

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 21-30

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The next morning.

Tang Sowol, standing a little distance away, gazed at the ten or so martial artists gathered in the outer courtyard. With a hand placed over her chest, she let out a long sigh.

“Haah...”

Her chest rose and fell conspicuously, the ample curves barely hidden even by the loose, signature martial robes of the Tang Clan.

As I awkwardly averted my eyes and fiddled idly with the sword at my waist, Tang Sowol, her face slightly stiff, broke the silence and asked,

“Are you not nervous, Brother*? You have such a composed expression.”

“What’s there to be nervous about? I’m not someone delicate enough to be unsettled by something that isn’t even dangerous.”

“Yes, yes. Unlike you, Brother, I am delicate and find this situation a bit nerve-racking. So, would you kindly help calm me down?”

As she spoke, she stretched out the hand she had previously placed on her chest.

I remained silent, merely staring at her outstretched hand, until Tang Sowol began pouting, her lips jutting out as she sniffed in dissatisfaction.

“Really now. Shouldn’t you at least hold my hand and say something reassuring, like, ‘It’ll be fine,’ or ‘This time won’t be like the last’? Isn’t that the proper thing to do?”

“Hmm.”

I pressed her protruding lips with my index finger, pushing them back in, and then chuckled.

“There’s no need to calm down. Even if we’re out to settle a grudge, in the end, we’re still going to kill people.”

“Well... that’s true, I suppose...”

“Don’t let yourself become desensitized to killing. The moment you become indifferent to life and death is when your blade grows dull. And Murim isn’t a kind place for those who wield dull blades.”

Tang Sowol stared blankly at me for a moment before falling into deep thought, her expression growing serious.

Before long, she raised her head, her face now relaxed.

“I didn’t expect that when I asked you to calm me down, you’d instead tell me to stay tense. I’m not sure I entirely understand what you mean.”

“Hmm.”

“But, I do understand that you said it out of concern for me.”

Tang Sowol gently clasped my index finger in her palm. Tilting her head playfully, she added in a teasing tone,

“By the way, you do know that I don’t use a sword, right?”

“It was a metaphor. I was speaking figuratively.”

When I chuckled incredulously, Tang Sowol mirrored my smile and nodded.

“I was only joking. Anyway, thanks to you, I feel a little more at ease now.”

“Then that’s good.”

Though I responded curtly on purpose, Tang Sowol merely patted my shoulder a couple of times, unfazed.

“Alright! I won’t overthink things too much and will focus only on what needs to be done right now. For example... not falling behind the members of the Dark Soul Unit.”

“By the way, now that we’re on the subject, what’s the skill level of the Dark Soul Unit? Surely, those gathered here aren’t the average standard?”

The ten or so martial artists standing in perfect formation without anyone supervising them gave off a disciplined air. Though I couldn't gauge their exact strength without fighting them, the aura they emitted suggested that each of them had reached the level of a seasoned first-class martial artist.

First-class mastery might not seem like much, as it's something anyone can achieve with enough effort, given sufficient time. But that doesn't mean it's weak. It's simply the realistic limit for most ordinary martial artists.

The majority of martial artists end their lives somewhere between third-class and second-class levels. A few rise to first-class status, setting up small dojos or living as local warlords in remote villages.

The leader of the Red Sand Gang, for instance, was a first-class martial artist, while most of his subordinates were second-class at best.

Though first-class martial artists might seem unimpressive compared to those who have reached the peak or mastered the lethal power of sword qi, they are still masters in their own right.

Yet here I stood, witnessing a scene where such first-class martial artists were gathered as mere foot soldiers.

Even knowing that the Tang Clan is part of the prestigious Five Great Clans, it was still a surprising sight.

In my past life, such disciplined forces could only be seen in alliances formed to resist the Black Lotus Sect or the Demonic Cult.

The unorthodox sects tended to adopt a ‘survival of the fittest’ approach, which made it difficult for them to build large-scale forces. Even if they succeeded, the moment they showed any weakness, the surrounding forces would tear them apart.

Hearing my question, Tang Sowol blinked a few times before responding.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t explained it to you yet. The Tang Clan has several armed units, but the two most prominent are the Blood Venom Unit (독혈대) and the Dark Soul Unit (암혼대).”

“I’ve heard those names mentioned in passing.”

“Besides those two, there are groups responsible for guarding the clan’s estate, managing the clan’s businesses, or handling miscellaneous tasks while focusing on their training.”

“So the Blood Venom Unit and the Dark Soul Unit are the clan’s main armed forces that can be immediately deployed in emergencies.”

“That’s right. While both units learn various martial arts of the Tang Clan, those with a talent for poison arts join the Blood Venom Unit, while those skilled in hidden weapons join the Dark Soul Unit.”

“I see. So this time, only members of the Dark Soul Unit were gathered.”

Tang Jincheon, known by the moniker ‘Poison King,’ was a master of poison arts, and Tang Sowol was born with the innate constitution of a poison spirit.

With poison being their specialty, they likely chose to bring those more proficient in hidden weapons for this mission.

“Since these are our primary armed forces, they receive ample support. The pay is generous, they’re taught advanced martial arts suited to their style, and they’re regularly supplied with lower-grade elixirs.”

“That’s a level of treatment that’s hard to find elsewhere.”

While I nodded in silent admiration, a familiar voice called out from behind.

“If you’re that curious, why not try rolling with the Dark Soul Unit yourself?”

Tang Jincheon approached with a hearty laugh, continuing,

“Since you’re now part of the Tang Clan, shouldn’t you learn some of the clan’s martial arts?”

“While I’m always open to learning new martial arts, I’m not particularly interested in serving in the Dark Soul Unit.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me it’s due to some misplaced humility about lacking ability.”

“On the contrary. I’m worried that my exceptional skills would create unnecessary friction between me and the unit.”

If a new recruit, introduced as Tang Sowol’s fiancé, were to suddenly outshine everyone in the unit, it would inevitably make things awkward when issuing commands.

“While I acknowledge your talent, arrogance isn’t a virtue, young man.”

“I’ll take this opportunity to show you that it’s not arrogance but confidence.”

“Hah! Very well, then. I won’t expect much, but I’ll watch with interest.”

Tang Jincheon shrugged, seemingly attributing my words to youthful bravado. The two men flanking him exchanged glances and smirked.

One of them was Tang Yujin, whom I had briefly seen at the dinner table yesterday. As for the other, he was a stranger to me.

The unfamiliar man was nearing old age, with half of his hair grayed and deep wrinkles on his forehead, yet his eyes gleamed sharply.

The aura he emitted was formidable, comparable to my peak in my previous life, meaning he was at least a master at the peak level.

In a respectful tone, he introduced himself,

“Pardon my rudeness. You must be the esteemed fiancé of Miss Sowol, whose fame precedes her. My name is Tang Cheolyeong, commander of the Dark Soul Unit.”

“So you’re the Dark Soul Commander. Miss Sowol has spoken of you often.”

“She didn’t seem very knowledgeable about the Dark Soul Unit, though.”

“That’s true. However, she did mention that during the time she couldn’t practice poison arts, she learned hidden weapon techniques from the most skilled practitioner in the Tang Clan.”

“Haha! Did she now? I feel both honored and a little embarrassed, hearing that in front of the Patriarch. By the way, Miss Sowol has often praised your swordsmanship as well.”

“...Ah.”

I turned to look at Tang Sowol, who immediately avoided my gaze. It seemed she wasn’t lying.

“I would have preferred to hear such praise directly.”

“Well, I didn’t want to feed your smugness, so I chose not to.”

“Fair enough. But since we’re already here, how about offering me some more compliments? I’ll graciously accept them all.”

Tang Sowol responded by clamping her mouth shut, though the tips of her ears turned red, betraying her embarrassment.

Watching her with a complicated expression, Tang Jincheon patted his daughter’s shoulder and said,

“We’ll be departing soon. Come along.”

With that, Tang Jincheon took a step forward, and the members of the Dark Soul Unit, standing in neat formation, parted to either side to make way.

Tang Jincheon began walking, followed closely by Tang Yujin and the Dark Soul Commander. A little farther behind, Tang Sowol and I followed.

When we reached the front of the formation, Tang Jincheon turned back, surveying the gathered members of the Dark Soul Unit with sharp eyes.

His gaze carried a weight far different from his earlier one—less the intensity of a Flowering Stage master and more the oppressive presence of a leader standing above others.

Without raising his voice, Tang Jincheon infused his words with a touch of internal energy so they reached everyone clearly.

“You’ve all heard by now. Sowol, a daughter of the Tang Clan, was targeted by some unheard-of thugs.”

No one responded. However, a few members’ auras became noticeably sharper, and some cast fleeting glances toward Tang Sowol.

Standing tall, Tang Sowol met their gazes without flinching.

“Fortunately, those thugs paid the price at the hands of Young Brother here.”

Now, all attention shifted toward me. Amidst the heightened tension, their eyes held gratitude and admiration.

It was a look I had grown somewhat accustomed to during my time in the Tang Clan, though I still wasn’t entirely comfortable with it.

It was... a bit overwhelming.

As I idly ran my hand over the hilt of my sword, Tang Sowol quietly placed her palm over the back of my hand.

“Are you nervous?”

“Not at all.”

“But you look nervous to me, so I’ll generously hold your hand. Like this.”

Echoing my earlier words in a playful manner, Tang Sowol smiled and added one more line.

“This is the correct answer.”

Understanding her meaning, I let out a small chuckle.

“I’ll keep that in mind for the future.”

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There was quite a distance between Sichuan Province and Guangdong Province.

However, for first-class martial artists, especially those of the Tang Clan—famous for their speed and light-footed movement techniques—it wasn’t something to worry about.

“Even accounting for conserving stamina, we should be able to arrive in seven days and nights...”

“Huh? We’ll be riding horses, Brother. Didn’t Father say it would take about three to four days?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head as she spoke.

Now that I thought about it, she had a point. No matter how fast or enduring a martial artist was, unless one had mastered a special lightness technique or reached a peak level of mastery, they wouldn’t outrun a horse.

Besides, riding a horse was far more convenient than traveling on foot. Still, there was one significant problem.

“I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

“You don’t know how to ride a horse? Why not??”

This time, it was Tang Sowol’s turn to tilt her head in confusion. Her reaction was purely one of disbelief, and I couldn’t help but feel slightly awkward.

Moments later, as if realizing something, she widened her eyes and clapped both hands over her mouth.

“Mmph! Mmmpff!”

“You can just take your hands off and speak.”

“Sorry... I just assumed all martial artists knew at least the basics of horse riding since everyone around me learned it. I thought it was common sense.”

“I figured that might be the case.”

The Tang Clan's warriors, unlike those from other places, likely had generous support and frequent opportunities to ride horses, which would explain why they learned.

However, most martial artists didn't bother learning how to ride. If they didn't have the money to acquire a horse, they had no choice but to travel on foot, and by the time they were strong enough to afford one, they often surpassed a horse in both speed and stamina, making it unnecessary.

I wasn't much different in my past life.

As I let out a small sigh, Tang Sowol, who seemed lost in thought for a moment, hesitantly spoke.

“Um... Brother?”

“What is it?”

She avoided eye contact, twisting the ends of her hair with her index finger, her feet shuffling awkwardly on the ground—clearly embarrassed about something. After sneaking a glance at me, she continued,

“If you don’t know how to ride a horse... would you like to ride with me?”

“Huh?”

“I’m sure you’d learn quickly, but you can’t expect to master it in just a day, right? I can’t very well leave you behind, so you’ll have to ride behind me.”

“Is that... how it works?”

“That’s how it works.”

Tang Sowol firmly nodded, though she still avoided meeting my gaze. Riding with her for three to four days, pressed closely together... I couldn’t help but feel a slight anticipation rising within me. Unfortunately, that feeling didn’t last long.

Tang Jincheon, having finished giving a short speech and instructing the servants to bring the horses and luggage, suddenly stepped between us.

“You’re not married yet, so what nonsense is this? Young Chen will ride with me.”

“Father?!”

Startled, Tang Sowol practically jumped in place. Despite laughing heartily at her reaction, Tang Jincheon sent me a pointed look. It was clear pressure to quickly nod in agreement.

But I couldn't back down when there was so much at stake.

“What do you mean, Father-in-law? You are the Patriarch of the mighty Sichuan Tang Clan, respected by the warriors gathered here. There's no need for you to inconvenience yourself because of me, and frankly, it wouldn't be right.”

“I told you not to call me that yet.”

“But if I can call Brother Cheong ‘Brother,’ why can't I call you Father-in-law?”

“The engagement ceremony hasn't happened yet.”

“But you did say it would happen right after this mission, didn't you?”

“...Not yet. Come along now. My horse is large and sturdy enough to carry two people with ease.”

Without waiting for my response, Tang Jincheon grabbed me by the back of my collar and started dragging me toward his horse. I tried to resist, but his mastery of the Flowering Stage was no joke, and he countered every attempt with precision.

Tang Sowol, initially dumbfounded by the scene, burst into laughter a beat too late and waved at me.

She could've tried to help stop this, but apparently, that wasn't going to happen.

After being dragged all the way to the front, Tang Jincheon finally let go of me. As I tidied up my disheveled clothes, I muttered in frustration,

“That was a bit much, Father-in-law. I could've walked on my own.”

“You're not my son-in-law yet. Besides, there's a big difference between 'could've walked on your own' and 'would've walked willingly,' isn't there?”

He had a point, so I had nothing to say in return. Given the choice between riding behind Tang Sowol or Tang Jincheon, it was obvious which one I'd prefer.

As I kept my mouth shut, Tang Jincheon chuckled and patted my shoulder.

“Well, I just wanted to get closer to you, so don't be too upset.”

“Yes, understood.”

I sighed inwardly as the servants returned, leading the horses.

The journey to Guangdong Province was relatively smooth.

With everyone riding swiftly on horseback, wearing matching green uniforms to signify they belonged to the same group, and being at least first-class martial artists, we didn't encounter any serious problems.

Even the fiercest bandits of the Green Forest, who would normally be foaming at the mouth for prey, chose to let us pass without a second glance.

However, there were a few unexpected disturbances.

No, it wasn't because someone blocked our path demanding toll fees, or because we got into a quarrel at an inn, or even because we ran into an enemy with a personal grudge.

Instead, it was because of the overly frightened reactions of the villagers we encountered.

As we traveled, stopping at villages once a day to rest or resupply, the closer we got to southern Hunan Province and into Guangdong, the more terrified the locals seemed.

In one particular village, they went as far as hiding behind crude barricades and arming themselves with farming tools in a clumsy attempt at defense.

Though the Black Lotus Sect was based in Zhejiang Province, Guangdong had long been known as a stronghold of unorthodox sects.

They must have mistaken us for unorthodox martial artists who came to rob or extort them.

Though we managed to resolve the misunderstandings with words, some of the members of the Dark Soul Unit seemed visibly shaken—it was likely the first time they had been treated like this.

“Hm.”

“What now?”

By this point, after three days of traveling together, I had grown fairly comfortable around Tang Jincheon. I learned that, unless it concerned something official or related to Tang Sowol, he was rather easygoing.

“Martial arts have a profound effect on a martial artist’s body, right? For example, the warriors of the Peng Clan are known for their large and sturdy builds, which is partially due to their bloodline but also significantly influenced by their martial arts.”

“Why are you suddenly bringing up something so obvious?”

“Well, is it possible that the Tang Clan’s martial arts are the reason why so many of your warriors have such fierce or grim appearances?”

“...What?”

Tang Jincheon turned to look at me, bewildered, but I was being serious.

“At first, I wasn’t sure. You know, because Sowol looks so gentle and cute overall.”

“Hm. My daughter takes after her mother and is quite beautiful. Had nothing gone wrong on this trip, I dare say she would’ve become one of the Five Beauties of the Martial World.”

I had only complimented Tang Sowol’s appearance, but he nodded so vigorously and confidently that it felt a bit over the top. Still, I continued with a helpless laugh.

“Even Brother Cheong has a refined, princely appearance.”

“Of course. He takes after me, after all.”

“...”

For a moment, I was left speechless. Was he serious?

Not to say Tang Jincheon wasn't handsome—he was, especially by martial artist standards.

Martial artists tend to improve physically as they progress, and by the time they reach the Flowering Stage, it's rare to see anyone with poor looks.

But Tang Jincheon's overall presence was... intimidating. There was a distinct air of pressure that came not from his martial prowess but simply from his appearance.

And it wasn't just him—many of the Tang Clan's warriors shared a similar look, with expressions that often seemed cold, fierce, or irritable.

This trait was more prominent in the older members, whereas it was less noticeable in the younger ones.

I had suspected it might be a side effect of their martial arts, so I asked, but...

“To give you a straightforward answer, you’re half right and half wrong.”

“...What?”

His reply was rather ambiguous.

“Oh, if it’s something difficult to explain, you don’t have to. I was just asking out of curiosity.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s true that our martial arts are the cause, but not because of any inherent flaw or side effect in the techniques themselves.”

“???”

Now I was even more confused. Was this some kind of cryptic answer? I’d heard that orthodox sects often used such indirect language, unlike unorthodox martial artists who preferred to speak plainly.

As I pondered the meaning of his words, Tang Jincheon chuckled and gestured with his chin.

“You, do you know what expression you’re making right now?”

“...A blank expression?”

“Technically, it’s a slightly furrowed blank expression. And that, my friend, is exactly the impression you have of Tang Clan warriors.”

“Ah!”

As I reflected on his words, I finally understood.

“Poison arts and hidden weapon techniques require constant vigilance, don’t they?”

“Exactly.”

Tang Jincheon nodded, satisfied. It was simpler than I had thought.

Both poison and hidden weapons were dangerous, not just to enemies but to the user and those around them.

Handling such techniques required extreme caution, and that kind of near-obsessive focus naturally wore on one's nerves.

Over time, it would manifest in their expressions, causing them to frown, scowl, and react more sensitively to minor things.

Accumulating over the years, it left a permanent mark on their faces, giving them the fierce, grim appearance they were known for.

It wasn't a flaw or side effect of the martial arts themselves, but simply the result of years of practice and habit.

Just as a farmer's skin darkens from a lifetime under the sun, or a blacksmith's arms grow thick from wielding a hammer, it was merely a byproduct of their profession.

So that's how the stereotype about Tang Clan warriors being more ruthless and sinister than other orthodox martial artists came to be.

"Well, that means Sowol should be fine, right?"

“I can’t say for certain yet, but she should fare better than most.”

Tang Sowol didn’t need to handle poison carefully or calculate her remaining poison levels during a fight. Her innate Poison Spirit Constitution allowed her to naturally control poison like an extension of herself, and her body could even synthesize poison internally.

In my past life, the Tang Sowol I knew always hid the melted half of her face beneath a veil, burdened by the destruction of her clan and filled with grief and venom.

But the current Tang Sowol... While she had been prickly at first, she now seemed more like a loyal puppy, growing more attached as we got closer.

Her core personality hadn’t changed, but her demeanor was so different that I was curious how she would turn out in the future.

If things continued as they were, it seemed unlikely she’d become the same person she was in my previous life. And I wasn’t going to let her go through the same suffering.

While I silently made that resolution, Tang Jincheon spoke in a slightly teasing tone,

“By the way, aren’t you still calling her just ‘Tang Sowol’? Since you’ll soon be officially engaged, how about thinking of a more appropriate title? Like calling her ‘Miss Sowol.’”

“There are many Tang women in the clan, so calling her ‘Miss Tang’ seems a bit too common.”

“Then just attach her name. Sowol won’t mind your informal tone, but since you’ll be attending formal gatherings in the future, it’s better to decide on something beforehand.”

“You’re right. That makes sense, but...”

“But what? Just say what’s on your mind.”

“‘Miss Sowol’... it’s a bit embarrassing, don’t you think?”

Tang Jincheon turned around with an exasperated look as if wondering what kind of man I was, but I couldn’t help it.

It really was too embarrassing for me.

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On the fourth day of travel, we finally arrived in Guangdong Province.

After passing through several small villages, we entered a moderately bustling town. Before long, a young boy came running toward us with a fawning smile on his face.

“Great hero! Is this your first time here? Do you need an inn with a large stable?”

“A stable, you say.”

Tang Jincheon stared at the boy for a moment before nodding.

“Lead the way. We don’t mind if it’s a little dirty, so don’t worry about that.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll take you to a good place!”

The boy flinched momentarily but quickly straightened up and began leading the way at a brisk pace.

Curious about something, Tang Sowol urged her horse forward, riding beside me and Tang Jincheon as she asked,

“Father, what exactly did you mean by that just now?”

“It means we have some business with not only the inn but also Hao Gate.”

“Hao Gate?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head in confusion, not understanding his words. This time, I answered on his behalf.

“Think about the name ‘Hao Gate.’ It’s just a simple wordplay.”

“Ah...”

Tang Sowol's eyes widened in sudden realization, though it seemed there was another reason behind her surprise.

“Father, I understand, but how does So-hyeob know about this?”

“Anyone who's been around Murim for a while knows it. If you need to contact the Beggar's Sect, you find a beggar with a knotted hem. If you need something from Hao Gate, you approach those with black-dyed sleeves and say, 'I don't mind if it's dirty.'”

“So there was something like that... Does that mean we're heading to a Hao Gate branch right now?”

“Not quite. While that boy may indeed be a member of Hao Gate, he likely has no idea who we are. Even the owner of the inn we're heading to might not know.”

“Wait, isn't Hao Gate supposed to be a sect that deals in information, like the Beggar's Sect?”

“That's true. However, unlike the Beggar's Sect, Hao Gate accepts anyone regardless of status. Most members are just riffraff, except for those directly handling requests or compiling local information to send to headquarters.”

If someone seeks out Hao Gate, they're supposed to relay the request to a superior if possible. Occasionally, they might assist fellow members in need. Above all, they should avoid betrayal if they can.

These are the only three rules Hao Gate members need to follow.

As long as they adhere to these basic principles, anyone can join Hao Gate. Whether they've learned martial arts or have experience gathering information doesn't matter.

"That's quite different from the Beggar's Sect."

"Well, of course. They were founded for entirely different purposes."

The Beggar's Sect was established during a time when the boundaries between orthodox and unorthodox factions weren't as clearly defined as they are now, and martial artists were constantly embroiled in conflicts.

Back then, it wasn't uncommon for ordinary people to lose their families or livelihoods due to these battles, leaving them as beggars with nothing to their name.

Amid this chaos, one man—who had lost everything—stood up and rallied beggars in similar circumstances, determined to change their fate.

That man became the first leader of the Beggar's Sect.

“I learned about that story when I was younger. He referred to evildoers as dogs disturbing the world's peace and drove them out, helping to establish clear distinctions between orthodox and unorthodox factions. Afterward, the sect gathered information from across the nine provinces to prevent such chaos from happening again.”

“Correct. The Beggar's Sect's emphasis on righteousness and information-gathering comes entirely from the influence of their first leader.”

Though the Beggar's Sect eventually grew in power and wealth, leading to internal factions such as the Blue Clothes Faction and Black Clothes Faction, in my previous life—when the Heavenly Demon led the Demonic Cult in their invasion of the central plains—the Beggar's Sect was the first to stand against them.

They fought until the very last member fell, never retreating, regardless of internal divisions.

This unwavering spirit became the turning point that changed the cynical view unorthodox martial artists like myself held toward the orthodox sects. It shattered the notion that righteousness was merely a form of hypocrisy.

Although the Beggar's Sect's martial arts lineage was eventually broken, their spirit played a crucial role in uniting the orthodox and unorthodox factions.

“On the other hand, Hao Gate is different. No one knows who founded it, when it was founded, or for what purpose.”

“Why is that?”

“That's because it wasn't initially created as a sect. It started as a natural network of mutual aid among those in harsh circumstances, which eventually evolved into a formal organization.”

Those who did menial and arduous work rarely had anyone to confide in. People who weren't in the same situation couldn't understand their struggles, and no one cared enough to listen to them.

So, just as farmers form cooperatives to help each other, these laborers banded together for mutual support, which became the foundation of Hao Gate.

Unlike the Beggar's Sect, which selects disciples based on martial talent, intelligence, or a sense of justice, Hao Gate accepts anyone because it was formed by ordinary people from the start.

“Hao Gate’s purpose isn’t grand—it’s survival. Their only goal is to endure in this harsh world without suffering too much. That’s why their rules are so lenient.”

They inform others if someone comes looking for Hao Gate, assist fellow members when possible, and avoid betrayal if they can.

It’s a simple set of rules, but the key lies in the phrase ‘if possible.’

There’s no absolute obligation. If their lives are at stake or if the reward is significant enough to make their heads spin, they’re free to break the rules.

“If breaking the rules allows them to survive or escape their lowly status, they’re encouraged to do so. That’s the true philosophy of Hao Gate.”

“That’s quite different from what I expected. I thought they’d be like the unorthodox version of the Beggar’s Sect.”

“Well, you’re not entirely wrong. Hao Gate became famous as an intelligence network by imitating the Beggar’s Sect, but their objectives are different.”

“And by objectives, you mean... money?”

“That’s part of it. But there’s another reason—to anticipate and avoid potential danger. Think of it like a rabbit growing large ears to hear a wolf’s footsteps in advance.”

Just as the Beggar’s Sect refuses to handle information that could be misused, Hao Gate avoids dangerous requests unless the compensation is worth risking their lives.

“That’s also why Hao Gate sent information about the hidden instigators to the Tang Clan without being asked.”

“To extract money from Father in a roundabout way?”

“That may be part of it, but their primary goal was likely to avoid the Tang Clan’s wrath.”

As luck would have it, the place where the Demonic Cult spies were hiding turned out to be in Guangdong, where Hao Gate’s headquarters is located. Worse yet, they provoked the notoriously persistent Sichuan Tang Clan, and Tang Jincheon found the instigators even faster than the spies could report their failure.

Realizing the situation, Hao Gate likely decided it would be better to sell out the Demonic Cult spies and earn both trust and money.

“That’s why we’ve come all the way to Guangdong. It’s possible that Father-in-law is meeting with Hao Gate not just to receive information, but because they promised to cooperate in capturing the instigators.”

“Wow... Is that true, Father?”

Tang Sowol widened her eyes and looked at Tang Jincheon in amazement.

“Everything Young Cheon said is correct. Honestly, I’m a bit surprised. I knew you were skilled with a sword, but I didn’t expect you to have such insight.”

“It’s just that I’m from Zhejiang Province, so I happened to pick up bits and pieces of information here and there.”

After toppling the Red Sand Gang and leaving my hometown, I spent nearly a decade as a wandering vagabond before joining the Black Lotus Sect. During that time, I had several encounters with Hao Gate, and after joining the sect, I learned more about them from the Ironblood Hall master.

Tang Jincheon gave me a curious look before chuckling and nodding.

“Well, it’s not something that can be entirely explained by being from Zhejiang... but never mind. Having a sharp-witted family member is always a good thing.”

Tang Jincheon laughed heartily, and soon after, we arrived at the inn.

It was a fairly large building—likely the best in town. Considering it had a sizable stable, there was probably a good reason for its reputation.

“Go ahead and rest inside for now. The Dark Soul Commander and I will visit Hao Gate.”

Tang Jincheon dismounted, relayed the same message to the Dark Soul Unit, and handed a pouch to the vice-captain before leaving with the commander and the boy who had guided us.

As I watched the vice-captain arrange for rooms that would allow us to stay together, I turned to Tang Sowol and asked,

“By the way, didn’t you say you finished absorbing the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass? Could you show me?”

“Hehe, you’ll be amazed.”

Tang Sowol puffed out her chest proudly.

While waiting for Tang Jincheon and the Dark Soul Commander to return, half of our group rested in the rooms we rented, while the other half went in pairs or trios to the marketplace to purchase necessary supplies.

And as for Tang Sowol and me...

Chirp!

We were in the backyard, catching sparrows.

“Did you kill it?”

“Of course not. I just paralyzed it. Still, the effect is stronger than I expected—it might have actually died.”

Tang Sowol picked up the stiff sparrow with a troubled expression. She gently stroked its feathers, and soon, the bird began to move again.

After looking around for a moment, the sparrow suddenly flapped its wings frantically and flew away.

“Looks like it didn’t die, fortunately.”

“I see. Dropping a flying bird with just a flick of your hand was impressive, but since I’m not well-versed in poison arts, I can’t say exactly how impressive it was.”

“Oh! That was a subtle, low-potency paralysis poison. It wouldn’t normally be enough to bring down a flying bird unless it was already resting.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Unlike ordinary weapons, which can increase their power by applying more strength or internal energy, poison’s potency and method of use are fixed.”

“True. Increasing the amount of poison doesn’t necessarily enhance its potency—it just increases the chances of poisoning someone with insufficient internal energy to resist it.”

“That’s exactly right.”

“Still, there are cases where the same type of poison varies in potency. For example, in the case of ‘Scattered Bone Poison,’ some versions completely block internal energy flow, while others only partially inhibit it.”

“That’s due to differences in purity, not potency.”

“Purity?”

“Yes. It’s like drinking pure alcohol versus diluted alcohol—the speed at which you get drunk is different.”

“That analogy makes sense.”

I nodded in understanding and turned my gaze to Tang Sowol, who was watching the sparrow as it flew off to rejoin its flock.

After briefly admiring her delicate profile, I asked,

“If the poison itself becomes more potent, wouldn’t it also be harder to detoxify?”

“Harder? That’s putting it lightly.”

Tang Sowol turned to me with a smug expression, raising her chin proudly and even crossing her arms in a way that emphasized her chest. With a sly grin, she declared,

“I guarantee, unless I personally retrieve the poison, complete detoxification will be nearly impossible.”

I suddenly didn’t know where to direct my gaze.

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It didn't take long for an opportunity to test Tang Sowol's bold claim to present itself.

“Hehe. It's right over there. I saw them staying at the inn until lunchtime today, so it's definitely them.”

The information came from a goat-bearded man with a servile tone—he was the Hao Gate informant and guide that Tang Jincheon had brought along.

He led us through the streets of Guangdong as though the entire city was his personal backyard, never hesitating as he took us on the shortest route.

While the atmosphere within the Dark Soul Unit had been somewhat relaxed during the journey, it grew increasingly tense as we neared our target. The cold, murderous aura they exuded upon setting out began to return, becoming sharper with each passing moment.

The ten or so warriors in our group radiated a carefully refined killing intent, led by Tang Jincheon at the front. Narrowing his eyes, he asked,

“Is their number as you reported?”

“Yes, sir. There are three at the peak level and several at the first-class level—”

“No, I’m not asking about their skill level. I’m asking how many necks we have to sever.”

“...Fifteen in total.”

Goat Beard answered with a slightly pale face, to which Tang Jincheon gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“You’ve done well bringing us this far. Thanks to you, we’ve made good time. Now, just lead us to the inn where they’re staying.”

“O-of course, sir! It’s just ahead!”

Nodding eagerly, Goat Beard quickened his pace.

“It’s an inn called *Hwaju Inn*. It’s quite lively and decently well-kept, but not exactly a place known for its entertainment. Most of the people who visit are merchants passing through on their way to other regions.”

“With so many travelers coming and going daily, it’d be easy to slip in unnoticed. It’s also a good place to quickly gather information.”

Of course, those bastards won't have a chance to gather any more news. Thanks to me, Tang Sowol survived, and with Tang Jincheon's help, she returned safely to the Tang Clan without anyone knowing.

It was worth it for Tang Jincheon to rush out on his own, even leaving behind his brother, Tang Yujin, to handle the aftermath. Though I doubt Tang Yujin himself would be particularly pleased to hear that.

Watching the long line of merchants stretched out along the street, I voiced a concern.

“With this many people around, couldn't they use the crowd to escape?”

“Don't worry about that. We've already stationed Hao Gate members to keep an eye on them and block off all routes of escape. Even if they manage to slip out, we'll know exactly where they go and how many of them leave.”

“So there you have it, Father-in-law. Instead of waiting in line to quietly sneak in, wouldn't it be better to strike now and finish things in one go?”

“You're in quite a hurry, aren't you? But I like it.”

Tang Jincheon chuckled and nodded in approval, while Goat Beard, who had been switching glances between us in confusion, widened his eyes in shock at my words.

He had been curious about my identity but hadn't dared to ask. Judging by his reaction, he was surprised by the title I used.

Tang Jincheon, however, paid no attention to the informant's bewilderment and turned to the commander of the Dark Soul Unit.

"Tie up the horses here for now. We'll use lightness techniques to leap over the wall. The location is..."

He trailed off and glanced at Goat Beard. The informant, who had been zoning out, quickly snapped to attention and answered in a flustered tone.

"They're staying at *Hwaju Inn*. It's a small, nondescript inn, so it might be difficult to find based on description alone."

"Then I'll carry you while I run. Just focus on guiding us."

"W-what?"

Without waiting for a response, Tang Jincheon picked up the startled Goat Beard and tucked him under his arm like a sack. Turning to me, he asked,

“What about you? Should I drag them out by the hair myself, or do you want to handle it?”

“We’re the ones who almost died, so it should be us.”

“Sowol, what about you?”

Tang Jincheon directed the question at his daughter, who nodded in agreement.

“I feel the same way as Brother Cheon, Father. I appreciate your help, but the fear and helplessness we felt that day are ours to confront.”

Tang Sowol spoke with sharp determination in her eyes.

Though still somewhat inexperienced, in this moment, she was no longer just the young lady of the Tang Clan—she was a martial artist seeking to reclaim her pride.

Tang Jincheon's expression softened into a satisfied smile.

“Very well. Do as you wish.”

With that, he gave Tang Sowol an approving nod before taking the lead.

“Hyup!”

Goat Beard let out an involuntary yelp but quickly covered his mouth with both hands. The Dark Soul Unit followed closely behind Tang Jincheon.

Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances.

“Shall we?”

“After you.”

I nodded and activated my lightness technique.

After leaping over the relatively low city wall with just a few steps, we followed Goat Beard's directions, running through several streets.

Eventually, we arrived at a place slightly off the main road. It wasn't too fancy, nor was it particularly shabby. There were a fair number of customers, making it an ordinary-looking inn in every sense.

"There! That's *Hwaju Inn!*"

Goat Beard pointed toward the inn as Tang Jincheon came to a stop. One by one, the Dark Soul Unit members gathered around, surrounding the area.

Sensing the ominous atmosphere, nearby civilians began murmuring amongst themselves before scurrying away. Those who had been dining inside the inn reacted even faster—throwing down their utensils, they raised their hands in surrender and slowly began exiting the building.

Tang Sowol leaned in close and whispered,

“Doesn’t it seem like they’re all too familiar with situations like this?”

“It probably happens often enough that they’ve grown used to it.”

At this time, Guangdong Province was a hotspot for displaced martial artists from Zhejiang. With countless life-and-death duels taking place daily, the locals couldn’t help but adapt.

Among those slipping out of the inn were several martial artists—not just ordinary civilians.

And mixed among them were members of the Demonic Cult attempting to sneak away unnoticed.

Were they trying to report back to the cult since they realized they wouldn’t survive this?

“That one! That one’s from the Demonic Cult—huh?”

Goat Beard’s exclamation came a second too late. I had already drawn my sword.

Ssskuk!

The second-class martial artist didn't even have time to react before my sword sliced through his neck. His headless body collapsed limply to the ground.

Thunk!

At the same time, a flying dagger whizzed through the air, weaving between the fleeing crowd before embedding itself deep into the forehead of a middle-aged man. The dagger, thrown by the Dark Soul Unit commander, buried itself up to the hilt, and the force of the impact caused the man's body to crumple backward.

A beat later, Goat Beard, looking rather deflated, muttered,

“Y-yes, that one was also a member of the Demonic Cult. But... how did you know? Did you already know them?”

I glanced at Goat Beard and replied,

“It wasn't their face—it was the demonic energy they carried.”

“But... they didn’t use any internal energy. How could you...?”

It’s common knowledge that a martial artist’s aura changes depending on their mastery and internal energy cultivation.

However, unless someone has a significant amount of internal energy or reaches a high level, it’s difficult to detect their aura, let alone distinguish it.

For someone at the peak like the Dark Soul Unit commander, it would make sense, but for a mere first-class martial artist like myself? It was hard to believe.

What Goat Beard didn’t know was that I possessed insights unsuited to this body—and I had fought against the Demonic Cult countless times in my past life.

Instead of explaining, I simply shrugged and stepped forward. At that moment, all eyes focused on me.

Seeing Tang Jincheon standing with his arms crossed as if he had no intention of intervening, I took a deep breath and channeled internal energy into my voice.

“If we’ve started, we might as well finish! Stop hiding like insects and come out! The Tang Clan’s daughter, Tang Sowol, whom you want dead, is right here!”

“Wait! Are you selling me out, Brother Cheon?!”

Tang Sowol asked incredulously, but my strategy worked.

“Go!”

A voice roared from the second floor of the inn, accompanied by an explosion of demonic energy that shattered part of the wall.

Kwaaang!

Amid the flying debris, three martial artists leapt out, their destination clear—Tang Sowol.

Unlike the earlier second-class martial artists, these three were clearly stronger, likely first-class or peak-level warriors.

However, they were still no match for the current Tang Sowol.

“You charge in like moths to a flame.”

Tang Sowol furrowed her delicate brows slightly before sweeping her hand in a wide arc. Her flowing sleeve released a faint, purple-hued poison mist.

The four who charged through the mist while holding their breath reached Tang Sowol—but by then, they were already half-dead.

Their skin had melted beyond recognition, their legs gave out beneath them, and they collapsed one by one, unable to even raise their swords.

One of them clenched his teeth and glared at Tang Sowol with wide eyes.

“H-how... I held my breath...”

“Poison isn’t always dangerous only when inhaled. Sometimes, even touching it can melt your flesh.”

Tang Sowol added in a quiet voice, almost as if to herself,

“I didn’t expect it to be this effective...”

The last of the group dropped his sword without ever getting a chance to swing it.

It was a swift and quiet death, but the fight wasn’t over. The demonic energy emanating from the inn remained strong.

“Now!”

The same voice from earlier shouted, and more martial artists leapt through the broken wall.

This time, nearly ten of them charged at once, their bodies wrapped tightly in thick clothing to guard against the poison Tang Sowol had just used. Among them was a peak-level expert radiating powerful demonic energy.

Even for Tang Sowol, dealing with all of them at once using poison mist alone would be difficult. She gritted her teeth and prepared to release a larger cloud of poison.

Ssswaeek!

She launched concealed weapons coated in poison, each one gleaming ominously.

However, Tang Sowol's skill with hidden weapons wasn't as polished as her mastery of poison arts. While she might be able to take down a few of the weaker ones, it was unlikely she could deal with the peak-level expert.

If she were alone, that is.

I pushed my **Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art** to its limit. Thanks to the *Hundred Poisons Pure Blood Pill* I had received from Tang Yujin, my internal energy flowed smoothly throughout my body.

At my will, my internal energy surged, and with it, the killing intent that had long lain dormant within me roared to life.

In the darkness of the night, memories of past battles, broken promises, and empty last words flickered through my mind, igniting a blazing heat.

I forged a sword out of pure killing intent—a blade with no physical form, yet sharp enough to pierce the heart of a warrior prepared to face death.

“Huurgh!”

One of the martial artists, who had been about to swat down Tang Sowol’s hidden weapons mid-air, hesitated. That was all the opening we needed.

Thunk!

Tang Sowol’s hidden weapons struck their mark. Even if her skills weren’t perfect, there was no way she would miss at this range.

And, of course, the weapons were laced with poison—most likely a highly potent one.

“W-what... what the hell was that?!”

The remaining martial artists glared at me, grinding their teeth in frustration. Ignoring their reaction, I turned to Tang Sowol and asked,

“Was that enough?”

“Yes. After you’ve done this much, I should show something in return.”

Tang Sowol’s eyes gleamed faintly with a greenish light as she responded, hinting that she had prepared another poison technique.

Since she seemed to have things under control, it was time for me to focus on my task.

Two peak-level martial artists, who had been hiding and waiting for the right moment, suddenly charged at me from the inn’s entrance.

An axe swung in from one side, while a fist cloaked in dark energy came from the other.

Judging by their aura, they were both at the early stages of the peak level. For most, they would be difficult opponents.

Difficult, yes... but not impossible.

“This should be interesting.”

Difficult didn't mean I couldn't win.

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The axe, wrapped in murky black demonic energy, and a fist coated in powerful energy, came hurtling toward Cheon Hwi-da.

“Th-this can't be!”

Following Tang Jincheon's order to observe the fight, the Dark Soul Unit commander hastily gathered his internal energy and slipped two flying daggers between his fingers.

In Murim, it wasn't uncommon for someone to defeat an opponent stronger than themselves. Variables like stamina, injuries, surprise attacks, mistakes, and innate talent could all create such opportunities. If things aligned just right, even a novice could plunge a knife into the heart of a master. And once stabbed, nine times out of ten, the person would die.

As someone skilled in using hidden weapons and poison, the Dark Soul Unit commander understood this better than anyone else.

However, there were limits.

It might be possible to handle a single poisoned opponent, like the ones Tang Sowol had dealt with earlier, but facing two uninjured peak-level martial artists was impossible.

Although the killing intent Cheon Hwi-da had displayed earlier had sent chills down even the commander's spine, his martial prowess was still only at the first-class level.

The commander pulled his arm back, ready to hurl the daggers, their edges shimmering with internal energy.

If he acted now, he wouldn't be too late. While fully deflecting the attacks was impossible, he could at least alter their trajectories enough to spare Cheon Hwi-da's life.

Just as he was about to release the daggers, a cold hand gripped his arm.

"That's enough."

"Patriarch!"

Tang Jincheon's voice was calm, yet firm. The commander protested loudly,

“We can't let the benefactor of our clan die like this!”

“He won't die. Just watch.”

Tang Jincheon's voice, at first glance, sounded indifferent, but as someone who had served him faithfully for years, the commander could tell—there was clear anticipation in his eyes.

As if bewitched, the commander turned his gaze to where Tang Jincheon was looking.

There stood Cheon Hwi-da, a relaxed smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he swung his sword.

“Ah...”

It didn't take long for the commander to understand why Tang Jincheon had stopped him.

An axe and a fist came rushing in from both sides. In response, I stepped forward and swung my sword.

My target wasn't the axe blade, but the handle beneath it, just beyond where the axe's destructive aura ended.

I wasn't aiming to block.

Axes, by nature, excelled in delivering overwhelming force in a single strike. The techniques of axe-wielders focused on maximizing that destructive power. Even without the aura-enhanced blade, the handle still packed enough power to be dangerous.

Thus, my intent wasn't to block the axe—I intended to *use* it.

Clack!

A dull sound echoed as my sword struck the handle, sending a portion of the immense force down my wrist.

Rather than resisting, I allowed my stance to collapse, bending my body sharply without losing my footing.

My waist bent so far that my upper body was nearly parallel to the ground. A half-beat later, the fist meant for my head sliced through empty air above me.

This maneuver, sometimes called *Iron Plate Bridge*, wasn't something I could normally execute so quickly. However, thanks to the axe's force pushing me down, I managed to evade the fist entirely.

Realizing that his own attack had been used against him, the axe-wielder gritted his teeth.

“You bastard!”

He raised his leg in a hurried attempt to kick me, but he couldn't be faster than me—I was already moving.

Twisting my waist to stand upright, I slashed at his lifted leg.

Sssk.

Because of my awkward position, the cut wasn't deep, but it struck a critical spot—the inner thigh. His movements would be hindered for a while.

After landing the blow, I exploded my internal energy from the *Yongcheon* acupoint at the soles of my feet to propel myself backward.

My soles tingled slightly from the impact, but it was a small price to pay compared to taking a fist wrapped in powerful energy head-on.

Boom!

The ground where I had been standing moments ago caved in as the martial artist's fist slammed into it.

Keeping my distance, I calmly observed the two assailants.

First, the axe-wielder. Though he was large, he wasn't truly a giant—his tall frame was skeletal, his bones clearly visible beneath his skin. The sight of such a frail

figure wielding a heavy axe was unsettling, but it also made him unmistakably familiar.

Demon Axe Dan Muk-sang.

In my past life, he had been one of the few peak-level experts of the Demonic Cult. He was also someone I had killed once before.

Thanks to mastering a martial art that allowed him to unleash explosive strength, he could wield immense power despite his emaciated frame. However, the side effects of that martial art had damaged his core energy, leaving him with his current skeletal appearance.

As for the other one—the bare-fisted fighter—I didn't recognize her.

Her appearance was bizarre: completely hairless, without even eyebrows, and her dark, cracked skin resembled a decayed tree trunk. Judging by her frame, she appeared to be female, but that was all I could infer.

Most likely, she had mastered a type of external martial art that hardened the body.

Both of them were grotesque in their own ways, but that wasn't unusual for those who practiced demonic martial arts.

Such techniques allowed rapid growth in strength and sometimes even enabled the user to surpass their natural limits. But the price was often severe physical side effects.

While I was deducing their martial arts, the axe-wielder—Dan Muk-sang—pressed on a point on his thigh to stop the bleeding and glared at me.

“So it wasn't the Tang Clan's daughter, but you we should've targeted all along.”

“You talk as if killing me would've been easy.”

“Heh. Typical hypocrites who call themselves righteous—gathering in numbers to gang up when things get tough. Still, watching you squirm at the end might not be so bad.”

Dan Muk-sang let out a raspy, phlegm-filled laugh, and I narrowed my eyes.

“Don't delude yourself. I meant you're going to die by *my* hands.”

I relaxed my shoulders and brought the tip of my sword to eye level, spreading my feet shoulder-width apart with my left foot slightly forward for better movement.

It was the most basic stance—so simple it could barely be called a formal technique.

I activated my **Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art**, once again pushing it to its peak. This time, instead of focusing my killing intent on a single point, I let it radiate outward, spreading across the area.

Dan Muk-sang, now within my killing intent's range, instinctively frowned.

“Damn it! How can someone so young have such a vile killing intent?! We can't let him live!”

“Hah. You Demonic Cult bastards want to kill every martial artist you meet. If someone overheard you, they might mistake you for a noble monk or priest.”

As I chuckled, the female martial artist seized the opportunity and charged at me.

Her plan was clear: she intended to catch me off guard while I was distracted by conversation. However, my killing intent had already enveloped the entire area.

To me, killing intent wasn't merely a feeling—it was the foundation of my martial art, woven into my internal energy and will.

In this space filled with my killing intent, nothing could escape my perception. The slightest movement registered immediately.

Before she could reach me, I twisted my body to evade her.

Swish!

Her razor-sharp claws, enhanced by demonic energy, narrowly missed my chest, leaving a faint tear in my clothes.

She was using a combination of fist techniques and clawing strikes, with her hardened, elongated claws radiating an ominous aura. They would have been quite dangerous—if they had hit me.

Before she could withdraw her outstretched arm, I brought my sword down.

Clang!

“Tsk...”

Though I had aimed for her wrist, the sound that rang out was metallic, as if I had struck steel.

Her hardened skin was so tough that, aside from a few cracks in the calloused surface, my attack hadn't inflicted any real damage.

With widened eyes, she clenched her teeth and swung her other fist toward me. But a direct attack like that, after her failed ambush, was easy to read.

I moved a half-beat faster, dodging her punch and slashing at her exposed armpit.

Clang!

This time, I targeted a softer spot, but the result was the same—I managed only to deepen the cracks slightly.

There's no such thing as a perfect martial art. Even the **Diamond Body** technique of Shaolin monks, known to be virtually indestructible, had been shattered by the Heavenly Demon. So a demonic martial art like hers must have a weakness as well.

Thankfully, her techniques were relatively simple—perhaps because her hardened body restricted her flexibility, or maybe due to her lack of natural talent. This simplicity was a common trait among those who forcefully grew stronger through demonic martial arts.

If I wanted to, I could keep dodging her attacks until she exhausted herself.

But I didn't have that luxury.

“Graaah! I'll kill you!!”

After all, I wasn't fighting just one opponent.

Dan Muk-sang, his skeletal body launching off the ground, came charging at me.

His reddened skin and faintly glowing eyes indicated that he had triggered his energy-bursting technique.

He was faster and more dangerous than before. Dodging with the same technique I had used earlier would no longer work.

But knowing that my opponent was none other than Dan Muk-sang, I didn't need to worry.

There was no reason to fear a martial art I had already overcome once.

Sensing the clawed woman's leg flying toward me, I sidestepped her and dashed toward Dan Muk-sang.

Whoosh!

The force behind his axe was immense, creating a sharp sound as it sliced through the air, aimed directly at my head.

I leaned back half a step, the axe grazing the tip of my nose before slamming into the ground.

Boom!

The axe buried itself deep into the earth. Though Dan Muk-sang quickly pulled it out, I was already slashing at him.

Splat.

My sword sliced deep into his hand, exposing the bone. Despite the injury, he showed no sign of pain, gripping his axe tightly as blood poured from his wound.

He began swinging wildly—diagonally, vertically, even thrusting upward at times. Each swing carried enough power to crush a person instantly, and his speed increased with every strike.

The oppressive force of his attacks, coupled with the fierce aura coating his axe, was like a storm of death. His eyes, now completely bloodshot, were unfocused. It seemed the explosive energy he unleashed had driven him mad.

To an ordinary warrior, the sight would have been overwhelming, but I had faced something far worse—the future Dan Muk-sang, far stronger than this.

Moving continuously at the center of the storm, I weaved through his attacks, countering where I could.

Even with my speed advantage, avoiding every blow wasn't possible. I dodged what I could and disrupted the trajectory of what I couldn't by meeting it with my sword.

Had I not trained relentlessly at the Tang Clan or consumed the *Hundred Poisons Pure Blood Pill* that Tang Yujin gave me, my body wouldn't have been able to endure the strain.

But it wasn't perfect.

Even if I avoided the axe, the black aura surrounding it nicked my body, leaving shallow cuts. Demonic energy seeped into my wounds like poison.

Still, I couldn't retreat. Creating distance would allow Dan Muk-sang to regain his rhythm and give the clawed woman an opening to attack from behind.

And besides, I wasn't the only one accumulating injuries.

Sssk!

A chunk of my hair was sliced off. One of Dan Muk-sang's fingers was severed.

A red line appeared on my arm. Dan Muk-sang's side was torn open.

Blood from my shoulder splattered on my cheek. Dan Muk-sang's right ear was sliced off.

Flesh was torn from my thigh. The tendons in Dan Muk-sang's left wrist were cut.

The skin on my neck was grazed. Dan Muk-sang's core was shattered.

A fresh wound overlapped the scar on my chest.

Thud!

And finally, my sword pierced Dan Muk-sang's heart.

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The sword I thrust pierced through Dan Muk-sang's gaunt chest. I could feel the sensation of crushing a heart through the blade's tip.

Kwoong!

The axe that had been relentlessly hacking at me fell to the ground. The demonic energy that had been gnawing at the surroundings had long since dissipated.

Dan Muk-sang, who had been blankly staring at the sword protruding from his chest, grabbed it with his battered hands.

His hands were so deeply cut that the bones were exposed, and one of his fingers had been severed and lost somewhere, adding yet another wound to his already ruined hands.

Gguuk.

The sharp blade dug into his palm. Despite having his dantian shattered and his heart crushed, the strength in his grip was astonishing, almost incomprehensible.

However, the harder he squeezed, the deeper his wounds grew, and yet he couldn't muster enough strength to pull the sword out.

“Kuhugh!”

In the end, he vomited blood and collapsed limply. The hand that had clung to the sword slipped off.

Blood dripped steadily. Dan Muk-sang, who barely managed to lift his head, glared at me with his bloodshot eyes.

Even though his body had collapsed, his willpower remained unbroken.

“You... you damned brat. I should have killed you... I should have done it back then... But it's not too late even now. Kill yourself quickly.”

“This feels a bit unfair. If you think about it, I have a grudge against you, not the other way around. But I suppose now you do.”

“That's not what I... Kugh!”

Dan Muk-sang coughed up blood once again, his complexion growing even paler as he spoke.

“You... you have talent in martial arts. What I mean is... you’re gifted at killing people.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“Looking at the bloodlust ingrained in your body, you must’ve killed many already.”

That was true. Even though time had rewound and events had been undone, my memories of them hadn’t vanished.

I killed to survive. I killed to avenge the dead. And in the end, I even rushed toward the Heavenly Demon, fully aware I couldn’t win. I had essentially killed myself.

The life of a martial artist is a perilous dance on the edge of a blade until the moment they fall. But even by those standards, my life had been extreme.

After all, I experienced the war against the Demonic Cult—a war that hasn't even occurred in this timeline.

I am certain I have witnessed more deaths and killed more people than anyone else in this era.

Dan Muk-sang's eyes, gradually losing focus, continued to fix on me.

“I know what you're trying to say. At your age, to be this broken—it's obvious.”

“Broken, you say.”

“You exude bloodlust as if it's nothing. You cut down people without hesitation. If that's not broken, then what is? Did you cut them down because you didn't want to die? Because they were your enemies? Or was it for your own glory?”

As he said this, Dan Muk-sang's trembling lips curled into a faint, twisted smile. His voice carried undeniable contempt.

“Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter. In the end, you're just another butcher who draws his sword at the slightest provocation. No different from me. Kuhugh!”

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to say you’re any different?”

“Haha. Of course not. All martial artists and martial arts should disappear. Myself included.”

“Dan Muk-sang. I know your story.”

The current Dan Muk-sang had only just begun to make a name for himself as a demonic martial artist. But before my regression, he had been one of the top masters of the Demonic Cult.

He was both powerful and infamous, with his deeds widely known.

It was said he lost his wife to the Green Forest Bandits, and when he sought help from the Hwangbo Clan, their young master violated and killed his daughter.

At this point in time, the Hwangbo Clan had covered it up, but before my regression, Dan Muk-sang revealed the truth, leading the destruction of both the Green Forest and the Hwangbo Clan. His vengeance became a tale known to all.

In a way, his revenge was justified. His hatred of all martial artists, regardless of affiliation, was somewhat understandable.

“But so what?”

“What...?”

Was it because I knew of his past? Or because I had denied his convictions so directly? Perhaps it was just a fleeting burst of life before his death.

Dan Muk-sang’s dim, unfocused eyes suddenly lit up. His pupils sharpened, glaring at me with a fiery intensity.

“To my eyes, you, me, and every martial artist gathered here are all the same. Fools swinging swords blindly, consumed by grudges.”

“I am! I am different! I mastered martial arts to break the chain of vengeance!”

“No. All you did was broaden your target for revenge to the entire martial world. If you truly wanted to break the chain of vengeance, you should’ve started by letting go of your own.”

“Ridiculous! Who in this world would willingly abandon the power they hold in their hands? I had no choice...”

“So you had no choice but to kill every martial artist? How is that any different from drawing your sword at the slightest provocation?”

“...!”

Dan Muk-sang gritted his teeth, glaring at me. However, his gaze lacked the strength it had before.

“Didn’t I just tell you? There might’ve been another way. But since we can’t think of it, people like us just draw our swords first.”

“I... I...”

“In the end, you see nothing but the sword. You’re practically blind. Perhaps that’s why you became a martial artist in the first place.”

I smirked as I looked into Dan Muk-sang's eyes, where stubbornness had hardened into delusion.

“But there is one difference between us.”

Perhaps sensing his impending death, Dan Muk-sang chose to spend his remaining strength listening rather than speaking. His eyes widened as if to hear my words more clearly.

“I won. Even if I'm just a blind butcher like you, seeing nothing but the sword, isn't it better to win than to lose?”

Dan Muk-sang didn't respond.

No, he had already stopped breathing, his eyes wide open. Perhaps he had died before I even finished speaking.

Slowly, I pulled my sword free. With that, Dan Muk-sang's withered body collapsed to the ground as if leaning on my blade was the only thing keeping him upright.

Thud.

I briefly looked at his corpse, sprawled atop the pool of blood he had created, before turning away.

Waiting in the distance was the martial artist who had been silently observing me all this time.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I can’t beat you alone anyway.”

The martial artist, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke.

Despite their appearance, which resembled a rotting old tree, their voice was surprisingly clear. However, they winced as they spoke, as if even talking caused pain. It was likely another side effect of demonic cultivation.

“Dan Muk-sang’s thoughts. I don’t agree. But he was a comrade. I didn’t want to interrupt his last words.”

“Is that so.”

With that, the martial artist took their stance once more. I raised my sword toward them.

My entire body was battered from fighting Dan Muk-sang. Blood continued to drip freely, and the demonic energy wreaking havoc inside me made my insides churn.

I'd probably be bedridden for days, unable to move. But I still had enough strength to cut down one more opponent.

“Do you have any last words?”

“Perhaps... you're right. We're all blind fools, consumed by revenge. I wanted to kill the Sama Clan... but...”

“But instead, you targeted me and Tang Sowol, who had nothing to do with them.”

“...I'm sorry.”

The martial artist apologized briefly. Unlike Dan Muk-sang, who believed all martial artists should die—especially talented ones—this one seemed different.

But a single apology wasn't enough to undo the lines we had already crossed.

Understanding this, the martial artist assumed a combat stance and spoke.

“I am the Ghostwood Witch, Sama Suryun.”

“Cheon Hwi-da. No title.”

Our belated introductions marked the beginning of the fight.

The demonic energy emanating from the Ghostwood Witch's fist soon spread throughout her entire body.

Shrouding one's entire body with energy—a reckless act. While it made her faster and tougher, it would undoubtedly drain her internal energy dozens of times faster.

Even with the rapid progress of demonic cultivation, such a technique was impossible for someone who hadn't reached the peak level. Unless she was burning her true essence, it was unthinkable.

No matter the outcome, the Ghostwood Witch wouldn't last even half a quarter-hour before dying.

Wasting no time, she kicked off the ground. Her figure resembled a log engulfed in dark flames.

Pabat!

She closed the distance with far greater speed than before. Her energy-laden fist shot toward my heart.

But I had already anticipated her movements through the bloodlust I had scattered in the area.

Dodging wasn't difficult.

Puhong!

Her fist sliced through empty air, releasing a shockwave that swept past my head.

Before the wind could settle, she launched a rising kick aimed at my chin. The intent was so fierce that my jaw tingled even before it landed.

Thanks to that, I managed to tilt my head back in time to avoid it.

Taking advantage of the opening, I swung my sword toward the Ghostwood Witch's neck.

Kkaang!

The blade was deflected with a metallic clang. This time, however, it left no mark.

Her skin, already tough like tree bark, was now reinforced with internal energy. It would've been strange if the blade had left a scratch.

I gripped my sword tightly, absorbing the shock of the rebound, and continued exchanging blows with her.

The Ghostwood Witch, her life burning away like a living torch, swung with all her might. I dodged her strikes or diverted their direction with my blade.

Occasionally, she would switch to clawing techniques or palm strikes, but they lacked finesse and were easy to predict.

Compared to Dan Muk-sang, who had unleashed a deadly ultimate technique, the Ghostwood Witch's attacks were lacking.

Her martial arts focused on defense, as opposed to Dan Muk-sang's extreme offensiveness. But even taking that into account, her skills were insufficient.

Still, she didn't stop. No, she couldn't stop. Once someone starts burning their life away, hesitation no longer exists.

I simply responded, parrying her strikes and swinging my sword in return.

Kang! Kaang! Kang!

I aimed for the same spot on her neck each time. Ordinarily, she would've died dozens of times by now. The only reason she was still alive was her unique demonic cultivation.

How many times had we repeated this stagnant exchange of attacks and counters?

The Ghostwood Witch's demonic energy, which had been burning brightly, began to wane. She must have been running out of internal energy.

Seeing her neck no longer protected by energy, I swung my sword once more.

Kaduk!

The blade was deflected again, but this time a small piece of her hardened skin chipped away.

Even as she sensed her imminent death, the Ghostwood Witch stubbornly kept striking with her fists and feet.

And so, I continued driving my sword into her neck, over and over again.

Kakak! Kaduk! Kwajik!

Finally, after countless strikes, her neck began to crack. The repeated blows had fractured her hardened skin, leaving faint sword marks.

It was like watching a tree slowly fall after repeated axe strikes.

Noticing the cracks, I focused the scattered bloodlust around me into my sword. My internal energy naturally followed.

But even that wasn't enough.

I squeezed out the remaining internal energy from my **Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art**, sharpening my will like a blade.

This strike would push my limits.

Ssswaeek!

The sword's movement was no different from before—same force, same trajectory, same speed. But there was one difference.

A faint crimson aura began to rise from the blade.

The Ghostwood Witch's eyes widened slightly as she noticed the sword energy.

And then—

Ssskuk.

Her shocked head flew into the air.

The flames of the living torch were extinguished.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Thud. Roll.

The Ghostwood Witch's head was severed, rolling across the ground with an expression of shock frozen on her face.

I gazed at it for a moment before exhaling the breath I had been holding.

“Huu...”

As the tension left my body, the strain in my muscles eased, and the pain I had been suppressing all at once flooded my senses.

The stinging agony from the cuts carved into my body. The sharp heat emanating from the deep wound on my chest.

It hurt, but it was bearable. The real problem was the demonic energy seeping into my qi pathways through the injured areas.

To make things worse, I had forcibly drawn sword energy during the last strike, leaving my qi flow in disarray. Now the demonic energy was rampaging through my meridians, making me feel as if my insides were twisting.

If not for the **Hundred Poisons Pure Blood Pill** strengthening my qi pathways, I'd have passed out by now.

I licked my lips, wishing I had a few more of those pills, and slid my sword back into its scabbard.

Srrrng.

My vision swayed. The moment I realized it was all over, my body relaxed, and the exhaustion hit me like a tidal wave. I staggered, my body tilting to the side.

“Brother Cheon!”

Tang Sowol rushed over and caught me, wrapping her arms around my shoulder to support me.

Her warmth was reassuring. The softness pressing against my upper body. The familiar scent of the oils she applied daily. And the concern in her gaze.

My heightened senses, frayed from the life-or-death battle, began to settle. I leaned into Tang Sowol, comforted by her presence.

“This is terrible! Are you alright? No, forget that—how could you let yourself get into this state? You should have asked Father for help!”

“I’m fine. I fought because I was confident I could handle it, and your father trusted me enough to leave it to me.”

“How can you say that... Never mind, just take off your clothes quickly.”

“What? Here? Don’t you think we should at least go to an inn or somewhere private?”

“What are you thinking? Your *shirt* is enough. I need to stop the bleeding first, don’t I? No more talking—just stay still!”

Her tone left no room for argument as she began tugging at my robe. Likely due to the repeated near-misses from the Ghostwood Witch’s attacks, my clothes were already tattered. They tore easily under her pull.

Chwaaak!

Tang Sowol flinched slightly, as if startled by the situation, but her expression quickly shifted when she saw the blood flowing from the numerous small cuts covering my body. Her eyes trembled violently.

“Again... this...”

“What about it? Just like before, it’s nothing serious this time either.”

“Covered in blood like that, your words aren’t convincing at all.”

With a sigh, Tang Sowol pulled out some golden ointment from her pouch and began carefully applying it to my wounds.

We were currently stationed around the inn to ensure no stragglers from the Demonic Cult could escape.

In the midst of this large encirclement, it was just me and Tang Sowol here, meaning...

The sight of me, shirtless, being carefully tended to by Tang Sowol, was in full view of the entire **Dark Soul Unit** and Tang Jincheon, her father.

“Ugh...”

This was uncomfortable. I wasn’t usually one to care about people staring, but the current situation was making me incredibly self-conscious.

Especially Tang Jincheon, who was glaring at me with an expressionless face, and Tang Yujin, who stood beside him, laughing as he patted his father's shoulder.

I really hoped they wouldn't take this any further.

I subtly turned my gaze away from them, and my eyes naturally landed on the area where Tang Sowol had been fighting.

Around ten members of the Demonic Cult lay sprawled on the ground, blood pooling beneath them. Among them was an elderly man who appeared to be a master at the **Flowering Stage**.

Unlike the others, he was still barely clinging to life, his pale face ashen as he took shallow breaths. A few members of the Dark Soul Unit were in the process of destroying his dantian and binding him.

As Tang Sowol busily applied ointment to my shoulder, I asked her, "Did you leave him alive on purpose? Well done. I didn't have the luxury of sparing anyone, so we can interrogate him later."

"Is that really important right now? The other wounds are manageable with this ointment, but this one... it's too severe."

Tang Sowol shot me a sharp look before gently pressing her fingers to the wound on my chest.

Her slender fingers brushed against my skin, the touch light but deliberate. The sensation, however, turned into a sudden jolt of pain when her fingers made contact with the wound itself.

“I need a bandage—or, no, there’s no time for that. Just hold on for a moment.”

Nodding slightly, Tang Sowol tucked a stray lock of her hair behind her ear with the same hand she’d been treating my wound with.

Then, without hesitation, she leaned closer and extended her tongue.

“Wha—wait a second.”

Startled, I tried to pull back, but Tang Sowol stepped on my foot, pinning me in place.

She smiled, her crescent-shaped eyes twinkling mischievously, and began to lick the outer edge of the wound.

Haltch, haltch.

The warm, wet sensation of her tongue traced along my skin.

“What are you...”

I was too dumbfounded to speak, but it didn't take long for me to notice something unusual.

The wound on my chest, which had been the largest and bled the most due to the deliberately provoked attack, began to stop bleeding. Not only that, but the pain that had been tormenting me was subsiding.

It wasn't just the pain from the wound she licked that was diminishing. Even the lingering internal pain caused by the demonic energy wreaking havoc within me began to fade.

It felt as though the sharp blade cutting through my body had been dulled.

After a while, Tang Sowol pulled back with a satisfied expression.

“What... what did you just do? The bleeding stopped, and even the pain is mostly gone.”

“Hmm? Curious, are you?”

Crossing her arms and puffing out her chest, Tang Sowol smirked smugly and continued in a slightly elevated voice.

“They say poison, when used well, can become medicine. I used a blood-coagulating poison to stop the bleeding and mixed in a mild paralytic toxin to dull the pain.”

“Haah.”

At her words, I examined the wound more closely. Sure enough, a scab-like crust was sealing the wound, stopping the blood flow. When I moved my arms and legs, I noticed that the overall pain had diminished, though my sense of touch had become slightly numb.

“Impressive. Using poison like this isn’t something just anyone can do.”

“Well, it’s a bit tricky, I admit. But for someone like me, it’s not impossible.”

Of course. With *Poison Dance Empress (Tang Sowol)*’s unique *Poison Spirit Body*, she could create and combine poisons within her body, making this far easier for her.

“But there is one issue.”

“Side effects?”

“Not exactly a side effect... More like...”

Tang Sowol trailed off, scrunching her nose. Her tongue, still slightly redder than usual, flicked out before she pulled it back in with a grimace.

“It’s so bitter. Is blood supposed to taste this bad?”

A dangerous statement on many levels—and it came with a real threat.

Thunk.

Tang Jincheon placed a hand on both our shoulders, gripping mine with noticeably more strength.

“You both did well. Each of you defeated an opponent stronger than yourselves.”

“That’s thanks to the **Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass** that Brother Cheon gave me.”

“Father-in-law. I’m injured... Could you ease up on my shoulder a little?”

I cautiously spoke, but Tang Jincheon ignored me, raising his voice.

“And! That last strike—though faint, it was undoubtedly sword energy! To glimpse the Flowering Stage before even reaching the age of twenty is truly a blessing for the martial world—and for the Tang Clan!”

“Thank you. But... could you please let go of my shoulder...”

“Do not grow arrogant. A moment of enlightenment can slip away as quickly as it comes. Remember this feeling, hone it, and make it your own.”

Tang Jincheon smiled as he spoke, but the pressure he exuded was suffocating.

It seemed my comment about being a patient finally registered, as his grip loosened—though not completely. Before he could pull back entirely, Tang Sowol stepped in.

“Father, please stop bothering him and let me take care of him.”

“Bothering? I was merely trying to praise him.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

Tang Sowol shrugged, pulling me protectively into her arms.

I sank into her embrace, my exhausted body too grateful to care about the humiliation. For now, it felt like being sheltered by a mother bird guarding her egg.

She escorted me past Tang Jincheon’s scowling face and toward the inn we’d surrounded.

“Is there an inn nearby that can accommodate everyone here?” she asked one of the guards.

“Uh, yes! There’s one right here. Since the guests have all cleared out, there should be plenty of space!”

“Oh my, how fortunate. Father, shall we handle the repairs for the damaged walls?”

“...Do as you like.”

Tang Jincheon nodded weakly, clearly drained.

Relieved, I allowed myself to be led inside the inn by Tang Sowol.

It wasn’t extravagant, but the interior was clean and well-maintained, likely thanks to the diligent innkeeper. Tang Sowol carefully laid me on a bed, covering me with a blanket before standing up.

“I’ll stand guard outside. Please rest and recover.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’m perfectly fine. Thanks to my poison, even a Flowering Stage martial artist couldn’t put up much of a fight.”

“I see. Thank you for helping.”

“It’s what I want to do.”

Tang Sowol smiled and pulled up a chair, sitting nearby to keep watch as I closed my eyes.

“I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“Yes, please rest.”

Her warm smile lingered in my mind as I began circulating my internal energy, expelling the remaining demonic energy and restoring my qi pathways.

As my focus waned, exhaustion took over. I didn't resist the pull of sleep.

When I opened my eyes, the room was dimly lit. Dawn must've been approaching. Tang Sowol was gone, likely tending to her duties.

I was about to close my eyes again to resume my meditation when—

Creak.

The sound of the door opening. Someone was entering the room.

Instinctively, I reached for the sword at my bedside and began to rise.

“Who's there—”

A soft hand clamped over my mouth.

I almost drew my sword but froze when the familiar scent on her hand made me pause.

The faint moonlight streaming through the window illuminated her face.

“Shhh.”

It was Tang Sowol, a playful smile on her lips as she pressed a finger to them.

Good heavens.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Shh!”

In the dead of night, Tang Sowol slipped into my room with a mischievous smile, pressing her finger to her lips in a gesture for silence.

Good heavens.

I froze, startled by her unexpected appearance. Before I could speak, Tang Sowol leaned in close and whispered softly.

“If Father finds out, we’ll both be in trouble, so promise me you’ll stay quiet, alright?”

I nodded silently, and only then did she remove the hand she had clamped over my mouth.

As the warmth of her touch faded, I couldn’t help but feel a faint sense of disappointment. I opened my mouth to ask, “What brings you here at this hour?”

“Why, to talk with you for a bit, of course.”

“Talk?”

“Yes! I would’ve preferred to do so during the day, but since you were asleep, now is the only chance I have.”

“If that’s the case, couldn’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“Well, that’s true, but...”

Tang Sowol pouted her lips slightly before continuing, “It’s such a bright moon tonight, and I couldn’t sleep, so I thought of you. Surely, you’re not saying you dislike me visiting like this?”

Before my regression, Tang Sowol had often sneaked into my room after a particularly intense battle against the Demonic Cult, using various excuses.

She’d say things like, *The moon is too beautiful to waste tonight, come look with me.* Or, *Let’s celebrate surviving another day with a drink.* Or even, *Since I saved your life, you owe me some company.*

In hindsight, her reasons were often absurd, but at the time, I didn’t mind them.

And even now, I found I didn’t mind.

“How long are you going to just stand there staring?”

“Eh?”

“You said you wanted to talk, didn’t you? Go ahead, make yourself comfortable.”

“Oh... Alright?”

She smiled, then perched herself on the edge of my bed. It felt awkward lying down next to her, so I slowly sat up and settled beside her.

“Well? What did you want to talk about?”

“There’s something I wanted to ask, but before that, let me check one thing. How’s your body holding up? If you’re still in pain, I can give you a little more paralytic poison.”

Tang Sowol stuck her tongue out teasingly, and I couldn’t help but let out a faint laugh, shaking my head.

“It still aches a little, but it’s nothing I can’t bear.”

“So, you’re saying it does hurt.”

She scooted closer, her shoulder brushing against mine. I gulped instinctively at her sudden proximity.

Then she leaned in and whispered near my ear, her tone sly, “Were you perhaps expecting something?”

“What do you mean?”

“That I’d lick your wounds again, like I did earlier today.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Oh my, so defensive. Brother Cheon, you really shouldn’t try lying—it’s too easy to read you.”

She giggled softly, then grabbed my arm and placed her palm against mine, pressing them together.

“That time, I had to lick your wounds to stop the bleeding. But if it’s just about relieving the pain, holding hands works just as well. Besides...”

Her voice dropped to a mock-serious whisper. “Father scolded me earlier for being improper, so this will have to do instead. But don’t worry, I’ll hold your hand for a long time, so you won’t feel disappointed.”

“I wasn’t disappointed to begin with.”

“Of course, of course. If you say so, then it must be true.”

Ignoring my protests, Tang Sowol began channeling her poison arts, guiding a faint trace of poison through the contact of our palms. I could feel the subtle venom flowing into me, dulling the pain.

Before long, the lingering discomfort in my body began to ease, and the pain that had been tolerable faded into something almost pleasant.

Noticing the improvement in my condition, Tang Sowol withdrew slightly, still close but now leaving just a faint gap between our shoulders.

We were still holding hands, though. Her dark eyes, tinged faintly with green, glimmered under the moonlight as she spoke.

“Now then, shall we get to the main topic?”

“There’s a main topic?”

“Of course! I always knew you were strong, Brother Cheon, but I didn’t expect you to be *this* strong. How on earth did you manage to take on two martial artists of higher realms at once?”

Ah, so that’s what she was curious about.

I chuckled faintly and shook my head.

“Well, first of all, I don’t think you’re quite correct about them being ‘higher realms.’ What do you think determines the strength of a martial artist?”

“Well, obviously it’s their *realm*, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so. I believe it’s their *strength*.”

“Aren’t realm and strength the same thing?”

“No. Realm and strength are two separate things. It’s true that someone in a higher realm has an advantage, but that doesn’t mean they’re invincible. By the way, what do you think determines a martial artist’s realm?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, pondering for a moment, before replying, “The depth of their understanding, perhaps? Even if each person’s insights are different, if the depth is similar, they’ll reach the same realm, won’t they?”

“Then what exactly is this ‘understanding’? Who decides how profound it is? Does superiority exist in understanding? Or are we simply assigning too much meaning to fleeting thoughts? What do you think, Tang Sowol?”

“Uh... um... I, uh...”

Tang Sowol stammered, clearly at a loss for words. The spark of curiosity in her eyes had dimmed, and now they spun in circles, her expression flustered.

It was amusing. She was likely grappling with thoughts she'd never had to consider before.

I shrugged and continued, "Think about it more carefully later. There's no fixed answer, but you should at least find one that you can accept for yourself."

"Then... may I ask how you define understanding, Brother Cheon?"

"Technique," I thought. The technique to kill more effectively. The technique to survive in this harsh world.

But that was *my* definition, and I couldn't simply lay it bare to Tang Sowol.

"If I were to tell you, it might influence your own thoughts. Once you've found your answer, we can talk about it."

"You sound just like Father when I ask him these kinds of questions."

"Any martial artist who cares about your future would probably say the same."

“Hmph. Flattery, huh?”

Though I hadn't meant it as flattery, Tang Sowol seemed pleased, so I let the comment slide.

“Now, let's return to the original question. What do you think the criteria for dividing realms are? It's something every martial artist learns at the very beginning of their training.”

“Something every martial artist learns...?”

Tilting her head this way and that, Tang Sowol finally spoke hesitantly, “Is it the harmony of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*?”

“There you go. See? You already knew the answer. That's correct. Whether you call it *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* or *Mind*, *Energy*, and *Body*, it doesn't matter. What's important is achieving harmony between all the elements that make up oneself.”

All humans are born with a physical body (*jing*), kept alive by the primal essence deep within them (*qi*), and guided by will and thought (*shen*).

The journey from third-rate to first-rate martial artist is the process of mastering the physical body. It's the most basic step, achievable by anyone through hard work, even without talent or unique experiences.

Once the body is mastered, the next step is internal energy. When one can freely extend their internal energy outward as an extension of their body, they reach the level of peak masters, acknowledged as high-level martial artists.

Those who master both the body and internal energy then challenge the realm of will and thought—what is often called *intent*.

“...But I haven't reached that level yet, so I can't say for certain.”

“You talk like you've experienced everything leading up to it.”

“Well, I have one foot in the door, don't I?”

“Oh.”

She seemed to recall the brief glimpse of sword energy I'd shown earlier, her eyes widening in realization.

“Now, let’s review. As you said, realms are divided by the level of harmony achieved. When internal energy is handled as naturally as moving one’s limbs, it’s called the peak realm. But none of this determines how well someone fights.”

“True, someone with sword energy has an advantage, but even a one-armed fighter’s strikes can kill if they hit a vital spot.”

“That’s why I was able to win today. My technique simply outmatched theirs, making the difference in realms irrelevant.”

“I think that’s even more impressive.”

“Coming from the daughter of the Tang Clan, known for its mastery of poison and hidden weapons?”

“Hmph.”

Tang Sowol awkwardly scratched her head, embarrassed by the remark.

The conversation shifted naturally into more personal topics, as the moonlight illuminated Tang Sowol's serene, yet pensive face.

And then, softly, she said, "When we return to the Tang Clan, the engagement ceremony will be held, won't it?"

"Yes, it will."

"Honestly... I'm looking forward to it. I thought I might never marry—or that, if I did, it would be rushed with a stranger I barely knew."

"People might think we're already getting married, but this is just an engagement."

"True, but I have no intention of breaking off the engagement. So, to me, this ceremony might as well be a wedding."

She chuckled quietly, her gaze turning to meet mine.

"Which is why I wanted to ask you something before the ceremony."

“What is it?”

Tang Sowol smiled softly, a wistful curve on her lips.

“Brother Cheon... Are you seeing someone else when you look at me?”

For a moment, she looked so much like the Tang Sowol from my memories—the woman I had loved.

“If you tell me now, I’ll let it go. But I’d like an answer.”

And so, I couldn’t respond right away. Perhaps, it was because of that resemblance.

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“Since I’m feeling generous, why don’t you just tell me now?”

Tang Sowol's gaze fixed squarely on me, waiting for my response. For a moment, I opened my mouth to speak, but all that escaped was a faint, inaudible hum.

It wasn't without reason. The interplay of light and shadow created by the moonlight, combined with her melancholic smile, made her seem so much like the Tang Sowol of my past life—the woman I had loved deeply.

Tang Sowol waited for my reply for a while, but when I couldn't bring myself to say anything, she lowered her head in silence.

Her hair cascaded down, veiling her face, leaving me unable to read her expression. In a quiet, almost whisper-like voice, she began to speak again.

“Do you know something? I quite like you, Brother Cheon.”

“At first, I thought you were just strange... but the more I saw you, the more I realized you had much to teach me. The fact that you're younger also suits my preferences, and honestly, your face... well, it's quite my type.”

She chuckled lightly, then turned fully to face me and raised her head.

The backlight obscured her features slightly, but her skin was flawless, without a single blemish. Her eyes quivered slightly, but they never avoided mine.

Before me was not the Tang Sowol, the Poison Dance Empress, who had endured countless battles and trials. What I saw instead was a young woman, just stepping into her role as a martial artist, nervously standing before the prospect of marriage.

“For some time now, I’ve felt a strange sense of dissonance. While we’ve been talking, Brother Cheon’s gaze has often drifted into the void or grown distant with a certain wistfulness. Hasn’t it?”

“It would have been better if it were just my imagination... but I see now that it wasn’t.”

Tang Sowol barely managed to lift the corners of her lips, forming a bitter smile.

“Even so, I still quite like you, Brother Cheon. So, let me change the question slightly.”

She extended one hand and cupped my cheek, as if to stop me from looking away, silently urging me to focus solely on her in this moment.

“What do you think of me, Brother Cheon? Are you looking forward to this marriage, just as I am?”

Her voice carried a faint tremor of unease.

Finally, I opened my mouth to respond.

“Of course, I am looking forward to it as well.”

I vividly remembered the promise we had made on a moonless night in my past life. I also remembered how that promise had ultimately ended.

To long for something that could never be—how could I not look forward to this?

But that wasn't the only reason.

“It's true that I was seeing someone else through you. But that person is no longer in this world.”

Until now, I had blurred the line, convincing myself that the Tang Sowol of this life and the one I had loved in my previous life were fundamentally the same. But now I understood. The Tang Sowol before me and the Tang Sowol I had loved were different people.

I could never see the Tang Sowol of my past life again. It was time I accepted that. However...

“Still, that doesn’t mean I can’t see you, Tang Sowol.”

After nearly two months spent together, I realized something. I wasn’t drawn to her because of my past. I was drawn to Tang Sowol herself, as she was now.

Even if, for some reason, I were to return to the past again and meet a Tang Sowol without the memories of this life... or if I lost all memories of my past life and encountered her as a blank slate...

I would undoubtedly circle around her like a moth drawn to a flame.

“So, I hope you won’t feel too anxious. I want you to look forward to the betrothal ceremony, just as I do.”

Tang Sowol, still holding my cheek, froze for a moment. Her lips moved as though she wanted to say something, but it took her quite some time before she spoke.

“I must be such a simple woman. It only took a few words from you to ease my heart. But waiting idly for my presence to grow within you? That’s not my style.”

Stretch.

Tang Sowol suddenly tugged at my cheek with her hand. Startled, I found myself frozen in place, letting her do as she pleased. Her eyes, tinged faintly with green, curved into crescent moons as she smiled.

“From now on, I’ll seduce you, Brother Cheon.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Exactly what I said. If you fall for me, it won’t be because you’ve forgotten someone else with time. It will be because you couldn’t resist my charms.”

Letting go of my cheek, she raised her index finger with a confident *snap*.

“Brother Cheon, you’ll soon find yourself addicted—to me.”

Her declaration was bold, even audacious. And though she must have known it, her ears turned bright red. Yet she didn’t avert her gaze or lower her raised finger.

I stared at her blankly for a moment before nodding, and only then did Tang Sowol rise to her feet with a satisfied smile.

“Well, that’s enough talk for now. I shouldn’t stay much longer, as I snuck in here secretly. It wouldn’t do to be caught.”

“Yes, I suppose it wouldn’t. Regardless of our engagement, it wouldn’t reflect well for you to be seen entering a man’s room late at night.”

“Why does it sound like you’re accusing me of doing something improper?”

Tang Sowol pouted her lips, then suddenly grabbed my hand and brought it to her mouth.

“Chomp.”

She bit my finger—not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to leave teeth marks and a slight sting.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, if people are going to misunderstand, I might as well give them something real to misunderstand.”

For a moment, I could only stare at her incredulously. But soon, she giggled and added an explanation.

“Of course, it wasn’t just a bite. I also applied the venom of the *Shuangtou Shechong*.”

“Venom?”

It didn’t feel like poison. But then again, it wasn’t like Tang Sowol would ever harm me. Still, curious, I raised my bitten finger to my nose.

Tang Sowol panicked, quickly batting my hand away.

“Why are you smelling it!?”

“Well, you said it was venom, so I was curious.”

“There’s no scent to it, so just stop!”

“It felt like there was, even if faint...”

“It’s not poison, so don’t worry about it!”

Saying that, she rubbed the back of my hand vigorously with her sleeve.

“What are you doing now? You’re the one who applied the venom, but now you’re wiping it off?”

Though I said nothing further, my questioning gaze seemed to make her sigh. She then began to explain.

“The *Shuangtou Shechong* is a mystical lizard with two heads. When it matures, one head falls off, and the two become separate lizards.”

“That’s... peculiar.”

“But it doesn’t stop there. For the lizard to fully mature, one head must devour the other. That’s why they coat each other in venom—to recognize one another even from afar.”

“And you applied that venom to me?”

“Yes. Now, as long as you’re not too far away, I’ll always know where you are.”

“Can I sense your location as well?”

“If you mastered venom-based martial arts and transformed your *dantian* into a venom core, then perhaps.”

After a brief pause, I glanced at my finger again. A thought suddenly struck me.

“Wait. Are you saying anyone skilled in venom-based arts could recognize this venom?”

“Since it’s a mark using my venom, only I can track your location from afar. However...”

“However?”

“If they see you up close, they might notice the venom of the *Shuangtou Shechong* on you. That’s partly why I applied it—to make it clear to others. Think of it as a territorial marker. To the elders of my family, it will signal my determination to be with you.”

Tang Sowol grinned playfully as she explained, then reached for the door handle.

“Well then, rest well, Brother Cheon. I’ll sneak back to my room before dawn.”

“Mm.”

I nodded absentmindedly, and with that, she left without looking back.

Staring at my hand, still warm from her touch, I chuckled faintly.

“Well, I suppose that’s fine.”

The moonlight poured down from a cloudless sky. I sat in a meditative posture and gazed up at the full moon I had once longed for so desperately.

Though I had been awakened by Tang Sowol's visit, my body, still recovering from internal and external injuries, required rest.

Having slept enough, I returned my focus to *Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art* and began circulating my energy. The murderous aura that usually accompanied my inner energy felt unusually subdued tonight.

"Make sure to lock your door at night," came the sudden voice.

"Huh?"

The next morning, as I stretched to relieve the stiffness from meditating all night, Tang Jincheon approached out of nowhere, his eyes fixed on my hand—the one Sowol had bitten.

“If you don’t, I might just wander into your room by mistake.”

It seemed Tang Jincheon had already learned about Sowol’s late-night visit.

As I froze in place, his hearty laughter filled the air. He patted me on the shoulder and added,

“Don’t rush things too much. There’s a proper order to everything, after all.”

“I’m quite fond of keeping things in order myself, so there’s no need to worry. Speaking of which, how is the interrogation going?”

“Hmph, trying to change the subject, are we? Well, I’ll let it slide since you seem committed to following the proper steps. As for the interrogation... it’s going to take some time.”

“What?”

How could that be? This was the Tang Clan.

“I can see the confusion on your face. Let me guess—you’re shocked that the Tang Clan’s interrogation is dragging on, aren’t you?”

“Well... to be honest, yes.”

This was before Tang Sowol became the Poison Dance Empress. In the current martial world, there was no one more knowledgeable about poisons than Tang Jincheon, the Poison King.

And the Tang Clan was renowned not just for its mastery of poisons but also for its expertise in medicine.

For someone like him to claim the interrogation was taking time—it was surprising, to say the least.

“Surely you’re not holding back, are you...?”

“Of course not. The Tang Clan may present itself as righteous, but there’s no reason to show mercy to someone who tried to kill one of our own. You know our family’s motto.”

“Then what’s the problem? No matter how strong their will is, your poisons should make them confess against their will.”

Tang Jincheon chuckled. “You know your stuff. Most people break under pain, but there are those whose resolve only hardens. The Demonic Cult is full of such tenacious individuals. Breaking their will isn’t the issue—it’s clouding their judgment that’s key.”

I nodded, recalling how Sowol had once interrogated members of the Demonic Cult in my past life.

But perhaps it wasn’t as easy as it seemed. Jincheon sighed heavily and continued.

“Using *Bewildering Soul Poison* to muddle their judgment worked... but when we try to get them to reveal the mastermind behind everything, they’re blocked by a mental restriction.”

“Ah...”

The Demonic Cult was infamous for placing such restrictions on its followers.

“In that case, I think I might be able to help...”

After all, methods to counter such restrictions had been actively studied before.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The Heavenly Demon's martial prowess often left people in shock, but in truth, the Demonic Cult wasn't inherently a powerful faction.

They diligently practiced martial arts, yet very few possessed talent, and among the martial arts they cultivated, there wasn't a single technique capable of elevating one's cultivation to higher realms.

No, not "few," but *none*. The advanced martial arts I saw in the Demonic Cult before my regression were all techniques established and taught by the Heavenly Demon himself.

This was only natural. Their resentment toward the martial world meant they rejected being a part of the grand flow of the martial arts world as a whole.

Unable to inherit or develop the deep-rooted martial traditions nurtured by the Central Plains, they were destined to fall short in terms of profound martial arts.

But they needed strength.

To achieve that, they embraced demonic techniques with severe side effects and wholeheartedly accepted *Evil Method*.

Unlike the martial artists of the Central Plains, who shunned sorcery, the Demonic Cult actively refined and advanced it. Perhaps because of this, their sorcery surpassed the level of the Central Plains martial world, even if their martial arts didn't. The mental restrictions they employed were part of that mastery, which even someone like Tang Jincheon couldn't easily unravel.

However.

“I think I might be able to help with that.”

“...What did you say?”

Tang Jincheon furrowed his brows, his expression twisted with disbelief. My claim must have sounded absurd, but I was completely serious.

The mental restriction was one of the most advanced sorcery techniques of the Demonic Cult, a skill so high-level that even the Righteous sect alliance had struggled against it.

That was why it became one of the first sorcery techniques to have a countermeasure developed.

“Due to my origins, I have at least some superficial knowledge of such vile methods.”

“Don’t think you can brush everything off just by saying you’re from Zhejiang Province.”

“Then how about trusting your future son-in-law this once?”

“That’s... not entirely to my liking, but it’s better than before.”

Tang Jincheon nodded reluctantly. His words sounded skeptical, but he wouldn’t be disappointed.

Though I had only memorized the countermeasures as they were taught, the methods themselves were created by some of the Central Plains’ greatest minds.

The Zhuge Clan, renowned for their expertise in formations; the monks and Taoist sects, known for their ability to cleanse evil and restore balance; and the Sama Clan, though not on par with the Demonic Cult, proficient in sorcery.

These three groups, who would have never collaborated if not for the righteous sect alliance, had come together to craft these countermeasures.

Following Tang Jincheon, we arrived at the most secluded room in the guest inn. Inside, the old man I had seen before was tied to a chair.

Though his appearance was shabby, his body showed no visible signs of blood or injuries. He didn't look like someone undergoing interrogation.

But his condition was far from normal.

His gaze was vacant, his pupils unfocused. He mumbled incessantly to himself, and drool dripped from the corner of his mouth.

He looked like a man whose mind had already broken. To someone unaware, it might even seem like a cruel act of bullying an ordinary old man.

“Cut the act. No one here is gullible enough to fall for your pathetic charade.”

“...How unfortunate,” the old man muttered.

His lifeless eyes still managed to focus on me with precision. Though his tone was listless, there was no hesitation in his words.

Shrugging, I continued speaking.

“The renowned Poison King wouldn’t have ruined you to the point where you couldn’t even speak. And even if he did, he’d have fixed you back up by now.”

“You’re surprisingly adept at flattery.”

“I’m merely stating the facts.”

“Look at you, still greasing your words even now.”

As Tang Jincheon and I exchanged light banter, the old man’s face twisted in irritation.

“Disgusting... Is the so-called elder of the righteous faction teaching a child not only how to kill but also how to torture? The rumors about the Tang Clan...”

“Quiet.”

With a swift jab to his pressure point, I silenced him. Since his *dantian* had already been shattered and he had no inner energy, it wasn't difficult.

“Let me guess. You were going to spout some self-destructive nonsense about how martial artists are nothing but murderers, or that martial arts should be eradicated. Save it. I don't care about your warped ideology.”

I met his murderous glare with indifference, placing my hand over my chest.

Mental restrictions typically operated in two ways.

The first was by inflicting immense pain to prevent certain actions—Poison-induced pain was a prime example of this method.

The second was by implanting powerful suggestions into the subconscious mind. This was achieved through Soul manipulation techniques or specialized rituals. However, this method was so intricate that only a few could utilize it.

Uniquely, the Demonic Cult combined these two approaches into one unified restriction.

They didn't place separate restrictions but interwove them, creating a more robust system.

If the pain from *Poison-induced pain* was removed, the suggestion would activate, causing the victim's heart to stop. Conversely, if their mental state faltered, the suggestion would restore their sanity, ensuring the restriction remained intact.

If their consciousness was completely broken in one blow, the *Poison-induced pain* would immediately corrode their heart and kill them.

In theory, the restriction could be neutralized by simultaneously overcoming both the pain and the suggestion. But how could one precisely gauge the moment when someone's consciousness wavered or sharpened?

Every individual had different constitutions and mental strengths, and they could also feign weakness to confuse their interrogators.

Though I had memorized the countermeasure, the complex explanation of how it worked largely went over my head.

All I knew was what I needed to do.

I pressed my hand against the old man's chest, sending my inner energy through to his heart. His shattered *dantian* had left his meridians desiccated, but I forcibly pushed my energy through.

The old man's eyes widened in agony as my energy forcibly expanded his meridians. It didn't matter; he was bound tightly enough that he couldn't even twitch a finger.

As my energy surged through the forcibly widened meridians, it began to break through the barriers within him. Blood trickled from his seven orifices as the resistance was crushed.

If I hesitated here, he would bleed out and die. Without delay, I struck at the key meridian points I had memorized and sent my energy surging.

Puhaak!

The old man coughed up a mouthful of blood. His vacant gaze became even more hollow, and though his heart beat slowly, it continued steadily.

The restrictions had been lifted, but the lingering effects of the *Bewildering Soul Poison* were now taking hold.

“Phew.”

I removed my hand and turned to Tang Jincheon.

“It’s done. I triggered the Thunder Sea Meridian. He’ll either die or become a vegetable within an hour, so the interrogation must be completed before then.”

“This easily?”

Tang Jincheon’s face was one of disbelief.

To prove it, I drew my sword and thrust it to the old man’s face, stopping just short of his eye. He didn’t even flinch.

But when I asked him a question, he immediately responded.

“State your name and position in the Demonic Cult.”

“Ye Neunghak. Leader of the Evil Hound Unit.”

Ye Neunghak mumbled vacantly. Tang Jincheon nodded in surprise.

“Incredible. This is the first time I’ve heard such information about the Demonic Cult. I’ll need to verify further, but it doesn’t seem like he’s lying. How on earth did you manage this?”

Tang Jincheon looked astonished, especially as Ye Neunghak continued drooling bloodied saliva.

I sheathed my sword and replied, “I’ll explain everything later. For now, focus on the interrogation. Time isn’t on our side.”

“Yes, right. You said we have about an hour? That’s not much time... Let’s see.”

Tang Jincheon paused to gather his thoughts before asking his next question.

“Why did the Demonic Cult target the Tang Clan and Sowol?”

“I heard... it could interfere with the *Grand Scheme*.”

“The Grand Scheme? Don’t tell me the Cult Leader ordered an attack on my daughter?”

“No... The Cult Leader merely had concerns. The actions were... my independent decision.”

“Hah. Independent decision, you say. It would take some serious nerve to issue such orders. So, what exactly is this *Grand Scheme*?”

“The annihilation of the martial world... the ultimate plan for collective vengeance.”

“Tch. Just another bout of the Demonic Cult’s delusions.”

Tang Jincheon clicked his tongue, clearly dismissing the idea.

In this era, his reaction was natural. Many believed the Demonic Cult's attempts at revenge were laughable because, historically, they had always failed.

Even when they raised their swords against the Central Plains, they had never made it past the Qingcheng Sect before retreating to the Ten Thousand Mountains.

Still, the current Demonic Cult had the Heavenly Demon.

He wasn't yet called the Heavenly Demon, but this lunatic would eventually reach the *Flowering Stage*—perhaps even beyond—with his demonic arts.

The invasion I remembered from my past life would occur about fifteen years from now, yet it seemed the groundwork had already begun.

Tang Jincheon dismissed it as delusional rambling, but to me, it felt different.

Although the Heavenly Demon had yet to claim his arrogant title, he was already the leader of the Demonic Cult and had likely been preparing for years to attack the Central Plains.

Tang Jincheon continued questioning Ye Neunghak, asking about their other members, the Cult's current state, and whether they were targeting any factions besides the Tang Clan.

Though Ye Neunghak answered obediently, his knowledge as a mere unit leader was limited.

The interrogation felt somewhat unproductive. Soon, foam mixed with blood began to leak from Ye Neunghak's mouth—time was almost up.

Recognizing this, I turned to Tang Jincheon.

“Father-in-law, may I ask the final question?”

“Oh? Ah, yes, I suppose that makes sense. It was you and Sowol who captured him, and your methods made this interrogation possible.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed briefly before stepping in front of Ye Neunghak. I stared at his half-glazed eyes and asked:

“What is the Cult Leader’s current level of martial prowess?”

“The Cult Leader... has reached the *Extreme Demon Realm*.”

Ye Neunghak coughed out the answer, shuddered violently, and then collapsed.

“That’s it,” I muttered, gazing down at his lifeless body.

“*Extreme Demon Realm*. So, he’s already reached the Extreme Demon Realm...”

It was the realm commonly referred to as *Hwagyeong*—the Flowering Stage.