin were to become a guest of the Tang Clan?"

"A guest?"

"Yes. I would benefit from learning her martial arts. She would gain an opportunity to persuade me. And the Tang Clan would gain a powerful ally, should the need ever arise. Wouldn't that be a mutually beneficial arrangement?"

"A mutually beneficial arrangement..."

Tang Jincheon stroked his chin, lost in thought.

Then, after a brief silence, he smirked and nodded.

"Son-in-law, be honest with me. Did you two plan this out in advance?"

"...I hadn't intended to propose it this way, but I was planning to ask you eventually."

"Hah. You sly little fox. Fine. There might be some initial pushback, but having a Flowering Stage master as an ally far outweighs any concerns. Just don't go beating around the bush next time. You can just tell me directly."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. Let's do this properly."

Tang Jincheon let out a hearty laugh, patting me on the shoulder.

Then, as if he had suddenly remembered something, he casually asked,

“Oh, so all this talk about adoption was just a formality, then? There’s no need for that. The elders might hesitate at first, but I can convince them soon enough.”

“...Uh. Well...”

I trailed off awkwardly, causing Tang Jincheon to give me a puzzled look.

Beside him, Seo Mun-Hwarin placed her hands on her hips and cleared her throat.

"Ahem. This One is entirely serious about this matter."

“...Son-in-law?”

“...Yes, well... it turned out like this.”

I avoided his gaze.

Seo Mun-Hwarin let out a long, deep sigh.

"Cheon Hwi-da, you need to take more responsibility for your words. You told This One that we should be happy together, and yet now you cast This One aside so coldly—what is This One supposed to do?"

"Son-in-law?! Just what kind of things have you been saying?!"

Shock. And then, rising in gradual waves—pure outrage.

Tang Jincheon's sharp energy flared as he glared at me, causing me to shake my head frantically.

"This is a misunderstanding! I did say something like that, but I meant it literally! It wasn't meant in any strange way—"

As I hurried to explain myself, Tang Sowol suddenly stepped in and placed her index finger against my lips.

“Shh. It’s fine, Cheon Hwi-da. After all, Sister Hwarin and I already planned to discuss this in private.”

So they had already planned this out.

Then again, if I had traveled all this way, only to find my fiancé stepping on some other woman and demanding more, I probably would have arranged for a private conversation too.

I had no idea what Tang Sowol intended to discuss with Seo Mun-Hwarin, but I was certain that I would be next.

Not that knowing this would change anything for me.

Gulp.

I swallowed nervously and nodded.

“...Thanks.”

“Fufu. What for? I’m your only fiancée, aren’t I?”

For some reason, I felt a chill run down my spine.

We arrived at Wuhuan City by carriage from a nearby village.

As expected, there was quite a bit of resistance upon Seo Mun-Hwarin’s return.

However, after she made it clear that she wished to abandon her unorthodox past and promised to assist the Murim Alliance as atonement, the backlash subsided.

Of course, rumors continued to spread among those who had gathered to watch the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering...

But given that the subject of those rumors was none other than the White-Haired Rakshasa, people quickly learned to keep their mouths shut.

More than anything, the excitement over the tournament resuming quickly drew attention away from her.

As for me...

“Cheon Hwi-da, how is your body holding up now?”

“...Mm. It’s still tough, but I can at least circulate my energy lightly.”

I was still struggling with my internal injuries.

I had run out of the Golden Venom Physician’s medicine, so I was now using the Tang Clan’s remedies, provided by Tang Jincheon.

While they were effective, they weren’t quite on the same level.

Well, the Tang Clan’s medical expertise was more of a byproduct of their poison research, whereas the Golden Venom Physician was entirely devoted to medicine. It made sense that his concoctions were superior.

It probably didn't help that I had been avoiding Acupuncture Blood Release from Seo Mun-Hwarin due to all the eyes on us.

Still, my recovery was progressing steadily, if a little slower than before.

“If your injuries are severe, you should refrain from circulating your energy altogether. You don't need to push yourself.”

“That warning is only for cases where one's body is in complete shambles. I'm not that bad.”

“Even so, I can't help but worry. I've already requested a few additional elixirs from the Tang Clan that are good for internal injuries. You'll be fine soon enough, so just rest until then.”

“It's not like I enjoy getting caught up in problems. But even without that, I planned to stay quiet today.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“...You already know. Today is your and Seol Lihyang's match. I'll be watching and cheering for you with Father-in-law.”

That's right.

With the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering now resumed, I had officially withdrawn due to my injuries, and Seo Mun-Hwarin had been disqualified.

Now, it was finally time for Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang to take the stage.

The tournament was still in its early rounds, but every participant had passed the qualifiers, meaning they were all skilled Peak Stage warriors.

“Who's your opponent, Tang Sowol?”

“A dart captain from Tianfeng Trading Company. I believe his title is Lightning Blade, but I don't know much about him.”

“...I've never heard of either name.”

Perhaps they were using this tournament to boost the reputation of their trading company.

If their dart captain performed well, it would attract more business.

I nodded in understanding.

Tang Sowol simply shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter who my opponent is—I plan to give it my all regardless.”

“Good mindset. The real issue is Seol Lihyang’s match.”

“Yeah... her matchup luck isn’t great.”

Seol Lihyang’s opponent was Wei Ji-Su-lian, a Peak Stage warrior from the Mount Hua Sect.

She was also a close friend of Tang Sowol’s, whom we were supposed to meet during our previous trip to Shaanxi Province.

Instead, we had encountered the dying Ghost Shadow Thief instead.

“Sulian is a highly promising warrior within Mount Hua, and she’s been training since childhood. She’ll be a tough opponent for Lihyang.”

“Probably. But it will still be a valuable experience. It’s not every day one gets to see Mount Hua’s martial arts firsthand.”

“That’s true... but I do feel a little guilty about hyping Lihyang up so much. I half-jokingly told her she’d bring back the championship.”

“That’s on you. She barely has any competition experience, and you dumped that pressure on her?”

“But Lihyang’s reactions are just too cute—I can’t help it.”

After exchanging some playful banter, we were interrupted by the sound of a door opening.

Seol Lihyang peeked her head in.

“Tang Sowol! Cheon Hwi-da! What are you two talking about? It’s almost time—we need to go!”

Her expression was tense, but her eyes burned with determination.

Seeing her, Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances.

Then, unable to help ourselves, we both chuckled.

“Yes. It’s time to go.”

“Tang Sowol and I will head to the waiting area. Father and Sister Hwarin, make sure to watch us closely.”

Tang Sowol lightly pushed Seol Lihyang forward, and the two disappeared down the hallway.

At last, the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering was truly beginning.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The late-stage juniors, faces tense yet filled with anticipation, crossed fists, testing each other's martial arts.

As I watched from the spectator stands, a sudden thought struck me.

Could it be that I, who possess memories from before the regression, am essentially someone who has undergone a reversal of aging?

If so, wouldn't squeezing in among them and quarreling to take the victory be rather childish?

Of course, the Grand Return Pill is tempting... but frankly, isn't this behavior rather immature?

Specifically, it's like how Seo Mun-Hwarin tried to make an impression at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering to wash away her past.

"Mn? Why are you looking at This One like that?"

“It’s nothing. Just thinking I’ve become a bit pickier lately.”

The ones I usually see are people like Tang Sowol, born with the Poison Spirit Constitution in the Tang Clan, or geniuses like Seol Lihyang, who show overwhelming talent in wielding yin-type internal energy.

Lately, I’ve seen desperate life-and-death duels with martial artists from the Black Heaven Sword Sect, and clashes of aura among supreme Flowering Stage masters like Seo Mun-Hwarin or the Black Lotus Sect’s Master of Black Lotus Sect, Sangwan Geuk.

And now, watching a mere above-average duel among late-stage juniors...

The fighting spirit is admirable, but honestly, it’s a bit of a letdown.

Still, setting aside their skills or the content of their duels, the martial arts they’re displaying are genuinely interesting.

Before my regression, I obsessively collected sword techniques, but most of them were from unorthodox sects, or had been corrupted following the invasion of the Demonic Cult.

Martial arts focused heavily on killing, steeped in killing intent. Effective in real combat, yes, but—

The problem is, martial arts aren't just about slashing swords.

Of course, to me, martial arts are simply techniques for killing people, and many unorthodox martial artists would agree.

But that's just *my* truth—it isn't some universal principle.

In reality, orthodox martial arts often carry different philosophies and ideologies beyond simply harming opponents. But to ask whether orthodox martial artists are weaker because of that? Absolutely not.

Unorthodox martial artists may attain achievements faster, but when it comes to true mastery, those who transcend are overwhelmingly from the orthodox side.

Swords that weren't meant to make you strong, yet end up making you stronger than any other.

I still can't understand that... which is why I find it all the more fascinating.

“Father-in-law.”

“Sowol is up next.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Seol girl comes after that.”

“That’s not it either. I already know the order.”

“Then what is it?”

Tang Jincheon turned his head slowly toward me from the dueling arena.

“What do you think makes a martial art strong?”

I thought he’d spout some nonsense, but surprisingly, it was a difficult question.

After thinking for a moment, Tang Jincheon spoke.

“Defeating the enemy is one kind of strength, and protecting oneself is another...But the hardest thing is protecting others. That’s why I believe the strongest martial arts are those that can protect others.”

“That’s a very orthodox answer. Could you give me an example?”

“What need is there for an example? For me, it would be *Universal Convergence Divine Art*... or rather, the Tang Clan’s poison arts.”

“Poison arts...?”

Hearing my puzzled tone, Tang Jincheon chuckled and continued.

“Because the Tang Clan upholds a moral line and wields power, we don’t get criticized openly. But in the martial world, those who use poison usually get called out for it.”

“That’s true.”

“Do you know why?”

“Isn’t it because the opponent collapses before they even get a chance to showcase their skills?”

“Exactly. For proud martial artists, it’s unbearable to have the martial path they’ve poured their life into denied like that.

But that’s only the victim’s perspective.”

Tang Jincheon raised one hand to the sky. A slight surge of internal energy began to stir, then coalesced into a swirling, ominous black smoke atop his palm.

He wasn’t born with the Poison Spirit Constitution, but through a complete transformation, he became a perfect poison wielder.

Perhaps because I’ve grown somewhat accustomed to poison after ingesting Tang Sowol’s toxins daily, I instinctively knew the moment I saw it.

That’s dangerous. If I touch it, I’ll melt away instantly with no chance to resist.

I reflexively assumed a defensive stance. Tang Jincheon, seeing my reaction, gave a soft chuckle and clenched his fist.

At that moment, the poisonous smoke vanished without a trace.

“See? You weren’t poisoned, yet just the *possibility* made you hesitate.”

“Who wouldn’t be surprised to see the Poison King’s poison?”

“Enough with the flattery. Even if it weren’t mine, if it were any poison you couldn’t resist easily, you’d have reacted the same. From the user’s perspective, just holding it grants the advantage.”

He’s not wrong. Unless the difference in power is overwhelming, fights always come down to strategic reads.

If poison can shut down most of your opponent’s moves, there’s no greater advantage.

Tang Jincheon nodded and continued.

“Poison ultimately eats away at the body. But because of that, you can fight more enemies, take fewer risks...And even if you face a vastly superior opponent, you can still land a blow if you’re willing to bet your life.”

Ah.

The first thing that came to mind was from before the regression—the annihilation of the Tang Clan in Sichuan.

Only the Heavenly Demon, Cheonma, who destroyed them, would know the full details.

But the poisoned land, where no life could survive, and the countless hidden weapons covering the ground left a vivid impression.

No doubt they all gave their lives to poison the Heavenly Demon just a little, to pierce him with even a single hidden weapon.

If one person failed, the next stepped up. If that still wasn’t enough, then another.

All for the greater cause, for vengeance, and to protect their family.

Thanks to that, Tang Sowol was able to escape, and though the Tang Clan's members scattered, many survived.

Though the Tang Jincheon of my previous life couldn't defeat the Heavenly Demon...

I remember his deeds clearly, and so I fully understood what he was trying to say.

"I see. Though the cost may be great, poison arts offer a chance to make the impossible possible—That's why you believe they're the strongest martial arts."

"Exactly. You really are my son-in-law, catching on so quickly."

Tang Jincheon chuckled with satisfaction.

It was a short exchange, but I felt like I'd gotten a glimpse into what he truly valued.

He chose to be the head of the vast Sichuan Tang Clan, rather than just a lone martial artist.

What mattered to him was protecting the clan, the family that had thrived for generations, even at the cost of his own life.

He wanted to become an unassailable wall that no outsider could dare challenge.

Truly a fitting answer for an orthodox sect—or more precisely, for the Tang Clan.

Even though I've grown somewhat used to living here, their values still feel foreign to me.

But if the people you must protect aren't a grand clan, but just a few people close to you—then I can relate.

For instance, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang...

Even though it's unlikely for a Flowering Stage master like Seo Mun-Hwarin to be in danger,

if she were in peril before my eyes, I wouldn't hesitate to draw my sword.

Victory or death doesn't matter. I just *have* to do it.

Otherwise, I'll lose my mind.

With that lingering ticklish sensation swirling in my chest, I bowed my head.

“Thank you, Father-in-law. I feel a little more at ease now.”

“Think nothing of it. As someone who's walked this path ahead of you—and as your father-in-law—I can always offer advice. Though honestly, I was a bit surprised you even asked this kind of question.”

“Pardon?”

“Think about it. Questions like ‘What's the strongest martial art?’ are ones children ask when they've just started learning.”

Now that he mentions it, I never had such questions when I was young.

I already knew advanced arts were better than third-rate ones.

That was enough. Rather than wondering beyond that, I just focused on getting stronger with whatever was in my hands.

To me, martial arts were just a tool to survive. That hasn't changed.

But after losing everything once before my regression, I've realized that surviving alone means nothing.

Of course, Tang Jincheon's answer isn't necessarily the right one *for me*.

Ultimately, I have to find and decide my own path.

Still, as advice, what he said was incredibly valuable.

And as long as you don't let yourself be swayed, the more advice, the better.

I nudged Seo Mun-Hwarin in the side as she sat pretending to watch the duel but clearly eavesdropping.

“Nyat?! Wh-why are you poking me?! Use words!”

“What do *you* think, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“Think about what?”

“No need to pretend. You heard everything.”

“Th-this One truly has no idea what you’re talking about...”

She awkwardly averted her gaze, clearly dodging. But before long, she cautiously glanced back and spoke.

“Kuhm-kuhm. Well then, to answer seriously—This One believes strong martial arts are like shouting loudly.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Shouting at the world. Proclaiming, ‘This is the injustice I suffered, and I will return it in kind.’”

“That’s...”

“It’s something I tell myself, something strangers might hear...But the one I most want to hear it is the enemy of This One.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke in a calm voice with a faint smile.

“No matter how far away they are, so they can hear. Even if they block their ears, so it reaches them. Even if I can’t face them directly, I shout so loud they lose sleep in fear. That’s the martial art This One values. The louder the cry, the stronger it becomes.”

I understood what she was saying. I knew what she once pursued.

But in the end...

“What was left after all that?”

“Eyes swollen from crying. A voice too hoarse to come out properly. A body so exhausted it could collapse at any moment. And eyes that look at me as if repulsed.”

Tang Jincheon wanted to leave something behind, even if he died.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin... had nothing.

Her martial arts only dragged herself and those around her into ruin.

So when she finally achieved her revenge, she realized—

It had been too much.

She'd gained the strength she longed for, achieved her vengeance,

Yet in her hands remained only blood.

It was only after facing and accepting that emptiness that she could ascend to the Flowering Stage.

So the “strong martial arts” she spoke of must be what her past self had once sought.

If so—

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Mmn?”

“What about now?”

At my abrupt question, she pondered for a moment, then smiled gently and shook her head.

“Strength in martial arts no longer matters to This One. What matters is whether I’ve obtained what I truly desire.”

“You will.”

What Seo Mun-Hwarin wants is to return to the past—to the happiest time of her life.

Of course, unless she experiences regression like me, she can’t go back.

But she can start building it anew from now on.

It’s not too late.

With that thought in mind, I lightly placed a hand over hers.

She stiffened immediately—but soon relaxed and chuckled softly.

“Everyone’s said their piece. Now it’s your turn. What do *you* think makes a martial art strong?”

“Well, is there really any deep meaning to it?”

Hearing Tang Jincheon and Seo Mun-Hwarin's thoughts gave me some insight, but...

A lifetime of beliefs doesn't change overnight.

“A martial art that kills people well is a strong martial art.”

Looking down at the martial arena, the duel had ended.

A peaceful bout where both had shown their all, yet no one had died.

Next up was Tang Sowol.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Tang Sowol steps onto the martial arena.

The generous folds of her green robe flutter lightly, and beneath her neatly tied-up hair, the pale nape of her neck gleams.

Only moments ago, the arena had reeked of sweat and tension, yet now it feels as though a flower has bloomed upon it, the entire atmosphere shifting.

I'm clearly not the only one who feels this way.

The crowd, who had been noisily gossiping about the previously inactive daughter of the Tang Clan, suddenly goes silent.

Amid that unnatural stillness, Tang Sowol scans the area and, spotting me, cheerfully waves her hand.

— *Waaah!*

Cheers erupt all around me.

Suppressing a chuckle, I quietly wave back.

Startled by the unexpected reaction, Tang Sowol giggles toward me, then calmly takes her place.

Watching her side profile, I hear Tang Jincheon beside me begin to chuckle.

“Hah, they’re all excited, not even knowing who Sowol waved to.”

“Indeed. If they thought for a second, they’d realize the truth.”

“Well, what can you do? Our Sowol’s beauty is enough to stir up a fuss.”

“As a fellow man, I have to admit we can be a bit simple at times.”

“I get that. Sowol waved to *this* father of hers, but look at the uproar.”

“Clearly, she waved to *me*, her fiancé. They’re just delusional.”

“???”

“..?”

As Tang Jincheon and I tilt our heads at each other in confusion, a low sigh sounds beside us.

“Ehuh... You two know that you’re wearing the exact same expression, right? Enough now, focus on the duel. Her opponent’s already arrived—it’ll begin any moment.”

Turning my gaze back to the arena, just as Seo Mun-Hwarin said, the opponent was already in place.

A large-framed middle-aged man holding a broad sword.

Though I can’t fully gauge his energy due to lingering internal injuries, his confidence in standing before Tang Sowol and revealing his fighting spirit suggests he’s surpassed first-class and reached the **Peak Stage**.

I hadn’t heard of him before and assumed he wasn’t much, but his martial level is higher than I thought.

Maybe he’s an escort who specializes in bodyguarding and has simply remained unknown.

Of course, such details don't seem to matter to Tang Sowol.

She turns to face me and mouths something clearly.

'Please watch me.'

It must be a continuation of what she said days ago—she's not someone who only needs to be protected.

I nod deeply so she can see it clearly.

Soon, the referee steps up, says a few words, and the two exchange formal fist salutes.

With the sound of a bell signaling the start, they move at the same time.

Tang Sowol leaps backward, flinging concealed weapons from her sleeve.

The opponent, with his broad sword, charges in to chase her down.

Metal balls—Jamo-hwan—bounce off the ground and scatter in every direction, with thin Plume-needles hidden among them aiming for the opponent.

Clenching his teeth, he swings his sword with one hand while the other uses internal energy to flap his stiffened sleeve.

Kkagang!

He knocks aside the Jamo-hwan with his sword, blocks the Plume-needles with his clothes.

He doesn't completely stop them—several Plume-needles hit him, and a small Jamo struck his shin.

Still, for a defense under such pressure, it's not bad.

But Tang Sowol doesn't let up.

Whirr!

Her wide sleeves flutter as she spins in place.

The flowing motion intersects, releasing a barrage of concealed weapons.

What's unusual is that these aren't Tang Clan weapons, but ordinary copper coins.

Not coin-shaped darts, but actual currency. I glimpse short, broken strings in her hand—the kind used to bundle coins.

“Seems like a waste of money... Or maybe it's worth every penny.”

Now that I think about it, Tang Clan's concealed weapons are all complicated and costly to make.

Plume-needles are difficult to forge thin, Jamo-hwan require precision to bounce properly.

So throwing actual coins isn't much of a loss. The Tang Clan certainly isn't a penny-pinching family.

Though... *this is* a lot of money. Still.

The truly impressive part is elsewhere:

The **sheer volume** of coins flying out is incomparable to before.

Rather than flinging them individually between her fingers, she must have swung an entire bundle and snapped the string with internal energy at the right moment.

That would explain the volume.

Of course, the trade-off is that she loses the fine control you get with single-coin throws.

In fact, about 30% of the coins missed their mark.

But the **impact** was unexpectedly strong.

Perhaps thinking it would be similar to before, the opponent wrapped his body with his reinforced sleeve and sword—

But the fabric, despite being hardened with qi, was pierced in an instant,

And when his sword struck a coin, the coin's recoil bent the blade's tip.

In a panic, he infused blade qi into his sword, managing to shield his vital points just barely...But his body was battered and tattered all over.

Judging by his solid build, he didn't slack on external body training, so no bones were broken,

But the pain made him grimace deeply.

Still, he hadn't given up. His eyes locked on Tang Sowol with undiminished will.

Once again, he stomped forward.

His sleeves shredded, unable to block Plume-needles. His sword alone couldn't fend off all the weapons.

Dodging them wasn't easy due to his bulk, and if he hesitated, he'd be bombarded by coins again.

So he chose to charge straight ahead.

Holding his sword upright to guard his centerline, he ignored minor defenses and dodging.

Since backward movement is always slower than advancing, it wasn't a bad strategy.

Focusing solely on closing the distance, he built up explosive speed.

Tat-tat!

However, Tang Clan's movement techniques were a level above.

Tang Sowol's steps were light, and though graceful, she widened the gap effortlessly.

Her movement art, tailored for adjusting distance while deploying poison and hidden weapons, allowed her to maintain high speed even while retreating.

As she widened the gap again, she resumed launching concealed weapons.

Since sharp-edged ones were unusable now, most were needle or pellet-type,

But each followed unique trajectories, suited to its type.

They didn't strike pressure points precisely, but they caused pain with every movement,

And the areas hit by the steel balls were swelling to the point of immobility.

The match wasn't ending quickly, but like clothes soaking in the rain, damage accumulated little by little.

It was a methodical but clever fighting style.

I was quietly impressed by how skillfully she wielded hidden weapons—

When, noticing my expression, Tang Jincheon gave me a mischievous grin.

“Looks like you’re a bit surprised, son-in-law.”

“Yes. Honestly, I didn’t expect this much from Tang Sowol.”

“Why? Thought she only focused on poison arts?”

“To be honest... yes.”

It’s not that Tang Sowol lacked hidden weapon skills—but compared to her poison arts, they were clearly secondary.

She typically used them to support her poison:

Spreading poison via Soul-Chasing Flying Butterflies, or using difficult-to-avoid weapons to inject poison directly.

That's how she fought, even when sparring with me.

And her recent mastery of the Universal Convergence Divine Art—a supreme poison technique—

Just learning that one art would be exhausting. I assumed she had no room to focus elsewhere.

Plus, she reached the **Peak Stage** after mastering it, so it was natural to think poison was her focus.

“But to be clear,” said Tang Jincheon, “Sowol *has* been focusing on poison arts.”

“Then...?”

“What you’re seeing now is what she accomplished with the *spare time* left over from studying poison.”

“...Excuse me?”

I turned from the arena to look at him in disbelief, but I’d heard correctly.

“It’s true. Sowol is much stronger than you think.”

“I’ve never thought she was weak.”

“Of course not. But *you* are far too strong, and you’ve become very familiar with the Tang Clan’s martial arts.”

“Ah.”

His words made me realize—

I had grown far too used to Tang Sowol’s martial arts.

From before the regression, we'd matched rhythms.

After regression, we'd sparred countless times, even from her lower-stage days.

And I always fought by disrupting my opponent's flow.

Given how well I understood her style, cutting her rhythm must have prevented her from displaying her full strength.

Even Tang Cheong, the *Dark Dragon*, found it hard to land his hidden weapons on me—

So she probably thought there was no point in showing off her comparatively weaker skills.

Her poison, on the other hand, could still affect me meaningfully.

“Also,” added Tang Jincheon, “once you reach the Peak Stage, you can finally embed internal energy into *thrown* weapons. That's when hidden weapon techniques evolve dramatically.”

“That makes sense.”

At first-class level, one can already channel qi into held weapons through *energized weapon infusion*.

That’s how the opponent reinforced his sleeves earlier.

But that only applies to weapons in hand, or in direct contact with the body.

Maintaining internal energy in something detached—like a thrown weapon—is much harder.

Unless done at the moment of throw, the energy disperses quickly.

To do it *stably*, you need to be at Peak Stage or higher.

That’s why even unorthodox sects, who don’t care much for honor, rarely rely on hidden weapons—They can’t make full use of internal energy.

So in all of Central Plains, only two places truly train in hidden weapons:

The Sichuan Tang Clan, and Sal Valley.

Sal Valley teaches them for practical assassination, treating their assassins as expendables.

Only the Tang Clan properly studies and passes down hidden weapon techniques.

And now, those very techniques were finally showing their true power in Tang Sowol's hands.

The hidden weapons flew relentlessly. Even if blocked, more followed in rapid succession.

Eventually, the opponent, battered and full of needles, raised both hands in surrender.

After saluting the defeated martial artist, Tang Sowol bounced over in my direction and shouted loudly:

“Brother Cheon! I won! Did you see?!”

I watched her bouncing form—along with certain other things that bounced—and waved back with a grin.

Then turned toward Tang Jincheon, who looked absolutely crushed.

“Told you.”

She really was waving at me.

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After finishing her match, Tang Sowol only bothered to retrieve the fallen hidden weapons before heading straight back to our seats in the audience stand.

Then, she pushed aside Tang Jincheon’s seat and claimed the spot next to me, planting her hands on her hips and puffing out her chest.

“Ahem!”

Her eyes curved into a mischievous crescent, as if savoring what’s to come. Her lips twitched, like she wanted to say more but was holding it in. Her chin tilted upward—not in arrogance, but in playfulness.

With her hands at her waist, she naturally leaned her upper body toward me. Maybe because of that, or perhaps the curve beneath her generously cut martial robe, I found my eyes drawn in despite myself.

Did she notice I’d been momentarily distracted? She slowly cracked open her eyes again and spoke once more.

“Ahem!”

“What the…”

I gave a short, incredulous laugh and clapped my hands loudly, making sure she noticed.

“Well done.”

“More praise, please!”

“I knew your poison arts were remarkable, but I didn’t expect your hidden weapon techniques to be at this level.”

“More~!”

“This was your first official match in the main tournament, and yet you elevated the Tang Clan’s prestige in front of countless spectators at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. The baseless rumors that followed your inactivity should end here.”

“Mm... Not bad, but something’s still missing.”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, arms still at her waist.

Her once neatly tied hair had loosened slightly from her earlier movements, and a few stray strands danced about.

As I watched, a sudden thought popped out of my mouth.

“As expected, my fiancée is the best?”

“Hiya! That’s it! I *knew* it! I’m the best for you, right? Yup, I knew it!”

Euskeuk, euskeuk.

She wriggled her shoulders in joy, happier than when she actually won her match.

Meanwhile, Tang Jincheon, bumped one seat over, looked sour watching the exchange.

And across from us, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes started to cloud with gloom.

Tang Jincheon’s reaction made sense, but why was *Seo Mun-Hwarin* affected?

As I blinked in confusion, Tang Sowol leaned even closer toward me.

Her upper body naturally pressed against my abdomen. The soft, yet weighty sensation left me frozen, barely able to breathe.

But she didn't seem to notice at all. Instead, she reached out and grabbed Seo Mun-Hwarin's hand, shaking it excitedly.

“Sister Hwarin! You saw, right?! What did you think?!”

“Eh, uh, what?”

Flustered, Seo Mun-Hwarin made odd noises before clearing her throat.

“Kuh-hum. Of course I saw. The true strength of the Tang Clan is shown in life-and-death battles. In a regulated match like this, one is bound by many restrictions, so I had little expectation. But... You far exceeded my imagination.”

“Hehe, thank you, Sister Hwarin.”

Tang Sowol smiled sweetly at her fluent, seemingly rehearsed answer, patted the small hand she held, and then pulled back.

Ever since the three of them—Tang Sowol, Seo Mun-Hwarin, and Seol Lihyang—had a private talk some time ago, their dynamic had shifted slightly.

No matter how many times I asked, they wouldn't tell me what they discussed, which irked me a little...

Still, their relationship didn't seem worse. In fact, it might've gotten better.

Even if there was some awkwardness, it was probably a good change.

I nodded to myself in thought, but then, perhaps because that soft pressure on my stomach vanished, I felt a sudden emptiness and awkwardly swallowed.

To distract myself, I brought up something else.

“Anyway, it's almost Seol Lihyang's turn. You said her opponent, Lady Wei Ji-Su-Lian, is a friend of yours, right? Could you tell me what kind of person she is?”

Tang Sowol puffed her cheeks and said nothing.

I mentally reviewed what I said and corrected myself.

“...Could you tell me what kind of martial arts Lady Wei Ji-Su-Lian, your friend, uses?”

“Puhuh.”

Finally deflating her cheeks, Tang Sowol nodded.

“Well, I don’t know Su-ryeon’s martial skills in detail either.

I tried to visit her while I was traveling through Shaanxi Province, but due to some incident, I ended up staying at the Zhongnan Sect for a while before returning home.”

“Right, I remember.”

“After that, we only exchanged letters. When I arrived in Wuhuan City, our schedules didn’t align, so we couldn’t meet... Oh! I did see her briefly when you were kidnapped, but I was pretending to be heartbroken—er, I was heartbroken—so we didn’t talk much.”

“I... I see.”

Hearing it laid out like that, I felt guilty for being so reckless back then.

I took her hand in mine to convey both thanks and apology—

“Mm. Hm-hm. Hm-hm.”

—but Tang Jincheon had been glaring at us from earlier, so instead, I gently brushed the back of her hand.

Thankfully, Tang Sowol seemed content with even that, letting out a giggle with crescent-moon eyes.

“Fufu. Once the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering settles down, I’ll set up that proper meeting we discussed, so don’t worry. Also, while I don’t know the details of her martial arts, I’ve got a general idea.”

“A general idea?”

“Yes~ I’ve seen her briefly, heard some rumors, and now that my level’s higher, my energy sensitivity has improved too.”

With that, Tang Sowol turned her eyes toward the arena, where the next match was nearly ready.

“Her level is first-class... but she feels like she’s already half a step into the Peak Stage.”

“She’s said to be among the top juniors of the Huashan Sect.

If she’s being called that, it’s only natural.”

Generally, reaching first-class before the age of twenty is enough to be called a prodigy.

Reaching the Peak Stage before thirty marks you as a genius.

Of course, within the Nine Great Sects or the Five Supreme Clans, with excellent martial arts and ample support, such geniuses appear at least once every generation.

Tang Sowol had reached the cusp of first-class around age twenty, and attained Peak Stage at twenty-three.

Her older brother Tang Cheong reached Peak Stage even before thirty, and though he wasn't as talented as Sowol,

with continued training, he'd likely reach **Flowering Stage** like Tang Jincheon eventually.

That would mark a true generational shift for the Tang Clan.

Anyway, if Wei Ji-Su-Lian was one of Huashan's top juniors, then nearing Peak Stage wouldn't be strange.

She must have long surpassed Seol Lihyang's current level.

"I just hope Lihyang doesn't get too discouraged."

"Hmm? Ohh... so that's what you're worried about, Young Lord Cheon?"

Tang Sowol blinked wide-eyed in amusement, then chuckled.

“Lihyang isn’t as weak as you think. Sure, it’ll be hard for her to win. But—”

She turned to look toward the arena.

Indeed, the referee was calling the names of Seol Lihyang and Wei Ji-Su-Lian.

From here, I could see Seol Lihyang stepping onto the arena, her face tense as she took a deep breath.

Opposite her, Wei Ji-Su-Lian waved confidently toward her fellow Huashan disciples with a relaxed expression.

Two starkly contrasting figures.

Yet perhaps Tang Sowol saw something different, for she rested her chin on her hand and murmured quietly.

“She won’t break that easily. Win or lose, she’ll show us something.”

“I’d be relieved if she doesn’t lose heart.”

“Yes. And this part is the most important—”

Tang Sowol leaned in and whispered directly into my ear:

“Both I and Lihyang... if we show something unexpected at this Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, it’s all to show *you*.”

As I flinched, she pulled back and smiled brightly.

At the same moment, Seol Lihyang and Wei Ji-Su-Lian exchanged formal salutes atop the arena.

“Ah! No wonder she looked familiar. You were the swordswoman with Sowol back then, weren’t you?”

“Ah, yes! That’s right. I’m Seol Lihyang.”

“Oh my~ I’m Wei Ji-Su-Lian, eleventh-generation disciple of the Huashan Sect. Whatever the outcome, let’s make this a duel without regrets!”

Wei Ji-Su-Lian bowed with a flawless, radiant smile.

Seol Lihyang returned the gesture, but her expression was far from calm.

‘She said she’s a friend of Tang Sowol... right?’

Tied neatly into one braid, her black hair framed her fair face.

Her robe, in shades of white and red, bore elegant plum blossom embroidery on the sleeves.

And her gentle voice and composed confidence only added to her aura.

To Seol Lihyang, Wei Ji-Su-Lian was a graceful person.

But not *just* graceful.

Now that her *Pure Yin Physique* had begun to awaken through proper training, Seol Lihyang, gifted in internal energy control, could sense it—

The sharp edge hidden beneath Wei Ji-Su-Lian's soft demeanor.

'Not quite on par with Tang Sowol... but she must be strong.'

A beautiful and strong woman.

They say friends resemble each other—and Wei Ji-Su-Lian was very similar to the Tang Sowol that Seol Lihyang had admired and aspired to catch up with.

And now, Seol Lihyang was standing across from her on the martial arena.

'I know. If we fight... I'll lose.'

She hadn't been slacking these past three years.

Fainting from exhaustion was a daily occurrence. Her hands never went long without blisters.

Though she hated to admit it, if it weren't for Cheon Hwi-da's persistent pushing, she might've given up long ago.

But her opponent would've gone through even more.

What Seol Lihyang had learned from her master, the Dark Soul Unit Leader, wasn't something that could be mastered quickly.

Time, effort, discipline—that's what training was.

The weight of Wei Ji-Su-Lian's accumulated training from childhood surely exceeded Seol Lihyang's three years by far.

'But...'

After saluting, Seol Lihyang briefly raised her head.

Even among the vast crowd, there were two faces she could clearly see—

Cheon Hwi-da with his usual stoic look, and Tang Sowol offering a faint, encouraging smile.

'I have to show them.'

That she'd grown this much since they helped her.

That even if she's lacking now, she'll repay them with more than what she received—someday.

If that time comes...

Swallowing the rest of her thoughts, Seol Lihyang took her stance.

One foot forward, the other sideways behind.

She unraveled the whip from her waist, letting it hang loosely, gripping the handle tight.

It was the most fundamental stance—ready to strike, move in any direction.

Wei Ji-Su-Lian also pointed her sword toward Seol Lihyang with relaxed grace, assuming her posture.

And then—

Ding!

The bell rang, announcing the start of the duel.

And with it, a cold, biting chill surged through Seol Lihyang's meridians.

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A chilling cold swirled along Seol Lihyang's bloodstream.

The *Glacial True Qi* she had cultivated was a martial art created solely to accept *Cold Yin energy* and to wield it.

It was not so powerful that it could shake heaven and earth, nor did it possess any miraculous capabilities.

However, in terms of the amount of internal energy she could unleash in one go, it stood second to none.

This was the one thing in which Seol Lihyang, lacking in physical strength, internal energy, and even years of accumulated training, surpassed Wi Ji-Su-Lian.

I need to make this a short battle...

Seol Lihyang threw herself forward, without hesitation, toward the only path where a sliver of victory existed.

Tadat!

She advanced. A basic, honest footwork unfolded from her, faithful to the fundamentals.

Originally, it was a foundational technique one would practice for a few years before switching to a different form. Wi Ji-Su-Lian's brow twitched upon seeing it.

To bring out basic techniques at the *Dragon and Phoenix Gathering*? A martial artist who had reached the level of *first-rate* would not be unaware of the gap between herself and her opponent.

To deliberately use basic techniques here could only mean one thing—she anticipated defeat and was preparing an excuse in advance.

“What on earth is she...!”

Wi Ji-Su-Lian was about to speak, but upon seeing the eyes of Seol Lihyang, who was preparing to wield her whip, she could no longer say a word.

Eyes opened wide as if determined not to miss a single thing. Lips tightly pressed as though even the energy to let out a battle cry would be wasted. And, lightly gathering atop the whip—

A thin layer of frost.

That presence, though not exuding killing intent, was fierce enough to rival a martial artist ready to fight to the death.

That spirit seeped into her technique as well.

Her arm, swept back behind her shoulder, drew a wide arc and fell straight down.

Ssswaeek!

Though she was wielding a whip, what Seol Lihyang chose was a simple trajectory stripped of all flair.

However, that did not mean it lacked variation.

Her shoulder, elbow, and wrist each accelerated in their own circular motion. And in the end, what received and unleashed all that power was a whip coated in white frost.

By the time the long whip had completed its arc, its tip had reached a speed even Wi Ji-Su-Lian's eyes struggled to track.

The fact that Wi Ji-Su-Lian could respond at all was purely the result of her accumulated training.

Thud!

Seol Lihyang's whip struck against the sword Wi Ji-Su-Lian had raised a half-beat earlier. Though she blocked it, it neither fully struck nor cut through.

The whip's path had been obstructed, but the rotational force behind it remained, wrapping the whip several times around Wi Ji-Su-Lian's sword.

The moment she realized that her whip was firmly entangled with the opponent's sword, Seol Lihyang opened her mouth for the first time and let out a fierce battle cry.

“Haah!”

She activated her *Glacial True Qi*. At the utmost of her capacity—or rather, pushing past her usual limit, she poured internal energy into the whip.

Responding to her burning will, her internal energy surged through the whip. From the already frost-covered whip, a white mist began to rise.

Though it was inferior to the *Nine Yin Pulse*, the *Pure Yin Physique* was also a rare innate constitution.

Seol Lihyang's natural Yin energy, following the incantation of the Glacial True Qi, gathered as thick, cold Yin Qi in her *dantian*, becoming an internal energy more refined than anything else.

If not properly countered, even Wi Ji-Su-Lian would not easily be able to fend it off. If she let it in even once, she'd suffer internal damage and collapse.

However, it was well known that practitioners of Yang or Yin-type techniques often transferred internal energy into their opponent via connected weapons to assert dominance with their unique energy traits.

Seol Lihyang had already demonstrated this technique in the preliminaries.

“You planned this from the start! But I won't fall for it so easily!”

Seeing Seol Lihyang charging in with her full power, Wi Ji-Su-Lian drew up her internal energy with a pleased expression.

While it was true that Seol Lihyang, thanks to her Glacial True Qi and innate Pure Yin Physique, could wield far more internal energy than someone of her level typically could...

That was only within the context of a fight between those of equal standing.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian was already a martial artist with one foot in the *Peak Stage*. It was hard to consider her an ordinary *first-rate* martial artist.

“Hrrmph!”

With a short breath held in, Wi Ji-Su-Lian’s sword began to glow with a faint pink hue.

Too faint to be called *sword energy*, but too dense to be mere *aura elevation*.

Seol Lihyang's internal energy was so pure even Tang Jincheon, the *Poison King*, had once praised it—but the martial arts of the Mount Hua Sect were not lacking in purity either.

Wuuuung—

Their internal energies clashed, and the whip entangled with the sword began to vibrate finely.

Neither had fully materialized their energy into visible form, so the silent struggle remained largely unseen.

However, being so close to Seol Lihyang's intense Yin energy, both could observe the state of the internal energy struggle with their eyes.

Frost flowed along the whip and covered over half the sword blade. But that boundary was slowly retreating upward.

The frost, overpowered by the opposing internal energy, began to melt under the heat, and the remaining droplets were shaken off by the vibrating sword.

Returning to its original state as if nothing had happened—or rather, now gradually overlaid by a pink radiance.

Once Wi Ji-Su-Lian's internal energy completely overwhelmed her opponent's, the outcome would be obvious.

Yet, Seol Lihyang's eyes remained calm.

"I figured it might come to this."

Resolutely, she braced herself.

Originally, she might have disrupted the opponent's focus by unleashing a *bewitching technique* here.

However, she had already revealed that trick during the preliminaries.

Unlike the unsuspecting judges then, Wi Ji-Su-Lian had remained vigilant from start to finish.

Using a bewitching technique here would likely have little effect and only waste her internal energy.

Since her only advantage was her internal energy, squandering it recklessly would be foolish.

So Seol Lihyang threw a gamble at a slim possibility.

Ugh.

She gritted her teeth. At the same time, her previously subdued gaze blazed with intensity.

Their weapons were already entangled, unable to move. Yet with the whip's length, close-combat techniques like *wrist strikes* or *joint locks* couldn't reach.

In such a situation, what Seol Lihyang chose over a bewitching technique—was a stealth technique she had learned from the *Dark Soul Unit* vice leader, her master.

The whip was a weapon wielded not through strength but through flexibility and wide joint movement.

Thus, most unconventional techniques involved using only one hand.

Naturally, Seol Lihyang had one hand free. In the brief moment it slipped into her sleeve and came back out, two small metal balls glinted between her fingers.

“Throwing weapons?!”

Wi Ji-Su-Lian’s eyes widened. Had she known of this beforehand like she had with Seol Lihyang’s Glacial arts, she could have been prepared.

But this was unexpected, hence her surprise.

“Take this!”

Seol Lihyang shouted on purpose. She swung her arm loudly and theatrically.

Each of her movements carried the intent to threaten, and the projectiles were aimed directly at Wi Ji-Su-Lian’s eyes.

A human being would reflexively flinch in such a situation. But martial artists trained their entire lives to suppress such reflexes.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian, raised in the Mount Hua Sect from childhood, might have been surprised—but not enough to lose her composure.

She stared straight at the flying projectiles and tilted her head.

It wasn't enough to fully dodge them, of course, and one of the metal balls grazed her forehead.

Puuck!

It wasn't a blade, so her skin wasn't cut, but the impact caused her head to jolt. Her bangs, now disheveled, covered one eye.

It must have hurt considerably. But even with one eye hidden by her hair, Wi Ji-Su-Lian wasn't grimacing—she was smiling.

As if impressed by Seol Lihyang's move, or perhaps anticipating what would happen next.

“Impressive, Heroine. Since you’ve shown me something good, I must return the favor.”

With those words, the tip of Seol Lihyang’s whip, which had been entangled with Wi Ji-Su-Lian’s sword, limply fell to the ground.

Thud.

What...?

Seol Lihyang’s eyes shook with disbelief.

Even while fending off the projectiles, Wi Ji-Su-Lian had managed to drive out Seol Lihyang’s internal energy and completely reclaim her sword.

Though not quite sword energy, the radiance from her blade was strong enough to slice clean through Seol Lihyang’s whip.

At the same time, the footwork of Mount Hua unfolded from Wi Ji-Su-Lian.

Light, graceful steps—but with each one, the distance between them shrank rapidly.

Before Seol Lihyang could even retrieve her whip, Wi Ji-Su-Lian surged forward with overwhelming momentum.

It was clear she intended to end things now, and Seol Lihyang could feel it in every fiber of her being.

If I try to retrieve the whip, I'll be too late...

Choosing to retreat instead of reclaiming her whip, Seol Lihyang threw herself backward, just as Wi Ji-Su-Lian's sword swung.

Ssskuk.

She wasn't too late—the sword didn't reach her yet. But what Wi Ji-Su-Lian cut wasn't Seol Lihyang—it was her whip.

“Ugh!”

Seol Lihyang let out a pained grunt, her brow twisting.

The remaining length of the whip was barely longer than a standard sword. No matter how she swung it, its power would be greatly reduced.

And there wasn't even time to swing it anymore.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian pressed the attack without pause, her sword dancing in fluid, unpredictable arcs.

The trailing pink traces her blade left resembled flower petals, but Seol Lihyang had no time to appreciate them.

The now-useless whip had already been discarded.

She had no chance to take out more hidden weapons, and even if she did, they'd be shot down easily.

Her gamble had failed—was it time to pay the price?

Seol Lihyang was helplessly being overwhelmed.

No...

Each swing of Wi Ji-Su-Lian's sword left small cuts across her body. They stung slightly, but weren't painful.

The bleeding was minor as well.

But that was only because Wi Ji-Su-Lian was deliberately holding back.

This was a martial duel—not a life-or-death battle. The gap in skill was obvious.

That's why she was restraining herself.

Indeed, Seol Lihyang had failed to respond properly once Wi Ji-Su-Lian closed the distance.

This can't go on...

For every step Wi Ji-Su-Lian took forward, Seol Lihyang retreated.

Each swing of the sword left thin lines on her forearms. Her hidden weapons were nearly depleted—and even those might not land.

There was no trick left to pull.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian was strong, and Seol Lihyang was weak. That was all there was to it.

Then what about me...?

Of course, no one would blame her.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian had long been known as a prodigy, and Seol Lihyang was a newcomer to the Murim world, appearing for the first time in this competition.

Even if she slowly got pushed back, surrendered, or fell out of the ring and was disqualified, people would still applaud her effort.

But—

This isn't enough.

Winning or losing wasn't the point.

There was a different reason she was standing here.

A cold breath escaped Seol Lihyang's lips.