

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 71-80

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Unlike Tang Sowol, who was rather excited about going on a long trip after a while, Seol Lihyang seemed a bit uneasy about leaving the Tang Clan.

She had been glancing around nervously for a while now before finally asking me,

"Hey, why does the Yongbong Gathering even exist?"

"You're asking that now?"

"No, I mean, I know the basics. It's for uniting the orthodox Murim, fostering camaraderie among the young generation, and giving them rare opportunities to experience real combat. My master told me all that. But even considering all that, isn't it a bit too extravagant?"

"Ah, so that's what you're curious about."

She had a point. The Yongbong Gathering was indeed an event of an astonishingly massive scale.

Not only did martial arts enthusiasts from all over the Central Plains gather, but sects looking for talented disciples, merchants hoping to make a fortune, and even high-ranking elders from prestigious sects who rarely left their seats of power all came together in one place.

"Plus, I heard that the winner is awarded the finest elixir, personally provided by the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects on a rotating basis. Even if you don't win, performing well can earn you access to martial arts manuals or weapons stored by the Murim Alliance."

"That's right. In the past, even unorthodox martial artists would sometimes enter just for those rewards. But of course, they all got caught."

With so many people present—some even at the Flowering Stage—it was nearly impossible to deceive everyone.

However, it seemed that Seol Lihyang's concern lay elsewhere.

"After training in martial arts and learning about Murim, one thing has stood out to me... Murim people are really closed off."

"That's hard to deny."

Even blacksmiths and physicians were reluctant to share their techniques.

But unlike them, martial artists took secrecy to an extreme—training in complete isolation, hidden from all eyes, or hunting down and eliminating anyone who dared to steal their true martial arts.

Given that martial arts were directly tied to survival, it wasn't completely unreasonable... but it did make Murim a far more closed-off world compared to other fields.

This was exactly what puzzled Seol Lihyang.

"But then, why would they give out rare elixirs and martial arts just because someone did well in a simple competition? That part seems strange to me."

"Ahem. Allow me to explain that, Lady Seol."

Tang Sowol smoothly slid between us, clearing her throat with a knowing smile before continuing.

"In short, the Murim Alliance was established precisely to break away from that closed-off nature."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. Nowadays, Murim is relatively peaceful, so it's hard to imagine... but in the past, bloody conflicts—what they called Bloodshed—were quite common."

She was right. I had heard a little about it from Seo Mun-Hwarin before.

Before the Black Lotus Sect was founded, Murim had been in utter chaos.

There was no clear distinction between orthodox and unorthodox sects like there is today, leading to frequent clashes. Whenever someone was killed, their allies would retaliate, leading to even greater bloodshed.

I wasn't particularly fond of the Black Lotus Sect Master, but even I had to acknowledge his achievements.

"And yet, even in such times, the major sects still feared the overwhelming power of the Murim Alliance."

"So... before the Murim Alliance existed..."

"Back then, even the imperial court had given up on trying to control Murim. That's when the Non-Intervention Principle was established."

Martial artists, swords in hand, were constantly at each other's throats, and they were too powerful to be easily subdued.

In the end, the reigning emperor at the time could do nothing but acknowledge that conflicts between martial artists were beyond his control and focus instead on ensuring that the bloodshed did not spill over to commoners.

This left the orthodox sects without any external support.

And so, they chose to prioritize greater causes over personal vendettas.

They set aside their grudges to prevent new victims, risked their lives not just for themselves and their families but even for complete strangers, and willingly joined hands with their rivals.

For the first time in the long history of Murim, a group freed from the chains of vengeance was born—a group that moved solely for the greater good.

That was the moment the Murim Alliance was established.

Nowadays, the Alliance feels more like a corrupt organization clinging to outdated traditions... but I still remember how they stood at the forefront when the Heavenly Demon invaded the Central Plains.

Even though the Murim Alliance collapsed, and more than half of the Nine Great Sects and Five Supreme Clans were wiped out, leaving their survivors consumed by revenge...

That didn't erase the noble ideals they once upheld, nor the resolve they displayed in their final stand.

As I nodded silently to myself, Tang Sowol, looking a little more mature than usual, playfully wagged her finger as she continued.

"That's why the Murim Alliance constantly needs to prove its strength. The extravagant rewards at the Yongbong Gathering serve exactly that purpose."

"So... it's a kind of show of force? Like saying, 'We're this strong, so don't mess with us?'"

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, still looking uncertain. Chuckling, Tang Sowol reached out and gently patted her back.

"Correct! You're catching on quickly, Lady Seol. You're becoming a proper martial artist now!"

"It's just that the scale is so huge I didn't think of it right away. It's not that impressive... And stop treating me like a kid, Sister Tang. I'm already eighteen. I'm all grown up."

Seol Lihyang grumbled, turning her head slightly as if embarrassed.

Seeing that, Tang Sowol's smile grew even warmer.

"Well, you see, that stoic fiancé of yours isn't the type to indulge in this kind of thing. So I'll just have to shower you with all the affection he won't give you."

"Wait, what? That's not—hyaa?!"

Tang Sowol didn't just pat her back this time—she started tickling her mercilessly.

Seol Lihyang twitched and tried to resist as Tang Sowol's fingers reached her sides, but... she didn't actually try to escape.

It was proof that their relationship had grown much closer.

Ever since Tang Sowol had once mentioned that Seol Lihyang reminded her of the past, she had started treating her much more kindly.

I had found it strange and once asked her why.

Her answer was... quite something.

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

Apparently, while she couldn't change how I saw her, she believed that treating Seol Lihyang well would make her feel guilty if anything ever went wrong—and would also allow her to sense any suspicious behavior immediately.

"Hey!"

"Hih! N-not my sides, Sister Tang!"

But watching them now, I couldn't help but think that maybe... she just enjoyed having a little sister.

Maybe it was because she had always been the youngest before.

Ever since Seol Lihyang began receiving regular Blood-Purging Acupuncture from me, she had also started paying more attention to Tang Sowol and treating her better.

When I asked why, she only gave me a vague answer—"Because of you."

I didn't quite understand the reasoning, but since the outcome was that the two of them had grown closer, I supposed that was all that mattered.

Honestly, when I first revealed the truth to Tang Sowol, I had been anxious about how things would turn out.

Though, there were times when their growing closeness felt a bit excessive.

"There might not be many people around, but we're still outside. How about you two exercise some restraint?"

"Gasp! Could it be that Brother Cheon is jealous?"

"I think so too, Sister Tang. Maybe he's secretly upset about what you said earlier about him lacking any charm?"

"When you put it that way, he does seem kind of cute..."

I can hear you, you know. I have no idea why they insist on finding me "cute."

As I let out a long sigh, Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang exchanged glances before breaking into laughter.

"It's fun precisely because you hate it so much."

"No special reason needed. Your reactions are just too amusing."

The thought of traveling all the way to the Murim Alliance with these two filled me with both excitement and a hint of resignation.

By the time we passed Sichuan and were nearing Hubei, Seol Lihyang finally spoke up, looking somewhat surprised.

"We haven't run into any real danger so far, huh? Considering all the things that happened to you and Sister Tang, I figured we'd have had at least one or two life-threatening encounters by now."

"What happened before was the exception, not the norm. This is how it's supposed to be. If incidents like that happened all the time, how do you think the Central Plains would function?"

"But still, you've both been through so many dangerous situations."

"Which is why Father didn't let us leave Chengdu for three years."

"Calling it worry might be an understatement... We really were just unlucky."

Tang Sowol nodded in agreement. She was right. But I was more concerned about something else.

The incidents we had faced so far had all stemmed from me trying to change events from before my regression.

Stopping the attack on Tang Sowol, which would have caused her poison qi to spiral out of control, naturally meant fighting off the attackers.

Uncovering the Demonic Cult's involvement behind the attack led us to them, and dealing with them resulted in stumbling across Seol Lihyang in a pleasure house, where I ended up taking on an entire Hao Clan branch while trying to get her out.

Going to retrieve a precious elixir somehow turned into encountering Jang Cheok, the Ghost Shadow Thief, who was on the verge of death, learning about the Demonic Cult's recent activities, and eventually fighting off assassins who tracked us down—all before seeking refuge in Wudang Sect.

People worried because I kept getting caught up in trouble every time I stepped outside.

But from my perspective, it felt more like my attempts to change fate were stirring up unintended consequences—like some sort of backlash.

Before Tang Sowol got involved, when I was traveling alone, the worst I had encountered were a few petty disputes.

Maybe there was some inherent cost to altering predetermined events.

Or perhaps it was simply because the Demonic Cult had a hand in so many affairs that disrupting their plans inevitably led to frequent conflicts.

I wasn't sure which it was.

But what I could confirm was that, since I had stopped trying to interfere with past events, nothing particularly troublesome had happened.

"Well... If you think about it, we have had a few small incidents. Like that drunk martial artist at the inn who picked a fight, only for Sister Tang to quietly knock him out with a sleeping poison. Or those third-rate Green Forest Bandits we handed over to the authorities. And let's not forget how you got scolded for sneaking into my room in the middle of the night just to ask me to freeze a bucket of water."

"That last one was unfair."

For the record, the actual complaint was that I shouldn't be barging into a young lady's room at night.

But the only reason we even ran into each other was that she had also gone out to get water because it was too hot.

Still, placing a block of solid ice beside my pillow had helped me sleep much better.

Regardless, our journey through Hubei remained relatively peaceful.

For several days, we continued traveling without issue, gradually approaching Wuhan City.

We decided to stop at a decent inn for the night and were just about to have dinner on the first floor when we overheard a commotion.

"You dare steal from the Golden Flower Merchant Guild?!"

"I-It's a misunderstanding! I swear, I would never—!"

A large man, stocky enough to appear more imposing than muscular, was angrily shouting at a small, fidgeting woman.

And as I caught sight of the woman's back...

I immediately recognized her.

I hadn't expected to run into her so soon.

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"You dare steal from the Golden Flower Merchant Guild?!"

"I-It's a misunderstanding! I swear, I would never—!"

Despite the inn being fairly large, the enraged voice echoed loudly throughout the hall, drawing my attention immediately.

And there, I saw a familiar figure.

I hadn't expected to run into her so soon.

Of course, since I hadn't seen her face yet, I couldn't be certain.

"I'll go check out the situation."

"Brother Cheon??"

"Cheon Hwi? You're not seriously—"

"I'm just assessing the situation. If there's something that needs mediating, I'll step in. If not, I'll come back. If the food arrives, go ahead and eat—"

"You just want to save a pretty lady and get closer to her, don't you?! You can't do that right in front of Sister Tang and me!"

Despite her words, the sly grin tugging at the corners of Seol Lihyang's lips showed that she was clearly teasing.

At this, Tang Sowol blinked in confusion.

"Lady Seol? I understand why I should be upset as his fiancée, but why are you—?"

"I mean, you can't do that in front of Sister Tang!"

Seeing her shamelessly revise her statement without a hint of guilt, I couldn't help but flick her forehead.

Smack!

"Oww!"

As Seol Lihyang clutched her reddened forehead and trembled in protest, I chuckled and said,

"Don't overthink it. Just wait here. Or come along if you really want to."

"I'm too hurt to move...!"

"Hmm. For now, I'll leave it to Brother Cheon. If it looks like he needs help, I'll step in."

Seol Lihyang glared at me, eyes shimmering with unshed tears, while Tang Sowol simply waved her hand with a laugh.

Leaving them behind—Tang Sowol gently rubbing Seol Lihyang's forehead—I approached the source of the commotion.

"You dare lie so shamelessly?! This won't do. I'll recover my stolen gold no matter what it takes!"

"I have no intention of fighting... Just listen to me for a moment—"

"In Murim, words are spoken with the sword!"

Clang!

With a furious expression, the massive man unsheathed his sword.

His movements were slow, and the excess fat shaking on his body made the whole scene look somewhat comical.

Srrng.

But the subordinates who drew their swords in unison were anything but laughable.

They weren't just bodyguards.

Since this was a merchant guild, they must be escorts—hired martial artists to protect their goods.

One at the peak of first-class, two barely at first-class, five at second-class.

No third-rate warriors.

For a merchant guild, that was an impressive lineup. A force to be reckoned with.

No wonder the leader was so confident.

Unfortunately, he had picked the wrong opponent.

As I got closer, I caught a clearer glimpse of the side of her face, confirming my suspicions.

A girl—more than a woman—with delicate, youthful features.

Even for someone with a naturally petite frame, she was incredibly small and frail-looking.

Her long, flowing hair reached down to her hips, pure white as if it had always been that way.

Her skin was flawless, smooth like a child's, untouched by any blemish.

Even from a distance, I could tell—if I got closer, she would undoubtedly carry a soft, pleasant scent.

One of the many side effects of Reversing Age.

I had expected to meet her at the Yongbong Gathering, perhaps just before the main tournament started if I was unlucky.

Though we were getting closer to Wuhan City, I never imagined I'd run into her this soon.

Suppressing the involuntary smile creeping up, I forced my expression into something more solemn and composed.

Then, as Seo Mun-Hwarin—despite pretending to be frightened—was clearly calculating the best way to subdue her opponents without revealing too much strength, I stepped in front of her.

"Hold for a moment. A sword may be an excellent tool for dialogue among martial artists, but that doesn't mean it should be drawn so recklessly."

"Who the hell are you to interfere with the Golden Flower Merchant Guild?!"

"I am Cheon Hwi of the Tang Clan. From what I've overheard, both of you seem to have grievances. I only wish to listen and mediate—will that be acceptable?"

"The Tang Clan?! You mean the Sichuan Tang Clan?"

The stocky man's aggressive demeanor wavered for a moment, his tone shifting to something more polite.

But after a brief hesitation, his expression grew uncertain as he scrutinized me.

"If you're from the Tang Clan, then why is your surname different?"

"Because I was not born into the Tang Clan—I entered as a son-in-law."

I gestured toward the table where my companions sat, specifically toward Tang Sowol.

Recognition flickered across his face as he nodded in understanding.

"I see... The hair and eyes confirm it. You must have attained a high level in poison arts. Apologies for my suspicion. I did not mean to offend, but I've been on edge and reacted sharply."

"It's fine. While those who falsely claim to be from the Sichuan Tang Clan don't last long, the Central Plains is vast. It's not unthinkable that someone might try to deceive others in the short term. Your caution was warranted."

"Much appreciated."

Despite his words, I could see the pity in his eyes.

It took me a moment to understand why.

Hair and eyes turning green was a transformation that only occurred when someone mastered a Tang Clan poison technique to the Transcendence level or beyond.

And reaching Transcendence was something that, even for prodigies, typically didn't happen before thirty.

Which meant...

He probably thought I was just a young man who had been married off to an older woman obsessed with martial arts, one who had remained single until old age due to her extreme dedication.

After all, if a woman ten or more years older than me had married me, the reason was self-explanatory.

It was all a complete misunderstanding.

But since he hadn't voiced it out loud and I found it amusing, I decided not to correct him.

Tang Sowol always teased me, saying people mistook me for an old man obsessed with martial arts.

Now, the tables had turned.

Of course, there was an actual old monster present here.

I glanced at Seo Mun-Hwarin.

With a deep sigh, she brushed down the front of her robes, looking as if she had narrowly escaped trouble.

But I knew better.

To others, she might seem like a mere first-class martial artist barely standing her ground against trained escorts.

But in reality, she was a Flowering Stage master, more than capable of taking them down effortlessly.

The only reason she was relieved was that she wouldn't have to go overboard.

With the Yongbong Gathering approaching, people were eager to size each other up.

If a supposed first-class martial artist single-handedly took down a squad of elite escorts, it would draw unnecessary attention.

For Seo Mun-Hwarin, who wished to blend into the orthodox world, perform decently, and lose at the right moment to solidify her place as a proper Murim figure, that kind of attention was the last thing she wanted.

For now, I needed to establish some rapport through this situation and then figure out how to help her.

As I nodded to myself in thought, the stocky man performed a respectful fist-and-palm salute and introduced himself.

"My apologies for the delayed introduction. I am Chu Jeongsan, eldest son of the Golden Flower Merchant Guild's leader."

Despite his hefty frame, his greeting was both courteous and confident.

You never know with people, but in my experience, men like him rarely turned out to be con artists.

I returned his salute, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been standing idly, hastily clasped her small fist in her other hand and spoke.

"I—this one—I am Seo-rin. I am grateful for your intervention."

...Does Seo Mun-Hwarin even try to stay inconspicuous?

It was good that she avoided her usual self-referential term, 'this one', which was an old-fashioned way of saying this lady—it would have given her away immediately.

But calling herself "this one" was just as unnatural.

And what was with that awkwardly altered name and that aged speech pattern?

I wasn't the only one who found it odd—Chu Jeongsan's gaze sharpened every time she spoke.

He had every right to be suspicious. If I were in his position, I'd be wary too.

However, I knew Seo Mun-Hwarin.

If she wanted something, she'd take it by force—she wouldn't sneak around stealing from people.

"From what I overheard, a valuable item has gone missing, and you suspect this young lady—ahem, this person here to be the culprit. Do I have that right?"

I hesitated slightly on young lady, remembering her real age.

Still, she seemed to understand, nodding with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"That's right! If you're from the Tang Clan, you must be knowledgeable about poisons! Please, help us resolve this issue, and I promise you'll be well rewarded!"

"I swear on my honor, I am innocent! Since you are of the Tang Clan, I trust that you will see the truth! However, ah... I must admit, I don't have much to offer in return..."

Seo Mun-Hwarin's firm declaration gradually trailed off into a defeated mumble.

Right.

She had recovered the Seo Clan's martial arts, but not their wealth.

While she had succeeded in annihilating the Black Sky Sword Sect, its leader, when cornered, had ordered his disciples to flee with all their riches.

A truly unorthodox display of loyalty.

Unless they were family or sworn disciples, people in Murim weren't exactly known for sticking around in life-or-death situations.

That was how the Black Sky Sword Sect Leader's son managed to escape, eventually returning for vengeance—only to perish alongside her.

This time, though, I wouldn't let things play out the same way.

With a sigh, I spoke up.

"Let's not just argue—tell me exactly what happened first."

"Ah! Forgive me, I've been too flustered. Let me explain from the beginning."

After clearing his throat, Chu Jeongsan calmly recounted the events.

The Case of the Missing Golden Toad

Recently, the Northern Ice Palace had sent word that they were purchasing anything heavily imbued with yin energy.

So, the Golden Flower Merchant Guild had set out to sell a Golden Toad they had recently acquired.

The Golden Toad was a rare spiritual beast, its body shimmering gold like the sun.

While it contained immense yang energy, it couldn't handle it, constantly releasing highly toxic yin-infused venom from its body.

And since it was still alive, it would continue excreting that poisonous yin energy.

"A creature that valuable must have fetched quite the price. You must have taken every precaution on your journey."

"Exactly! We exercised extreme caution in our travels!"

"But something went wrong."

"Indeed! The Golden Toad vanished overnight! And no matter how I think about it, that young lady is the most suspicious!"

"And why do you think that?"

"We rented the entire third floor of this inn. I told the innkeeper not to allow any other guests up there, and my escorts stood watch all night. Yet somehow, come morning, there was a stranger wandering around the third floor!"

"And that stranger was Lady Seo."

"Precisely. I don't know how she avoided my men's detection, but she's undoubtedly the most suspicious person here."

"That's a fair assumption. Lady Seo, do you have any defense?"

"I did not steal anything...! I merely found it odd that they wouldn't let anyone upstairs, so I went up to take a look out of curiosity! I had no intention of stealing anything, and I did not take the Golden Toad!"

...She might actually be telling the truth.

After years spent pursuing vengeance, this was her first time freely wandering the world.

It wasn't unreasonable to think she had been curious about her surroundings.

But even if that were the case, no one was going to believe her.

Who would buy the excuse that someone snuck past armed guards just because they were curious?

And more importantly—how did she even manage to do it?

To the others, she was nothing more than a first-class martial artist, a slightly odd but harmless young woman.

But I knew better.

If I wanted to support her, I needed more than just words.

Perhaps in my past life, she had no choice but to fight her way out, escaping to Wuhan City under pursuit.

I sighed.

Luckily, though Golden Toads were rare, their venom still classified them as toxic creatures.

And among us was an expert on poisons.

I turned toward Tang Sowol, who had been watching with great amusement from behind.

"Can you help me out here?"

"Oh my~? And for free?"

Her lips curled into a mischievous smile, her eyes narrowing like a crescent moon.

That look was far from reassuring.

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"Would you mind helping me?"

"Oh my? Just like that, for nothing in return?"

Tang Sowol licked her lips, her eyes curving like a crescent moon.

Of course, she was probably half-joking. Most of the time, she made such suggestive remarks only to ask for something trivial in the end.

However, after three years, her beauty had flourished even more. And now that she had reached the Peak Stage, her body had become more balanced, naturally drawing the attention of those around her.

Just a moment ago, Chu Jeongsan had been looking at me with sympathy. Now, his gaze was that of someone witnessing betrayal.

Shrugging once, I returned to the table where Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang were seated.

“Tang Sowol. Do we really need to act like this?”

“And what exactly is ‘this’? I wouldn’t know, so why don’t you explain it to me, Brother?”

“Aren’t we engaged? I’d appreciate it if you didn’t act so stingy.”

“Hmm. If someone overheard, they might think I’m asking for something outrageous.”

“Weren’t you?”

“As you mentioned earlier, tracking poisons isn’t too difficult. So, I’d like to ask you for something that isn’t too difficult either, Brother Cheon.”

Tang Sowol beamed, looking as if she was thoroughly enjoying herself. That expression alone made me uneasy. Just what was she planning to make me do?

As I let out a deep sigh, she waved her hand at me.

When I leaned in closer, she whispered softly into my ear.

The warmth of her breath and her distinct scent instantly melted away any tension in my body. I knew I was walking right into this, and yet, there was no way to resist.

Like a prisoner awaiting execution, I half-resigned myself and waited.

Whisper, whisper.

“...Is that really all?”

“Heavens, Brother Cheon, do you not trust me? Anyone would think I make unreasonable demands all the time.”

“Well, you certainly give off that impression. I was expecting to be stripped to the bone today.”

“But aren’t we already one and the same? What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine. So what would be the point in stripping anything away? Now then, let’s get up. Lady Seo has been glaring at us for a while now.”

Turning slightly, I saw Seol Lihyang with a twisted expression, as if she had just been force-fed something unbearably bitter.

Tang Sowol chuckled at the sight, then grabbed her hand and stood up.

“Come now, lead the way. We should solve the problem quickly and finish our meal in peace.”

“Well... I don’t know about you and Tang Sowol, but Seol Lihyang looks like she’s going to choke on her food at this rate.”

“I am Tang Sowol of the Tang Clan. I heard you need help finding Golden Toad. Is that correct?”

“Yes. This deal is of utmost importance to our Golden Flower Merchant Guild. If you find Golden Toad for us, we will compensate you generously.”

“I feel the same way! I can’t promise you anything grand, but if you can clear my name, I will do whatever I can to help!”

Chu Jeongsan and Seo Mun-Hwarin’s desperate expressions didn’t faze Tang Sowol in the slightest. She simply nodded confidently.

“I don’t need a grand reward. I would, however, like to take a small sample of Golden Toad’s poison. Would that be acceptable?”

“As long as it doesn’t harm Golden Toad, you may take as much as you wish!”

“Thank you. And this young lady here is?”

“I am Seo-rin.”

“?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head at Seo Mun-Hwarin’s strange way of speaking but quickly turned to me and, as if understanding something, nodded.

...What? Why was she looking at me like that?

Suppressing the sudden surge of frustration, I watched as Tang Sowol gave Seo Mun-Hwarin a reassuring smile.

“Lady Seo, are you also participating in the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering?”

“That is correct. Though it is a bit early for me, I decided to step into the martial world.”

“Well, if you miss this year’s event, you’d have to wait five more years. That makes sense. May I ask where you’re from?”

“I... I hail from Jiangxi Province. My sect is a small, privately inherited school, and my master instructed me not to reveal our name until I reach a certain level of attainment. I apologize for that.”

Her speech was oddly formal, like someone reading from a book.

She was clearly nervous, but her words flowed smoothly, suggesting she had memorized this explanation in advance.

Unfortunately, Seo Mun-Hwarin had no talent for deception. Her introduction sounded outright suspicious.

Tang Sowol tilted her head again at the awkwardness but soon glanced at me once more and nodded as if reassured.

I had no idea what part of that clumsy explanation had convinced her.

At the very least, when I fabricated my backstory, I made it sound natural—mentioning my origins in Zhejiang Province, covering up my past, and even explaining my martial arts lineage.

I shook my head in disbelief, but only briefly.

Tang Sowol, still smiling, continued, “Well then, how about we have a meal together while you tell me more about Jiangxi Province? I’ve always wanted to visit, but I never had the chance.”

Though she was smiling, her fingers kept poking my back.

Come to think of it, we were originally supposed to pass through Jiangxi Province on our journey, but I had abducted her in Hubei Province instead.

Half of her words were meant for me.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, oblivious to this, widened her eyes.

“Are you truly willing?!”

“Of course. I’m not doing this for a grand reward. As a member of the righteous sects, I simply wish to do the right thing.”

“Huh!”

Perhaps because every time she tried to set out into the world, something forced her to return home early, Tang Sowol looked quite pleased with her first real attempt at playing the role of a righteous martial artist.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin seemed deeply moved by such straightforward kindness—something rarely seen in the unorthodox martial world.

To any observer, we looked like noble disciples of the Tang Clan, stepping forward to right an injustice.

But knowing the truth, I could only suppress my laughter.

Still, I barely managed to keep myself from laughing out loud before Tang Sowol cleared her throat and changed the subject.

“Ahem. Now then, let’s get to the details. Could you explain everything that happened leading up to Golden Toad’s disappearance?”

“Of course. Up until I went to bed last night, I personally confirmed that it was safely in its cage.”

“Was there anything unusual?”

“Nothing in particular... Oh! Now that I think about it...!”

Chu Jeongsan slowly began recounting the events, and Tang Sowol listened patiently before nodding as if reaching an easy conclusion.

“Well, let’s start with the most important part. Lady Seo did not steal Golden Toad. I don’t know why she was wandering the third floor, but she certainly isn’t the culprit.”

“See?! I told you—it was not I!”

“Then... where in the world did Golden Toad go?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin looked triumphant, while Chu Jeongsan grew increasingly frantic. Before the tension could escalate, Tang Sowol calmly intervened.

"First of all, I can see that the Golden Flower Merchant Guild took great care in preparing to transport Golden Toad, seeking advice and making thorough arrangements. However, there seems to be one overlooked detail."

"An overlooked detail?"

"Yes. As you know, Golden Toad is a spiritual creature that thrives in places filled with Yang energy and naturally accumulates such energy within itself. However, being a toad—an entity innately attuned to Yin energy—it cannot withstand its own Yang energy. To cope, it surrounds itself with a protective layer of poison imbued with extreme Yin."

"That is correct. That's why we not only fed it high-Yang food but also confined it in a specially designed cage to prevent any Yin energy from leaking out."

"That is indeed the proper method to ensure safety. But that safety only applies to humans. Now, could you take us to where Golden Toad's cage is located?"

"Of course."

Leading the way, Chu Jeongsan took us to his room on the third floor.

There, in the middle of the room, was the empty cage.

Tang Sowol crouched down in front of it, reaching inside and feeling around as she spoke.

"Ensuring that no one gets exposed to Golden Toad's poison and Yin energy during transport is important. However, sealing the Yin energy inside also means that it accumulates within the cage itself."

Withdrawing her hand, Tang Sowol revealed her fingertips, now dusted with a thin layer of white frost.

"As I mentioned earlier, Golden Toad is a creature that lives in environments rich in Yang energy. But if it were forced to remain inside a cage where its own poison trapped excess Yin energy, what do you think would happen?"

"...Could it have frozen to death?"

"If that were the case, there would at least be a body left behind. More importantly, a spiritual creature has an incredibly strong life force—it wouldn't perish so easily."

"Then where could it have gone?"

"To escape the cold of the cage, it would have sought out the warmest place it could find. Even though it's a spiritual creature, a toad is still a toad. It couldn't have gone far..."

Muttering softly, Tang Sowol lightly licked the traces of Golden Toad's poison from her fingers. Then, without hesitation, she turned toward the window.

Creak.

She carefully pushed the half-open window wider.

There, basking in the sunlight with a drowsy expression, was a golden toad.

"Fortunately, it's summer. The warmth from the sun must have been enough for it."

"W-What?!"

Chu Jeongsan was initially stunned, but his expression soon shifted to a mix of embarrassment and disbelief.

"...I must apologize to Lady Seo. I was wrong to accuse you so hastily."

"H-Huh? Oh! It's fine! I mean, honestly, who would have expected the toad to be up here? It's not like it could have climbed up on its own."

Seo Mun-Hwarin, still staring in amazement at the living spiritual creature, waved her hands dismissively.

Chu Jeongsan, too, let out a deep sigh and shook his head with a troubled expression.

"But still, I did draw my sword and accuse you without proof. I will make amends for that. You mentioned you're attending the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, correct? That means you'll be heading to Wuhan. Have you arranged accommodations yet?"

"I have not. But as a martial artist, must I be picky about where I sleep? As long as I have a roof over my head to shelter from the rain, it will be enough."

"In that case, why not stay at an inn run by the Golden Flower Merchant Guild? I will provide you with a letter—present it, and you will be allowed to stay free of charge."

"Are you serious?!"

"Of course. I would also like to extend this invitation to the three members of the Tang Clan who helped us. What do you say?"

Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and I exchanged glances before nodding in agreement.

"There's no reason to refuse. We'll gladly accept."

"Though we only asked for some of Golden Toad's poison, solving our lodging problem is certainly a bonus."

"With so many people flocking to Wuhan for the event, finding a good inn later would be difficult anyway. This works out well."

Seeing our positive response, Chu Jeongsan visibly relaxed, exhaling a deep breath of relief.

Ultimately, this incident had forged a beneficial connection between the Tang Clan and the promising newcomer, Seo Mun-Hwarin.

To outsiders, it appeared to be an act of goodwill and trust. But as a merchant, Chu Jeongsan surely had his own calculations. Not that it mattered, since it benefited us all.

"Well... Honestly, I was quite worried for a moment, but I'm relieved that it all worked out. That said, while we've identified the problem, I'm still unsure of how to prevent it in the future. If you have any advice, I would be grateful."

"You don't need to overcomplicate it."

Tang Sowol repositioned the cage near the window.

At that moment, Seol Lihyang stepped forward and placed her hands on it.

The frost that had formed inside the cage rapidly melted away, vanishing in an instant.

She had likely used her Glacial True Qi to absorb only the excessive Yin energy.

As for the lingering poison, Tang Sowol had probably already neutralized it.

Before long, the cage was completely free of Yin energy.

Golden Toad glanced at it, then, with a little wobble, turned around and leaped back inside.

"Spiritual creatures are much smarter than people think. As long as they are provided with comfortable living conditions, they often prefer the safety of captivity over struggling in the wild. If you maintain the right balance, you won't have to worry about it escaping again."

As she gently stroked Golden Toad's back and collected its poison, Tang Sowol smiled in satisfaction and gave a few final instructions on how to properly care for it.

That evening, after parting ways with Chu Jeongsan, we gathered to drink.

Drunk, Tang Sowol threw one arm over my shoulder while wildly waving her other arm through the air.

"Listen to this! Our dear Brother Cheon, he actually—"

Her words slurred in a ridiculous way, making not only Seol Lihyang but also Seo Mun-Hwarin look visibly exhausted.

Though for a completely different reason, I, too, found myself utterly astonished.

So this was possible...

Even if one's height stopped growing, a poison gland could still continue to develop?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Having recovered Golden Toad, Chu Jeongsan wrote us a letter of introduction before immediately departing with his escort guards.

We, too, finished our slightly delayed meal and prepared to resume our journey toward Wuhan City.

However, there was one significant difference this time.

“It looks like we’ll be traveling together for a while. Please take care of me, Lady Seo.”

“Oh! Since we’re staying at the Golden Flower Merchant Guild’s inn, that makes sense. I’ll be in your care as well!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin had officially joined our group.

Since the primary goal of this Dragon and Phoenix Gathering was to pull Seo Mun-Hwarin away from the Black Lotus Sect and into the Tang Clan, this development was a fortunate one for me.

She was clearly delighted, even hopping lightly in place.

She must have felt that she was taking another step toward the life she had dreamed of—a normal, human life.

However, Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang seemed to see things a little differently.

“This is your first official step into the martial world, isn’t it? There must be a lot you don’t know yet. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

“You’re participating in the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering too, right? You look a bit younger than me... Even if your sect is a secret, surely your age isn’t?”

The two of them bombarded Seo Mun-Hwarin with curious questions, their eyes shining with interest.

Tang Sowol seemed excited at the chance to finally act as a kind senior martial artist, helping a junior—a role she had lamented missing out on for the past three years.

Seol Lihyang, on the other hand, was simply thrilled to meet someone close to her age and skill level for the first time since learning martial arts.

But I knew the truth.

Seo Mun-Hwarin wasn't just some naive newcomer to the martial world.

She was once White-Haired Rakshasa, a name that had shaken the entire Central Plains with terror.

Despite her youthful face and petite frame, she was, in reality, a Flowering Stage martial artist who had long surpassed the age of fifty.

While the others enjoyed their conversation, I found myself in an awkward position, unable to laugh along.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, though flustered, answered their questions one by one.

“Uh, um... Then, may I ask about the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering? I decided to participate, but I don't know much about it. And my age... I am s-sixteen.”

“Pfft—!”

I barely managed to stifle my laughter, clamping a hand over my mouth.

Tang Sowol, noticing my sudden reaction, turned to me with concern.

“Brother Cheon? Are you alright?”

“Ahem. I’m fine. I just choked on my saliva. Pay it no mind.”

“Well, as long as you’re okay...”

Though she still looked puzzled, she let it go.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin, who clearly had many reasons to feel guilty, sighed in quiet relief.

How was I supposed to react to this?

It felt like seeing a different side of my master and parental figure—one I probably wasn’t meant to witness.

While I was lost in thought, Tang Sowol clapped her hands together with a bright smile.

“Oh! Speaking of which, we got so caught up in other conversations that we never heard about Jiangxi Province.”

“Oh, that’s right! Well, let’s see... Since we still have a long way to go before reaching the next village, I suppose I can share a few stories.

Do you know why Jiangxi, unlike other provinces, lacks any dominant clans or sects worthy of being called its ‘overlords’?”

...Wait. Here? She was really bringing that up here?

The reason Jiangxi lacked any Five Supreme Clans or Nine Great Sects was simple.

Because Seo Mun-Hwarin—White-Haired Rakshasa—had completely overturned the province over a decade ago.

The Seo Mun Clan, once a righteous clan, had been wiped out, leading to the rise of unorthodox factions.

But even those forces had eventually been exterminated by Seo Mun-Hwarin's own hands.

As a result, only minor sects and small-scale factions remained, unable to dominate the vast province.

There was no doubt that Seo Mun-Hwarin had played a tremendous role in shaping Jiangxi's current state.

And she was well aware of that fact herself.

...Well, considering that she had spent so many years in seclusion training, maybe she just didn't have any other stories to tell.

Surely, she wasn't just trying to casually insert her own history under the guise of talking about Jiangxi Province.

That night, after arriving at the next village without incident, we secured rooms at a decent inn.

It was then that Tang Sowol made an unexpected suggestion.

“We’ll be traveling together for a while, so wouldn’t it be better if we got to know each other better?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I mean, let’s not just eat—let’s also have a drink tonight. Of course, Lady Seo should only have a little.”

“I don’t mind, but... Seol Lihyang, and, uh, Se— ahem —Rin. What about you two?”

For some reason, my tongue stumbled over Seo Mun-Hwarin’s new alias.

At first, she looked puzzled.

But after a few more times, she simply accepted it and nodded.

“I don’t mind.”

“I, too, am fine with it. B-But let’s not order anything too expensive...”

“You needn’t worry about that. I am a daughter of the Tang Clan, after all! I have plenty of money, so drink as much as you like.”

Tang Sowol puffed out her chest proudly, clearly excited about this.

No doubt this was another item on her list of things she wanted to do during her martial world journey—having drinks with newfound comrades.

Well, whatever.

She seemed to be enjoying herself, so that was enough.

And given her Poison Spirit Physique, she wasn’t likely to get overly drunk, either.

So I ordered a strong white liquor without much thought.

I really shouldn't have done that.

At first, it was fine.

We talked about the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering—how the grand prize this time was being offered by Shaolin Temple, making it highly likely that the legendary Great Rejuvenation Pill was at stake.

We discussed rumors about Wudang Sect's rising genius, who had already been chosen as the next sect leader.

We even debated whether the Hwangbo Clan or the Jinjeon Clan would claim the title of Dragon of Authority this time.

It was an engaging and enjoyable conversation, filled with the latest martial world gossip.

But then, Seo Mun-Hwarin tilted her head and asked a single question—and that was where everything went wrong.

“There’s one thing I’m curious about. You two say you’re engaged, but how did that come to be? It doesn’t seem like a typical political marriage, since the Tang Clan is too prestigious for that.”

“...Are you implying my family name isn’t even worth mentioning?”

“A-Ah! That’s not what I meant! I just... I was simply wondering how it came about!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin flailed her arms in a panic, shaking her head so vigorously that her long white hair swayed in front of her face.

Tang Sowol, chuckling at the sight, took a sip of her drink before casually replying.

“Well, if I had to describe it... it’s not an arranged marriage—it’s closer to a kidnapping marriage.”

“...A kidnapping marriage?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, still struggling to fix her half-messy hair, blinked and looked between us in confusion.

“..Just how brazen does one have to be to kidnap a daughter of the Tang Clan?”

“Hehe. Right? That’s what I thought too. But surprise! It really happened!”

“...What?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes went wide as she stared at me, even leaning back slightly, as if genuinely alarmed.

“Let’s get one thing straight—it was an inevitable situation. It’s not like I resorted to force from the very beginning.”

“Hmph. Cheon Hwi-da, skipping straight to kidnapping just because words didn’t work isn’t normal, you know? You did the same thing to me.”

“W-Wait a moment. Are you saying... this wasn’t the first time?”

“Mhm. It’d probably make more sense to hear Sister Tang’s story first, though.”

“That does seem logical. Then, after I finish, Lady Seo can tell her story to Seol—ugh, this is confusing. Your surnames are too similar. I’ve known Lady Seo for a while now—would it be alright if I just called you Sister?”

“Huh? I don’t mind at all! I already call you ‘Sister’ anyway, but you always call me Lady, and it felt a bit distant.”

“I suppose it became a habit. But I never meant to put distance between us. If anything, considering our similar circumstances, I’d love to treat you like a real younger sister.”

“Sister...!”

Tears welled in Seol Lihyang’s eyes as she trembled with emotion.

Meanwhile, Tang Sowol wore a suspicious smile—one that suggested everything was going exactly as she planned.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, unaware of any schemes, simply clapped her small hands together, moved by the touching moment.

...Honestly, what the hell was going on?

I took another sip of baijiu, only for Tang Sowol to casually extend her cup toward me.

Noticing it was empty, I poured her a refill without much thought.

She downed the entire drink in one go before continuing.

“Ahem. Now, back to the topic at hand. Lady Seo, let’s say you’d just embarked on your first journey into the martial world. Then, suddenly, a complete stranger—who looks much younger than you—shows up and tells you it’s too dangerous and that you need to return home immediately. What would you do?”

“...I’d at least hear them out first.”

“But would you actually go back home?”

“Unless it was a truly serious matter, or their words inspired trust, I wouldn’t turn back.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin's voice was firm—once she made a decision, she rarely changed her mind.

But even she was taken aback by Tang Sowol's next words.

“I said the same thing. And that night, I was forcibly subdued and kidnapped. When I woke up, I was inside a pitch-dark cave.”

“...What?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin's gaze snapped to me, as if she were looking at a legendary pervert.

This was so unfair.

“If you phrase it like that, what do you think that makes me?”

“A reckless kidnapper?”

“What kind of kidnapper unties their captive’s acupoints just because she complains, travels to the next village to buy food and furs, and even empties her chamber pot for her?”

“KYAAA! W-Why would you suddenly bring that up?!”

“I wasn’t the one who started this conversation.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin physically dragged her chair closer to Seol Lihyang, as if distancing herself from the dangerous criminal.

“...A chamber pot...?”

Her face twisted in visible discomfort.

Tang Sowol, laughing gleefully, waved a hand dismissively.

“Haha! There’s no need to be so alarmed, Lady Seo. If I only told half the story, it would sound strange, but Brother Cheon actually treated me quite well. That’s why we ended up engaged.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yes. Allow me to explain the full story.”

After taking a sip of alcohol to wet her throat, Tang Sowol launched into a detailed account.

Since she was the one kidnapped, rather than the kidnapper, she remembered everything far more vividly than I did.

Even I found myself entertained—so Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was hearing it for the first time, was completely absorbed.

Aside from the moment when she broke into a cold sweat upon mistaking me for an ancient martial arts grandmaster, she listened with fascination, nodding along in admiration.

As the conversation flowed, the atmosphere grew warm and lively.

We moved on to discussing how we had settled old grievances, how Seol Lihyang had attempted to coax Tang Sowol away, and how, when things didn't go as planned, she had simply kidnapped her instead.

Now eager to share, Seo Mun-Hwarin cautiously spoke up.

"...This one has yet to experience much of the martial world, so there aren't many stories to tell. However, I can share a tale... that happened to this one's master."

She was clearly trying to slip in her own past under the guise of someone else's story.

But before she could even get started, Tang Sowol abruptly interrupted her.

"So, let me tell you something interesting about Brother Cheon..."

...?

Seo Mun-Hwarin froze mid-sentence, caught off guard.

Tang Sowol, however, continued talking as if completely unaware of the interruption.

It was then that I noticed something alarming.

She had already finished five bottles of alcohol.

And rather than expelling the alcohol's effects, she was intentionally letting it spread through her system.

“...Why aren't you neutralizing the alcohol?”

“Hihihi~ Because proper drinking etiquette means not suppressing one's drunkenness~!”

“...Who the hell told you that?”

“Oh.”

A beat too late, I realized.

No one told her that.

She was perfectly capable of neutralizing alcohol—but she was choosing to get drunk, just so she could justify saying nonsense while intoxicated.

I really didn't want to learn this particular lesson about Tang Sowol's personality.

“So, where was I...? Ah! When I asked for food, Brother Cheon actually pulled out a fasting pill! And since I was already miserable being stuck in a cave, I got a little irritated and told him to repeat after me that a fasting pill ‘isn't real food’... And not only did he actually repeat it, but he even did it in a way that was kinda cute, so—”

“Tang Sowol. Why don't you flush out the alcohol? If you don't, I can do it for you.”

“Ah, ah! Brother Cheon, you be quiet! I'm still talking!”

Squish.

Suddenly, she threw an arm around my shoulder, wildly flailing the other in the air.

I froze.

There was a noticeable difference in her physique.

Her poison glands—normally small and subtle—had noticeably swollen.

That alone made me too stunned to argue further.

I had no idea... that this was only the beginning of a nightmarish, never-ending drunken rant.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Tang Sowol's drunken rambling repeated itself endlessly.

I wasn't really paying attention—my focus was more on the sensation of her body leaning against my shoulder. But for Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin, it was clearly an exhausting ordeal.

“Hey! Cheon Hwi-da! Do something about Tang Sister!”

“I think I've heard the kidnapping story at least seven times now...”

“Well, I suppose it's about time to put a stop to it.”

Nodding, I lightly shook Tang Sowol, who had practically collapsed against me.

“So then, Brother Cheon told me—huh? What's going onnn?”

“Tang Sowol. I think you've had enough. No, actually, you have had enough.”

“Huhhh? But I'm at the perfect buzz right now. Don't be such a killjoyyy.”

“...I think you’ve long since passed that point.”

“Then that means I haven’t quite passed it yet, right? Just one more! One last drink!”

“...Fine. Just one last drink.”

Shaking my head, I picked up yet another bottle of liquor and poured it into her cup.

And then—

Press.

I directly sealed her pressure points, paralyzing her.

Tang Sowol’s martial realm had advanced considerably, so this wasn’t an easy feat.

However, since she had been clinging to me so closely, she was completely off guard.

Besides, her dulled reflexes from intoxication made it much easier.

I hadn't pressed too hard, so she would recover quickly.

But before that, I placed my palm on her back, intending to expel the alcohol from her system.

Woong—

As I channeled my inner energy, the scent of strong liquor began pouring out from her breath.

I didn't remove all of the alcohol, but at least enough for her to regain her senses.

Indeed, her flushed face was rapidly returning to normal before my eyes.

Though she still couldn't move... perhaps that would give her more time to reflect on what she had done.

I smirked, choosing not to release her acupoints just yet.

Instead, I slid an arm under her neck and legs and lifted her into my arms.

“Unfortunately, tonight’s drinking session ends here.”

“...Huh. Didn’t expect you to seal her acupoints without hesitation. But hey, at least you did something.”

“I-I suppose that’s to be expected from someone experienced in these matters...!”

Seol Lihyang shook her head with an unreadable expression, while Seo Mun-Hwarin forced out an awkward compliment.

It was probably because Tang Sowol, in her drunken stupor, had spent the entire night retelling her kidnapping story over and over.

“Seol Lihyang, you handle the bill. I’ll take Tang Sowol upstairs and put her to bed.”

“But I don’t have my coin pouch with me.”

“I have it. Just take it.”

“...Huh?!?”

I simply stood there and waited.

Flustered, Seol Lihyang hesitated before slowly approaching me.

Then, after mentally preparing herself, she reached a hand straight into my robe.

Fumble.

Her fingers hesitantly brushed against my chest, awkwardly searching.

It tickled slightly, making me raise a brow.

“...What exactly are you doing?”

“You told me to take the pouch myself.”

“...And why are you digging through my robe?”

“Because I need to find it.”

“...You mean the pouch that’s hanging from my waist?”

“...Oh.”

Seol Lihyang blinked.

She slowly pulled her hand out of my robe, cleared her throat, and acted like nothing had happened.

“Ahem. The pouch was here the whole time.”

She casually reached for my waist instead.

But just as she leaned forward, bringing her head closer, I whispered.

“...Careful. You’re being awfully bold, considering I have a fiancée.”

Seol Lihyang jumped back like she had been burned.

“T-That’s not what this was!!”

“Oh? You say that, but Tang Sowol is awake and fully aware—just unable to move. And yet, right in front of her, you shamelessly tried to seduce her fiancé.”

“Hey!! You’re making it sound way worse than it actually was!!”

“...But didn’t you actually do something suspicious?”

I chuckled while glancing at Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been rolling her eyes nervously, failing to find a place to interject.

“Relax. I was just joking. Now go pay the bill. We need to wake up early tomorrow, so don’t stay up too late.”

“...Tch.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin had been concealing her martial prowess, making her seem like an upper first-rate martial artist at best—similar to Seol Lihyang.

So if Seol Lihyang was tired, then Seo Mun-Hwarin must have been too.

Realizing this, Seol Lihyang let out a long sigh.

“...Fine, fine. I’ll go. But first—”

Before leaving, she gently grasped Tang Sowol’s hand and gave it a small shake.

“Tang Sister, it wasn’t like that. Please don’t misunderstand, okay?”

With no response from Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang nodded to herself and left with Seo Mun-Hwarin to settle the bill.

I watched them leave for a moment before heading upstairs.

Inside one of the rooms we had rented, I carefully laid Tang Sowol down on the bed.

Then, after sitting beside her, I spoke.

“So? How long are you going to pretend? You should’ve regained control of your body a while ago.”

“...Ugh. I was hoping you’d pretend not to notice.”

Tang Sowol flinched.

Her green eyes, still slightly glossy from the alcohol, peeked at me with mild annoyance.

“If you’re that embarrassed, drink in moderation next time. Or at the very least, purge the alcohol regularly.”

“...Yes, yes. I admit, I got too carried away. Lady Seo must think I’m some kind of lunatic, huh?”

“...She probably thinks your drunk habits are strange, not that you are strange. So don’t worry too much.”

“...That’s a relief, at least.”

I sighed, brushing her forehead gently before standing up.

“Finish flushing out the alcohol and get some rest.”

“...I was planning to do that anyway.”

Tang Sowol closed her eyes, reclining comfortably.

With her Poison Spirit Physique, she didn't even need to use Qi circulation techniques—she could absorb or dispel alcohol with ease.

I wondered what it must be like... to be physically incapable of getting drunk, unless one actively chose to be.

As I silently observed her, she suddenly cracked open one eye and asked.

“If you plan on staying longer, why not just lie down next to me instead of standing there?”

“...Your father is still terrifying, so I'd rather not.”

“Coward.”

“Heh. Just kidding.”

In that short time, Tang Sowol had already expelled all traces of her intoxication.

Now, as if she had never been drunk in the first place, she simply waved her hand at me with her usual calm expression.

I smirked, waved back, and returned to my own room.

I wasn't as drunk as she had been, but I had definitely had my fair share of drinks.

To shake off the lingering buzz and refine my inner energy, I focused on my Qi circulation practice before bed.

Knock, knock.

A familiar presence stood outside my door.

I immediately got up.

“Wait a moment.”

After quickly adjusting my clothes, I unlocked the door—only to find Seol Lihyang, glancing around suspiciously as if she were up to something shady.

“...What are you doing here this late?”

“Oh, uh... Nothing much. I just forgot to return your coin pouch earlier.”

“You could’ve given it back in the morning.”

“Yeah, but it was bugging me. I mean, I’m just a guest of the Tang Clan. Tang Sister is their actual daughter, and you’re her fiancé. My position is different from yours.”

“We’re among friends. There’s no need to be so formal.”

“Maybe, but still... No matter how close we are, holding onto someone else’s money all night just feels weird. There’s quite a lot in here, too. What if I lost it?”

“...Then we’d just track it down using the special poison scent Tang Sowol secretly applied to it.”

“...Wait. Isn’t that the same poison she once put on you? You’re telling me she also put it on the pouch?”

“Well, considering how much money is inside, precautions were necessary.”

Although I had told Tang Jincheon to give me a reasonable sum, his definition of "reasonable" apparently differed greatly from mine.

With that much money at stake, we needed to be careful.

Seol Lihyang simply nodded in agreement.

She hesitated for a moment before speaking in a more cautious tone.

“...Actually, I have a favor to ask, Cheon Hwi-da.”

“...I figured. What is it? Go ahead.”

“It’s nothing serious. It’s just that... while I haven’t neglected external martial arts, I’ve been focusing more on internal energy cultivation.”

“That’s true.”

Due to Glacial True Qi requiring the control of massive energy reserves, prioritizing internal cultivation often meant sacrificing external techniques.

Over the past three years, Seol Lihyang’s martial prowess had improved rapidly, but her physical conditioning had inevitably fallen behind.

“I think all the traveling has worn me out. Even when I practice Qi circulation or get proper rest, I still feel stiff.”

“...And?”

Seol Lihyang hesitated for a long time before leaning in close, lowering her voice as if sharing a secret.

“...Could you do that pressure point massage you used to do for me? It’s been a while...”

“...So that’s what this was about.”

I had wondered why she was being so roundabout.

“Well, we need to wake up early, so let’s make this quick. Come in.”

“Alright!”

She quickly slipped into my room.

Then, with an almost rigid motion, she lay down on my bed—face down.

Maybe it was because we were in a different place, or because it had been so long since I had last done this for her, but...

I suddenly noticed things that had changed over the years.

Her hips had become more defined.

Her chest, slightly pressed against the mattress, spilled out just a little to the side.

Her once lifeless hair had regained its natural shine, contrasting against her pale, porcelain skin.

Her height hadn't changed much, but everything else had.

And given her Pure Yin Physique and Yin-based martial arts, she would likely continue to change even more in the future.

Just as she had in my previous life.

She probably wasn't even aware of the subtle allure she was exuding.

Still lying down, she turned her head slightly and asked,

“...Well? Are you going to start?”

“Don’t rush me. I was just about to.”

Shaking my head, I straddled her lower back.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—we had already seen each other at our worst in my previous life.

There was no risk of me being flustered.

Rather than anything inappropriate, the feeling was closer to nostalgia.

Placing my palm gently against her back, I began.

“Hhht?!”

A small sound escaped her lips.

There was still a faint scent of alcohol lingering on her breath.

Meanwhile...

Seo Mun-Hwarin was feeling oddly satisfied.

“Mmm. It feels a little strange, but... they’re all good people.”

Tang Sowol’s drinking habits were a bit troublesome, but aside from that, she was exactly what Seo Mun-Hwarin had imagined a righteous martial artist to be.

Seol Lihyang had treated her like a close friend, always looking out for her.

And Cheon Hwi-da... Well, he kept laughing at her words for some reason, but she could tell he was genuinely considerate.

On top of that, they were all exceptional martial artists.

Of course, the familiar feeling she got from Cheon Hwi-da's presence and the fact that he was already at Peak Stage at such a young age did bother her a little.

But geniuses were simply like that.

Seo Mun-Hwarin herself was considered a genius, so she understood it well.

The only thing that made her feel a little guilty was the fact that, despite looking like a child, she was actually far older than the others.

But in the end, she was happier than she had been in a long time.

For the first time, it felt like she was reclaiming a piece of her lost life.

She even caught herself grinning when alone.

Perhaps it was because she was still savoring the lingering warmth of her first drinking session with friends.

Unable to fall asleep, Seo Mun-Hwarin finally sat up.

“...Maybe I should go get some fresh air.”

Though her body had reverted to youth, she still retained her full martial prowess.

She wouldn't suffer from fatigue, even if she stayed up all night.

However, just as she carefully slipped out of her room—

“...Mmh?!”

She heard something strange.

But the voice was familiar.

“...No way...”

Lowering her presence, she silently approached the source of the noise.

It came from Cheon Hwi-da's room.

Perhaps someone had forgotten to close the door properly, because there was a small gap in the frame.

Gulp.

Swallowing nervously, Seo Mun-Hwarin peeked inside.

And saw it.

Cheon Hwi-da, pressing down on Seol Lihyang's body, massaging her relentlessly.

Her fiancé, handling the body of another woman... and Seol Lihyang, not resisting at all.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's entire body stiffened.

She had no idea what to do.

This... This isn't right...!

Just as she resolved to intervene, she heard—

“Shhh.”

Tang Sowol's voice.

Seo Mun-Hwarin hadn't even noticed her approach.

But the real problem...

...was that Tang Sowol didn't seem remotely surprised.

Instead, she peered into the room, nodded in satisfaction, and smiled.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's mind blanked.

And then—Tang Sowol, as if preventing her from interfering, gently pulled her back.

A whisper tickled her ear.

“...It's fine. Everything is as it should be. You should go rest.”

“...?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin returned to her room in a daze.

And updated her opinion of them.

From slightly strange but good people...

...to good people, but very, very strange.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Several days had passed since Seo Mun-Hwarin joined our group.

Thanks to our steady travel pace, we arrived in Wuhan City well before the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering was set to begin.

However—

“...Hngh.”

For some reason, whenever I got too close to Seo Mun-Hwarin or made direct eye contact, she would avert her gaze and subtly distance herself.

...Did something happen?

Our journey had been uneventful, so I couldn't think of anything that would make her act this way.

And since she was only subtly avoiding me, asking outright felt unnecessary.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was a woman who carried herself with confidence, a natural result of her immense skill.

So what could possibly have shaken her like this?

The worst I could recall was:

Getting drunk and singing along to one of Seol Lihyang's favorite songs.

Attempting to cook a meal to celebrate my progress in Thunderous Stride, only to completely ruin the ingredients.

Buying a slightly indecent martial arts novel at a marketplace—because a true martial artist should also understand the world—which ended up messing with my head for days.

But none of those seemed relevant right now.

Still, I supposed it was a good thing that she had warmed up to us before the gathering.

She wasn't avoiding me completely, just acting a little awkward—meaning that if I spoke to her, she would at least listen.

If we had met after the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering started, I would have had only a short window to convince her before the main event began.

And of course, since Seo Mun-Hwarin was a much stronger martial artist than me, kidnapping her was simply not an option.

“...Hmmm.”

“Why are you nodding to yourself all of a sudden, Cheon Hwi-da?”

“...Mmm.”

I couldn't exactly tell her that I was deep in thought about how kidnapping wouldn't work, so I just nodded again.

Seol Lihyang gave me a weird look, like she had just caught a dog nodding at thin air.

But before she could say anything else, Tang Sowol spoke up, making her expression soften.

“Hyang, you don’t understand. Brother Cheon knew there would be a crowd, but now that he’s actually in the middle of it, he feels uncomfortable.”

“Huh? But why? He already knew there would be a lot of people.”

Seol Lihyang blinked in confusion, while Tang Sowol poked my side playfully.

“Well, you see—Brother Cheon has a habit of being wary of anyone who gets too close, unless he completely trusts them. So just walking through a crowd like this must be mentally exhausting for him.”

“...Really, Cheon Hwi-da?”

That was completely wrong.

I was simply naturally aware of anyone entering my space—which was something any cautious martial artist did.

Of course, this ability came from my past-life insights and the fact that my current body had reached Peak Stage.

But I wasn't actually exhausted by it.

Still, since it worked as an excuse, I just nodded.

"...More or less."

"You live such a troublesome life."

Seol Lihyang shook her head in disbelief, while Tang Sowol giggled, looking pleased that she had guessed correctly.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin, who knew firsthand that it wasn't actually that exhausting, held both hands over her mouth, struggling not to correct them.

Since all three of them were stunningly beautiful, we were starting to attract attention.

If this had been a stronghold of unorthodox martial artists, we probably would have already gotten into trouble.

But this was Wuhan City—home to the Murim Alliance Headquarters.

Not only that, but righteous sect disciples from all over had gathered for the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, along with countless martial arts enthusiasts who cared more about the reputation than their own meals.

I hadn't expected anything major to happen here.

But even I was caught off guard by the reactions we received.

“Incredible...! He can't even be twenty-five yet, and he's already reached the Peak Stage?”

“I'd heard that the Tang Clan's daughter was a prodigy, but even so, her level of mastery is hard to believe. Senior Brother.”

“She was caught up in an unfortunate incident a few years ago... She must have forged herself anew since then.”

“Well, we’ve been training hard too, so we’ll be fine! Right, Senior Brother?”

At first, their gazes were drawn by appearance—but by the end, they were genuinely impressed, using this moment as motivation for their own training.

“Haah. They all seem outstanding, but I have no idea who they are. Do you recognize them?”

“Why overcomplicate it? There’s only one highly-skilled Tang Clan daughter who has yet to receive a title because she rarely appears in public.”

“Ah! Then I suppose the others are in a similar situation.”

“Well, maybe the two in Tang Clan attire, but that smaller girl in different clothing might have just joined them on their journey.”

“That’s a fair guess. But that white hair is unusual. The Tang girl’s green hair is obviously from her poison training, but...”

“White hair, huh? There’s no way she just naturally went gray at that age... She must practice Yin-based martial arts.”

“Wait... Does that mean we might actually see Ice Qi techniques in action?!”

“We can’t say for sure. But one thing’s certain—the number of flowers in the martial world is increasing.”

“Hah! So it’s no longer just The Three Flowers of Murim—it’s now The Five Flowers of Murim!”

Impatient enthusiasts were already speculating about our martial styles and potential titles.

“Ah! I didn’t expect to run into you here! How have you been? I was a little worried since I hadn’t heard from you in a while.”

Among the crowd, I spotted Jin Baek from the Wudang Sect.

“...What are you doing here?”

“What kind of question is that, Brother Cheon? I’m obviously here for the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.”

“Well, that much is obvious, but... wait. What did you just call me?”

“Hm? Brother Cheon, of course.”

“I thought we were about the same age?”

“Pfft. Who cares about age? What’s important is that you taught me a lot. That alone is reason enough for me to treat you like an older brother.”

“...Brother, huh.”

I never expected Jin Baek to be this grateful for the small kindness I had shown him in my past life.

Looking at him now, I could tell he had been training diligently over the past three years. He had surpassed the entry level of first-rate martial artists.

The last time I had seen him, he was only at the second-rate level, and given what I knew of his mediocre natural talent, this was impressive progress.

Considering his young age and the standards of a major sect like Wudang, this level of growth would certainly earn him recognition as a promising talent.

In that context, I could somewhat understand his reaction.

Jin Baek might not have been remarkable in every way, but he had always been a good person.

Even when tensions between righteous and unorthodox sects were high, he had never treated me with hostility.

And in the end, he had even sacrificed his True Essence to carve out an escape route for others.

...Yet, despite the life he had given me, I had failed to fulfill my revenge.

A mix of complicated emotions and quiet satisfaction curled my lips into a small smile.

“Well, call me whatever you want. Just don’t expect me to return the favor—I’m not the affectionate type.”

“Haha! I’d probably feel weird if you actually called me ‘younger brother’ anyway. This works better.”

He let out a hearty laugh—a stark contrast to the youthful innocence I remembered from before.

Now, he felt more like the Jin Baek I had known in my past life.

"By the way, Brother Cheon, could you introduce me to your companions? I recognize Tang Sojeo, but the others are new to me."

"Sure. This is Jin Baek—he’s from Wudang Sect. Tang Sowol and I got to know him during our stay at Wudang."

With that brief introduction, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin exchanged awkward bows with him.

Afterward, we made light conversation about recent events as we walked.

Before long, we reached the Golden Flower Merchant Guild's inn.

"This is where we'll be staying."

"...Wow. This place looks way too luxurious. Were there even any rooms left?"

"They'll make room for us. And if not, they'll find us a place elsewhere."

I pulled out the letter from Chu Jeongsan and waved it.

Jin Baek, realizing what it was, gave a knowing nod.

"Ahh! That explains it. Even though our Wudang Sect arrived early, we struggled to find an inn, so I was a bit worried. But if you already have a connection, that's a relief!"

“...Is it really that crowded?”

“You already know—Shaolin Temple is sponsoring the grand prize this time.”

“True. The other Five Supreme Clans and Nine Great Sects have incredible elixirs... but...”

“The Great Rejuvenation Pill is on a whole different level.”

“Exactly. That’s why even more participants have gathered this year.”

He sighed, recalling something his senior brother had mentioned.

“On top of that, where there are people, there’s profit. Tons of merchants have come to make money off the crowd. It’s even busier than the last Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.”

After that brief exchange, Jin Baek prepared to part ways.

“I’ll be heading back now. If you go a little further down the street, you’ll find Myeongwon Inn—that’s where I’m staying. Feel free to visit if you get bored.”

“...Why would I visit you?”

“Pfft. You’re right—we should focus on the gathering first. After it’s over, let’s have a meal together instead.”

“Oh! That sounds great!”

“Honestly, with you competing, I know I have zero chance of winning... but I’ll still do my best!”

His enthusiasm was refreshing.

As he walked away, Tang Sowol leaned close and whispered in my ear.

“...He’s certainly a lot more energetic than a certain someone we know.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about... But I imagine this person must be incredibly beautiful, an exceptional martial artist, and the kind of woman who could turn the Three Flowers of Murim into the Five Flowers just by existing.”

Tang Sowol’s expression shifted between amusement and exasperation.

Seol Lihyang, unable to tolerate us any longer, shuddered before marching ahead.

“Enough! If you two keep talking, I’ll die just from listening. Let’s just go inside! Rin, you too.”

“U-Uhm... Alright...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin hesitated, glancing at me, but eventually followed Seol Lihyang.

She looked like someone handling a dangerous explosive, nervous that it might detonate at any moment.

...It was a bit concerning, but standing around on the street wasn’t an option.

After exchanging a glance with Tang Sowol, we both sighed and followed them inside.

Inside the Inn

At first, the innkeeper hesitated, saying there were no available rooms.

But after reading Chu Jeongsan's letter, he quickly changed his tone and led us to a reserved VIP suite.

Apparently, most of the Golden Flower Merchant Guild's businesses had collapsed... except for their escort service and inns, which were thriving.

That explained why the facilities were so luxurious.

After all, it was a VIP room.

But there was one problem.

There was only one room.

I requested extra bedding, laying it down in a separate corner of the room.

Then, in an unmistakably firm tone, I drew a line.

“...Don’t cross this.”

“...???”

“...???”

“...Are you talking to us?”

The three of them looked at me like I had lost my mind.

But I had no choice.

Because even I couldn't guarantee what I might do otherwise.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Wuhuan City was reached with ample time to spare. Having secured a room at an inn, all that remained was to focus on training as usual and maintain physical condition until the preliminary rounds of the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting began.

It was only later that the realization dawned—this gathering was not just a martial arts tournament but also a place for fostering connections.

“I can't do this anymore. This is just too much. Honestly, I don't understand it. How do the Five Supreme Clans even maintain their prestige as the Five Supreme Clans? At this rate, how can anyone concentrate on martial arts?”

“Well, rather than remaining as mere strong individuals, maintaining a large family requires fostering harmonious relationships with those around them.”

Still, who would have expected guests to come visiting every day after the first few days in Wuhuan City?

“In any case, I’m done. I can’t do this anymore. Just because I’m the fiancé doesn’t mean I have to attend every single gathering. From now on, I’ll be skipping one out of every three.”

“...Even if you’re exhausted, you’ll still attend two out of three, then...”

Tang Sowol tilted her head with an ambiguous expression, as if unsure whether to feel disappointed or pleased.

But the moment she spoke her next words, any lingering dissatisfaction instantly melted away.

“Well, all the complicated matters are over now. The only thing left is to greet a few close friends, and that can wait until after the preliminaries are over.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So, how about sparring with me all day today?”

“Sounds good. Let’s head down right away.”

Grabbing my sword immediately, I was about to head toward the open space behind the inn when Tang Sowol chuckled and stood up to follow.

“You’re such an easy person to read.”

“Hmph. I refuse to acknowledge that.”

“You’re seriously addicted to martial arts.”

“Whether I’m addicted or not will be decided in a match.”

Now that I thought about it, it had been a long time since I last sparred with Tang Sowol.

No—this would actually be the first time since she had reached the Peak Stage.

I had seen her Returning to the Origin Divine Art a few times before his regression, but it had been at such a high level that I hadn’t been able to fully grasp it.

But now, there was much I could learn.

“You’re the one who suggested sparring all day, so don’t regret it now.”

“You’re talking about sparring, right?!”

Ignoring Tang Sowol’s startled reaction, I grabbed her hand and half-dragged her down.

After that, they sparred to the point of utter exhaustion.

“It was a satisfying day.”

“...Are you sure it wasn’t just you who was satisfied...?”

After quickly washing off the sweat from the intense training session, I returned to find Tang Sowol, who had bathed earlier, sprawled on the bed, muttering in exhaustion.

Beside her, Seol Lihyang was placing a hand on her forehead, likely channeling a bit of cold energy to cool her down.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was watching the scene from a slight distance with an expression of curiosity and envy, cleared her throat.

“Ahem. So, why did you call us all together?”

“Mm. It’s nothing much. Since the preliminaries are approaching, I wanted to discuss the schedule for the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting.”

As I sat on the edge of the bed and spoke, Seol Lihyang, who had been preoccupied with cooling Tang Sowol down, widened her eyes and waved a free hand.

“Hey! Why did you torment Tang unni like this again?”

“Torment? That’s an unfair accusation. I was merely taking the sparring seriously.”

“That’s the same thing! And didn’t you tell me to stay away from your bed? But now you’re sitting there all natural and cozy?”

“I can’t exactly stand while talking. Just move aside for a bit. I’ll handle things from here.”

“What? Cheon Hwi-da, don’t tell me you’re planning to...!”

For some reason, Seol Lihyang blushed as if jumping to a strange conclusion. I ignored her, pushed her aside, and sat closely next to Tang Sowol.

Then, I gently placed her head on his lap as a pillow and repositioned Seol Lihyang’s hand back on her forehead.

With this, Tang Sowol had a comfortable pillow, Seol Lihyang could still cool her down, and I could enjoy the soothing chill from Seol Lihyang while also feeling the pleasant weight on his lap.

A perfect arrangement where everyone benefited—except for one person.

Seo Mun-Hwarin.

She glanced around nervously before subtly reaching out to grab Tang Sowol's sleeve, a sight that was somewhat pitiful to witness.

“Well then, about the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting preliminaries...”

“Ah, but before that, today's medicine—I mean, tea—must be drunk.”

Perhaps because Hakryeongcho was known as a potent poison, Tang Sowol deliberately called it tea in front of Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Having apparently prepared in advance, she dipped the tip of her pinky into a cup of water and began stirring.

With each slow rotation of her finger, the once-clear water gradually turned a faint shade of purple.

Once it reached the right concentration, she passed it over to Seol Lihyang.

Letting out a small sigh, Seol Lihyang wrapped her hands around the cup and infused it with internal energy, rapidly cooling the liquid.

“Oh!”

With a short exhale, the tea chilled in an instant, forming a thin layer of ice on the surface.

As she took the frost-covered cup, Seo Mun-Hwarin asked in a slightly depressed voice,

“When will this finally end?”

“Hm...? Well, since you can now withstand up to half the full concentration, I’d say you’ll develop complete resistance in about three or four more years.”

“Seven years in total... that’s long.”

“Well, it’s not just any poison but one that even affects the Tang Clan’s toxins. So, if you can gain full resistance with just a few cups of tea over seven years, I’d say that’s a bargain.”

“Let’s correct one thing. This is horrible-tasting tea.”

“But didn’t you say it’s easier to drink when it’s cold? Just chug it all at once.”

“...Fine.”

Bracing himself as if swallowing a lethal poison, I downed it in one go. Even now, I still couldn’t get used to the taste, causing his brows to furrow deeply.

“You do know that the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting preliminaries are divided into two types, right?”

“Of course, I do.”

“I know there are two types, but I don’t know the specifics.”

“You don’t know at all. Isn’t it just sparring between participants?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been staring intently at the cup that once held the poisonous tea, blinked and spoke.

Well, she had come to participate in the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting without much preparation, so it was understandable that she wouldn't know the details. That was precisely why I had brought it up.

I was also planning to subtly warn Seo Mun-Hwarin that she might be exposed sooner or later.

Fortunately, I had heard about this from her in his past life and had also asked his senior—Tang Cheong, who had participated in the last Dragon and Phoenix Meeting.

“Since there's someone who doesn't know, I'll briefly explain. The preliminaries consist of two different methods, and you can choose whichever suits you best.”

One method, as Seo Mun-Hwarin mentioned, involved sparring against a martial artist from the Murim Alliance.

Winning wasn't necessary; the key was to display a level of skill sufficient to pass the preliminaries.

Neither one's stage of martial attainment nor the amount of internal energy accumulated mattered. This test evaluated only one thing—how well one could fight.

This method was commonly chosen by martial artists from minor sects, wanderers, or bodyguards who had not mastered exceptional martial arts.

“The other method involves leaving a mark on a chunk of Xuan iron.”

“A chunk of Xuan iron, you say?”

“That’s right. Unlike the sparring method, this one is heavily reliant on internal energy and cultivation level.”

Even if it weren’t ordinary iron but Xuan iron, a sufficiently strong sword aura could cut into it. The block was so thick that fully slicing through it was impossible, but it was certainly possible to leave a deep, visible mark.

One didn’t necessarily need to be at the Peak Stage. Any first-rate martial artist should be proficient in Energy Infusion Swordplay, the technique of imbuing weapons and one’s body with internal energy for reinforcement.

Since Xuan iron was much heavier and sturdier than regular steel, leaving a mark on it was extremely difficult unless one had exceptional skill or wielded an extraordinary sword.

In other words, the depth of the mark depended on how well one could control Energy Infusion Swordplay and how much internal energy one could infuse into a single strike.

Since the results could be judged with the naked eye rather than relying on internal perception, this method was well-suited for quickly evaluating a large number of participants.

Moreover, it allowed one to avoid displaying their combat skills in front of others.

“Which brings me to my point—since the second method is faster and simpler, Tang Sowol and I plan to leave marks on the Xuan iron. But Seol Lihyang and Seorin, your cases are different, aren’t they?”

“Hm... That’s true.”

“Ah, uhm, ahem! The same goes for me!”

Seol Lihyang had barely managed to reach mid first-rate, but her internal energy reserves were lacking due to insufficient time spent cultivating. Moreover, she hadn’t benefited from an environment rich in yin energy or rare elixirs.

On the other hand, Seo Mun-Hwarin—despite being an absolute master at the Flowering Stage—felt guilty for deceiving others into thinking she was only mid first-rate.

Each of them nodded in agreement for their own reasons.

“What will you do? The first method requires displaying a certain level of skill and takes longer. But in return, it allows you to build a reputation early on.”

“The second method allows you to hide your strength, but it makes passing the preliminaries harder, right? I guess I’ll just go with sparring against a Murim Alliance warrior. Honestly, I doubt I could even scratch Xuan iron with my pitiful amount of internal energy.”

“Your martial arts allow for powerful bursts of energy, but... Ah, I see. You’re trying to hide that aspect, huh?”

“Yeah. If I have to conceal the part I’m most confident in, this is the better choice, right?”

“You remembered well, Lihyang. Good job.”

Tang Sowol, still resting her head on his thigh, beamed and reached out toward Seol Lihyang.

After a moment of hesitation, Seol Lihyang leaned in, and Tang Sowol gently patted her head.

I observed them briefly before turning to Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“What about you, Seorin? I don’t know your exact capabilities, but if you’re really mid first-rate, you might barely pass by striking the Xuan iron.”

“This one...”

Seo Mun-Hwarin hesitated, debating how much of her true strength to reveal and how to establish her reputation as a promising junior martial artist.

In his previous life, she had chosen the sparring method and garnered some attention, which led to the Murim Alliance Leader himself taking an interest in her.

His instinct was to tell her to stay as inconspicuous as possible during the preliminaries.

But back then, she had gradually started avoiding him, so I hadn't been able to pressure her into making a different choice.

Thus, I decided to give her a subtle warning instead.

“I heard that this year's Dragon and Phoenix Meeting is larger than expected. Because of that, the Murim Alliance Leader will personally oversee the early rounds of the main tournament. If you perform too well in the preliminaries, you'll attract more attention.”

“The Murim Alliance Leader himself?”

“That's right. If you're considering joining the Murim Alliance or seeking support from a clan or sect, sparring in the preliminaries might work in your favor.”

With this much explanation, Seo Mun-Hwarin would understand—her vague plan of winning once or twice before dropping out was not an option.

Now, she had to make a choice.

She could either give up making a name for herself at the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting and build her reputation slowly as a promising martial artist.

Or she could take the risk, reveal her strength, and immediately establish herself as a righteous faction martial artist.

Seo Mun-Hwarin pursed her lips tightly, anxiously twisting a strand of her white hair.

I silently waited.

Before long, her small lips parted.

With a voice trembling from a mix of apprehension and anticipation, Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke.

“This one shall challenge the sparring method alongside Lihyang.”

“...Is that so.”

Now that it had come to this, I needed to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The preliminaries of the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting had begun.

For Tang Sowol and me, it was a simple matter—we left deep marks on the Xuan iron block with a moderate level of sword aura, and that was it.

Now, all that remained was to wait for Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin to finish their sparring matches.

“That ended faster than expected. What do you want to do now, Brother Cheon?”

“The sparring matches have drawn a large crowd, so it’s possible that Lihyang and Seorin haven’t had their turns yet. Heading back to the inn without them seems a bit coldhearted, so how about we wait and leave together?”

“And take the chance to watch some of the other participants’ matches?”

“Well, something like that.”

I shrugged and turned my steps toward the dueling grounds.

As Tang Sowol and I walked for a while, we soon arrived at the Murim Alliance’s training grounds.

It was an unexpectedly vast space, likely designed from the start to accommodate a large number of people.

The grounds had been divided into multiple sections, allowing several participants to spar with Murim Alliance warriors simultaneously.

All around, the clashing sounds of weapons rang out, punctuated by cheers and sighs of disappointment.

While half-listening to the fluctuating fortunes of the competitors, I scanned the surroundings.

“As expected of the preliminaries, the overall skill level is a bit lower. But seeing so many different martial arts styles at once is quite entertaining.”

“Hm?”

“I don’t see Lihyang or Lady Seo anywhere. I suppose it’s hard to find them in such a large crowd.”

Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances and smoothly shifted the conversation.

“Yes, with so many people here, it won’t be easy to spot them.”

“Indeed. Regardless of their actual skills, witnessing such a wide variety of martial techniques in one place is a rare experience.”

We both chuckled at our awkward attempts to change the subject.

“Shall we take a more careful look around?”

“That seems like a good idea. Both Lihyang and Lady Seo stand out, so we should be able to find them soon enough.”

Seol Lihyang, thanks to her Pure Yin Physique, had grown even more beautiful, and she unconsciously exuded an alluring charm.

As for Seo Mun-Hwarin, there was no need for explanation—her strikingly long, snow-white hair would make her easy to spot at a glance.

We wandered through the crowd of spectators who had gathered to watch the matches from a distance.

However, despite our efforts, the sheer number of people made it difficult to find them.

Eventually, Tang Sowol sighed and gestured for me to come closer.

“Brother Cheon, Brother Cheon. I have a great idea—would you like to hear it?”

“What is it?”

“You should give me a shoulder ride.”

“...???”

I blinked in confusion at her sudden suggestion.

Tang Sowol chuckled at my reaction and explained further.

“If we get to a higher vantage point, we’ll have a better view. And conversely, Lihyang and Lady Seo will be able to spot us more easily.”

“...Are you serious?”

“I am always serious.”

“Hah! Fine. But if you get embarrassed and ask to come down later, don’t expect me to let you.”

“Hmph. That’s my line. You’re the one who gets embarrassed easily, aren’t you, Brother?”

Tang Sowol tilted her chin up with a playful smirk. Irritated by her provocation, I crouched down.

“Let’s see you try, then—”

“Eii!”

Before I could even finish my sentence, she eagerly climbed onto my shoulders.

The firm pressure of her thighs pressing against the sides of my face, the warmth of her body, and her familiar scent flooded my senses all at once.

I had thought she was joking, but her boldness left me momentarily frozen.

Judging by the startled expressions around us, others were just as shocked.

After all, seeing a fully grown woman riding on someone’s shoulders in such a public setting wasn’t exactly a common sight.

Though they held their tongues upon noticing her Tang Clan uniform, I could tell they were equally bewildered.

Tang Sowol, however, seemed completely unfazed.

Growing impatient with my hesitation, she lightly tapped the top of my head with her palm.

“What are you doing, Brother Cheon? Hurry and stand up. This isn’t any different from when I was standing next to you.”

“...Or could it be that after all your talk, you’re backing out now? Surely you’re not that much of a coward?”

“Tsk. What nonsense. You’re so light I barely noticed you were there.”

With a bit of unnecessary bravado, I straightened up.

Immediately, Tang Sowol squeezed her thighs tighter around my shoulders and grasped my hair for balance.

“Let go of my hair. That actually hurts.”

Sighing, I secured her by placing my hands firmly around her thighs.

Finally, she relaxed her grip on my hair and, as if in apology, gently smoothed out the strands she had ruffled.

From my perspective, all I could see were people looking at us like we were crazy, but from her vantage point, she probably had a better view.

I recalled that Tang Jincheon planned to arrive just in time for the start of the main tournament. That was fortunate.

Letting out a small sigh of relief, I continued scanning the area.

Then—

“Ah! I found them! Looks like they’re about to start!”

Tang Sowol suddenly brightened and pointed excitedly in one direction.

As we moved closer, the crowd parted as if making way for a charging carriage.

I tried to ignore the growing heat creeping up my face, forcing myself to remain nonchalant. Meanwhile, Tang Sowol simply waved with a bright smile.

“We’re over here! Over here!”

“Ngh—?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin visibly flinched and immediately pretended not to know us.

Of course, that wouldn’t do her any good—everyone could already tell we were together.

With a flushed face, she turned her focus back to her match preparations.

Her opponent, a martial artist from the Murim Alliance, let out a wry chuckle and assumed his stance.

“You must have strong ties with the Tang Clan.”

“W-We merely happened to meet on the way here and traveled together, nothing more.”

“Hah. The ease of forming friendships is a privilege of youth. I was the same in my younger days.”

The judge overseeing the match smiled nostalgically.

Of course, considering Seo Mun-Hwarin’s actual age, that comment was more frustrating than anything else.

“...When does the match begin?”

“If you’re ready, you may start now.”

The judge, his smile fading, nodded solemnly.

Then, he unslung the spear from his back.

His upright posture, the precise angle of his raised weapon, and the unwavering stillness of his stance—all of it spoke to the years he had devoted to the path of the martial arts.

Though his talent was lacking, and he had failed to break past the Peak Stage despite approaching forty, the examiner was still a seasoned martial artist at the very peak of the first-rate level.

For evaluating the countless hopefuls participating in the Dragon and Phoenix Meeting, he was more than qualified.

Unfortunately for him, his opponent was not just any martial artist but a hidden monster—no, rather, an expert at the Flowering Stage who had refused to give up on her dreams even at an advanced age.

Was it because Seo Mun-Hwarin had decided to take the risk and introduce herself to the world as the martial artist Seorin?

Or was she simply too embarrassed by the situation and wanted to end it quickly?

Whatever the case, she revealed more of her skills than she likely intended.

Pabat!

With an explosive burst, Seo Mun-Hwarin shot forward.

Her movement technique resembled the one she had taught me but was subtly different—this was likely the original, unaltered form of Thunderclap Steps.

Kwaang!

“What?!”

Even while suppressing her internal energy to a first-rate level, her speed was astonishing.

No, rather than sheer speed, what was truly terrifying was the sudden burst of acceleration—like a bolt of lightning striking out of nowhere.

Before, I had thought Thunderclap Steps was just a movement technique that allowed a martial artist to momentarily push past their limits by forcefully surging internal energy.

But after learning its name from Jang Cheok, the Ghost Shadow Thief, I began to see it differently.

And thanks to that, I could now perceive much more.

The Thunderclap Steps Seo Mun-Hwarin had just displayed had the same fundamental principles as my own footwork. The difference was that her version wasn't suited to me.

It was fast, flashy, and overwhelming—a technique that not only showcased the user's power but also applied immense pressure on their opponent.

That flashy aspect was what didn't suit me at all. That was probably why she had altered the technique before passing it on to me.

The version of Thunderclap Steps I had learned was merely fast and powerful, lacking the ostentatious display she now demonstrated.

Well, considering it was a Rising Martial Art, its flashiness wasn't merely for show.

Flashiness, after all, could disorient an opponent's perception.

However, it didn't contain the deceptive illusions or misdirection one might expect. Instead, its movements were straightforward and direct.

So then, what was the purpose of the Thunderclap Steps' flashiness?

The answer became clear almost immediately.

“Hup...!”

Startled by the sudden closing of distance, the examiner instinctively gasped and thrust his spear.

But his form had already faltered in shock, and his hasty stab wavered ever so slightly.

Watching this unfold, I realized—the technique’s flashiness transformed into oppressive pressure, forcing the opponent into making a rash move.

Considering the path of vengeance Seo Mun-Hwarin had walked in her youth, it was no surprise that her martial arts incorporated the principles of domination.

She tilted her head ever so slightly to avoid the poorly executed spear thrust, then stepped in closer.

The examiner desperately swung his spear shaft in a horizontal sweep, but—

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s Golden Silk Capture was faster.

Her delicate fingers slipped through his guard, one hand gripping his collar while the other twisted his wrist, forcing him to drop his weapon.

With his balance thrown off, she lightly kicked his calf.

Thud.

The examiner staggered before collapsing onto the ground.

His expression was one of sheer disbelief, as if he couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, however, looked as though she had just made a terrible mistake.

She must have realized, belatedly, that she had displayed far more of her strength than she intended.

But there was no helping it. The moment had already passed.

Waaahhh—!

A thunderous cheer erupted, the loudest yet.

Even those waiting for their turn were openly astonished by the display.

“Whoa! Brother Cheon, did you see that?! Lady Seo took down the examiner in an instant! That examiner wasn’t weak, either! No wonder she keeps her martial school a secret! She must be from some mysterious, single-lineage sect!”

“Well... something like that.”

The Seo Clan had been exterminated, and any outlaws who had stolen their techniques had been eradicated by Seo Mun-Hwarin’s hands.

She was likely the only one in all of Murim who had mastered the Seo Clan’s martial arts.

If I counted myself—having learned her movement technique—then perhaps two.

If a sect had disappeared long ago, leaving only one known survivor, then what else could people assume but that she hailed from a mysterious, single-lineage school?

Seo Mun-Hwarin awkwardly picked up the fallen spear and handed it back to the stunned examiner.

Still bewildered, he alternated between looking at his spear and at her before shouting loudly,

“Pass! Next participant, step forward!”

“Y-Yes!”

Seol Lihyang, visibly nervous, stiffly stepped forward to face her examiner.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Seol Lihyang, filled with tension, stepped forward with stiff movements before the opponent.

It seemed that fighting in a Battle against another person—especially in front of such a large audience—was impossible for her to ignore.

With Seol Lihyang’s skills, she really had no reason to be this nervous.

As I shook my head, Tang Sowol, still perched on my shoulder, waved her hand enthusiastically.

“Lihyang!”

She didn't say Good luck or anything of the sort—just called her name and waved.

Seol Lihyang reflexively turned at the sound, her face momentarily blank as she looked at Tang Sowol. Then, as if something clicked, she broke into a bright smile and waved back.

Lowering her head, she suddenly smirked and glanced at Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had moved close to her side.

“You see? She responds just fine. Are we really that embarrassing?”

“Well, I'm already feeling plenty embarrassed, so I was hoping you'd just pretend not to notice.”

“Oh dear, and here I thought we'd grown at least a little closer. It seems I was mistaken.”

“T-That's not the issue at all!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin puffed up her cheeks, clearly holding back words she wanted to say, only to deflate them moments later.

She was the type of person to react this strongly to even something so minor.

I couldn't help but wonder—if she made it to the main tournament and had her identity exposed before the entire Murim Alliance, how would she even handle it?

As I let out a deep sigh, Seol Lihyang, now visibly calmer, took the pojun stance before the opponent.

“I look forward to your guidance.”

“Hmm! By the way, miss, are you also part of this group?”

“These people are far beyond someone like me.”

With those brief words exchanged, the two assumed their stances.

It seemed that the opponents were rotated out when they became too exhausted, but since Seo Mun-Hwarin had ended her match before the opponent could even attempt anything, this one was continuing on.

Both were first-rate martial artists, but the opponent had likely reached that level over the course of a decade or more—he was a seasoned warrior with extensive combat experience.

Seol Lihyang, on the other hand, had advanced rapidly in a short period of time. She had barely even dueled against anyone outside the Tang Clan, let alone experienced real combat.

On paper, she was at a serious disadvantage.

But I didn't think so.

Yes, Seol Lihyang had only trained in martial arts for three years. Even with her best weapon—the whip—she hadn't yet reached a first-rate level of mastery.

However, when it came to handling internal energy, her talent was second to none—even compared to the other geniuses I knew.

And now, she had fully mastered an advanced internal technique—Glacial True Qi, a force as cold and piercing as pure Yin energy itself.

With that much of a gap, she had more than a fighting chance.

Ignoring Seo Mun-Hwarin's not-so-threatening glare, I focused entirely on Seol Lihyang.

Taking a half-step forward, she swung her whip in a wide arc.

“Hup!”

Her movements were fluid, as if the whip were an extension of her arm, undulating like a rippling wave.

Sswaeeek!

At first, the whip's trajectory followed a smooth curve, but then, in an instant, it lashed out with explosive speed—so fast it became nearly invisible—striking straight at the opponent.

A solid attack.

But not enough to shake a seasoned warrior.

Calmly, the opponent extended his spear, letting the whip wrap around it.

Papack!

The whip coiled tightly around the shaft, but instead of resisting, the opponent smoothly rotated the spearhead in the same direction.

It was a textbook demonstration of Barrier Seizing Strike—one of the fundamental techniques of spearmanship.

Then, he swung his arm outward with force.

With the spear already spinning and entangling more of the whip than Seol Lihyang had intended, an outward swing only intensified the pull.

“Ugh!”

Instead of pulling him, she was the one being pulled off balance.

Though she managed to keep hold of her weapon, the sheer difference in physical strength—and in external martial arts training—made the outcome obvious.

If this continued, she would either lose her grip on the whip or have her stance completely broken.

Even though this was just a Battle and not an actual fight, that would be enough to call the match.

Her first strike had been fierce enough that she would still receive a decent evaluation.

But if Seol Lihyang was the type to settle for decent, she wouldn't have reached mid-first-rate in just three years—nor would she be this tense over a mere preliminary match.

The feigned panic in her eyes suddenly sharpened.

Now, it was the opponent's turn to be surprised.

Unlike hers, his reaction was genuine.

“Binggong...!”

His eyes widened as he readjusted his grip on the spear.

At some point, the entire shaft—along with the whip wrapped tightly around it—had turned an eerie white, coated in frost.

If this continued, it wouldn't take long for the Glacial True Qi to seep through the weapon and reach his hands.

Determined not to let that happen, the opponent gritted his teeth and began to squeeze every last bit of internal energy from his core.

But neutral, orthodox internal energy was poorly suited to counteracting Seol Lihyang's Yin-based force, which spread like piercing needles through every opening.

In the end, all he could do was pour out twice as much energy as her to purge the encroaching cold and forcibly shake off the whip.

His robes fluttered wildly from the sheer surge of energy, and the spear trembled in his hands.

He was likely already preparing to rotate out after this match.

Perhaps that was why—so focused on concentrating his energy—he failed to notice when Seol Lihyang’s lips parted.

"Puff—"

It wasn't exactly a song.

Just a single sustained note, drawn out in her clear, pleasant voice.

Yet, imbued within it, her internal energy slipped into the opponent’s ears.

"...Tch!"

Caught in the midst of channeling energy into his spear, the opponent had left his body's circulation vulnerable.

Now, his muscles locked up, freezing stiff.

If this continued, he would either succumb to the Glacial True Qi spreading from the spear or suffer internal injuries from the Yin energy seeping in through the sound.

In the end, he was forced to release his grip on the spear, redirecting all his energy inward to force out the invading chill.

With a complicated expression, he finally spoke.

"That's enough! The Battle ends here. I concede."

"OK."

"This was quite an eye-opening experience. Now I truly understand why Yang Energy Techniques and Yin-Cold Techniques are considered so dangerous."

“Th-Thank you!”

As soon as the Battle ended, Seol Lihyang dropped the frosty, razor-sharp expression she had worn moments ago and respectfully performed a pojun bow.

The moment she lifted her head, she sprinted toward us and began bouncing excitedly in front of Tang Sowol and me.

“Sister Tang! Sister Tang...!”

She clearly wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come out.

Tang Sowol, watching her with a gentle gaze, finally spoke.

“You did well, Lihyang.”

“Yes!”

“I hate to interrupt while you’re still riding the high, but could we perhaps continue this conversation after you get off my shoulders?”

“You really have no sense of timing, you know. At a moment like this, you should at least say a few words of praise to Lihyang.”

“Yeah, yeah! Hurry up and praise me! Say I was amazing! Tell me I did well!”

I glanced at Seo Mun-Hwarin, wondering if I was the one in the wrong here, but she was too busy stifling her laughter to offer any help.

In the end, I took a deep breath and gave Seol Lihyang the response she wanted.

“...Alright, alright. You did well.”

“That was so half-hearted! Do it again!”

“In a Battle, countering an incoming whip by slicing through it or wrapping it around your own weapon to disarm the opponent is the standard response. Using that knowledge to channel Glacial True Qi into the weapon was a clever move.”

“More!”

“Concealing a portion of your strength to lure an opponent into complacency is a fundamental survival skill in the Martial World. Today, you proved yourself as a true martial artist—beyond any doubt.”

“Ooooh! What else?!”

Her eyes sparkled playfully as she waited for more. I simply stared at her for a moment before shaking my head.

“...Leaving right now wouldn't be such a bad idea.”

I turned around with Tang Sowol still on my shoulders. In a panic, she reached down and tugged at my hair.

“Brother Cheon? You're not seriously planning to go all the way back to the inn like this, are you...?”

“Cheon Hwi? Hey! Come on, just say it one more time! That's all I'm asking! Are you really leaving?”

Instead of answering, I simply kept walking.

After all, I wasn't the type to fight battles I knew I couldn't win.

After returning to the Golden Flower Inn, it seemed our eccentric display had sparked some rumors.

Not that it mattered.

Everyone had passed the preliminaries, so now there was nothing left to do but wait for the main tournament to begin.

Although I wasn't quite as eager as Seo Mun-Hwarin, I had high expectations for the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering as well.

It was a rare opportunity to observe countless martial arts styles in one place—and, more importantly, to study techniques from orthodox sects that I was unfamiliar with.

My approach to martial arts was simple: gather and refine. By analyzing various techniques, incorporating their strengths, and adapting them to suit me, I gradually evolved my own style.

For someone like me, the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering was nothing short of a grand feast.

And I wasn't the only one anticipating it.

Before I left the Tang Clan, Tang Jincheon had mentioned that, due to the rules of the competition, there had never been a Dragon and Phoenix Gathering champion from the Tang Clan.

The Tang Clan frequently produced Dragon and Phoenix titleholders, but never a winner.

It wasn't a matter of pride or reputation—but still, the fact that they had placed such high expectations on me was undeniable.

Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, too, harbored their own hopes.

They were already debating how they should introduce me to their close acquaintances after the tournament ended.

However, for me, there was something even more important.

Seo Mun-Hwarin.

I couldn't allow her to walk the path of the Black Lotus Sect in this lifetime.

I knew too well how much she had longed for a normal life, even in her final moments.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had left something behind—something that had traveled through time and still lived on inside me.

How could I possibly stand by and do nothing?

Even as I swung my sword in practice and circulated my qi, my mind churned endlessly with possibilities.

No matter what I did, I couldn't stop the inevitable meeting between Seo Mun-Hwarin and the Murim Alliance Leader.

Who was I to ask the Murim Alliance Leader to delay his arrival by a few days?

And I certainly couldn't stop Seo Mun-Hwarin herself.

I had already tested the waters by bringing up the topic indirectly.

Her response had been clear—she was willing to take the risk.

She saw this Dragon and Phoenix Gathering as her chance to forge a new path.

Like most martial artists, once she had made up her mind, there was no turning back.

Even if I revealed that I knew her true identity...

Even if I told her she would definitely be exposed...

Nothing would change.

Because she had already made peace with the possibility.

The goal was clear. The conditions were set.

There was little I could do.

To gain something, one must either wield overwhelming strength or sacrifice something else.

And so, I made my choice.

Perhaps it was fate.

My first opponent was Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Her white hair swayed in the wind as I gazed at her.

Then, in a quiet whisper, I sent a sound transmission directly to her.

“White-Haired Rakshasa, Seo Mun-Hwarin. Kidnap me.”

This was the best plan I could come up with.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

—*White-Haired Rakshasa, Seo Mun-Hwarin. Kidnap me.*

This was the best plan I could come up with.

I had no confidence in persuading Seo Mun-Hwarin. I also had no confidence in deceiving the Murim Alliance Leader.

So, the only thing left for me to do was to overshadow this entire situation with an even bigger issue.

What mattered most was that Seo Mun-Hwarin did not join the Black Lotus Sect—that, no matter the trials ahead, she would not give up and would instead live a proper life.

Of course, upon hearing my sound transmission, Seo Mun-Hwarin reacted as if I had just exposed her greatest secret.

“Hiccup!”

Halfway up the Battle stage, she suddenly let out a hiccup.

Her wide, trembling eyes quaked as if an earthquake had struck her soul, her lips opened and closed soundlessly, and her fingers twitched, itching to clamp my mouth shut before I could say anything else.

Anyone could see that she was utterly flustered. But, as a master who had reached the Flowering Stage, she quickly regained her composure.

Her expression smoothed out, and soon enough, her lips moved as she replied through sound transmission.

—W-What nonsense are you speaking of? This one no idea what you mean!

Oh?

So her face had calmed down, but her mind was still in complete chaos.

Outwardly, she maintained her indifferent stance on the Battle stage, performing a proper bow. Meanwhile, she continued to send sound transmissions at a rapid pace.

—I know everything. And by the way, not only did you respond through sound transmission, but you also referred to yourself as ‘This one’ instead of this humble one.

—Nngh?!

Seo Mun-Hwarin smacked her own lips as if trying to punish them for their betrayal.

Her abrupt action drew the attention of both the referee and the audience. Realizing her mistake, she hurriedly performed another bow, pretending nothing had happened.

After that, the Murim Alliance master serving as the referee began explaining the rules of the Battle.

I only half-listened, letting his words pass through one ear and out the other, while I focused on sound transmission once more.

Since I could no longer call her the Ironblood Hall Master, and she disliked the title White-Haired Rakshasa, I figured the safest choice would be to simply call her senior.

It was just a pseudonym, but after traveling together for so long, I had gotten used to calling her by name.

—Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin . I understand this must be overwhelming. But please, for the sake of the time we've spent traveling together, just listen to me for a moment.

—Why are you speaking so formally? It's creepy. And yes, I did slip up and call myself 'This One', but what does that have to do with this White-Haired Rakshasa nonsense? Sound transmission isn't a skill exclusive to peak-level masters, you know.

She rubbed her arms as if trying to shake off an unpleasant chill.

Since she had outright referred to herself as a demonic cultist while denying it at the same time, it was clear she planned to feign ignorance until the end.

Technically, she wasn't wrong—sound transmission required exceptional internal energy control rather than a high cultivation level.

But I had expected this much.

If I could have simply talked her into reason, I wouldn't have needed this elaborate plan.

Since persuasion wasn't an option, I had no choice but to set up a different strategy—one that involved me getting kidnapped.

—If you want to feign ignorance, so be it. But just know this: I am aware of why you entered the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

—My name is Seo-rin, not Seo Mun-Hwarin. And my only purpose here is to gain experience and make a name for myself.

—As I mentioned before, the Murim Alliance Leader is seated in the VIP section above us. He is probably already suspecting you.

—And why should that matter? I am not this Seo Mun-Hwarin person, so I have nothing to hide.

—You may believe you can conceal yourself, but you will fail. Your identity will be exposed to the entire world, and you'll be branded as a disgraceful fugitive with no place left to go.

—That's a bit harsh, don't you think?

She pouted slightly, looking rather dejected.

Now that I had made my point, I got to the real issue.

—That is why you must kidnap me.

—What?!

—Your cover is going to be blown anyway. But if you take me hostage and release me after some time, I can vouch for you. I can say that Seo Mun-Hwarin was a good person at heart.

—I told you, I am not Seo Mun-Hwarin. And besides, what difference would that make? A single person's claim won't overturn the entire murim's judgment.

—The murim as a whole? No. But the Tang Clan is a different matter.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had no intention of avoiding the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

Which meant she had no way to avoid the Murim Alliance Leader's scrutiny.

When her identity was revealed, people would undoubtedly react with shock and condemnation.

And if she kidnapped me—the Tang Clan's future son-in-law—it would only make things worse.

But what if I returned unharmed?

What if I claimed that Seo Mun-Hwarin had helped me rather than harmed me?

What if I testified that she truly wished to leave her past behind and start anew?

Other factions might not believe me, but the Tang Clan would.

Because I was already one of them.

The Tang Clan repaid both grace and grudges in full measure.

If I asked Tang Jincheon to give Seo Mun-Hwarin a chance, he might hesitate—but he wouldn't refuse outright.

Of course, at first, they would be wary of her. Even if they provided her with accommodations, they would keep a close eye on her.

But I knew the truth.

I knew that Seo Mun-Hwarin was not the villain that murim rumors made her out to be.

Given enough time, the Tang Clan would slowly come to accept her—just as they had accepted me and Seol Lihyang after we left the Ironblood Hall.

—So, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin . Kidnap me. Leave the rest to me.

The referee was almost finished explaining the rules.

The crowd's excitement over the first match of the tournament was building.

And the Murim Alliance Leader's suspicions were deepening.

It was time for a decision.

Seo Mun-Hwarin subtly shook her head—so faintly that only I could notice.

—I appreciate the thought, but I told you, I am not Seo Mun-Hwarin. I am Seorin.

...Is that so?

She said nothing more and simply assumed her stance.

Seeing her prepare to fight, I let out a bitter chuckle and sent one final sound transmission.

—But you will end up kidnapping me.

If she had agreed willingly, that would have been ideal...

But if she refused to cooperate, I had no choice but to force her hand.

I squared my stance, making sure she saw my movements clearly.

Left foot forward, knees slightly bent.

The key was to keep my soles pressed to the ground while lifting my heels just a fraction—allowing me to explode forward at a moment’s notice.

This stance had been adjusted to fit my style, incorporating elements of Ghost Shadow Steps—but its foundation was unmistakably Thunderclap Steps.

And if there was anyone who could recognize Thunderclap Steps, it was the person who had taught it to me—Seo Mun-Hwarin herself.

At first, she seemed uncertain. But then, her mouth fell open in shock.

“T-That’s...!”

The moment her stunned voice escaped, the match began.

Daaang!

I didn’t answer her.

Instead, I charged.

Kwaang!

The ceremonial gong rang loud enough for the audience to hear—

But an even louder boom erupted from beneath my feet.

A burst of internal energy propelled me forward like an explosive cannon shot.

And it didn't stop at just one step.

Kwaang! Kwaaang! Kwarung!

A series of internal energy bursts erupted beneath my feet.

It was Thunderclap Steps—or at least, something close to it.

The sound was a little dull, likely because it had been mixed with various other techniques.

Still, in terms of speed, it was nearly on par with the original Thunderclap Steps.

Four steps.

Just four steps were all I needed to cross the vast Battle stage and arrive before Seo Mun-Hwarin.

She still wore a dazed expression.

I took advantage of the moment, slashing upward with my sword, which had been hanging low at my side.

Sswaeeek!

The blade, now wrapped in a crimson sword aura, shot toward her neck at blinding speed.

But—

Tap.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, her hand cloaked in an even darker crimson internal energy, casually struck my sword with a single palm.

My trajectory was instantly thrown off-course.

She had used only the bare minimum amount of fist energy to block, effortlessly inserting her hand into the sword's path and deflecting it.

It was a blow that hadn't even required her full strength.

Of course, that was to be expected.

She was a Flowering Stage martial artist—the very wall I had failed to surpass.

I had never intended to win this fight in the first place.

Ever since I lost my cultivation and had to rebuild from scratch, I had known all too well that insight remains, even when power is stripped away.

So victory was never my goal in this Battle.

My purpose was simple—to show her what I had inherited from her.

That alone would be enough to force Seo Mun-Hwarin into kidnapping me.

“Where did you learn that footwork?!”

“You know exactly how to make me talk, don’t you?”

I smirked and began swinging my sword in earnest.

A downward slash. A diagonal cut. A horizontal sweep.

There was nothing particularly flashy about my movements.

No extravagant techniques, no overwhelming force—just an unbroken series of basic sword strikes.

Yet, each one was aimed precisely at her weak points. Each one followed the exact trajectory needed at the exact moment.

This nameless sword art, like Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, was an amalgamation of various sword techniques I had pieced together.

Ordinarily, such a patchwork style should have been crude and ineffective.

But thanks to my understanding—and Seo Mun-Hwarin's teachings—it had become something deadly.

Yes.

In a way, this was a sword forged from everything I had learned from her.

From the skills she had imparted to me.

From the battles I had fought for her vengeance.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's expression grew more and more conflicted as she deflected each of my strikes.

“This sword... Who taught you this?!”

“I can't say.”

I shook my head slightly and pushed my internal energy even further, activating Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

The sword aura wrapped around my blade surged, expanding in size and unleashing a ferocious presence.

At the same time, I could no longer suppress the killing intent embedded within the technique.

A chilling aura, honed through countless battles and deaths.

Of course, for someone like Tang Sowol or Seol Lihyang—or Seo Mun-Hwarin—this level of killing intent was no threat.

It wasn't about martial prowess.

It was simply that they knew why I had come to wield such an aura.

Still, for Seo Mun-Hwarin, the fact that I could wield restrained killing intent rather than raw, unhinged bloodlust seemed to strike a different chord.

“...You've gone this far?”

Muttering under her breath, she reached out once more.

Just as before, she aimed a fist at my sword path.

But this time, something changed.

Even before our weapons physically clashed, our respective sword aura and fist aura met mid-air.

And at that moment—

Seo Mun-Hwarin's crimson fist aura trembled, then took on a distinct form.

—*Qi Manifestation.*

A technique that only those who had reached the Flowering Stage could wield.

A symbol of absolute martial dominance.

Her manifested qi did not deflect my sword.

It pulled it in instead.

I didn't resist.

Allowing myself to be drawn in, I stepped closer.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, her face still complicated, pressed a finger against my pressure point.

Tuk.

“...It seems you got your way in the end. Now, close your eyes for a moment.”

A surge of internal energy sealed some of my meridians.

My eyelids grew heavy against my will.

I could have resisted if I truly wanted to—but I didn't.

My vision blurred.

In the distance, I saw the Murim Alliance Leader abruptly rising from his seat.

I saw Seol Lihyang attempting to rush onto the Battle stage, only for Tang Sowol to stop her.

Ah.

I had told Tang Sowol about my plan, but I had forgotten to inform Seol Lihyang.

Well, she'd figure it out soon enough.

With that last thought, my vision faded into darkness.