

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 61-70

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Tang Sowol shut the door tightly and locked it carefully, her eyes gleaming.

“So, what shall we play? What shall we play?”

The wounds from the sparring match had already been treated, and the Blood Venom Unit Leader was resting in the adjacent room.

There was no excuse to leave, nor was anyone likely to enter.

In other words, it was just the two of us in this room.

Realizing this, I started to feel a bit nervous. Meanwhile, Tang Sowol, seemingly without a care, was pulling out the golpae (a set of traditional gambling tiles) I had caught a glimpse of earlier in the morning.

Well, it wasn't surprising. Golpae were an old tool, sometimes used for fortune-telling. It wouldn't be strange to find some lying around the Wudang Sect.

Given that they performed rituals and wrote talismans for worshippers, using golpae for divination wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary.

The only issue was that golpae were more commonly associated with gambling.

She shouldn't be getting into this kind of thing already...

"Do you even know how to play? The rules can be quite complicated."

"Of course, I do! The Blood Venom Unit Leader taught me yesterday."

Was it really okay for him to be teaching his lady something like that?

I was a little taken aback, but after hearing the details, it seemed more like he had given her a bit of preventive education—so she wouldn't get scammed somewhere.

“If you bet money, it becomes gambling. And no matter how high your martial arts skills are, you can never beat a seasoned gambler.”

“That’s true.”

People usually think of gamblers as having fancy hand tricks, but in reality, they often exchange hidden signals, manipulate their opponent’s thoughts, or even rig the gambling tools themselves.

Just like the Blood Venom Unit Leader said, no matter how skilled you were in martial arts, there were ways to get tricked.

So, the best option was to avoid it entirely... but the more you tell people not to do something, the more they want to try.

If she had never been exposed to it, that would be one thing. But now that she knew about it and was interested, it was better to show her how to enjoy it without betting money.

The Blood Venom Unit Leader had thought this through.

As I was nodding in understanding, Tang Sowol suddenly leaned in, her eyes shining.

“So, how about a wager without money?!”

“...?”

I stared at her, trying to figure out what she meant.

Perhaps due to the *Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass* (a rare poisonous herb) intensifying the poison within her body, her black hair and eyes now carried a faint green hue.

Even before my regression, when I had only seen half of her face, I thought she was beautiful.

Now, with both sides fully revealed, she was breathtaking—enough to hold my gaze all day without growing tired of it.

However, while her appearance remained stunning, her overall demeanor differed significantly from my past memories.

In my previous life, her emotions were faint, barely perceptible. But now, Tang Sowol reacted vividly, like a budding sprout full of life.

Her crescent-shaped smile, the faint puff of breath from her nose, the way her lips twitched as if she were always ready to laugh—her anticipation was palpable.

And when she leaned in close to me, the scent from her body drifted over, drawing my attention to her figure—one that even loose-fitting clothes couldn't completely conceal.

Without realizing it, I turned my head and asked,

“...Aren't you a little too close?”

Ever since the misunderstanding between us had been resolved, Tang Sowol had been acting comfortably around me.

But this level of proximity? It had happened only a handful of times.

Her response, however, was completely nonchalant—like she didn't see any problem at all.

“Hm? We’re betrothed now, so isn’t this fine?”

“Betrothal and marriage are different.”

More specifically, the difference lay in whether or not I’d have to fight Tang Jincheon, the Poison King, in a forced duel if we crossed a certain line.

Of course, it didn’t seem like Tang Sowol cared about that at all.

Slide.

She gently cupped my cheeks with both hands and pulled me closer.

The touch of her slender fingers and the unfamiliar warmth of her body sent heat surging through my head.

Our gazes locked at the suddenly shortened distance.

Then, in a firm but playful tone, she asked,

“So? Are you in or out?”

Her words suggested a choice, but her eyes made it clear that she knew I wouldn't refuse.

And really, at this point, did I even have a choice?

She understood me all too well.

“Fine. So what's the wager?”

“Hm. Let's see... A favor, perhaps? The loser grants the winner one request.”

“A favor?”

“Yes! Of course, nothing unreasonable or excessive.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Saying that, I reached out and touched Tang Sowol’s cheek in return.

I wasn’t about to be the only one flustered here. This much payback was only fair.

In the past, she had always kept her right side covered due to the poison that eroded her skin.

But now, there was nothing but soft, smooth skin beneath my fingers.

“I guess I should start thinking about what I’ll have you do for me.”

“Ugh!”

Tang Sowol’s face flushed instantly, caught off guard.

Like a startled cat whose tail had been stepped on, she jumped back with a flustered expression.

“Th-then let’s start right away! Best of three—whoever wins twice first takes the victory!”

“I don’t mind.”

Tang Sowol poured the golpae onto the floor.

And then—

“Wh-what?!?”

She leapt up from her seat, screaming in despair.

Her face had gone pale as if she had seen a ghost.

But no matter how shocked she was, the outcome wouldn’t change.

“Why... why am I getting completely wiped out, Cheon Hwi-da?! Don't tell me...!”

“What? You just learned the rules yesterday. Where did you get the confidence that you'd win?”

“I didn't expect you to be this good! Wait, you're not even that old yet—how are you so experienced?!”

“If you were paying attention, you should've realized it the moment I asked if you were sure about this instead of questioning the rules.”

"Just answer me already! You're not... cheating, are you?! Just what kind of outrageous request are you planning to make me fulfill?!"

"I never cheated. It was purely a difference in skill. Ah, and to be fair, you were also quite unlucky."

"No, but seriously—how did this even happen?!"

"I was going to tell you even if you didn't rush me. It's nothing too grand. It's just that, when I was young, I spent some time running errands and barely scraping by in a gambling house."

"...What?"

Well, that was only half true. When I was too young to be given proper tasks, I did work at a gambling house run by the Red Sand Gang for a while.

But that wasn't the main reason.

After I joined the Dark Soul Unit, I finally got my hands on some money and went all in on purchasing martial arts manuals.

At one point, I heard a rumor that a gambler affiliated with the Hao Clan was wagering a Rising Sword Technique in a gambling match.

The deal was simple: if I won, I would get the martial arts manual; if I lost, I had to pay ten gold taels.

Back then, due to the Dark Soul Unit Leader's petty restrictions, I couldn't access the good techniques stored in their archives.

I had never learned the Rising Sword Technique before, and techniques of that caliber were rarely up for sale. So, desperate, I took the chance.

...I didn't expect to lose twenty times in a row.

At first, that gambler was thrilled to be draining my gold. But after ten rounds, he started going quiet. By the twentieth, he just handed over the manual and pleaded with me.

He wanted me to forget everything that had happened.

He was probably scared I'd hold a grudge and come for revenge.

To be fair, I was frustrated and pissed off, but I never planned on retaliation. So, I accepted his offer.

After that, we became somewhat acquainted, and he shared some insight about gambling.

He said that in one or two rounds, anyone might win. But for a complete amateur like me, going up against a professional gambler? I was bound to get cleaned out.

At the very least, he was decent enough not to cheat outright—he just took my money fair and square.

Later, he ended up wagering elixirs in another gambling match and got his head chopped off by a temperamental unorthodox master.

That so-called master was eventually hunted down and executed by the Hao Clan, but by then, the gambler was long dead.

Since then, I swore off gambling halls entirely.

Anyway, my golpae skills now were the remnants of that desperate struggle to obtain the Rising Sword Technique.

For Tang Sowol, who had just barely learned the rules, defeating me was an impossible feat.

After losing two consecutive rounds in our best-of-three match, she collapsed onto the floor like a squirrel who had lost its acorn, utterly devastated.

I chuckled at her miserable expression.

"Well, now. Since I won, that means I get to make a request. What should I ask for..."

"Ugh! You were only thinking about martial arts anyway, weren't you?!"

Tang Sowol bit her lip and dramatically flopped onto the bed, shouting in an exaggeratedly tragic tone.

"You'll just ignore a bothersome person like me and run off to discuss martial arts with your seniors, won't you?!"

"...What are you even talking about?"

I sighed, exasperated.

"We already agreed to spend the evening together, remember? And yes, I do love martial arts, but there's something else I like just as much, right in front of me. So where exactly do you think I'd be going?"

It took her a moment to fully process my words.

Then, her face turned red as she tried and failed to suppress a pleased smile.

But as if suddenly realizing something, she looked down at herself—only to freeze.

Finally noticing how exposed she was in front of me, she yanked the blanket over herself, cocooning up like a silkworm.

Only her face peeked out as she cautiously asked,

“Th-Then... what exactly are you going to make me do?”

“It’s nothing much. I just wanted to know—what is it that you want from me, to the point that you’d go this far just to ask?”

“...Ah.”

Tang Sowol flinched as if I had struck a nerve.

She curled up slightly, hesitating, before finally straightening and speaking again.

“Was it... that obvious?”

“Not really. It just seemed a bit unnatural that instead of asking me directly, you used a favor as an excuse.”

“Hmph. You act like you don’t pay attention to me, but you actually understand me quite well, don’t you?”

"Who knows? Maybe it’s just that I’m watching you when you’re not looking at me."

“...Okay, that was kind of creepy.”

“...”

“I was joking. Don’t worry.”

Still bundled in the blanket, she giggled and lightly tapped my thigh with her forehead.

As I stretched my legs out, she took it as an invitation and laid her head on my lap, looking up at me.

“You’re right, Cheon Hwi-da. There was something I was curious about, but I couldn’t figure out how to bring it up.”

“Then let’s do this. My wish is for you to tell me what’s on your mind.”

“You know, every time we have a conversation like this, I feel like I really lucked out with my fiancé.”

Chuckling to herself, she cleared her throat before continuing.

“Ahem. First, I want to make one thing clear—I’m not suspicious, nor am I jealous. Please keep that in mind.”

“...That just makes me more nervous, but alright. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I nodded, and after a brief pause, she finally spoke.

“Cheon Hwi-da, you once said that when you look at me, you think of someone else, correct?”

"I also told you that person no longer exists in this world."

“...Then, do you also think of that person when you look at Seol Lihyang?”

An unexpected question.

But I understood what she was trying to ask.

Tang Sowol had realized it.

She had noticed that when I saw Seol Lihyang, memories of the past—of the Demonic Sound Witch from my previous life—came rushing back to me.

I hesitated for a long time, choosing my words carefully.

And finally, I spoke.

“...I—”

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“...Then, do you also think of that person when you look at Seol Lihyang?”

The unexpected question caught me off guard, leaving me momentarily speechless.

If she was asking whether seeing Seol Lihyang made me think of the Tang Sowol from my past life—of course, the answer was no.

However, just as Tang Sowol reminded me of her past self, it was also true that seeing Seol Lihyang made me recall the Seol Lihyang from before my regression.

Both of them were figures deeply engraved in my life—memories so profound that even I couldn't control their presence in my mind.

That was likely why Tang Sowol had asked.

She believed that my affection for her stemmed from someone in my past, an unknown presence shaping my current emotions.

She wasn't entirely wrong.

I did hold the present Tang Sowol in special regard.

But the Tang Sowol of my previous life—who knew me, understood me, shared countless memories, and formed a promise with me that was never fulfilled—was just as precious.

Strictly speaking, the unconditional goodwill I had shown the Tang Sowol of this life, and the love that had gradually bloomed from it, were undoubtedly influenced by the Tang Sowol from before my regression.

And in that sense, Seol Lihyang was no different.

Though I considered the Seol Lihyang of my past and the Seol Lihyang of today as separate individuals, I still remembered.

I remembered how she used to act all prickly, only to tremble alone as a side effect of her Pure Yin Physique.

I remembered how she would flare up in anger over trivial pranks, then leap with joy over the smallest gifts.

I remembered how she blushed when she received pears of the same name as hers, how she whispered coy words in bed, how she sought reassurance with desperate gestures.

I remembered the final breath she exhaled in my arms.

The warmth of her blood as it flowed out.

The complaints and curses she muttered as she died.

The last words she never got to say.

The faint scent of pear that lingered at the tip of my nose.

I remembered all of it.

It was a realization that struck too suddenly, a loss that hit before I had the chance to process it.

And in the end, the void left behind had been filled with a rage so fierce that it burned even myself.

Like soot that had sunk in too deep, the memories clung to me, unable to be erased.

Just as Tang Sowol was unforgettable, so too was Seol Lihyang—an existence I could never completely disregard, no matter how hard I tried.

And inevitably, that lingering presence influenced how I saw the Seol Lihyang of today.

After much contemplation, carefully choosing my words, I finally spoke.

“I...”

If Tang Sowol was asking whether my feelings for the current Seol Lihyang stemmed from my past memories—

If she meant that the love that had been suddenly cut short was now growing again—

“...I do think of her at times when I see Seol Lihyang.”

“...Ah.”

Tang Sowol's voice came out weak, trailing off in disappointment.

I quickly added,

“But that doesn't mean anything will happen that you need to worry about.”

“I already told you, didn't I? I have neither jealousy nor suspicion.”

“But you must have felt uneasy. That’s why I’m saying this again, just to be sure.”

She was still resting her head on my thigh.

I gently ran my fingers through her black-green hair as I continued.

“You are my fiancée. I can’t even imagine anyone else.”

“...You really are trying to seduce me, aren't you? If so, I'd say you've succeeded spectacularly.”

She smirked, seemingly unable to resist bringing up what had happened in Guangdong.

“I wasn’t that worried. But... it’s still nice to hear. Could you say a little more?”

“More?”

“Yes, more. That way, even if something happens, I won’t feel uncertain or shaken.”

“...?”

I wasn't entirely sure what she was getting at, but since she asked, I decided to be a little more honest than usual.

“I've always thought your eyes are beautiful, Tang Sowol.”

“...W-What?”

“It's probably because of your Poison Spirit Physique, but the way a faint green hue shimmers over your black irises makes them look like gemstones.”

“...Oh. Um. That's... I wasn't expecting this kind of response. I just wanted to hear you say that I'm the only one for you...”

“I'll add that too. Next, your hair—it's such a rare color, my eyes are naturally drawn to it. And the way you keep it well-maintained, letting it flow down like silk, is beautiful.

"And when you tie it up for convenience, revealing the pale nape of your neck... It always catches my eye. And every time, it stirs something inside me."

"Agh, 'adding' it, you say... Just how long is this going to go on?"

"Patience. This is only the beginning. Next, there's your lips, your scent, your fingers... The way you've become more comfortable with casual touches, how you keep brushing against me, and how—every single time—your chest ends up pressing against me..."

"...Wait a moment. Cheon Hwi-da, you usually act so indifferent, but are you actually really into this kind of thing?"

"Of course. I've just been holding back because of many reasons—whether it's Tang Jincheon's watchful eye, my martial arts training, or the fact that we're only engaged and I was worried you might not like it if things moved too fast."

"Y-You've been holding back?"

"Mm. That's why you're feeling uncertain, isn't it?"

"...I-It's not like I'm that uneasy..."

Her voice wavered slightly as she hesitantly muttered.

I gently pressed my thumb against her lips.

She ended up biting down on it, startled, unable to speak properly.

Leaning in slightly, I whispered.

“Enough talking. Just listen, Tang Sowol. This is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Her eyes wavered like a candle flickering in the wind.

Seeing that, I smirked and continued.

“Let’s see... Next was lips, wasn’t it?”

The evening was still young. There was plenty of time.

“Hoo...”

As I stepped out of the guest room, the night breeze cooled my flushed face, its refreshing touch easing the lingering heat.

Perhaps the wind had blown the clouds away—at the same time, the moon emerged, faintly illuminating the darkened world.

“...It’s later than I expected.”

What had been evening just moments ago had turned into deep night.

Meanwhile, Tang Sowol, after enduring a relentless barrage of ‘things I like about you’, had succumbed to exhaustion and fallen asleep—still cocooned like a silkworm in my bed.

Well, no wonder. She hadn’t just blushed—she had shrieked non-stop in embarrassment.

And let's not forget the sparring match earlier in the day.

I would've liked to just lie beside her and fall asleep, but... before that, I needed some fresh air.

After all, she wasn't the only one feeling overheated.

I exhaled deeply, looking around.

"...It's dark."

I could still make out my surroundings, but just barely.

It was likely because tonight's moon was only a crescent.

Not that it mattered—I wasn't planning on going far.

If needed, I could always expand my qi sense to navigate.

I only intended to take a brief walk around the small clearing in front of the guest rooms.

After that, I'd have to pry Tang Sowol out of the blankets and send her back to her own room.

Scratching my head, I put together this simple plan and started walking without much thought.

I hadn't expected Tang Sowol to be thinking about something like that.

And honestly, I hadn't given it much thought myself.

But since I had brought Seol Lihyang into the Tang Clan instead of leaving her behind, it was a matter worth addressing at some point.

Lost in thought, I paced around for who knows how long.

And then—

In the dimly lit distance, I spotted a wiry, scarecrow-like figure.

“...What brings you out so late at night?”

“Hoho, it’s been a while.”

“Ghost Shadow Thief, Elder?”

“Indeed. It’s me. So stop looking at me as if I were some ghost.”

“But I had my qi sense spread out...”

“Heh. Your skills are impressive, but you’re still far from being able to sense me.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I was wondering why you were sneaking around in the dark, concealing your presence at this hour.”

“...What?”

“Don’t tell me you stole something from Wudang again...”

“You brat! Just what kind of person do you take me for?!”

“Well, according to your own words, a thief. One who, despite going all the way to Southern Barbarian Beast Palace and Northern Sea Ice Palace to steal treasures, ended up losing everything.”

The Heart-Guard Armor he had snatched from Southern Barbarian Beast Palace had been shattered in a single clash against the Heavenly Demon, and the Northern Sea Ice Palace’s martial arts manual had ended up in my hands.

In short, for all his trouble, Ghost Shadow Thief had gained nothing in his later years—only hardship.

“So, I figured you might be trying to swipe something from Wudang to make up for it.”

“...I won’t say the thought never crossed my mind. But I already took the scabbard of the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal. There’s nothing more valuable here that I could steal.”

“Ah, so it’s just that the risk outweighs the reward.”

“Are you going to keep making me out to be a shameless old thief?”

“My apologies. I’m just easily startled, so when I see shadows suddenly appearing at night, I have a habit of checking whether it’s a person or a ghost.”

“...And if it were a ghost?”

“I’d cut it down.”

“...What?”

“If something lurks in the darkness, forsaking its humanity, it’s bound to be dangerous. So I’d cut it down.”

Ghost Shadow Thief was silent for a moment before cautiously speaking.

“...My title does have ‘Ghost’ in it, but that refers to my shadow-like stealth. I don’t actually consider myself a ghost.”

“I know that much.”

“...Do you now.”

An awkward silence stretched between us.

Finally, Ghost Shadow Thief, unable to endure it, stomped his foot and approached.

Under the faint moonlight, he truly did resemble a shadowy specter—though not in the way his nickname suggested.

As the black silhouette drew closer, his features became more distinct.

Only when we were near enough to recognize each other's faces did he clear his throat.

"Ahem. It's a fine night, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. So, why exactly are you out here at this hour?"

"...You're not letting that go, huh."

He gaped at me but then chuckled and nodded.

"Well, I ran into an old friend I thought I'd never meet again. And then I saw the crescent moon—the kind of night that, in my younger days, I would've called perfect for thieving.

"So, my mind got a bit tangled, and I decided to take a walk."

"I see... But isn't a new moon—with no moonlight at all—a better night for stealing?"

“Surprisingly, no. When the moon is completely gone, people become more cautious. It actually makes things riskier.”

“...Huh.”

I had only thrown that question out absentmindedly, but his answer was unexpectedly insightful.

Now that I thought about it, even I had instinctively considered expanding my qi sense because of the darkness.

On an even darker night, I would’ve spread it even further.

Striking the right balance between making an opponent wary and lulling them into complacency... That was always crucial.

As I nodded in understanding, Ghost Shadow Thief added,

“And also... I was waiting for you.”

“...For me?”

“Yes. There’s something I wanted to discuss with you—alone.

“About your martial arts.”

“If it’s about the killing intent in my swordsmanship, the Third Elder of Wudang already confirmed that it’s not the Thousand Kill Style.”

At my response, Ghost Shadow Thief shook his head.

“No, not your sword. I meant your footwork.”

“...My footwork?”

I flinched.

I hadn’t expected him to bring up my movement technique.

His gaze sharpened, piercing through the darkness as he continued.

“That footwork of yours... It’s changed a lot, but it still carries the traces of the Seo Clan’s techniques, doesn’t it?”

The person who had taught me my current footwork...

Was the Ironblood Hall Master.

And her name was Seo Mun-Hwarin.

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Seo Mun-Hwarin.

She was once the second daughter of the Seo Clan, a prestigious and renowned righteous sect.

The Seo Clan was famous for its exceptional swordsmanship, but Seo Mun-Hwarin herself had little interest in martial arts. Other than learning the very basics, she never truly devoted herself to it.

Since she was expected to marry into another family someday, her clan didn't see this as a major issue.

Thus, she spent her days peacefully, preferring embroidery over the sword—until the Seo Clan met its sudden destruction.

Their home was in Jiangxi Province, a place lacking strong orthodox forces like the Five Supreme Clans or the Nine Great Sects.

Furthermore, it was adjacent to Zhejiang Province, a region where the orthodox and unorthodox factions frequently clashed.

For a long time, the Seo Clan had maintained a firm grip on Jiangxi, making them a thorn in the side of the unorthodox sects.

Eventually, an equally old and ambitious unorthodox sect, the Black Sky Sword Sect, gathered its allies and mid-sized sects under its influence to conspire against the Seo Clan.

Their plan was simple.

Feigning an end to their long-standing conflict, the Black Sky Sword Sect's leader proposed an arranged marriage between their sects.

Weary from the never-ending territorial struggles in Jiangxi, the Seo Clan accepted.

Thus, a wedding was arranged between Seo Mun-Hwarin's younger brother and the Black Sky Sword Sect Leader's daughter.

What should have been a day of celebration turned out to be the Seo Clan's final day.

The head steward, bribed beforehand, poisoned the alcohol, incapacitating the clan head and his closest retainers.

Meanwhile, the guests—secretly allied with the Black Sky Sword Sect—drew their hidden weapons one by one.

The Seo Clan was not weak by any means.

However, the Black Sky Sword Sect had planned their attack meticulously.

The warriors of the Seo Clan, who took pride in protecting Jiangxi as a righteous faction, were struck down one after another.

Even their patriarch, whose skill was said to be unmatched save for a handful of supreme martial artists, fought desperately while poisoned—yet in the end, he was beheaded by the Black Sky Sword Sect's leader.

Her younger brother, who should have been a groom, was stabbed through the heart by his bride—his eyes filled with betrayal as he took his last breath.

Seo Mun-Hwarin survived for one reason.

Because she had never properly learned martial arts.

Lacking internal energy and the presence that martial artists carried, she was deemed unimportant and overlooked.

This allowed her to escape.

However, it did not change the fact that, in a single night, her entire world had been reduced to ashes.

She had watched, with her own eyes, as her family and household retainers were slaughtered.

What could she have possibly felt in that moment?

Even if no one else knew, I understood it all too well.

The unbearable rage burning in her chest.

Clenching her fists so hard her nails dug into her skin.

Screaming her throat raw, yet the fire inside never dimming.

Her hair, once black, turning stark white in a single night—proof of the unbearable torment within her.

And there was only one way to quench that fire.

Revenge.

Thus, Seo Mun-Hwarin left Jiangxi and began wandering the martial world in pursuit of vengeance.

Born a noble lady, she soon experienced homelessness, starvation, and betrayal.

And eventually, she learned what it meant to kill with martial arts.

To take revenge, she had to survive.

And the martial world was not kind to a young woman traveling alone.

Anyone who approached with bad intentions had to be struck down.

Fortunately, Seo Mun-Hwarin had never lacked talent.

Though she had never seriously trained, she still remembered the basic fist techniques she had learned for self-defense.

What should have been merely foundational exercises—normally practiced before proper sword training—became her focus.

She refined them, improved them, and trained relentlessly.

By the time she realized it, she had stepped into the ranks of experts.

And the moment she became aware of her strength, she began her long-overdue revenge.

Of course, no matter how strong a peak-level martial artist might be, they alone could not annihilate all the sects ruling over Jiangxi.

So, she started with the weakest sects.

She lured them out one by one.

Sometimes through deception.

Sometimes through ambushes.

At first, only a handful of martial artists disappeared.

But as time passed, Seo Mun-Hwarin's vengeance grew bolder.

Partly because her martial prowess was rapidly increasing.

But also because she had already wiped out so many sects that hiding was no longer an option.

Realizing the threat she posed, the sects that had conspired against the Seo Clan, including the Black Sky Sword Sect, began hunting her down.

But she survived every single attempt on her life.

Instead, she surpassed the peak-level realm—and massacred even more sects.

Her onslaught was like a wildfire, an unstoppable calamity.

By the time her vengeance reached its climax, every enemy sect had been wiped out—leaving only the Black Sky Sword Sect standing.

She knew the truth.

The Black Sky Sword Sect's leader had been a supreme master for a long time.

And after absorbing the Seo Clan's martial arts, he had grown even stronger.

But knowing that didn't matter.

Because by then, the fire of revenge had already consumed her.

She slaughtered every warrior of the Black Sky Sword Sect.

And for three days and nights, she engaged in a life-or-death battle with its leader.

In the end, Seo Mun-Hwarin crushed his skull.

And by then, the martial world had given her a new name—

The White-Haired Rakshasa.

With that, her revenge was complete.

But once the flames of vengeance died down, all that remained was ash.

The bloodshed she had caused weighed heavily on her.

Despite her righteous cause, she had killed far too many people.

For someone who had once been gentle at heart, slaughtering hundreds was bound to leave scars.

Drained and weary, Seo Mun-Hwarin gathered what remained of the Seo Clan's martial arts and went into seclusion.

This was the story known to the world—the destruction of the Seo Clan and the vengeance that followed.

However, there was one more detail the world did not know.

After refining her foundation and achieving the supreme realm through endless battle, she finally obtained her clan's secret martial arts.

And upon seeing them, she realized...

They were a clear, perfected version of everything she had painstakingly developed on her own.

Her progress surged even faster.

Eventually, she ascended to the Flowering Stage—a realm beyond mortal limits.

Yet, perhaps because of the guilt and remorse that haunted her after her revenge—

She didn't just undergo the usual rebirth (환골탈태) that came with reaching the Flowering Stage.

Her body reversed in age.

She became younger.

Thus, having returned to the body of her happiest childhood, Seo Mun-Hwarin made a resolution.

Now that her revenge was over, and although things had changed somewhat, she had inherited her family's martial arts. She decided to live a new life—a life without the stench of blood, a life befitting a person.

So, she erased as much evidence of her identity as possible and headed to Hubei Province.

She aimed to participate in the Yongbong Gathering held at the Murim Alliance in Wuchang City, starting over as an unremarkable yet decently skilled young martial artist from an unknown sect.

Well, that was the plan—until the Murim Alliance Leader, who usually only made an appearance during the finals, decided to spectate from the very first match. As a result, she was discovered immediately.

Due to the ruthless hand she wielded during her revenge, Seo Mun-Hwarin was already considered a prominent figure in the unorthodox world.

Though, as a master who had reached the Flowering Stage, they had tried to reason with her diplomatically, in the end, she was expelled without achieving her goal.

Eventually, when even her rejuvenated appearance was exposed, she abandoned the idea of a new life. In search of a place to belong, she joined the Black Lotus Sect—

and there, she met Seol Lihyang.

This is the story of the Seo Mun Clan and Seo Mun-Hwarin, as I know it.

She was my teacher, a figure akin to a parent. Though she never formally passed down her martial arts to me, she would occasionally observe and guide my techniques.

Thanks to her, I was able to refine my swordsmanship, improve my inner cultivation technique, and adapt my footwork—once a disconnected mess—into something that fit me perfectly.

And yet... to think that the footwork Seo Mun-Hwarin tailored for me was actually an improved version of the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had always drawn a clear line, insisting she had no intention of passing down her martial arts to me. This was entirely unexpected.

“Ghost Shadow Thief, is this truly the footwork of the Seo Mun Clan?”

“It certainly looks that way to me.”

“The Seo Mun Clan's martial arts once spread far and wide, didn't they?”

“The White-Haired Rakshasa managed to recover most of it, but some techniques were so widely dispersed that reclaiming them was impossible. However, this isn't just any incomplete technique.”

Ghost Shadow Thief shook his head firmly.

Come to think of it, he was someone who had once infiltrated the Seo Mun Clan's secret archives. If nothing else, he possessed a genius-level talent in footwork and movement techniques.

It was hard to dismiss this as mere coincidence.

"I understand. Let's assume my footwork is indeed from the Seo Mun Clan. But what do you mean by saying it's not just any incomplete technique?"

"I mean it quite literally. By the way, what have you been calling this footwork until now?"

"It doesn't have a name. My teacher created it for me, and she said its true value would only manifest when I used it, so she never gave it an official name. If I were to name it, I suppose it would simply be 'Nameless Step'."

"Sigh... Such an exceptional martial art is about to be buried unnoticed."

“What exactly did you see in my footwork that made you say that?”

“What else? Have you ever heard of Thunderclap Step?”

“...Not at all.”

“Well, that’s not surprising. It has been a long time since the Seo Mun Clan was destroyed. Thunderclap Step is a renowned footwork technique known for its extreme speed. It gets its name because every step produces a sound reminiscent of thunder.”

“Oh.”

Now that he mentioned it, something did come to mind.

My footwork was fundamentally a martial art specialized in instantaneous speed and precise control over acceleration and deceleration.

While it lacked in seamless directional changes, it allowed me to explosively accelerate by channeling my inner energy into the Yongcheon Blood Point. Additionally, I could stomp down mid-stride to convert my speed into raw power, enabling me to halt abruptly.

Among these features, the explosive release of inner energy at the Yongcheon Blood Point produced a sound that, to an untrained ear, might resemble thunder.

Though my current level wasn't high enough to emphasize that sound, in my previous life—when I had reached the Transcendence Realm—the resemblance had been much clearer.

I had always believed this footwork was meant to exploit momentary openings in my opponent's defense.

To think it was actually one of the Seo Mun Clan's superior martial arts...

If that were the case, then why had Seo Mun-Hwarin, who so adamantly refused to pass down her clan's techniques to outsiders, lied to me?

As confusion clouded my thoughts, Ghost Shadow Thief spoke in a low voice.

"...It seems you had no idea."

"No. She always told me she had created it just for me."

“That part is likely true. You never learned the Seo Mun Clan’s inner cultivation technique, nor did you study its theoretical principles. Yet, traces of repeated refinements are evident—alterations made so that even someone with entirely different martial arts could use it without difficulty.”

“It must not have been an easy task.”

“Indeed. But the question is... why?”

Why had Seo Mun-Hwarin gone to such lengths?

The question slipped from my lips before I could stop myself.

Ghost Shadow Thief let out a hearty laugh.

“You ask why? The answer is simple. If anyone were to pass down the Seo Mun Clan’s martial arts to you, it would be the White-Haired Rakshasa. But she has many enemies.”

“Enemies...”

Now that he mentioned it...

The son of the Black Sky Sword Emperor had somehow survived and, much like Seo Mun-Hwarin, rose to the Flowering Stage out of sheer vengeance—

only to ultimately die alongside her.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's revenge had been spectacular, but it wasn't perfect. Branded as a figure of the unorthodox world, her reputation in Murim had never been favorable.

“She didn't want to burden her disciple with her own baggage.”

“...Ah.”

The moment I heard those words, I realized—

I wasn't the only one who saw Seo Mun-Hwarin as a teacher.

Surely, she had also considered me her disciple.

As I struggled to suppress the surge of emotions welling up within me, Ghost Shadow Thief shifted the conversation back to the main point.

“I won’t tell anyone about your teacher. However, considering the past wrongs I committed against the Seo Mun Clan, as well as the fact that you saved my life this time—I’d like to repay you for both.”

“Repay me? In what way?”

“I’ll teach you half of my footwork.”

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“I’ll teach you half of my footwork.”

“All or nothing—I don’t understand what you mean by ‘half.’”

“Just so we’re clear, it’s not because I only have one leg left that I can only pass down half of my footwork.”

“...What exactly do you take me for? I would never be so disrespectful as to think that.”

“It was a joke. Though, judging by your reaction, it doesn’t seem to have landed well.”

He was likely trying to adapt to his condition as a one-legged man in his own way, but it was a difficult joke for me to respond to.

Scratching the back of his head awkwardly, Ghost Shadow Thief continued speaking.

“The essence of my footwork, *Ghost Shadow Step*, lies in deception. It deceives the opponent about distance and even fools the perception of a Flowering Stage martial artist.”

“Deception, you say?”

“That’s right. You’ve seen my movements, so let me ask—how did they feel to you?”

“They were faint yet fast. More than anything, what amazed me was how you forced your opponent to react half a beat slower.”

“I didn’t expect you to grasp that much, but you’re correct. Mere speed alone won’t allow you to replicate my footwork.”

Ghost Shadow Thief let out a small chuckle before continuing.

“The key is to disrupt your opponent’s perception, making your movements seem unpredictable, drawing out their openings. Then, you throw yourself into the gaps that appear. That is the core of Ghost Shadow Step. And that’s what I will teach you.”

“In other words, you won’t be teaching me anything beyond that.”

“Haven’t I said from the beginning? I’m only teaching you half. Stealth isn’t achieved through footwork alone. It requires movement techniques as well. If I were to teach you everything, I would essentially be passing down my entire martial art. And that, I cannot do.”

Footwork and movement techniques were inherently interconnected—they inevitably influenced each other. It wasn't surprising that there were footwork techniques completed only when paired with a matching movement technique.

After all, martial arts were about maximizing strengths and compensating for weaknesses, creating harmony between techniques.

However, one thing still weighed on my mind.

“Senior, I recall that you never wished to leave behind your martial arts. Yet, you're willing to pass down even half of it to me. I'm curious about your reasoning. You've already repaid your debt for saving your life with Glacial True Qi.”

“It's nothing complicated. I saw you when I mistook you for having succumbed to qi deviation, and I also heard how your duel with Jeon Il-bi played out.”

Ghost Shadow Thief's gaze grew distant for a moment, as if he were looking at something beyond this place.

“You must have lost something precious before. The scars from that loss must have twisted you.”

“The world of Murim is truly merciless. Your circumstances are unfortunate, but you’re hardly the only one who has suffered bitter experiences.”

“I know. It’s just that very few people survive such trials, and even among those who do, even fewer manage to rise to prominence—so they remain unnoticed.”

Even now, somewhere in the world, there must be someone swallowing their own misery.

The endless cycle of vengeance breeding more vengeance was not some distant tale.

I had experienced it firsthand in my past life.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, having lost her family, exacted revenge upon the unorthodox sects of Jiangxi Province, including the Black Sky Sword Sect.

The surviving son of the Black Sky Sword Sect’s master later rebuilt his father’s sect and, in turn, sought vengeance upon Seo Mun-Hwarin.

And I, having lost both Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin in the process, hunted down and killed anyone even remotely associated with the Black Sky Sword Sect.

Many perished before they could even complete their revenge, but... that was simply the nature of Murim.

A place filled with swordsmen, warriors with unbending pride—that was what Murim was. It wasn't all camaraderie and honor.

There was a reason why the Orthodox Sect was so highly regarded.

They knew when to cut off grudges, valued gratitude over vengeance, and extended their hands to others first—that's why they were respected by the people.

But Ghost Shadow Thief wasn't merely stating the obvious cruelty of Murim.

“Despite all that, you still formed new bonds. Someone who once lost everything now has something to protect again.”

“...That's...”

“I won’t ask about your circumstances. And I won’t tell you about mine either. But one thing is clear—I don’t want to see a young martial artist, not even yet in his twenties, repeat the same mistakes I did.”

Ghost Shadow Thief looked me directly in the eyes as he spoke. His gaze carried traces of regret... but also a hint of relief.

“So grow stronger. And when you do, don’t forget why you sought strength in the first place. That will be enough.”

“I promise. Your teachings will not be used in vain.”

This was my genuine vow.

Though I was often astonished by the sheer scale of the Tang Clan’s resources, I had once stood at the peak of the Transcendence Realm.

There were more things I could do than things I couldn’t. If I had set my mind to it, I could have lived a life of unparalleled wealth and luxury.

Instead, I had spent my fortune collecting and studying the martial arts of the Central Plains.

Of course, all of that had been shattered with the emergence of the Heavenly Demon.

The world was vast, and there existed geniuses beyond my comprehension. And I had to protect my people from that monster.

There was no room for foolish indulgence in power.

As if he sensed my sincerity, Ghost Shadow Thief flinched slightly. Then, he let out a satisfied laugh and nodded.

“Good. Then, let’s begin transferring the core principles. You should be able to apply them directly to your footwork.”

“Is that even possible? No matter how I look at it, our martial arts are entirely different.”

“It’s possible. My martial art is a patchwork of techniques I stole, so it tends to integrate well with others.

...Besides, haven't I already examined the Seo Mun Clan's martial arts before? I'll make the necessary adjustments for you."

I silently narrowed my eyes at him.

Ghost Shadow Thief averted his gaze and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Hmph. Don't look at me like that. Didn't your teacher, unlike me, say she would let go of petty grudges from the past?"

"I was just looking at you."

"Well, for just looking, your stare feels rather murderous."

"I've been told that often. My expressions tend to be stiff."

"And yet, when you were with your fiancée, your lips were loose and relaxed beyond measure..."

“...Are you seriously comparing my fiancée to an old man? Enough talk, let’s get started.”

“Tsk, tsk. And here I am, having to teach while being treated like this.”

Despite his grumbling, Ghost Shadow Thief straightened his hunched back. After clearing his throat once, he began.

“As I mentioned earlier, Ghost Shadow Step is fundamentally a deceptive footwork. Speed is merely a secondary aspect.”

“I saw you exploit gaps in perception while fighting the Soul Reaper. When you say ‘deception,’ do you mean understanding these gaps and using them against your opponent?”

The blink of an eye, the brief moment when an inhale turns into an exhale, a lapse in concentration, personal habits, weaknesses in one’s martial arts—

There is no such thing as a perfect technique, nor a perfect human.

Everyone, even if only for a fleeting moment, has instances where they are more vulnerable than usual.

Given that my martial arts rely on seizing these openings and tearing into my opponent's weak points, I was naturally attuned to this concept.

However, it seemed I had misunderstood something.

“The end result may be the same, but the process is entirely different.”

Ghost Shadow Thief let out a small chuckle and lightly tapped his foot.

In an instant, he had moved behind me.

“Just now—did you see my movement?”

“Yes. You jumped to my right and moved directly behind me.”

“Correct. Then what about this?”

As I turned to answer, he demonstrated his footwork again.

However, this time, I couldn't quite catch his movement.

I could tell he had started toward my side, but suddenly, as if time had skipped, he was back in his original position.

"...Did you accelerate midway?"

"My speed was the same. Can you figure out where the difference lies?"

I fell silent, carefully comparing his two movements.

However, the only thing I could conclude was that this wasn't a simple technique one could grasp with just a moment of thought.

"...I don't know. I don't believe I lost focus, though."

"Well, not knowing is natural. After all, this technique is designed so that the person experiencing it firsthand won't realize what's happening."

Ghost Shadow Thief chuckled and pointed to the ground.

“I left footprints on purpose. Take a look—you’ll understand immediately.”

At his words, I looked down.

And there it was—the clear difference in the angles of the two sets of footprints.

“...Oh.”

“Now do you see?”

“Yes. The angles of the two steps are different. Even the depth of the imprints varies.”

“Exactly. They appear similar but are actually slightly different. However, you instinctively judged the second movement based on what you saw the first time.”

“In other words, it looks the same as before, but in reality, it’s different—so it comes across as an unpredictable movement.”

“Precisely. The essence of Ghost Shadow Step lies in refining these deceptions and applying them over a wider range.”

Rather than exploiting gaps in perception, this technique creates them to exploit.

There was undoubtedly an element of illusion in its footwork.

But ultimately, the true essence of this martial art was...

“Dominance.”

Not about always being ahead—but ensuring that, in the crucial exchanges of moves, one remained a step ahead.

Placing one’s strongest attack against the opponent’s weakest point.

A technique designed to ensure one always maintained superiority.

It wasn't merely about deception.

It was about destabilizing the opponent's rhythm, widening the openings, and pressing the advantage further.

That was the Ghost Shadow Step I had witnessed.

"...Am I wrong?"

"If that's what you think, then that's what it is."

"...What kind of irresponsible answer is that?"

"Well, it's not like you'll be using it exactly as I do. I'll teach you properly, but just take the parts that are useful to you. It's easier that way for both of us, isn't it?"

"That's... true."

Neither of us had ever learned martial arts through proper instruction.

We had simply taken bits and pieces from here and there, modified them, and adapted them to suit ourselves.

Moreover, Ghost Shadow Thief was someone who preferred evasion over direct confrontation.

Even if we used the same technique, our perspectives on it would naturally differ.

As I nodded in understanding, Ghost Shadow Thief clasped his hands behind his back and spoke.

“Now that you’ve grasped the concept, focus. I will now recite the oral formulas.”

The martial arts transmission continued until the first light of dawn.

I would still need to refine it to suit me and practice until it became second nature—

but with this, I had taken another step forward.

During the day, I dueled with disciples of the Wudang Sect.

Occasionally, I would find myself staring absentmindedly at the sword marks engraved on the sect's plaque.

At night, I pondered how to integrate Ghost Shadow Step into Thunderclap Step.

And when I returned to my quarters, I spent time idly chatting with Tang Sowol before eventually drifting off to sleep.

Several days passed like this.

Then, at last, a messenger from the Tang Clan arrived at Wudang.

“It's been a while—though not too long, Young Master. It seems Miss Sowol is not suited for extended stays away from home.”

The elderly man greeted me with a genial smile.

It was none other than Tang Cheolyeong, the leader of the Dark Soul Unit, whom I had once traveled with.

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Just as I was beginning to grasp the essence of Ghost Shadow Step, the people sent by the Tang Clan to escort us back arrived.

“Has the leader of the Dark Soul Unit come in person?”

“Well, we’ve met once before, haven’t we? The Clan Lord thought it would be better to send someone familiar, so he sent me.”

I had previously traveled with Tang Cheolyeong, the Dark Soul Unit leader, on our way to Guangdong Province.

Though we hadn’t spoken much, I knew him to be a highly skilled and loyal member of the Tang Clan.

As I nodded in acknowledgment, Tang Cheolyeong let out a hearty laugh and turned to Tang Sowol, who was fidgeting behind me.

“My lady, I hope you aren’t displeased that I arrived too late. I came as soon as I received word, so I ask for your understanding.”

“A-Ah! No! I wasn’t upset with you at all, Dark Soul Unit Leader! It’s just that, um... I suddenly remembered what I said before we left, and it made me a little embarrassed...”

Tang Sowol trailed off, slipping further behind me.

Curious, I tilted my head.

At that moment, Tang Cheolyeong widened his eyes and exclaimed,

“Ah! You mean what you said before departing from the Tang Clan? Yes, I can see why that would be embarrassing. But in this case, it was inevitable. There’s no need to dwell on it too much.”

“...What exactly are you talking about? I feel a little left out, being the only one unaware.”

“Haha! It’s nothing much. As you know, Young Master, I’ve been assisting the young lady with her hidden weapon techniques lately.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“At that time, she told me—and likely many others—that not only had she made significant progress in her poison arts, but she had also far surpassed her previous level in hidden weapon techniques. She was so confident that she declared she wouldn’t return before completing at least a full month of training outside the clan.”

“...How long have we been away from the Tang Clan?”

“About twenty days. If we depart from Zhongnan Mountain today and travel diligently, we should reach the Tang Clan in four days.”

“So, she’s still short of a full month. She was so certain when she said it—I doubt she ever expected it would turn out like this.”

I smirked and turned around.

There, I saw Tang Sowol peeking out from behind the Blood Venom Unit leader, using him as a shield.

“...Why are you hiding?”

“I’ve known Young Master Cheon for quite some time now. I can tell what you’re thinking. You were planning to tease me, weren’t you?”

“Tease you? That’s a misunderstanding. I was simply curious about something.”

“And what might that be?”

“Well, if we stay here for about another seven days, you’ll complete a full month. Were you considering delaying our departure until then?”

“If only Dark Soul Unit Leader here kept his mouth shut, no one would know the difference. What do you think? Interested?”

“Eek! No! Absolutely not! Even if I forced it to be a full month, nothing would change! In the end, I’d still be the fool who set out on a grand second journey into Murim, only to return after failing to even explore half of Shaanxi Province!”

For someone like me—an aimless wanderer of the unorthodox world in my past life—traveling through Murim was nothing extraordinary.

But for young martial artists raised in prestigious orthodox sects, journeys into Murim often held a certain allure.

Especially for the young elites, the post-qi blossoming stage disciples, who often saw their experiences during such journeys as accomplishments worth boasting about.

Clearing out bandits who oppressed commoners, defeating ruthless warriors from unorthodox sects, dueling and triumphing over famous martial artists—To them, these were grand tales.

For someone constantly roaming Murim with a sword at their side, such encounters were commonplace,

but for those experiencing it all for the first time, it was nothing short of exciting.

Yet, Tang Sowol had failed to have such an experience—not once, but twice.

And this time, despite bringing a personal guard for extra security.

Of course, both times, there had been unavoidable circumstances.

“Hm. I understand that breaking your own declaration so quickly must be embarrassing.

But honestly, as Dark Soul Unit Leader mentioned, wasn't this situation out of your control?”

She survived an encounter against five Soul Reapers and nearly twenty elite assassins.

Even with the help of Ghost Shadow Thief and the Blood Venom Unit Leader, any ordinary post-qi blossoming stage martial artist would have been severely wounded or even killed.

Hearing the full story, no one would blame her for returning early.

“...Still, when the next Yongbong Gathering comes around, I'll meet familiar faces. What am I supposed to say then...?”

“What do you mean? Just brag about your capable fiancé.”

I shrugged and reached out my hand toward Tang Sowol, who was still hiding.

“Come on, let’s go. We should at least say goodbye to the sect leader before we leave.”

Tang Sowol stared at me for a moment before placing her hand in mine.

Then, with a satisfied smile, she nodded.

“Hmph. Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I do have something to boast about.”

“Dark Soul Unit Leader, what about you?”

“I’ve already bid farewell to the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal. I also have a letter from the Clan Lord, so I visited him first.”

“Understood. Then we’ll go on our own. Please prepare for our departure with the Blood Venom Unit.”

“Take your time.”

After exchanging nods with Tang Cheolyeong, Tang Sowol and I made our way to the sect leader’s quarters.

When we arrived, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal didn’t look any different from before.

He seemed busy. He seemed weary.

Yet, there was an odd sense of calm about him—

as if he knew that at any moment, everything could change.

“Senior Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal.”

“So, did you come here because you were curious about the contents of the letter I received from the Tang Clan Lord?”

“No, I simply felt that I should pay my respects before leaving.”

“Well, there wasn’t much in the letter. Half of it was the usual formalities, thanking me for protecting you two. Another half was an empty promise to share a drink together like in the old days. And the last half was him worrying that, although his son-in-law may be a bit ruthless, at least he isn’t Thousand Kill Star.”

“...That seems to add up to more than one letter’s worth.”

“Who’s keeping count? Since we’re both addressing each other as Clan Lord and Sect Leader out of formality, the letter naturally became one and a half in length. And I wasn’t sharing it because I thought you were curious—I simply needed a light topic to open the conversation.”

With that, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal let out a long sigh and tucked the letter away.

Then, finally turning to face me, he gave a faint smile.

“First, let me ask—was your stay here comfortable?”

“It was fine.”

“I had no complaints either.”

As Tang Sowol and I answered almost simultaneously, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal nodded in satisfaction.

“That’s good to hear. I was worried that you might have felt uncomfortable after thoroughly thrashing my disciples in the sparring matches.”

“...I thought it was all within the boundaries of fair competition.”

“I was only joking. However, I did hear that you paid special attention to a disciple named Jin Baek. May I ask why?”

“There’s no particular reason. It just reminded me of the past.”

As Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal intended, the sparring matches between Tang Sowol, myself, and the Wudang disciples must have been a valuable experience for them.

They got to witness hidden weapon techniques—something rarely encountered outside of special circumstances.

They also had the chance to face a killing sword rather than the Daoist school of swordsmanship they were accustomed to.

It was a rare and controlled opportunity to experience such a thing.

However, due to Tang Sowol's background in the Tang Clan and her reliance on hidden weapons,

she occasionally lost to some of the older second-generation disciples during spars.

In contrast, I—young in appearance, undefeated in every match except against the Third Elder, and exuding a lethal aura with my sword—had, well...

Let's just say some of the disciples were wary of me.

After facing me once, they rarely challenged me again.

Among them, Jin Baek stood out.

Even after multiple defeats, he would continue to smile and ask for another match.

If he didn't understand something, he would politely ask me to explain it.

Winning or losing, pressure during battle—none of it seemed to matter to him. He only cared about the sword.

The same unwavering spirit I had seen before my regression,

though slightly altered by the Wudang Sect's destruction in my past life,

must have been something ingrained in him from birth.

“Heh. Reminded you of the past, you say? You're still young, yet you speak like an old man.”

“Oh! Young Master Cheon does have a habit of doing that.”

Tang Sowol eagerly nodded in agreement, as if she had been waiting for the chance to say so.

I stared at her, exasperated.

Instead of backing down, she simply tilted her chin up, as if daring me to disagree.

Looking up from below usually makes a person look unflattering—so why does Tang Sowol look beautiful?

No, more importantly, how would she even look unflattering?

No matter how I tried to imagine an unappealing version of her in my head, all I could think of was how stunning she remained.

After all, even when half her face had melted away in my past life, I had still found her beautiful.

As I nodded to myself, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal let out a chuckle and spoke.

“I once thought that Jin Cheon must have arranged this marriage because he cherishes his daughter, and because you’re a talent he wanted to keep tied to the Tang Clan...But now, I see that isn’t the only reason.”

“...Ah.”

Only then did Tang Sowol realize where my gaze had been lingering.

Her face flushed red.

Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal’s laughter grew even louder.

“I’ve never regretted not having children. But now, I do feel a little envious of my old friend.”

He then turned to me with a thoughtful look.

“But tell me, Young Master Cheon—since you’re about to leave Zhongnan Mountain soon...Did you find what you were looking for?”

“...What I was looking for?”

On the first day, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal had told me—that if there was anything I wished to take from Wudang, I was free to do so.

And now, though I hadn't learned Wudang's martial arts,

I felt like I had gained an understanding of what they sought to achieve through their techniques.

Not their philosophy, their Dao—but how they tried to reach it through martial arts.

The key lay in unbroken flow.

Even when a strike missed or a stance faltered, it was all accepted as part of the technique.

Not a sword that severed an opponent's flow to take their head—but a sword that created its own continuous rhythm.

It was certainly a deeper martial art than mine, but it was too different from what I pursued for me to adopt it completely.

That said, it wasn't without meaning.

A sword that transitions into the next technique from any stance.

Rather than just the numerous intricate forms and subtle movements, the most important aspect was the distribution of weight.

Even if the body swayed or the sword was knocked aside, as long as the center of balance remained intact, one could continue stepping, continue attacking.

I didn't know how Wudang solved this problem in their techniques, but by incorporating the principles of Thousand-Jin Pendulum or the concept of weight, I could likely mimic their approach.

How I would integrate this into my own swordsmanship was something I would need to research and train for—but I had already gained meaningful insights.

I respectfully clasped my hands and bowed.

“I have taken more than enough.”

“Haha. That’s good to hear.”

For a brief moment, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal’s weary face softened, taking on the gentle air of a true Daoist.

Beneath his kind expression, however, was a gaze that seemed to pierce through everything—

laced with a hint of relief.

I wasn’t sure what his true intentions were,

but it seemed that he had been hoping for something.

Not that it mattered.

Whatever it was, it wasn't a threat to me.

With a small nod, Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal clasped his hands together in farewell.

“Even if not for another disaster like this, you are always welcome here.

I would never turn away the daughter of an old friend or her fiancé.”

“I am grateful for your kind words.”

“I'll make sure to tell Father not to just send letters next time, but to visit in person!”

With that, we left the Sect Leader's chambers.

And as we walked down the corridor, I locked eyes with Ghost Shadow Thief, who had been waiting for us from a short distance away.

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A short distance away in the corridor, my eyes met those of the Ghost Shadow Thief.

The old man, leaning lazily against the wall, smirked and curled up the corners of his lips.

“You heartless brat. Shouldn't you at least show your face before leaving?”

“I intended to. It's just that you were quicker than me, that's all.”

“Hah, you sure know how to talk.”

With a chuckle, the Ghost Shadow Thief straightened his posture and stepped away from the wall. Then, he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me.

“Take it.”

“What is this?”

“The location of my tomb. Just in case, don’t go looking for it right away. Wait until rumors spread that the Ghost Shadow Thief’s secret vault has been discovered, and then pay a visit.”

“...Are you really going through with this?”

“Why act so surprised? I started my life as a thief—ending it as one seems like the cleanest way to go. More than anything, just imagine the countless warriors of the Central Plains swarming to raid my grave.”

“That would certainly be quite the spectacle.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief never stole anything more precious than a man’s life, but within his own principles, he had undoubtedly taken the most valuable things he could.

Though his tomb and vault wouldn’t contain any legendary martial arts manuals, it would be filled with high-level techniques. Even if there were no divine weapons, renowned swords would surely be neatly displayed.

His prime had been nearly sixty years ago, but there were still those who remembered his name.

Once word of the vault spread, people would flock to it in droves.

It wouldn't just be unorthodox warriors coveting the treasures inside—reputable sects, who had suffered at the hands of the Ghost Shadow Thief in the past, would also rise to reclaim what was stolen from them.

Recovering what was once taken—what a simple and just cause to rally behind.

“It's going to be utter chaos.”

“That's exactly what I want. I've always liked grand funerals.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief grinned as if just imagining it brought him joy. His smile, oddly pure and childlike, made me chuckle despite myself.

“Thanks to you, I won't have to die alone in some remote cave, forgotten by all. Instead, the whole world will know my final moments.”

“Now that I think about it, you did say that if I survived the assassins, you'd give me the Tomb Map without hesitation.”

“That’s right. Initially, I planned to tear it into pieces and scatter them across the land, but for you, I’m making an exception and giving you the whole thing intact. You should be honored.”

“I’ll save my excitement for after I’m the first one inside the vault. We’re heading back to the Tang Clan now, but what about you? Despite your age, you’re still in good shape.”

“Haha, I’m not on death’s door just yet. But I don’t have much time left either. This last injury took a heavy toll on my vitality, and my internal energy won’t be able to hold off aging for much longer.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief looked down at his remaining leg. But rather than regret, his expression held relief.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I passed on what I learned from the Demonic Cult, I made peace with an old friend I never thought I’d see again, and I gave you what I needed to. Now, I plan to leave Zhongnan Mountain soon.”

“I see.”

“If time is short, then I’ll just have to move quickly. I have a lot to prepare to make sure the rumors spread across the Central Plains naturally, without me lifting a finger.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief was preparing for his own death.

It was clear why he was saying all this. He had already accepted that this was our last meeting.

The next time I saw him, it would likely be to pour a drink over his grave.

No matter how often I encountered people who knew their time was up and walked toward their own deaths, I could never grow used to it.

Had my thoughts shown on my face? The Ghost Shadow Thief shrugged and spoke again.

“Don’t look so grim. I didn’t just leave you with the Tomb Map, did I?”

“...Ah.”

He was right. Though incomplete, the Ghost Shadow Thief had also taught me his footwork technique.

I wouldn't use it as it was, but its core principles would be woven into my own movements.

I had stolen and learned many martial arts, but those who had directly taught me were few and far between.

Feeling a strange sense of nostalgia, I found myself glancing down at my own feet, then at the Ghost Shadow Thief's. Suddenly, he reached out and patted my shoulder.

"We're different in many ways, but we do share one thing in common."

"And what might that be?"

"Neither of us properly learned martial arts the usual way. What we mastered works fine for ourselves, but it can't be passed down to others."

He was right.

The Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was as formidable as any divine technique, but if anyone else tried to practice it, they'd call it a monstrous, demonic art.

After all, it granted complete control over internal energy and immense power, but at the cost of being endlessly tormented by murderous impulses.

Even among demonic arts, it would be considered particularly twisted.

More than just a set of techniques, the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was a culmination of my life—a collection of martial fragments stolen from various places, pieced together into something that suited me perfectly.

It was never meant to be passed on to another. It was crafted solely for myself.

History had seen many martial geniuses, but few had ever left behind their full techniques and insights. This was likely the reason why.

However, the Ghost Shadow Thief shook his head.

“I used to think the same. But you, like my younger self, dissect the Ghost Shadow Steps, stripping away the unnecessary parts and incorporating only what fits your own style.”

“You’re the one who told me to do that.”

“I’m not criticizing you. It’s just...”

The Ghost Shadow Thief trailed off, choosing his words carefully before continuing.

“I’m simply surprised. Seeing how you learned martial arts the same way I did... it makes me think you might not just be imitating. You might actually be able to understand it in its entirety.”

I knew exactly what he meant.

The more I studied the Ghost Shadow Steps, the more I could feel the depth of thought behind it.

I began to understand why the Ghost Shadow Thief had incorporated certain movements into his techniques, why he sought to deceive others using a martial art meant to kill.

When learning other martial arts, I could naturally grasp their fundamental principles and intended purpose.

But with the Ghost Shadow Steps, his intent came through even more clearly.

As if, by understanding his martial art, I could come to understand the man himself.

The Ghost Shadow Thief must have noticed my thoughts, as he let out a quiet chuckle.

“At first, all I wanted was to make money. But before I knew it, I had become obsessed with the thrill of stealing and the exhilaration of being admired by the world.”

“There are plenty of lunatics in the martial world. A mere obsession with theft is a relatively harmless quirk.”

“Hah! You’re right. In the end, my madness was nothing more than a case of kleptomania. But do you know what I thought when I tricked an old friend into inviting me to Wudang Sect and finally stole the scabbard of the Flowing Cloud Sword?”

“Guilt, perhaps?”

“That disappeared about halfway when I left behind a stolen Quanzhen Sect martial manual in the black market.”

“That was rather quick.”

“It would have been better if it happened after hearing the sect leader’s declaration that he wouldn’t hold me accountable, or after making peace with Jeon Il-bi, at the very least.”

But when he firmly shook his head, his next words left no room for doubt.

“What I felt back then was fear.”

“...Excuse me?”

“No matter how careless he may have been, I managed to slip past the notice of a Flowering Stage master and sneak into his private chambers. If I had wished, I could have stolen the Flowing Cloud Sword itself rather than just its scabbard. And

if I were an assassin instead of a thief, I could have aimed for the life of the previous Wudang Sect Leader.”

Of course, a Flowering Stage martial artist wouldn't be so easily killed. That's why he had said he could have aimed for his throat, not that he could have taken it.

But the simple fact that he had achieved a flawless infiltration against an absolute master—something no one else had ever done—would have been enough to shake the entire Central Plains to its core.

“As you said, I was just a man obsessed with theft. The harder something was to steal, the more exhilarating it felt. And hearing the world fuss over my exploits was equally entertaining. Even my plan to turn my tomb into a treasure vault and scatter the Tomb Map was ultimately just a way to boast of my legacy one last time.”

“But not everyone shares your sense of amusement.”

The true essence of the Ghost Shadow Thief's martial art wasn't simply about deception through unpredictable movements.

The half he didn't teach me—the true secret of his skill—was a stealth technique capable of fooling even the eyes of Flowering Stage masters.

“No matter how I looked at it, I could only see disastrous consequences. That’s why I never passed my martial art down to anyone. I told myself it was because I didn’t want to leave behind a legacy of thieves.”

“And yet, you still taught me half of the Ghost Shadow Steps.”

“I did feel gratitude toward you, yes. But... to be honest, in my old age, I got greedy.”

“Greedy?”

“No matter how vast the Central Plains is, there are very few people like you and me—people who master multiple martial arts. Even fewer can refine them into something uniquely their own, and those who reach the highest realms are almost nonexistent.”

“There are nearly none.”

Before my regression, my younger self had arrogantly considered himself a Grandmaster-level genius for good reason.

I could do what others couldn't. I could instantly grasp martial arts that had been developed and refined for generations, steal their essence, and adapt them into my own.

The Ghost Shadow Thief must have been the same in his youth.

After all, Seo Mun-Hwarin had introduced me to his name not simply because he was a thief who had stolen his clan's techniques, but because he, like me, had collected and refined multiple martial arts into a style entirely his own.

This wasn't a matter of innate talent or intelligence—it was a completely different kind of ability.

I might not have been a true genius of that level, but still...

“Thanks to you, I'll have a grand send-off. And I thought that would be enough. But the more I considered the future, the more melancholic I became.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief's vault would surely cause an uproar across the Central Plains. But eventually, every festival comes to an end. What once burned brightly would inevitably fade into quiet obscurity.

Once someone gathered all the Tomb Maps, found the grave's location, bypassed the myriad traps and competitors, and finally entered the vault...

That would be the end of it.

And then, he would simply be forgotten.

“But you're different. No matter how much the form may change, what I have left behind will always live on in your martial arts. And if you take on a disciple, it will be passed down even further.”

“A trace...”

“Yes, a trace. My body will decay and disappear, but I've come to desire a more lasting mark. A vault alone isn't enough. I wanted someone who would truly understand and carry on what it means to be the Ghost Shadow Thief.”

“And you think that person is me?”

“I'd like it to be you. Not that I have any right to demand such a thing after only passing down half my technique... Well, I've rambled on long enough. As I said before, old men tend to develop strange habits.”

The Ghost Shadow Thief let out an awkward chuckle before taking a step back and cupping his hands in a formal salute.

Gone was his usual playful demeanor—this time, his gesture was as serious as when we had first met.

“My name is Jang Cheok. The world may call me the Ghost Shadow Thief, but I want you to remember this old man by his real name.”

That was the last I ever saw of Jang Cheok.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Cheon Hwi-da, along with the Dark Soul Unit and its leader, descended from Zhongnan Mountain and made their way to the Tang Clan.

As expected, they encountered an ambush by assassins. However... as long as the King of Assassins wasn't present himself, it wasn't a serious threat.

After all, they had the leader of the Dark Soul Unit, a seasoned supreme martial artist, on their side.

Thanks to that, even though they faced significantly more first-class assassins and Soul Reapers than last time, they managed to dispatch them with much greater ease.

With this matter taken care of, there shouldn't be any major problems later on, even when the Ghost Shadow Thief returns to the grave he has prepared for himself.

Aside from the assassins, the journey to the Tang Clan was uneventful. Upon arrival, I and Tang Sowol were met with mixed gazes of concern and relief from the clan retainers and household members, who had already heard the news.

Then, we heard Tang Jincheon declare,

"From now on, the two of you are forbidden from leaving Chengdu for the next three years."

"What? F-Father, why?!"

"Hm. To be honest, if every time you two go out, you end up in situations like this, even I would impose a restriction...."

"Be quiet! Whose side are you even on, sir?!"

"Wait, was there even a side to take here?"

As I let out a long sigh, Tang Jincheon spoke again, his voice slightly trembling.

"Sowol. And you, my future son-in-law. To put it plainly... I am anxious and afraid."

"Father???"

"You are both strong for your age. And I, too, am strong enough to be counted among the ten greatest martial artists in the Central Plains... But even so, the mere thought of you encountering someone beyond your level, in a place beyond my reach, terrifies me."

"Well..."

Even Tang Sowol couldn't immediately respond. She hesitated, perhaps taken aback by how directly her father voiced his concerns.

The sharpness in her gaze softened, her lips—previously pressed in stubborn defiance—relaxed, and her hands, which had been resting on her hips, slowly returned to her sides.

Because she knew.

She knew that everything we had gone through was far from ordinary. That it had been dangerous. And, most importantly, that it had happened far too often.

If all martial journeys were like ours, there wouldn't be so many young prodigies wandering alone after leaving their sects.

“Of course, I'm not saying you should never leave Chengdu for the rest of your lives. I just wish for my anxious heart to be at ease... at least until you both achieve a higher level of martial attainment.”

“...Father...”

Tang Sowol fell silent for a moment before speaking in a calm voice.

“In three years, the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering will be held.”

“I can’t stop you from attending that. Besides, seeing how quickly you both are growing, I believe three years will be enough for me to rest easier.”

In truth, even a first-class martial artist wouldn’t be easily beaten up wherever they went. At that level, one could serve as the head of a small martial hall or join the combat units of a respectable sect.

That was likely why Tang Jincheon had felt assured enough to allow Tang Sowol to step into the martial world in the first place.

...Only for her to get kidnapped by me right away.

Regardless, Tang Sowol was now significantly stronger than she had been back then.

Her hidden weapon techniques, which had been somewhat unrefined, had vastly improved after training under the leader of the Dark Soul Unit. She had even mastered Soul-Chasing Flying Butterflies, albeit only one technique from the set.

And as for her poison arts? There was no need to even mention it. It had already been some time since she’d become capable of bringing down supreme martial artists stronger than herself.

Though her poison arts had grown more potent due to the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass, the real reason for her rapid improvement lay elsewhere. She had fought real battles, faced mortal danger, and, through those experiences, gained a deeper understanding of martial arts as a whole.

For martial artists, crisis is opportunity. As long as one doesn't die, one always walks away with something.

That was how I had managed to reach the supreme realm with an unorthodox martial path.

And that was also how Tang Sowol, in my previous life, had broken through her long-standing bottleneck and reached the Flowering Stage at a relatively young age.

But realization alone isn't enough—it must be internalized.

Tang Sowol was no exception. She had accumulated an immense amount of high-density experience in a short period, and now she needed time to organize and make it her own.

The same applied to me. After all, I had just stolen and learned a portion of Zhongnan's martial arts and received the essence of the Ghost Shadow Steps.

...Though I wasn't sure if we really needed three full years for this.

Then again, perhaps Tang Jincheon wasn't just referring to the time needed to digest martial comprehension.

Tang Sowol was already a fully matured first-class martial artist. I had an advantage since I had already broken through once before, so reaching the supreme realm was easier for me. But Tang Sowol... she was going to have a much harder time.

Countless warriors spend their entire lives as first-class martial artists, never managing to take that next step. The wall to the supreme realm was high—immensely so.

However, Tang Sowol's talent, physique, and the Tang Clan's resources were a fortuitous encounter in and of themselves.

Perhaps when Tang Jincheon said three years, he meant...

“Sowol. Three days from now, I will begin teaching you the Universal Return Divine Art . Within three years, I will ensure that you break through the bottleneck.”

“W-Wait! Isn’t that a martial art only my brother is allowed to learn?!”

“Your brother has always been more inclined toward hidden weapons than poison arts. He also has more talent in that area. That is why I have decided to pass down the Reverse Guiding Three Yang Return Art to him instead. You need not worry.”

“That’s not the problem! I understand that the Universal Return Divine Art focuses on poison arts and that the Reverse Guiding Three Yang Return Art suits my brother better... But both of those techniques are exclusively meant for the Clan Leader and the Young Clan Leader! Father!”

“That is true. However, the decision to pass Universal Return Divine Art to you was made long ago.”

“...What?”

“The moment you were born with the Poison Spirit Physique within the Tang Clan, it was unanimously agreed upon—by myself, the elders, and all the clan retainers. Naturally, Tang Cheong was also informed when he officially became the Young Clan Leader, and he agreed to it as well. So, there is no need for you to worry about complicated matters. Just focus on mastering the Universal Return Divine Art. It is no ordinary technique—you must take it seriously.”

“Ugh...”

Tang Sowol couldn't find the words to respond, tilting her head in confusion.

Well, I understood her reaction. The Universal Return Divine Art was one of the Tang Clan's most treasured techniques.

For someone like Tang Sowol, who had never once desired the position of Young Clan Leader, this must have come as a shock.

But in the end, she would learn it.

At least, in my past life, she did.

According to her, the Universal Return Divine Art was a technique that allowed one to infuse various poisons into their internal energy.

Most poison arts naturally cause the user's internal energy to become poisonous as their mastery increases. However, they typically only develop one or two types of poison, and their efficiency isn't particularly high.

As a result, poison users often carry external poisons to augment their techniques—just like the leader of the Blood Venom Unit had done.

But the Universal Return Divine Art was different. It allowed the user to refine and absorb various poisons, merging them into their internal energy and using them selectively at will.

Thanks to this technique, once mastered, the practitioner would not only attain absolute poison immunity but, upon reaching the Flowering Stage, their internal energy and even their physical body would become completely infused with poison—transforming them into a true poison entity.

...Now, doesn't that sound familiar?

That's right. The Universal Return Divine Art wasn't just about controlling poison—it was about becoming poison itself.

It was only natural that this technique closely resembled the Poison Spirit Physique, a constitution that made one more akin to poison itself rather than a human being.

Then, does this mean that learning the Universal Return Divine Art would be meaningless for Tang Sowol, who was already born with the Poison Spirit Physique?

Of course not.

Rather, the Poison Spirit Physique was said to maximize its potential when combined with the Universal Return Divine Art.

The only issue was that, in my past life, she had only begun learning it after reaching the Supreme Stage.

...Well, I'm sure Tang Jincheon has his own plans. If she's truly talented enough to reach Flowering Stage through poison arts, he must have some method in mind, even if it's a little early.

More than anything, a father who cherishes his daughter as much as Tang Jincheon would never put her in harm's way.

I lightly patted Tang Sowol's shoulder as she remained flustered.

"Everyone is fine with it, so what are you hesitating for?"

"H-However...."

"Don't tell me you're planning to overthrow your brother and take the position of Clan Leader?"

"Of course not! I have no such ambitions! Besides, I know very well how much my brother has done for me. I could never betray him like that!"

"Then it's settled. Stop overthinking it and just focus on training."

"This isn't as simple as you make it sound! There are matters of legitimacy, tradition... things far more complicated than you realize!"

"I don't know about that. Seems to me like you're making an easy decision unnecessarily difficult. The elders are fine with it, your brother is fine with it, and you're fine with it—so what's the problem?"

"...Is that so?"

Tilting her head in confusion, Tang Sowol blinked at me. She might have been troubled, but to me, she just looked adorably lost, which made me chuckle a little.

But before I could tease her further, Tang Jincheon spoke with an odd expression.

"Tell me, son-in-law. I know it's strange for me to say this, but... don't you have any ambition?"

"Ambition?"

"It's rare for a woman to become the Clan Leader, but it's not unheard of in the Tang Clan. If Sowol truly wished for it, she could absolutely take the position."

"That... might be true."

"Becoming the husband of the Tang Clan's leader would grant you tremendous power and influence over Sichuan. Even if you're a son-in-law rather than a direct successor, that's still an enviable position, don't you think?"

"I have no interest in that. From the very beginning, I was never after the Tang Clan—I was after Tang Sowol herself."

"Hoo..."

"Besides, even if I were to take control of the Tang Clan, it wouldn't suddenly grant me enlightenment or help me break through to the Flowering Stage. More likely, I'd just be buried under political matters and unable to focus on martial arts. Isn't that exactly what's happening to you, father-in-law? And wasn't that also the case for the Sect Leader of Zhongnan?"

Because I know.

I know that someday, the Heavenly Demon will invade.

I know that even those who have reached the Flowering Stage will be powerless before his overwhelming might.

I know that the once glorious Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects will crumble into dust.

I know that Tang Sowol's hair will turn white from despair as she watches the Tang Clan fall.

Even though the Tang Clan was far more powerful than I had originally thought, it still wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough to withstand the inevitable destruction brought by the Heavenly Demon.

Unless Tang Sowol was willing to abandon her clan and run, I only had two objectives.

To make myself and my loved ones stronger than we were in my past life—so that I could protect them.

And to warn the martial world of the Demonic Cult's impending threat, so that they could prepare.

Beyond that, no amount of wealth or prestige meant anything to me.

Perhaps sensing the truth behind my words, Tang Jincheon sighed and shook his head.

"A daughter who refuses power even when it's offered... and a son-in-law who couldn't care less about the Tang Clan's authority... You two really are a perfect match. A pair destined for each other."

"F-Father?!"

"Oh, I completely agree."

"Cheon Hwi-da! Just what exactly are you agreeing with?!"

Flustered, Tang Sowol's face turned red as she jumped up in place before furiously smacking my shoulder.

It didn't hurt.

But if I kept teasing her, she might actually get mad, and from past experience, I knew better than to push my luck.

So, I just let her hit me as Tang Jincheon let out a small chuckle and gently intervened.

"Enough. Don't bully your fiancé too much, Sowol."

"Bully?! That wasn't my intention...!"

"If you're really that troubled, take three days to think about it. But for now, there's something more important."

Saying so, Tang Jincheon opened his arms and pulled Tang Sowol into a light embrace.

"I should have said this sooner, but... I'm just glad you're safe, my daughter."

"Ugh... I-I'm sorry for making you worry, Father."

Watching the touching father-daughter moment, I clapped lightly before Tang Jincheon released Tang Sowol—only to suddenly turn to me with his arms still open.

"You worked hard too, son-in-law. How about a hug?"

"Mm... I'll pass."

"Good. Honestly, I regretted offering the moment I said it."

Then don't ask in the first place.

Later that night, before returning to my room, I made a brief stop at the Outer Court Hall.

There, I handed Seol Lihyang a manual on Glacial True Qi.

“Picked this up on the way.”

However...

“...Did you seriously just stop by to dump trash on me the moment you got back?”

...What kind of reaction is that?! Even after giving her something valuable, she still acts like this!

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

"Picked this up on the way."

"...Did you seriously just drop by just to dump trash on me as soon as you got back?"

...What kind of reaction is that?! Even after giving her something valuable, she still acts like this!

Sure, Glacial True Qi is notoriously difficult to master, but it's undoubtedly a powerful martial art. And considering Seol Lihyang was born with a Pure Yin Physique, even its usual drawback wouldn't be an issue for her—

"Ah."

As I was silently grumbling over her lack of appreciation, I suddenly noticed something.

The manual's condition.

The exterior was visibly worn, and, likely due to the Ghost Shadow Thief's harsh life on the run, it wasn't in the best shape.

The edges had water stains, as if it had gotten wet and then dried, and the spine was slightly warped.

I had tried to avoid bragging too much and played it off as something I'd just "picked up," but from Seol Lihyang's perspective—someone unfamiliar with martial arts—it was completely understandable why she thought it was actual trash.

Shaking my head, I clarified,

"I was joking. I happened to come across a powerful Glacial Qi technique and thought it would be useful for you."

"This thing???"

"Despite how it looks, it's actually the core internal energy technique of the Northern Sea Ice Palace."

"Uh... huh. But... is it really okay to just learn another sect's martial arts? Did you even get permission?"

"Nope. Didn't ask. It was stolen in the first place."

"S-Stolen?!"

At least she had learned enough under the Blood Venom Unit's commander over the past month to understand that stealing martial arts could lead to serious trouble.

"G-Give it back! I appreciate the thought, but there's no need to go that far! Besides, isn't the Northern Sea Ice Palace a really powerful sect? I think I learned about them before...."

"You're right. It's the strongest faction in the Northern Outer Lands. But don't worry—first of all, I didn't steal it myself, so even if trouble arises, it won't be the worst-case scenario. And secondly, given their own circumstances, there's a good chance they won't even bother making a fuss about it."

"So... you're saying it's fine???"

"It should be. And even if it's not, I'll make sure it is, so don't worry about that."

"...Just in case, how exactly do you plan on handling it?"

"Through sincere apologies and some negotiations, of course."

"Wait—so you're not just gonna pull out your sword and fight?!"

...I think I'm starting to understand how Seol Lihyang sees me.

As I let out a long sigh, Seol Lihyang awkwardly scratched her cheek, looking a little embarrassed.

"Sorry. I was just so surprised..." She hesitated before adding, "Anyway, you're sure it's fine?"

"Yeah. But don't try learning it on your own."

"Not like I could even understand it if I tried."

"Good point. Now that I think about it, maybe it's still a bit too early to give this to you."

As I tucked the Glacial True Qi manual back into my robes, Seol Lihyang glared at me in disbelief, her lips twitching in frustration.

I'd seen this exact expression countless times before in my past life.

"You can't just take back a gift like that!"

"I'm not taking it back permanently. I just got ahead of myself and mixed up the order of things."

Tomorrow, I'd show this to Tang Jincheon and discuss it with him. He was probably already searching for a suitable ice-based technique for Seol Lihyang, so this might actually help.

The fact that it was from the Northern Sea Ice Palace wouldn't be too big of an issue either.

According to the Ghost Shadow Thief, Glacial True Qi was an unusual case.

Someone like Tang Jincheon would definitely know how it was regarded in the martial world.

While it was a legitimate martial art with some symbolic significance, the truth was...

Because no one had successfully mastered it in ages, it had fallen into obscurity—to the point where people wouldn't even mind if someone else picked it up.

And besides, Seol Lihyang wouldn't even understand the manual right now. She had only just begun her martial arts training.

"So just wait a little longer."

"Ugh... fine."

She slumped her shoulders in disappointment, so I chuckled and reassured her,

"Don't look so down. In return, I'll tell you what happened while I was gone."

"Oh! Right! Master told me you were in some really dangerous situations!"

"Hmph. That wasn't even close to dangerous. Listen up—so, in Shaanxi, there's this place called Daemang Mountain..."

Perched on the edge of the veranda, I started recounting my experiences—though with some minor adjustments.

For instance, I downplayed how I discovered the cave, making it sound like a complete accident. Or I toned down the brutality of my fights against the assassins.

Perhaps because she had lived in a small world her entire life, Seol Lihyang's reactions were incredibly animated.

She gasped just hearing the name "Shaanxi", her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Then, when I offhandedly mentioned that I used to be considered a genius, her expression turned oddly skeptical.

As I continued—telling her about the unusual terrain that led me to the cave, the encounter with the Ghost Shadow Thief, the battle with the assassins, and my visit to Wudang—she hung onto every word, reacting differently each time.

I wouldn't exactly call myself a skilled storyteller, but having such an enthusiastic audience made it a lot more fun to recount my adventures.

By the time I had squeezed out every last detail, Seol Lihyang was staring at the ceiling with a dazed expression.

"I'm so jealous... Do you think I'll be able to go on a martial journey someday?"

"If you train hard, there's no reason you can't."

"Really? Do you think I could be as strong as Sister Tang by the time I turn twenty?"

"Hmm... That might be a bit difficult. Tang Sowol started training at a much younger age and has consumed countless precious elixirs."

"Then... what about half of that?"

"More than half, definitely. You're not lacking in talent. But instead of aiming for five years, I'd recommend aiming for three."

"Why? What happens in three years?"

"Actually... Tang Sowol and I just got banned from leaving the city for three years."

"Wait, what?!"

"We're allowed to move around Chengdu, but we're strictly forbidden from traveling any farther."

She blinked, momentarily at a loss for words, before nodding slowly.

"Huh... Now that I think about it, that makes sense. But... why three years specifically?"

"Because that's when the Yongbong Gathering will be held. It's a massive event that takes place every five years, and I guess they couldn't justify stopping us from attending."

"Oh! The Yongbong Gathering! I actually learned about that! It's the huge tournament where the Murim Alliance gathers all the young martial artists from the Central Plains, right? If you perform well, you can even earn a title or receive rare elixirs!"

"For the most part, yes. But one small correction—it's not open to all young martial artists. Only those from the orthodox sects."

The orthodox and unorthodox factions had a bit of leeway, as long as someone wasn't infamous.

However, the entire demonic faction was outright banned from participating.

In other words, just being a participant in the Yongbong Gathering was enough to prove one's status in the martial world.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was likely planning to use the Yongbong Gathering to wipe his identity clean.

...Though in the end, she would fail and end up joining Black Blood Lotus.

If my memory was correct, that would happen exactly three years from now, during the next Yongbong Gathering.

Rather than letting her fall into Black Blood Lotus, I wanted to bring Seo Mun-Hwarin into the Tang Clan instead.

Which meant I absolutely had to participate in that gathering.

As I nodded to myself, deep in thought, Seol Lihyang hesitantly spoke up.

"Do you think... I could participate in such a huge event too?"

"Anyone can enter. The difficult part is getting a good result."

"Mmm... If I train really hard, do you think I could barely make it to second-rate within three years?"

She looked up at me anxiously, shifting restlessly.

It seemed she had been eating well and resting properly in the Tang Clan—her cheeks were noticeably rounder now.

Compared to how skinny she used to be, she looked much healthier.

For a moment, I wondered if this was what Seol Lihyang from my past life might have looked like if she had put on some weight.

She was probably feeling discouraged comparing herself to me and Tang Sowol, but...

Seol Lihyang was actually a genius in her own right.

She had once forcefully modified an incompatible martial art and reached the Flowering Stage.

She had also taught herself the basics of sound-based martial arts just by listening to courtesans sing.

If someone like her were given a proper environment, proper guidance, and three whole years to train...?

"Well..."

If things went well, she might even reach the beginning of the first-rate level.

Seeing my hesitant expression, Seol Lihyang began to look uneasy.

"Ugh... Three years... Is that really enough? If I end up embarrassing you and Sister Tang, maybe I should just go as a spectator instead..."

"You don't need to worry about that. No one starts off as a strong martial artist. Everyone has had a time when they were weak, so no one will mock you just for that."

"There were plenty of people like that in the Hao Clan."

"That's because they're an unorthodox sect. I was talking about the orthodox side. Besides, even if you don't reach first-rate, keep in mind that you'll only be eighteen by then. Reaching first-rate at that age is already considered an incredible feat. Most participants will still be stuck between second-rate and third-rate."

Because the Tang Clan produced many first-rate martial artists and attracted other high-level warriors, first-rate masters seemed common here.

But in reality, reaching first-rate meant becoming a master in one's field—it was no small feat.

"So, don't overthink it. Just focus on training. Since I'm here, I might as well help you out a little before I leave."

"Huh? You're gonna train me? But I'm still not that confident..."

Seol Lihyang hesitated as she stood up, clearly unsure.

I shook my head.

"Not quite. The Blood Venom Unit Leader is probably guiding your training just fine. What I'm going to do is something simpler—Meridian Acupressure."

"Meridian Acupressure? What's that?"

"It's a technique that uses internal energy to stimulate pressure points, relieving fatigue and enhancing recovery."

If you think of acupuncture and blood-sealing techniques, it's similar in principle.

The only difference is that instead of paralyzing or disabling someone, it's used for healing and support.

While doctors and skilled martial artists could use it for medical treatments, I wasn't that proficient.

For me, it was just a simple trick—

—But when it came to Seol Lihyang, things were different.

In my past life, unlike Tang Sowol, who had maintained a certain level of formality, Seol Lihyang had pestered me constantly with all sorts of unreasonable requests.

It was partly because we had started off as bickering rivals and partly because she simply didn't know how to express embarrassment properly.

Because of that, she had often asked me for ridiculous favors...

And one of them was Meridian Acupressure.

Back then, Seol Lihyang had a limp, and after walking around all day, she would complain about exhaustion and ask me to relieve her pain before bed.

So while I might not be an expert in Meridian Acupressure, I had plenty of experience using it on her.

As she tilted her head in confusion, I smirked and tapped the floor.

"Lie down on your stomach."

"Huh? Like this?"

Without hesitation, she lay down in front of me.

I then climbed on top of her back.

"W-Wait, what?!"

Startled, Seol Lihyang tried to push herself up, but I gently pressed her back down.

"Stay still."

"W-What?! What are you trying to do?!"

Though her voice grew louder, she obediently stayed in position.

Rather than answering, I simply focused my internal energy into my fingertips.

Then—

Press.

"Hiyaaak?!"

Her back arched like a bow in response.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The meridians are the pathways through which qi flows, covering the entire body like a vast network.

They have no physical form—dissecting a human body won't reveal them—but the overwhelming evidence of their existence is undeniable, and no martial artist doubts their reality.

Martial artists circulate internal energy through their meridians, and in some cases, they can stimulate them to trigger various physical effects.

For example, they can block their own bleeding, temporarily suppress pain, or even paralyze an opponent by striking their numbing acupoints. Some can even knock someone unconscious by targeting their vital acupoints.

Certain basic acupoint techniques are considered essential knowledge for any martial artist, even if they haven't studied meridians in depth.

Naturally, Seol Lihyang had learned the basic concepts from the Blood Venom Unit leader.

She still hadn't memorized the names and locations of the acupoints properly, but she understood their effects.

...Or so she thought.

A light press of Cheon Hwi-da's finger landed on the acupoint at her shoulder.

She didn't know the name.

She only had a vague memory that "there was something important around here."

However, her body responded before her mind could process it.

Press.

His fingers pressed down with a firm, unwavering touch.

It wasn't painful, but the pressure was just right—enough to feel it but not enough to hurt.

That much was fine.

She flinched instinctively but actually found the sensation a bit refreshing.

However—

The moment Cheon Hwi-da's internal energy flowed through her acupoint—

"Hiyaak?!"

Seol Lihyang's back arched like a bow.

A flood of thoughts raced through her mind as she struggled to comprehend what had just happened.

'W-What was that?!'

She understood the process.

The moment Cheon Hwi-da's internal energy entered her body, it carried a faint, foreign sensation, which instantly transformed into a wave of heat at her shoulder.

Her meridian, stimulated by his internal energy, absorbed it, causing an explosive surge of vitality in her body.

The fact that she was able to grasp this process so quickly was proof of her innate talent—but that didn't matter to her at all right now.

The real issue was how overwhelmingly intense this surge of vitality was.

And the moment this massive energy spread through her body, which had been exhausted from rigorous training—

Her body reacted in a way she couldn't control.

Like dry soil drinking in rainwater, her fatigued muscles immediately absorbed the newfound energy.

Her body tensed for a moment, then—

Relaxed.

The sensation was so unexpected that she involuntarily jerked.

A wave of warmth and satisfaction followed, and she quickly became alarmed.

"Wait! Hold on! Stop for a second!"

"Didn't I tell you not to move? Meridian Acupressure requires a significant amount of internal energy and precise control. I'm doing this for your benefit, so cooperate."**

"That's the problem! It—It feels too good! I-It's weird! Stop it right now!"

She desperately cried out, but her inability to fully describe what was happening made it impossible for Cheon Hwi-da to take her words seriously.

"Enough talking. Lie back down. We're just getting started."

"H-Huh? Uh...?"

He gently but firmly pushed her back down.

Helpless, Seol Lihyang obediently lay flat again before she even understood why she wasn't resisting.

And before she could process it—

Cheon Hwi-da continued.

Press. Press. Press.

"Hnn! Hic! Aah?!"

His fingers traced her meridians without hesitation, precisely targeting her acupoints.

Though he was sitting lightly on top of her, his weight felt immense, and waves of heat bloomed throughout her body.

His Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art radiated its raw, untamed power, but—

Even so, it never once broke free from his control.

To Seol Lihyang, however, it felt like a foreign energy was freely rampaging through her body.

It was invasive—almost violating, in a way.

The problem was that it felt ridiculously good.

"Hyaaaak?!"

Her voice cracked as she let out a strange, high-pitched sound.

Her body continued to heal and recover, but her mind was starting to break down.

She struggled to hold on to her sanity and forced herself to think rationally.

"How the hell is he so good at this?!"

After experiencing Meridian Acupressure firsthand, she realized—

Forget the person receiving it—for the one performing it, this technique required extreme concentration, precise internal energy control, and deep knowledge of the human body.

For every touch to elicit such a raw reaction from her body, just how skilled did he have to be?

But... she was mistaken.

Certainly, Cheon Hwi-da's martial understanding was extraordinary, and his deep comprehension of martial arts and human anatomy was far beyond normal—

However, his Meridian Acupressure wouldn't have worked this well on anyone else.

And for good reason.

Because he had tailored it exclusively for Seol Lihyang.

Across both his past and present lives, she was the only person who had ever asked him for this.

He knew exactly how much internal energy to use.

He knew exactly which acupoints to press first for maximum effect.

He knew exactly where she felt the most discomfort.

Whether by choice or circumstance, he had no choice but to learn her body inside and out.

After all, in their past life, their relationship had become... intimate.

That's right.

Cheon Hwi-da was a monster that she herself had created.

Of course, Seol Lihyang had no knowledge of the consequences of her past life's actions.

Right now, she was struggling just to hold on to her sanity.

"T-This... this is dangerous...!"

Her body burned with heat, her muscles tensed and relaxed uncontrollably, and her misaligned bones snapped back into place.

Her nerves, forcibly realigned, sent waves of pleasure and relief through her body.

She had felt something similar before.

The Blood Venom Unit leader, who had taken her in and cared for her, often helped massage her muscles after training, carefully working out the tension in her limbs.

He had been a true mentor.

However, right now—

The memory of his gentle care was being completely overwritten.

Replaced by something far more intense, far more effective... and far more dangerous.

"I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

She repeatedly apologized to her former teacher in her mind.

But no matter how much she pleaded, she couldn't stop the memory from being rewritten.

In that moment, Seol Lihyang instinctively knew—

From now on, whenever her body felt sore or exhausted, she would instinctively recall this sensation.

“Ggaaahhh...”

In the end, she gave up resisting, melting onto the floor like a cat inside a warm box, letting out a helpless sigh.

The Meridian Acupressure continued for quite some time, but like all things, it eventually came to an end.

When Cheon Hwi-da finally released her, Seol Lihyang lay limp on the wooden floor, completely drained.

Her face was flushed red, and she was panting heavily, as if she had just finished a full sprint.

Yet, despite her exhaustion, her body felt lighter and more refreshed than if she had woken up from a deep, restful sleep.

The cool morning breeze washed over her, easing the warmth that still lingered in her body—reminding her of just how precious such relief could be.

But then—

A thunderous revelation reached her ears.

"For the next three years, I'll give you Meridian Acupressure every day if possible. So focus entirely on your training, Seol Lihyang."

"...What? Every day?"

"Not unconditionally, of course. I have my own schedule, and things might come up. So it's only 'if possible.'"

"I-Isn't that a bit much? You're busy too, and this has to be exhausting for you as well!"

"You've finally built a solid foundation, and now that I've found you a proper internal energy technique, you'll be starting your real martial training soon. It's going to be much harder than before. I was the one who brought you to the Tang Clan, so at the very least, let me help you this much."

From Cheon Hwi-da's perspective, he had already given Tang Sowol the Self-Purging Poison Grass, yet Seol Lihyang had received nothing from him.

So this was his way of making it up to her.

But to Seol Lihyang, this was not an easy decision.

'Every single day...? Can I even endure that...?'

Just imagining it made her nervous.

She tried to ignore the tiny sense of anticipation creeping up inside her, struggling to find the right response—

Until, suddenly, a name popped into her head.

And she panicked.

“Sister Tang...!!!”

To Seol Lihyang, Tang Sowol was the very embodiment of the noble lady she had always admired.

She was also the daughter of the man who had saved Cheon Hwi-da’s life, and because of that, she had always treated Seol Lihyang kindly.

Having received so little kindness in her life, Tang Sowol was special to her in a way completely different from Cheon Hwi-da.

So it was only natural that she didn’t want to do anything that would make her upset.

"H-Hey! You can’t just waltz into another woman's room whenever you feel like it! Get Sister Tang’s permission first! Then it’s fine!"

"That... sounds kind of strange, but fine. I’ll do that."

Cheon Hwi-da shrugged indifferently.

His casual response irritated Seol Lihyang so much that she instinctively clenched her fists.

Then, as he nodded, she let out a sigh of relief and slowly unclenched her fingers.

“Haaah...”

At the same time, a strange sharp pain pricked at her heart, like a needle piercing deep inside her chest.

For a brief moment, her eyes burned, as if she might tear up—

...but Seol Lihyang didn't understand why.

She simply assumed it was because she was finally relaxing after all the tension.

"Yeah... this is fine."

She reassured herself.

Tang Sowol knew just how dangerous (?) Meridian Acupressure was.

If she were in this situation, she would never allow it.

So this ridiculous "tyranny" from Cheon Hwi-da would end right here.

Seol Lihyang was still mistaken.

She didn't realize that her case was unique—

That Meridian Acupressure wasn't normally this overwhelming.

And the next morning, when Tang Sowol casually granted permission, Seol Lihyang shivered.

"H-Huaahh...."

Whether it was from excitement or fear, only she knew.

Three Years Later

Tang Sowol had entered secluded training under Tang Jincheon to master the Universal Return Divine Art.

Seol Lihyang had officially begun practicing Glacial True Qi, learning to control the Yin energy of her Pure Yin Physique.

And I—

I had spent these years integrating the martial arts I had observed in Wudang, incorporating them into my swordsmanship, while also refining my footwork with the Ghost Shadow Steps I had learned from the Ghost Shadow Thief.

And so, three years passed.

Tang Sowol, with the Tang Clan's limitless support and a brilliant master like Tang Jincheon, had finally stepped into the Peak Stage.

Seol Lihyang, surpassing everyone's expectations, had reached mid-first-rate.

And as for me—

"You've gotten taller."

...I had grown taller than Tang Sowol.

By two full finger joints.

"Cheon Hwi-da, is that really such an important achievement to you...?"

"Of course it is."

I no longer had to tilt my head up to look at her.

I no longer had to endure her teasing about being younger.

I was finally free from that humiliation.

Compared to that—

Even the fact that I was beginning to glimpse the path beyond the Peak Stage seemed insignificant.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

What is growth?

There may be countless answers to that question, but to me, it is simple.

Growth is being able to do what you once couldn't and seeing what was once invisible to you.

"This is the difference in our eye level now."

"How can you talk about 'eye level' while looking at the top of my head?!"

Startled, Seol Lihyang immediately backed away—naturally weaving her movements to angle herself behind Tang Sowol for cover.

Her retreat was flawless, almost instinctive.

"Your footwork has become quite natural, I see."

"I really don't want to hear that from you."

Peeking out from behind Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang gave me a look of exasperation.

Tang Sowol nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Yes, well, it's not just her footwork. Her whip techniques have also improved quite a bit. And lately, she's even started practicing sound-based martial arts—seems to suit her well."

"Sister Tang?! Aren't you supposed to be on my side right now?!"

"Oh my, isn't it only natural to side with my fiancé?"

With a playful smile, Tang Sowol stepped away from Seol Lihyang and stood beside me.

Betrayed, Seol Lihyang's eyes welled up with frustration.

"Eek! Eeeiit...!"

She stomped her foot in protest, but her words failed her.

Seeing her reaction, Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances—then burst into laughter.

"Don't feel too bad. Honestly, Tang Sowol and I were always going to reach this level—we were already strong to begin with."

"Yes. Normally, reaching the Peak Stage before the age of thirty is considered a remarkable feat. But Cheon Hwi-da here reached it at fifteen. However, Seol Lihyang's case is different."

And Tang Sowol was right.

I had retained all of my insights from my past life, and on top of that, I had incorporated new experiences from this one.

Of course, I would grow quickly.

In fact, calling it "growth" felt strange—because for me, this was more like reclaiming my former strength.

Tang Sowol was in a similar situation.

Born with the Poison Spirit Physique, raised within the Tang Clan, trained in elite poison arts, and fed countless rare elixirs—

And in the last three years, she had been personally guided by Tang Jincheon, a Flowering Stage master.

Yes, she had worked hard, but her circumstances had also played a crucial role in her achievements.

But Seol Lihyang?

While she had received more support than an ordinary retainer, it was nothing compared to what Tang Sowol had.

Before arriving at the Tang Clan, she had never even practiced martial arts.

She had been severely undernourished, nothing but skin and bones.

"Your starting point was different from ours. The fact that you've come this far in three years is something to be proud of."

"Well... that's all thanks to Sister Tang and the Clan Leader... and you too, I guess."

When faced with genuine praise, Seol Lihyang shrank back in embarrassment, her lips twitching as she struggled to suppress a smile.

This expression—

It was exactly the same as the Seol Lihyang from my past life.

She had always been awkward about accepting compliments, twisting her reactions in strange ways.

And just like before, despite her Pure Yin Physique, she had naturally gravitated toward sound-based martial arts.

Even though her body was now healthy, even though her environment had changed—she had still chosen the same path.

It was the same with Tang Sowol.

Now that she had reached the Peak Stage and mastered the Universal Return Divine Art, her hair and eyes had turned a deep black-green, just like in my past life.

By now, I had gotten used to seeing reminders of my previous life.

Still—

"That color is always beautiful."

"...Am I next?"

At my absentminded remark, Tang Sowol's expression shifted—half wary, half pleased.

I tilted my head, and she narrowed her eyes.

"As a woman of the Tang Clan, I cannot simply allow myself to be on the receiving end. This time, I shall strike first."

"What are you talking ab—"

Before I could react, Tang Sowol looked up at me—by exactly two finger joints—and said,

"As you mentioned earlier, Cheon Hwi-da, you've grown quite a bit."

"And I'll keep growing. Ideally, until you have to stand on your tiptoes to reach my lips."

"Ugh...! W-Well, your face has become more refined, too. It's a shame that your cuteness has faded, but... this mature look suits you as well."

"That's fine. From now on, I'll be the one treating you like the cute one—it evens out."

"Aghh...! Your martial arts were already formidable, but now even your words have become more dangerous. Though my martial journey was short, I still met Cheon Hwi-da along the way—so I'll have plenty of stories to share with my friends."

"I appreciate it. But I won't be boasting about anything. Because everything I like about you—I want to keep to myself."

"...?"

She blinked, processing my words.

Then, a few seconds later—

"Hyaaaah!"

With a high-pitched shriek, Tang Sowol sprang backward and ducked behind Seol Lihyang.

It was the exact same scene from earlier, except—

This time, Tang Sowol was hiding behind Seol Lihyang instead of the other way around.

Of course, even though Seol Lihyang had grown, she was still much smaller than Tang Sowol.

Tang Sowol's attempt at hiding was completely ineffective—her flushed face was still fully visible.

Even so, she wrapped one arm around Seol Lihyang's leg for support, while dramatically extending her index finger at me.

"Foul! That was a foul move!"

"I thought the rule was to embarrass each other with compliments?"

"That may be true, but where was the compliment in that statement?!"

"Hmm."

...Now that I thought about it, she had a point.

As I nodded in acknowledgment, Seol Lihyang, in an exhausted tone, spoke up.

"Are you two done? We should get going. We can't keep the Clan Leader waiting forever."

Her expression looked as if she had just witnessed something unpleasant.

Well, to be fair... we had been wasting quite a bit of time.

I reached down and helped Tang Sowol to her feet.

"Alright. Let's go see my father-in-law."

For the first time in three years, we were finally heading out.

Sure, our destination was the Yongbong Gathering—but that didn't mean we couldn't enjoy ourselves along the way.

Time to secure a generous travel allowance.

I still wasn't used to the Tang Clan.

Or rather, I had yet to fully grasp the difference between my definition of "generous" and Tang Jincheon's.

"Tell me, son-in-law. The first thing you say before setting off on a long journey is that using gold ingots is inconvenient, so you'd like some silver mixed in instead?"

"As long as I'm not indulging in extravagance, silver is still a large sum of money."

"You're the son-in-law of the Tang Clan, traveling with none other than the Poison King's daughter. You should be staying in fine inns and carrying yourself accordingly."

"Hmm. Fine inns have spacious rooms... meaning we could share one without issue—"

"Hold it right there."

Before I could finish, Tang Jincheon casually flicked his fingers toward the ceiling, and in the same instant, a surge of internal energy shot out.

A decorative pearl ornament embedded in the ceiling rattled.

...What?

Why was he using Object Manipulation just to make a point?

Honestly, I was a bit taken aback.

But rare opportunities to witness such techniques didn't come often, so I focused on the moment.

I observed how his internal energy remained stable even outside his body, how it changed upon contact with the pearl, and how he controlled it with precision.

Of course, I didn't fully understand it yet—but committing it to memory might prove useful in the future.

Unfortunately, Tang Jincheon's demonstration was brief.

By the time I had absorbed what I could, the pearl was already in his hand.

He placed it on the desk—closer to me than to himself.

"It's a luminous pearl. Hard to see in daylight, but valuable if sold."

"And why are you suddenly handing this to me?"

"So that you book at least two rooms instead of spouting nonsense about sharing one."

...Wait.

Did he seriously use Object Manipulation just to rip a pearl out of his own ceiling...

Just to tell me not to share a room with Tang Sowol?

It had been over three years since our official engagement, and he was still like this?

I couldn't just let that slide.

Accepting the pearl, I nodded politely.

"Thank you. I'll take a room with Tang Sowol, and Seol Lihyang can have her own. That way, you'll be seeing grandchildren soon enough."

"What?!"

Shocked, Tang Jincheon immediately used Golden Thread Snatch to snatch the pearl from my hand and then threw it back to the ceiling.

The pearl curved unnaturally midair—almost like a hidden weapon—before reattaching itself perfectly to its original position.

And then, with the most shameless expression, Tang Jincheon cleared his throat.

"Let's pretend that never happened."

"Fine. But now that it's been over three years since our engagement, I'd like to know when you'll actually allow us to get married."

"If it were up to me, I'd delay it another seven years."

"If you insist on making it ten full years, I'll take Tang Sowol and elope."

"...Ahem."

At my words, Tang Sowol, who had been quietly snickering in the background, suddenly perked up with interest.

Tang Jincheon sighed.

"If I were against it, I wouldn't have agreed to the engagement in the first place. But it's still not the right time. We know who you are and what kind of person you are—but others don't."

"So, in short, you want me to make a name for myself first."

"Exactly. It's not mandatory, but it would be ideal. And for someone like you, that shouldn't be difficult."

"That was an awfully long-winded way of saying, 'Do your best at the Yongbong Gathering.'"

"That's right, my dear son-in-law! Since you're competing anyway, why not win? And while you're at it, declare to the world who your fiancée is—in the most spectacular way possible!"

"Leave it to me."

I answered confidently.

Tang Jincheon let out a short chuckle.

"Heh. You're getting more and more shameless."

"That just means I feel closer to you, father-in-law."

"Tch. That's how all men are."

Even as he shook his head, a small smile remained on his lips.

After laughing and chatting for a while, he finally straightened his posture and stood.

Then, placing a hand on each of our shoulders, he spoke.

"This time, you're traveling without any escorts... but you two should be fine."

"Don't worry. Even if, by some misfortune, we end up facing a Peak Stage master, at the very least, we should be able to run away."

"...With all your limbs intact?"

"That, I can't promise."

As I furrowed my brows, running through possible worst-case scenarios, Tang Jincheon burst into boisterous laughter and gave my shoulder a hearty slap.

"I'm joking. If I worried that much, I might as well tell you not to leave at all."

"That's true."

There were barely a hundred Peak Stage martial artists in all of the Central Plains.

The odds of not only running into one but also having them as an enemy were exceedingly low.

"Go on ahead and enjoy yourselves for a while. I'll be busy, so I'll arrive just in time for the main tournament."

"You're coming as well, father-in-law?"

"Did you know? Ever since the Yongbong Gathering was founded, the Tang Clan has never won even once."

"Well, the rules aren't exactly in your favor."

After all—

Hidden weapons were restricted to blunt or non-lethal ones.

And poison was completely banned.

For a sect that specialized in poison and hidden weapons, it was practically like fighting with their hands tied.

"But thanks to my son-in-law, we finally have a shot at winning this time. So, of course, I have to watch."

Though Tang Jincheon's expression was cheerful, there was a faint trace of bitterness in his smile.

"I've kept you too long. Go on. And remember—separate rooms."

"Of course. We'll see you in Wuhuan City, father-in-law."

With a final polite fist salute, I picked up my prepared belongings and stepped through the Tang Clan's grand gates.

The three-year travel ban had officially come to an end.