

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 171-180

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As we stepped into the passageway, Sama Yuryeon pressed a point on the wall.

Drk—

The stone door closed behind us as if it had always been part of the wall.

Though sunlight was completely blocked, the passage wasn't too dark thanks to luminous pearls embedded closely together along the walls.

“Pretty,” I commented.

“Expensive,” said Tang Sowol.

“???”

As the two of us gave different impressions simultaneously and tilted our heads, Sama Yuryeon carefully began descending the stairs and spoke up.

“The luminous pearls embedded here aren’t very large, and their shapes are uneven. They’re probably low-grade gems that were cut up. Even with this many embedded, it's only bright enough to see the ground. They shouldn’t be too expensive.”

“You know the quality and market price of luminous pearls too?”

“Yes, well... I once dabbled in business to create a secret fund without the clan’s knowledge.”

“You did?”

“How many people do you think just watch quietly while someone stockpiles military funds? It was crushed—very thoroughly.”

Sama Yuryeon answered calmly, and Tang Sowol muttered in a troubled voice.

“You said ‘enemy’... Even if the succession competition became overheated, they’re still family... right?”

“I figured the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix would say something like that. From what I’ve seen and heard, you seem to have a kind nature. Besides, the Tang Clan is somewhat unique compared to other noble families.”

“I’ve heard that succession conflicts can get severe in other families as well.”

“Yes, most are. You could call it a kind of ‘weeding out.’ After all, the most outstanding must become the next head.”

There was a wry smile in Sama Yuryeon’s voice as she spoke—sounding both bitter and mocking.

“Still, since they are your children, it’s important for the clan head to maintain balance to avoid bloodshed... but.”

“But sometimes, there are those who believe that to truly grow, one must shed the blood of others. Just like how people kill cows or pigs to survive, some are ready to kill people if necessary. My father, the current head of the Sama Clan, is one such person.”

Sama Yuryeon wore a faint, crafted smile—neither affirming nor denying it.

Sensing the sudden shift in atmosphere, Tang Sowol glanced around and whispered softly.

“Brother Cheon, you seem to know the Sama Clan well... Just how bad is it?”

“It’s a place where even your own blood is treated like a chess piece. I’ve heard it used to be better, but... at least in this generation, the Sama Clan is no different from a miniature murim world.”

“Ack! Don’t say that out loud! It echoes in here!”

“This place echoes so much, it wouldn’t matter if we whispered.”

“Well...”

Tang Sowol cautiously looked ahead. Noticing her gaze, Sama Yuryeon gave a light smile as if it were nothing.

“Haha, it’s fine. It’s not confidential or anything. Anyone who needs to know already knows. To put it simply, the Clan Head—my father—has as many children as possible and stirs up competition among them.”

“Wouldn’t that just throw the clan into more chaos? I don’t understand why he’d choose that.”

“That kind of thinking only works in orthodox sects. In the unorthodox world, it’s normal for a few to die during the succession battle. Even those who survive will be purged if they stay in the clan. The Clan Head just chooses to do it with his own hands.”

“But still... they’re family. His own children.”

“They’re warriors before they’re family. And children born out of political marriage are tools more than anything. If you’ve had six or seven kids, the affection naturally wears thin. Once you pass ten... well, it gets hard to form attachments. Only three of us are left now, including myself!”

Sama Yuryeon giggled as if telling a funny story.

But perhaps because she was still immature—A faint killing intent, an old but undiminished resentment, briefly leaked out.

Even I noticed it immediately, and so did Tang Sowol.

Awkwardly, Sama Yuryeon continued in a sheepish voice.

“But in the end, it’ll all be solved when I become the clan head. As a woman, I can’t have dozens of children like my father, so the successor competition will be a lot more relaxed.”

“I see.”

“Yes. So don’t worry. To survive in the Sama Clan, and to become the head and fix its problems, I need to prove my usefulness for now. That means even if I wanted to betray you two, I can’t.”

Though her voice was light, almost forced, her words were likely sincere.

Even if she lacked martial talent, Sama Yuryeon was sharp-witted. She could have escaped the clan if she truly wanted.

But the fate she witnessed as a child—Sama Suryeon’s downfall—likely left her too afraid to break free.

This became known later, after the Orthodox-Unorthodox Alliance was formed.

As the Black Lotus Sect's Grand Administrator, Sama Yuryeon had deliberately sent the Sama Clan to the most dangerous battlefield, leading to its near destruction.

The underground dungeon of the Sama Clan had been used for various experiments.

The subject of those experiments? Genetics.

They aimed to manipulate bloodlines artificially—to replicate the special physiques of the Peng Clan, the physical build passed down through the Huangbo Clan, or the intellect of the Zhuge Clan.

Because, like the Huangbo Clan whose talents declined over time, the Sama Clan feared they too would eventually fall.

Though once a clan that rivaled the Zhuge in brilliance, their abilities had deteriorated drastically in recent generations.

So they began researching what traits were heritable, and whether only desirable ones could be passed on.

Of course, the participants' consent didn't matter.

Regardless of gender, if you were deemed suitable, you were forced to become a breeding stud or a surrogate.

When Sama Yuryeon later dug up the remains of her fallen clan, the wretched appearances of her siblings became a major topic.

Some had gone completely insane, while others were kept barely sane through dark arts.

Even for someone like me, who'd seen many horrors, it had been unpleasant.

Sama Yuryeon, still haunted by that fear, couldn't leave the clan.

Unlike Sama Suryeon, she had no naïve sibling willing to risk everything for her.

So, at least until this mission is over, Sama Yuryeon cannot betray us.

A person running from fear, rather than toward a goal, has few options.

I don't know how long I stared silently at her back.

The sloped passage gradually widened, and the luminous pearls were now whole, not fragments. The light illuminated not just the ground but the entire space.

A large cavern. And a fork in the road.

Standing before it, Sama Yuryeon scanned her surroundings and said,

“I'm not sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Both paths have mechanical formations. But it doesn't feel like one is correct and the other a trap.”

“Can you tell what the traps are?”

“The left path has a collapsing floor. The right path triggers something from above.”

“Can you tell what’s inside?”

“No. The usual hidden weapon or poison shooter has a nozzle you can identify. But this... the floor falls and the ceiling drops—it’s hard to predict.”

“I see.”

“In general, the standard is: blades or spears sticking up from below, or boulders dropping from above. So I’d recommend the left path, since it’s easier to counter.”

“Counter it how?”

“If you prepare in advance, you can smash the floor traps right before falling. Also, the pit might be deep, so we could anchor ourselves with rope...”

“No need for that.”

“Huh?”

Passing by the startled Sama Yuryeon, I asked Tang Sowol,

“You can do it, right?”

“It’s a bit hard while carrying someone...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of Sama Yuryeon.”

“Wait, don’t tell me...!”

“I’ll throw her. Be ready to catch.”

“Oh! If that’s the case.”

A knowing grin spread across Tang Sowol's face.

Then, before Sama Yuryeon could grasp the situation, Tang Sowol performed lightfoot techniques and leapt forward.

Tat!

She ran along the sloped wall and flew straight past the fork into the next cavern.

The Tang Clan's body techniques were among the finest of the noble houses—this was well within her abilities.

Her martial level was also at the verge of the Peak Stage.

While I nodded calmly at the expected result, Sama Yuryeon let out a confused breath somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

“This... you can just do it like that?”

“You’ll be doing it next.”

“M-my lightfoot skills aren’t that great!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say—throw!?”

Realizing too late what I meant, Sama Yuryeon tried to retreat, but it was already over.

I enhanced my body with internal energy and grabbed her ankle.

Then spun her around several times before flinging her through the air.

“KyaaAaaaaah!”

She flailed wildly but landed safely in Tang Sowol's arms.

"N-not fair! If I had just a little more time, I could've bypassed or dismantled the traps!"

"Weren't you the one who said time was precious?"

Chuckling, Tang Sowol gently set the trembling Sama Yuryeon down.

Only then did I gather energy into my legs and launch myself across.

Running across walls like Tang Sowol was too inefficient.

The Thunderblade and Phantom Step techniques were about speed and deception, not stability.

Instead, I poured inner strength into my legs and sprinted across the entire passage in one bound.

Now mute with disbelief, Sama Yuryeon just opened and closed her mouth wordlessly.

Shrugging, I commented,

“When your body’s lacking, your mind suffers.”

“Normally, it’s the other way around.”

“Normal people can’t break through the Peak Stage wall. Sama Yuryeon, you’re still just a first-class martial artist, right?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get there one day.”

“Ghhk!”

Knowing all too well her talents were average, Sama Yuryeon trembled in shame.

I wasn’t lying.

She does eventually reach the edge of Peak Stage—just in her late thirties.

After enjoying her rare display of frustration, I finally spoke.

“This time, the gap was short enough to jump. But there’ll be traps we can’t cross like this. Your help will be necessary.”

“I understand.”

“And even if you make a mistake, don’t worry.”

I kicked a stone back toward the path we’d crossed.

Click!

A loud mechanism triggered, and the floor collapsed instantly.

Just as Sama Yuryeon predicted—a floor-based trap.

But there were no blades or deep pits beneath.

Instead, it was filled with foul-smelling, sticky muck.

“Ugh... What’s that smell?”

“What else? It’s shit.”

“Excuse me?”

“Elder Ghost Shadow Thief liked messing with people, but he didn’t kill without cause.”

Even the outer formation was non-lethal.

Naturally, the traps inside the vault lacked killing power.

They lacked only killing power.

“Even if you fail to detect a trap and I can’t stop it, you won’t die.”

“But you’ll wish you had.”

“See? Doesn’t that put your mind at ease?”

“Not even a little.”

Sama Yuryeon grimaced as she stared at the filth below. A fire sparked in her narrow eyes.

“From now on, I won’t miss a single trap...!”

Well, if she puts in the effort, we all benefit.

And to her credit, Sama Yuryeon kept her word.

She just... only kept it.

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"I won't miss a single one from now on...!"

Sama Yuryeon steeled her resolve. In truth, she scanned her surroundings much faster than before, thoroughly detecting all the traps.

As she declared, she successfully identified every single mechanism trap in advance.

However, she merely identified them.

For example, she realized something would spill out from an opening in the floor, but she didn't expect that "something" to be cockroaches.

Tang Sowol shrieked and scattered poison in every direction, and I also unleashed a wave of killing intent to prevent them from getting close.

Still, the cockroaches came—crawling from below, flying in from above. While we could kill or drive them away, we couldn't force them in the opposite direction.

Which meant that Sama Yuryeon, who was at the front, had no choice but to be covered in them once.

In the end, Sama Yuryeon stood there, unconscious for about three seconds.

There were other mishaps too, like missing the timing to pass through a narrowing corridor and crawling out slowly (none of us expected her to be that slow).

Or after safely passing through a trap that required stepping only on the correct tiles, letting out a sigh of relief, only to spot a ridiculous-looking scarecrow in the corner of her vision and falling backward in fright (truthfully, I knew it was there but didn't say anything because it didn't look dangerous).

Despite a few such twists, we eventually passed through the endlessly branching paths and arrived at a massive stone gate.

Just like the fake entrance, the words 'Divine Thief's Hidden Vault' were prominently carved into the door.

This must be the real entrance to the Vault.

Realizing that the trap-laden path was finally over, Sama Yuryeon collapsed onto the floor and muttered a string of curses.

“That Ghost Shadow Thief guy must have been some twisted pervert obsessed with tormenting people.”

“Well, that’s not far off. Strictly speaking, he tormented people to attract attention, though.”

“You speak as if you met him yourself.”

“Hmm? You didn’t know? Tang Sowol and I had ties with the Ghost Shadow Thief before he passed. Because of that connection, we received the complete map.”

“Oh.”

“For reference, we came here partly to retrieve his hidden treasures, but just as much to hold his funeral.”

“Isn’t this... grave robbing? Is this really okay...?”

Sama Yuryeon trailed off, and Tang Sowol replied with a faint smile.

“It was the Elder’s own wish. To stir up the whole Central Plains, to release the treasures he had long hidden back into the world, and to be buried in the deepest part, watching it all unfold.”

“That sounds more like...”

“More like a festival than a funeral, doesn’t it? I think so too. That’s why we must end this before it goes too far. It’s fine to enjoy the banquet, but getting drunk and making a mess is disgraceful.”

“I see. So since the situation grew bigger than expected, you plan to bring it to a close before it turns into serious conflict. I knew the Tang Clan was sensitive about grace and resentment, but I didn’t expect you to act first to grant a favor.”

Huh. So Tang Sowol had such plans too?

I had simply thought we were sending off the Ghost Shadow Thief after his death. I hadn’t really given much thought to the turmoil spreading across the Central Plains.

Just when I think I've gotten used to her, she shows me another new side.

As I nodded silently, Tang Sowol shook her head with a troubled expression.

“Granting a favor first? I only did what I had to as a member of the orthodox sects, and in the process, made sure it would benefit the Tang Clan. It's no different from what any other orthodox martial artist would've done. Had it been someone else, they would have made the same choice.”

“Maybe so. But what matters is that the person here now is the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix.”

Sama Yuryeon smiled with a sly expression, as if she were plotting something.

But I knew. That was the smile she made when she was being sincere.

Strange. The Sama Yuryeon I knew was so twisted that she'd always scoff at upright declarations like that.

Maybe she hasn't been twisted that much yet. Come to think of it, her reactions while breaking through the mechanisms were a bit clumsy.

She was bold, yes, compared to her martial skill, but compared to the pre-return Sama Yuryeon who never showed a weakness, she was full of openings.

If that's the case, maybe we can bring her over to our side?

Not to the Tang Clan. Someone like Sama Yuryeon would shine best not in a stable environment like the Tang Clan, but in a chaotic place like the Dark Soul Unit.

She might still be a bit inexperienced, but she is Sama Yuryeon. Even now, she could easily secure a spot in the Dark Soul Unit, and one day, she'd rise to the rank of commander.

And since the Dark Soul Leader likes me, if I plant a favor with her now...

Both the leader and the commander of the Dark Soul Unit would owe me a favor.

That would be a major help when it comes time to form an alliance of orthodox and unorthodox factions before confronting the Demonic Cult.

Well, there's no need to decide right now. As long as I do it before we part ways after this is over.

I nodded inwardly and raised my arms to the tightly sealed stone door.

“Alright. Let's see what's inside.”

“Hehe, I'm a little excited, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Please, let it be good martial arts... please, good martial arts...”

Leaving behind Tang Sowol's voice filled with genuine hope and Sama Yuryeon's muttering, unable to abandon her regrets despite knowing better, I pushed with strength.

Ggrug—

I didn't even push that hard, yet the stone gate opened smoothly.

And what greeted us inside... was a heavily glamorized portrait of the Ghost Shadow Thief.

Even if it was his younger self, I doubt he ever looked like that.

“If the Ghost Shadow Thief Elder didn’t paint it himself, he must’ve hired an artist. And of course, that artist would want to please whoever was paying him... well, that explains it.”

Tang Sowol and I, having seen the real Ghost Shadow Thief, shook our heads as we approached the painting.

Surprisingly, the painting was life-sized. I hadn’t realized it because I’d grown taller, but now I could tell it matched his actual height.

...Actually, maybe it’s a bit taller?

Well, compared to the beautified face, that’s a minor issue.

The important part wasn't the painting, but the large stone tablet engraved beneath it.

"This is... a brag."

"I didn't expect it to be this intense. Honestly, I think I'd want to brag a little before dying too."

The tablet was densely inscribed with a list of places the Ghost Shadow Thief had stolen from and the items he had taken.

At the top was, of course, the Imperial Household. The stolen item?

...The Empress's undergarments.

I'd heard the rumor, but seeing it in person still left me speechless.

The realization that he actually infiltrated the imperial palace to steal that really hit.

Below that were the names of the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects, and then names of slightly less prominent but still prestigious factions.

Further down were personal names and titles.

All of them remarkable figures, though the items themselves felt oddly underwhelming.

Still, I hadn't expected so many.

Some of the organizations still existed, but many were long gone.

As for the individuals, most were likely dead by now.

In other words, most of the stolen items had no owner to return to. We'd have to sort through them and see how many were actually useful.

"Well, it's clear there's a lot to see. Where shall we begin?"

"That's obvious."

Behind the portrait and the stone tablet were two large branching paths, each with two rooms.

Each room had a label above the entrance.

The left side had items stolen from sects and clans. The right side had items taken from individuals.

And the inner rooms seemed to contain the more valuable items.

“Let’s start with the Tang Clan’s items. Back then, the Sama Clan would’ve been far more powerful, so we might be able to retrieve everything in one go.”

“I agree. Sama Yuryeon, you remember our terms, right?”

“Yes. The Sama Clan’s martial arts. And a reasonable amount of gold—those will suffice.”

“You’ve seen what the Ghost Shadow Thief prepared, so you can probably guess... There might be no gold here. Or if there is, not much.”

“But you promised to give it.”

“I did. If there’s not enough, I’ll send it through the Tang Clan. Or perhaps substitute it with something else.”

“Something else...?”

Hearing something different from what was agreed, Sama Yuryeon narrowed her eyes even further.

I simply shrugged and walked inside.

The room was crude, carved from stone, yet fairly spacious. Platforms were arranged neatly in rows, and on each platform were stone boxes of various sizes.

Examining the nearest platform, I saw an inscription similar to the ones on the tablet.

It read where and what was stolen.

Mount Emei Sect, Love Letters of Bright Light Immortal Woman

“Love letters?”

“If I recall, the Bright Light Immortal Woman was a sect leader two generations ago. She rarely made public appearances, but she’s still alive and well...”

Tang Sowol tilted her head and opened the stone box. Inside was a smaller wooden case, and within that, a stack of neatly organized letters.

I skimmed through them.

“Hmm. These are... intense. But as far as I know, even though Mount Emei allows long hair, one must leave the sect to start a family.”

“Bright Light Immortal Woman still belongs to the sect. Uh... we should probably return this, right?”

Half the letters were erotic jokes, the other half cringeworthy love confessions. I folded them neatly.

Well, she was probably young at the time. Understandable.

We continued checking the platforms in order.

A pair of shoes belonging to the Chief of the Sal Valley, and a half-finished footwork manual he was writing.

A sculpture carved by the Patriarch of the Namgung Clan.

An old elixir stolen from the Wudang Sect shrine, along with more love letters exchanged with the Bright Light Immortal Woman.

And the sword sheath from the Zhongnan Sect that I'd heard about before.

With limited space in our packs, we had to selectively take what was valuable.

Finally, we came upon one of the names we'd been waiting for.

Sama Clan. Illusory Spirit Pill, Manual of the Soul-Thundering Sword

“Ah! The Soul-Thundering Sword is my grandfather’s technique! And the Illusory Spirit Pill helps with advancing sorcery, so it’s rare but extremely valuable in our clan!”

“That’s good. Since it belongs to you, go ahead and open it, Sama Yuryeon.”

“Thank you.”

Sama Yuryeon opened the stone box with a brightened expression. Inside was a small wooden case.

She opened the smaller case first, revealing a gray pill with an eerie aura. That must be the Illusory Spirit Pill.

She examined it closely, nodded with satisfaction, and tucked it away.

Then, she checked the Soul-Thundering Sword manual.

“Huh??”

“What kind of content is it...? Huh?!”

Sama Yuryeon blinked in confusion, and Tang Sowol, peeking over her shoulder, froze.

Curious, I looked as well.

“...You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It was a vividly illustrated erotic scroll. Surprisingly well-drawn, too—though a bit exaggerated.

Sama Yuryeon muttered blankly.

“Why... why is there an erotic scroll drawn by my grandfather here...?”

“Better that than the Sama Clan’s secrets being stolen.”

For once, Sama Yuryeon's expression was truly dumbfounded.

She didn't look very comforted.

Though she seemed a bit bitter, she collected the Soul-Thundering Sword scroll and we moved on to the next platform.

And finally, we found one marked Tang Clan. But reading the contents made us freeze.

Tang Clan of Sichuan. Golden Dragon Hundred Victory Technique, Blue Scorpion Paralysis Poison, Cheon Hwi-da's Clove Oil, Tang Sowol's Hairpin

"Ha... seriously."

A dry laugh escaped me.

The clove oil was used to maintain my sword, and the hairpin was one Tang Sowol used frequently—hard to steal, but not a big loss.

Perfect items for a thief.

“So I didn’t lose it... it was stolen.”

I never imagined he’d steal from me and Tang Sowol, the very people who saved his life.

No matter how I think about it, the Ghost Shadow Thief really was crazy.

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My clove oil and Tang Sowol’s hairpin—both shamelessly listed among the items stolen from the Tang Clan.

“So I didn’t just lose them... they were actually stolen.”

A dry laugh escaped me. Seriously, the Ghost Shadow Thief wasn’t in his right mind.

As I laughed to myself, Tang Sowol peeked her head over to see what I was looking at.

“Cheon Hwi-da? What’s so funny over there?”

“Take a look at this.”

I pointed to the inscription on the pedestal and the hairpin inside the stone box that sparkled as if it were brand new.

“My hairpin?!”

Finally realizing the situation, Tang Sowol let out a chuckle of her own and picked it up.

She inspected it from all angles and nodded.

“It’s definitely mine. Though he polished it up nicely—maybe out of guilt for stealing it—this little nick here is still present. I thought I lost it somewhere around Zhongnan Sect... He must have placed it here thinking we’d be the ones to find it first, right?”

“Maybe partly. But I see it a bit differently. Whatever else you might say about the Ghost Shadow Thief Elder, he was immensely proud of his achievements. No matter how mischievous he was, he wouldn’t have stored these with the Tang Clan’s stolen goods unless there was a reason.”

“Meaning...?”

“It means we need to read this too.”

Just like Tang Sowol’s hairpin, my half-used clove oil had also been refilled. Tucked under the lid of the bottle was a small, folded letter. I unfolded it and read:

You are nameless now, but when you read this letter, that won’t be the case anymore. The two of you I saw were bound to become famous in the martial world. That’s why I placed these here in advance.

“So he says.”

“Hmm. It’s been quite some time since our titles became known... Could it be he died much earlier than we thought?”

“Maybe. It’s possible he placed these in the box before the Dragon and Phoenix Assembly even began.”

“Well, if it had shown signs of being opened before, the mood would’ve been ruined.”

With a small smile, Tang Sowol replaced the hairpin she was wearing with her old one. I also tucked the clove oil and letter into my inner coat instead of my pack.

Then, feeling a bit more uplifted, I turned to the next pedestal.

“Alright, let’s check the rest quickly.”

“Ah, by the way, Cheon Hwi-da...”

“Hmm?”

“What do you plan to do about that one over there?”

Tang Sowol pointed toward the far end of the room. Unlike the others, that pedestal was lavishly decorated with gold and red dye, and space had been cleared around it.

No matter how you looked at it, it clearly housed the most valuable item in the room.

If it was the most precious among stolen goods from the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects, then... it could only be that.

“Should we return it to the Imperial Family? And if so, how do we even go about doing that?”

“Not a simple matter.”

I wasn't well-versed in the imperial family's lineage, but judging by the Ghost Shadow Thief's age, he must've stolen it from either the current Emperor's mother or grandmother.

Being part of the imperial family meant she may not have trained in martial arts herself, but she would've had access to quality cultivation and food.

In other words, she might still be alive.

Truly not an easy decision. So—

“Don’t you think it’s best to leave difficult problems to the elders? I’ll hand it over to my future father-in-law and let him handle it.”

See? This is the kind of thing you have to deal with if you’re going to become the head of the Tang Clan.

How could I possibly be plotting to take over the Tang Clan through marriage?

I’ll just let Brother Tang Cheong handle all the tedious affairs while I go travel with Tang Sowol.

After that, we went through the rest of the rooms and gathered what we needed.

Just like in the first room, there was more stolen loot than expected, so we had to be selective.

As a result, anything not taken from a renowned sect had to be put back.

Of course, there were things we could deal with immediately—like mid-tier elixirs that were safe enough to consume casually, or poisons that Tang Sowol could absorb and replicate later.

When we emerged, both of us carrying packs stuffed to the brim, Sama Yuryeon spoke with a serious tone.

“Now comes the important part.”

“We’ve already explored everything, haven’t we?”

“Which means it’s time to leave. There aren’t many people who could break through the formation and traps to get into the Vault this quickly, but...”

“...”

“You’re saying there may be quite a few people waiting for us outside. Like I said earlier, don’t worry about it.”

“I remember. I’m not saying it’ll be impossible to get out safely. Just that things might get complicated.”

“Complicated, huh.”

“Even if the two of you could get out just fine, I might not be so lucky.”

“What, are you saying I should kill you now and take the Sama Clan’s share while I’m at it?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying I might get caught up in a fight and get hurt or killed. And by the way, that joke about ‘neck’ and ‘share’ wasn’t funny.”

“I wasn’t aiming for a joke...”

As I shook my head, Sama Yuryeon shrugged and continued.

“I’m not trying to say anything grand. Just... if we get up there and there really are people waiting to fight, I’ll immediately turn around and hide back inside. Don’t take it the wrong way.”

“Huh...”

I was startled by how brazenly she said she'd hide until the fight was over, but on second thought, it made perfect sense.

Sama Yuryeon was at best a first-class martial artist, and barely so. If she ran around aimlessly, she'd only get in the way.

Just as she said, she could get hurt by a stray blade.

“Alright. Just don't hide too deep.”

“Of course. I'm not planning to sneak off with anything we left behind.”

I hadn't thought she would. My concern was that it would be hard to call her back if she went too far in... but if she'll take care of herself, that's better for me.

“Good. Let's handle this well. But before that, could you check if anything is hidden nearby? A formation or mechanism, perhaps.”

“Here??”

Tilting her head, Sama Yuryeon pointed to the entrance of the Vault—the large portrait of the Ghost Shadow Thief.

“Yes. Didn’t I say it earlier? We didn’t just come here to retrieve the Vault’s contents. The main reason we came was for the funeral.”

“Ah... So you think his grave is here too.”

“Considering the Elder’s personality, I’d say there’s a high chance.”

He was someone who took pride in his thievery and even left signs of his theft for recognition.

He threw out invitations just for the fun of it and wanted everyone to admire his achievements.

Of course, he’d want to be buried in the one place where he could watch people covet his treasures after death—the final grand festival.

Was my guess correct? After examining the area around the portrait and stone tablet for a while, Sama Yuryeon soon approached.

“I think I found it.”

“Then please proceed.”

“Yes. Just take a few steps back.”

Sama Yuryeon moved her hands over the wall behind the portrait and the stone tablet.

Kugugung.

The floor split open, revealing a hidden staircase.

We slowly followed it down into a lower chamber.

At the bottom was a modest, square room. Not ornate, not spacious.

The ceiling held a dimly glowing night pearl, and in the center was a rough coffin.

Next to it stood a wooden crutch, leaning at an angle.

The crutch was just the right size for the Ghost Shadow Thief, who had lost one leg in a battle with assassins.

That made it obvious who was lying in the coffin.

“So here you were. Hiding a little too well, weren’t you?”

“We may have arrived a bit early, but in the end, just as the Elder boasted, all of Central Plains has come to know his name.”

Tang Sowol and I exchanged a few brief words, our voices heavy with emotion.

Our time with the Ghost Shadow Thief hadn’t been long, but it had left a deep impression.

The footwork I used most, Ghost Shadow Step, had come from him.

And the Blood Soul Pill he stole from the Demonic Cult had played a crucial role in the Murim Alliance becoming wary of the cult.

If I hadn't returned in time...

If I hadn't gone to the cave from memory during that fateful encounter...

The Ghost Shadow Thief would've died quietly in that small cave, without meeting us, without passing on his martial arts, and without ever revealing the Vault to the world.

Yet, by chance or fate, all of it became possible.

Instead of dying alone, he now lay peacefully in the completed Vault, watching martial artists flock to his name.

After a moment of thought, I drew my sword.

Sring.

“Cheon Hwi-da??”

Tang Sowol looked puzzled, but I gave her a faint smile and stepped toward a nearby wall.

“The Ghost Shadow Thief Elder succeeded in his goal. His name will echo across the Central Plains for at least the next hundred years.”

“No doubt about it.”

“But a title alone isn’t a name.”

After passing on his martial arts to me, he had sensed that we wouldn’t meet again.

And he had said—

“Though the world will know me as the Ghost Shadow Thief, I ask you to remember me by my name.”

As the only martial artist to inherit his skills—if only partially—I had promised I would.

“This should be acceptable. It felt wrong that such a grand tomb didn’t even have a gravestone.”

I raised my sword to the wall and began carving, as if painting with a brush—delicate, yet unhesitating.

Here lies Jang Cheok, the Gentleman Thief who passed through the world as if it were his own courtyard.

After gazing at the inscription for a moment, I spoke.

“Then let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s.”

We offered two bows to pay our final respects.

Drk.

Suddenly, the passage we came from sealed shut, and a new path opened on the opposite wall.

I hadn't expected a mechanism here. And it opened from a bow, of all things.

As I stood dumbfounded, Sama Yuryeon explained as she scanned the surroundings.

“This doesn't lead to another chamber.”

“Then what is it?”

“It's a direct path to the outside. But it seems the mechanism can only be operated from here.”

“So it wasn’t made for his own convenience. He expected someone would find their way here... maybe even bow. Which means...”

It was likely he had anticipated Tang Sowol and me specifically.

I chuckled lightly and bowed toward the coffin.

“Thanks for the shortcut.”

After walking a long stairway free of traps, we finally reached the exit.

It was still a dark cave, but the view outside was familiar.

It was the same cave marked “Divine Thief’s Hidden Vault”—the one Tang Sowol and I had mistaken for the entrance.

“So it loops around like this, huh.”

With a hollow laugh, we stepped outside, past the formation barrier.

And just as expected, a sizeable crowd was waiting for us.

However, all of them were either already dead... or dying.

“What the...?”

Startled, we came to a stop as a man stepped forward.

A middle-aged man with sharp, venomous features, clad in a purple robe, his body radiating toxic energy as blood dripped from his fingers.

Green hair and eyes—the symbol of a Tang Clan expert.

A face I had never seen while living in the Tang Clan these past years, but one I remembered clearly from before my regression.

The Sect Leader of the Thousand Poison Gate—who had taken advantage of the chaos caused by the Demonic Cult to invade the Central Plains.

One who bore Tang Clan blood, but was no longer of the Tang Clan.

The Poison Demon's gaze now turned toward Tang Sowol.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

What allows orthodox sects to remain “orthodox” is their ability to choose righteousness over gain in the most critical moments.

But in the end, even the righteous martial world is filled with people.

There have always been those who committed unspeakable crimes while hiding behind the banner of righteousness.

They were merely dealt with quickly the moment they crossed the line.

No matter how powerful a sect is, the fact that even non-government martial clans often maintain their own prisons is telling.

Because while one may not be able to bring themselves to kill their own child or disciple...

Letting them run free would only tarnish the sect's name and increase the number of innocent victims, so they compromise by locking them away for life.

And yet, sometimes, someone escapes.

The man standing before us—Tang Mu-ak, the Poison Demon—was just such a case.

A middle-aged man with sharp features reminiscent of a viper.

Clad in a violet robe, toxic energy radiating from his entire body, blood still dripping from his fingers, he stared—no, he glared—not at me, but at Tang Sowol, standing by my side.

“At last... the time has come.”

His voice, soaked in bloodlust and poison, muttered darkly.

He was clearly dangerous—but that green hair and those eyes, so familiar to the Tang Clan, revealed the signs of a practitioner who had advanced through Tang Clan poison arts. And that left Tang Sowol deeply shaken.

“Who... Who are you to have caused this massacre? And that hair...”

“He’s an enemy.”

I stepped in front of her, raising my sword. Tang Sowol, startled but quick to respond, stepped back and began gathering her internal energy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sama Yuryeon quickly turning back the way we came, slipping back into the Bigo.

Smart move.

I spoke.

“He’s Tang Mu-ak. You’ve heard the name before, haven’t you, Tang Sowol?”

“...No... it can't be...!”

Her face went pale.

Of course she knew. If anyone would know, it would be her.

Tang Mu-ak was originally a branch family member, but had proven his abilities and loyalty time and again.

He was an elite martial artist of the Tang Clan, destined for a smooth promotion to Elder.

But he was far more ambitious than anyone expected.

Not for greater cultivation. Rather, he was simply obsessed with poison.

Stronger poison, faster poison, subtler poison, poisons with unique symptoms, easily accessible poisons...He was so consumed by poison that perhaps the toxins seeped into his very brain.

And then he saw Tang Sowol, the newborn daughter of the Clan Head.

With her Poison Spirit Constitution, he believed he could make great strides in his research.

A human-shaped poison vessel with near-universal adaptability to toxic substances. He could finally conduct the experiments he never dared try on the Clan Head, Tang Jincheon.

He could perhaps even create new poisons, or unlock the secrets of the Poison Spirit Constitution, maybe even become something akin to poison itself.

That desire was enough to drown out his last shred of morality.

In the end, Tang Mu-ak used his position to steal important research and toxins from the Poison Hall, and finally, attempted to kidnap the infant Tang Sowol.

Though her mother fought desperately and managed to stop him, Tang Mu-ak's poison skills were unmatched, and she died smothered in toxins before treatment could even be attempted.

In the House of Poison, within Sichuan Tang Clan, the Clan Head's wife had died from poison.

Tang Jincheon, consumed with rage, tried to kill Tang Mu-ak—but Tang Mu-ak had planned his escape and successfully fled to Yunnan Province, a remote region where not even imperial influence reached.

Tang Jincheon tore through Yunnan, instilling terror in his wake as he earned the title Poison King, but he never managed to find Tang Mu-ak.

Eventually, he had to give up and return to the Tang Clan—he couldn't remain absent as clan leader forever.

From then on, he raised his only daughter with extreme care and love.

So what happened to Tang Mu-ak, who had barely clung to life?

Did he decide to live quietly from then on?

Of course not.

Having once been so close to possessing the Poison Spirit Constitution, his obsession only grew stronger.

Before my regression, during the chaos of the Demonic Cult's invasion, he tried again to abduct the now-grown Tang Sowol to use her as an experimental subject.

She had told me the story herself, having defeated Tang Mu-ak in the process and reaching the Flowering Stage (Hwagyeong).

His eyes, also green, were filled with a completely different madness compared to Tang Jincheon or Tang Sowol.

“You know who I am?”

“Of course. You’re the one who nearly killed my fiancée. I may not know your face, but I remember your traits well enough.”

“Fiancée, huh.”

Tang Mu-ak grinned.

“Then there’s one more thing you must know about me.”

With those words, a wave of menacing energy exploded out from him.

So vicious and full of murderous intent, it felt like standing in the jaws of a ravenous beast.

If even I could feel this much pressure... he couldn’t just be a Sub-Perfection master. But he wasn’t quite Flowering Stage either.

While hiding in Yunnan, Tang Mu-ak didn’t quietly build strength. He immediately began subjugating nearby sects.

At the time, Yunnan was fragmented. After their defeat to the Beast Palace, the remnants of the Five Venom Sect were divided into hundreds of factions, each claiming to be the rightful successor.

Though once famous for its poison arts, the Five Venom Sect couldn’t compare to the Tang Clan. And with their techniques fragmented, they were no match for Tang Mu-ak.

In the end, he unified them all and reclaimed the sect’s complete legacy—forming the Thousand Poison Gate.

Tang Mu-ak became its leader, and a martial artist whose poison could rival even the Flowering Stage. A poison so potent it could affect even masters at that level.

But so what?

“Even if your poison can infect a Flowering Stage master, that doesn’t mean you’ve reached it yourself.”

“No fear, huh. Or is it confidence—because you’re the Blood Flame Sword Demon?”

He nodded, then lashed out with his arm.

From his purple sleeves burst countless needles—not as fine as the Tang Clan’s feather needles, but far more numerous and reeking of lethal poison.

I met them head-on, slashing with a blade infused with inner power.

Woosh!

The sword energy rippled through the air, the hidden teachings of Shaolin I had learned manifesting through my strikes.

The force of the slash became a gust of power that scattered the needles in an instant.

But the needles were just a distraction.

Tang Mu-ak had already closed the distance and thrust a poison-covered palm at me.

Boom!

“Guh!”

I twisted away just in time to avoid a direct hit, but even a slight graze on my arm caused the poison to spread rapidly.

Despite the resistance I'd built up under Tang Sowol's training, my vision blurred from the intensity of the toxin.

“Cheon Hwi-da...?”

Alarmed, Tang Sowol reached out and began drawing the poison out of me—but Tang Mu-ak didn’t let up.

“Try blocking this too!”

He launched another poisoned palm. I could no longer rely on my senses and instead tapped into Divine Sword Unity to anticipate his attacks.

Teng! Tuhng! Teng!

My inner power clashed with his—the violent energy of my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art smashing against his poison-infused strikes.

Blackish-purple energy scattered with each clash, searing the ground and releasing poisonous mist.

“His inner power...!?”

Inner power, once dispersed, typically loses effectiveness.

Even the Blood Flame Fist Demon's energy scattered into faint heat, and Seol Lihyang's Yin aura would dissipate into nothing more than a chill.

But Tang Mu-ak's?

Even when dispersed, it continued to release poison.

That was impossible. No matter how far poison cultivation advanced, inner energy itself shouldn't produce such toxicity after separation.

Even the Poison Dance Empress of my past life couldn't do that easily.

...Or could it be?

I looked down between exchanges and noticed a slight sheen on the floor—moisture.

Then it hit me.

He wasn't relying on inner power alone. He'd used a medium—liquid, infused with poison.

And the only thing on his hands was blood.

That wasn't the blood of fallen warriors—it was his own toxic blood.

I moved carefully, avoiding the rising fumes and any splashes of poison-tainted blood as I countered.

His palm techniques were excellent—but my sword was better. In a normal fight, I'd have already severed one of his arms.

But now, my body was being eaten away by the poison.

“Cheon Hwi-da! The poison—”

“Spit! I said fall back—it’s too dangerous!”

I spat out blood and shouted.

For Tang Sowol to fully draw out the poison, she’d need direct contact.

But Tang Mu-ak was fighting at close range, surrounding himself in toxin.

If she stayed behind me, she’d be too exposed.

At least now she could absorb the surrounding fumes and assist from afar.

Whether poison would affect Tang Mu-ak, I didn’t know—but throwing hidden weapons at him might.

Thanks to my training, I could still endure—as long as I didn’t take a direct hit.

“I thought I could endure this much...”

Then it hit me.

Kuhuk!

Even a trace of poison riding my sword into my hand—and it felt like my organs were being torn apart. My limbs weakened.

Compound poison.

No matter how hard I tried to circulate my inner energy,

the poisons were clashing wildly inside me.

I vomited black blood.

“I never let my guard down... I just didn’t expect poison this strong...”

As I dropped to one knee, Tang Mu-ak approached, his hand glowing with that deadly aura, like the Tang Sowol of my previous life.

A poison that could kill even a Flowering Stage master—

which meant his mastery of poison had reached that level.

If I took a direct hit, I'd die before Tang Sowol could help.

I can't die here. I won't let everything I've done go to waste. I can't let Tang Sowol die—not again.

So I'll burn it all here.

If I need stronger inner power to purge his poison, then I'll force it.

Even if it means falling into Qi deviation.

Even if I have to draw on Innate True Qi.

I focused my will at my dantian.

My inner energy was violent and volatile enough that ordinary warriors might already think I'd gone mad.

But it was still under my control.

So I released it all.

Even if I can't stay conscious for long—if I can just defeat him before that...

I steeled my resolve and prepared to let loose—

Srrrk.

“Stop. You can't go that far, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Tang... Sowol?!”

Despite my warning, she had returned. Her hand pressed to my shoulder, already drawing out the poison—but slowly.

“Sevenfold Soul-Chasing Powder... no, it’s similar, but with changed ingredients. Including... Hakryeongcho.”

“It’s Sevenfold Soul-Breaking Powder. Similar power, but far harder to cure. It even bypasses Tang Clan immunity built through Hakryeongcho.”

“If you wanted to make a poison even the Tang Clan couldn’t neutralize in time...Congratulations. You’ve succeeded.”

Tang Sowol sighed deeply. Her eyes hardened as she stared directly at Tang Mu-ak.

“Your target...was me, wasn’t it?”

“You know me well.”

“Then take me—and let the others go.”

“Why would I do that? Killing them all would be simpler.”

“If Cheon Hwi-da dies, I’ll kill myself immediately. If I drop my resistance, all the poisons in me will melt me from the inside. Even you can’t neutralize them that quickly.”

Tang Mu-ak fell silent.

But I didn’t need to think.

“W-Wait! You can’t—if you go with him—!”

“I know. I’ll die. Or worse, suffer through unspeakable experiments first. But at least... you’ll live.”

Her eyes were clear—like someone who had accepted everything. Like someone who had made a decision.

And I, overwhelmed, could only stare up at her.

Then I heard Tang Mu-ak's voice.

"...Fine. But don't remove the poison completely. Now that I've seen his sword firsthand, it's sharper than I thought."

"I'll neutralize the Sevenfold Soul-Breaking Powder...

but leave a sleep toxin strong enough to knock him out for three days."

"That'll do. Do it."

Tang Mu-ak nodded, still holding poison in both hands.

Tang Sowol bowed slightly, then turned back to me.

“Cheon Hwi-da.”

“I told you—don’t—kuh!”

Before I could finish, I coughed up more black blood. She looked at it quietly, then gently touched my cheek with a faint smile.

Her hand trembled slightly.

“Thanks to you, I survived. Thanks to you, I was happy. When I thought about the future... it was always with you.”

“Then move aside. I’m not—”

Before I could speak, she silenced me with a kiss.

My first kiss in this life tasted bitter and thick—of blood and poison.

Already weakened, I could barely stay awake. As sleep overtook me, I faintly heard her voice.

“I love you.”

Before I could say anything in return—darkness took me.

When I opened my eyes again,

Tang Sowol was gone.

I must bring her back.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Resentment is persistent and complicated.

Blinded by revenge, one bathes in blood, abandons reason in pursuit of martial power, and sometimes even creates new grudges for personal gain.

Thus, all manner of human figures live a life reeking of blood, telling themselves there must be something of value in the pile of corpses.

“Murim is a forest that feeds on blood.”

“Sword Demon, you truly lack tact. Must you say such things right now?”

Congratulating me for defeating the Poison Demon and reaching the Flowering Stage?

“It’s late. But I’ll forgive you. Today is a good day, after all.”

Tang Sowol said with a faint smile as she sat down beside me. I shifted slightly to make room, and we each fixed our gaze in different directions.

I looked at the camellia blossoms, which had just begun to bud with the onset of cold weather.

Tang Sowol looked at the unusually bright full moon tonight.

At some point, we had begun to gather in this spot every night. Without making any specific arrangements—it just happened naturally.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Driven to the brink by the Heavenly Demon, the Righteous-Murim Alliance had been chased all the way to Hebei Province.

There weren't many places left to rest peacefully. And among them, how many could boast both camellia trees and a clear view of the moon?

By coincidence, this place satisfied both conditions.

We didn't know each other's circumstances, but we weren't heartless enough to drive the other away from one of the few remaining sanctuaries.

And this—right now—was the result.

Though the camellias had only begun to bud, a few months later, crimson blossoms would be in full bloom.

Just imagining that scene seemed to calm the inner demon that had always boiled within me. I had been gazing blankly at the tips of the branches when—

Tang Sowol spoke in a low voice.

“So?”

“Hmm?”

Normally, aside from brief greetings, she'd sit quietly and leave without a word. So her suddenly speaking caught me off guard.

“So, what did you mean by what you said earlier? About Murim being a forest that feeds on blood.”

“It's nothing. Just that everyone in Murim is broken in some way.”

“I knew that already, but hearing it from you really drives home how negative a person you are.”

“But it's the truth. You're the same, Tang Sowol.”

“Hehe. I'm not here to lecture you on being wrong or criticize you for being negative. I just meant that it's reassuring—because you're always the same.”

She said this, taking her eyes off the moon and letting out a soft chuckle.

Her white, graying hair swayed, and through it, I could see a glimpse of her half-melted face. She was smiling, and yet a faint killing intent radiated from her.

It wasn't directed at me. It simply overflowed naturally.

Twisted to the point it was hard to believe she was the cherished daughter of the Tang Clan in Sichuan, raised with the best things, in the best home, surrounded by the best.

But anyone who knew her circumstances would understand her strangeness.

How many people could remain sane after watching their family and loyal retainers—who were like family—slaughtered before their eyes?

Tang Sowol could no longer be called a warrior of the Righteous Faction.

Though at this point, the distinction between the Righteous and the Demonic seemed meaningless.

Tang Sowol, who had been quietly watching me, turned her gaze back to the night sky and spoke in a quiet tone.

“To bring up such a thing out of nowhere... I suppose you become sentimental at night as well, Sword Demon.”

“That’s the first time anyone’s called me sentimental. But, well. Just for today, I suppose you’re right.”

“Pardon?”

“To be honest, I wasn’t sure you could carry out this mission properly.”

“Care to explain what you mean?”

Tang Sowol narrowed her visible eye, hidden partly by her bangs, and gave me a sharp look.

I replied in a calm voice.

“Murim is a forest that feeds on blood. But that forest is now entirely ablaze, engulfed by the hands of a giant named Heavenly Demon.”

“But the one I fought this time wasn’t the Heavenly Demon, but the Poison Demon.”

“And yet, he was the last blood relative of the Tang Clan.”

Officially, all those of Tang Clan blood—both direct and collateral lines—had been wiped out.

The Tang Clan valued family so deeply that not a single one fled. They all fought the Heavenly Demon to the end.

Except for Tang Sowol.

Why she alone escaped, no one knows. She never told anyone.

But judging from her actions over the past few months, it likely wasn’t because she feared death.

Perhaps she had been given an order—to survive, so that the bloodline of the Tang Clan would not be extinguished.

Tang Sowol was the most gifted of her clan. The late Poison King's judgment was likely correct.

Except for one thing—he failed to consider the agony of having to abandon her dying family to survive.

“Even such deep-rooted grudges have faded. The Righteous and Demonic factions have set aside the past and joined hands. Even the rule of non-interference with government affairs has long since been broken.”

“So you're saying I might hesitate to fight the Poison Demon because of our blood ties.”

“At worst, I even considered the possibility that you might defect to his side.”

“Hmm.”

Tang Sowol rested her chin on her hand with a hum and looked at me again.

“And what would you have done if that happened?”

“What else? Like I said earlier, I’d just be using this place alone from now on.”

“Is that really all?”

She shrugged as I failed to answer.

“That was a rather mean-spirited question. But I understand your point, Sword Demon. However, I believe there’s something you don’t know.”

“What is it?”

“The Poison Demon was also my mother’s killer.”

“Huh??”

Surprised, I listened as she told me about something from when she was just a baby. After she finished, she looked quietly up at the sky and continued.

“The reason I volunteered for this mission wasn’t to avoid unknown dangers, or to eliminate threats obsessed with capturing me, or even to reunite with the last remaining relative of the Tang Clan, as you feared. It was to avenge my mother.”

“So I worried for nothing.”

In a time when revenge and survival held greater value than righteousness or justice, no words could be more trustworthy.

But Tang Sowol responded in an unexpected way.

“Worried? Did you say you were worried?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You say that, yet you seemed awfully lonely standing out here alone in the cold night.”

“I never said that.”

“Then why did you volunteer for the task of protecting me from the Demonic Cultists who might sneak up from behind while I fought the Poison Demon?”

“Why don’t you be more honest?”

“You know, Tang Sowol, you really are a bothersome woman sometimes.”

“And negative men are just as troublesome.”

Letting out a small sigh, I answered.

“Because I thought it was too close to call.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t think you could win against the Poison Demon.”

“You didn’t...”

“I was ready to step in if necessary. I never imagined you’d absorb his poison and reach the Flowering Stage in the process, though.”

“Oh my.”

Tang Sowol dragged out her words with a tone of satisfaction. After a brief awkward silence, she cautiously asked,

“I heard you suffered serious internal injuries during that fight.”

“Not enough to die.”

“How long will you need to recover?”

“Might not be able to fight properly for half a year.”

“In times like this, half a year is practically a death sentence! With your skills, I thought such injuries were impossible... what happened?”

“Nothing much. That damn Sword Demon came looking for me again. And more cultists swarmed me than expected.”

“Still, that doesn’t explain it...”

“Half of them fled in fear.”

“Ah.”

Tang Sowol nodded, seemingly understanding now.

In this era, only revenge and survival held value. Those who stayed and fought alongside me chose revenge. Those who ran chose survival.

“Why did you stay until the end, Sword Demon?”

“Like I said, I was ready to step in if needed. There’s nothing more reliable on the battlefield than your poison.”

“Is that really a reason to risk your life?”

“Well.”

Why did I risk my life and stay until the end?

Perhaps it was because I was tired of this hollow life where no one remained around me. Or maybe it was because I felt a sense of kinship with Tang Sowol, who was consumed by vengeance.

But whatever the reason, it wasn’t exactly a noble one. Not enough to justify putting my life on the line.

So I could only say:

“No particular reason.”

But it must have sounded unconvincing to Tang Sowol.

“How can someone so tactless and pessimistic also be so dishonest?”

“I didn’t expect you to pick a fight all of a sudden.”

As I stood dumbfounded, she suddenly climbed into my lap.

A comfortable weight. Warmth that soothed my chilled body in the winter wind. Before I knew it, the budding flowers and bright full moon had vanished from view.

Only Tang Sowol, looking down at me with a strange expression, remained.

Before I could say anything, she leaned in and kissed me.

Soft lips. A tongue that slipped between them. Then, a strange liquid flowed down my throat.

Vitality surged through the body that had been suffering from internal injuries.

“What is this...?”

“Puhaha! A very special poison created by permanently consuming part of my inner energy.”

“You numbed the pain? No, the internal injuries really are healing fast...”

“Have you never heard that the line between medicine and poison is thin?”

“I thought it meant that the wrong medicine could kill.”

“It also means that the right poison can be used as medicine.”

Tang Sowol, who initiated it all, couldn't meet my gaze. In a slightly flustered tone, she continued.

“Sword Demon, are you familiar with the Tang Clan’s law?”

“A favor must be repaid double, and a grudge tenfold. Isn’t that the famous saying?”

“Yes. Thanks to you, I was able to fight without interference and defeat the Poison Demon. So I must repay you at least this much, don’t you think?”

Why did it bother me?

She had acted on impulse and was now retreating out of embarrassment. So this time, I decided to ask.

I wrapped my arm tightly around her waist and asked again.

“Is that all?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m asking if you did it solely to repay a favor.”

It was a question half born of impulse. But speaking it aloud, I realized.

Why I had involved myself in something so dangerous. Why I hadn't left her side even knowing I could die.

I gently brushed aside her long white bangs.

She flinched slightly, but didn't cover her face or turn away.

There, her right cheek appeared melted, as if burned.

One might call it grotesque, but I felt no revulsion.

No, if anything, I felt a small satisfaction at being the one to whom she showed this unguarded side.

There really wasn't a particular reason.

Just as a man born with nothing and a woman who lost everything needed no special reason to grow close.

I simply didn't want to let Tang Sowol go.

She had seeped into the scar I thought would never heal—and I didn't want to lose her this time.

As I gently stroked her ruined cheek, Tang Sowol poked at my chest with a slightly flushed face.

“This poison rapidly heals internal wounds, protects your meridians, and even prevents future injuries. But... there's one issue.”

“What is it?”

“Once you're addicted, you have to keep taking it—regularly, for the rest of your life.”

“That means...”

“Tomorrow, the day after, the day after that, ten years from now... you’ll have to keep taking my poison.”

After saying that, Tang Sowol chewed her lip slightly.

Then, she smiled. A pure smile, unlike any before, free from distortion.

“Sword Demon. You’ve been poisoned by me.”

It was the clearest answer to my question.

When I opened my eyes again, Tang Sowol was gone.

“Sama Yuryeon. I need a favor.”

I took out the lotus token I had received from the Black Lotus Sect Master.

Yes. From that night before the regression, I had long been addicted to the poison called Tang Sowol.

There is no antidote.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

When I came to, I was back in the secret chamber of the Ghost Shadow Thief—more precisely, the small room where his coffin lay.

As soon as I grasped the situation, I spoke to Sama Yuryeon, who must have brought me here while I was unconscious.

“Sama Yuryeon.”

“Ugh! Why did the Poison Demon have to show up here of all places? Judging by how he left all the luggage we painstakingly carried behind, it seems his only goal was the Flying Butterfly Poison Sealing Cloth... Seriously, how can someone be this unlucky?”

“Can you hear me?”

“Ugh! I just wanted a breather away from that cursed household, and now look at me...!”

Was it shock? Or could she genuinely not hear me? Sama Yuryeon wandered around the small room, muttering to herself.

So, I pulled out the Lotus Token I had received from the Black Lotus Sect Master and held it up to her face.

“Huh?! That’s...???”

Only then did Sama Yuryeon regain her composure, and I continued speaking.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“That Lotus Token is tempting, but if it’s that dangerous, I’ll pass. Things are already plenty dangerous as they are.”

“You don’t need to worry about the Poison Demon killing you. He’s only interested in Tang Sowol to begin with. And this isn’t a particularly dangerous task.”

After saying that, I casually tossed the Lotus Token to her. She caught it on reflex and stared blankly. Meanwhile, I quickly checked my physical condition.

I wasn't at full strength. The poison from the Seven Treasures Soul-Severing Powder had been purged, but the internal injuries remained.

In truth, my wounds were bad enough that I should be recovering for at least a month. But I had a way to speed up the process.

I took out the elixirs I had originally intended to return to their rightful owners and began swallowing them one by one.

Each was from a reputable martial sect and classified at least as mid-tier or higher. Enough to put out the immediate fire.

“A-Are you insane?! Why are you taking all of that by yourself?! You're wasting their effects, and now we've lost our bargaining chips...”

“But I'll be able to swing a sword again. Hand over the Phantom Spirit Pellet (환령단) too.”

“Ah... So your ‘favor’ was to take the Phantom Spirit Pellet back?”

I swallowed the pellet in one go and shook my head.

“On top of that, I need you to run an errand.”

“An errand...?”

“Go to the Tang Clan. Tell them Tang Sowol was taken by the Poison Demon and that I’m heading to the Heavenly Poison Sect right now.”

“W-Wait a minute. Are you saying you’re going to defeat the Poison Demon alone?”

“There’s no time. After delivering my message and the luggage to the Tang Clan, don’t return to the Sama family—head to the Black Lotus Sect instead.”

“You already lost once in a one-on-one fight with the Poison Demon. What makes you think storming the Heavenly Poison Sect will be any different?! This is suicide!”

“If I say I sent you, the Sect Master won’t turn you away. Whether you end up working as a strategist or a clerk, that’s your call. The Sect Master treasures her people. It’ll be enough to get you out of the grip of the Sama family.”

“Hello? Are you even listening?”

“If you accept, take the token and go to the Tang Clan. If not, return it.”

“You’re really going to die, you know?! Maybe not from the Poison Demon, but from overdosing on all those elixirs!”

“Die, huh...”

What surfaced in my mind was the final scene I witnessed before the regression.

Overwhelming demonic energy engulfed the sky, crushing Tang Sowol’s poison, and then her heart was pierced.

Seol Lihyang, Seo Mun-Hwarin, and Tang Sowol—they all left behind the same words in their final moments: “Live.”

But I didn't obey. Even knowing it meant death, I swung my sword at the Heavenly Demon.

The reason was simple.

Even if I survived that moment, it meant nothing.

What difference is there between living a hollow life and being dead?

“What I truly fear is not death.”

Words I could only say because I had died once.

Perhaps it was because I had dreamed of Tang Sowol—remembered the moment just before death.

The killing intent I normally kept in check began to leak out uncontrollably.

Sama Yuryeon, no matter how low her martial attainment, couldn't fail to notice this.

Her gaze weighed heavily.

“Those eyes... You're serious.”

“I've always been serious.”

“Understood. I accept the conditions... but I can't do any more than this.”

“Anyone hearing you would think you're desperate to help. Don't worry—I won't ask for more.”

“Even if I wanted to help... geez.”

Sama Yuryeon, now carrying my share of the luggage, let out a long sigh.

“I hope we get to meet again. With the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix too.”

That was the last thing she said as she climbed the stairs and left.

Though she was a little clumsy and overly sentimental now—unlike her pre-regression self—the core of her hadn't changed.

She always kept her promises. I didn't need to worry about her stealing supplies and running off.

As the effects of the elixirs began to kick in, I felt my energy rampaging like a wild beast and sat in meditation.

Their nature, purity, and additional functions varied, but I had never been picky about elixirs.

The internal energy cultivated from the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was far from pure, and even the coarsest energies weren't enough to overpower the killing intent embedded in my cultivation.

“Hoo...”

Taking a deep breath, I settled into a seated meditation posture.

It didn't take long to recover from my injuries.

Of course, consuming more than a dozen different elixirs all at once is a madman's act.

Though I had managed to calm the rampaging energy, strictly speaking, I hadn't absorbed it—I was merely keeping it from exploding.

Normally, I'd need to spend a long time slowly refining it into my Dantian... but I didn't have that luxury.

So I spread the energy throughout my meridians, using it gradually as I leapt across the land with light footwork, heading straight for Yunnan Province where the Heavenly Poison Sect resided.

Having recovered most of my pre-regression martial prowess, I could run faster and longer than any horse. Without rest, I reached my destination in less than three days.

In the process, I burned off most of the unstable elixir energy that had felt like it might burst my meridians.

Even so, I couldn't relax.

The Poison Demon surely knew he couldn't stay in the Central Plains long after abducting Tang Sowol.

He must have rushed back to the Heavenly Poison Sect just as quickly.

After another half-day of running, a massive pavilion appeared in the distance.

Not quite the scale of the Murim Alliance or the Black Lotus Sect's main compound, but still far beyond what one would expect from an ordinary sect. A five-story building sprawling across a wide area.

Yunnan was far from the imperial reach, allowing them to flaunt their power openly.

Perhaps, having absorbed the remnants of the Five Poisons Sect, they needed to assert their authority and pride.

Either way, I would reduce it all to ashes.

I walked slowly, checking my condition.

Much of the energy used for movement hadn't been refined into my Dantian, but had instead served as temporary fuel. My body was brimming with strength.

On the other hand, having run nonstop for three days and nights, my nerves were fraying... but that was just right, considering what I was about to do.

I looked up at the sky one last time.

The sky, tinged with gray, looked ready to pour rain at any moment, and even in broad daylight, the sunlight scattered and faded behind the clouds.

Today, the air pressing down on my shoulders felt unusually heavy.

In contrast, the emotions that had been dormant until now began to rise as I stood before the Heavenly Poison Sect.

The boundary between past and present blurred.

Though my regressed body bore no trace, in my memory and in my heartscape, the poison called Tang Sowol had taken root.

The clumsy confession. The desperate gestures. That infuriating pride, the revenge she never abandoned, and even that vague promise we made beneath a dim moon on a day just like today.

No one else might remember—but to me, it was as vivid as if it happened yesterday.

“Ah...”

A sigh escaped me. Was I drunk on the memory, or on my own bloodlust?

My body staggered of its own accord, not from will, but from the weight of emotion.

As past and present overlapped and my vision distorted, only my feelings remained clear.

Love. Regret. Despair. Rage. Longing. And killing intent.

Originally, Tang Sowol and I were like two matching pieces of a puzzle.

We each had wounds, and we could soothe each other's pain.

Without Tang Sowol, I had no reason to wield a sword. And she, without me, had no reason to live.

We could only be whole with each other.

Even if, through the turn of time, this became a delusion only I remembered—something I could never share.

Even so, Tang Sowol was the piece embedded deepest within me.

Just knowing she wasn't by my side now... that alone was enough to break me.

So I will take her back.

Even if it means walking the Path of Asura I've so long resisted.

Ffwoosh!

The killing intent that had only simmered within me now exploded outward, engulfing the area.

“W-What the...?!”

“Kuhugh!”

Two Heavenly Poison Sect guards clutched their throats and trembled.

Frozen stiff, unable to resist, I cut their necks cleanly.

Ssskuk...

Two heads rolled across the ground. Now alerted, more of their warriors rushed out, but they met the same fate.

Some were struck down unaware. Others died trying to flee.

The unrestrained killing aura spread further and further, intensifying with each breath.

Sensing the danger, Heavenly Poison Sect experts began to appear one after another.

“You bastard! Do you know where you are—?! Wait, he’s no ordinary man! Spread out and focus only on poisoning him!”

They were all masters at the Peak Stage, and yet, the moment they met my gaze, they panicked and released clouds of poison.

As expected of the Poison Demon’s subordinates, the toxins were potent, designed to bypass the resistances commonly developed in the Central Plains—especially in the Tang Clan.

But they would not touch me.

The reason poison masters like Tang Sowol and Tang Jincheon are immune to all poisons is simple—their bodies are already filled with it. There's no room for more.

Before the regression, Tang Sowol had said: if poison destroys the body, and inner demons destroy the mind, then the two are not fundamentally different.

Though she spoke of her own poison at the Flowering Stage, I took it to mean something else.

If inner demons enveloped not just the mind, but the body as well—if one completely succumbed to madness—then perhaps no other poison could enter.

I stopped resisting the inner demon I had slowly been drawing out.

I gave up control over my killing intent, surrendering to instinct.

My vision narrowed. My mind dulled, as if intoxicated.

But my purpose became even clearer.

“I will cut them down.”

The stench of burning flesh filled my nose.

This place was now the ruins of a shattered wall.

A pavilion in flames.

A moonlit midnight garden where Tang Sowol’s face blocked the full moon.

To reach Tang Sowol—

Four more floors.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Aaaaaaahhh!!”

It was less a human scream and more like the howl of a beast.

Rough and menacing, without the slightest hint of restraint.

As if to prove it, the overwhelming killing intent that engulfed the entire floor surged, and thick, blood-red sword flame erupted violently.

It looked like the entire pavilion had caught fire. But where real flames would burn flesh, this sinister black-red flame cut through human bodies.

Ssskuk.

In an instant, the warriors of the Heavenly Poison Sect were slashed down and sent rolling across the floor.

All of them were masters who had reached the Peak Stage, and yet, despite deploying advanced formation techniques, they were unable to stop a single intruder and fell one by one.

“Why... why would such a monster appear now...?! The Sect Leader is so close to completing the Grand Method!”

Grinding his teeth, one of the elders of the Heavenly Poison Sect stood and watched instead of aiding his subordinates.

More accurately, he had to watch—because the position he stood in was the only place where there was even a sliver of a chance to stop this lawless invader.

The massive structure of the Heavenly Poison Sect’s main building served both as a show of strength to outsiders and to establish the authority of the long-serving inner circle that supported the Sect Leader.

The first floor was shared by all. But above that, each level belonged to a different master.

This second floor belonged to the First Elder, who had played a major role in rallying the remnants of the Five Poisons Sect under the Heavenly Poison Sect’s banner.

And for a martial artist—especially one who practices poison arts—having a hidden trump card within their own territory was common sense.

The subordinates now dying on this floor had stepped up merely to buy time for their master to prepare.

They didn't last long.

Now the entire second floor was drenched in blood. Furniture and bodies had been slashed down, leaving nothing taller than waist-high.

At last, the First Elder came face to face with the cause of it all.

A swordsman, drenched in blood, staggering like a drunk. Behind him, corpses marked every step of his advance.

He radiated such intense killing intent that even a Sub-Perfection master like the First Elder struggled to breathe.

His face looked young—surprisingly so—but the elder paid no mind to such trivial details.

His eyes.

Eyes swirling with the bloodlight of qi deviation—red like madness and killing intent, sharp as blades and burning as if to incinerate the world.

Eyes that clearly belonged to a salgwi—a living killing ghost.

Yet oddly, to the First Elder, the redness didn't feel like blood or flame.

It looked rusted.

The sharpness in his gaze was dulled by corrosion, and the ferocity resembled not fresh flames but the faint heat lingering in ashes.

Even after living long as a martial artist, witnessing his sect's fall and reconstruction, the First Elder found this strangely unfamiliar.

“So intense... Your methods are so brutal—do you have some grudge against the Heavenly Poison Sect?”

“But this is where it ends. You've crossed too many lines. How dare you run wild here—here of all places?!”

But the First Elder faltered when faced with Cheon Hwi's silent advance.

He had planned to buy time by talking, but hadn't expected the man to not react at all.

Still, he couldn't back down now.

He had to appease the spirits of the dead under his command, protect the Heavenly Poison Sect from suffering the same fate as the Five Poisons Sect... and, above all, he couldn't allow the Sect Leader's Grand Method to be disrupted.

There was a reason the upper floors were given to elders, instead of simply granting them lavish homes elsewhere.

It was part of a long-term setup for the Sect Leader's Grand Method—one that would use a Poison Spirit Vessel to ascend.

Someone who had mastered poison arts to such an extent was already no different from a venomous creature.

Just as formations required artifacts, the elders and protectors who remained on each floor could support the Sect Leader's ritual merely by being present—and leaving their floor during the ritual would doom it to failure.

“I am old and have lived long enough. If I die, let it be here. If I survive, it shall also be here.”

Even if the First Elder perished, the poison steeped into his body would continue to assist in the ritual.

“No one will ever again ignore the Heavenly Poison Sect—or the Five Poisons Sect!”

Shouting his lifelong conviction, the First Elder stomped the ground and spread his arms wide.

From his sleeves, his collar, and even his open mouth—countless poisonous insects spewed out.

And that wasn't all. The wall behind him cracked open, releasing even more venomous creatures, several times the number already released.

A grotesque sight—but not surprising in Yunnan Province, where poisonous insects and snakes were plentiful.

If the Tang Clan applied poison to weapons and projectiles, the Five Poisons Sect evolved to control living venomous creatures as weapons.

The First Elder was a renowned master of poison arts since the Five Poisons Sect's heyday.

"You must've ingested some powerful anti-venom to survive this long! Let's see if you can endure this!"

The Five Poisons Sect's martial arts straddled the line between sorcery and combat—unorthodox but clearly limited in raw power.

Even now, as the Heavenly Poison Sect rebuilt from the Five Poisons Sect's ashes, the First Elder still took pride in that heritage.

These were poison beasts he had raised and bred himself. While time was short and he couldn't gather them all, what he unleashed was enough to drown a man.

Flying insects filled the air, and ground creatures swarmed so densely there was no space to step.

No matter how strong a martial artist, evading or cutting down everything was impossible.

Of course, even the First Elder wasn't naïve enough to believe this alone could kill Cheon Hwi, considering the overwhelming force he had shown so far.

But if he could land a hit, that was enough. Poison, once inside, would steadily erode the enemy.

Even if he fell, the next floor—or the one after that—could finish off the beast.

But that hope shattered almost immediately.

Ffwoosh!

The killing aura around Cheon Hwi surged violently.

To be precise, the previously chaotic aura now honed itself into a singular, instinctual focus—to annihilate the obstacles in front of him.

The killing intent, strong enough to shake even Sub-Perfection masters, converged into a single, concentrated force.

No matter how grotesque and refined the poison beasts were, they were still creatures—there was no way they could endure Cheon Hwi’s full killing intent.

Plop. Plop.

One by one, the insects dropped.

Those crawling on the ground buried their heads into the floor, while those further back were forced forward by command, only to meet the same fate.

He hadn’t even drawn his sword. Just with a glare—just by focusing his killing aura—everything the First Elder had cultivated his whole life was obliterated.

“W-What is this...”

The First Elder trembled as he refused to believe what he saw.

But it wasn’t an illusion. His prized creatures had died before even reaching Cheon Hwi’s body.

Cheon Hwi stepped forward without pause.

Desperate now, the elder swung his hand.

The Five Poisons Sect's true secret wasn't in raising poison beasts. The most deadly poison... was the practitioner themselves.

The First Elder charged his sharp nails with internal energy and unleashed his technique.

A strike infused with poison, cloaked in violet energy, cutting through the air.

Unlike wild, beastly martial arts, his movement was precise—like a snake's fang, or the sting of a venomous insect.

It wasn't meant for drawn-out fights, but for that one perfect strike.

If he could just land it, he would win.

Aiming for Cheon Hwi's neck, he struck—

Shaaak!

Cheon Hwi tilted slightly, taking the strike to his chest instead.

His clothes and skin were torn open by the swirling energy.

The wound wasn't deep, but the poison had clearly entered his body.

A smile spread across the First Elder's lips.

“Got y—”

It became his dying words.

As his vision spun midair, he finally realized—

His neck had been cut.

Cheon Hwi hadn't dodged or blocked the strike.

He had simply allowed it, and swung his sword at the same time.

'You'll die soon anyway.'

That was the thought that remained in the First Elder's fading consciousness as his head fell to the ground.

No matter how strong the antidote, surely Cheon Hwi couldn't withstand a poison infused with an entire lifetime of cultivation.

Maybe it wouldn't kill him now—but it would corrode him over time. Perhaps on the next floor, or the one after that.

That's what he had believed.

But Cheon Hwi walked past the freshly fallen corpse, staggering and rust-eyed as ever.

And as he drew close, the First Elder saw it.

A stream of dark violet poison flowing from the torn flesh... but not entering Cheon Hwi's body—forced back out, as though it had been rejected.

And then he saw something else.

Amid the blood-soaked garments, the familiar green robe of the Tang Clan.

Only then did the First Elder realize who this invader was—and why he was rampaging so madly.

But it was already far too late.

His head had already hit the ground.

Plop. Roll.

In the fading edges of his consciousness, he heard a faint mutter.

“Three more floors...”

The meaning wasn't lost on the First Elder's severed head.

'Sect Leader... perhaps we were too greedy...'

And with that, a once-notorious master of Yunnan passed away.

The third and fourth floors fared no better—if anything, they fared worse.

They belonged to the Left and Right Guardians of the Heavenly Poison Sect, both of whom had mastered Tang Clan martial arts, not the Five Poisons Sect's.

But to Cheon Hwi, such techniques—hidden weapons, poison arts—were all too familiar.

The Left Guardian of the third floor was defeated in under fifteen minutes, his heart pierced after all his techniques failed.

The Right Guardian, terrified by Cheon Hwi's onslaught, didn't even get to unleash his trump card—he jumped out of the fourth-floor window.

His subordinates, their will broken, followed in retreat. Only a few remained to fight to the death in loyalty to the sect.

And thus, Cheon Hwi—alone—drove the Heavenly Poison Sect to the brink of annihilation.

He opened the final door.

The fifth floor.

There stood the Poison Demon, face twisted in a deep scowl.

And atop a platform, unconscious, lay Tang Sowol.

“Ah...”

The bloodlight in Cheon Hwi’s eyes wavered—and a trace of reason returned.

For him, Tang Sowol... was that kind of person.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Ah"

My body is hot. It didn’t take long for me to realize that it was because I had been drenched in blood.

After wiping away the blood splattered on my face, the red-tinted world returned to its original color.

Like the distorted outlines of a badly drawn painting coming back into focus, the mixed-up past and present returned to their proper places.

Rationality, which I thought I had completely lost, came back to me, and the fire of my qi deviation calmed down, if only slightly.

All of it was for one person—to hold her in my sight.

Tang Sowol.

She lay unconscious atop a platform that looked like both an altar and a stage.

Though she appeared to be unconscious, she otherwise seemed unharmed. Judging by the swirling and tangled aura around her, it looked like she had tried to do something but was interrupted.

Even now, my internal energy surged violently, as if it would tear through my meridians, and murderous intent erupted at random—causing the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art to spiral out of control.

But it would not cloud my reason.

At least, not as long as Tang Sowol was present.

As I silently sighed in relief at her safety, a man suddenly stepped in front of me.

He wore purple robes, but his hair and eyes were dyed green.

The Poison Demon frowned fiercely, exuding a sinister aura as he opened his mouth.

“How dare you! How dare you interfere with the Grand Work!”

“So it means nothing to you that most of Thousand Poison Gate was slaughtered by my hand?”

“Of course, their deaths are regrettable, but they do not take precedence over the Grand Work.”

The Poison Demon’s voice carried not vengeance, but the annoyance and fury of being obstructed in his work.

“The Grand Work, huh. Don’t tell me you think you can make the Poison Spirit Physique your own.”

In Murim, there are many special constitutions. Some pity them, others envy and covet them. Naturally, there have been various studies on whether such constitutions can be stolen or replicated, but none have ever succeeded.

There's no way the Poison Demon doesn't know that. He scoffed and gathered his poisonous qi.

“Claim the Poison Spirit Physique as my own? Why would I chase after something so uncertain? I've already reached the threshold of the Sub-Perfection master stage. The poisons I hold surpass that level.”

As he spoke, the Poison Demon emitted a faint aura from his entire body as if to resist the killing intent I directed at him.

He looked like a toad soaked in venom, but it was far too threatening to simply laugh off. I must not let it touch me. My instincts, sharpened as much as my blurred reason, blared a warning.

“One more wall to climb, and I'll reach the realm of True Poison Masters. While I find the difference between those born with the Poison Physique and those who acquire it fascinating, it's not worth giving up the chance.”

“Then why did you kidnap Tang Sowol?”

“Obviously, to climb that final wall.”

A vivid purple aura shimmered above the Poison Demon’s hand.

His poisoned strike was so vicious that even a single clean hit had been enough to knock me down instantly before. But now, he seemed even more dangerous than back then.

Around Tang Sowol, the chaotic auras began to twist and wrap around the Poison Demon’s hand.

“The Poison Spirit Physique stores poison within the body and allows its user to draw it out at will. If that body has matured enough to house multiple kinds of poison, and if I could squeeze it all into a single drop...And if I make that drop mine, it would surely become a stepping stone to reach the realm of a True Poison Master.”

“What the...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill her. I never expected to reach my goal in one try anyway.”

Only then did I understand the identity of the aura coiling around the Poison Demon's hand.

Unlike his usual purple qi, this was a faint green glow. Tang Sowol's internal energy... no, part of the poisonous qi she held.

Just as he had explained, he hadn't fully extracted or condensed it, but he had successfully begun the process. He was in the middle of extracting her poisonous qi.

"After squeezing her dry once, her vessel will be empty. Then I can feed her the poisons I want and combine them. The second drop will serve as an even higher pedestal."

"You lunatic."

"Heh. I don't know how you're still sane enough to speak like that, but anyone can see who the real madman here is. It's you, you Soul Reaper bastard."

The Poison Demon growled and took a stance. Now I understood his goal. Like shearing sheep periodically, he intended to use Tang Sowol's body as a vessel to mix and condense poisons, harvesting them again and again.

There's no way Tang Sowol could remain unharmed through such a process. She would suffer agonizing pain each time, as if her dantian were being shattered. Even if her actual dantian were destroyed, her Poison Spirit Physique would remain intact, so the Poison Demon's experiment would continue.

In the meantime, her body and mind would slowly fall apart.

Maybe not right away, but in the end, she would die.

That was something I could never allow.

The heart that had found solace in her safety now tightened painfully, then began pounding loud enough to drown out all else.

Thump! Thump!

"I've heard enough. Now, let me tell you my plan."

Was the pounding of my heart a kind of signal?

The rage that had briefly calmed upon seeing Tang Sowol surged back with renewed force. My internal energy, which had already felt like it couldn't get more intense, began to flow even faster.

Rather than resisting the qi deviation, I surrendered myself to it and continued.

“You die here today. That's my plan.”

The blazing flame of my murderous intent focused on the man before me—No, it concentrated into the sword meant to cut him down.

And then, the footwork that followed.

Kkwaang!

The Thunderclap Steps lived up to its name, thundering as it pushed my body forward. Adding the subtleties of Ghost Shadow Steps created a footwork where each step varied in speed, making it impossible to predict.

A martial art ingrained deeply enough to perform even in the midst of qi deviation. But there was one difference now.

My rampaging internal energy burst outward in all directions, uncontrollably overflowing.

Like trudging through a pool of blood, each footfall lit the ground with a dark crimson glow.

It was the very definition of wasteful use of energy, which I had always deemed foolish...but there was no reason to conserve energy anymore.

I poured all the internal energy remaining in my dantian into my sword.

Ffwoosh.

My sword, infused with killing intent, ignited with crimson qi and slashed toward the Poison Demon's poison strike.

“Aaaaahhh!”

A battle cry burst from my mouth. My overwhelming internal energy inflated the sword's flame, splitting the very air in two.

“You reckless fool...!”

The Poison Demon hastily pulled his hand back, but the aura he had extended surged forward anyway.

His poison strike, a mix of purple and green, flew at me in the shape of a palm and clashed with my blade.

Chaaak!

Internal energy clashed against internal energy. Murderous intent consumed and burned away the poisonous qi.

But even so, the leftover poison didn't disperse. Instead, it clung to my body.

It wasn't like internal energy—it felt more like a thick liquid.

It was like being wrapped in the damp fog of early morning,

but the Poison Demon's poison was far more malevolent.

The noxious energy seeped in through my nose and mouth,

invaded through my pores.

Perhaps he thought that compound poisons like the Seven-Treasure Poison Soul Powder wouldn't work on me anymore—he unleashed a direct, potent poison from the start.

I didn't know what kind of poison it was. Even though I had heard stories from Tang Sowol before regression and had lived in the Tang Family for nearly four years afterward, I had no knowledge of this poison.

But even its residue was enough to melt a person.

My lungs and skin stung in pain. The poison that had entered my body would begin corroding it, slowly eating away at me.

Before, that would have been fatal.

Ptuh!

I spat out a dark violet liquid. It wasn't blood. It was the poison that had infiltrated me, expelled by the flow of my internal energy.

But it wasn't perfect. Perhaps I had been slightly poisoned—my lungs still ached with every breath.

Lesser poisons had no effect, but it seemed even this potent poison worked its way in, little by little.

I wouldn't fall in one strike, but unlike with other Thousand Poison Gate martial artists, I couldn't afford to just take the hit and keep fighting.

But then again, I'd only used the tactic of sacrificing flesh once or twice even before. No matter how strong the poison,

it wasn't enough to bring me down so easily anymore.

That was enough.

“I was wondering how you made it here. So you used your qi deviation like that. You won’t last long...”

“I’ll cut you down before that.”

“Such bravado from a brat who hasn’t even lived half his life.

Perhaps I should’ve killed you back there, even if it was risky.”

Maybe he thought launching poison from afar was pointless,

because the Poison Demon clicked his tongue and swung another poisoned strike directly.

I swung my sword to counter it, and the air between us twisted as our auras clashed.

Boom! Crash! Kkraaang!

My blade, wreathed in dark crimson qi and blazing with killing intent, slashed toward the Poison Demon—but was blocked.

It wasn't just energy he had thrown—the poison he had coated on his hand disrupted my internal energy upon contact and shattered my sword flame head-on.

Though my strikes had more power, my energy dispersed like it was infected by the poison. In the end, it was an even fight.

All that remained in my strikes was killing intent. And killing intent alone couldn't kill the Poison Demon, even if it made him flinch.

Thus began our close-range clash.

Sometimes my blade cut into the Poison Demon's skin, sometimes his palm grazed my clothes.

Wounds accumulated on both of us, but neither could land a decisive blow.

Perhaps because my sword technique was slightly sharper,

I was gaining a faint, gradual upper hand. But— the problem was that I would collapse before long.

My meridians, torn apart by qi deviation. The Poison Demon's qi that could corrode flesh on contact.

It wouldn't be strange if I collapsed mid-fight.

I couldn't let that happen. While I still had strength left,

I had to risk it and bet everything on one decisive move.

Even if his poison could scatter my internal energy, if it couldn't suppress my killing intent, then I needed even more killing intent.

I tried once again to pull the thorn from my heart, to peer into the well within it.

But...

There was no more killing intent to draw out. I was already as enraged as I could be, already pouring every bit of it into my sword.

My killing intent is not infinite.

I'm not Heaven-Slaughter Star.

Still, I swung my sword. With only the will to cut.

“Ah.”

In the chaos of past and present overlapping from the qi deviation, I suddenly realized something.

The reason I swung my sword was not to kill someone.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

When had it started, I wonder—this killing intent seeping into my sword?

Was it when I turned the tables and killed the Lord of the Red Evil Sect, my parents' enemy, who had used me to the end and then tried to kill me?

Was it when I became a mercenary swordsman just to survive and cut down warriors I held no grudge against?

Or perhaps it was the very moment I first picked up a sword—when I felt its heavy weight and sharp edge and realized that a sword was nothing more than a tool to kill people.

My killing intent deepened when I lost Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, but even before that, I had always harbored murderous intent deep in my chest.

That mindset continued to influence me for years.

A sword is a tool, and martial arts are merely techniques for killing. Thus, true mastery of martial arts is measured by how effectively one can kill.

That single sentence may be the most concise way to define who I am as a martial artist. My martial arts were always refined for greater efficiency.

By the time I created the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, even the killing intent that led to qi deviation had been incorporated into my internal energy.

Fierce killing intent gave me strength, and thanks to that strength, I reached the realm I stand in now.

But now—as I searched the well of my heart, trying to summon deeper killing intent to defeat the Poison Demon,

all I found was scorched ash and dry air.

At that moment, I had no choice but to admit it—my killing intent is not infinite. I am not Heaven-Slaughter Star. I am but an ordinary person.

Even when I swung my sword with the sole will to cut, it no longer reached the Poison Demon.

My mind, dulled by qi deviation, blunted my will. So, even the frailest intent scattered in vain—it was inevitable.

And yet, I continued to swing my sword. Because I could not give up.

Past and present jumbled together in the chaos of qi deviation. As I pushed through that storm and scoured my heart for something more to burn, I realized—

“Ah.”

The reason I had taken up the sword was never to kill.

I hated the world. The strong exploiting the weak, mocking them, even taking their lives—and the endless cycle that forced the next generation to obey the same cruel fate.

I hated it all.

So, I killed.

I wanted revenge.

When I lost those who had first shown me what human warmth was, I fell into a rage so deep it led to qi deviation.

So, I killed.

I despaired of life. Born with nothing, never able to grasp anything—and when the one who told me it was okay, that we could live together anyway, had her heart pierced right before my eyes...

I raised my sword against the Heavenly Demon, knowing I would lose.

To kill him?

Was that really why?

Had my sword always been swung solely to kill?

I would have said yes once. But now, having poured out every last drop of killing intent and reached the bottom, I know better.

When I destroyed the Red Evil Sect, I wasn't truly avenging my parents.

I was just bitter that my young, helpless self hadn't been able to protect them.

When I went mad with rage at the deaths of Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, I didn't seek to kill the enemies already long dead.

I was furious with myself—furious that I had been too late and could only watch them die helplessly.

Even that final moment—when I ignored Tang Sowol's last wish for me to survive and rushed the Heavenly Demon—I hadn't given up on life or been consumed by revenge.

I was just overcome with grief.

Grief so overwhelming that I couldn't endure it any other way.

I had no insight, no wisdom. It took me far too long to understand. Even if killing intent boiled up and stained my sword, I never raised it just to kill someone.

“I see now.”

I swing my sword to save Tang Sowol. So how could I possibly say I was wielding it properly while chasing killing intent?

That's no better than swinging blindly with my eyes closed.

Then it's time—time to open my eyes.

I erase the killing intent.

And in its place, I fill it with something more honest.

I simply—

“Just wanted to protect her.”

Zzzk.

As I speak those words, the crimson sword aura begins to crack and crumble.

The burning scent that had clung to the tip of my nose is already gone.

“What...?”

The intense killing intent that had been focused on a single person disappears without warning. Startled, the Poison Demon backs away and scatters his poisonous qi.

This was a deadly poison created by combining decades of research into the Tang Family’s secret arts with the Five Venoms Division’s legacy.

So potent that even a Flowering Stage master could be poisoned by it.

Now, infused with Tang Sowol’s own poisonous qi, it was even deadlier.

Just brushing against it could harm the skin, no matter how fiercely I tried to dispel it with qi deviation.

So I must cut it down before it touches me.

With a sound like something breaking apart, the crimson sword qi just barely scatters the Poison Demon's attack.

But something is different now.

Zzzk...

The cracks that had started forming in the sword aura earlier deepen significantly.

Seeing this, the light of wariness fades slightly from the Poison Demon's eyes.

“As expected. You've lasted this long, but your limit is near.”

Instead of responding, I focus. And I calm the raging currents of qi deviation—because I no longer need them.

The internal energy of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, once wild and untamed, now gradually falls under control.

The killing intent that used to be embedded in it has vanished without a trace.

Without killing intent, the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art is an ordinary martial art. Its energy is murky, devoid of any mystical quality. At best, it's just first-class level.

But what matters isn't how great the technique is. It's what you wield it for.

Zzzeook.

The cracks in the sword aura deepen even more—to the point where it looks like it could shatter any moment.

The Poison Demon smirks, one corner of his mouth curling up, as he gathers violet poison in both hands.

As if to finish me off with this one strike.

“To be honest, I was surprised. Your level is unbelievable for someone your age. Your swordplay surpasses even those who’ve trained for decades. And you even threw yourself into qi deviation just to resist poisoning... such resolve.”

Tang Sowol’s green poisonous qi mixes with his already vivid purple aura. Not merely swirling on the surface now—the green qi has fully merged into the violet, perhaps because he’s grown accustomed to it.

Maybe it’s the effect of the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass she absorbed.

The poison swirling atop the Poison Demon’s hands now burns almost twice as fiercely. So virulent that even his own hands begin to melt.

“I’ll admit it. Blood Flame Sword Demon, you truly deserve that title—you’re a swordsman worthy of the name.”

Even as blood welled from his decaying flesh, the Poison Demon’s smile only deepened.

At last, the poison, now saturated with blood venom, stopped consuming its master.

“But what did that sword ever change? What have you left behind in this world? I am different! Look! My poison will become the greatest in history, and I will become the supreme poison master, carving my name into Murim forever!”

His voice was filled with ecstatic madness.

In contrast, the voice that left my mouth was weak and hoarse.

“So just because there’s nothing you can’t do, does that mean there’s nothing you want to do?”

Before regression, the Black Lotus Sect Master told me—if a man holds just a single sword in his heart, he is already a Sword Demon.

But now, things are different. I know what I truly hold in my heart.

“And don’t speak of being ‘the greatest of all time’ so lightly.”

The one I must one day cut down...The Heavenly Demon was not someone this insignificant.

“You arrogant brat! Be honored to be the first to fall before the greatest poison in history! Die!!”

The air around the Poison Demon distorts as his poison energy converges, warping the very space, as if corroding the world itself.

And so, I do what I must. The thing I know best.

I raise my head and grip my sword firmly.

“I’ll cut you down.”

Not just the Poison Demon before me—but everything threatening Tang Sowol.

So I can protect her this time.

I swing my sword toward the approaching poison strike.

No special technique—just a simple, horizontal slash.

Kkwaang!

A thunderous explosion erupts as my sword clashes with the Poison Demon's twin palms. The cracked crimson sword qi finally shatters completely—But that doesn't mean my blade was pushed back.

Through the scattering red energy—a pale light begins to rise, like snow falling from the winter sky, like a full moon suspended in a dark night.

Pale white, yet clearly shaped like a sword.

In Murim, this is called—

Sword Force.

“...!”

The Poison Demon recoils in horror, desperately pulling his hands back—but it's too late.

Will refined into resolve. Resolve sublimated into absolution.

What follows is a sword strike so absolute, only one of equal standing could possibly face it.

Ssskuk!

The Poison Demon's hands—everything above the wrists—are severed. No, even that wasn't enough. The wall behind him is sliced at an angle and collapses.

Kuuung!

The debris crashes to the ground with a deafening sound.

The gray sky finally releases its rain. Soaked in the downpour, the Poison Demon wore a blank expression.

He instinctively tilted his head to avoid a fatal blow, but even he knew—it was pure luck he survived that moment.

With a newly formed Sword Force, just barely large enough to cover the blade, I adjusted my stance again.

The Poison Demon, now missing all fingers but his thumbs,

stood bleeding, unable even to try stopping it, and screamed in rage.

“H-How!? How can this be?! The Grand Work was right before my eyes! I’ve waited for this day since before you were even born! If it weren’t for you...!”

“Who knows. Even without me, the outcome wouldn’t have changed.”

This time, the Poison Demon dies by my hand—but in my past life, it was Tang Sowol who brought him down.

“I won’t... I can’t end it here!!”

Screaming with fury, the Poison Demon unleashed a massive flood of poisonous qi. Its concentration hadn't increased, only its volume. He had released all the poison he had left in one final attack.

But—

“Pointless.”

A light upward swing of my sword. A powerful gust followed, scattering the bulk of the poison into the sky.

Beyond the cleared vision, I saw the Poison Demon fleeing through the ruined wall.

“You think I'll let you escape?”

A straight thrust. The tip of the sword aimed directly at the Poison Demon's heart.

Puuhk!

“Gugh... Kuhugh!”

The dying sound of the Poison Demon as my sword pierced his heart from behind.

Even now, his toxic blood tried to corrode the Sword Force that had shattered his heart—but unlike sword qi, this force held firm. The blood boiled away into foul-smelling steam.

With only his thumb remaining, the Poison Demon tried in vain to push the sword from his chest.

I watched his futile struggle—then thrust upward.

Srrk.

His torso was sliced clean in half. I watched him fall and collapse, then finally turned away.

All that remained was to take Tang Sowol and leave this place.

But—

My vision blurred.

The elation that had filled my body just moments before vanished, leaving behind only accumulated exhaustion.

My meridians were shredded from qi deviation. The Poison Demon's poison had inflicted real damage. Using Sword Force, something I wasn't used to, had long drained my willpower.

Even so, I squeezed out the last of my strength and stepped forward.

One step. Two steps.

But I couldn't take a third.

Thud.

My body collapsed onto the wet ground. I tried to use my sword as a cane to stand, but I couldn't rise again—only keep myself from collapsing completely.

One more step.

Just one more, and I could reach Tang Sowol.

But before I could take that last step, my eyes closed.

Swaaah—

The sound of pouring rain filled my ears.

Under the cold raindrops, Tang Sowol's eyes opened.

Because that one remaining step—was hers to take.

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The cold raindrops tapping against her face—With their touch, Tang Sowol's eyes slowly opened after lying still for so long.

“Brother... Cheon...”

Her voice was cracked and parched beyond dry. She quenched her throat with rainwater and slowly raised her body.

In truth, she had regained consciousness quite some time ago.

While she had returned to awareness, she had been unable to lift even a single eyelid.

The great art had been halted by Cheon Hwi's intervention, but that was only a temporary effect.

The Poison Demon had merely stopped progressing further, yet the technique still connected them, allowing him to draw out and use Tang Sowol's poison.

Thus, Tang Sowol only regained freedom of movement after the Poison Demon's death.

She hadn't been able to move her body, but her senses had remained intact, allowing her to hear and feel what had happened.

She could roughly guess what reckless acts Cheon Hwi had committed, and how he had managed to bring down the Poison Demon.

Perhaps it was the aftereffects of having her internal poison drawn out to the limit, or the havoc wreaked on her blood vessels. Even the slightest movement or breath brought excruciating pain, yet Tang Sowol did not stop.

She rose to her feet, stepped down from the altar, and barely managed to stand.

Before her was Cheon Hwi, who had lost consciousness just short of taking his final step.

Kneeling on one knee, sword plunged into the ground as rain poured down on him—his appearance was far too pitiful to be called that of a victor.

Tang Sowol forced her heavy legs to move.

"Kh!"

Splosh.

She nearly stumbled with her first step. Even so, it brought her one step closer, and finally, she could see Cheon Hwi up close.

Though the rain was washing him clean, his body was still stained red with blood. Even in unconsciousness, his eyes were wide open, refusing to yield until the end.

His grip on the sword was so firm it showed no sign of loosening.

Were it not for the faint breaths he still drew, he could easily have been mistaken for a corpse.

But even more dreadful than what was visible was the condition within—and Tang Sowol could easily guess how dire it was.

“Qi deviation... and even poison...”

A hint of urgency crept into her voice as she checked Cheon Hwi's pulse.

The Poison Demon's residual poison in his body was nothing more than traces of remnants. Even in her weakened state, Tang Sowol could easily absorb that much.

The real problem lay in his shattered meridians and internal injuries.

With a sound mind, famed elixirs, and a powerful expert nearby in case of emergency, perhaps his life could be saved somehow.

He might never be able to use martial arts again, but survival was what mattered most.

But right now, none of those conditions were present.

Cheon Hwi was unconscious. There were no elixirs left—Tang Sowol herself had nearly become one—and no expert strong enough to help was anywhere near.

“At this rate...”

A dreadful thought flashed through her mind, and Tang Sowol bit her lip hard.

In her frantic search for a solution, one idea suddenly came to her.

Her gaze turned toward the Poison Demon's lifeless corpse. His venomous blood, still potent in death, was corroding the floor as it bubbled and hissed.

Tang Sowol's expression hardened with resolve.

"The Poison Demon... he used my poison as if it were his own."

Though he had drawn it out through the great art and taken control of it, he had refined and amplified its potency himself.

Tang Sowol possessed the Poison Spirit Body. When it came to poison, she was second to none.

"If the Poison Demon could do it, then so can I."

More accurately—she must.

Depending on how it's used, poison can become medicine.

A moment ago, Tang Sowol had recalled a particular combination of poisons that could help heal Cheon Hwi's internal injuries, if even slightly.

The issue was that she didn't have those poisons herself. After all, the Poison Demon had ripped most of them out from her to use in his technique.

All she had left were one or two basic poisons.

But what about the Poison Demon's poison, created from decades of accumulation and mixed with the very toxins he had stolen from her?

Surely everything she needed was in there.

“Hoo...”

Taking a deep breath, Tang Sowol reached toward the stream of poison flowing from the Poison Demon's body.

“Ugh!”

Responding to her will, the empty vessel that was her Poison Spirit Body began greedily absorbing the poison contained in the blood.

Veins bulged on her pale hand, dyed in deep violet—a sign this was no ordinary poison.

“Just a little more... just a little...”

She murmured through cold sweat trickling down her forehead.

Though the Poison Spirit Body was a special constitution that allowed one to control poison at will, it wasn't absolute.

Just like when she had absorbed the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass and had to spend days restraining the strengthened toxins, unable to use poison arts properly.

The amount and strength of poison she could absorb at once depended on how much she had built up and on her own ability.

And right now, Tang Sowol was pushing herself beyond her limits.

If she made even a slight mistake, the deadly poison might spiral out of control, destroying Cheon Hwi, who was already half-dead, and even claiming her own life.

But she didn't stop. She didn't hesitate.

“Brother Cheon risked everything for me. I can't be the only one to retreat.”

It was strange. Tang Sowol had originally meant to sacrifice herself to save Cheon Hwi.

Yet when she came to her senses, it was Cheon Hwi who had risked his life to save her—again.

She always felt that she was the one who drove Cheon Hwi to extremes, feeling both grateful and secretly guilty.

But only when she became the one risking her life for him did she truly understand—

That while it was indeed something great, it was also something natural.

To give your all for the one you cherished more than yourself—that was simply how it should be.

In fact, upon awakening, she had offered her neck to the Poison Demon, and now, without much thought, she was absorbing poison without hesitation.

If Cheon Hwi had just burned himself for her, now it was her turn.

That was all there was to it.

Her veins burned, and her heart stopped and started in agony.

But even through her fading senses, her heartscape grew clearer.

She pictured holding hands with Cheon Hwi, sharing silly conversations. On sunny days, perhaps they could go on outings—just the two of them, or with others she liked.

She wanted to hear his voice before falling asleep and see his face first upon waking.

She didn't need sweet words or a broad, reliable back.

All she wanted—Was a landscape that included Cheon Hwi.

She just wanted him by her side. That was enough.

At the moment her will solidified, not only the poison she touched but also the toxic energy lingering in the air began reacting to her Poison Spirit Body and flowing in.

She began to dominate the entire floor's poison—and more than that, the range was expanding.

Fourth floor, third, second... and finally the first.

Before long, the entire hall of the Thousand Poison Gate began falling under the influence of Tang Sowol's will and the ability of her Poison Spirit Body.

Ordinarily, such a feat would be impossible.

But her empty body instinctively craved poison, and her resolve was burning brighter than ever—creating an extraordinary phenomenon.

From the fallen warriors of the Thousand Poison Gate, to the various poisonous creatures raised in the halls, to rare minerals and plants stored away—Every last bit of poison was now converging on Tang Sowol.

Clenching her teeth, she swept the influx of poison into herself.

The toxic energy swirled and intensified, endlessly combining and separating, generating countless new combinations.

Among this sea of countless mixtures, Tang Sowol sought only one.

A reckless task akin to stirring the ocean with a twig to extract a single drop of water...Yet not a meaningless one.

Her ever-clearer heartscape became a guiding light, attracting the necessary poison and filtering out the rest.

As proof, the dark purple vortex of poison swirling around her began to fade, and a dense green aura slowly rose from within.

A poison crafted for one person only—Cheon Hwi.

“Brother Cheon.”

He didn’t respond to her voice.

Tang Sowol gently caressed his cheek and then softly embraced him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck. The damp rain, the cold skin—Yet still, there was a faint trace of life, rising and falling with each breath.

As if engraving it into herself, she held him close, then spoke quietly.

“If I am the moon, then Hwi , you are my light.”

She called him by name for the first time.

The vibrant green aura born from a swamp of venom began concentrating into one point.

“I can only shine if you’re by my side.”

With those words, Tang Sowol gently pressed her lips to Cheon Hwi’s.

Just like before—it was still a kiss that reeked of blood.

But what entered him now was not a bitter sleep-inducing poison.

It was a strangely sweet liquid.

Though she didn't realize it herself, by coincidence, it was the same poison she had once used to heal Cheon Hwi's internal injuries in her past life.

After a long while of administering the poison, Tang Sowol finally withdrew her lips.

Perhaps it was the dim sunlight breaking through the gray clouds that seemed so dazzling...

She rested her head against Cheon Hwi's chest. Her voice, weary from handling so much poison, emerged in a faint murmur.

"I love...you, Brother Cheon."

And with that final whisper, Tang Sowol lost consciousness again.

Not long after, just as the rain fully stopped, a small sound came from Cheon Hwi's body.

Ududck.

The sound of something breaking apart and reforming. The poison Tang Sowol had administered temporarily stabilized his meridians, and the long-delayed transformation of his body had begun.

The torn meridians expanded and solidified. Damaged organs regenerated. Skin melted by poison shed like a husk, revealing fresh skin underneath.

But all this was not something Cheon Hwi, even at the Flowering Stage, could have achieved alone while dying.

His metamorphosis was centered around Tang Sowol's poison.

That poison had a name—Love.

Half an hour later—Having heard the situation from Sama Yuryeon, Tang Jincheon and Seo Mun-Hwarin hurried to the scene—

What they found was Cheon Hwi and Tang Sowol, peacefully asleep, wrapped in each other's embrace.