

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 101-110

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

*“This isn’t enough.”*

Winning or losing wasn’t important to Seol Lihyang.

Of course, winning would be nice. But that wasn’t why she stood here.

It wasn’t for victory, nor to make her name known, nor even to witness the martial arts of the Mount Hua Sect.

*“I need to show it.”*

To Cheon Hwi, who always pushed forward on his own, never relying on others when faced with hardship.

And to herself—who, knowing full well that she couldn't be of much help to Cheon Hwi, could do nothing but watch in frustration.

She simply wanted to prove something.

*Prove what, exactly...?*

Why was it, despite how painful it was, she still couldn't give up?

Certainly, she was sincere in wanting to return even a fraction of all that Cheon Hwi had given her. But that alone wasn't enough to sustain her.

Cornered to her limit, the obsessive thoughts that had gripped her throughout the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering began to unravel. What she saw then was simply the unadorned truth.

“Ah.”

The incoming blade.

The beautiful and strong martial artist she had always admired and wished to resemble.

And above, Cheon Hwi—watching with his usual composed expression, but his clenched fists betraying his worry.

All of it forced her to confront the depths of herself—something she had long turned away from.

And the last thing Seol Lihyang’s eyes held was the unembellished, true self she had hidden away.

Only then did she realize her feelings.

*“I... I must really like Cheon Hwi.”*

She knew he already had a fiancée.

But it wasn’t that she wanted to take him away from Tang Sowol.

Tang Sowol was someone Seol Lihyang was also grateful to—someone she admired and who had always guided her.

All Seol Lihyang wanted was—

*“Please look at me.”*

She didn’t need to have him all to herself. He had never belonged to her in the first place.

*“See me.”*

She once thought just being by his side would be enough. But it wasn’t. That alone didn’t satisfy her.

Once she became aware of her own feelings, the thirst inside her refused to be quenched.

*“Look at me...”*

She remembered the occasional affectionate glances Cheon Hwi had given her.

She remembered the rough but tender hands that had pressed on her back after a grueling day of training.

She liked how he always prepared things suited to her taste, as if he just knew, even without her saying anything.

She liked the subtle warmth that followed his quiet interrogations, as though he knew all her weaknesses.

*“I will make you look at me.”*

She would wait no longer.

She wouldn't sit by and hope in vain for Cheon Hwi to approach her first.

She would go to him herself.

She couldn't bring herself to covet Tang Sowol's place. And yet... she couldn't just stay idle and watch either.

Perhaps it was because she had suppressed these emotions for the past three years. Seol Lihyang's heart was on the verge of bursting.

*"If defeat is already certain..."*

Then she would pour out everything she felt and collapse afterward.

No matter how far away he was, no matter who else was around—she would shout loud enough that he would have no choice but to hear.

To know that *she was here*.

Her lips, once busy just dodging Wi Ji-Su-Lian's sword, parted. A cold breath escaped between them.

Her internal energy focused to a single point, and then came her clear, high voice.

Even Wi Ji-Su-Lian, who hadn't flinched when projectiles flew at her face, took a step back in surprise.

A massive wave of cold Yin Qi began to surge around Seol Lihyang, carried on the notes of her voice.

There were no lyrics. The tone was monotonous, more like a hum than a song. It was plain.

But the result could never be called plain.

Frost began to form on the floor of the arena, spreading outward from Seol Lihyang.

Even though it was midday in the middle of summer, everyone who heard her song instinctively rubbed their arms against the sudden chill.

Strangely, though, no one found it threatening.

It was like stumbling into a cool patch of shade on a hot day—welcome, not frightening.

The cold, spreading even into the spectator seats, evoked the same response.

It wasn't a desperate cry born of being cornered.

What it carried wasn't the venom of resentment or malice.

It held only one thing—the will not to collapse without showing everything she had.

Those watching from afar likely received it as pure martial determination.

But for Wi Ji-Su-Lian, who had just exchanged blows with her, it felt different.

She didn't know who the song was meant for...But it certainly wasn't for her.

“The one in this duel is me, you know,” Wi Ji-Su-Lian muttered with a wry smile, raising her sword once more.

Seol Lihyang's final burst of *bewitching sound* was fierce, but not sharp.

The amount of internal energy she released exceeded her control, so while she could release it all at once, she couldn't finely manipulate it.

So Wi Ji-Su-Lian simply endured, waiting for the storm of Yin Qi surrounding Seol Lihyang to subside.

If she had taken the blast head-on, it might've been dangerous—but sensing something was off, she'd withdrawn immediately and only needed to block the aftershocks.

Drawing out her full internal energy, Wi Ji-Su-Lian held her sword at the ready.

She, too, knew this was likely Seol Lihyang's last stand.

With no thoughts for what came after, to expel so much internal energy would certainly lead to collapse.

Thanks to that, Seol Lihyang's song continued without pause until the very end.

She poured out every breath she had stored in her lungs, drained every last drop of energy from her *dantian*...

Until even a faint echo of her resolve reached the one she wanted to reach.

“Ah...”

The song stopped, as Seol Lihyang emptied everything inside her.

The ground was frozen solid. The air was wintry.

The last remnants of Yin Qi were sliced apart by the rising flame of Mount Hua’s sword.

Wi Ji-Su-Lian’s blade had already stopped just before Seol Lihyang’s throat.

Looking up at it, Seol Lihyang gave a weary—but satisfied—smile, and cupped her hands in a martial bow.

“I yield.”

Seol Lihyang's journey in the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering ended there.

But clearly, something else had just begun.

"...Oh."

For a moment, my mind went blank at the sound of Seol Lihyang's voice.

It wasn't because of the immense cold Yin Qi that froze the surroundings, Nor was it because she had channeled her internal energy so finely that even the farthest note carried a chill.

It was because of what was contained within her voice—something I had never expected.

I know the Seol Lihyang from before my regression.

I remember what she carried in her voice—torn like a ghost's wail when she was known as the *Demonic Sound Witch*.

*Resentment.*

She lamented her bitter fate, cursed a world that never reached out to her, and damned everyone to suffer like she did.

Many among the Demonic Cult had tragic lives, but Seol Lihyang was among the worst.

Her handling of demonic energies that were not meant for mortals made sense in that context.

It was surprising, even baffling, that Seol Lihyang—who had once been so filled with hatred and distrust, especially toward men—had come to have that kind of relationship with me.

To me, her *bewitching sound* was always a scream.

The last outcry of someone battered and cornered from all sides, with nowhere left to run.

Just like I had once called the scene of the fall of the Ironblood Hall, and of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin being struck down, a “hell”—and carved it into my *heartscape*—So too did Seol Lihyang carry her own hell.

Even after we became close, her martial arts still held that sorrow, never softening.

That's why, to me, Seol Lihyang's sound was always filled with Resentment.

But now, she was completely different.

I knew, logically, that she hadn't gone through all that suffering in this life.

So that kind of deep Resentment wouldn't exist yet.

But I hadn't expected this level of change.

The moment I heard her voice, and the chill it carried brushed against me like a refreshing breeze—I knew.

Even if no one else did, *I* knew what she had put into that sound.

Because I had watched her in my past life—And because the one her song was directed at, was *me*.

The emotion Seol Lihyang poured into her *bewitching sound* was unmistakably *affection*.

“I’m here,” she sang. “So don’t look away. See me.”

That beautiful hum lingered in my ears.

That chill seemed to whisper it.

And so I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“I see.”

I had always known Seol Lihyang held a degree of fondness for me.

I had helped her escape the Hao Clan, supported her in various ways—

So it wasn't strange she might be grateful, or even somewhat attached.

But I hadn't realized it was *this* kind of affection.

To me, the bond with Seol Lihyang had already ended once.

Of course, when I remembered her, there was still a bittersweet fondness...

But that bond had been forcibly severed by death.

Seol Lihyang doesn't remember anything from before the regression.

And yet—she has once again come to care for me.

Just as I fell again for the Tang Sowol of this life, thinking her a different person from the one before...

Just as Tang Sowol still came to love me, though the journey was different—

The only difference is this:

Tang Sowol already stands at my side.

I am now the son-in-law of the Tang Clan.

Even if I knew Seol Lihyang's feelings and wanted to respond... I couldn't.

“Haah...”

I didn't know what to do, and a sigh escaped me without my realizing it.

Seol Lihyang had shown her growth.

Even if it hadn't led to victory, that didn't make it any less admirable.

...Maybe it was because of that sigh, But as I sat beside her sighing deeply, Tang Sowol reached out her hand quietly.

**Swiik—**

But this time, she didn't place it on the back of my hand like before the duel.

Instead, subtly angled so Tang Jincheon couldn't see, she placed it on my thigh.

She gently brushed it, then brought her lips close to my ear—

Close enough to feel her warmth, though she didn't quite touch me.

But even that wasn't enough for her.

Carefully, instead of whispering aloud, she sent a *transmitted sound*.

Even for a master like Tang Jincheon, hearing a sound sent this close would be near impossible.

What was she going to say, this secretly?

Maybe she noticed what I felt from Seol Lihyang's sound too.

I swallowed dryly.

And then—

—“Young Lord Cheon. Did you know? Being the Tang Clan's son-in-law doesn't mean you can't take a concubine.”

...*What?*

—“It just means that permission doesn't lie with you—it lies with *me*.”

Tang Sowol gave a sly smile, then giggled aloud before continuing.

—“In other words, if *I* allow it, there’s no problem at all.”

—“Yes. *If I* allow it.”

The playful tone of her voice made it clear.

She had already known.

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The matches that followed in the *Dragon and Phoenix Assembly* unfolded more or less as expected.

As always, members of the *Five Supreme Clans* and the *Nine Great Sects* recorded the highest results, while one or two talented individuals from smaller sects or wandering backgrounds made a name for themselves...

Tang Sowol held her own impressively but was ultimately defeated by a promising young monk from the *Shaolin Sect*.

No matter how hard she trained in external arts, he still charged forward as if he were unaffected, even after taking a steel ball directly to the body.

Even if bladed hidden weapons had been permitted, he would have been a difficult opponent to beat.

Right. There were no real upsets to speak of.

**Squeeze, squeeze.**

“Cheon Hwi, is your internal injury all healed?”

“It’s healed.”

Seol Lihyang began kneading my shoulder the moment Tang Sowol and Tang Jincheon stepped out to take care of something.

I slowly turned my head to stare at her.

“Huh? What is it?”

“I’m fine now. No need for the massage. And besides, massages won’t heal internal injuries anyway.”

“Hey! You’re always poking and pressing at me, huh?! You’ve done all *that*, and now I can’t even give you a simple shoulder massage?! No one’s even around right now!”

“I—*This One* is here.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin quietly raised her hand from the corner, but Seol Lihyang pretended not to hear and continued.

“It’s not like I’m touching weird places like you do! It’s just your shoulder! Don’t misinterpret my kindness and just stay still!”

“This and that are clearly different. And don’t call it a weird place. It was your *back*, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t care, I don’t care! If you’ve got nothing else to do, just sit still!”

Seol Lihyang shook her head with a stubborn attitude.

Indeed, while there may not have been any surprises in the Dragon and Phoenix Assembly itself, one *unexpected development* did occur afterward—

Namely, that Seol Lihyang now clung to me whenever she had the chance.

I knew why. After watching her match, how could I not?

It was only the addition of what Tang Sowol said to me via transmitted sound at the end that made everything all the more complicated.

I never thought there'd be a day in my life when I'd be tormented by such worries.

Perhaps realizing things weren't going her way, Seol Lihyang stopped kneading and began lightly tapping my shoulder with a loosely clenched fist.

I gently grabbed her hand and pulled it away.

“I appreciate it, but I really don’t need it. Since I’ve recovered, I should check my condition by swinging my sword a bit in the training ground.”

“Tsk. Martial arts, huh... Fine. I suppose it can’t be helped.”

Seol Lihyang stepped back with a regretful sigh, then gave me a look that said, *See how considerate I am?*

“How about that? I knew you were itching to get moving, so I let you go right away. Aren’t I a thoughtful woman?”

“It would’ve been perfect... if you hadn’t said it out loud.”

I gave a dry chuckle and grabbed my sword as I rose from my seat.

The guesthouse provided by the *Golden Flower Merchant Guild* when we first arrived in Wuhuan City was excellent—aside from only having one room.

After I was kidnapped, the *Murim Alliance* insisted on preparing rooms for Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang in case anything else happened.

Naturally, with Tang Jincheon, myself, and Seo Mun-Hwarin also returning (with quite a few rumors in tow), we all ended up staying in the alliance's quarters.

We practically monopolized one of the annex buildings designed to host important guests.

Not that I was complaining—it was warm, the food was great, and, more importantly, the training grounds were superb.

Well, of course they were. Most people staying at the Murim Alliance would be martial artists, so it made sense for the facilities to be proper.

I strapped the unfamiliar black sword to my waist, and as I did, I heard a small sigh behind me.

“*Eh*uu. Kids these days are truly something.”

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. If you're not too busy watching over the place, would you mind sparring with me for a moment?”

“Hmm?! With *This One*? Of course! Let's go at once!”

Delighted that someone had finally spoken to her, Seo Mun-Hwarin bounced over enthusiastically.

Seeing this, Seol Lihyang narrowed her eyes. She seemed like she wanted to say something but ended up shaking her head and quietly following behind me.

No soft bedding, no creaky wooden floors—just solid, flat stone beneath my feet.

My internal energy was full, my meridians were clear, and after good rest and food, my body brimmed with strength.

But more than any of that, what truly made my heart stir was something else—

The hilt that fit perfectly in my palm. The solid weight that pressed from wrist to shoulder.

I hadn't gone this long without holding a sword either before or after regression.

It felt like a missing piece had finally returned—like everything was finally functioning properly again.

“Now I feel alive.”

“You really are something else.”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be this bad. But after watching the Dragon and Phoenix Assembly... I just couldn’t hold it in any longer.”

“I understand. *This One* was also quite impressed by the finals.”

The final match had been between the young master of the Namgung Clan and a disciple of the Shaolin Sect.

The Namgung Clan had been annihilated before my regression—not a single direct descendant remained.

So I’d never seen their swordsmanship in its true form, which only heightened my curiosity.

After witnessing it in person, I finally understood why the Namgung Clan claimed to be the best swordsmen under heaven.

Their pride may have seemed arrogant, but their skill was worthy of it.

They won the championship, and though the Shaolin disciple had also performed brilliantly and displayed impressive martial arts...

It was *fist and leg techniques*, not swordsmanship—so it didn't move me as much.

“Oh, but *This One* still finds you more astonishing, Cheon Hwi. I've lived long and experienced much, so I've seen many called geniuses. I dare say *This One* counts among them.”

“I'm well aware that I'm exceptional.”

“No, you misunderstand. A genius is someone who learns and comprehends quickly—who does what others can, but better, and sometimes what others cannot.”

“Right. I guess I'm that kind of genius.”

“In other words, a genius shortens the process and produces a unique result. But you... you didn’t have any process. It was as if you simply *appeared* one day.”

“I wasn’t expecting an interrogation, Senior.”

“Oh, I have no intention of pressing you. *This One* already peeked into your *heartscape* once, remember?”

“I do.”

Back then, I had to push myself to defeat the Lord of the Black Sky Sword Sect.

So I forced myself to draw out the buried memories and insights of my past life.

I won—but my body was ruined.

The uncontained force must’ve spilled everywhere, and those who were nearby, like Seo Mun-Hwarin and the Black Lotus Sect Master, likely noticed something.

“I know it wasn’t something built hastily. It was extreme, yes, but how could *This One*, of all people, deny such a path? However...”

“It’s alright. Please speak freely.”

“I was only going to say—don’t be too surprised.”

“Huh?”

I tilted my head in confusion. Seo Mun-Hwarin extended a hand and beckoned.

“Some things are best explained through action rather than words. Come at me with everything you’ve got.”

“Then I won’t hold back.”

What was she talking about?

Well, if she wanted me to come at her full-force, I was more than happy to oblige.

As a Flowering Stage master, Seo Mun-Hwarin could handle anything—even me, now that I had regained much of my past prowess.

So I released sword energy from the start.

**Wuuung—**

The sensation of the sword becoming one with my hand.

My internal energy surged from my *dantian*, flowed through my widened meridians, and enveloped my sword.

A dark crimson shimmer—resembling both fire and blood.

Not quite *sword flame*, but close enough that I smiled with satisfaction and prepared to rush Seo Mun-Hwarin—

“Mn?”

Then I stopped. I sensed something was off.

I looked up—and Seo Mun-Hwarin, already nodding slowly, confirmed my suspicion.

I closed my eyes and turned inward.

My internal injuries were healed. My internal energy had grown. My meridians had expanded thanks to *Divine Sword Unity*, and I could now wield more internal energy in a single motion.

As a result, my sword energy output had also strengthened.

Everything seemed perfect. So what was this feeling?

There it was—a strange discord in the deepest part of me. I focused harder, and soon I understood.

*“Killing intent...”*

“*Kuheum*. It may have changed a little.”

The *killing intent* that had once naturally mingled with my internal energy.

It was that very intent that made my *Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art* so powerful, despite its many side effects.

But now—that killing intent felt different.

It hadn’t disappeared. It was still there, clinging tightly.

Nor had it weakened. Its poisonous edge was still sharp.

But this strange sense of dissonance...

“*Ah.*”

Only after much thought did I realize—

The killing intent was mine, but no longer matched *me as I am now*.

Originally, the source of my killing intent was the deaths of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin in my previous life.

It was my personal hell, etched into my *heartscape* because I *refused* to forget.

So my time, my steps, had remained fixed in place.

The Lord of the Black Sky Sword Sect, whom I needed to kill, was already dead.

Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin—those who had died—were now alive and well.

The past could no longer be changed, and no matter how strong or happy I became in the future, I thought I would always carry that day's hell within me.

But—

Who could have known I'd actually turn back time?

Seol Lihyang was alive, her limbs intact.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, though still shaky, was now stepping toward a normal life.

The one who caused their deaths—the Lord of the Black Sky Sword Sect—had already fallen by my hand.

I had *truly changed the past*.

That day's memories still haunted me. The emotions I felt then—the surging killing intent—they were all undeniably mine. But now...

*"This is troublesome."*

I was no longer standing in the same place.

My long mourning had ended with the completion of my aimless revenge.

Well, past or not, those memories and emotions were still mine.

My *heartscape* remained vivid, and manipulating the deep, lingering killing intent wasn't difficult.

But... I could no longer walk the same path as before.

“Huhh...”

If rage and killing intent are no longer my path—then where do I go from here?

I don't know the answer to that yet.

Well. That's that. But this duel is still a duel.

“Here I come.”

“Eh?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes widened in surprise.

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If wrath and killing intent are no longer the path I walk, then where should I go?

I still don’t know the answer.

Well, that’s that and this is this, and a spar is still a spar.

“I’m coming.”

“Huh?!“

As I charged in with my sword raised, Seo Mun-Hwarin's eyes widened into perfect circles.

Clearly flustered, she drew her sword diagonally in a rush, but I knocked it upward from below with my palm, sending it harmlessly over my head.

Unlike during the days when she was the Ironblood Hall Master before my regression, I thought I could now take advantage of her smaller frame, having only recently returned to youth...

But I suppose that was too naive a thought.

Seo Mun-Hwarin smoothly deflected my sword strike and blinked rapidly as she asked,

“Wh-What, was that all?! This One may not be the one you faced directly, so cannot say for certain, but surely, the mental image you harbor, Cheon Hwi, is of the same kind as This One's.”

“It's roughly similar.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who lost all her family before her eyes, and I, who lost those I thought of as kin before I could even react.

A vengeance that, despite many twists and turns, we eventually achieved.

In that sense, Seo Mun-Hwarin and I had much in common. Even more so than when she once told me before my regression that we resembled each other.

It must be why she treated me with such caution.

Because she knew what lay ahead for someone who lived their entire life for revenge.

A self that no longer felt the same, a sense of emptiness from the loss of a lifelong goal, and a complete uncertainty about what comes next.

In the midst of that, only regret and lingering attachments surface vividly.

That must be why, after defeating the former master of the Black Lotus Sect, Seo Mun-Hwarin simply reclaimed the martial arts and immediately secluded herself.

But,

“Even after revenge, life continues.”

I struck down with the blade that had been knocked upward. The sword energy burning along its length looked threatening even to my own eyes, but Seo Mun-Hwarin met it precisely with an equivalent level of internal energy and slammed the sword flat.

**Thud!**

The sword, which should have come down vertically, was bent into a right angle by a mere flick of her hand.

She hadn't just deflected it, but diverted even the power of my downward strike entirely.

A technique that joins with the opponent's strength rather than opposing it, subtly distorting the result without them realizing.

It was from her that I learned the principle behind Chakui Myori—the subtleties of redirecting momentum.

The only difference is that I could never fully twist a sword imbued with such intense energy like hers.

To counter sword energy, I too must unleash my own, and when two sword energies clash, a tremendous rebound force occurs.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin controlled even that with ease and twisted it at will.

Things that were invisible back when I was still in the Peak Stage had now become clear, and I couldn't help but be impressed. Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head and asked,

“That is true, but when blinded by revenge, is it really possible to think of what lies beyond?”

“Alone, it's difficult. Yes. If one is alone, that is.”

After erecting the gravestones of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin. Even when I was feared as the Sword Demon and the Demonic Cult's invasion turned all of Zhongyuan into chaos, I remained blinded by an impossible vengeance.

Yes. That is, until I met Tang Sowol.

“So you’re saying you were different, Cheon Hwi?”

“If it is people who push others into hell, then isn’t it also people who pull them back out?”

I, who had nothing, and Tang Sowol, who had lost everything—perhaps it was inevitable that we were drawn to each other.

From her, I saw something beyond revenge, and she saw the same in me. And so, we promised a future together.

Even if it ended as a mere dream, broken by the Heavenly Demon.

Even if we were torn apart forever, sent to different times through regression...

Even so, I remember what I received from Tang Sowol. I know now that my life lies beyond revenge.

For from the very beginning, revenge was never my true goal.

The Heavenly Demon.

Only that monstrous figure was the one I had to surpass.

“So, nothing has changed. Surely, the meaning of everything I’ve carried all my life might feel faded now... but a person cannot remain bound to the past forever, can they?”

“Cannot remain bound to the past... yes, that is true.”

I tried momentarily lengthening my sword energy, spinning it to enhance its power—demonstrating every technique I had.

Seo Mun-Hwarin either avoided or parried them all.

Not a single speck of dust on her robe. She smirked and nodded.

“The emotions buried in the past are like ropes tied around stakes. If you tie them around your waist, you won’t fall when you stumble.

They become the driving force that allows the impossible.”

“But if you want to go far, they’ll only get in the way.”

“Indeed. If you’ve already untied that knot from your waist, then This One must’ve been worrying needlessly.”

“Well, I still don’t know where to go though.”

I lifted the corners of my mouth and kept moving, kept swinging my sword.

The stable linkage I’d learned from Zhongnan Mountain allowed me to continue regardless of how many times my sword was deflected, and the techniques I learned from the Ghost Shadow Thief transformed the same sword paths into something else entirely.

Right now, I must look like a storm wreathed in sword energy.

Which made Seo Mun-Hwarin all the more amazing for fending it off barehanded.

She had carved out her own domain, unshaken by the swirl of my strikes. Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head.

“It’s fine not to know the direction. All paths eventually lead to one. What Cheon Hwi must remember is only this—what are you walking the path for?”

“What I’m walking for…”

“If you can establish just that, then even if you stray for a while, you’ll one day reach your answer. And complete yourself.”

Something I’d heard even before the regression, from Tang Sowol. That to reach the Flowering Stage, one had to complete themselves.

I still don’t fully understand what that means. But unlike before, I now have time.

Once I restore my lacking internal energy and reach true Sub-Perfection, I’ll soon reclaim the full martial strength of my previous life.

That would finally place me at the starting line.

Perhaps she felt she had said everything she needed. Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had quietly received all my attacks, began to change her momentum.

Her usual harmless demeanor vanished, replaced by something far more savage.

“I believe you’ve let it all out now, so it’s about time This One took her turn.”

“Please go easy on me.”

Though her figure still seemed small and fragile, her deeply sunken eyes were like those of an asura.

Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her fist. And then—

**KWAANG!**

Sword and fist collided head-on. Even though she had wrapped her internal energy to match mine out of consideration, I was still the one who lost out.

“Hmph!”

My sword was flung far back. I spun with the momentum and slashed low.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had already raised her foot, stomped down on it, slamming it to the ground.

It wasn't just a difference in strength—she had used the mystery of Mountain Press to weigh down not only my sword but even the space beneath her foot.

But this was only a temporary effect. Her finely honed internal energy, sharpened like a needle, had pierced through my sword energy, but it wasn't enough to completely suppress my sword, which had achieved Divine Sword Unity.

In that briefest of moments, my sword regained its original weight.

Though her foot remained heavy with Mountain Press, I could manage.

My internal energy, previously spread evenly, began to concentrate in my waist and limbs. With that, I thrust upward to break Seo Mun-Hwarin's stance.

That was my intent—until—

“Did I not say before? To This One, hands and feet are the same.”

Sword energy shimmered, and Seo Mun-Hwarin was stuck tight to the blade being thrust upward.

“What the...”

She wrapped her foot in internal energy to block the sword aura, lightened her body using Chosangbi, and then used Chakui Myori to perch atop my sword.

Scaling a cliff vertically is something a martial master can attempt, but...

To think she could do the same atop a sword wrapped in sword energy!

As I let out a helpless laugh, Seo Mun-Hwarin extended her foot triumphantly.

Her foot, as if it were pointing a sword, pressed beneath my chin.

There was no internal energy behind it, so all I felt was the softness of the arch through her shoe... but this clearly marked the end of the spar.

I let out a long sigh and withdrew my sword energy.

“I’ve learned a lesson.”

“Mhm. You did well too. You handled that new insight quite adeptly.”

“Well, yeah.”

Not exactly joyful, since it was an insight I had already reached before regression. It would be strange not to be familiar with it.

Feeling slightly grumpy, I sniffed ostentatiously in Seo Mun-Hwarin’s direction as she lightly hopped off my sword.

“It was a good match, but next time, could we do it barefoot? It’s hot in the summer, and uh...”

“W-What?! Are you implying This One’s feet smell?!”

“I didn’t say that exactly, but... yeah, you know??”

“This One does not! But regardless, that is not true! After rejuvenating, This One’s body emits only a lovely fragrance!”

“A lovely fragrance? I suppose that depends on perspective.”

“Kyaaah!”

Finally losing her temper, Seo Mun-Hwarin kicked off her shoes, revealing her bare feet.

“Smell them! Go on, smell them properly!”

“No thanks.”

“Ugh! You talk too much! In that case, This One shall prove her point by force...!”

Maybe because of her short height, she lifted one leg perfectly straight, aligning it with the other.

Though dressed in martial robes, it was an extremely improper posture.

But Seo Mun-Hwarin, now blinded by foot odor accusations, paid it no mind and bounced toward me.

“Come! Smell and see for yourself!”

“I said no. If you want someone to verify, ask Seol Lihyang over there watching.”

“M-Me?!”

At first, she had focused on her training. Then, she'd watched our spar in awe. Now, she was holding her mouth shut, stifling laughter—until she sprang up in surprise.

Then she quietly turned her head away after glancing at Seo Mun-Hwarin's bare feet. Her expression? Awkward, to say the least.

“Y-You scoundrels! This will not do! No matter what it takes, This One will clear her name today!”

Truly upset now, Seo Mun-Hwarin began chasing us using her internal energy.

With one leg raised high in an utterly improper pose!

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin... must it come to this?”

“Kyaaah! Sister Seo Mun has gone crazy!”

“Where do you think you’re going?! You’re the one who made me like this!”

As we ran circles around the training ground, shrieking and yelling—

Tang Sowol and Tang Jincheon, who had stepped out briefly for Murim Alliance business, returned.

“We’re back. Young Master Cheon! You won’t believe what we just heard—we’ve been given Sobriquet... huh?”

They froze upon seeing Seo Mun-Hwarin hopping after me with a leg pointed toward the sky, while Seol Lihyang and I scrambled to escape.

To be honest, we were frozen too. Of all times, they had to come back now.

Only silence filled the training ground. Perhaps it was that stillness that made Tang Jincheon’s sigh sound even louder.

“Haaah.....”

He said nothing, but the emotion in his eyes was so clear, words weren’t needed.

Seo Mun-Hwarin shrieked at the gaze, as if she were being judged like some senile old woman.

“Do not... do not look at This One like thaaat!”

It was summer.

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

After returning from the training ground, we all gathered, and Tang Sowol finally continued with what she had intended to say earlier.

"Brother Cheon, we've been given Sobriquet!"

"Well, you made enough of an impression to deserve one."

As I nodded indifferently, Tang Sowol's expression turned slightly sullen.

"Aren't you the least bit curious, Brother Cheon?"

"Sobriquet hold no meaning. Whether the world praises or scorns me, my sword belongs to me alone. Better to spend that time training, even a little more."

"Hmmm. But what's your real feeling?"

"You and Seol Lihyang were the ones who did most of the fighting at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. All I did was get kidnapped, so I doubt I received a flattering epithet."

At my blunt reply, Tang Sowol chuckled and shook her head.

"Don't worry. You've been given a rather cool epithet."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well... that's the part that's a liiittle awkward..."

Though she trailed off, Tang Sowol soon waved her hand as if brushing it away and continued.

"Shall we start with mine and Lihyang's first?"

"You're trying to deflect so blatantly that it's making me nervous... but go on then."

I reluctantly nodded and turned to Seol Lihyang. As expected, though she seemed a bit dazed by the news of receiving an epithet, her face brimmed with anticipation.

"An epithet... for me?"

Her grinning mouth twitched without rest, her hips wiggled slightly, and from time to time she'd glance at Tang Sowol with glittering eyes, urging her on without words.

Her reaction was so obvious that everyone present couldn't help but smile.

Even Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been sulking over her plummeted social dignity, relaxed her expression.

"Ahem. Since Lihyang seems quite eager, I won't drag it out too long. To get straight to it... I've been given the epithet Flying Butterfly, Poison Phoenix."

"Wait a second. I know how impressive your poison arts are, but during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, you only demonstrated hidden weapon techniques."

"Yes, that's true. But it would feel a bit off to give an epithet based solely on the hidden weapons when my poison arts are my main focus."

"Well... I suppose that would seem like teasing."

"Exactly. There's an unspoken rule—when giving Sobriquet to the Tang Clan's participants after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, they include your actual main martial art, even if it wasn't used during the event. Besides, I once took down a top expert from the Demonic Cult with poison, a while ago."

So, at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, she showed a fluttering footwork like a butterfly—hence Flying Butterfly. And since poison arts are her specialty, Poison Phoenix was added.

A bit convoluted, but I suppose that's how the epithet was formed. At least Tang Sowol seemed pleased with it, which was good.

As I nodded, Seol Lihyang leaned forward slightly toward Tang Sowol and asked,

"Sister Tang? Then what about my epithet?"

"Hehe, you were really dying to know, weren't you? Well then, you'll be happy to hear it. You've been given a very lovely epithet too."

As Tang Sowol smirked and lifted the corner of her mouth, Seol Lihyang gulped audibly.

Amid her building anticipation, Tang Sowol slowly spoke.

"You've been given the epithet Pure Sound, Ice Blossom."

"Pure Sound, Ice Blossom! I'm happy... but a bit embarrassed too, since it has 'blossom' in it."

She blushed while smiling. I chuckled softly at her reaction.

"Why? I think it suits you well."

"Really?"

"Of course."

An epithet containing 'flower' is usually reserved for women who are not only beautiful but also exceptionally skilled.

And in that sense, Seol Lihyang is more than worthy of being compared to a flower.

Her long black hair contrasts strikingly with her fair skin. Her expressive face only enhances her refined features.

Though traces of youth remain in her face, she's undeniably growing into a proper young lady.

Even with her Pure Yin Physique concealing her figure's curves, there's an oddly seductive air about her.

If she isn't likened to a flower, then who could be?

"So relax, and just enjoy it."

"Hehe. That's a relief..."

She chuckled sheepishly, but then suddenly stiffened and looked toward Tang Sowol.

Tang Sowol, puzzled by her glance, quickly waved a hand and smiled as if to reassure her.

"It's fine, Lihyang. I actually like my phoenix epithet better, since I value martial skill more... and besides, I never expected to receive a 'flower' epithet in the first place."

"Huh? But why not? You're way more—"

"No, no. It's not that. The 'flower' epithet is generally only given to unmarried women."

"...What?"

Seol Lihyang's eyes widened, and Tang Sowol gently continued.

"I haven't gone around making a big deal about it, but I also haven't hidden the fact that Brother Cheon is my fiancé, right? It's been a few years now, and most people who should know already do. We're not married yet, but since I'm spoken for, I can't be called a flower that shows its beauty to all."

"Ah."

Finally understanding, Seol Lihyang slowly nodded in a daze. Then she began sneaking glances at me.

Normally I wouldn't have thought much of it, but after what she showed during our sparring, and her recent, more frequent teasing, the meaning wasn't hard to guess.

Now it was my turn to be conscious of Tang Sowol's gaze.

Of course, Tang Sowol, who no doubt knew everything, only smiled quietly and brought the conversation back to the main topic.

"Now, lastly, we come to Brother Cheon's epithet."

"What kind of epithet could it possibly be for you to stall so much...?"

Unlike Tang Sowol or Seol Lihyang, I had been given Sobriquet before.

It happened twice before my regression, after all.

Though they were infamous—Blood Wolf and Sword Demon—they were useful. Not prestigious, but effective in keeping useless trouble away.

Of course, in this life, I expected something less... sinister.

I hadn't gone overboard, nor had I held back. And I was now the prospective son-in-law of the prestigious Sichuan Tang Clan.

They wouldn't give me something ridiculous.

"Bloodflame Sword Demon."

".....?"

"Your epithet is Sword Demon."

"...Who on earth gave me that epithet?"

I already disliked that it contained Sword Demon, the same epithet I had before regression. But even more concerning was the Bloodflame part.

No matter how you spin it, it's far too ominous an epithet for a martial artist of the orthodox sects.

Annoyance bubbled up to my throat, but I quieted down as Tang Sowol continued.

"They say it was given directly by the Black Lotus Sect Master."

"I see. Then it can't be helped."

The Black Lotus Sect Master had seen me fight the Black Sky Sword Emperor. He's one of the few who glimpsed the image etched into my heart.

He was also the one who gave me the Sword Demon epithet in my previous life, so in a way, this was inevitable.

And since it came from him, who would dare object?

If the epithet spread from Zhejiang all the way to Wuhuan City, there's no changing it now.

Still, just because I had to accept it doesn't mean I liked it.

To be exact, I didn't mind it for myself—it was the Tang Clan I worried about.

I carefully looked toward Tang Jincheon. He casually sipped his tea, unconcerned.

"It's fine. You didn't do anything wrong. And to be honest, I expected it from the moment I saw your martial arts."

"Father-in-law..."

"I know you possess overwhelming killing intent, but you're not controlled by it. You've grown rapidly without falling into qi deviation even once. No matter what your past holds, the Tang Clan has accepted you. So it's fine."

"Thank you."

I bowed deeply. Tang Jincheon chuckled and poured poison into his remaining tea, turning it into a bubbling toxic brew.

Then, without hesitation, he drank the obviously deadly liquid in one gulp, eyes widening.

"Still. That's that, and the Black Lotus Sect Master who dared give my son-in-law such an epithet—I'll have to settle that score someday."

...He doesn't look fine at all. No matter how I look at it, he seems very angry.

"Wait. Tang Sowol, didn't you say it was a cool epithet?"

"Huh? Isn't Bloodflame Sword Demon an incredibly badass name?"

"...??"

"...??"

She and I stared at each other, blinking.

I tilted my head to the left, she copied me. Tilted it right, she copied again. Kind of cute, honestly.

We tilted back and forth like that for a moment—until realization hit me like a brick.

"Wait... You seriously think it sounds cool?"

"Of course! It's got four strong-sounding words. How could it not be cool?"

Such a matter-of-fact response. Her voice even carried a hint of frustration, as if she couldn't understand my confusion.

"Well... I suppose public opinion doesn't matter. As long as my fiancée likes it, that's enough."

"Hehe, I knew you'd see it that way."

She smiled brightly, finally satisfied.

Well, even if it does sound like a demonic epithet, the fact I've gained one is worth celebrating.

I've grown quite a bit now, and recovered a large portion of my past-life martial prowess, so it's about time I began involving myself more in Murim affairs.

Having an epithet makes recognition easier—saves trouble on both sides.

Actually, a demonic-sounding epithet might even help.

The reason I've decided to start involving myself in Murim affairs now is simple.

Before my regression, as a child, I was so focused on survival that I had no energy for anything else...

Later, when I could eat regularly and no longer feared starving or being beaten to death, I finally began paying attention to rumors in Murim.

And that happened around this age.

So soon, incidents I remember will begin cropping up again in the ever-chaotic Murim.

If I time it right, I might gain something—or resolve things for the better.

Of course, I'm not doing this for fame or power.

Didn't I recall it during my light spar with Seo Mun-Hwarin?

My goal is ultimately to face the Heavenly Demon.

Though the Heavenly Demon is truly worthy of the title of greatest under heaven, that doesn't mean the other Flowering Stage experts are weak.

During the early phase of the Demonic Cult's invasion, half of the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans' top masters died—either from underestimating the Heavenly Demon or from clashing egos.

The remaining half joined forces with the Black Lotus Sect to confront him, but they were annihilated too.

In other words, Zhongyuan faced the Heavenly Demon with only half its strength.

If they had been cautious from the start—if they had prioritized the greater good and survival over pride—maybe the outcome would have changed.

My personal growth is important, but uniting Murim's power is just as vital.

Fortunately, I've spent my life among the unorthodox, so I understand their mindset well, and now I belong to an orthodox clan.

It's worth a try.

To do that, I need to be acknowledged by Murim.

What was the biggest recent commotion again...?

While trying to recall it, I heard Tang Jincheon speak again, finishing another cup of poison tea.

"Ah, I almost forgot. I just heard something from the Murim Alliance Leader. I think you should know about it."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Remember when you and Sowol went to Shaanxi and all hell broke loose? That elixir the Ghost Shadow Thief stole from the Demonic Cult and handed to the Alliance?"

"Of course. Who could forget a drug made from people? ...Don't tell me something's happened again?"

"It's similar. The incident is in a different region, but it's clear the Demonic Cult is involved."

Tang Jincheon sighed lightly before continuing.

"In Hebei Province, a similar elixir has been circulating. It's slightly less potent in boosting internal energy, but has fewer side effects."

"What?"

"And because of that elixir, the Peng Clan and the Yeon Clan are at each other's throats. It's complicated, so the Alliance Leader and I will handle it—but be careful not to get caught up in it."

"No way..."

A memory flashed through my mind.

The conflict between the Peng Clan of Hebei and the Jinju Yeon Clan.

It had ended with the dual suicide of both heirs.

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

“Huu...”

A sigh slipped out on its own. What I had heard from Tang Jincheon was enough to leave my head spinning.

The Peng Clan of Hebei and the Yeon Clan of Jinju—those two families had never gotten along.

Of course, it wasn't baseless hostility. There were reasons behind it, all valid in their own ways.

First of all, both the Peng Clan and the Yeon Clan were located in Hebei Province.

Hebei was vast, yes, but not so vast that two prominent clans could coexist without conflict.

In fact, several generations ago, back when the Yeon Clan still practiced corpse-controlling arts, they were one of the Five Supreme Clans.

But once they could no longer use such arts, alongside the sealing of several of their talismanic techniques, they ceded their place to the Peng Clan.

Because of that, conflicts over interests—large and small—remained frequent between the two families.

Even their martial arts posed a problem.

The Peng Clan was known for its innate physique, outstanding external techniques, and domineering sword arts that made full use of those traits.

The Yeon Clan, on the other hand, had developed a unique external art derived from corpse-manipulation techniques, altering their own bodies and using that foundation to form a powerful martial art style.

Different methods, but ultimately overlapping results. For proud martial artists, it's no surprise they'd find each other detestable.

Moreover, the Peng Clan, hot-tempered and blunt, despised the Yeon Clan's eerie and secretive atmosphere, while the Yeon Clan resented the Peng Clan for taking their former position—deeply insecure about it.

Everyone in Murim knew: when those two clans meet, a fight breaks out.

But that wasn't why I felt so overwhelmed right now.

The current dispute over the elixirs—between the Peng Clan and the Yeon Clan.

In my previous life, it ended with both heirs committing suicide together.

And it had all been orchestrated by the Demonic Cult—that’s what made it so frustrating.

“I had a rough idea, but still...”

Back when we interrogated the Demonic Cult elites who ordered the attack on Tang Sowol, we learned they were preparing to invade Zhongyuan.

The Heavenly Demon, who had already reached the Extreme Demon Realm, was likely aiming for an even higher realm, and to guarantee a more decisive and overwhelming victory, they were trying to divide the Murim of Zhongyuan.

In fact, after Tang Sowol’s face had melted away on one side, the Tang Clan became fiercely hostile toward the unorthodox sects.

The Peng and Yeon Clans, both having lost their heirs, stopped fighting for the moment but grew colder—merely watching each other’s misfortunes.

Whether it was the Demonic Cult's doing or not is unclear, but whenever the Black Lotus Sect tried to expand its power, all sorts of incidents occurred, preventing it from ever leaving Zhejiang Province.

The conflict between the orthodox and unorthodox reached a peak. Even within the orthodox sects, internal strife was common.

And the unorthodox sects, despite the Black Lotus Sect's existence, couldn't unite as one.

Then, the Heavenly Demon invaded in that chaos. No wonder half of our forces were wiped out before we could properly respond.

I've recovered most of my former martial prowess, and incidents I remember are about to begin surfacing.

If possible, I want to help resolve these conflicts smoothly and unite Zhongyuan's Murim.

But achieving peace in Murim is something even the massive Murim Alliance hasn't managed after decades of effort.

Trying to solve it alone—it's no wonder it feels impossible.

So I sighed deeply again, and seeing this, Tang Sowol quietly approached and asked,

“Why the gloomy face, Brother Cheon?”

“It's nothing.”

“Sighing like that nonstop... It's enough to drive me crazy with worry. Please tell me before I die from frustration.”

“It's just... I've been thinking about what your father-in-law told me—about the Peng Clan and the Yeon Clan.”

“Ah, yes, that bothered me a bit too. Their relationship's always been bad, but hearing the Demonic Cult is involved makes it more concerning.”

“Well. It seems the Demonic Cult's plan has already been disrupted, so that's a relief at least.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief had stolen and revealed the elixir made from ground-up humans.

It could quickly provide immense internal energy, but due to the mix of different people's energy, the side effects were severe—most users succumbed to qi deviation.

In my previous life, unaware of the elixir's origins, when an inferior version began circulating in Hebei Province, the two clans fought over it, trying to monopolize it.

Both the Peng and Yeon Clans possess strong internal techniques. Since the weaker elixir had diminished effects and side effects, they likely thought their arts could suppress the risk.

Though, in reality, I'm sure the elixir was still tainted. Why would the Demonic Cult give something good to the Murim?

There were many ways to stir conflict. That was just one of them.

But in this life, Tang Sowol and I rescued the Ghost Shadow Thief and exposed the existence of the elixir.

Surely, the Murim Alliance Leader would've informed the Peng and Yeon Clans directly.

Naturally, they'd know how the elixir was made.

According to Tang Jincheon, the two clans weren't even fighting to monopolize the elixir this time.

Each accused the other of colluding with the Demonic Cult to destroy them.

At this point, it seemed like the Demonic Cult didn't even matter—they were just fighting because they wanted to.

As I shook my head, Tang Sowol looked at me curiously and asked,

“This is a little surprising.”

“What is?”

“That you care this much. If it were someone close, I’d understand—but this is the first time I’ve seen you concerned over someone you barely know.”

“To be precise, it’s not completely someone else’s business.”

What was really on my mind was the possibility of improving relations between the Peng and Yeon Clans.

Not to the point of reconciliation, of course—but perhaps they could at least unite in the face of a powerful external enemy.

That said, I couldn’t explain this to anyone. Doing so would mean revealing that I’d regressed.

So I spoke of another reason—one that was still true and sincerely held.

“The plan may have been disrupted, but the Demonic Cult’s involvement still worries me. They once targeted you, after all. Who knows what foolish dreams they’re still chasing? If their goal hasn’t changed, they might come after you again.”

“Ah... So you’re saying you’re worried about me?”

“...To summarize, yes.”

“Hehe... heheh...!”

Tang Sowol began laughing strangely.

When I stared at her blankly, she finally wiped her mouth and composed her expression.

“Ehem. So! I understand your thoughts now. Then how about this?”

“You have a plan?”

“Maybe not a plan exactly, but at least we can gauge the atmosphere between the Peng and Yeon Clans.”

Tang Sowol shrugged, raising her chin with confidence.

And then... she just kept holding her chin up.

Not understanding the gesture, I blinked at her, only for Tang Sowol to tilt her chin again as if urging me.

With a sinking feeling, I cautiously reached out and tickled just beneath her chin with my fingertip.

She shivered, then smiled in satisfaction and continued.

“Do you recall how the younger generation of the Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects didn’t return home right after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering but stayed behind to socialize?”

“Oh, right. I remember hearing that.”

With so many pillars of the orthodox sects gathered in one place, it’d be a shame to part too quickly.

The elders discussed heavy matters with the Murim Alliance, while the younger generation had their own informal gathering to build camaraderie.

“You don’t mean...?”

“Yes. It’s called the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting, held after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. At some point, it became tradition for the winner to host the others... and the invitations just arrived today.”

As she said that, Tang Sowol grasped my hand, which was still under her chin, and held it tightly with both of hers.

“I imagine the heirs of the Peng and Yeon Clans will be attending. And since I did promise to take you there, I was thinking we could go together...”

“You’re trailing off. There’s something you want, isn’t there?”

“Oh no. Nothing big, really. You don’t need to worry.”

“I’ve learned firsthand how annoying that answer is.”

I chuckled, gently tickling the inside of Tang Sowol's palm with my finger as I asked,

“Go ahead and say it. What do you want me to do?”

“It's nothing major... Just... could you help me save face?”

“Ah.”

Now that I thought about it, it was necessary.

Though Tang Sowol had proven she'd reached the Peak Stage at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, she had only demonstrated her hidden weapons and poison arts.

Compared to other Peak Stage heirs, she might still seem lacking.

She'd also been in seclusion for three years, completely absent from the public eye.

And as for me—her fiancé—I only made a brief impression before swinging my sword a few times and then getting kidnapped by Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Of course, everyone now knows that Seorin is Seo Mun-Hwarin and a master of the Flowering Stage. She's someone no heir could hope to defy.

Still, it couldn't be helped if others underestimated me. I hadn't shown them anything.

I personally didn't care. My martial prowess would soon speak for itself, and I don't concern myself with others' opinions.

But Tang Sowol was different.

The Tang Clan had pinned hopes on her to win the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. She was probably excited to show off her fiancé to her long-time friends.

And I ruined all of it by getting kidnapped by Seo Mun-Hwarin.

I had told her in advance, but it was more of a one-sided notice than a request.

Tang Sowol had gone along with my selfish request without complaint, even handled all the fallout from my absence.

She even thanked me for at least informing her in advance this time.

Now that I think about it, I really am kind of a jerk.

No, I was definitely being unfair.

After thinking it over, I made up my mind and nodded.

“I get it.”

“Then...!”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure to show them properly this time.”

“Properly...?”

“Yeah. You said you wanted to save face, right? I’ll make it so no one can look down on you. I’ll make them envy you.”

“Uuh... Brother Cheon? You’re already amazing, so just acting normal is more than enough, really?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve lived at the Tang Clan for over three years now. I’ve just been too lazy to bother, but I know the etiquette expected in formal settings.”

“You were lazy all this time?!”

Tang Sowol screamed in shock, but I just nodded casually.

Of course, simply behaving politely wouldn’t mean much.

This is a gathering of the most promising young elites in all of Zhongyuan. Their pride runs deep.

So I’ll mix in a little unorthodox flair. After all, in the unorthodox sects, if you seem weak, you get eaten alive.

And when it comes to commanding presence, the orthodox can't hold a candle to the unorthodox.

It's a matter of survival.

And I'd made quite a name for myself among those blustering, deadly martial artists.

"You can look forward to it."

"Just act normal! Normal, do you hear me?!"

Tang Sowol looked like someone crushed under the weight of her own invitation, but... well, that wasn't my concern.

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

What is the duty of a fiancé?

If the couple were already married, it wouldn't be a difficult question to answer.

To bear heirs, raise them well, and share the burden of the household's affairs together with strength and unity.

It's something everyone knows. Of course, that doesn't mean it's easy to uphold.

In any case, for those already married, their duties are clear. But for an engaged couple, the answer becomes a bit more ambiguous.

They've promised to marry, but haven't done so yet. Is there any real obligation between fiancés?

There may be much debate about this... but I believe, to some extent, there is.

A promise may be only a promise, but a promise carries weight.

Well, even if it weren't for that, considering all that Tang Sowol has done for me and how much she's considered my position,...it's only natural that I'd want to do right by her.

“That’s why I put in a bit of effort.”

“Please change.”

Tang Sowol shook her head without the slightest hesitation. So firm that even I, who rarely feels dejected, found myself a little downhearted.

Perhaps I’d spent too long with women whose emotions showed on their faces too easily.

Unconsciously, I almost pouted, but quickly pulled my lips back in—albeit a little too late.

“Tsseup. Lips back in, please.”

“Mmuph.”

Tang Sowol pressed my lips in with her palm. The warmth and softness of her hand, along with her familiar scent, filled my senses—mixed with a bit of dissatisfaction. And then...

**Lick.**

“Kyaak! Why would you stick your tongue out like that?! You could’ve just spoken!”

“You’re the one who covered my mouth so I couldn’t talk.”

“That’s... true.”

Nodding in understanding, Tang Sowol casually rubbed her now-moistened hand on my back.

I brushed it off and checked my attire again.

The Tang Clan’s distinctive green martial uniform. Not just any uniform, but a fairly high-quality one.

The kind of garment whose quality alone would suggest one’s status.

However, such clothing might work on commoners, but it holds little sway among martial artists.

Whether they have backing or not, martial artists are always prepared to cut—or be cut. That’s just how they live.

So, when trying to project intimidation through clothing among martial artists, a different approach is needed.

For example... a threatening presence, like someone who’s survived countless battlefields.

Back in my previous life, when I’d just reached the Peak Stage and earned the Blood Wolf sobriquet.

How many martial artists came looking for trouble once I started making a name for myself?

Those who wanted to defeat me to gain fame, those who wanted to make me submit, and even those who sensed my growing power and wanted to eliminate me preemptively.

It wasn’t until I had cut down countless unorthodox jackals that I realized—

They found it easier to pick a fight because I looked too young. Too soft. Too easy.

And so, after some trial and error, I found what worked—what became today's appearance.

Ever since I adopted this battle-hardened aura, the number of provocations dropped dramatically.

I looked into Tang Sowol's green-tinted eyes and saw the reflection of my current self.

Instead of wearing new clothes, I wore the uniform from my battle with the Black Sky Sword Emperor.

It was neat, but if one looked closely, their eyes would naturally be drawn to the sword marks on the collar and sleeves.

Evidence that I had dodged blades by a margin of less than an inch.

And then, there was the sword at my waist.

A black blade, already considered a fine weapon even when sheathed, radiating immense presence.

Though I had polished it until it gleamed like new, I'd wrapped the hilt in the worn leather of my previous sword handle.

Most wouldn't notice it. But someone with sharp eyes—or someone already trying to judge me—would see it differently.

They'd think, "This is someone who values his sword, yet doesn't hesitate to wield it."

If the above was something I wanted others to notice on their own, what follows are things I needed to actively project.

The most important is one's gaze.

A calm, unwavering gaze that seems unshakable in any situation. And a glance that sweeps others as if searching for weaknesses.

That alone gives a sharp impression—like I could cut them down at any moment.

But a gaze alone isn't enough.

That's where momentum comes in.

The Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art naturally blends in killing intent, and so my presence has become quite ferocious.

I didn't plan to flaunt my power, but if used well, this aura could seize the entire room instantly.

Only after confirming my reflection in Tang Sowol's eyes did I nod to myself.

"No matter how I look at it, this seems fine."

"Eep!"

Perhaps because we were standing so close our breaths nearly touched, Tang Sowol blushed and turned away.

A moment later, she snuck glances at me and hesitantly spoke.

“W-Well. I think... you look very much like yourself right now. Cool, even. Kind of like when we first met...”

“If it looks fine, then isn’t it okay to go as is?”

“But for gatherings like this, dressing more modestly is usually...”

“If it’s fine, let’s just head out now.”

“Ugh, no... This isn’t right... really...”

For some reason, Tang Sowol looked conflicted. Her steps were slower than usual, and as a result, we ended up arriving a bit late.

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This Dragon and Phoenix Meeting was being held at the Namgung Clan's residence.

Surprisingly, the Namgung Clan had even gone so far as to purchase a villa in Wuhuan City, just so they could have a comfortable stay during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, which only happened once every five years.

“The Tang Clan doesn't have anything like this?”

“If we did, we wouldn't be worrying about lodging. Honestly, among the Five Supreme Clans, the Namgung Clan is especially... excessive.”

Of course, it's not like the Tang Clan or other families lack the money to buy a residence in Wuhuan City.

It simply isn't worth the investment. Besides, there's a general belief that the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering is meant to take the heirs out of their homes and into the wider world.

So why did the Namgung Clan go out of their way to build a mansion here?

Simple. Their family motto is to be the best, in everything, everywhere.

Maybe the arrogance of the Emperor Sword Form had etched itself into their family psyche.

Or maybe it's the other way around—their ambition and pride led them to create a technique like the Emperor Sword Form.

Regardless, being second-best was never acceptable to them. So now, after winning, they were inviting everyone to their mansion in Wuhuan.

They probably thought even the best guesthouse wouldn't meet their standards.

The Namgung Clan was also a family that often produced Dragon and Phoenix Gathering winners.

“Now that I think about it, is there a participation requirement for the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting? The Yeon Clan is coming, so it's not limited to just the Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects, right?”

“There isn't. The meeting isn't an official event—it began as a gathering for those who stayed behind after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering. Just a chance to socialize before going back. But if there's anything close to a condition... it's the host's invitation.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

So it didn't have to be one of the Five Supreme Clans or Nine Great Sects. As long as someone was reputable—or showed promise—they could be invited.

As we walked, Tang Sowol repeatedly sighed, then glanced at me and smiled, only to sigh again. Before long, we arrived at the massive mansion.

It wasn't quite on the level of the Tang Clan or the Zhongnan Sect, which were large enough to contain a small village within their grounds,

...but for a single residence, it was huge and extravagant.

A clear display of the Namgung Clan's need to show off.

The Namgung martial artist at the gate narrowed his eyes as he spotted me and reached for the hilt at his waist.

“Who are you?! Some unorthodox scum dare show up at the great Nam—huh?”

Of course, that was before he saw Tang Sowol's Tang Clan uniform and realized something was off.

He looked back and forth between me and Tang Sowol, then finally seemed to understand the situation and bowed.

“M-My apologies! I didn't realize you were from the Tang Clan... I was—”

“Haaah.”

Tang Sowol closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she had a resigned, weary smile on her face.

“We'll overlook that little slip. It was an understandable mistake.”

Even though she said it was fine, the gatekeeper still couldn't lift his head.

Only after we passed through did he finally straighten his back.

Tang Sowol linked arms with me naturally and glanced back at the man.

“Oh, and for the record—‘young masters’ is incorrect.”

“Did I mess up again...?”

“This is my fiancé.”

“Ah.”

Grinning at the dumbfounded gatekeeper, Tang Sowol confidently stepped inside.

I whispered quietly to her.

“So you’ve finally realized how efficient this is.”

“Hardly. If I could, I’d make you change clothes right this moment.”

“If it bothered you that much, you should’ve said so before we left.”

“And who was it that leaned in so close and silenced me...?!”

Though Tang Sowol glared at me, her shoulders slumped soon after as if deflating.

“Ehuu... It’s too late now anyway. I’ll leave it to your method this time.”

“Don’t worry. Have I ever failed to meet your expectations?”

“If only you’d stop talking...”

She shook her head but couldn’t hide her smile.

Since I was already close to Sub-Perfection, the easiest way to assert presence was to casually release a bit of momentum.

Even if I held back my killing intent, the aura produced by combining my current level with my past-life experience would be hard to handle for most young elites.

Of course, I wouldn't go that far. Tang Sowol wouldn't like it if I were too blatant.

So I'd just let it leak... subtly.

As we entered, we saw that many of the young martial artists had already arrived and were enjoying the banquet.

The moment we stepped in, all eyes turned to us.

Probably because we arrived a little late.

Feeling the weight of those stares—or perhaps simply nervous being in such a setting for the first time in a while—Tang Sowol tightened her grip on my arm.

I stayed close to her, slowly surveying the room and subtly raised my momentum.

At once, expressions across the room stiffened.

The exceptions were martial artists from the Zhongnan Sect I was acquainted with, Tang Sowol's friend Wei Ji-Su-Lian, and the host himself—Nangung Jong.

I figured this much was enough to show proper decorum, and I allowed myself a moment of satisfaction.

**Pinch.**

Tang Sowol pinched my side. Then, quietly mouthed a whisper into my ear.

— *Withdraw your aura immediately.*

I promptly reined in my presence, feeling a bit sullen.

...She caught me.

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

Sword Dragon Namgung Jong. Today, he was in a particularly good mood.

The reason was simple. After winning the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering and receiving the epithet Sword Dragon, many had showered him with praise—or looked on with envy.

As the heir of the Namgung Clan, raised under constant pressure to always be the best, being publicly acknowledged as the best filled him with an indescribable joy.

Even his father, who always held him to strict standards, had smiled broadly for the first time in a while.

Thus, it was only natural that this year's Dragon and Phoenix Meeting, hosted by Namgung Jong as the winner, would be held in grand and splendid fashion.

*'Excellent.'*

An overwhelming spread of delicacies piled high on the banquet tables, fine liquor gathered from every guesthouse across Wuhuan City, and a room filled with promising young elites.

The pillars of the current orthodox Murim—the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects—were here, along with those who once belonged to such groups or aspired to challenge their standing.

Additionally, many who lacked powerful backgrounds but possessed great talent and potential had gathered in small groups, chatting among themselves.

Some were deep in discussion about martial arts, while others spoke of clan businesses. Occasionally, one would try to recruit an unaffiliated talent into their fold.

To Namgung Jong's eyes, it looked like a gathering of refinement, far removed from a rowdy street tavern. He was genuinely pleased.

Of course, fights breaking out into sparring matches, or young men and women sneaking off into secluded corners after making eyes at one another—those things happened often enough that this wasn't too different from any drinking party.

But for Namgung Jong, who had spent his life swinging a sword and was hosting such an event for the first time, he was still unaware of such nuances.

So he sat at the head table, smiling contentedly as he downed a cup of liquor.

Since it was his first time drinking, his face quickly scrunched up, but mindful of those watching him, he forced himself to wear a calm expression again.

*'Bitter. And the scent is strange. Why do people drink this stuff?'*

Whether anyone knew what he was grumbling about internally, a large man approached with booming laughter.

“Hahaha! As expected of Brother Namgung! Even the way you drink is bold and vigorous!”

“I don’t recall becoming your brother, Hwangbo Gwang. Aren’t you quite a bit older than me?”

“Ah, don’t worry about the little details! Once you’ve shared a drink together, you’re like brothers, aren’t you? Here, let this younger brother pour you another!”

“No need. Not everyone’s arrived yet. I can’t be the one drunk before the guests.”

“Ah! I didn’t even consider that! Very well, we’ll drink together later then! Hahaha!”

Feigning admiration, Hwangbo Gwang retreated, but Namgung Jong’s gaze toward him remained cold.

*'Hwangbo Gwang. All muscle and no spine. A prime example of preying on the weak and bowing to the strong. I've heard even his own Hwangbo Clan tries to hush up his disgraceful behavior. He's someone I'd gain nothing from befriending.'*

The Namgung Clan always aimed to be the best. For Namgung Jong, being selective with those around him was a given.

So while he kept his distance from someone like Hwangbo Gwang, that also meant he was extremely open toward those who were useful or deserving to stand beside him.

“Um, are you Young Master Namgung? Thank you for inviting me to the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting. It's been such a deligh—”

“Oh! Lady Wi Ji-Su-Lian of the Plum Blossom Sword Peak, isn't it? I've often heard that the swords of the Huashan Sect are both beautiful and deadly. To see one in person—it's truly impressive...

If it's alright, may I speak with you for a bit about the sword?”

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

Getting especially friendly with Wi Ji-Su-Lian, one of the most promising elites of the Huashan Sect, was natural for Namgung Jong.

Of course, part of that came from his interest in Huashan swordsmanship, and partially because Wi Ji-Su-Lian's appearance happened to be quite close to his ideal type.

In any case, as Namgung Jong continued the enthusiastic conversation, determined not to miss the opportunity—

—two people entered who had recently been the talk of the town.

Tang Sowol of the Sichuan Tang Clan. And her fiancé, Cheon Hwi.

Public opinion of Cheon Hwi wasn't great, due to the way he had been helplessly kidnapped. But Namgung Jong didn't share such prejudice.

*'There's no way someone could fight back properly against a Flowering Stage martial artist.'*

Having grown up watching his father, the Sword King, Namgung Jong understood all too well how terrifying someone of the Flowering Stage was.

Even he would've fared no better in that situation.

Rather, he held Cheon Hwi in high regard for managing to bring the Flowering Stage martial artist who kidnapped him into the Tang Clan's fold.

And he couldn't fully gauge either Tang Sowol or Cheon Hwi's martial prowess. That meant, at the very least, they had reached the Peak Stage—possibly more.

That alone was enough reason for Namgung Jong to want to befriend them.

He was just about to pause his conversation with Wi Ji-Su-Lian and go greet the new arrivals.

The couple walked in, arms linked—and from Cheon Hwi's side, an eerie pressure began to radiate.

“Huup...”

“This is...”

“No way...?”

Gasps rang out from all around. Though it wasn't aimed directly at anyone, they instinctively knew.

Cheon Hwi's subtle but overwhelming presence was blanketing the surroundings.

For some reason, Namgung Jong himself, as well as Wi Ji-Su-Lian beside him, felt unaffected—but everyone else couldn't tear their gaze from Cheon Hwi.

Though he sensed something strange in the atmosphere, Namgung Jong was briefly puzzled by the lack of any oppressive pressure on himself.

“Ah.”

*‘Lady Wi is a childhood friend of Lady Tang. And I’m the one who sent out the invitation as the host. I suppose he’s showing a form of respect.’*

Normally, one would feel offended at someone causing a stir at their own banquet.

But Namgung Jong felt differently. Rather, he was slightly pleased. It felt as though Cheon Hwi was recognizing and respecting him as the winner of the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering and the host of this meeting.

Namgung Jong was, by nature, a positive person.

As he twitched the corners of his mouth in amusement, it seemed Tang Sowol noticed her fiancé's antics and sent him a discreet warning. Cheon Hwi reined in his presence.

But that didn't mean it vanished completely.

It simply no longer extended outward—yet the chilling pressure still clung around Cheon Hwi's frame. Only after the storm passed did Namgung Jong get a proper look at him.

He looked quite young. Unlike Tang Sowol, who had clearly passed her coming-of-age, Cheon Hwi didn't even seem to have reached twenty.

But youth did not equate to inexperience.

Though his outfit was neat, it wasn't stiff with newness. It bore clear traces of battle—his usual clothing, well worn.

The sword at his waist was impeccably maintained, a constant reminder that it could be drawn at any moment.

He carried the air of a veteran who had lived through the martial world for decades.

And that presence he had exuded earlier—though Namgung Jong had never experienced it directly, he knew that everyone gathered here today was a prodigious elite of the orthodox Murim.

To have overpowered them all, even briefly—that alone proved Cheon Hwi was no ordinary man.

But what drew Namgung Jong's attention the most—

—was Cheon Hwi's gaze.

*'He's supposed to be from a vagabond background...'*

Even if he'd spent several years in the Tang Clan, adapting to such formal banquets wouldn't be easy.

The opulence alone was overwhelming, not to mention the reputations of those present.

Yet Cheon Hwi didn't seem to care at all, gazing around with indifference.

They were clearly human eyes—yet it felt as if one were looking into a blade reflecting light.

And then, by chance, their eyes met.

Namgung Jong understood.

“Ah.”

In those eyes, there were only two kinds of people.

Those he could cut, and those he couldn't.

Like a blood-hungry wolf. Or a sword always ready to test itself. That overwhelming impression hit Namgung Jong head-on.

Bloodflame Sword Demon.

An epithet too ominous and grand for a young elite—but because it had been publicly endorsed by the Black Lotus Sect Master, no one dared to object.

Rumors said Cheon Hwi had singlehandedly annihilated a sword sect and even slain a Sub-Perfection-level martial artist.

Though most dismissed it as exaggerated nonsense, with some even assuming the epithet was given in mockery by the Black Lotus Sect Master.

*'Foolish talk.'*

What Namgung Jong saw in Cheon Hwi was the real thing.

This encounter would surely shift others' opinions as well, slowly but surely.

Namgung Jong nodded inwardly in admiration.

*'I'm glad I got the chance to meet him today.'*

Like the elders of his clan, Namgung Jong aspired to become the greatest swordsman in the world. Though it was still a distant goal, he knew that well.

Someone like Cheon Hwi would undoubtedly help him on that path.

Suppressing the ambition that flared within him in just that brief moment, Namgung Jong smiled at Wi Ji-Su-Lian, who was now staring dumbfounded at the pair.

"It was a pleasant conversation, Lady Wi. But it seems new guests have arrived—I'll take my leave."

"Ah... yes. I'll come with you. I wanted to greet Sowol anyway."

So together, they made their way toward Tang Sowol and Cheon Hwi, crossing the banquet hall.

When they arrived—

Though no sound was heard, Tang Sowol was clearly mouthing something rapidly—probably a voice transmission.

Cheon Hwi, on the other hand, wore a sullen expression, grumbling quietly. The sharp aura from earlier had vanished.

It was clear: he'd been scolded by his older fiancée for needlessly showing off.

Just moments ago, Cheon Hwi had seemed powerful but dangerous. Now, he looked just like any other young man his age.

“Hah.”

Namgung Jong gave a short laugh and opened his mouth to speak—

“Welcome—”

“Hold it right there, little brother!”

“Even if he was invited by Brother Namgung, don’t you think that was incredibly rude? This won’t do at all! I, Iron Fist Hero Hwangbo Gwang, younger brother of Brother Namgung, shall personally teach this junior a lesson!”

“?”

Hwangbo Gwang had stepped in, loudly berating Cheon Hwi before Namgung Jong could speak.

For a moment, Namgung Jong looked dumbfounded, unsure of what was happening. Then Hwangbo Gwang grinned at him.

“.....!”

Only then did Namgung Jong realize—Hwangbo Gwang was trying to curry favor with him by acting tough.

He tried to stop him, not wanting unnecessary trouble. More importantly, their levels were simply too different.

Cheon Hwi hadn't even tried to suppress anyone. He had merely let out a sliver of his presence.

That alone had briefly overwhelmed the elites gathered here.

But perhaps Hwangbo Gwang had mistaken that for Cheon Hwi's full strength. Or perhaps he simply couldn't fathom someone so young being at such a level.

Like a rampaging boar, Hwangbo Gwang charged in.

"Stop, Hwangbo Gwang. It's true there was a disturbance, but there was no killing intent. That doesn't warrant—"

Namgung Jong reached out to grab Hwangbo Gwang's shoulder to stop him—

"Uaaagh!"

The moment he touched him, Hwangbo Gwang screamed like someone had slashed him and collapsed.

He clutched his neck—and a moment later, a wet stain spread between his legs.

Namgung Jong's expression contorted.

“Now it looks like I'm the one who scared Hwangbo Gwang into wetting himself.”

He clicked his tongue internally.

In front of him, the true culprit—Cheon Hwi—smiled faintly.

“Thank you for the invitation. But... the smell is a bit much. Would you mind if we moved elsewhere to continue this conversation?”

Faced with that brazen comment, all Namgung Jong could do was nod.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A noble young master as if drawn from a painting, but looking somewhat tired today, Namgung Jong let out a long sigh and opened his mouth.

“Haah... At the very least, the Hwangbo Clan won’t file any complaints, so don’t worry.”

“I know.”

In the previous life, Hwangbo Gwang lost everything—his life, his honor—when all his hidden deeds were exposed by the Hungry Ghost Division.

He had neglected his training, acted like a thug, and despite his large, imposing frame, he wasn’t much.

When he was killed by the Hungry Ghost Division in the past, it was revealed he hadn’t even fully reached the Sub-Perfection Stage. He was in the same half-step state as I am now.

Being born into a prestigious clan means starting several steps ahead of others.

Exceptional talent, advanced martial techniques, an abundant supply of elixirs, and an environment where one can focus solely on martial arts.

What others struggle their whole lives to gain even one of, he was born holding many—only to throw them away through his own lack of effort.

I don't know why the Hwangbo Clan continues to protect someone like that, but with so many skeletons in his closet, they likely won't raise their voices over just this.

So I seized the moment when Namgung Jong placed his hand on Hwangbo Gwang's shoulder to try and stop him, and focused my killing intent there.

I didn't expect him to wet himself, though.

As I nodded while chewing on the prepared food, Namgung Jong's eyes gleamed with interest.

“You knew?”

“There were things I'd heard.”

“Hmhm. So you didn’t just flare up, but acted with calculation.”

Nodding with a satisfied expression as if pleased, Namgung Jong was the opposite of Hwangbo Gwang.

Obsessed with the sword, he trained day and night. He didn’t cause trouble, and his name was often mentioned in tales of good deeds.

When the Demonic Cult invaded, he was one of the first to step up.

Though he fell at the hands of the Heavenly Demon in the end, unlike the barely Sub-Perfection Hwangbo Gwang, Namgung Jong had reached the complete Flowering Stage before he died.

Someone you lose nothing by befriending, and risk much by turning against.

Personally, I was more interested in his swordsmanship than anything else, but Tang Sowol and the Tang Clan probably thought differently.

Since we’d moved seats, I clasped my fist and offered a formal greeting.

“I seem to have delayed my greetings. I am Cheon Hwi-da of the Tang Clan. Also, I apologize for what happened earlier.”

“As I told Hwangbo Gwang, you didn’t imbue it with killing intent. It wasn’t so rude as to warrant an apology.”

“Well, there’s still the matter of what happened to him.”

“That too is fine. Had you drawn your sword, it would have been a much bigger problem. The fact it ended here is fortunate.”

“...?”

A surprisingly accommodating attitude. Whatever the reason, my actions had disrupted the mood at a banquet hosted by Namgung Jong.

I narrowed my eyes and stared at him.

A princely face as if sketched by a master, but behind his gaze surged a deep, swirling ambition.

Similar to the Black Lotus Sect Master—but fundamentally different—this was blatant desire.

This guy... could it be...?

“I withdrew from the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering due to poor health, but I watched the entire event. All of the participants were impressive, but the most memorable bout was yours, Young Master Sword Dragon.”

“Hahaha! To hear that from none other than Young Master Cheon Hwi—I’m honored. My epithet may sound fierce, but it was recognized by the Black Lotus Sect Master. Now I see, there was no exaggeration in the rumors after all.”

As I gently set the tone, Namgung Jong eagerly took the bait.

That’s right. What I saw in his eyes was a raw thirst for recognition.

If the Black Lotus Sect Master was filled with a desire to own and dominate the world...

Then Namgung Jong was filled with a desire to be admired by the entire world.

This kind of overt person was rare, but not unheard of among unorthodox martial artists. I recognized it immediately.

Even accounting for the Namgung Clan's tradition of pursuing excellence, it was excessive... but well. No one is perfect.

If you have good character, talent, and a great family, then you're bound to have a flaw somewhere.

"So then, which match did you enjoy most? The genius from the Shandong Clan? Or the heroine from Jeomchang Sect? Ah, was it the monk from Shaolin I faced in the finals? They were all strong, so I feared my shortcomings might have been exposed."

Though his words were modest, his face screamed "Please praise me in detail."

Shaking my head inwardly, I answered.

"Just as you said, they were all excellent martial artists, and the matches were stirring... but the duel with the Shaolin monk, Wonyu, burned in me most. That

final display of the Emperor Sword Form truly showed why the Namgung Clan is called the foremost sword family in the world.”

“Young Master, you’ve a talent for making a man blush. The Namgung Clan may hold that title, but I still have far to go.”

“That’s just how much it impressed me.”

And that’s true. If I fought Namgung Jong now, I’d probably win.

But that’s separate from the sword technique itself—the Emperor Sword Form was unlike any I’d seen before.

“I haven’t seen your sword yet, but I can tell it’s no ordinary thing. May I ask—where did you learn it? It doesn’t feel like the Tang Clan’s swordplay.”

“I don’t belong to any specific sect. I’ve had the fortune to learn bits and pieces here and there, and I’ve been building up my foundation from that. I’ve received much help from the Tang Clan.”

“Hooh. Is that so?”

I glanced sideways. Tang Sowol, in the middle of a cheerful conversation with Wi Ji-Su-Lian, turned her head with a curious tilt.

But it didn't last long. As I continued looking, her lips twitched—and she broke into a silly smile.

I answered with a faint smile of my own.

After that, I continued to offer modest praise to Namgung Jong and built rapport.

I greeted Wi Ji-Su-Lian, and exchanged a few light words with Jin Baek of the Zhongnan Sect, who arrived later.

Perhaps because everyone here walked the path of martial arts seriously, the initial awkwardness quickly faded, and we soon delved into impassioned discussions about martial techniques.

To me, most of it was ground I had already covered, so it wasn't particularly moving.

But seeing how clearly each clan and sect's philosophies emerged from their discussions, it was still interesting.

Surprisingly, the fiercest debate was between Wi Ji-Su-Lian and Jin Baek.

The Huashan Sect and the Zhongnan Sect both share the roots of the Quanzhen Sect and live in proximity.

I had assumed this closeness led to mutual understanding, but that didn't seem to be the case.

The debate centered around whether one should preserve a constant center amid change, or throw oneself into change to pursue progress...

Honestly, I barely understood half of it—I know almost nothing about Taoist philosophy.

Seeing Namgung Jong and Tang Sowol understand it at least somewhat reminded me why Seo Mun-Hwarin in my past life had forced me to study.

Had I known even the basics of Taoist teachings, I might've gained much from this discussion.

And such knowledge expands one's perception and awareness—often becoming the seed of insight.

Perhaps this line of thought only came to me because the matter of the Black Sky Sword Sect had been resolved, a chapter closed.

Once you've looked within, it's only natural to start looking outward.

Anyway, we were enjoying a spirited, if not quite heated, martial debate...

When we heard a sharp voice from not far away.

“You think you can say that and walk away?!”

“Did I say something unacceptable? This is why people call you ignorant.”

“You dare! I've had enough! Get out to the sparring yard at once!”

Only one of them—the man—was shouting in a rage.

The woman facing him wore a cold expression, smiling faintly as if mocking him.

I looked around to see what had started the commotion.

Just then, Tang Sowol mouthed a voice transmission to me.

— Brother Cheon. Those two.

— What about them?

— They're the heirs of the Peng Clan and the Yeon Clan that you were looking for.

“Hmm??”

The sound escaped me without thinking. I widened my eyes and looked at the two again.

Earlier, Hwangbo Gwang had wet himself trying to throw a fit—but the man now fuming with anger was even larger than him.

He must be over seven cheok, maybe even eight.

Impressive in size, but even more terrifying was that his entire frame was packed with muscle.

You'd wonder if he was really the same kind of human as me.

And the greatsword on his back—more like a hunk of iron—was about the length of a full-grown man.

Just swinging something like that with that body—how many people could withstand it?

No doubt he was the heir of the Peng Clan.

Meanwhile, the woman glaring coldly at him was the exact opposite.

Petite even for a woman, no visible muscle to speak of.

She looked more like a doll—or a living corpse.

No visible weapons, so she must use bare-handed techniques.

But her body seemed too frail for that.

Still, if you asked whether she was weak...

She was not.

The pressure emanating from her was on par with the Peng Clan heir's.

Her skin was pale like a corpse, and her joints moved with a strange stiffness, but the energy flowing from her body was unmistakable.

Demonic Aura.

I recognized it well—it was the same aura Seol Lihyang once wielded in my previous life.

Unlike pure yin qi, which was inherently destructive, ghostly energy wasn't that potent in itself.

But it had a special function: weakening the opponent.

When someone is touched by demonic aura, it chips away at their mind.

Hesitation grows, fear devours reason, and eventually, they're left trembling, unable to act.

Many evil techniques make use of this. Inducing hallucinations, disorientation, or short-term loss of consciousness...

I'd seen it often in the hands of Seol Lihyang and other martial artists who manipulated ghost energy.

Of course, it's not almighty.

To someone with firm willpower and refined discipline, its effects would be diminished.

And such sorcery-like powers would be rejected by orthodox sects.

If the Yeon Clan hadn't built decades of trust, they likely wouldn't have remained part of the orthodox world.

Still, despite its drawbacks, its strength lies in consuming not the body—but the mind.

A poison that targets the spirit.

With that much demonic aura swirling around her, even someone born with immense strength would find it hard to gain the upper hand.

Just as I began to assess their full presence...

I remembered.

If these two were the heirs of the Peng and Yeon Clans...

Then they were the ones who, in my past life, ultimately committed suicide together.

I had heard they were lovers, driven to despair by the feud between their families.

I narrowed my eyes and raised my internal energy, expanding my qi perception.

The world grew clearer.

And within it, the two—who looked moments away from breaking into a fight—were silently exchanging a flurry of hand signals and voice transmissions.

“Ha.”

What a tiresome way to live.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The heirs of the Peng and Yeon families growled at each other. At a glance, their relationship seemed almost hostile, like sworn enemies...

“Sigh...”

When I expanded my qi sense, I saw they were secretly exchanging sound transmissions and simple hand signals so others wouldn't notice.

How exhausting.

In my previous life, they both took their own lives at the same time, so I knew how deeply they cared for each other. But I hadn't expected them to pretend to be so hostile in public.

As I shook my head inwardly, the argument—as fights between martial artists usually go—was turning from a war of words into a full-blown confrontation.

“Follow me to the dueling arena! I’ll make you pay for insulting the great Peng family!”

“You think I’d be scared just because you said that? Don’t forget I won our last match!”

Stomping heavily, the huge man approached us, unable to contain his anger.

Following behind him was a pale, slender woman.

At the sight, Tang Sowol looked over in panic. She even let out a hiccup from the surprise.

“Hiccup...”

Originally, I had planned to approach them naturally, strike up a conversation, and gradually hear out their situations.

I was going to talk to the heir of the Peng family, and Sowol to the heir of the Yeon family—figuring it would be more comfortable to speak with someone of the same gender.

But with the atmosphere like this, that plan was clearly going out the window.

Well, using a slightly different approach wouldn't hurt either.

Honestly, I thought of a far more realistic way than trying to make friends with them directly.

I handed a cold glass of water to hiccuping Tang Sowol, then turned to the side.

There was Namgung Jong, wearing a troubled expression and sighing as if he knew this would happen.

I poured him a drink and asked,

“Sir Sword Dragon. This is my first time in such a gathering, but surely not for you. Are those two always like this?”

“Hoo... Unfortunately, yes. Every time they meet, they quarrel over trivial things, borrow the dueling ground, and end up leaving on bad terms.”

“I see. I knew the Peng and Yeon families weren't on good terms, but I didn't think it was this bad.”

“Those two, in particular, are worse than most. Since they’re the same age, they must’ve been compared often.”

So every time they gathered, they pretended to duel and went home separately?

I could guess what really happened. They probably said they were going home but met up in secret somewhere.

“To be honest, it’s a headache for me as the host. I can’t not invite them, but if I do, they always end up fighting.”

“Tsk.”

“I even asked the Peng family personally as a favor, but it ended up like this anyway...”

“You seem to have gone through quite a bit. If it’s alright, may I offer some help?”

“It would be appreciated, but how?”

“Well, first, I’ll try talking to them. Most problems can be solved through conversation.”

When I smirked, Namgung Jong paused for a second and then shook his head.

“Those two are among the most skilled of the young generation. On top of that, they’re the rebellious type—the more you pressure them, the harder they push back. They’re not like Hwangbo Gwang from earlier.”

"...?"

For a moment, I didn’t understand what he meant, but then I realized—he thought I was going to suppress them with killing intent like before.

I gave a wry chuckle and shook my head.

“Nothing like that, don’t worry. But I will need some alcohol.”

“We’ve got plenty of that... but...”

He still looked doubtful, but I just gave him a calm smile.

Soon enough, the two hot-tempered ones arrived, their atmosphere menacing.

The Peng heir's massive frame blocked the light and cast a long shadow across the table.

I exchanged a quick glance with Namgung Jong and put on a slightly softened expression as I turned toward the two.

“Well, no choice then. Let’s do this.”

“Peng Woojin, that bastard. He should at least pretend to hold back a little.”

Namgung Jong rubbed his temple, clearly irritated, and I took the chance to extend my presence toward the two heirs.

I excluded any threatening intent—just enough for them to notice, like knocking on a door.

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Cheon Hwi-da, betrothed to the Tang family.”

“Hm? And you are?”

“The Blood Flame Sword Demon...? Ah, my apologies.”

Peng Woojin raised a brow, while Yeon Ga-hye—realizing my nickname had been coined by Lord of the Black Lotus Sect—apologized belatedly.

I offered a polite cupped-fist salute to both.

“It’s fine. I’m sure you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’m Peng Woojin of the Peng family. Thanks for the greeting, but now’s not really the time.”

“I’m Yeon Ga-hye of the Yeon family. I appreciate your understanding... but yes, perhaps we should continue this conversation another time.”

With that, they glared at each other again. I quietly focused my inner power and sent a split sound transmission to both.

Sound transmission, after all, is the art of using internal energy to project your voice to only one person. And with enough control, you can send different messages to multiple people at once—like I was doing now.

*—Since I'm speaking to both of you at once, no need to talk to each other. Just listen.*

*—What are you...*

Eon Ga-hye tried to respond via sound transmission, but I cut her off.

*—I know about your relationship. Even with the families at each other's throats, it seems the heart doesn't follow reason.*

*—If you don't want this widely known, sit down quietly without causing a scene. After the banquet, don't go home. Head to the inn behind Cheongsan Guesthouse and wait there.*

*—What are you talking about? You're threatening us based on baseless assumptions?*

Peng Woojin glared at me in place of the flustered Yeon Ga-hye. In response, I subtly mimicked the hand signals they had exchanged earlier.

I didn't know the meaning, but they would.

The way I did it made it seem like I actually knew something.

Eon Ga-hye turned even paler, and Peng Woojin let out a real glimmer of anger.

He was two heads taller than me, and his presence was certainly intimidating—but I'd still win in a fight.

I met his gaze head-on and raised my aura again—not to draw attention this time, but to suppress him directly with killing intent.

It was directed only at Peng Woojin, so to everyone else, it would look like we were having a conversation and he suddenly frowned.

Eventually, Peng Woojin turned his gaze from me to Namgung Jong.

“Come to think of it, today’s supposed to be your celebration for winning.”

“Took you long enough to remember.”

Namgung Jong stared between me and Woojin with an incredulous look.

He could tell we’d exchanged sound transmissions, but didn’t know the contents, so he was curious about the sudden change.

I couldn’t tell him the truth, so I just laughed it off. Meanwhile, Peng Woojin sat down and spoke.

“I know how much my friend here appreciates praise, so I won’t ruin the mood. Let’s settle this duel another day.”

“Fine by me. I did feel a bit bad about disrupting things for Brother Namgung...”

“Stop the slander about me.”

Eon Ga-hye also sat down after a moment of hesitation.

Namgung Jong half-heartedly denied Woojin's comment, but no one paid attention.

Wi Jisureon sat awkwardly between the still-tense Woojin and Ga-hye, and Tang Sowol looked like she had no idea what just happened, blinking rapidly.

**Blink, blink.**

*—Cheon Sohyeop? What on earth did you say to make them calm down like that?*

Ah, she finally gave in to her curiosity and sent a sound transmission.

*—It'd take too long to explain. Just know we agreed to meet separately after this.*

*—Huh? Uh... Okay...*

She nodded, still looking unsure.

Later, Namgung Jong, now in a better mood, brought out some rare wine, and Wi Jisureon lightened the atmosphere by asking Tang Sowol about her recent life—and about me.

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye awkwardly laughed and acted like they were ignoring each other, though they occasionally threw me probing questions and exchanged glances.

Not that it meant much.

As night deepened and the guests began to disperse, a slightly drunk Namgung Jong, who had been subtly venting his drunkenness away from others, placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Brother Cheon Hwi-da. How old are you again?”

“I’m eighteen.”

“I’m twenty-five.”

“...Is that so.”

“Post-generation juniors” refers to martial artists who have not yet reached their thirties. So there can be significant age gaps even within the same group.

In this case, Namgung Jong wasn’t old—I was just young.

“But why ask suddenly? Didn’t the Plum Blossom Sword Maiden already ask you all those questions about her fiancé?”

“I’m twenty-five.”

“...???”

He repeated his age instead of answering. As I stared at him in confusion, he avoided my gaze awkwardly.

“From now on, just call me Brother. I’ll call you little brother.”

“Ah...”

So he wanted to become sworn brothers now that we'd grown a bit closer?

He didn't seem particularly experienced with relationships, which made it amusing.

Clearing his throat, he continued.

“Ahem. I know your martial skill is extraordinary, but I'd like to know how skilled you really are.”

“Are you suggesting...”

“Come visit the Namgung Clan someday. You said the Namgung sword techniques left an impression, didn't you? It might help both of us on our paths.”

“How could I refuse a chance to see the swordsmanship of the greatest sword clan in the world? I'll contact you soon.”

“Good! I’ll remember that. See you next time. Stay safe.”

After exchanging polite salutes, Tang Sowol followed me out of the manor, subtly watching me for cues.

Once we were far enough away, she naturally looped her arm through mine and whispered,

“Now will you tell me? What exactly did you say to make the Peng and Yeon heirs so quiet? And what do you plan to do next?”

“It’s nothing serious.”

After hearing the details of what I said via sound transmission and what I was going to do, Tang Sowol jabbed my side repeatedly in alarm. It tickled a bit.

“You’re kidnapping again...”

“That’s a harsh way to put it. I merely made sure my new friends, who were too drunk to walk, had a place to stay at a nearby inn.”

That's all it was.

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

The plan was simple. First, I'd threaten—no, catch the attention—of Paeng Woo-jin and Yeon Ga-hye by letting them know I was aware of their relationship.

After the Yongbong Gathering ended, when the two gathered at the designated location, I'd confirm they were both overly intoxicated, then I and Tang Sowol would escort them to the nearby inn.

“And lastly, when they've sobered up, we get the honest truth out of them. Isn't it a perfect plan?”

“Perfect?! You just said it was a threat!”

“You misheard.”

“And they didn’t even drink that much in the first place! There’s no way they’d be so drunk they couldn’t stand!”

“If they can’t stand, then they’re drunk. Simple. Whether it’s because of demonic qi flow being blocked or due to paralysis poison, either way, they’re intoxicated.”

“Poison?! Are you planning to drag me into this too?!”

Tang Sowol shrieked. I gently cupped her face with both hands. Her small face fit perfectly in my palms. Admiring the softness of her cheeks, I lowered my voice.

“They say husband and wife are of one body and mind. Since we’ll be a couple one day, it’s not a bad idea to start practicing.”

“H-Husband and wife... of one mind...”

“Besides, what we’re doing is not only to uncover what the Demonic Cult is scheming, after they tried to kill us—it’s also to clear the misunderstanding between the Paeng and Yeon families and help them reconcile. It’s definitely not a bad deed. It could even be called righteous.”

“R-Righteous...?”

“Yes, righteous. A just cause, pure enough to face the heavens with no shame.”

“Uh... Uhh?”

Her green-tinged eyes began to spin. Her face grew increasingly red.

Good. It’s working. At this rate—

I was about to smirk when—

“Ha!”

Tang Sowol snapped back to her senses, her gaze sharpening.

“You scoundrel! Did you really think I’d fall for that smooth talk?”

“Didn’t you?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why are you still holding my hand?”

“!”

She placed her hand on mine, which was still cupping her cheek, seemingly to push it away—but then just left it there.

She pouted briefly in my direction, then finally pulled away with a reluctant and hesitant motion.

“Haa... Brother Cheon. Are we really doing the right thing?”

“Honestly, even I was surprised at how easily you were swayed just now.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! I mean kidnapping the heirs of the Paeng and Yeon families!”

“It’s not kidnapping, it’s... temporary protective custody. Besides, I intend to make sure it ends up being the right thing. I don’t think this will be a simple matter.”

“You always seem so worried, Brother Cheon. What exactly is bothering you so much? To be honest, I don’t understand it. You’re more than just a genius—you’ve achieved something that only comes once in a generation.”

Well, to me, regaining my martial prowess from before the regression makes this progress feel slow...

From Tang Sowol’s perspective—without knowing I’d regressed—I had trained on my own, reached the Peak Stage in just a few years, and then within three years was already stepping into the Sub-Perfection realm.

Of course, I’m not the first of my kind in Murim’s history.

There was Zhang Sanfeng, founder of the Wudang Sect, Damo of the Shaolin Temple, and the Blood Buddha who once ruled the western Murim. They were like me.

Well, even without regression, they achieved even greater things at a younger age or pierced through unseen realms.

That’s probably why people are surprised but not suspicious of me.

As I silently nodded, Tang Sowol continued with a serious face.

“Brother Cheon, I still don’t quite get it. The Paeng and Yeon families might be on bad terms, but at most they’re fighting over influence and arguing. Maybe a harsh duel now and then. No one’s getting killed, are they?”

“That’s for now.”

“Sure, the relationship between Paeng and Eon’s children is unfortunate... Wait, did you just say for now?”

Tang Sowol flinched and questioned me, trying to persuade me not to go through with it.

“Yes. For now. But it’s going to get worse. I suspect that’s exactly what the Demonic Cult is aiming for.”

“Given their recent behavior—subtly stoking chaos in the Central Plains—it does make sense... But the Murim Alliance has already warned both families.”

Before regression, the cult had concealed its ambitions until the moment they invaded. But this time, I managed to reveal a few of their schemes.

Still, due to old biases, no one took the threat seriously yet.

At least the Murim Alliance is on guard. That's how they quickly noticed the Demonic Cult's potions spreading in Hebei Province.

By now, the cult must be frustrated that their plans keep getting disrupted. But—

“You think the Demonic Cult will just give up?”

“Hmm. I only faced them once, but I agree—they don't seem like the type.”

The cultists are all lunatics. You can't expect rationality from them.

Plans disrupted? Might fail?

I survived against them until the very end in my previous life. I know exactly what comes next.

They won't back down. They'll go even more extreme to achieve their goals. And if that doesn't work, they'll burn everything down out of spite.

They don't value their lives. They don't know how to give up. Their relentlessness is beyond comprehension.

Even though their power—besides the Heavenly Demon—is comparable to only a single elite clan, they were never easy to defeat.

“It never hurts to be cautious. And it doesn't hurt to act fast, either. Didn't they say it's already been a while since that potion started spreading in Hebei?”

“So that's why you're calling it kidnapping.”

“There's another reason. Honestly... I just don't see myself becoming friends with people quickly.”

“But you got close to Namgung pretty fast, didn't you?”

“That was just because Namgung hyung is strange. I showed a bit of pressure, congratulated him on his win, gave him some face... but I didn’t think he’d latch on so fast. Turns out he really craves recognition, just like Paeng Woo-jin said.”

“I think anyone would like being treated that way. Well... he does seem to crave approval. Still, he’s not the kind to let just anyone near him. Remember how he looked at Hwangbo?”

“That was cold. Honestly, like he was looking at trash. Which... isn’t entirely wrong.”

It’s not widely known yet, but before regression, Hwangbo Gwang’s crimes had been exposed by Agwibu.

People knew he bullied civilians and weak martial artists, but the truth was worse.

“Even if Namgung’s weak to flattery, he still has discernment. Anyway, that’s not what matters now. We’re almost at the meeting point. What’s important is how we take down Paeng Woo-jin and Yeon Ga-hye.”

“You’re really going through with this...”

“I started the moment I sent that first sound transmission.”

“Once we’ve... kidnapped—I mean, protected—them, what then?”

“First, we hear their side. Then we share our information. Hopefully explain why it had to be this way... Though I’m not sure they’ll accept it.”

“Then we’d better do it right. If we fail, it’ll just get worse.”

“I don’t plan to fail. But that means you’re in this with me, right?”

“We’re already in this together. There’s no backing out. And besides, a perfect ambush isn’t even possible.”

“True. They’ll both be on alert.”

“Then how about this? There’s a type of poison that’s harmless by itself, but causes strong paralysis the moment the two meet...”

In a cautious tone, Tang Sowol whispered her plan to me. It actually made a lot of sense.

Later that night...

The clouds covered the moon. It was a pitch-dark night.

I stepped out in front of Paeng Woo-jin and Yeon Ga-hye, who had arrived first, and gave them a casual wave.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m a bit late.”

“You bastard. What’s your goal, threatening us like that? What do you, the Tang Family’s son-in-law, expect to gain?”

“Depending on your answer, we won’t stay quiet.”

Despite my polite greeting, Woo-jin growled like a wild beast, and Yeon Ga-hye coldly gathered her inner power.

“Threaten? That’s harsh. I just had a few questions.”

“Hah! What a coincidence. I’ve got some questions too.”

Paeng Woo-jin scoffed and strode toward me, his large frame and unchecked aura like a wild predator.

But as he walked, his expression subtly twisted.

“What’s this smell? Cough!”

His face crumpled instantly, like he’d inhaled something foul. Clutching his neck, he forcibly summoned his qi and drew the massive blade on his back.

“Poison...! Was this the Tang Family’s doing?!”

“Of course not. Just my own decision.”

I responded flatly and drew my sword, swinging it toward his blade.

**Chaeng!**

His qi was weak—he was too busy purging the poison and rushed to attack—but the strength of his arm was impressive. The rebound force in my hand was no joke.

Still, if brute force alone could defeat qi, inner techniques wouldn't have evolved this far.

Now that I'd gauged his strength, my second strike came with a higher level of qi.

Slice.

The sword's fiery aura cleanly split the large blade in two.

“What the—?!”

Woo-jin had expected a clash or a stalemate. Caught off guard, he was a half-beat too slow.

I used Ghost Shadow Steps to close in and pressed on a pressure point.

**Thunk!**

Maybe I hit too hard because of his thick muscles. The sound was like a punch. Woo-jin's body froze as I struck his meridian.

“Just a pressure point...!”

He tried to brute-force his way out—something his exceptional physique almost allowed—but...

“Don't worry. Nothing bad will happen.”

As if I'd just stand and watch.

I struck him again, hitting a second point to seal his voice too.

Then I turned around.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Tang Sowol was holding Yeon Ga-hye, who had collapsed, and apologizing profusely.

First, she used an odorless poison in the darkness. Once they were partially affected, she released a strongly scented poison to paralyze them.

Of course, this alone wouldn’t have worked. Too dangerous poisons weren’t an option, and subtlety limited the choices even more.

Also, both the Paeng and Yeon families were physically resistant to poison due to their strong bodies.

So with Woo-jin slowed down, I struck his pressure point, and as Yeon Ga-hye moved to help, Sowol sprayed another dose to neutralize her.

It was an improvised plan, but it worked.

Woo-jin was still glaring daggers at me. I sighed and slung him over my shoulder.

“I admit it. You’ve got a talent for kidnapping, Tang Sowol.”

“Please, shut your mouth, Brother Cheon.”

Tang Sowol, carrying Yeon Ga-hye, closed her eyes tightly.

Now all that was left was to have a quiet conversation at the inn.

When I unsealed his speech point, Paeng Woo-jin shouted in solemn defiance:

“Ugh! Kill me!”

“Didn’t I just say I have no intention of doing that...?”

His first words gave me chills for some reason.