

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 1-5

I was hungry.

So, I swung my sword. After all, an orphan with nothing but his body had no other choice.

Fortunately, I had talent. Thanks to that, despite never having properly learned any martial arts, I reached the peak. That says it all.

I swung my sword frantically, cut down people, quenched my thirst with their blood money, and swung my sword again...

One day, in the midst of those repetitive days, I realized something.

I was no longer hungry. And people were now calling me a *Sword Demon*, fearing me.

I hadn't committed atrocities enough to be called a *Demonic Lord*. I had just seen too much blood—that was the problem.

I didn't show mercy at the tip of my sword, nor did I allow compassion, so it was only natural that the longer I survived, the more entangled grudges wrapped around me like a spider's web.

Standing in the middle of a blood-soaked path, I came to understand: the affairs of the world could not be resolved with a single sword.

Just when the moniker *Sword Demon* was about to spread further, the Demonic Sect rose to power.

They were always a group that frequently invaded the Central Plains, but they were never a real threat.

That was because the essence of the Demonic Sect lay in those who gathered to seek revenge after suffering injustices at the hands of martial artists.

Strictly speaking, they were a group of losers, lacking proper martial arts, money, and backing.

All they had was malice, a single-minded obsession to kill their enemies at any cost. Hence, they were always met with pity by orthodox factions and ridicule by unorthodox ones.

That was, until the one who called himself *Heavenly Demon* appeared.

He was like a natural disaster that scorched the entire Central Plains.

The nine great sects, boasting long histories, either fled from their bases or were annihilated on the spot.

The five great families, once so powerful they seemed able to pluck a bird from the sky, didn't even leave a single cornerstone behind.

The *Black Alliance*, a coalition of unorthodox warriors, fared no better. Once their leader, who was infamous for his abilities despite his disposition, was swiftly assassinated, the survivors either joined the Demonic Sect or fled to parts unknown.

One by one, supreme masters at the pinnacle of martial arts fell meaninglessly, and even when they banded together, they couldn't handle the Heavenly Demon.

He became the undisputed greatest of the past and present.

Even after the long-standing enmity between the orthodox and unorthodox factions was set aside in favor of unity, it was impossible to stop him.

And so, as I reached the twilight of an era where even the infamy I had earned through a lifetime of grudges faded into insignificance, where everyone was preoccupied with mere survival—

I met a woman in Hebei Province, at the end of my desperate flight for survival.

Tang Sowol, the *Poison Dance Empress* and the sole survivor of the Sichuan Tang Clan. Despite the difference in our origins—me being from an unorthodox background and her from an orthodox clan—we got along well.

Perhaps it was because no special catalyst was needed for a man born with nothing and a woman who had lost everything to draw close to each other.

But those relatively peaceful days came to an end when the Heavenly Demon destroyed even the imperial army and finally set foot in Hebei.

If we fled any further, the only places left would be Liaoning or the martial world beyond the borders. I was considering leaving the Central Plains entirely to escape the Heavenly Demon, but...

Tang Sowol chose to fight the Heavenly Demon.

“Are you really going to go?”

“To save me, many of my family members lost their lives.”

“They were remarkable people. Even more so because they made a choice I never would have.”

“‘Double grace, tenfold vengeance.’ Since that day, I have never once forgotten the Tang Clan’s law. I couldn’t forget it.”

“What a shame. All those lives will have died in vain.”

“But, Sword Demon, you can survive. You’re planning to flee, aren’t you? Don’t worry. I’ll buy you enough time.”

“You knew, huh.”

I let out a deep sigh and looked up at the sky. The cloudy night sky dimmed even the moonlight.

Tang Sowol stood beside me, looking down at the ground, as if she had committed some sin.

For a while, we gazed in silence at different places, but soon our eyes met.

Her once-black hair had turned completely white since the destruction of the Tang Clan. Her long bangs covered half of her face, and her green eyes, now dulled like her hair, were filled with fatigue and a sense of guilt.

“May I look at your face for a moment?”

“If it’s you, as much as you want.”

Tang Sowol quietly turned her face toward me. I gently brushed her bangs aside, revealing the scarred half of her face.

A hideous scar marred the beauty that had once been enough to be called unparalleled. She had told me that it happened when she exceeded her limits, using a deadly poison technique during her childhood in a life-threatening situation.

Though it was a scar she herself detested, it was never a reason for me to shy away from her.

I stared at her bare face for a long time—not just to remember it, but to etch it into my very soul.

When her face began to flush slightly, I made up my mind.

“I’ll go with you.”

“You mustn’t.”

“Why not? Is it because I’m not at the level of a *Poison Dance Empress* like you? Even though I’m only at the peak level, I’m confident I can be of some help.”

“Sword Demon, there’s no reason for you to risk your life. Didn’t you always say it? That survival is what matters, that you wanted to live and enjoy wealth and glory.”

“That’s true. I still believe it’s better to roll in the mud and live than die gloriously.”

But words weren’t the only things I had exchanged with Tang Sowol over time.

I was born as a worthless orphan and lived by relying on a single sword. At the end of that life, I had met a woman with whom I could share my heart. I could no longer live as I had before.

Tang Sowol, who had once again covered half of her face, cautiously held out her hand.

Tang Sowol flinched at first, but she didn't pull her hand away. Instead, she hesitantly held my hand in return.

Perhaps it was because she wasn't used to such things. Unable to look at her, I turned my head for no reason.

Feeling the cold night wind cool my heated skin, I opened my mouth to speak.

“The night is dark today. I was looking forward to a full moon tonight.”

“It's a bit disappointing if you think of it as the last night sky we'll ever see.”

“When a clear day comes again, we'll come back to see it. Together.”

“Pardon?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head briefly, then smiled faintly as she understood my meaning.

“Did you know? Though all of the Tang Clan’s buildings were burned and destroyed, and our famous pond has dried up, it’s actually the perfect time to build new pavilions.”

“What do you mean by that all of a sudden?”

“What else would I mean? I’m saying we should build a place to watch the moon together.”

“You and me?”

“Yes. You and I.”

The moment I understood what it meant to rebuild the fallen clan together, my mind went blank.

Tang Sowol giggled softly at my rigid expression, then gently pulled my hand.

“Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my room. There are many things I want to tell you and many things I want to hear, but this isn’t the right place.”

“I see.”

As if possessed, I followed Tang Sowol into her room.

That night, we spent all our time together. As if there would be no tomorrow, we shared the pasts we had lived before meeting and planned the future we would face together.

If this were a tale told by a street storyteller, we would have miraculously defeated the Heavenly Demon and found a happy ending.

But miracles did not happen.

Tang Sowol stood before the Heavenly Demon, prepared to burn her life to ashes for the sake of her clan's revenge and her future.

And the last flower of the Sichuan Tang Clan fell, her heart pierced, right before my eyes.

The swamp of poison engulfed the surroundings in a violet hue. At its center lay Tang Sowol, dying powerlessly. Her face was twisted in pain and unfulfilled vengeance, contorted into a fierce grimace.

But the moment our eyes met, a troubled smile bloomed on her face, as if to cover the venomous aura surrounding her. Then, her lips moved silently in a whisper.

"Live... please."

With those final words, Tang Sowol stretched out her poisoned hand toward the retreating Heavenly Demon.

The venom, so intense that it could dissolve even the body of a poison master who had reached the *Flowering Stage* (화경 - a supreme level of martial arts mastery), reacted violently as the purple swamp began to boil.

It was the final technique Tang Sowol unleashed by burning up her entire being—a poisonous mist (*toxic fog*) that dissolved anything it touched. The mist engulfed the Heavenly Demon.

Even the Heavenly Demon could not emerge unscathed—his skin began to char and burn. But—

Thud!

With a single powerful step forward, everything was scattered.

Tang Sowol's last desperate will, the mist formed by a lifetime of accumulating poison, and even her body—none of it remained. All of it was erased from this world without a trace.

“...Ah.”

Tears, which I thought I no longer had any reason to shed, rolled down my cheeks.

Tears so hot they felt like they would burn my face. The faint scent of poison that lingered in the air. A roar closer to that of a beast than a man. And, as always, a single sword clenched in my hand.

A murderous intent so intense it seemed like it would engulf the entire world turned my vision red.

“I’ll kill you!!”

Burning everything I had left—my inner strength, my lifespan, my sanity—I charged straight at the Heavenly Demon.

Yet, even so, I could not cut through the *demonic energy* of the Heavenly Demon’s ultimate martial art.

I couldn’t even pierce through the protective energy shield that always surrounded him. He gazed at me.

Those eyes, desolate to an extreme, seemed to stare into an abyss. And at that moment, I realized—neither I nor Tang Sowol had stirred any emotion in this man.

But what did that matter? I had already resolved that my life would end here today. I unleashed the last of my innate energy without reservation...

The Heavenly Demon, wearing a bored expression, flicked his hand.

Wooong!

A dark energy fell upon me from above. The sky, blackened by his power, seemed to collapse around me. I ground my teeth in frustration.

“Couldn’t reach him, huh...”

If I had just a bit more talent, if I had a bit more time, if I had learned a more powerful martial art...

If that had been possible, would things have turned out differently? Could Tang Sowol have lived? Could I have slain the Heavenly Demon?

Futile regrets scattered into nothingness. That was my final thought.

It should have been.

“Kuheugh!”

I gasped for breath, groping at what should have been my severed head.

It felt like waking from a deep sleep, or perhaps like coming to my senses after a night of heavy drinking—my mind was in a haze.

Had I dreamed of my pre-regression life after a long time? No wonder I’d been restless in my sleep.

Yes. I didn’t know how or why, but I hadn’t died—I had returned to the past. To my childhood nearly 20 years ago.

I surveyed my surroundings with a foggy mind.

The dark, damp walls of a cave. A distinct stench that stung my nose. My body trembling uncontrollably. An empty *dantian* (丹田, the energy center for martial arts).

Everything about my surroundings and my physical state was far from normal. As I grasped my situation, memories of the previous day began to resurface.

Having returned as an orphan struggling to survive day by day, I had worked hard in my second life.

Building on the enlightenment I had gained when I reached the peak in my first life, I quickly cultivated martial arts. I dismantled the black-market organization that had lured me into the unorthodox world, securing funds.

With the strength and wealth I gained in a short time, I poured everything into one goal: to find Tang Sowol, who had only just debuted in the martial world, and successfully capture her.

“Mm! Mmmph!”

I looked down at Tang Sowol, who was writhing at my feet.

Her body was bound tightly with thick ropes, prepared in case she managed to undo the pressure point technique I had used. A gag had been placed in her mouth to prevent her from committing suicide.

Yet, despite her situation, Tang Sowol glared at me with sharp, unyielding eyes.

“...I really did it, huh.”

Though there had been no other way to save her, when I objectively considered what I had done—yeah.

I had kidnapped the youngest daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Did I really go through with it..."

I kidnapped the youngest daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan.

I was confident I had handled things cleanly, so a pursuit team wouldn't immediately follow. But that was only a matter of time.

In the orthodox sects, there's an odd tradition where young elites roam the martial world alone, under the name of *Murimchuldo* (무림출도, a sort of coming-of-age journey for martial artists). However, just because they leave home doesn't mean they're abandoned.

If a sect is large enough, they periodically check on the young warrior's wellbeing, and if something happens, they send reinforcements.

After all, they want these future elites to gain experience, not to die. That's only natural.

Still... even knowing all of this, I had no choice. It felt like yesterday was the only opportunity I'd ever get. So, I went for it.

Feeling a bit guilty, I awkwardly smiled at Tang Sowol.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“Mmmpf! Mmmph!”

Tang Sowol writhed furiously, as if telling me to shut the hell up. How harsh.

I rolled her over and pushed her into a corner. Then I sat down a fair distance away and began to circulate my inner energy.

Gwangrang Talmyungong (광랑탈명공, Wolf Stealing Life Technique).

It was a revised cultivation method I developed after gaining enlightenment when I reached the peak.

Now, unlike before my regression, I wouldn't suffer from a chronic lack of inner energy or its impurities.

In fact, after only a brief session of energy circulation, my completely drained internal energy and stamina from overexertion yesterday began to recover rapidly.

“Huu...”

With the urgent matter of recovery dealt with, I opened my eyes. I had to—because I'd been distracted by the sound of Tang Sowol struggling and wriggling her way toward me.

“Were you planning to wait until I was cultivating and then try to cause inner energy deviation (주화입마, a state of losing control over one’s energy flow)?”

“Mmmpf!”

“I’ll tell you now, it’s a waste of effort. In your current state, you won’t be able to undo the pressure points I sealed or escape from the stake holding your ropes in place.”

Even if, by some miracle, she did manage to break free and land a hit on me, the unique nature of *Gwangrang Talmyungong*’s inner energy makes me less susceptible to inner energy deviation.

I didn’t explain that part, but it seemed she understood she couldn’t really harm me no matter what she did.

Her glare was still fierce, but her body slightly relaxed as if she had lost some of her tension. I crouched down in front of her and spoke.

“You can scream or curse all you want, but don’t bite your tongue. If you promise that, I’ll remove the gag.”

“Ugh...”

Tang Sowol hesitated for a moment before nodding. She seemed displeased with the idea of complying, as she angrily gnawed on the wooden gag in her mouth. Still, since I was about to remove it, I figured it wouldn't be a problem.

Carefully, I pulled out the gag. A long strand of saliva stretched and broke as it came free. I wiped her mouth roughly with my sleeve, and soon enough, her composed voice reached my ears.

“What's your goal?”

“Hm?”

“You're a senior martial artist who's somehow regained your youth. Surely you understand what it means to turn the Tang Clan into your enemy.”

“A senior martial artist?”

So that's what she thought. I suppose it made sense. Before my regression, I had been a fully grown adult. Tang Sowol is five years older than me.

Now, she was barely twenty, and I, who was even younger in this life, was still in my mid-teens. The age difference probably felt even greater since I was still growing.

But to her, the idea that a mere child had defeated her, a direct descendant of the Tang Clan and one of their most promising young elites, must have been inconceivable.

Even though it had been a surprise attack, being captured without a single wound would have made her acutely aware of the disparity in our abilities.

Since she wouldn't even consider the possibility of someone traveling back in time, it was only natural that she assumed I was an old martial master who had regained his youth.

It's not unheard of for such masters to occasionally return to the martial world after reversing their aging. Still, I didn't particularly like being viewed that way by Tang Sowol.

Think about it: from my perspective, I had only recently pledged my future to her, and now she was treating me like some old grandmaster. This misunderstanding needed to be corrected somehow.

“I’m fifteen this year.”

“Is that so.”

She said it, but for some reason, her wariness only increased. She looked at me as if I were some crazy old monster pretending to be a fifteen-year-old.

Sadly, it didn’t seem like I could clear up this misunderstanding anytime soon. Strictly speaking, I wasn’t entirely wrong in claiming to be fifteen, but still. I decided to change the subject for now.

“Relax. I don’t intend to harm you.”

“If that were true, you shouldn’t have kidnapped me in the first place.”

“I understand why you’d misunderstand, but I did this for your sake.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.”

Tang Sowol responded with a sarcastic tone, clearly uninterested in hearing me out.

But what I said was the truth—I really did kidnap her for her own good.

That night, beneath a sky without even a trace of moonlight, when we made our promise and shared various stories, I had learned something.

The reason half of Tang Sowol's face had melted away had to do with an incident that occurred shortly after she debuted in the martial world.

"Double grace, tenfold vengeance."

That was the famous law of the Tang Clan. Because of this widely known rule, few dared to antagonize them. Conversely, many sought to curry favor with them.

Despite their rigid approach to navigating the complex web of grudges and favors in the martial world, the Tang Clan was not without enemies.

There are people who only remember the wrongs they suffered, never their own misdeeds. There are even those who hold dear the most vile of villains. And no matter how thorough one is in seeking vengeance, it's inevitable that a few flies will slip through the cracks.

Returning tenfold vengeance means planting tenfold the seeds of hatred.

Few dared to oppose the Tang Clan, but those who did were enemies of the worst kind—ones who could be called mortal foes.

Tang Sowol had been ambushed by such enemies.

Survivors of a black-market sect wiped out by the Tang Clan, forest bandits whose stronghold had been destroyed, the disciple of a notorious demonic lord, assassins whose organization was shattered after being framed for their crimes—

All of them had deep grudges against the Tang Clan, and they banded together to attack Tang Sowol.

They likely sought to repay their losses in kind. In that sense, Tang Sowol was their ideal target.

She was the youngest daughter of the Tang Clan, beloved by all, and possessed a unique constitution known as the *Poison Spirit Body* (독령지체).

If they could kill Tang Sowol, they believed it would leave a lasting scar on the Tang Clan. Though they failed,

Tang Sowol was only barely first-rate at that time, and her survival was entirely thanks to her Poison Spirit Body.

The Poison Spirit Body allowed her to store poison within her body and synthesize it into stronger toxins.

Using that ability, she had managed to unleash a poison so potent that it even began to dissolve her own body, enabling her to narrowly escape.

Afterward, the enraged head of the Tang Clan personally pursued and eliminated every surviving attacker, reducing them to nothing but a handful of poisoned dust.

As for Tang Sowol—she had lived the rest of her life ashamed of her scarred face, hiding it behind her bangs.

Knowing how much she had been affected by what happened to her face, I had intended to prevent the ambush from happening this time.

“Still... how did things come to this?”

“Well, perhaps it’s because you ambushed me in the middle of the night.”

She wasn’t wrong. But I had my reasons.

I didn’t know when or where Tang Sowol might be attacked again, so rather than trailing her around to protect her, wasn’t it simpler to just keep her in a safe place?

Besides, fighting an unknown number of enemies, each with different martial arts techniques, was far more complicated than subduing Tang Sowol—who, while formidable, was someone I had fought alongside a few times before in my past life.

“I told you, didn’t I? There are people out there who are targeting you, Tang Sowol.”

“And I told you, didn’t I? Thanks for the warning, but I can handle it on my own.”

“I also said that’s impossible.”

“How am I supposed to trust someone I met for the first time today? Especially when the person who’s actually threatening me right now is you, senior.”

“I’m fifteen, though.”

“A fifteen-year-old swordsman wouldn’t talk like you.”

“What’s wrong with my tone?”

“You sound like one of the elders from my clan. You definitely don’t feel younger than me.”

Now that I think about it, at this age, I did speak in a more casual, unrefined manner. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say that, as an orphan scraping by, I came across as servile and meek.

Regardless, I didn’t try to act dignified back then. I didn’t even know how to carry myself with dignity.

I briefly searched my memory, trying to recall how I used to speak as a child.

“Well... I-I don't think you should judge people based on how they talk...”

“It's a little late for that now, senior.”

For a moment, I felt a pang of sadness. I remembered the Tang Sowol from before my regression, and I knew that the person before me now was not the same one. The realization made my heart ache.

Whether she noticed my feelings or not, Tang Sowol continued in her sharp tone, unfazed.

“By the way, senior, may I ask why you kidnapped me in the first place?”

“Hm? Oh, well...”

“I'm still alive, my *dantian* and limbs are intact, and I haven't been tortured in any way. So, it seems like you have a reason to keep me unharmed.”

As if she'd seen something distasteful, Tang Sowol wrinkled her nose, clearly displeased with my attempt to change my tone.

This is harder than I thought. Maybe I should just speak the way I usually do.

‘Whatever your reason may be, it surely isn’t an ordinary one. If there’s something I can do for you, I’ll cooperate, so please release me.’

“My goal, huh...”

It was simple—protect Tang Sowol from the impending ambush. So that I would never again have to see her cry while looking at her scarred face.

That was my entire objective.

“I’ve told you multiple times already. Soon, people with grudges against the Tang Clan will come to attack.”

“I was being serious, senior. I’m not seriously injured, so if you release me now, I can pretend this never happened.”

“It’s tempting to imagine avoiding the Tang Clan’s infamous daggers, but unfortunately, I can’t agree to that. Sorry.”

“Then the grudge between us will only deepen.”

Tang Sowol’s response was as sharp as a blade. I sighed as I watched her for a moment.

“Fine. Let’s do this instead. It might take some time, but the Tang Clan will surely notice something is wrong and send a pursuit team, won’t they?”

“Yes. Despite appearances, I’m quite beloved by my family.”

“That’s obvious. Anyway, here’s my condition: I’ll release you either when the Tang Clan’s pursuit team arrives or after one year.”

If the pursuit team arrives, I’ll hand Tang Sowol over to them and make my escape. Even if they don’t find this place, a year should be enough to ensure her safety from the upcoming attack.

Tang Sowol thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Fine. How much ransom are you thinking?”

“I don’t want any ransom. All I ask is that you listen to me while you’re here. What do you say? I think that’s a pretty generous deal.”

“Hmm? If that’s the case... Huh?!”

Suddenly, Tang Sowol scrunched up her face and curled her body, as if trying to shield herself from me.

“What now?”

“If it’s not a grudge, and wealth isn’t your goal, then there’s only one thing left. You must be after my body.”

"....."

“You’ve regained your youth, and now you desire a young woman, is that it? How tragic... To think I’d lose my purity to some ancient monster in a cold, dark cave...”

“But remember this. If you dare to forcibly take a woman of the Tang Clan, you’d better be prepared for the consequences.”

“...Is that so...?”

She certainly was bold and confident before her face was scarred. And honestly, she was beautiful enough to back it up.

Watching her tremble, flushed all the way to her ears, I flicked her forehead with my finger.

Ppaak!

“Ugh!”

The impact was stronger than I intended. Tang Sowol began trembling in a different way, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Let’s add a condition. Stop calling me an ancient monster or making strange assumptions. If you agree, none of what you fear will happen.”

“...F-Fine.”

Tang Sowol nodded, tears welling up in her eyes.

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“I’m hungry.”

Tang Sowol, still tightly bound, spoke with a bold attitude.

“I have *Byukkokdan* pills.”

“Senior... No, young swordsman, you might not realize this because you’ve probably ruined your taste buds while cultivating, but *Byukkokdan* isn’t real food.”

“If it fills your stomach without harming your body, it’s food.”

“No. *Byukkokdan* tastes awful and only provides just enough nutrition to keep you from dying. It’s no different from eating tree bark, and nobody calls tree bark food.”

Did she really dislike *Byukkokdan* that much? Well, I could understand her point.

After all, it's just ground grains mixed with a bit of pine pollen and hardened into pills. Even at its best, it wouldn't taste good.

It's something used only in special cases like *closed-door cultivation*. I only bought it because I figured I'd be stuck here for a while doing just that.

"Still, you'll get used to it if you keep eating it."

"What a poor, unfortunate soul. Your taste buds... how pitiful."

Tang Sowol gave me a pitying look, then continued in a mockingly gentle tone.

"Come on, repeat after me, young swordsman. *Byukkokdan* is..."

"*Byukkokdan* is..."

"Not food."

"Not foo— Wait, hold on."

I was about to mindlessly repeat her words before catching myself. Ever since we made our agreement, her hostility had diminished significantly, but somehow her shamelessness seemed to have increased even more.

“For someone who’s been kidnapped, you sure are demanding. Just eat what I give you.”

“If I’m unlucky, I’ll have to live on *Byukkokdan* for a whole year. I’d rather bite my tongue and... Oh, wait. I promised I wouldn’t do that. Fine, then—I’ll refuse to eat anything and starve to death instead.”

“Do you really think such bluffs will work on me? I can just force-feed you.”

“And do you really think I wouldn’t be able to throw it up afterward? I assure you, I can.”

Knowing Tang Sowol, she probably would do it. I’d experienced her stubbornness enough times to be certain of that. Still, there was a fatal problem with fulfilling her request.

“I don’t have any money.”

“...What?”

“I spent all my money buying antidote wine.”

“Oh...”

No matter how well I knew Tang Sowol’s abilities, I wasn’t foolish enough to confront her unprepared. With my insufficient internal energy and incomplete physical training, I had to make thorough preparations—so thorough that I spent every last coin I’d scraped together in my second life.

After a long moment of hesitation, Tang Sowol sighed in resignation and spoke.

“Inside the right side of my waist sash, there’s a pouch. Use that.”

“Hmm. Alright.”

Feigning a cough, I reached toward her waist.

As my fingers brushed against the high-quality silk of her green robe, it made a soft, rustling sound. As expected of the Sichuan Tang Clan—they sure wear fine clothes.

Though the sash was tightly tied, it wasn't snug against her waist. In fact, from a distance, it might have appeared a bit loose.

It made sense—Tang Clan warriors, who often used poison and concealed weapons, tended to wear loose-fitting clothing to hide the contours of their bodies.

Just last night, Tang Sowol had resisted fiercely, pulling out hidden weapons from various parts of her clothing to throw at me.

Carefully, I slipped my fingers inside the sash, mindful not to get cut by any hidden weapons.

“Ah!”

Tang Sowol flinched slightly. Even though she'd given me permission, I suppose it's only natural to react that way when someone touches your personal belongings—or your weapon, for that matter. I should finish quickly.

With that thought in mind, I carefully searched the inside of her sash. Since there was no outward bulge indicating the pouch's location, I had no choice but to feel around.

However, whether it was discomfort or something else, Tang Sowol began squirming and trying to move away from me.

“W-Wait! That’s...”

“Stay still. You’re getting in the way.”

Gripping her shoulder to keep her still, I continued my search.

I felt the cool metal of darts, the sharp edges of needles, and the hard surface of steel shards. Finally, my fingers brushed against a small pouch.

“Is this it?”

“Yes! That’s it, so please hurry and take your hand out!”

“No need to rush. I was going to do that anyway. Just how hungry are you?”

Tang Sowol shot me a glare, her expression one of disbelief. Still, the pouch was more important.

It was surprisingly heavy. When I opened it halfway to peek inside, it was filled not with coins but with silver ingots.

This is more than I managed to save after my regression. Does she seriously carry this much around as allowance during her debut in the martial world? The five great families must be wealthier than I imagined.

“That’s only natural. Oh, by the way, have you decided to demand a ransom after all? If you release me now, I’ll have this pouch filled with gold ingots for you.”

“Don’t act like you’re flaunting your wealth—it’s your family’s money, not yours.”

“Then how about my weight in gold and silver?”

“I believe your value is far greater than a mere heap of gold, Tang Sowol.”

“Well, I *am* an extraordinary woman.”

Tang Sowol nodded seriously, as if she agreed wholeheartedly with my words. Her nonchalant attitude made me chuckle as I pressed a few pressure points on her body.

The pressure point seals would hold until tomorrow. The bindings were secure too.

Satisfied, I stood up and stretched my stiff body.

“I’m going to head down to the village. Is there anything specific you want to eat or need?”

“Ugh... As long as there’s meat, anything will do. As for other necessities... freedom?”

“If you want to escape, feel free to try.”

“Really?!”

“But if you run away after making a promise and get caught again... Well, you can look forward to what happens then. I won’t be as lenient as I am now.”

Of course, no matter how much I tried to sound harsh, I doubted I’d be able to truly treat Tang Sowol cruelly. Even when I resolved to be strict, my body wouldn’t follow through.

Tang Sowol, unaware of my inner turmoil, swallowed nervously and shook her head.

“As a daughter of the Tang Clan, I wouldn’t dream of breaking a promise I’ve made. Still, a cave is hardly a suitable place for a person to live. If we’re going to be here for a while, there are a few things we’ll need.”

“What exactly do you need?”

“First, something to lay on. The floor is too hard and uneven to sleep comfortably.”

“And?”

“I can’t keep wearing the same clothes forever, so could you get me some spare clothing? Normally, I would have obtained additional Tang Clan uniforms through the family’s merchant groups, but... I won’t expect that here. Just something clean and decent will do.”

“Got it.”

“Do we have enough water for drinking and washing? If not, we’ll need jars to store it.”

“I’ll prepare that too.”

As I listened to Tang Sowol’s requests, I realized something.

I’d spent all my time thinking about how to kidnap her—I hadn’t given a single thought to what would come after.

I began mentally listing the supplies we’d need. But before I could finish, Tang Sowol’s confident tone faltered, and she started to stammer.

“Also... um...”

“Also?”

“W-Well... Uh... Ugh!”

She hesitated, chewing on her lips as if debating whether or not to speak. Finally, with a determined expression, she said,

“Undergarments. And... a chamber pot, please.”

“I’ve been holding it in for a while, but I don’t think I can last much longer.”

“...Got it.”

“Oh, just to be clear, when I mentioned undergarments, I meant as spares, not because... well... not because I had an accident, so don’t get the wrong idea!”

“You don’t need to explain in such detail...”

A headache started to form. Just as I raised a hand to rub my temple and sigh, I met Tang Sowol's gaze—her face bright red, but her posture rigid as she stared at me defiantly.

Of course, she was embarrassed. But knowing Tang Sowol, she was probably trying to hide it behind a show of pride.

I'd seen her act like this before—when cornered, she'd resort to bluffing.

“Stay put for a moment.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring her confusion, I released some of the pressure points I had sealed, allowing her to circulate a small amount of internal energy.

“What is this?”

“Hold out until I return.”

“Of course, I planned to... but are you sure it’s okay to let me use my internal energy? Even if it’s a small amount, if I use it well, I might be able to escape.”

“‘If you use it well,’ huh. I’m sure you could. But I trust you—you promised, didn’t you?”

Tang Sowol stared at me, her mouth slightly agape, as if she’d been struck speechless.

“Alright, I’ll be off now. Stay put while I’m gone.”

“Y-Yeah... Have a safe trip?”

Waving lightly at Tang Sowol, who was still stammering in confusion, I left the cave.

Tang Sowol was bewildered.

“Why?”

Why had he released her pressure points and left?

Could he have genuinely meant it when he said he trusted her? Of course, Tang Sowol intended to keep her promise.

It wasn't just because of the promise—after considering the strange man's skills, she figured that staying put was actually safer.

She slowed her breathing and tried to suppress her bodily needs, recalling the events of the previous day.

That lunatic had told her to return home because it was dangerous, and when she refused, he had drawn his sword without hesitation.

Clearly, he wasn't in his right mind, but his martial skills were undeniable.

He had perfectly countered every hidden weapon she threw, as if he had predicted their trajectory. He seemed well-versed in poison, discerning between those that could be neutralized with antidote wine and those that couldn't, skillfully alternating between breaking through and evading her attacks.

But what chilled her most was his eyes.

Cold, sharp, and unwavering—like a blade driven deep into its target, devoid of emotion and utterly ruthless. Even when she revealed the hidden needles concealed behind her darts or released her final attack, the *Black Smoke Needle Barrel* (묵연침통), scattering countless poisoned needles in an instant, he remained unfazed.

Without showing even a hint of disturbance, he had dismantled her every move with precision, all without emitting a single trace of sword energy.

No matter how prideful Tang Sowol was, she couldn't help but feel crushed. She had lost consciousness in despair, only to wake up bound and gagged, with her internal energy sealed—yet otherwise unharmed.

“...Maybe ‘unharmed’ isn't quite right.”

Could her current state really be considered unharmed? Upon reflection, she realized that wasn't quite true.

Sighing deeply, Tang Sowol began wiggling her fingers, testing the strength of her restraints.

With some effort, it seemed possible to escape. She could, for example, dislocate one of her wrists and slip it free.

Could she make a successful escape from that lunatic's grasp if she fled now?

She seriously considered it for a moment but soon decided against it. She relaxed her body and slumped into a more comfortable position.

What ultimately held her back was the weight of her promise and an undeniable sense of unease.

She had invoked her family's name when making that promise, so breaking it would be dishonorable. That much was obvious.

But why hadn't the lunatic severed her tendons or taken away her hidden weapons, even after finding them while searching her pouch? Why had he left her body intact?

More than anything, despite how arrogantly she had acted, why had he complied with all her requests without much complaint?

Tang Sowol had already realized that this wasn't an ordinary kidnapping. But she still couldn't figure out the exact reason behind it.

“Could it be...?”

Perhaps... Though it seemed absurd, perhaps the lunatic genuinely believed she was in danger and had kidnapped her purely to take her somewhere safe.

The reason didn't matter much. His methods were eccentric and unreasonable, but...

“Well, all old martial masters are like that.”

Everyone knew that martial masters who reversed their aging rarely had a sound mind.

Tang Sowol gave up on trying to figure it out. At the moment, holding back her bodily urges was a more pressing concern than deciphering her kidnapper's motives.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

I returned to the cave, carrying a large jar on my back. The jar, which I had bought to store water, was now filled with various supplies I had picked up in the village.

As I entered, my eyes met Tang Sowol's. She was lying comfortably on the floor as if it were her own home.

“You're back?”

“If anyone saw you, they'd think you're the owner of this place.”

“This is the most comfortable position I could manage. By the way, hurry up and give me that.”

“Oh, you mean this?”

I pulled out a well-wrapped bundle of dumplings from the jar. Still warm, they were generously stuffed with meat—I figured they would satisfy her.

But instead of looking pleased, Tang Sowol frowned deeply at the sight of the steaming dumplings.

“I don’t want dumplings. I want *that*.”

“If you don’t say what *that* is, how am I supposed to know? Be specific.”

“Ugh!”

Tang Sowol’s face turned bright red as she glared at me, her expression as fierce as if she were facing a lifelong enemy.

I was about to ask why she was overreacting when I finally understood as she muttered her next words.

“...The chamber pot, please.”

“Oh.”

I had forgotten.

I quickly took it out, but there was still a problem—Tang Sowol was bound hand and foot, making her as helpless as a caterpillar. Even with a chamber pot, she wouldn’t be able to take care of her business in this state.

Perhaps realizing the same thing, Tang Sowol's eyes trembled as she stared at the chamber pot. The trembling soon spread throughout her entire body, and she began to shiver like a newborn lamb. She carefully glanced up at me.

"Young swordsman, um... You're not going to say that you'll help me undress, like when you took my pouch earlier, right?"

"Of course not. The important thing is that you don't leave the cave, not that you're tied up all the time. I'll untie you for now."

"Th-Thank you!"

Tang Sowol's face lit up instantly. Her reaction was so simple that it made me chuckle as I drew my sword.

After cutting the ropes binding her, she awkwardly rubbed her freed wrists. She then picked up the chamber pot but paused suddenly.

"Are you going to stay here while I...?"

“Of course.”

“I see...”

With a determined look, Tang Sowol bit her lip and reached for her waistband. Her sash fell to the floor with a soft thud.

But she didn't stop there. Her hands moved next to the waistband of her inner clothing.

Right. She had to lower her pants to use the chamber pot.

Realizing this obvious fact belatedly, I quickly turned around and walked out of the cave.

“I'll wait outside. Call me when you're done.”

“Huh? Oh! Yes, I will!”

Leaving Tang Sowol's voice behind, I leaned against the wall near the cave entrance.

Kidnapping her was one thing, but living together was turning out to be far more complicated than I had expected.

I briefly considered creating some basic rules for our cohabitation when I heard Tang Sowol's voice calling from inside the cave.

"Young swordsman, may I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"What should I do with the chamber pot after I've used it?"

"I'll take care of it."

When I went back inside, Tang Sowol was sitting with her head lowered, her face bright red. After tying her hands and feet with the remaining rope, I picked up the chamber pot.

It was still warm.

I emptied the chamber pot by the river, cleaned it thoroughly, and returned to the cave.

As soon as I entered, I saw Tang Sowol crawling toward the dumplings.

We exchanged glances in silence. Without a change in expression, Tang Sowol spoke in a calm voice.

“Perfect timing. It’s hard to eat with my hands tied. Could you untie me again?”

“No. This situation is different from before.”

“I don’t see how it’s that different.”

“I can feed you myself, so there’s no need to untie you.”

“...What?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, confused, but soon nodded as if she had come to terms with it.

“I didn’t think of that. Fine, I’ll leave it to you.”

Instead of crawling any further, she lay back on the floor and opened her mouth wide.

“You’ve gotten cheekier in just a short while, haven’t you?”

“Well, after everything we’ve been through, wouldn’t it be strange to feel embarrassed about something like this?”

“You’re not wrong. But eating while lying down isn’t ideal—you’ll get indigestion.”

I helped her sit up and lean against the wall.

“You’re quite attentive, aren’t you?”

“And you’re surprisingly tough. I thought you’d be looking more miserable.”

“I’m holding it in. I can’t stand the thought of you enjoying my despair.”

“I don’t have that kind of taste. Now, open your mouth.”

“...Ahh.”

Tang Sowol obediently opened her mouth, resembling a baby bird begging for food. I smiled slightly at the sight and tore a dumpling into a manageable piece before feeding it to her.

While she chewed, I took a bite of my own dumpling.

We continued this back-and-forth until the dumplings were gone. After swallowing the last bite, Tang Sowol licked the crumbs off her lips and spoke.

“Now that we’ve finished eating, how about a little conversation?”

“Conversation? About what?”

Tang Sowol leaned in slightly, looking directly into my eyes.

“You seem to know quite a lot about me, don’t you?”

“To some extent, yes.”

The Tang Sowol of my past life and the Tang Sowol before me had experienced different events. They weren’t entirely the same person.

For example, her hair was different. After the fall of the Tang Clan in my past life, her hair had turned completely white. She had also grown her bangs long to cover the scar on her face.

But now, her hair was black, her bangs neatly trimmed, and, most notably, she didn’t carry the same heavy, melancholic aura.

Her tone, gestures, and appearance all had subtle differences.

“That longing gaze of yours is making me uncomfortable.”

“Don’t mind it. It’s nothing.”

“‘Don’t mind it,’ you say... That’s ridiculous.”

Though she grumbled in disbelief, she sighed deeply when I didn’t respond further.

“Fine. Anyway, it’s clear you know me well. But I know nothing about you.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Yes, so let’s take this opportunity to get to know each other.”

For a moment, my breath caught.

In my past life, countless martial artists, both orthodox and unorthodox, had gathered in Hebei to escape the Heavenly Demon. Naturally, there had been many conflicts, and my relationship with Tang Sowol had been no exception.

At first, we ignored each other, pretending the other didn't exist. But when I found myself in danger while fighting the Demonic Sect's elite, Tang Sowol was the first to come to my aid.

That was the day I realized that some people help others without expecting anything in return. Of course, back then, I couldn't accept it and kept asking her why she had helped me.

When I questioned her, asking if she knew what kind of person I was, Tang Sowol had simply smiled faintly and said:

“Because we're comrades fighting together. Isn't that enough? And if that answer doesn't satisfy you... Well, we can just get to know each other from now on.”

That moment had marked the beginning of our friendship.

And now, this younger Tang Sowol, who hadn't yet experienced those events, was saying the same thing.

Even though she was different, she was still Tang Sowol.

It made me feel strangely ticklish inside. As if sensing her advantage, Tang Sowol smirked.

“Ah! You smiled just now, didn't you? Can I take that as your agreement?”

I touched my lips and realized she was right—I had been smiling without even noticing.

At this point, refusing would feel awkward, so I nodded.

“Do as you like.”

“That's what I intended to do anyway. First...”

Tang Sowol nodded toward the remaining dumplings.

“Let’s have one more.”

“Good timing. I was thinking one wasn’t enough either.”

“And tell me your name.”

“My name?”

“Yes. I don’t even know your name yet.”

Come to think of it, I hadn’t told her. I fed her a piece of dumpling and answered.

“Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Cheon Hwi-da, huh? That’s a name I’ve never heard before. Do you have a title or nickname?”

“I don’t have one.”

In my past life, I was first called *Blood Wolf*, and after reaching the peak, I was known as *Sword Demon*. But now, I had no nickname.

That was only natural—I hadn’t been back long, and most of my time had been spent training to regain my former skills.

Tang Sowol looked slightly disappointed as she shook her head.

“Cheon Hwi-da... Our first meeting was rather strange and unfair, and I went through a lot because of you. But I’ve decided you don’t have any ill intentions.”

“Thanks for that. I know I acted crazy, but I had my reasons.”

“Well, since we’ve agreed to be honest with each other, don’t you think it’s time to be a little more open?”

Tang Sowol gave me a playful look, showing off her bound wrists.

“Let me ask again. Do you really believe my life will be in danger soon?”

“Yes.”

“And you still can’t tell me exactly why, can you?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“If I insist on leaving the cave and resuming my journey?”

“I’ll bring you back by any means necessary.”

“You’re quite persistent. But you do understand that I can’t just go back without any reason, right?”

“Of course.”

If she left only to return shortly after, it would look like she had fled in fear. That would be a serious blow to the Tang Clan’s reputation.

Tang Sowol closed her eyes, seemingly deep in thought. After a while, she opened them, her gaze sharp but calm.

“Fine. I’ll trust you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Though I don’t believe your claim about imminent danger, I’ll trust that you acted with good intentions.”

“That’s good enough.”

Relieved, I stood up.

“Wait here for a moment. I have something for you.”

“Huh? Where are you going? Cheon Hwi-da? I can’t eat without you!”

Ignoring Tang Sowol's protests, I headed toward the deeper part of the cave.

I hadn't chosen this cave randomly—there was a reason I had brought her here.

After searching for a small crack that was hard to spot unless you knew it was there, I plucked a single violet flower growing inside.

Carefully cradling the delicate flower in both hands, I returned to Tang Sowol and handed it to her.

“Take this.”

“...What is it?”

“It's a gift.”

Tang Sowol blinked in confusion, glancing between me and the flower. Of course, she would recognize it—this was a rare herb she had discovered in my past life.

However, her response wasn't quite what I had expected. Bowing slightly, she said:

“Sorry, but receiving a flower as a gift feels a bit awkward.”

“It's not what you think.”

“Especially when I'm tied up like this. I think you should save such gestures for your fiancée.”

“It's not like that.”

“Yes, of course. This is just an ordinary gift with no special meaning, right?”

Though she said this, Tang Sowol squirmed away from me as if genuinely alarmed.

I couldn't help but feel a bit wronged.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Tang Sowol eyed me warily as she subtly increased the distance between us. In response, I extended the violet flower in my hand toward her once more.

“This is *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*.”

“What?! Did you just say this is *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*?!”

Startled, Tang Sowol quickly crawled back toward me, closing the distance she had just put between us. She carefully examined the flower again, nodding repeatedly in awe.

Ah, I see. It wasn't that she failed to recognize *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*—she had simply refused it earlier because she thought it was just a random flower gift.

That realization was slightly irritating, but regardless, the important thing was that I had managed to give her the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass* earlier than in my past life.

In my previous life, Tang Sowol had fought desperately against the attackers but was ultimately outnumbered and forced to flee.

Frankly, the fact that she had managed to hold out for so long was impressive. If she hadn't been a genius or born with the unique constitution known as the *Poison Spirit Physique* (독령지체, Dokryeong Jiche), she wouldn't have survived at all.

While fleeing, exhausted and drained of her inner energy, she had stumbled upon this very cave by sheer chance.

Planning to quietly rest and recover, she had wedged herself into a corner... and there, she had found it: the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*.

This herb was remarkable in many ways. The part that resembled a flower wasn't actually a flower but a purple-tinted stalk. Despite its name, it had almost no inherent toxicity.

Its most notable property was its ability to enhance the potency of any poison it came into contact with, regardless of the poison's type.

Thus, it was known as *Poison Enhancing Grass* (배독초) rather than simply a poisonous herb. Martial artists who specialized in poison techniques would go to great lengths to obtain such a rare herb.

For someone like Tang Sowol, who could store poisons in her body and synthesize them into stronger toxins, this herb was a priceless treasure—worth more than gold.

However, in my past life, Tang Sowol had not had enough time to properly absorb the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*.

In the end, she could only use it as a one-time enhancer, temporarily amplifying the poison she emitted externally.

With that amplified poison, she had managed to fend off most of the attackers who had pursued her to the cave's vicinity. But the problem was that the enhanced poison had been too strong.

As a first-class martial artist, she couldn't control its potency, and even her *Poison Spirit Physique* had struggled to withstand the surging waves of poison.

Though she eventually escaped with her life, half of her face had already been melted by the poison.

But this time, things could be different.

The *Poison Spirit Physique* allowed its wielder to remember and store all poisons they encountered. It was a constitution more akin to a poison creature than a human.

Have you ever heard of a poisonous creature dying from its own poison? It's rare, but it does happen. However, most poisonous creatures develop immunity to their own toxins.

Tang Sowol was the same. If she could properly absorb the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*, not only would her poison techniques become far more powerful, but she would also develop the resistance necessary to withstand the enhanced toxins.

There would be no need to recklessly sacrifice both the herb and her body, as she had in my past life.

I spoke to Tang Sowol, who was still staring at the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass* with a dazed expression.

"I'll untie you again, so go ahead and take it."

"Huh?"

"How long will it take you to absorb it and imprint it on your body?"

“You knew that I have the *Poison Spirit Physique*, didn’t you?”

“It’s not exactly a secret, is it?”

“That’s true, but there aren’t many people who understand what the *Poison Spirit Physique* can actually do.”

“So, are you going to take it or not?”

“Of course I’ll take it! Thank you very much. But since you’re being so generous with untying me and even giving me rare herbs, couldn’t you leave me untied more often?”

“I’ll think about it while we’re both in the cave.”

“That’s more than enough!”

Tang Sowol nodded triumphantly, her face brimming with confidence. As soon as I untied her, she quickly snatched the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*, worried I might change my mind.

Then, as if tasting it, she stuck out her tongue and licked the flower-like part of the herb.

“...What are you doing?”

Tang Sowol gestured with her hand for me to be quiet and continued savoring the herb.

My eyes couldn't help but follow her tongue, which flicked across the vivid purple surface. Come to think of it, this was Tang Sowol's first time venturing into the martial world.

Having grown up pampered at home, she probably didn't realize how her actions might be perceived by other men.

I didn't mind, but behaving like that around others might cause trouble.

“Hah...”

A sigh escaped my lips. At the same time, Tang Sowol finally pulled her tongue back from the herb and nodded.

“Hmm. I understand now. I estimate it will take at least three months to fully absorb it.”

“Three months? I thought the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass* itself didn’t have much toxicity.”

“You’re right, but there’s no helping it. Absorbing the herb means doubling the potency of all the poisons I’ve already stored in my body. Naturally, my body will need time to adapt.”

“I see.”

I understood. While the herb itself could be absorbed quickly, the problem lay in the amplified toxicity of the existing poisons.

If she rushed the process, her body might fail to withstand the poison’s power, and parts of her might melt—just like in my past life.

“So, while your body is adjusting to the herb, using poison techniques will be difficult, right? Since this herb enhances poison, there’s a risk of the stored toxins running wild.”

“You even knew that?”

“I happened to pick up that bit of knowledge.”

“Even if someone isn’t a poison master, they can still use poison techniques in a basic way. Applying poison externally is always an option.”

“Is that why you carry poison around with you?”

Tang Sowol pressed her lips together in silence. Of course not. Why would someone who could produce poison internally bother to carry it around?

Shrugging, I glanced around the empty parts of the cave. It was quite spacious.

“So... three months, huh? I suppose I should prepare some wooden dummies for you to practice throwing your hidden weapons.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I have no intention of displaying my martial arts in front of you.”

“You already showed me everything you’ve got, and none of it worked. What’s there to hide?”

“Ugh... That’s—!”

Tang Sowol’s face turned red, likely recalling how she had been captured. Then, her complexion paled as if reliving the embarrassment.

Chuckling at her colorful expression, I shook my head.

“I’m not asking you to show me some secret ultimate technique. I’m saying that as a martial artist, you can’t neglect training. If you don’t like the techniques you’ve already shown me, at least practice your fundamentals.”

“Well... fine. I understand! If you insist, I’ll do it. Just make those dummies already!”

“Not today. I’ll make them tomorrow.”

“...You’re really going to provoke me like that and then say *tomorrow*?”

Tang Sowol stared at me in disbelief. I silently pointed toward the cave entrance.

“It’s almost sunset. By the time you’ve absorbed the herb and finished your meditation, it’ll be time to sleep.”

“And I have my own training to finish tonight. I’m not going to stay up all night just to make those dummies.”

Finally understanding, Tang Sowol nodded quietly.

“Alright. Tomorrow it is, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“By the way, don’t you think it’s a bit much to act like a boss when you’re the one who got kidnapped?”

“It’s a little late to bring that up, but you’re going to help anyway, aren’t you?”

When I wordlessly nodded, she laughed gleefully.

“Haha! There’s no rush, so let’s take things one step at a time.”

“Sure, though it’s me who’ll be doing all the work.”

Satisfied with my response, Tang Sowol sat cross-legged and prepared to meditate. Before swallowing the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass*, she glanced at me with a sly grin.

“Would you mind standing guard for me?”

“I’m the most dangerous thing in this cave, you know.”

“That’s precisely why I’m asking.”

“I’ll be training too. If anything disrupts us, I’ll deal with it.”

“Understood. Then I’ll go ahead and meditate right here next to you.”

Smiling brightly, Tang Sowol swallowed the herb in one gulp and closed her eyes, her posture completely defenseless.

After watching her for a moment, I drew my sword. I had done my inner energy training in the morning—now it was time to work on my external techniques.

My body was still soft and underdeveloped, like unrefined steel. My muscles were insufficient, my balance was off, and I ran out of breath too easily.

In short, I was like crude metal filled with impurities. My goal was to hammer and temper myself until I became a well-forged sword.

There were no shortcuts. The only method was to keep swinging my sword until exhaustion claimed me. This was the simplest yet most essential part of martial arts.

“Hup!”

With a suppressed shout, I slashed through the empty air. A straightforward, vertical cut with no unnecessary flourishes.

The following strikes were just as simple—basic slashes and thrusts, executed without any flashy techniques.

I wasn't born with exceptional talent, nor had I been fortunate enough to learn prestigious martial arts.

In typical unorthodox fashion, I had learned various mediocre techniques and pieced together what I could, creating a rootless style of my own.

Yet, as I continued to swing my sword, fight, and survive, I had come to understand one thing:

You don't need grand techniques to kill someone.

A sword swung at the right moment, aimed at the right spot—that was all it took. You didn't need to be faster, stronger, or more dazzling.

After all, humans are fragile creatures who die when their vital points are struck.

Thus, I discarded all the useless tricks I had learned. They had been nothing more than second-rate techniques, anyway.

In their place, I returned to the basics. I swung my sword as I had when I first picked it up.

Whoosh!

The sound of my sword slicing through the air echoed in the cave. Not good enough—the tip of my blade wavered slightly, a sign of instability.

Sharpening my focus, I continued to swing. Within my reach, with as much force as I could control, I aimed to make my sword move exactly as I intended.

How many times had I swung my sword by then? I began to feel slight changes with each stroke.

The trajectory grew cleaner, forming straighter lines. The sound of the air being cut became quieter, and the sharpness of my strikes grew more pronounced.

No, I hadn't achieved some great revelation. My body was simply adapting, becoming more suitable for wielding a sword.

Though my body was still young and weak, I took solace in its rapid growth.

Starting proper training at an earlier age this time, I would surely surpass my past self.

Whether that would be enough to defeat the Heavenly Demon, I didn't know. But I had to try everything I could.

In the worst-case scenario, if Tang Sowol insisted on risking her life for revenge, I would have to forcibly drag her out of Zhongyuan. For that, I needed to reach the *Transformation Realm* (화경, Hwakyung).

The *Transformation Realm*, huh? A distant goal, but one I had no choice but to pursue.

Firming my resolve once more, I continued swinging my sword without pause.

Eventually, when my body was so exhausted I could no longer move a single finger, I collapsed onto the ground.

“What kind of insane training is this?!”

Startled, Tang Sowol rushed over and helped me sit up.

“...This is how I’ve always trained.”

“You’re going to ruin your body at this rate!”

“I didn’t swing recklessly—I calculated every move.”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Just lie down for now. Ugh, look at all this sweat. You should wash up if you can, though I doubt you have the energy.”

“As you can see.”

“Fine, I’ll wipe you down a bit, so stay still.”

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. I owe you one, after all.”

With a more familiar tone, Tang Sowol grabbed a spare set of clothes to use as a towel and gently wiped me down. After finishing, she tilted her head and asked:

“I’ve heard of people becoming stronger after regressing to their youth, but never weaker. Are you sure you’re really just a young swordsman?”

“It’s a relief you’ve finally figured that out.”

“It’s all because of that old man’s way of speaking you have! I thought I was a genius, but Zhongyuan is truly vast. Who knew there were geniuses greater than me...”

“Enough of the flattery. Go get some rest. I’m about to pass out.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to leave yourself so defenseless in front of me? Aren’t you going to tie me up again?”

“You asked me to stand guard, yet you’re just as defenseless.”

“Ah! That’s right—I asked you to guard me, and instead, you started dancing with your sword!”

“Did it disturb your meditation?”

“No... not really...”

Tang Sowol trailed off, looking confused.

Of course, she wouldn’t understand. I hadn’t swung my sword randomly—I had done so in a way that enveloped her in my aura, providing a sense of security.

Not realizing this, Tang Sowol let out a long sigh and stood up.

“Well, whatever. Let’s just get some sleep. We have plenty to do tomorrow, don’t we?”

With that, she lay down in her usual spot. Her voice reached me as drowsiness crept over me.

“Goodnight. See you tomorrow.”

I didn't remember what I said in response.

The following days proceeded much the same as the first.

Every morning, I trained my inner energy. Then, I would go down to the nearby village to buy food and other necessities.

At night, I focused on external techniques until I was too tired to stay awake.

As this routine repeated, the cave gradually became more livable, and Tang Sowol and I grew closer.

Time passed, and by the time Tang Sowol had absorbed more than half of the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass* and I had accumulated enough inner energy to reach the first-class level...

We were eating dinner, as usual, when I sensed a faint killing intent outside the cave.

I rose to my feet and stepped out.

“...Ha.”

Sure enough, a group of martial artists was advancing toward the cave, slowly forming a perimeter around it.

Not one of them wore the green robes of the Tang Clan.