

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 41-50

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Through the small window of the carriage, I could see the familiar sight of Chengdu in the distance.

“So, nothing happened after all.”

“It sounds like you were hoping something would go wrong. Is that just my imagination?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that when everything goes smoothly without any problems, you start feeling uneasy, you know?”

“I’ve never felt that way,” Tang Sowol replied, tilting her head as if she couldn’t understand.

I glanced at Seol Lihyang, seated across from me. She nodded in agreement, as if she understood perfectly.

“Yeah, I get it. Like, you think, ‘There’s no way my life could go this smoothly. Life’s supposed to be more messed up and shitty than this.’ Right?”

“Exactly. So it’s not just me, then.”

“I didn’t say anything to you or Tang Sowol, but honestly, I’ve been feeling the same way,” Seol Lihyang said.

She had a small book spread out on her lap. It wasn’t a martial arts manual—just a basic book to help her learn to read and write.

If someone could personally tutor her one-on-one, it wouldn’t be an issue. But in the Tang Clan, there weren’t many who practiced yin-based martial arts.

They could teach her the basics, but to reach higher levels, she would have to understand the specific meanings of the texts on her own.

Whether it was understanding the deeper meanings of martial techniques or applying them in practice, everything would come after that.

That’s why Seol Lihyang had started learning to read—just as I had with the help of the Ironblood Hall’s leader in my past life.

“Still, I’m surprised the patriarch agreed so easily to this. It’s not like the techniques are the Tang Clan’s core martial arts, but they still came from the clan’s vault, didn’t they?”

“Your influence must have been significant, young hero. Even though we haven’t had the official ceremony yet, you’re already considered part of the Tang Clan. And if it’s for repaying a past debt, how could they not offer their support?”

“I thought they might at least attach some conditions or show a bit of reluctance.”

“If they did, then it wouldn’t be a proper repayment of a favor. Besides, I think my father saw some of my own situation in Miss Seol’s circumstances.”

While the martial world is vast, those born with unique constitutions are extremely rare.

That also means it’s hard to find anyone who can truly understand the talents and drawbacks associated with such constitutions.

Though Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang had different constitutions, they both faced difficulties because of them.

Perhaps Tang Jincheon wanted to give Tang Sowol someone who could relate to her.

Though, in truth, the person Seol Lihyang got along best with wasn't Tang Sowol—it was me.

“Whatever the reason, I'm grateful for it. I never thought I'd learn to read in this lifetime, and now I'm even going to become a guest of the Tang Clan.”

“Do you know what a guest's responsibilities are?” I asked.

“Nope. But I know what I'm supposed to do. Tang Sowol explained it. I'll live in a nice house, eat good food, wear warm clothes, and practice martial arts. When necessary, I'll do work for the Tang Clan. Oh, by the way, Cheon Hwi, what does this word say? I learned it last time but forgot.”

“It's 'silkworm cocoon.' And yes, you pretty much got it right. I understand how you feel. Sometimes, having something go wrong makes you feel better, even if your body suffers for it.”

“Exactly! As long as it's nothing too serious, of course.”

“Something like the carriage wheels breaking or getting stuck in the mud for a while would be just about right.”

It wasn't just Seol Lihyang who felt that things were going unusually well. I felt the same way.

I had uncovered the people behind the attack on Tang Sowol, something I hadn't known in my previous life. As a result, I'd gained insight into the Demonic Cult's activities at this time, become aware of hidden restrictions on my abilities since returning, and even unexpectedly encountered and saved Seol Lihyang.

There had been difficulties, but the rewards outweighed them.

Most importantly, I'd been able to let go of one of the biggest regrets of my past life.

Seeing me nod in agreement, Tang Sowol pouted slightly, as if she felt left out.

“If things are going smoothly, isn't that something to be happy about? Why worry about problems that haven't happened yet? Come here, young hero. I need to discuss something with you.”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t we agree to hold the engagement ceremony as soon as we returned to Chengdu? Since it’s just an engagement, it doesn’t need to be grand or involve a lot of people, but we still can’t do it half-heartedly.”

“That’s true. The Tang Clan would have to maintain appearances, even for an internal event.”

“Exactly. So let’s discuss it. We won’t have much to do ourselves, but if you have any preferences, we should make a list in advance.”

Tang Sowol patted the seat beside her. It seemed like she was trying to change the subject a bit forcefully, but it wasn’t a bad topic to focus on, so I decided to play along.

I scooted over and sat right next to her. “Alright. So, what do we need to decide?”

“The order of the ceremony will follow Tang Clan traditions, but we need to decide on the location and the guest list.”

“Hmm. I’m not too picky about the location, but I’d prefer somewhere outdoors rather than inside. I get uncomfortable in cramped spaces. As for guests...”

The first face that came to mind was the Ironblood Hall’s leader.

He’d been a mentor, almost like a parent to me, ever since I met him as an orphan. He was the one who told me to look beyond the sword, taught me everything he knew about martial arts, and encouraged me to live a life for myself, not just for survival.

But the Ironblood Hall’s leader I knew no longer existed.

Just as Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang had become different people in this timeline, the current Ironblood Hall leader was the same person, yet not the same.

With a bitter smile, I shook my head. “There’s no one. I have no family, no friends.”

For a moment, silence filled the carriage. Then, Tang Sowol awkwardly patted my shoulder, wearing an uneasy smile.

“Th-that’s alright! The Tang Clan is your family now, isn’t it?”

“Yeah! I’ll be your friend, too. That should be enough, right? Isn’t that right, Sister Tang?”

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m fine. And Tang Sowol, could you not pat my shoulder? It still hurts.”

“Oh? Sorry. Is the injury from last time still bothering you?”

“It’s mostly healed. It wasn’t a broken bone, just some bruising. I thought it would be better by the time we got to Chengdu, but we left sooner than I expected.”

“I didn’t think my father would decide to leave Yeonju the very next day, either. But we’ll have to make sure you’re okay before the ceremony. Can you show me your shoulder?”

“What’s the point? It’ll be covered by clothes anyway.”

“Still, let me take a look. If your shoulder hurts, your posture will be affected, and you’ll flinch whenever you move. That won’t do at all.”

“It’s fine. I can endure it. It’s not that bad.”

“There’s no need to endure it. We can address it right now.”

“Is there a medicine for bruises? I thought it was just a matter of circulating internal energy to speed up recovery.”

“There’s no medicine, but I can numb the pain, at least.”

With a mischievous grin, Tang Sowol grabbed the fabric of my shirt around my shoulder and pulled it down.

Swoosh.

In an instant, my shoulder was exposed. I was about to ask what she was doing when she tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned in.

A flash of pink as her tongue darted out.

“Bleeeh...”

Just like before, she began licking the bruised area on my shoulder. The sensation was both ticklish and damp, and it was something I could never quite get used to.

Even though it was the third time she'd done it, it still made me feel embarrassed. I turned my head slightly, avoiding her gaze, and found Seol Lihyang staring with wide eyes from behind her book.

“Eep!”

Startled, she froze in place, her face bright red, though her eyes sparkled with curiosity. Clearly, she wasn't planning on intervening.

Unable to stop or even respond, I stayed stiff as a board until Tang Sowol finally pulled back, leaving my shoulder thoroughly coated in saliva.

I quickly adjusted my clothes and moved my shoulder. It felt slightly numb, but it wasn't stiff, and the pain had lessened considerably.

It must have been her unique application of the numbing poison she'd used before. I couldn't help but wonder if this was the only way to administer it.

When I stared at her, she met my gaze with an innocent expression, as if nothing had happened.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Do you really not know why I’m asking?”

“If you’re about to thank me, there’s no need. It’s something any fiancée should do.”

“That’s not what I meant. Why did you do that here? There are other people around.”

“Well, I’ve already done it in front of the Dark Soul Unit, so why be embarrassed now?”

“Come on, be honest. You’re just getting a kick out of licking me, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little. It’s fun to see your reaction,” she said, sticking out her tongue playfully.

I let out a half-amused, half-exasperated sigh. “You’re developing a strange hobby.”

“And? Did you dislike it?”

“Tell me honestly.”

“I didn’t say I disliked it.”

“And if you were to be a bit more honest?”

“It felt good, but... I’d appreciate it if you chose the location more carefully.”

“Alright. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tang Sowol giggled and nodded.

Just then, there was a sudden *thud* and *crash!* The carriage came to an abrupt stop.

Instinctively, I reached out to steady Tang Sowol, but...

“Ugh!”

Seol Lihyang, who hadn't been close enough to grab onto anything, banged her head against the ceiling.

“Ow... What the heck just happened?”

Rubbing her head with one hand and fumbling for her dropped book with the other, Seol Lihyang looked dazed.

As if in response to her question, one of the Dark Soul Unit members knocked on the side of the carriage.

“Are you all alright? One of the wheels broke. I'm afraid you'll have to step outside for a bit.”

“Yes, we'll do that,” Tang Sowol replied promptly.

Then she turned to me with an intrigued expression.

“I can’t believe the wheel actually broke. Young hero Cheon, you really called it.”

“Yeah, that was unexpected. Still, at least now I don’t have that uneasy feeling hanging over me.”

“And it broke just as we were about to reach Chengdu. I suppose we should be grateful for that.”

We exchanged amused smiles before turning to Seol Lihyang. She was the only one who seemed to have been hurt by the incident.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. My head hurts a bit, but at least I didn’t bite my tongue or anything. I’ll be alright,” she said, glancing between me and Tang Sowol.

Then a faint, resigned smile spread across her face.

“Yeah, this makes sense. My life was never going to be that easy, was it?”

It was a smile tinged with a bit of bitterness.

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“I heard a lot happened in Guangdong Province, so I came to check on your condition as soon as things were settled... Yet here you are, full of energy, swinging your sword as if nothing happened, junior brother.”

A few days after returning to the Tang Clan, I was in the training yard, using “training” as an excuse to escape, when Tang Cheong appeared, shaking his head at me.

“I heard you fought until exhaustion dealing with the Hao Mun in Guangdong. If you’re feeling inadequate because of that, there’s no need to rush. You’re already far stronger than one would expect for someone your age.”

“Thank you for the concern, but that’s not the reason. While I did realize my shortcomings, I know all too well that impatience can lead to ruin.”

“This insufferable brat. Then tell me—what exactly happened that has you swinging your sword so fiercely here?”

“Well, the thing is...”

I sheathed my sword and began explaining cautiously.

“Brother Cheon! How does this outfit look? Does it suit me?”

After finishing my morning training, I cleaned myself up and returned to my room, only to find Tang Sowol standing there, arms outstretched like she owned the place.

As was typical of Tang Clan attire, the base color was green, but gold embroidery and flowing decorative embellishments made it quite ornate.

It looked less like martial attire and more like something a noblewoman would wear—something luxurious.

Of course, she looked stunning. How could Tang Sowol, wearing fine clothes, not be beautiful?

I was startled by her sudden appearance, but soon nodded and spoke.

“It suits you. It’s refreshing to see you in something fitted rather than the usual loose garments.”

“Goodness. Are you saying you don’t usually like how I dress?”

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“Just answer me—do you prefer looser clothes or ones like this?”

“I don’t have a preference either way.”

Tang Sowol frowned slightly, clearly dissatisfied, and pouted as she spoke.

“So, no matter what I wear or how much effort I put into dressing up, you don’t care at all?”

“That’s not true.”

Alarm bells rang in my head, and I instinctively denied her accusation.

“What I meant was, even if you wore rags and went unwashed for days, you’d still look beautiful to me.”

“Hmm. But that’s a separate matter. Surely you have a preference, don’t you?”

“Well... yes, I suppose so.”

“Then, from that perspective, how does this outfit fare?”

Faced with her unusually persistent questioning, I paused to think before replying.

“I think this one’s better. It feels fresh because it’s different from your usual style. But why are you suddenly asking this?”

“I’m deciding what to wear for our engagement ceremony. So, you’re saying you prefer something that feels different from the usual, right? Since it’s a special occasion, it’s better to wear something unique. Alright, I’ll try on another outfit with a similar feel.”

“Wait. What do you mean you’re going to try on another outfit *here*?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. If this were a wedding, there’d be a specific outfit I’d have to wear. But since it’s just an engagement ceremony, as long as it’s formal, the attire is relatively flexible.”

“Why not just settle on the one you’re wearing now?”

“Oh, come on. I’ve got a few more prepared; we need to compare them! Unless... am I being a bother?”

“No, it’s fine. We still have some time before the meal anyway.”

“Great! After I decide on my outfit, let’s have a meal and then pick out your outfit together.”

“That sounds—”

“Hmm? What was that?”

“I mean, I’m looking forward to it so much I’m speechless,” I said with a strained smile.

“And that’s how I spent the whole day either critiquing outfits or giving my thoughts on her choices while she changed.”

“Junior brother... Are you bragging to me right now?”

“Excuse me? Did you even listen to what I just said, senior brother?”

“Was I wrong? Sounds to me like Sowol wants to show you her best side. She even let you help pick out her outfit.”

“I was hoping you’d focus on the part where I was tortured all day...”

“How is that a bad thing? Don’t tell me you found our Sowol bothersome?”

Tang Cheong’s gaze sharpened slightly as he stared at me. Letting out a long sigh, I quickly shook my head.

“Of course not. I didn’t mean it that way. Would you like to hear more?”

“Hmph. Let’s hear it, then.”

There was something vaguely prickly about his reaction. Even Tang Cheong, who dotes on his youngest sister, might find what I’m about to say exhausting.

“This happened the next day...”

“Brother Cheon, would you like to try this tea?”

“What’s this?”

“It’s tea brewed with crane spirit grass.”

“Are you trying to poison me?”

Crane spirit grass is infamous as a highly toxic herb. Consuming it raw would melt the organs of even a seasoned martial artist. When combined with other poisons, it creates the infamous *Seven Steps Soul Chasing Poison*—a lethal toxin that kills within seven steps.

And now Tang Sowol was offering me tea brewed with it.

Had I unknowingly done something to upset her? I stared at her face, searching for a clue.

But no matter how hard I thought, I couldn’t recall doing anything wrong. Just yesterday, I’d spent all day helping her pick out clothes.

Catching my gaze, Tang Sowol chuckled gleefully.

“Haha! Do you really think I’d serve you something harmful? Don’t worry; it’s diluted to a safe level.”

“That’s a relief, but... why are you giving me poison tea in the first place?”

“Because it’s necessary.”

“You’re not planning to poison me and use the antidote as leverage to make me do things, are you?”

“Do you think this is some kind of poison sect?! Of course not! I mean... I might want to have you do a few things, but...!”

“So, there is something.”

“Absolutely not! This is for your benefit, young hero.”

“How can poison be beneficial? Even if some poisons can be medicinal when used correctly, crane spirit grass is notorious for being pure poison.”

“You’re very knowledgeable, young hero. Most people without poison-related training wouldn’t know that.”

“Well, my betrothed specializes in poison, so I thought I should learn a bit.”

I’d picked up some basic knowledge from the books I’d read at the Tang Clan’s poison library, along with things I’d learned in my past life.

It wouldn’t directly help me with martial arts, but knowledge of poisons and medicine is always useful.

Hearing this, Tang Sowol smiled approvingly and nodded.

“Well done. That’s a great attitude to have. Shall I pat your head as a reward?”

“No need. And stop treating me like a child.”

When I gave her a pointed look, Tang Sowol raised her hands in mock surrender, still smiling.

Her smug grin irritated me more than usual, so I asked again, half-grumbling.

“Fine. How exactly is diluted poison supposed to be good for me?”

“Crane spirit grass is highly toxic, but that also means you can develop a strong resistance to it.”

Tang Sowol explained that by drinking increasingly concentrated crane spirit grass tea, I could eventually build complete immunity to its poison.

She continued, “In doing so, you’ll also develop resistance to many plant-based toxins. It’s incredibly versatile!”

“Huh... That does sound impressive. But if it’s so great, why doesn’t everyone build immunity to it?”

“That’s simple. First, most people don’t know how to properly extract and dilute the poison. A single mistake could kill you. Who would gamble their life on that?”

“I see. And the second reason?”

“Money,” she said with a knowing smile.

“Money?”

“Exactly. Crane spirit grass is extremely rare and can’t be cultivated artificially. Even a single root costs a fortune. And building immunity requires a constant supply. The expense would be enormous.”

“And yet, you’re giving it to me?”

“Impressed, are you? But don’t worry too much...”

Tang Sowol raised her index finger, and from its tip, a dark, viscous droplet formed.

“Thanks to my *Poison Spirit Constitution*, I can generate it myself.”

Ah. That explained it. With her unique constitution, once she’d absorbed the poison, she could reproduce it indefinitely without additional cost.

Relieved, I looked down at the tea.

“Fine. I’ll give it a try.”

“Go ahead. Drink it all in one go.”

Under her expectant gaze, I drank the tea in one gulp.

And immediately, I regretted it.

“Ugh!”

“Brother Cheon?!”

My body felt feverish, my stomach churned, and pain radiated from my core—classic symptoms of poisoning.

Clenching my teeth, I used all my inner energy to suppress the toxin. Meanwhile, Tang Sowol panicked, her hands fluttering nervously.

“W-why is this happening? I was sure the dilution was perfect...”

Supporting my swaying body, she mumbled incoherently.

I exhaled sharply and asked, “Did you account for the enhanced toxicity caused by *Self-Poisoning Hybrid Grass*?”

“...Ah.”

Her dumbfounded expression was the last thing I saw before closing my eyes.

Thankfully, I only ended up with a mild fever and stomach cramps. Still, I spent half the day stuck in the restroom.

“So, there was a slight mishap, but it was an effort to help me build my resilience to poison. That’s all.”

“Sounds like Sowol went to a lot of trouble to get you something beneficial,” Tang Cheong said with a sly grin.

“Please don’t make it sound like she gave me some miraculous tonic, senior brother.”

“Well, isn’t that what it was?”

That might apply to Tang Clan members like him, but not to me.

Suppressing my complaints, I sighed, only for Tang Cheong to suddenly heave a deep sigh of his own.

“Hah. I came here to tell you that the Hao Mun offered a *Gongjin Pill* as an apology, but instead, I’ve spent all this time listening to your stories.”

“You should’ve led with that!”

The *Gongjin Pill* was a high-grade elixir, just barely in the upper tier.

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The Outer Courtyard Hall, where most of the guests resided. Among them, I headed to the place that had only recently begun to be inhabited.

An unexpected scene unfolded before me.

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t you see? I’m training in martial arts.”

Seol Lihyang was trembling in a horse stance. I scanned her up and down carefully—then, I was startled.

“Unless it's a special exception, all martial arts start from the lower body. Strengthening your lower body deepens your martial foundation and increases stamina. It’s tough, but it's a win-win situation.”

“If you understand that, then just go away already. I’m dying here, don’t distract me.”

“But with that posture, you’re just making it difficult for yourself without actually training properly.”

“What?”

Seol Lihyang’s eyes widened. However, her limbs were still trembling so much that she didn’t look particularly threatening.

“Your posture is a complete mess.”

I let out a deep sigh and placed my hands on her shoulders and elbows.

“Look. Extend your arms straight, and relax your shoulders. Don’t try to lift your arms using your shoulders. Ah, and don’t forget to keep your arms parallel to the ground.”

“Huh? Wh-what?”

Seol Lihyang made a strange sound. I shook my head at her dumbfounded expression and pressed lightly on her legs.

“Your thighs should be parallel to the ground, just like your arms. If it's too hard, don't half-raise them awkwardly—spread your legs wider instead.”

“Where do you think you're touching?!”

“Obviously, your thighs. They're bent at an angle that's putting unnecessary strain on your knees. Lower yourself more—think of it like sitting in an invisible chair.”

“M-my butt...”

For a moment, Seol Lihyang's face flushed red. But she soon let out a long sigh and corrected her posture as instructed.

“Good. Now, hold that position and count to a hundred.”

“You suddenly show up out of nowhere, and now this...!”

“Ah, fine! I'll do it! Just stop looking at me like I'm some incomprehensible creature!”

Shouting, Seol Lihyang began counting. Seeing her putting in the effort was rather satisfying.

As I watched with amusement, she somehow managed to count all the way to a hundred before collapsing onto the ground, sprawled out in the open training area.

She didn't even have the energy to shout anymore—just panting quietly.

I picked her up and carried her over to a shaded area under a tree beside the training ground.

“Ahh... that feels nice.”

“Well, of course, it's cool. You're in the shade.”

“As if I didn't know that? I was thanking you for moving me.”

“Then just say thank you from the start.”

“Thank you! Happy now?!”

“Well done.”

I chuckled at Seol Lihyang’s exaggerated way of emphasizing each syllable and ruffled her long, sweat-drenched hair.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Wiping off the sweat I got on me from carrying a certain someone who was stupidly overexerting herself in training.”

“I-I take back my thanks! I don’t need it, just get lost!”

“This is the only shaded spot around here. Besides, I came to talk to you—I can’t just leave now.”

Seol Lihyang shot a glare at me without a word.

Her gaze was sharp, but for some reason, it didn't feel threatening at all.

Maybe it was because I was too used to the Seol Lihyang of my past life.

Back then, she was hostile to nearly everyone except for a select few she had opened her heart to.

Even for me, it took months of enduring her sharp glares before she even started to acknowledge me.

It wasn't surprising that I ended up being sent to Ironblood Hall.

Despite her extraordinary talent and mastery of the rare Sound Arts, she clashed with others far too often.

Even though the Black Lotus Sect belonged to the unorthodox faction, it was still an organization. Having a single outstanding individual was good, but internal discipline was far more important.

Of course, I was also demoted because I had a habit of drawing my sword at the slightest provocation.

Seol Lihyang, who had been glaring at me, eventually sighed in resignation and asked,

“So? What did you want to talk about? Shouldn’t you be busy preparing for your engagement with Sister Tang?”

“I am busy. That’s why I ran away... No, I came to see you before things got even busier.”

“???”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head in confusion, but I ignored it and continued.

“Oh, but first, I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“I heard that while you were looking for a decent martial art to practice, a Tang family martial artist was assigned to guide you in your fundamentals. Have you always been training alone with such a terrible stance?”

“No! My instructor teaches me well. My posture only got weird because I was practicing alone. Normally, they correct me properly.”

“Then what was I looking at just now?”

“Uh... actually, today was supposed to be my rest day, so I was studying literature all morning, but...”

“But?”

“My head started hurting, so I took a little break, and, well... this happened.”

So basically, she used training as an excuse to avoid studying.

As I stared at her with mixed feelings, Seol Lihyang covered her face with her hands and shouted,

“D-don’t look at me like that!”

“Well, I can understand.”

After all, when I first started learning to read, I also made similar excuses to escape to the training grounds—only to be dragged back by the Ironblood Hall Master multiple times.

“Still, when you’re told to rest, you should actually rest. Make sure you follow that one rule.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll just spend the rest of the day studying properly.”

“I’m not just saying this for nothing. I don’t know who your instructor is, but the Tang Clan wouldn’t assign just anyone to train you. He’s probably not quite a master, but at least an experienced instructor. There’s a reason why he told you to rest today.”

“Oh! Right. He’s the vice-captain of the Dark Soul Unit. I’ve seen him a few times on my way here.”

“The vice-captain of the Dark Soul Unit?”

Of all people, they assigned her a vice-captain from one of the Tang Clan's two major combat units?

I had seen him a few times while traveling to Guangdong. He was a seasoned martial artist, nearly at the peak level, and a formidable female warrior at that.

Although the Dark Soul Unit primarily specialized in hidden weapons, she also carried a whip at her waist, meaning she was skilled in unconventional weapons as well.

“The Tang Clan must have high expectations for you. Don't waste this opportunity.”

“I know. He even volunteered to teach me. There's no way I'd take it lightly.”

“He volunteered?”

“Yeah. He said he had a similar past to mine. The Tang Clan gave him a new chance, and he hoped I'd get the same.”

“Huh.”

That made sense. Tang Sowol once told me that the only two requirements to join the Dark Soul Unit were skill with hidden weapons and absolute loyalty to the Tang Clan.

If unmarried, members were sometimes arranged to marry into a branch family of the Tang Clan.

Only highly vetted individuals could join, and at the same time, all of them had no choice but to be deeply loyal to the clan.

“Well, lucky you. But if you knew all this, why did you still overwork yourself today?”

“Ugh! I-I won’t do it again, so drop it already!”

“I’m not scolding you. I’m just concerned.”

“...Concerned?”

“Yes. Usually, when you're told to rest, it means they're going to push you to the brink of death soon, so you should recover while you can.”

Seol Lihyang's face stiffened as she realized she had dug her own grave.

I chuckled at her pale expression before finally getting to my main point.

“By the way, after the engagement ceremony, Tang Sowol and I will be traveling to Shaanxi for a while. I'll be gone for some time, so I wanted to let you know in advance.”

“...What? Just the two of you?!”

And a few days later—

Tang Sowol and I held our engagement ceremony.

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The engagement ceremony was held in an atmosphere that was neither modest nor overly extravagant.

The decorations were lavish, and Tang Sowol was dressed even more splendidly. However, the ceremony itself was brief and ended quickly.

Though many people gathered, the only outsiders present were the Hao Clan's emissaries, who had conveniently arrived to deliver the Gongjin Pill.

A modest banquet was held, and food was distributed to the nearby households of Chengdu. Yet, very few people actually knew my name.

Well... that didn't mean everything went smoothly.

“Here! Have a drink!”

“But Elder, I still have the cup I just received from Third Elder.”

“Then hurry up and empty that one so you can take mine!”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I downed the liquor in one gulp.

A scorching heat burned down my throat, followed by the delayed aroma of alcohol. My vision wavered for a moment.

I didn't dislike drinking—in fact, I enjoyed it occasionally.

But this was my first time drinking in my new body since returning to the past, and I'd never been forced to drink this much all at once. Controlling the intoxication wasn't easy.

“Phaah...”

“Haha! Well done! I'll pour a little more than that stingy Third Elder, so look forward to it!”

As I let out a long breath, First Elder, who was sitting beside me, roared with laughter and filled my empty cup again.

Drip, drip.

I had just emptied it, yet my cup was already brimming with liquor once more.

The reflection on the surface revealed my face, now completely flushed red.

The engagement ceremony itself went without issue.

The problem was the banquet that followed.

Elders I had never met before gathered one by one, offering me drinks. High-ranking members of the Tang Clan joined in as well, each pouring me a cup.

From my perspective, I had already consumed dozens of drinks without pause.

Even though I was discreetly using my inner energy to purge the alcohol, my body—still not fully matured—was struggling to keep up.

Eventually, I swallowed my pride and spoke carefully.

“May I have some food before continuing?”

“Hmm? Ah, of course! Hahaha!”

At least First Elder, who had just poured me a drink, still had some consideration.

He laughed heartily instead of urging me to drink.

I stuffed a mouthful of fatty pork into my mouth.

At the very least, they wouldn't make me drink while I was eating.

As I slowly chewed, First Elder chuckled and patted my back.

“Looks like those old geezers gave you a hard time. Sorry about that. But we had our reasons.”

With my mouth full, I couldn't respond, so I simply listened.

His graying hair and beard, along with his slightly worn green martial robe, gave him an aged appearance.

Yet his eyes gleamed with a sharp light—a textbook image of an old master.

The kind they warn you about in the martial world: *Beware of old men and children.*

Judging from his presence, First Elder was indeed a martial artist of extraordinary skill.

He smirked.

“No need to answer. Just listen.”

“The clan head firmly instructed us elders—me included—to honor a past promise now that Sowol has brought home her fiancé.”

“...?”

“Normally, the marriage of a direct descendant is a matter of great importance for the entire clan. But Sowol had the issue of her Poison Spirit Physique.”

The Poison Spirit Physique alters the body, making it almost akin to poison itself.

If one hasn't absorbed any poison yet, it's not a problem.

But once serious poison arts training begins, toxic energy naturally seeps into the body.

The owner of the Poison Spirit Physique develops immunity to their own poison, so it isn't an issue for them—but for their offspring?

A fragile fetus wouldn't stand a chance against the toxic energy.

Once a person with the Poison Spirit Physique reaches a certain level, having children becomes nearly impossible.

“Sowol is the Tang Clan’s blessing. She will undoubtedly achieve greatness and further advance our martial arts. But to do so, she had to sacrifice a part of her future.”

Her talent was so immense that merely practicing poison arts practically guaranteed her success.

Yet, training in poison arts meant forfeiting certain aspects of her life.

Tang Sowol was part of the Sichuan Tang Clan.

Even if it was for the good of the clan, it was unfair to force her into a one-sided sacrifice.

“So we, the elders, made a promise with the clan head. If Sowol ever chose to marry, it would be a matter of the Tang Clan, but one beyond our interference. We agreed to respect it without opposition.”

I had indeed done much for the Tang Clan.

I had saved Tang Sowol’s life.

I had given her the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass, an invaluable herb for a poison master.

I had also provided a cultivation method that could mitigate the Poison Spirit Physique's side effects.

Still, even considering all of that, the speed and lack of opposition to our engagement had left me puzzled.

Now, I finally understood why.

“You’ve been living in the Tang Clan for quite some time, but you only met the elders at the engagement ceremony. That was deliberate.”

“I used to think I wouldn’t be like this, but as I aged, I became a stubborn old man. Rather than risk saying something unnecessary, I chose to avoid meeting you altogether.”

Gulp.

I swallowed my food before speaking.

“Then... should I take it that you're sitting here with me now because no unnecessary words will be spoken?”

“You catch on quick. The other elders likely feel the same, but I, too, am grateful to you. Thanks to you, I was able to let go of one of my burdens. I feel lighter than ever. So, drink up. You’ve had enough time to purge the alcohol by now.”

“...You knew?”

“Your inner energy control was subtle enough to impress even me, but you can’t hide the scent.”

Poison cultivators tend to have highly sensitive noses.

They must distinguish between various toxins by smell.

I hadn't expected them to differentiate between the natural aroma of alcohol and the unnatural scent of purged liquor.

Martial prowess aside, the experience these elders had honed over the years was a weapon in its own right.

I let out a dry laugh and raised my cup.

“In that case, I’ll gladly accept another drink.”

The next morning, I woke to the presence of Tang Sowol entering my room.

I let out a deep sigh.

“...I’m dying.”

“I told you to drink in moderation. You kept accepting everything the elders offered—of course, your body couldn’t handle it.”

“There were... reasons.”

“Yes, yes. It was your first time drinking, so you misjudged your limits? I understand. I did the same. But next time, drink with me.”

Tang Sowol patted my back as if I were a reckless child who had wandered too close to the water.

I felt strangely conflicted about how things had turned out.

But I had no excuse—I really had drunk myself unconscious.

“Are you sure you want to leave today? We could rest for a day before setting out.”

“I have a plan. Just watch.”

I stretched to clear my head, then pulled a small wooden box from my robe.

As soon as I opened the lid, the distinct, musty scent of medicinal herbs filled the air.

“That’s... Gongjin Pill, isn’t it?”

“Right. The one Hao Clan sent.”

The Hao Clan had been put in a desperate situation thanks to the chaos caused by Red Flower Pavilion’s master.

In an attempt to smooth things over, they had hastily sent this as an apology.

It wasn’t on the level of legendary elixirs like Great Restoration Pill, Purple Heaven Pill, or Hundred Poisons Pure Blood Pill, but it was still one of the best medicines available for purchase.

It was their way of showing utmost sincerity.

Tang Sowol looked at me in disbelief.

“...Cheon So-hyeob, surely you’re not—?”

“Mmm. If I absorb it, my hangover should be gone.”

The elixir was processed for easy absorption, but that didn't mean all of its effects would directly convert into inner energy.

Some loss was inevitable—it would either dissipate with one's breath or be absorbed into the body's meridians.

Once the energy seeped into the meridians, the body would naturally regain vitality, and minor ailments like hangovers would vanish instantly.

Unless I had suffered a severe internal injury, the elixir's effects wouldn't be significantly diminished by something as trivial as a hangover.

Even so, most martial artists preferred to consume elixirs when their bodies were in optimal condition—for the sake of focus.

In other words, as long as my concentration remained intact, there was no issue using an elixir as a hangover cure.

It wasn't some priceless ancient relic—just a Gongjin Pill. I could still extract its full potential in my current state.

Gongjin Pill was considered a high-grade elixir, but I had taken it multiple times in my past life. There was no need for concern.

Of course, Tang Sowol, who was unaware of this, was understandably alarmed and hurriedly tried to stop me.

“W-wait a moment, So-hyeob! Maybe you should take that later—”

But I was faster.

The moment the pill touched my tongue, it melted like thick honey.

A second ago, it had carried the bitter scent of medicinal herbs—now, it exuded a crisp, refreshing fragrance.

As soon as the elixir slid down my throat, I swiftly guided its energy along the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art circulation method.

At the same time, I accelerated my inner energy circulation to the maximum, using the generated flow to forcefully refine the Gongjin Pill's energy.

The energy, which had begun to scatter, was quickly assimilated into my existing qi and rushed through my meridians.

One cycle. Two cycles. Three cycles.

With each repetition, the elixir's energy gradually merged with my own, becoming completely attuned to my inner power.

After several cycles, the entire energy of the Gongjin Pill had become mine—except for the small portion I had lost during the initial acceleration.

To finish, I ran my qi through my body two more times, allowing the newly acquired energy to settle in my dantian.

Only after fully stabilizing my qi did I slowly open my eyes.

“Huuh...”

My dantian, noticeably heavier than before, gave off a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

The hangover that had been weighing me down was completely gone, and my mind was crystal clear.

Smirking in satisfaction, I nodded.

“Not bad.”

“*Not bad?! What part of this is not bad?!*”

Tang Sowol, who had been standing guard, sighed in exasperation and began furiously smacking my shoulder.

I took a few hits without complaint before rising to my feet.

“Enough. Just watch.”

“Watch *what?*”

Though she grumbled, she halted her assault and observed.

In response, I drew my sword.

Then, without hesitation, I channeled my newly increased inner energy into the blade.

Wooong—

A faint resonance rang out as a crimson aura flared up along the sword.

Unlike when I fought the Demonic Sound Witch, I could now manifest sword energy without forcing it.

It wouldn't last long, but it was more than sufficient for actual combat.

Tang Sowol, still frozen in place, stared at the blazing energy coating my blade.

Her rarely-seen dumbfounded expression made me grin.

“What do you think? Seems like I absorbed it well enough.”

“...Eh? Ah, ahem.”

She quickly cleared her throat and regained her composure.

“I suppose I was worrying over nothing. Still, I was *startled*, so please at least *warn me* next time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tang Sowol, her face still faintly flushed, hastily nodded before awkwardly changing the subject.

“A-anyway, are you fully prepared for the trip?”

“I plan to finish up now. But I already got most of it ready yesterday.”

A sturdy martial robe, a well-sharpened sword, and a moderately sized travel bag.

It might seem too simple for a journey to Shaanxi, but a heavy coin pouch made all the difference.

Tang Sowol seemed to have had the same thought—her attire was nearly identical to mine.

For some reason, it reminded me of when I first kidnapped her.

Noticing my gaze, Tang Sowol, whose cheeks were still faintly red, giggled and spread her arms playfully.

“You’re not going to kidnap me this time, are you?”

“If you want, I could.”

“Hehe. Tempting, but perhaps next time. Besides, my father and Seol Lihyang are already waiting for us outside.”

“...Wait. Since when?”

“Since I walked in, most likely?”

“How long did it take for me to absorb the Gongjin Pill?”

“Hmm... In about a quarter of an hour—oh.”

Only then did Tang Sowol realize what had just happened.

Her eyes widened in shock.

It was early morning.

A betrothed daughter had entered her fiancé’s room.

And she was only leaving a long while later.

Meanwhile, the fiancé, who had supposedly been drinking all night, appeared perfectly fine—if not more energetic than before.

“...Hmm.”

Did I just screw myself over?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“You—what in the world were you doing in there that took you so long... Hmm?”

Tang Jincheon, who had been narrowing his eyes at me, suddenly paused and let out a dry chuckle.

“Well, this is ridiculous. I was about to say something, but now I can’t even complain.”

“Didn’t you receive a Gongjin Pill from the Hao Clan, Father-in-law? It’s all thanks to that.”

“Hah. Gongjin Pill is indeed a fine elixir, but its effects are limited to boosting internal energy. When did this happen?”

Long ago.

Of course, I couldn’t say that, so I forced a wry smile and answered vaguely.

Fortunately, I had already shown glimpses of sword energy before.

“I had already grasped the concept while crossing swords with the Demonic Cult. After experiencing real combat until I collapsed from exhaustion, I had no choice but to internalize it.”

“To be honest, that’s hard to believe. How many people at your age could reach this level? Even I wasn’t this skilled back then.”

“I’m still incomplete. I have the realization, and I have the internal energy, but my body hasn’t caught up yet.”

“That part can’t be helped. The only solution is to take the time to train properly.”

Tang Jincheon let out a small laugh before gesturing toward the two people standing behind him.

“I was planning to assign a proper escort this time so you wouldn’t come back injured again, but... maybe that was unnecessary.”

“About that...”

“I’m joking. Whether you like it or not, I’ll be assigning them to you. Don’t even think about shaking them off.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

As I nodded, Seol Lihyang, who had just finished exchanging greetings with Tang Sowol, approached me.

“Cheon Hwi-da. That talk just now... I don’t understand all of it, but... you got stronger, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Congrats. And, um... make sure to stay safe.”

“Even you are saying that now?”

“I heard you always come back injured whenever you go out.”

...I can't deny that.

Even before taking the Gongjin Pill, I wasn't someone who would just get beaten up.

But how could I control the way events unfolded?

It was a little unfair to think about how others might perceive me, but since it was technically true, I decided to change the subject.

“Just make sure to keep up with your training while I'm gone. If you overdo it again like last time, you'll only end up hurting yourself.”

“I already got scolded for that once. I won’t do it again, so don’t worry.”

“Good.”

With a nod, I turned my gaze toward the middle-aged woman standing a bit further back.

This wasn’t the first time I had seen her.

I had briefly exchanged greetings with her during the banquet after the engagement ceremony.

I couldn’t recall her name, but I was certain she was the vice-captain of the Blood Venom Unit.

“Don’t tell me the vice-captain is assigned to be our escort?”

“With your skills, it would only be fitting for a vice-captain to accompany you as a guard, don’t you think?”

If the Dark Soul Unit was composed of assassins specializing in hidden weapons, then the Blood Venom Unit was a force made up of warriors who specialized in poison arts.

Naturally, only first-rate martial artists could join, and a vice-captain was someone who had reached the peak master level.

Assigning such a high-level escort meant that Tang Jincheon truly valued Tang Sowol—and that he had been deeply anxious during the time he lost contact with her.

This time, he must have wanted to ensure her journey through the martial world went smoothly.

He likely hadn't mentioned it, but I wouldn't be surprised if he had also arranged for people to secretly report back on our movements—just like he did the first time Tang Sowol set out.

Not that it mattered, since we weren't heading anywhere particularly dangerous.

We departed from the Tang Clan, making our way toward Shaanxi Province.

This time, there was no need to rush.

Since this was, in name, a continuation of Tang Sowol's unfinished journey through the martial world, we didn't take a carriage.

Instead, we traveled on foot, carrying only what could fit in a single travel bag.

Of course, with plenty of money on hand, it wasn't exactly an ordinary journey.

As we walked and chatted, Chengdu gradually shrank into the distance.

At some point, when the city had become just a small speck behind us, the vice-captain moved closer and asked,

“So, you're traveling to Shaanxi. Is there anything in particular you wish to see?”

“Well, since we’re going to Shaanxi, I was thinking of visiting Zhongnan Mountain and Mount Hua.”

The elixir I had heard about in my past life was supposedly hidden in a cave at Daemang Mountain, slightly below Zhongnan Mountain.

By setting our destination as Zhongnan and Mount Hua, we would naturally pass by it.

The vice-captain seemed to consider my words for a moment before speaking again.

“Before that, I’d like to ask something. Now that you are officially part of the Tang Clan, would you mind speaking more comfortably? You’re casual with Lady Sowol, yet you still address us formally.”

“If that’s what you prefer. But I recall Tang Sowol using honorifics when speaking to you.”

“She speaks formally to everyone, so it’s fine.”

“...I see.”

“Also, I’ll send letters ahead to Zhongnan Sect and Mount Hua Sect. While it wouldn’t be difficult to prove Lady Sowol’s identity, suddenly showing up without notice might be inconvenient for both sides.”

“Wait. I was only planning to look around the foot of the mountains.”

Zhongnan Mountain and Mount Hua had long been revered as sacred lands.

Now, with Zhongnan Sect and Mount Hua Sect flourishing as the dominant sects of Shaanxi, countless people flocked to them.

I had only intended to blend in with the crowd and take a casual look around.

But the vice-captain shook her head.

“Since I’m traveling with you, it would be better to send a letter and at least exchange greetings.”

“...Hmm?”

The Sichuan Tang Clan was part of the Five Great Families.

Naturally, they maintained good relations with other orthodox sects, including Zhongnan Sect and Mount Hua Sect.

If a Tang Clan heiress visited a village at the foot of their mountains without even a formal greeting, it wouldn't be rude, but it would still be seen as somewhat improper.

"...Is that so?"

"Yes. Of course, if you wish to quietly admire the mountains, we can simply say so. There's no need to worry about a lengthy visit."

"The orthodox sects are as complicated as ever."

"You'll get used to it soon enough."

As I scratched my head, Tang Sowol, who had been giggling behind her hand, suddenly spoke as if she had remembered something.

“Oh, even if we only briefly greet Zhongnan Sect, could we stop by Mount Hua for a longer visit? I have a friend there that I’d like to see.”

“I don’t mind. We’ll send the letters regardless.”

After that, just as planned, we sent letters from the next village and continued traveling toward Shaanxi, taking time to sightsee along the way.

Since Tang Sowol’s first martial world journey had been cut short by her kidnapping, she seemed eager to make the most of this trip.

As for me, I spent my time training movement techniques, getting accustomed to my increased internal energy, and occasionally drawing out sword energy—all while watching Tang Sowol’s delighted expressions up close.

Of course, it wasn’t all smooth sailing.

But that was to be expected.

One reason young martial artists were sent on journeys was to gain real combat experience.

This also meant that the martial world of the Central Plains was constantly plagued with large and small incidents, forcing martial artists to gain real combat experience whether they wanted to or not.

There were scammers who specifically targeted naive young martial artists, disputes between warriors that dragged in bystanders even during a quiet meal at an inn, and bandits lurking beyond Sichuan Province.

Of course, most of these were swiftly handled by the vice-captain escorting us, but there were times when Tang Sowol or I had to step in as well.

If the danger wasn't too great, there was no reason to pass up an opportunity for practical combat experience.

After traveling for quite some time, we finally arrived at a village near Daemang Mountain.

It was my first time seeing it in person, but the location and surrounding terrain matched exactly with the descriptions I had heard.

As the sun began to set, I pointed toward the small village.

“Let’s stay there for the night.”

“Oh, perfect timing. Now that I think about it, we always seem to reach a village just when we’re getting tired or when night is about to fall. Is it just my imagination?”

“No, you’re right. Unless a village is too remote or intentionally planned, there’s usually another village within a day’s travel.”

“That’s fascinating.”

“There’s nothing strange about it. People’s walking pace and endurance haven’t changed much over time. Naturally, settlements formed in places that fit those distances.

"Of course, if we used lightness techniques or rode mounts, the pattern wouldn’t match as precisely.”

Tang Sowol tilted her head in thought.

“Still, I expected that we’d have to camp out a few times or, if our timing was off, rush with lightness techniques before nightfall.”

“Oh, that’s because we have an excellent guide.”

I smirked and gestured toward the vice-captain, who was still following us silently from behind.

Receiving our gazes, the vice-captain simply nodded without a word.

“I traveled through Shaanxi frequently in my younger days.”

“Oh? So you started your martial world journey here?”

Now that I thought about it, Tang Sowol had originally planned to start her journey in Hubei, not Shaanxi.

Her initial route was supposed to take her through Hubei, Anhui, Henan, and then Shaanxi, before returning to Sichuan.

She had intended to see nearly seventy percent of the orthodox martial world—only to get kidnapped right away.

Considering that, it made sense why she was still excited despite having been away from the Tang Clan for quite some time now.

The vice-captain of the Blood Venom Unit gave a nostalgic nod.

“Yes. At the time, I was about to join the Blood Venom Unit, so I wanted to experience the world one last time before fully committing myself.”

“Wow. What was Shaanxi like back then?”

“The trends have changed, and there are some new buildings, but overall, not much is different.

"Martial artists still fight every single day, and the powerless still suffer in the chaos.”

“Uh... We haven't seen anything that bad on our way here.”

Tang Sowol blinked, confused.

I shook my head.

“That’s because we didn’t stay to see the aftermath.”

“The aftermath?”

“Yes. When martial artists start a fight at an inn, who do you think pays for the damaged furniture and buildings?”

“The ones who broke them, of course.”

“But what if they’re already dead?”

“Hmm... I guess their sect or family would be contacted?”

“And if their sect refuses to take responsibility? After all, their disciple wasn’t the one who started a fight—they just got caught up in one.

"If it were me, I’d shift the blame elsewhere. Especially if my disciple was the one who died or got injured.”

Even if that wasn’t the case, the sect might have already suffered heavy losses from another conflict, leaving them unable to pay.

Or maybe they were simply too far away for the victims to seek justice.

Of course, the local authorities would try to mediate, but... the chances of receiving full compensation were slim.

“More importantly, to ordinary people, martial artists are terrifying. Just demanding compensation could be dangerous for them.”

“...Oh.”

For someone like Tang Sowol, who was raised in the Tang Clan—one of the top five most powerful forces in the martial world—this was probably a foreign concept.

She stared at me, mouth slightly agape, as if she had just realized something.

Raising a finger, I briefly summarized what we had encountered so far.

“The fact that bandits exist means someone has already been robbed.

“The fact that scammers are still thriving means plenty of people have already fallen for their tricks.”

“Strength alone isn’t power, is it...?”

Tang Sowol nodded, looking slightly disheartened.

Perhaps feeling sorry for her, the vice-captain smiled faintly and spoke up.

“But not everything in the martial world is bad.

"For example, I met my husband during my journey."

"Wait, really?"

"It's true.

"I once ran out of travel funds and had to take a caravan escort job. During that mission, I suffered a serious injury, and the person who treated me was..."

The vice-captain began recounting her past in a calm voice.

Watching Tang Sowol's eyes light up again, I suddenly felt a little guilty.

Maybe I had focused too much on the negatives.

As I silently listened to the vice-captain's story alongside Tang Sowol, a thought suddenly struck me.

"...Hmm?"

A natural way to lead them to the cave where the elixir was hidden had just come to mind.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Deep within Daemang Mountain, there lies the ancient corpse of what appears to be a martial master, alongside tattered and decayed fragments of a martial manual and an extraordinary elixir.

It's easy to tell others about such a discovery, but convincing them to believe it and embark on the search together is an entirely different challenge.

Even to me, it sounds like a highly suspicious tale—something you'd expect to find in a cheap novel rather than reality.

To make matters worse, due to a certain mental restriction imposed upon me by the nature of my regression, I cannot reveal the fact that I have returned to the past.

If anyone were to ask how I knew about it or who told me, I'd have no answer, leaving me in an awkward situation.

Of course, I had considered sneaking off at night to search for it alone...

But honestly, trying to find a path I've only ever heard about in the pitch-black darkness? I wasn't confident. On top of that, there was no way I could completely deceive the Blood Venom Unit leader, who had been assigned to guard me.

I could suppress my aura enough to keep it from leaking out, but hiding my presence entirely like a seasoned assassin? That was beyond my abilities.

As I was pondering how to reach the cave naturally, I happened to see the Blood Venom Unit leader sharing tales of his younger days, with Tang Sowol listening intently.

That's when it hit me—I could do the same.

Fortunately, as embarrassing as it was, I had just the right story to tell.

So, at the break of dawn, as Tang Sowol was tying her hair in preparation for a light morning exercise, I approached her with a question.

“Shall we stay here for another day?”

“Hm? Why the sudden change of plans?”

“I want to explore the mountains nearby. Also, there’s something I’d like to share with you.”

“Hmm... I’m not sure what story you want to tell, but if that’s what you wish, I suppose staying an extra day wouldn’t hurt. It’s not like we’re in any hurry.”

Good. That was the first step.

After breakfast, we set off on a mountain path. It wasn’t particularly treacherous, so Tang Sowol and the Blood Venom Unit leader climbed at a leisurely pace.

Since the unit leader rarely spoke unless necessary, Tang Sowol was the first to break the silence.

“So? What’s this story that made you drag us up a mountain?”

“If I had to put it simply, it’s about my childhood.”

“Well... you still look like a child to me.”

“Then let’s say it’s a story from when I was even younger.”

“Heheh! I was just teasing. It’s just surprising since you never talk about yourself.”

Tang Sowol chuckled as she gently stroked my arm, as if soothing a sulking child. I had plenty of retorts ready, but since it was true that I was still young, I let it slide.

Besides, the story I was about to tell was from my past life, when I was around my current age.

I sighed lightly before continuing.

“Where should I start...? Ah, right. First, I should mention that I had a master.”

“Well, that’s to be expected, isn’t it? With your skills at such a young age, talent alone wouldn’t have been enough.”

“But my swordsmanship and internal energy techniques didn’t come from my master. I pieced them together from various martial arts I picked up along the way.”

“...What?”

Tang Sowol widened her eyes in disbelief, but it was the truth.

The Ironblood Hall leader had been something akin to a master to me, teaching me literature and many other things, but when it came to martial arts, she had only taught me movement techniques and basic combat strategies.

Sure, she had pointed out dangerous flaws in my crude swordsmanship and internal techniques, but that was about it.

She never truly passed down her martial arts to me. Even the movement technique she "taught" was something I developed out of necessity during my training.

That was why, until the day she breathed her last, I had never openly called her my master.

Because I had never inherited her true martial arts.

Lost in old memories, I fell silent for a moment. Tang Sowol, patiently waiting for me to continue, blinked at me curiously. Seeing her reaction, I smirked and resumed my story.

“My internal technique is a modified version of Blood Wolf Art—a third-rate demonic technique—refined using other internal arts I either bought or stole. As for my swordsmanship, I started with the basic Three Talents Sword Art, then experimented with countless styles, ultimately creating something that’s neither here nor there.”

“...Did you just say you modified and created your own techniques?”

“It’s not as impressive as it sounds. I had someone to correct me when I strayed too far, and I wasn’t inventing something new—I was merely adjusting existing techniques to suit myself. If someone else were to learn my martial arts, at best, they’d reach the level of a first-rate expert... maybe second-rate.”

The true power of Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art depended entirely on my personal insights.

Anyone lacking similar experiences or realizations would be consumed by its murderous aura and fall into deviation.

No matter how powerful it was, a technique was meaningless if one couldn't wield it with a clear mind.

The same applied to my swordsmanship. My style had no formal techniques. It was a patchwork of moves taken from various schools, used as needed.

However, each strike was executed at the precise moment, in the precise manner, with the precise intent required.

If I failed to do so, my swordsmanship would be nothing more than flailing.

After hearing my story, Tang Sowol shook her head in disbelief.

“To me, that sounds even more impressive. So when you rejected my father’s offer and spoke of ‘your own mountain to climb,’ this is what you meant?”

“That’s right. Though, I wouldn’t say it’s particularly impressive. It’s simply a matter of perspective. I don’t know much about orthodox martial arts, but I’ve heard that each technique carries a deeper meaning.”

But to me, techniques—no matter how refined—were merely methods of killing.

While others pursued martial arts as a way of life, passing them down through generations to elevate their lineage, I approached it differently.

That's why I dismantled techniques.

Even though my swordsmanship was nothing more than first-rate at best, all martial arts contained a true essence (眞, jin).

The quality of a technique depended on how well it embodied that essence, but no technique was entirely devoid of meaning.

Rather than trying to understand or embrace meanings that didn't resonate with me, I broke them down until nothing remained but their core movements—the smallest units of action that produced specific effects.

In the end, my sword was merely an assortment of these essential movements, wielded as the situation demanded.

If there was any underlying intent, it was simply to kill my enemy.

“So, to brag a little—I am good with a sword. I can confidently say that there aren’t many in all of the Central Plains who can match me. But... if you ask whether my sword has depth, the answer is no.”

That was why the Ironblood Hall leader had always told me...

That she hoped I wouldn’t live my life solely to survive.

That she wanted me to see the world, experience more, and realize that there were other paths besides the one I walked.

She had always tried to teach me a way to live, not just how to fight.

Ironically, it was only after losing everything once that I finally understood her words.

“Oh, now that I think about it, I heard something similar not too long ago.”

I glanced playfully at Tang Sowol, and she averted her gaze, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Ahem. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“If I have spent my whole life walking this path simply because I knew no other, then someone wanted to show me that there are different roads to take... and that this one isn’t so bad either. Even if you don’t remember saying it, Tang Sowol, I do. That’s enough.”

“Kyaaaah! Why are you suddenly bringing that up? And in front of other people, no less...!”

Flustered, Tang Sowol trailed off as she turned around.

There stood the Blood Venom Unit leader, looking away as if he hadn’t heard a thing.

Of course, the slight twitch at the corner of his lips suggested he had been listening quite intently.

Tang Sowol shot me a glare full of resentment, but I simply chuckled and shrugged.

“The conversation may have veered off track a little, but the point is this—I once thought I was a genius.”

“...I don’t quite follow how that’s your conclusion.”

“Why not? Even if my martial arts lack depth, I handle a sword well, don’t I? Now, imagine a younger version of me—one who just picked up a sword and hadn’t yet realized the importance of depth. What kind of thoughts do you think I had?”

“...Ah.”

At last, Tang Sowol seemed to grasp something, her lips parting slightly in realization.

Now, I knew that my lack of depth was the greatest obstacle preventing me from reaching the Flowering Stage.

I also knew that in this vast world, there existed a monster known as the Heavenly Demon.

But back when I was nothing more than a frog in a well, I genuinely believed that I was a once-in-a-lifetime prodigy.

“A genius born once in a thousand years. A hero whose name would go down in the annals of the martial world. A grandmaster who would single-handedly build a force to rival the Five Great Clans and the Nine Sects. ...I actually thought I might be that person.”

“Th-That much?!”

Tang Sowol looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

But shockingly, before my regression, the fifteen-year-old Cheon Hwi-da had truly believed such nonsense.

“Do you know why I have such extensive knowledge about special physiques?”

“Now that you mention it... that is rather strange.”

I knew an unusual amount about Poison Spirit Physique and Pure Yin Physique, mostly because I had heard firsthand accounts from those who possessed them.

But my knowledge extended beyond just those—I understood many rare constitutions, their abilities, their drawbacks, how to overcome them, where to go, and what martial arts to learn to make full use of them.

For an ordinary martial artist, such knowledge was entirely unnecessary.

And the reason I knew all this was simple.

“I thought I had one of those rare physiques.”

“...Excuse me???”

“To be honest, I figured that was the only explanation for my genius.”

Once again, I’ll say it—I was utterly convinced that I was special.

And why wouldn’t I?

I was newly enamored with martial arts, and I had reached a level where I was confident I could defeat every Red Sand Gang bastard except their leader.

That kind of arrogance stuck with me for quite some time.

“Thinking about it now, it’s so embarrassing I could dig a hole and hide in it. But back then, I was dead serious. Even when I was simply gathering firewood, I would deliberately venture deep into the mountains, looking for unusual terrain.”

“...I don’t quite understand. Why would you do that?”

“Because I figured someone like me was bound to stumble upon a great opportunity sooner or later.”

By now, Tang Sowol didn’t even have the energy to be surprised—she just gaped at me.

I fought the urge to poke her cheek and continued. This part was important.

“So, whenever I saw a tree with an unusual shape, I would investigate the area, wondering if something was hidden there.”

I casually pointed toward a tree in the distance, one that grew sideways in a shape eerily reminiscent of a snake with its mouth open.

As I stepped off the trail toward it, Tang Sowol and the Blood Venom Unit leader hesitated for a moment before following.

Good. I just needed to repeat this a few times.

We continued on, passing a toad-shaped boulder, a valley where the wind howled like wailing ghosts, and a waterfall that split into two streams.

And eventually, hidden behind thick foliage, we found a small cave.

I had heard of this place before my regression, so I had a vague idea of its location.

Though I wandered a bit, it didn't take long to find.

At first, Tang Sowol had been skeptical, but as the search went on, she started to enjoy herself, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

At last, we arrived at the cave entrance, and I paused before speaking.

“This is it. Back then, I thought this would be the final place—the one that held a true opportunity.

A sacred herb of unmatched power.

A slumbering mystical beast.

A hidden chamber where an ancient master had left behind a martial manual and a legendary elixir.”

“Hah. That’s the classic story, isn’t it? But... well, every now and then, things like that really do happen.”

Tang Sowol exhaled sharply, clearly enjoying the little adventure. I smirked and nodded.

“Well then, let’s go inside. Just... don’t get your hopes up too much.”

“Heh. At this point, something has to be here. Didn’t you find the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass in a similar manner?”

“...I suppose you could say that.”

After all, I had found it based on information I remembered from my past life.

“Alright, that’s enough talk. Stand beside me. We’re going in together.”

“Got it.”

With Tang Sowol standing next to me, I pushed aside the overgrown foliage covering the entrance and stepped inside.

Just as expected, at the center of the cave lay a single martial manual and a wooden box emitting an ominous aura.

And sitting cross-legged before them...

A gaunt old man silently watched us.

The moment I sensed the concealed killing intent, my body reacted instinctively.

I drew my sword.

...I hadn't expected him to still be alive.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

According to the stories I had heard before my regression, this cave was supposed to contain a damaged martial manual, a precious elixir, and the remains of an ancient corpse.

But right now, inside this cave, there was not only a manual and an elixir but also a gaunt old man silently glaring in our direction.

...So at this point in time, he was still alive.

For a moment, I hesitated. Then, as I instinctively sensed a hidden killing intent, my sword was already drawn.

Srrng—

“Brother Cheon? Why are you suddenly drawing your—wait... huh?”

Tang Sowol, who had been tilting her head in confusion, finally noticed the old man in the corner of the cave. She gasped in shock and immediately stepped back.

Her hand had already disappeared into her wide sleeves, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

At the same time, the Blood Venom Unit leader stepped forward, adopting a similar stance as he kept a wary eye on the old man.

A tense silence fell over the cave.

And then, the old man was the first to speak.

“Let's put an end to this. It seems we have a misunderstanding.”

His voice was slightly cracked but carried no hostility. In fact, the killing intent that had been directed at us had completely vanished.

I maintained my stance but eased my energy just slightly before speaking.

“Who exactly are you, and why are you here in this secluded cave?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Judging by that green robe, you must be from the Tang Clan. But what business do you have in this remote mountain in Shaanxi? This place is so deep in the wilderness that even wild beasts rarely roam here.”

“...I should rephrase my question, then. Who did you mistake us for to have released such quiet, yet lethal killing intent?”

“Oh? You noticed? That was just for an instant, yet you caught on... You have a keen sense for one so young. Or perhaps... I truly am nearing my end.”

He was right.

I had only sensed his presence after entering the cave, when I detected his killing intent.

Before that, outside the cave, I hadn't noticed even the slightest trace of him.

If not for my training in Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, which had made me highly sensitive to murderous intent, I likely wouldn't have noticed it at all.

That explained why Tang Sowol and the Blood Venom Unit leader had reacted a little slower.

This old man had concealed his presence so completely, and their focus had been on the martial manual and the elixir.

The old man chuckled to himself before adjusting his posture.

As he did, the faint aura surrounding him became clearer, making his figure more distinct in the shadows.

White, unkempt hair. Clothes stained black with dried blood.

And a severed leg, roughly hacked off.

I see...

So that's why he deliberately left out the martial manual and elixir as bait while keeping his presence hidden.

With his crippled body, fighting multiple rounds would be difficult.

His plan was likely to kill his opponent in a single strike.

Whoever he had been waiting for, it clearly wasn't us.

Despite his frail body—so thin he looked like he couldn't even lift a spoon—his sharp gaze was still brimming with life as he spoke.

“Ghost Shadow Thief. It's been a long time, but that's what they used to call me.”

“Ghost Shadow Thief...”

Tang Sowol widened her eyes as she repeated his name in disbelief.

She hesitated for a moment before whispering to me.

“Brother Cheon. Have you ever heard of the name ‘Ghost Shadow Thief’ before? I’ve learned about many renowned figures in the martial world as a daughter of the Tang Clan, but this is the first time I’m hearing this name.”

“It’s only natural that you haven’t. He was already a relic of the past even among veteran masters, and he hasn’t been active for decades.”

And he never would be again.

In the future I had experienced, the name ‘Ghost Shadow Thief’ had never once resurfaced.

The only reason I knew about him was because the Ironblood Hall Leader had mentioned him in passing.

In other words, only martial artists old enough to have reversed aging would still remember his name.

Seeing our subtle reaction, the Ghost Shadow Thief slumped his shoulders, looking slightly sheepish.

“Heh. I suppose I really have been retired for too long. Rather, I’m surprised you even know my name, young warrior.”

“My mentor once told me that you stole a martial art from their family when they were young. That’s why I remember.”

“...Hah. You’re not about to take revenge on behalf of your master, are you?”

“No. They already buried the past. If they don’t care, it would be ridiculous for me to avenge them.”

“That’s a relief.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief let out a long sigh.

And it was the truth.

The Ironblood Hall Leader, Seomun Hwarin, had abandoned all past grudges after her clan was annihilated, choosing to focus solely on avenging her family's destruction.

She had once said that she held no resentment toward a mere thief who had stolen some martial techniques when her clan was still intact.

The only reason I brought up the Ghost Shadow Thief was not to denounce him, but to use him as an example—someone like myself who had mastered various martial arts through theft and adaptation.

The old man smiled in relief upon hearing that his past crimes had not made him a target.

However, his expression soon hardened.

“I see. And I can tell neither of us has any intention of fighting.

I don't know why you came here, but wouldn't it be best if we simply went our separate ways?”

“...That’s a bit difficult. We were just playing a game of ‘searching for a hidden fortune’—and it seems we actually found one.”

“Why? Are you after the martial manual and the elixir?”

“I won’t deny it.”

“Brother Cheon?!”

Tang Sowol gasped, shocked at my blunt response.

I smirked and added,

“Of course, I’m not saying we intend to take them by force. Not that it would be easy to do so, anyway.”

The old man scoffed.

“So, I refuse to hand them over, and you don’t plan to rob me. Would you mind explaining in more detail?”

“...You seem to be in quite a dire situation.”

“I’d like to put on a brave front in front of young folks, but with one leg left and nearly a month of starvation, even that’s beyond me.”

“Then allow us to help you. In return, would you be willing to share the elixir?”

“So you’re saying I should exchange my life for the elixir. That’s quite reasonable. No matter how valuable an elixir may be, it can’t be worth more than a life. But unfortunately, I must refuse.”

“Why?”

My brow furrowed instinctively.

The Ghost Shadow Thief chuckled before answering.

“First, because I have no lingering attachments to life. I’m over ninety years old. I’ve lived long enough and accomplished almost everything I wanted.”

“‘Almost’...?”

“Let me finish. This is actually the most important reason— No one, not even you, should take that elixir. To be precise, no one should ever consume it.”

“...Why?”

“No matter how obsessed martial artists are with their swords and their pursuit of strength, there’s a line that shouldn’t be crossed. How could one be born as a human... and consume humans to gain power?”

“...I don’t understand what you mean.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief’s voice grew solemn.

“That elixir... was made from human lives. I stole it from the Demonic Cult.”

And in that cult, there was only one person who could be called a monster.

The Heavenly Demon.

The fact that the Heavenly Demon had already ascended to the position of Cult Leader of the Demonic Cult and was preparing to invade the Central Plains was something I had learned while interrogating Ye Neunghak, the leader of the Bloodhound Unit.

But I hadn't expected his name to come up here.

"...Can you tell us everything you know?"

The Ghost Shadow Thief looked at me for a moment before slowly nodding.

"Very well. I'll start from the beginning. It's a rather shameful story, but in my youth, I was a grave robber."

What followed was a tale that, while hardly honorable, was certainly eventful.

The Ghost Shadow Thief had once made his living by digging up graves and selling the treasures buried within.

One day, while plundering the tomb of a martial artist, he happened upon an ancient martial manual.

And thus, he began his path as a warrior.

But old habits die hard. Even after mastering martial arts, he didn't abandon his ways.

Instead of robbing the dead, he started robbing the living.

Money, elixirs, martial arts manuals, rare artifacts—anything of value, he stole without hesitation.

“Only two things were exceptions: human lives and things as precious as life itself. After all, there's no point in stealing something you can't use or even brag about.”

To him, thievery was a way to test his own skills and validate his worth.

“To live as a shameless thief my entire life, then to gain the title of Ghost Shadow Thief, earning both contempt and admiration— There was no greater thrill.”

“...If you loved it so much, then why did you retire?”

“Because there was nothing left to steal.”

At his peak, Ghost Shadow Thief was virtually unstoppable.

His combat ability was merely top-tier, but his mastery of stealth and movement techniques allowed him to evade even Flowering Stage grandmasters—if only for a brief moment.

“The last thing I ever stole... was the former empress’s undergarments.”

“...I see. That’s... quite impressive.”

Tang Sowol, who had been listening quietly, forced out an awkward compliment in a voice laced with disgust.

The old thief merely shrugged as if pleased with himself.

“I had stolen from the most prestigious martial sects, slipped past imperial palaces guarded by elite warriors and formation arrays, and walked in and out as I pleased. As a thief, I had already achieved everything there was to achieve.”

At that moment, he realized—no matter what he did from then on, he would never surpass what he had already accomplished.

And so, he chose to retire.

“I never took a disciple. After all, all I had ever learned was thievery. I may have been addicted to the thrill of success, but... It wasn't exactly a noble pursuit, was it?”

“...At least you were self-aware.”

“That self-awareness is the only reason I managed to live this long.”

Starting with a stolen martial art from a grave, he had pieced together, adapted, and refined countless techniques—

All for the sake of stealing.

But he had no desire to pass down his legacy.

At this point, Tang Sowol cautiously asked,

“Um... You said you stole from many prestigious sects. Then... by any chance...”

“Don’t worry.

True inheritance arts are more precious than life to martial artists.

From the Tang Clan, I only stole a rather mediocre whip technique and a formula for anesthetic poisons.”

“...That is still highly classified information.”

Tang Sowol let out a dry laugh, looking exasperated.

But it seemed she had no intention of holding him accountable for ancient crimes.

“After retiring, I lived a peaceful life with the fortune I had amassed. But as death slowly crept closer... I realized I couldn’t bear to let everything I had stolen go to waste.”

“Did you decide to distribute it among the common folk, like some kind of righteous outlaw?”

“That would be far too boring. Since I started as a grave robber... wouldn’t it be fitting to end as one?”

He wasn’t saying he planned to rob graves again.

It was the opposite.

He wanted his own grave to be robbed.

He planned to gather everything he had ever stolen into a single massive and elaborate tomb—

Then spread rumors and maps across the Central Plains, leading future treasure seekers to it.

“But in my old age, a new desire arose. I had already stolen from both orthodox sects and imperial treasures— Wouldn’t it be perfect if I also had treasures from the outer martial world?”

Thus, the Ghost Shadow Thief targeted two places:

Northern Sea Ice Palace and Southern Barbarian Beast Palace.

His body wasn’t what it once was, so he couldn’t steal anything too significant.

Still, he managed to take a noteworthy yin-based internal technique from Ice Palace and a beast-hide breastplate from the Beast Palace’s secret vault.

“And lastly... I planned to steal something from the Demonic Cult. Honestly, I wasn’t too worried. After all, while their poisons are impressive, their martial arts... are far from remarkable.”

His original goal?

To steal something simple—perhaps even a fire poker used to maintain the sacred flames they revered.

But what he saw there changed everything.

He witnessed people willingly sacrificing themselves, offering up their very innate energy to be refined into an elixir.

“...It was a horrifying sight.

But the truly terrifying part?

No one was forced.

They volunteered.”

“...Why in the world would they do such a thing?”

Tang Sowol looked horrified.

But I... had a feeling I knew the answer.

The Demonic Cult was a gathering of vengeful spirits, either fueled by personal grudges or raised from birth with a thirst for revenge.

Many of them were powerless, unable to change their fates.

But then, someone arrived.

“The Heavenly Demon.

That is what the current Cult Leader calls himself.

And he possesses power great enough to justify such arrogance.”

For those who had nothing, he was a savior.

He could avenge them, change the world—

And if offering up their own bodies and lives could help that cause, they were more than willing.

That was the true horror of the Demonic Cult.

“...I may have lived a life far from righteousness, But this... this was something I couldn't ignore. If left unchecked, the Central Plains would soon be bathed in blood.”

And so, the Ghost Shadow Thief stole the elixir that was meant to be presented to the Heavenly Demon.

In return, the Heavenly Demon severed one of his legs, shattered his internal meridians, and left his vital energy completely disrupted.

Even after barely escaping Xinjiang Province, he was relentlessly pursued by assassins from Sal Valley.

“I ran, and I ran, and in the end... I made it here. It seems they either gave up or I managed to lose them, But my injuries left me too crippled to move any further.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief gave a bitter smile, still seated cross-legged.

“Now do you understand? This elixir must never fall into anyone’s hands. It may greatly enhance internal energy, but... It is guaranteed to cause deviation. Unless someone has already lost their mind, they must never consume it.”

His voice was firm—

But suddenly, he froze.

Then, he let out a long sigh.

“...I was too careless. It seems our uninvited guests still haven’t left.”

From outside the cave, the sound of approaching footsteps could be heard.

The steps were unnervingly light.

Like those of an assassin.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“...It seems I was too careless. Our uninvited guests haven’t left yet.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief let out a deep sigh.

At the same time, footsteps echoed from outside the cave.

They were light—too light. The unmistakable gait of assassins.

Then, several small metal orbs, riddled with tiny holes, rolled into the cave, slipping through the foliage covering the entrance.

Clink. Clank.

The dull sound of metal striking stone filled the air. From the countless holes in the orbs, a faint purple smoke began to seep out.

As the smoke steadily filled the cramped cave, I calmly shifted behind Tang Sowol.

“Hm. Poison.”

“Indeed. Poison.”

“What do you want to do, young miss?”

“These assassins are likely the same ones who have been chasing Ghost Shadow Thief—probably from Sal Valley. I’ve been curious about their poisons. This is a good chance to see for myself.”

With a composed expression, Tang Sowol crushed one of the rolling orbs underfoot.

The brittle shell shattered easily, releasing its full contents.

The previously faint poison smoke surged outward in an instant—

—only to unnaturally swirl toward Tang Sowol, as if being sucked in by her presence.

Seeing this bizarre sight, the Ghost Shadow Thief let out a dry chuckle.

“Well, I wasn’t worried about someone from the Tang Clan getting poisoned, but this... This is beyond my expectations.”

“I’m a bit of an anomaly, even among my clan. That said... this is quite a vicious poison.”

Her brows furrowed in mild irritation.

I asked, “What kind of poison is it?”

“Normally, poisons that spread as smoke are convenient but lack potency. It’s difficult to concentrate their effects, and there are too many restrictions when blending them.”

As she explained, Tang Sowol pulled out two antidote beads from her sleeve.

The smaller the bead, the higher the quality—these were nearly top-grade.

Something difficult to obtain even for the Tang Clan, which valued antidotes just as much as poisons.

“So instead of lethal toxicity, they designed it purely to inflict suffering. It’s plant-based, but since you haven’t built full resistance to Scholar’s Weed yet, Brother Cheon, this could be dangerous for you. Keep this in your mouth at all times. You too, Ghost Shadow Thief.”

“I understand.”

“Heh. It’s been a while since I’ve seen antidote beads. Much appreciated.”

I tucked the bead under my tongue, careful not to swallow it.

Then, I drew my sword once more, keeping it ready but not raised—prepared to strike at any moment.

Seeing this, the Ghost Shadow Thief panicked and tried to stop us.

“Wait! Are you actually thinking of fighting them? I appreciate your sense of justice, but I won’t allow young warriors like you to get dragged into an old man’s mess and die because of it.”

His expression was resolute as he pushed the martial manual and the wooden box toward us.

“This is Glacial True Qi from the Northern Sea Ice Palace. Take it and go. As for the elixir—under no circumstances should you consume it. Head to the Martial Alliance and relay everything I’ve told you. They’re after me. I’ll buy you time.”

I accepted the manual and box, securing them in my robe.

But I shook my head.

“We’d like to, but as you know, Sal Valley and the Tang Clan are practically sworn enemies. Even if we run, do you really think they’ll just let us go?”

The rivalry between the Tang Clan and Sal Valley was infamous.

It had all started when Sal Valley framed the Tang Clan for one of their assassinations.

But after fighting for so long, their hatred had become self-sustaining—at this point, they tried to kill each other on sight.

Of course, in terms of sheer power, Sal Valley was no match for the Tang Clan.

If their headquarters were ever exposed, they’d have been wiped out long ago.

But Sal Valley had always remained hidden, which was why this feud still continued.

Since this was common knowledge, the Ghost Shadow Thief knew it as well.

He opened his mouth as if to argue—then, seeing the futility, he simply pressed his lips together.

Still, it wasn't as if we had no plan.

With all the poison absorbed, Tang Sowol narrowed her eyes at the faint presences lurking beyond the foliage.

“Ghost Shadow Thief, even in your weakened and injured state, you are still a true top-tier master. Naturally, they would have sent assassins of equal caliber to hunt you down. Tell me—was the Reaper King among them?”

“No. But there were five Specters, along with several first-rate assassins.”

In Sal Valley, assassins were ranked by three tiers.

- Third-tier assassins could eliminate third-rate martial artists.
- First-tier assassins could take down first-rate warriors.
- Specters were skilled enough to assassinate peak masters.

And above them all, the Reaper King was said to silence even Flowering Stage grandmasters without a sound.

In other words... five peak-level warriors and multiple first-rate assassins.

At a glance, it seemed we were outmatched.

The Ghost Shadow Thief was injured and couldn't fight for long.

And among us, only the Blood Venom Unit leader was at pinnacle level.

However—

“That's enough for my poison to be effective. We can handle this.”

Tang Sowol smiled.

Her words were not a boast.

They were a fact.

Moreover, I had taken a Strength-Nurturing Pill, allowing me to reach the threshold of Peak level.

With the Ghost Shadow Thief looking astonished behind us, Tang Sowol suddenly thrust her palm forward toward the entrance.

Paang!

A shockwave sent a cloud of poison surging outward.

And then—

“Khaagh!”

“Urgh!”

Two assassins collapsed, groaning in agony.

They must have been waiting just outside the entrance, prepared to ambush us—

Only to be struck first.

Seizing the moment, the Blood Venom Unit leader dashed out with light movement techniques.

“I’ll clear a path ahead.”

That was all he said before disappearing into the chaos.

Hearing the sudden clamor of battle, Tang Sowol and I quickly followed.

Outside, we found the Blood Venom Unit leader relentlessly scattering poison at the masked assassins.

He was using his poisons liberally, filling the entire valley floor with deadly miasma.

Though Sal Valley assassins had some poison resistance, their expertise paled in comparison to the Tang Clan.

Unable to push through the thick poison, they hesitated—

—while some of them began scaling the cliff walls, trying to flank us.

Predictably, the ones climbing were Specters.

Their presence was faint, but their movements were undeniably those of pinnacle-level warriors.

“I’ll handle the Specter on the left.”

“Then I’ll assist the Blood Venom Unit leader with the first-rate assassins.”

Tang Sowol nodded naturally before glancing at the Ghost Shadow Thief, still standing on one leg.

"Elder, what about you...?"

The Ghost Shadow Thief let out a faint chuckle before replying.

“In a situation like this, how could I possibly withdraw alone? I may avoid taking lives when I can... but for those who call themselves ghosts, forsaking their own humanity— I have no reason to spare them.”

With a single nod, we split into three directions, each taking our position.

Just as I arrived, two Specters landed gracefully on the ground after scaling the cliff wall.

Their eyes, visible through the slits of their masks, were devoid of emotion. A lifeless, machine-like gaze—one that saw people not as humans, but as mere targets.

It was a gaze I was all too familiar with.

One of them, wielding a curved blade similar to a scythe—a Reaper’s Crescent Blade—spoke first.

“No matter how skilled a Tang Clan warrior may be, I have no interest in killing a mere young successor who isn’t even our target. Step aside, and I will spare your life.”

I smirked.

“And you—if you offer your neck quietly, I’ll make sure to cut it cleanly so it doesn’t hurt.”

“...Are you insane?”

“I’m not crazy enough to trust the words of an assassin.”

He had probably hoped to shake me with words alone, judging from my young appearance.

But when he realized it wasn’t working, he clicked his tongue in annoyance.

No one in their right mind would believe the words of an assassin—especially one from Sal Valley.

These people slaughtered women, children, and even unarmed civilians without hesitation if they interfered with their missions.

The Specter with the Reaper’s Crescent Blade exchanged glances with his companion—

Then charged straight at me.

The other assassin moved to flank me, aiming for the Ghost Shadow Thief instead.

I had been suppressing my presence deliberately—

But I hadn’t expected them to play so perfectly into my plans.

A grin curled at my lips.

I lunged forward to meet the charging Specter, simultaneously unleashing my internal energy through Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

At the same time, I directed all of my refined killing intent at him.

“W-What—?!”

The sudden surge of overwhelming pressure caught him off guard.

He faltered mid-charge, his breath hitching.

And in that moment of hesitation—

I struck.

Since this fight would be short and decisive, I poured as much internal energy as my body could withstand into my sword.

Unlike reinforcing my body, there was no limit to how much energy I could channel into my blade.

Wooooong—

A red aura began to coalesce around my sword.

The initially faint sword energy rapidly stabilized, its color deepening with intensity.

By the time it had turned into a deep, blood-like crimson, the Specter had barely regained his composure—

And hastily swung his Reaper's Crescent Blade to counter.

Kaang!

But his hurried strike was flawed.

His balance faltered. His body tilted to one side.

“H-How...?!”

His once-calm eyes widened in shock.

First, he had been shaken by my killing intent.

Then, he had been overwhelmed by my fully formed sword energy.

But I wasn't finished yet.

Before the other assassin could realize what was happening and intervene, I had to end this fight completely.

Though the sword energy of Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was as powerful as forbidden techniques, rather than pressing the attack, I swiftly withdrew my blade—

And prepared my next strike.

I drove my sword straight into the opening exposed by his disrupted stance.

He barely managed to block, leveraging the curved nature of his Reaper's Crescent Blade to deflect my attack.

Realizing he was in danger, he muttered something under his breath—

Then spat.

"Tch!"

A thin needle shot toward my eyes.

I hadn't expected him to be hiding something like that in his mouth,

But I had already sensed the faint killing intent gathering at his lips.

I tilted my head just in time—

The needle grazed my ear instead of hitting its mark.

At the same time, I withdrew my sword and slashed again, aiming at the even wider opening he had just exposed.

Kaang!

Once again, he barely managed to block.

But that was all he could do—defend.

The fundamental reality hadn't changed.

The moment I had awakened my sword energy, I had become capable of clashing against weapons infused with sword aura.

And the difference in our skill levels was clear.

One clash.

Two clashes.

Three clashes.

At times, I overwhelmed him with the sheer explosive power of Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

Other times, I allowed myself to be wounded, just to pierce at his vitals in return.

And sometimes, I used adaptive techniques, taking advantage of the unorthodox shape of his weapon against him.

With every exchange, the Specter fell deeper into defensive footing.

His body accumulated small wounds.

But it wasn't as if he had just stood there and taken it.

He had fired hidden weapons from his sleeves.

He had scattered poisoned sand.

At one point, he had even launched a suicidal charge, trying to flip the battle in a desperate gambit.

But every trick failed.

Of course, it did.

The martial arts of assassins were designed for killing.

And to me, martial arts were nothing more than techniques to kill people.

We viewed combat through the same lens—

Which meant I could read his every move before he even made it.

Even his faint killing intent was enough of a warning for me.

One brief moment of carelessness.

One single mistake.

And I relentlessly pursued that weakness—

Like a wolf hunting its prey.

By the eighth exchange—

Schhk.

The Specter's head tumbled to the ground.

His lifeless body collapsed soon after.

Then, I turned to the other assassin who had been heading toward the Ghost Shadow Thief—

Only to see him suddenly change course, rushing toward me instead.

I grinned.

“Next.”

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A second Specter abandoned its course toward Ghost Shadow Thief and instead dashed toward us.

Was it because they had lost a comrade in an instant to an unexpected opponent? The eyes visible beneath the mask trembled uncontrollably.

I smirked at the one who so plainly revealed their emotional turmoil.

"Next."

But rather than engaging, the Specter abruptly changed direction again, executing a swift footwork technique and rushing back toward Ghost Shadow Thief at full speed.

It wasn't my first time facing assassins, but this was the first time I'd seen one turn their back and flee like this.

"Huh."

A hollow chuckle escaped me before I swallowed it down.

I had certainly regained a portion of my past strength, reaching the threshold of the Peak Realm. But this was a level achieved solely through internal energy.

I could now parry sword energy with my own, no longer needing to evade it, and that alone gave me the confidence to defeat most opponents. However...

My body had yet to reach the level befitting a Peak Martial Artist.

No matter how much internal energy I infused into myself, my physical abilities couldn't exceed a certain limit without proper external martial arts training.

In other words, my speed in executing movement techniques was inevitably slower.

The Specter must have noticed this during our earlier battle, which was likely why they abandoned me and turned their attention back to Ghost Shadow Thief.

It was a little frustrating, but given that their objective was never me in the first place but rather Ghost Shadow Thief, it made sense.

A martial artist who had reached a certain level would carry their pride regardless of faction, but an assassin had no such thing.

The assassin's footwork carried them swiftly away. Chasing after them was impossible, so I simply called out in a loud voice.

"Sir! One of them got away!"

Ghost Shadow Thief, mid-battle, flicked a glance in my direction. He had no leisure to respond, but his movements subtly changed.

Where he had previously thrown counterpunches when opportunities arose, he now focused entirely on dodging.

Only now did I notice—his body had weakened, his movements had slowed, and missing a leg made continuous motion difficult. Yet...

Even considering all that, his footwork was astounding.

He moved across the ground as if gliding, making his trajectory unpredictable and forcing his opponent to react half a beat too late.

At times, he even kicked off the cliff the Specters had climbed earlier, rebounding without ever losing his stance.

The rumors that, in his prime, he had plundered places guarded by Flowering Stage martial artists weren't lies after all.

If this was his level, he could certainly hold out for a while.

Feeling a little more at ease, I kicked off the ground toward him.

On the way, I glanced at Tang Sowol and the vice-captain. Hmm. No need to worry about that side.

Most of the elite assassins were already dead or dying from Tang Sowol's poison. The lone surviving Specter capable of fighting was trapped in a swamp of venom, unable to escape thanks to the Blood Venom Unit's vice-captain.

At this rate, they'd be finished soon. That meant I only needed to focus on my side.

I turned my gaze forward again. The distance had closed considerably.

Two black-coated daggers came flying toward me—perhaps an attempt to keep me at bay.

But no matter how adept an assassin might be, they were still human. They couldn't completely conceal their killing intent.

Only one person had ever managed that—the Heavenly Demon I saw in my final moments.

Predicting their trajectories, one aimed at my forehead and the other at my foot, I moved accordingly.

Chaaang!

I deflected the dagger aimed at my forehead with my sword, while the one targeting my foot I avoided by subtly shifting my step—switching the order of my left and right footfalls.

The dagger embedded itself in the ground just ahead of me. Without breaking stride, I kicked it up and sent it spinning back toward the nearest Specter.

The dagger whirled through the air.

I hadn't learned hidden weapon techniques, and kicking instead of throwing meant it lacked speed.

Still, a blade was a blade. Unless they had defensive energy enveloping them, they had to react.

"Tch."

One of the Specters clicked their tongue and twisted their body.

They didn't fully evade it, letting it graze their side instead.

That brief hesitation was enough.

"White Specter! Be careful! As I said, that bastard—!"

One of them, having seen me cut down their comrade in an instant, shouted in alarm.

But it was already too late.

I exploded my internal energy through the Yongcheon Acupoint at the center of my sole.

Paaang!

My foot instantly lost sensation. A dull pain followed, but in return, I gained a sudden burst of acceleration.

A single leap—the only one my current body could execute.

As the distance closed rapidly, the one called White Specter widened their eyes and turned toward me instead of Ghost Shadow Thief.

Since they had been fighting, their fist was already enveloped in Fist Qi as it shot toward me.

No—upon closer inspection, their fingers were slightly loose. If necessary, they were prepared to parry my sword with the back of their hand or even seize my blade.

Not a bad decision.

A trained martial artist's hands were tough enough to resist ordinary blades, and a warrior's Fist Qi was always stronger than weapon-based attacks.

And besides, outwardly, I still looked like a teenager. They probably assumed I would lose in a contest of raw power.

Any experienced martial artist would make the same calculation.

But I was not bound by such common sense.

Who could possibly imagine that their opponent had returned from death itself?

I pulled my sword arm back, as if drawing a bowstring.

Seeing the obvious thrusting posture, White Specter smirked.

A thrusting technique was always fast and powerful, but if it failed, it left an enormous opening.

They must have thought I was an overconfident rookie, unaware of the internal energy disparity.

Perfect.

I took a deep breath, summoning my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art's killing aura to my sword.

A fierce and unpredictable force, yet to me, as familiar as my own limbs.

Though the amount wasn't fully satisfactory, it was enough for a little trickery.

A crimson vortex began swirling along my sword.

White Specter's eyes filled with shock.

At the same time, my foot touched the ground.

Boom!

A Powerful Stomp and a Deadly Thrust

I stomped down hard, Jin'gak technique stabilizing my stance. My body, which had been sprinting forward, came to an abrupt halt, and the accumulated force surged upward from my ankle.

It passed through my calf, knee, thigh, side, and back, climbing higher with each small rotational shift in my muscles and joints. This careful transmission not only preserved the force but amplified it further.

This was Four-Limbed Spiral Power—also known as the Mystique of Flexibility.

It was said that the Taoist masters of Wudang could control external flows to the point of reversing waterfalls.

I wasn't nearly as skilled or enlightened, but I understood the fundamentals of channeling power upward through my body.

The moment that raw, full-force energy reached my shoulder, I unleashed it through my arm in an explosive thrust.

KWAANG!

A near-explosive rupture echoed as the crimson vortex of sword energy tore through the air.

The White Specter clenched their fist, their jaw tightening as they braced for impact. Their Fist Qi thickened, coating their knuckles like hardened steel.

They had abandoned the thought of deflecting or catching my blade—this time, they were meeting my attack head-on.

As expected of an elite assassin, they hadn't trained in ordinary martial arts. Mid-motion, their elbow joint extended unnaturally, twisting their fist's trajectory into an unpredictable arc.

But such deviations were meaningless now.

The moment our attacks neared—just before impact—the swirling vortex of my sword's energy snagged their fist's trajectory, twisting it once more.

Their aim faltered.

A brief but decisive clash between Fist Qi and Sword Qi ensued.

And then—

Puuuk!

My blade pierced through their fist, impaling their entire arm before skewering their throat.

Their mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air, but no words came—only the faint hiss of escaping breath.

Then, they collapsed.

A Moment to Breathe

“Phew.”

I exhaled the breath I had been holding, rolling my stiff shoulder.

It had been a while since I had last wielded Sword Qi properly. With my limited Inner Energy, I had mostly fought with pure technique—but now, cutting down an opponent with such raw power felt strangely satisfying.

I supposed, after all, I truly did love the sword.

Of course, that strike had come at a cost.

My remaining Inner Energy was now halved. The excessive output had caused minor internal injuries in my meridians, and despite utilizing Four-Limbed Spiral Power, I had failed to channel all the energy perfectly. My entire body ached as if I had been struck by a hammer.

Still, it had been worth it.

I had taken down another Specter in a single strike.

Now, our numbers were even—two against two.

With the numerical disadvantage gone, raw skill would determine the victor.

And when it came to skill, I prided myself on standing above the rest.

Unless I was facing a Flowering Stage master, no ordinary assassin—no matter how infamous—could reach me.

Perhaps it was because I had freely wielded Sword Qi at my age and slain a peak-level martial artist in a single stroke—but Ghost Shadow Thief looked at me with a mixture of awe and disbelief as he spoke.

“I never expected to witness two heaven-sent geniuses in my twilight years.”

“One of them must be her,” I said, glancing at Tang Sowol. “Who’s the other?”

“I already told you. The current Lord of the Demonic Cult.”

“...I wouldn’t say I’m anywhere near that level.”

I responded with a wry smile, shaking my head.

The Wall I Could Never Surpass

My strength didn’t come from talent.

It came from returning to the past—from a unique experience that no one else possessed.

I would reach the level I had in my previous life quickly enough.

But beyond that lay the wall of the Flowering Stage, an insurmountable boundary.

In my previous life, I had struggled against that wall, repeatedly facing death's edge, only to ultimately meet my end without ever breaking through.

But the Heavenly Demon had been different.

He had already surpassed that wall, fending off the combined assault of multiple Flowering Stage masters—and cutting them down instead.

Ghost Shadow Thief had risked his life to steal the sacred elixir meant for the Heavenly Demon.

But honestly?

I doubted it would weaken him in the slightest.

Because in my final moments from my past life, I still vividly remembered what I had seen—

How Tang Sowol, who had ascended to the Flowering Stage as the Poison Dance Empress, was struck down within a few exchanges.

How I, blinded by rage, had charged forward—only to be crushed with a single flick of his hand.

A vast, abyssal darkness that swallowed the world.

An overwhelming pressure befitting the arrogant title of Heavenly Demon.

No matter how powerful the elixir was, someone who wielded that kind of power would hardly be affected by its absence.

In the end, the elixir that Ghost Shadow Thief had stolen never reached the Heavenly Demon.

Instead, it ended up in the hands of some lucky street thugs.

This time, we had left too many traces—hence the assassins had tracked us down. But in my previous life, Ghost Shadow Thief had simply hidden until his final breath, never being discovered.

Being compared to a true monster like that left a bitter taste in my mouth.

But no matter how impossible the task seemed, I couldn't just sit back and do nothing.

I had my role to play.

First—

I had to take down the remaining Specters.

A Desperate Gamble

“...Hmm?”

The moment they confirmed their comrade's death, the two remaining Specters immediately retreated.

They exchanged glances—then bit down hard on something hidden in their mouths.

As if they were crushing a pill.

And then—

Their auras erupted.

Their skin turned an ashen black, and crimson light flared in their eyes.

Their previously restrained killing intent now spread uncontrollably, lashing out in all directions.

It was an overwhelming transformation. At first glance, they looked like men who had succumbed to madness-induced internal deviation.

But I knew better.

This wasn't some reckless loss of control.

"...Demonic Explosion Pills? Why the hell do assassins have those?!..."

Demonic Explosion Pills were a forbidden secret of the Demonic Cult.

Even if Sal Valley's assassins were currently working under their orders, obtaining these pills shouldn't have been so easy.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Demonic Explosion Pills? Why would assassins have those...?"

Since the discovery of Innate Energy, countless attempts have been made to harness its power.

One of the most common results of such attempts was the latent energy explosion technique, frequently seen in the unorthodox martial world.

It grants a temporary surge in internal energy and physical ability, but the side effects are severe—at best, the user collapses from exhaustion; at worst, their meridians become twisted beyond recovery, making it impossible to use martial arts ever again.

And yet, people still sought to master these techniques.

Why?

Because they granted power beyond one's natural reach, if only for a moment.

Even when I created the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, I had studied several latent energy explosion techniques.

Through them, I had grasped the foundation of explosive internal energy control.

But ultimately, what I created was a mere imitation—an art that mimicked the burst of Innate Energy, but did not actually consume it.

If it had, the consequences wouldn't have been exhaustion or the loss of martial arts—it would have been instant death.

After all, people only sought these desperate techniques to survive.

What would be the point if it cost them their lives?

The Madness of the Demonic Cult

But the Demonic Cult was different.

Their warriors lacked proper martial arts, forcing them to cultivate demonic techniques riddled with side effects.

To them, Innate Energy wasn't something to be carefully preserved—it was a means to an end.

The Heavenly Demon aside, the true terror of the cult didn't lie in their martial prowess.

It lay in their burning thirst for vengeance.

It was only natural, then, that they would dedicate themselves to researching ways to gain overwhelming power, even at the cost of their lives.

And so, through such research, the Demonic Explosion Pill was born—one of the Demonic Cult's most closely guarded secrets.

At its core, it functioned similarly to latent energy explosion techniques.

But its efficiency far surpassed them.

Why?

Because unlike other warriors, the users of this pill did not seek to survive.

They sought to drag their enemies down with them—no matter the cost.

This pill didn't just ignite Innate Energy.

It deliberately induced inner deviation, allowing the user to weaponize the backlash.

The user would suffer excruciating agony and face certain death...

But until the pill's effects wore off, they would be unstoppable.

Why Do They Have This?

And now—

Before me, the two remaining Specters had just swallowed Demonic Explosion Pills.

This shouldn't be possible.

The pill was incredibly difficult to manufacture and even harder to obtain outside the Demonic Cult.

Yet, for some reason, these assassins possessed them.

Their auras swelled madly as their bodies began decaying—their skin blackening, their eyes burning with the crimson glow of inner deviation.

Their once-subtle killing intent now ran wild, slashing at the surroundings like an unrestrained beast.

Even Ghost Shadow Thief, usually unshaken, looked startled as he turned to me.

"Did you just say... Demonic Explosion Pills? You recognize the pills they swallowed?"

"They're a secret of the Demonic Cult. You mentioned that Sal Valley's assassins were working for them... but their connection may run deeper than we thought."

"Hah... Just when I thought this mess was over, it takes another turn."

Ghost Shadow Thief sighed heavily, his expression weary.

But despite his fatigue, I could sense a grim resolve in his clenched jaw.

So, I shook my head and spoke in a flat tone.

"Don't do it."

"...What do you think this old man is planning?"

"I don't know. But people prepared to die tend to wear the same expression you're wearing right now."

"Hah. The things young ones notice these days."

Ghost Shadow Thief let out a hollow chuckle and settled into his stance.

He merely bent his knees slightly and let his arms hang loosely at his sides—yet his presence nearly vanished.

Even though I could see him, it felt like looking at a boulder lying at the bottom of a valley, not a person.

Ironically, his movements were far more assassin-like than those of the Specters.

I couldn't help but admire his skill.

A Deal With the Thief

"Come to think of it, you said you were building a tomb, didn't you?"

"That's right. Though it seems this place might end up being my grave instead."

"If you make it out alive, would you mind giving me a few martial arts manuals from your collection?"

"Huh? If I survive, sure. Anything but my own techniques."

"Your movement techniques are indeed impressive, but what I've learned isn't bad either. So... it's a deal?"

"Fine. You'll even get a map of the tomb itself, as a bonus."

"That'd only be useful after you're dead, wouldn't it? Anyway, since we've settled that—please go handle the other side."

"Hmm?"

I gestured toward Tang Sowol and the Blood Venom Unit's vice-captain.

They were struggling against a rampaging Specter who had also swallowed a Demonic Explosion Pill.

"Could you help them first? I'll take care of these two."

"Will you be alright?"

"You saw my skills earlier, didn't you?"

Ghost Shadow Thief hesitated for a moment before nodding.

"Fine. Hold out for a little while—I'll be back soon."

And with that, he glided away, his movement technique so smooth it was as if he were sliding across the ground.

At the same moment, the two Specters, unable to fully control their sudden surge of power, stumbled briefly—then simultaneously launched themselves forward.

BOOM!

The impact of their footfalls was far too loud for assassins. The sheer force of their movements left craters in the ground, and their intensified killing intent burned as they closed in on me.

Their speed was unmatched compared to before.

I quickly stepped forward, raising my sword to intercept them.

"Not so fast."

As if they had been waiting for this moment, one of them swung down diagonally with a willow-leaf saber, while the other thrust forward with a straight sword in a deadly, linear strike.

Their blades aimed directly for my throat and heart.

In that instant, I understood.

They had never intended to target Ghost Shadow Thief.

Their real target had been me from the beginning.

They must have determined that as long as I was standing, they could never take him down.

I clenched my teeth and lunged forward.

Before their weapons could fully unleash their power, before their momentum reached its peak, I struck upward from below.

My well-forged crimson Sword Qi clashed against the murky gray energy of the willow-leaf saber.

KA-BOOM!

The force within both weapons was so immense that the impact didn't even sound like clashing steel—instead, it exploded like a thunderous detonation.

A half-beat later, the backlash rippled through my blade, traveling up my arm in a violent shockwave.

It was obvious—I couldn't match them in raw power anymore.

Not after they had taken the Demonic Explosion Pills.

Not in strength, and not in Sword Qi potency.

So instead of resisting, I let the force carry me away.

My body flew backward, spinning slightly in midair.

Because of this sudden shift in angle, the straight sword that had been aiming for my heart only managed to graze my side instead.

"Tch!"

A chunk of flesh was torn from my side, but that was still far better than having my heart pierced.

Still airborne, I swiftly applied acupressure to stop the bleeding.

And the moment my feet touched the ground—

I kicked off instantly, my bent knees snapping straight as I launched forward once more.

A Different Approach

I narrowed my focus, concentrating my killing intent into a single point.

The Specters were leaking energy uncontrollably, their bodies unable to contain the overwhelming power they had absorbed.

They were also in the midst of inner deviation, meaning they couldn't control their killing intent either.

Up until now, I had sensed their killing intent to predict their attacks.

But now, that method was useless.

I couldn't read scattered, wild energy anymore.

So instead—I changed tactics.

Instead of outwardly releasing my own killing aura, I pulled it inward, condensing it.

All beings were born with Mind, Energy, and Body—the mastery of which determined their martial prowess.

And killing intent was the most primitive form of intent, capable of suppressing others or even dealing internal damage just through sheer pressure.

By fusing my killing aura into my internal energy, my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art had gained a lethal edge that set it apart from other techniques.

The thicker the killing aura, the deadlier the technique.

Of course, the side effects were just as severe.

A Glimpse of Hell

A burnt, metallic scent mixed with the stench of blood filled the air.

My eyes remained locked onto the Specters as they prepared their next attack—

But what I saw was something else entirely.

A palace consumed by crimson flames.

Corpses covering the ground, their blood flowing like rivers.

A hellish landscape, seeping into my very soul.

The day I lost Seol Lihyang.

The day I lost Seo Mun-Hwarin.

The day I lost everything except the sword in my grasp.

Back then, Tang Sowol had given me advice when I struggled before the wall of Flowering Stage.

"A martial artist must shape their own inner world."

But my inner world had never been an ideal.

It had become my personal hell.

I killed to survive.

I killed because I wanted to.

I killed out of rage.

I killed for revenge.

I killed because there was nothing left but killing.

I had long forgotten why I even wielded a sword.

All that remained was murderous intent.

And in that hell, my swordsmanship was perfected.

"Huu."

A breath, barely more than a sigh.

The red-stained vision in my mind faded away—

And all that remained were the two Specters, their bloodshot eyes locked onto me.

The Counterattack

The straight sword sliced toward my neck.

I raised my blade.

The Sword Qi enveloping my weapon had grown sharper—its crimson glow surging like flames.

Its color had deepened, darkening to a blood-soaked red.

The moment my blade struck the side of the straight sword—

CRACK!

My blood-colored Sword Qi devoured the gray energy coating the blade, burning through it as it advanced.

Just as it was about to completely sever the straight sword—

A willow-leaf saber came swinging for my waist, forcing me to retreat.

"Tch."

Clicking my tongue, I stepped back—

And in that instant, the Specter wielding the straight sword flinched.

It was the same one who had initially tried to escape toward Ghost Shadow Thief.

Did he hesitate?

Did he feel fear?

An assassin of Sal Valley, renowned for erasing all emotion, especially fear... yet at this moment, he visibly hesitated after meeting my gaze.

Perhaps it was the inner deviation stirring his emotions.

If so—

Then this was an opportunity.

I unleashed the full weight of my killing intent.

I didn't sharpen it.

I didn't focus it.

I simply let it spill out, unchecked.

A monstrous, suffocating aura of death flooded the surroundings.

The Specters trembled.

I smirked.

"What's wrong? Didn't you throw away your lives just to kill me?"

"Monster... Who's the real Specter here?"

One of them muttered under his breath.

I swung my sword at him.

He barely managed to raise his straight sword in defense.

The willow-leaf saber came slashing down, aiming to cleave through my shoulder.

But... its speed was noticeably slower than before.

Still faster than before the Demonic Explosion Pill, but now at a level I could handle.

That was enough.

Even if I couldn't read their killing intent anymore, I still had my eyes.

The angle of their feet, the twist of their waist, the position of their shoulders, their line of sight—

I had spent my life analyzing martial arts, breaking them down to their fundamentals.

And now, I dissected their every movement, anticipating their strikes before they could fully form.

It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to use right now.

Clashing Blades

CLANG! CRACK! KAANG!

Three blades clashed in rapid succession.

Each time, the Specters' gray Sword Qi shattered like brittle sparks.

This wasn't about winning every exchange.

It was about dominating the crucial moment of impact.

I stepped in close before their arms could fully extend, forcing our blades into a direct clash.

I let our Sword Qi grind against each other, chipping away at theirs—

And the instant it threatened to become a contest of raw strength, I withdrew.

I couldn't block or dodge every attack.

Their blades left wounds on me.

But none were deep enough to sever muscle or bone.

I was soaked in blood, but I never relented.

I kept attacking—never retreating, never yielding.

But there was one problem—

My internal energy was draining too fast.

"Kh...! What the hell...?!"

"That damn venomous bitch!"

The Specters, who had been moving relentlessly, suddenly slowed down.

It wasn't because my internal energy was running out.

It wasn't because the effects of the Demonic Explosion Pill had worn off.

The real reason was above them.

A Soul-Chasing Flying Butterfly flitted overhead, its wings moving with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

A legendary hidden weapon, wielded only by the direct bloodline of the Sichuan Tang Clan.

Unlike conventional throwing weapons, which followed predictable straight or curved trajectories, these butterflies moved erratically, making them almost impossible to predict.

With each delicate flap of its wings, a faint purple mist scattered into the air.

And that venomous powder had already settled onto the Specters' heads.

Of course, I had been exposed too—

But under my tongue rested the Poison-Resistance Pill given to me by Tang Sowol.

The Specters, however, had no such protection.

They faltered.

Which meant the fight was already over.

The Killing Blow

SLASH!

The Specter wielding the willow-leaf saber lost his arm at the elbow, then collapsed as my blade severed half his throat.

The Specter wielding the straight sword tried to block—

But his weapon shattered in the attempt.

Fragments of his own Sword Qi-infused blade lodged into his eyes.

Blinded and stunned, he was helpless.

A final stroke of my sword finished him.

The battle had ended in an instant.

I looked up, dazed, as a wave of exhaustion and satisfaction washed over me.

Above me, the Soul-Chasing Flying Butterflies still hovered, circling persistently.

Like snowflakes drifting from the sky, the venomous powder continued to settle on me.

A numbness began spreading through my limbs.

From a distance, Tang Sowol was watching—her eyes filled with worry, on the verge of tears.

And then I realized—

"Ah."

The killing intent I had drawn forth in battle—

It was still overflowing, saturating the air like a suffocating mist.

From the outside, it must have looked like I had completely succumbed to inner deviation.