

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 131-140

## I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Willpower is single-minded thought.

I could roughly grasp what that meant in my head.

Fundamentally, Willpower is a power that makes the impossible possible. However, its direction varies depending on the individual, and it is heavily influenced by the Heartscape of the martial artist.

There was a time before my regression when multiple masters who had reached the Flowering Stage gathered their strength. While the fact that they were still defeated by the Heavenly Demon was significant, what mattered now was that I had, from a distance, been able to witness the martial arts of those at the Flowering Stage.

The Abbot of Shaolin, symbolizing the Buddha's compassion, was simply solid, unwavering, and his presence reached the very edge of one's perception.

The Lord of the Black Lotus Sect, wielding two spears of varying lengths, unceasingly pressured and overwhelmed his opponent. From start to finish, one could feel the Path of Tyranny—the desire to dominate.

The Murim Alliance Leader, having risen from the Beggar's Sect, displayed a determined, unyielding palm technique that conveyed his resolve to stake everything in the face of injustice.

Other Flowering Stage masters each revealed their own supreme techniques.

I couldn't say I fully understood each of their martial arts, having only seen them once or twice, nor could I make comparisons. But what they represented came through clearly.

The Abbot of Shaolin sought to become a Buddha.

The Black Lotus Lord sought to become a tyrant above all others.

The Murim Alliance Leader simply pursued righteousness.

Surely, these are what Seo Mun-Hwarin meant when she spoke of Willpower and single-minded thought. In other words, it is the destiny that a martial artist strives to fulfill over their entire life.

Then what is it that I seek to accomplish?

At first, I swung my sword because I was hungry. But at some point, even when I was no longer hungry, I continued to swing it.

To eat better food, to live in a better house, to be admired by more people.

And because I simply liked the sword.

But even that didn't last long—because vengeance began to mix into my reason for wielding the sword.

During the peak of the Heavenly Demon's invasion, I fought to survive. Yet, in the final moment—when I saw Tang Sowol fall—my sword once again carried the flames of revenge.

If I had to choose one thing that defined my sword, it would be vengeance...

But if asked whether that's something worth pursuing for a lifetime, I would hesitate to say yes.

After all, I've already failed once, and now I'm making up for it through regression. I even defeated the Lord of the Black Sky Sword Sect before he became the Black Sky Sword Emperor.

In my previous life, maybe. But in this life, vengeance is no longer a lifelong goal.

"It's difficult."

The sparring with Seo Mun-Hwarin had lasted until sunset. During that time, I had managed to reproduce a few sword strikes with faint traces of Willpower, but that sensation still felt far off.

As I loosened my increasingly sore shoulders and muttered to myself, Seo Mun-Hwarin chuckled and said,

"That's only natural. Awakening one's Willpower is akin to reflecting on oneself and redefining who one is. For people like you and me, it can't be easy."

“What do you mean by people like ‘you and me’?”

“Obviously, I mean martial artists of the Unorthodox Faction.”

“I may not look like it, but I’m from the Orthodox Faction.”

“That’s only your affiliation. Of all the martial artists I’ve seen, you’re the second most unorthodox.”

Was it that bad?

I asked, slightly sarcastic.

“Then who’s the first?”

“Who else? The Black Lotus Lord.”

“Mm. I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

If a martial artist who uses martial arts for personal gain is to be called 'unorthodox', then none could rival the Black Lotus Lord—at least in this era.

I nodded a few times and sheathed my sword.

“Still, being in this position makes me understand why so few high-ranking unorthodox martial artists reach the Flowering Stage.”

“Indeed. People say it’s because they constantly fight among themselves, or that their martial arts aren’t preserved and easily fade—but that alone isn’t the reason. In fact, proportionally speaking, the Unorthodox Faction has more experts.”

That’s true. The Orthodox Faction often accepts disciples even if they lack talent, whereas in the Unorthodox Faction, someone dies almost every day...

The biggest difference comes from real combat experience.

Orthodox martial artists are only allowed to enter the murim world after they've become decently strong, sometimes even under the grand title of “First Step into Murim.”

But Unorthodox martial artists are always thrown right into the heart of the murim.

They face far more life-and-death situations, and if they survive, they inevitably grow stronger faster.

Unorthodox martial arts also tend to focus on rapid strength gain.

That's why, at the same level of cultivation, unorthodox martial artists are generally stronger in real fights than those of the orthodox side.

Even among the Five Supreme Clans and the Nine Great Sects, most individuals barely measure up by comparison.

Their true strength lies in their massive organizations.

So, despite the Orthodox Faction having superior scale and cohesion, the balance of power between Orthodoxy and Unorthodoxy is roughly maintained.

This remains true even at the Flowering Stage—the realm beyond mere mastery, where one is considered an absolute master. The cause is slightly different, though.

Even at the same cultivation level, unorthodox Flowering Stage masters are usually stronger in terms of pure combat power.

The Black Lotus Lord is one of the youngest among the Flowering Stage, yet is evaluated as being among the strongest.

But the numbers tell a different story.

While many unorthodox martial artists die young, very few of them ever break through to the Flowering Stage.

Up until now, I thought it was due to the impurities in their internal energy, their vulnerability to mental deviation, or that orthodox techniques—built on strong fundamentals—were more suited for reaching greater heights.

But now that I've faced it myself, I understand.

Those were just excuses added after the fact.

Even if one's internal energy is impure, there are ways to compensate. My Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, for example, uses killing intent to balance it.

Vulnerable to deviation? That only happens when one recklessly reaches for the next realm without qualification. Those who lose control were never meant to ascend in the first place.

And while a strong foundation is certainly important, it's no guarantee.

If it were, only those born into great martial families would reach the top, and yet, how many nameless individuals have risen to the highest heights? How many masters spent their whole lives on fundamentals and still died in mediocrity?

If you bring talent into the discussion, then the argument ends there—some are born to reach the Flowering Stage, others are not.

So why is it that, despite being stronger on average, unorthodox martial artists struggle to reach the Flowering Stage?

The answer is simpler. And more fundamental.

“This is no different from the path of ascetic cultivation.”

“They say that, long ago, people became immortals through martial arts. I think that’s an exaggeration, but perhaps it’s not entirely baseless.”

Reaching the Flowering Stage through Willpower requires introspection and endless refinement.

Such open-ended cultivation is foreign to most unorthodox martial artists, who are preoccupied with survival and wealth.

But for orthodox martial artists, it’s familiar.

“To be honest, it’s a little overwhelming.”

“That’s how walls are. Once you get past them, sometimes they weren’t that daunting after all.”

“You told me not to rush, not to compromise, and to struggle and seek with intensity, right?”

“Indeed. I let go of myself and endured over ten years of contemplation to reach my current level. Rushing won’t get you anywhere.”

“Mm. Considering your age, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, isn’t it more like nearly twenty years? ...Ah, for the record, I’m eighteen.”

“Don’t say that out loud!”

Suddenly struck by the cruelty of reality, Seo Mun-Hwarin glared and began pounding my shoulder with clenched fists.

Unlike during the spar, they held no real strength—more like playful taps.

I accepted the blows and nodded.

“Understood. Actually, it’s a good thing. I have more urgent matters right now anyway, so it’s a good time to slow down and focus on training as you advised.”

“And what do you mean by ‘more urgent matters’? Why do you need to train leisurely?”

“Well... compared to my insight, my internal energy and body are a bit lacking.”

“...?”

“I don’t have enough internal energy to maintain sword flame for long, and my body’s so frail that just a few repetitions of movements under Divine Sword Unity leave me exhausted.”

“Huh?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked rapidly in disbelief.

But it was true. Seol Lihyang had suffered during her fight with the Blood Flame Sword Demon due to depleted stamina and the inability to suppress her Pure Yin Physique’s energy.

Meanwhile, I had simply collapsed from pure exhaustion.

“Well, external arts are a bit lacking, but that’s not a huge concern. As long as I keep training, they’ll catch up. More importantly, I haven’t stopped growing yet.”

“You mean height?!”

“Not as much as before, but a little, yes.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin stared up at me with silent envy.

Come to think of it, she was shorter than even Seol Lihyang. Maybe she'd been a little taller before her rejuvenation, but probably not by much.

“The real issue is my internal energy. I was originally planning to supplement it with the Summoning Pill, the prize from the Dragon and Phoenix Summit... but as you know, I was disqualified.”

“S-Sorry...”

“It's not your fault, Senior. Besides, Seol Lihyang arranged for me to receive a special elixir from the Yeon Clan Head, and I'm getting one from Clan Head Paeng too, so it'll be resolved soon.”

“But neither of them has even arrived yet. What are you talking about?”

“They’ve already promised me. If they have any pride, they’ll honor it.”

“Your compatibility with Hyang is almost too perfect... It’s just unfortunate that it’s in such bandit-like ways.”

I shrugged at Seo Mun-Hwarin’s grumbling and headed out of the training hall.

On the way, I told to bring Seo Mun-Hwarin’s dinner tray to my room instead of hers, as we’d be eating together tonight.

Unlike Seo Mun-Hwarin, who still looked fresh and dry, I had gone all out in our sparring, so I quickly washed up and changed clothes before returning to my room.

My head had been full of martial arts all day—but the moment I saw the scene before me, all thoughts vanished.

Understandably so, since Tang Sowol was pinning Seol Lihyang to the floor, sitting on top of her with both knees pressing down on her arms, completely restraining her.

“Hehe... You’re not getting away this time.”

“Let—let me go, Sister Tang!”

“Nope. You’re the one who kept running, so this is your fault.”

Tang Sowol grinned with oddly ragged breath, and I couldn’t help but blurt out—

“What the hell are you two doing? In my room?”

At my voice, Tang Sowol jerked her head toward me, looked between herself and the pinned Seol Liyang, then quickly shook her head.

“P-Please wait! I can explain everything!”

A line I’d heard many times before.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

After sparring to my heart's content, receiving guidance from Seo Mun-Hwarin, and even, albeit dazedly, grasping the thread of Willpower, I had been in a rather good mood.

That is, until I entered my room—only to find Tang Sowol, panting heavily, pinning Seol Lihyang beneath her.

“What are you two doing? In my room...?”

“P-Please listen to me for a moment! I can explain everything!”

“...Is that so? Is that how it is?”

“W-Why do you sound convinced?! You're making me seem like some kind of weirdo!”

Tang Sowol practically shrieked as she jumped to her feet and strode over to me, grabbing my hand.

“Hyang kept running away, so I had no choice!”

“So when someone runs, you just pounce on them... then what happens if I run away now?”

“I’d collapse on the floor and cry my eyes out.”

“Well, that would be a problem.”

With a faint chuckle, I sat down on the edge of the bed. I then reached out and gave the cheek of Seol Lihyang—who still looked dazedly at her own arm—a gentle tug.

**Streetch.**

“W-What was that for?!”

“Jealousy.”

“Why take it out on me?”

“Well, I can’t exactly pull Tang Sowol’s cheek, can I?”

I looked over at Tang Sowol. She was in the middle of dragging in Seo Mun-Hwarin, who seemed to be debating whether to stay or leave.

After a brief hesitation, Tang Sowol tightly closed her eyes and stuck her face forward.

“I’m ready now. A little’s fine!”

I stared at her determined expression, then slowly extended my hand and—

**Boop.**

I grabbed her nose instead of her cheek.

“Ehh??”

Tang Sowol looked confused, speaking in a nasal tone. I simply shrugged and said,

“Isn’t it more fun to grab something unexpected? Besides, I never thought anything actually happened. I’m sure there’s a story—just like there was with me.”

“Y-Yes! That’s right! I really had no choice but to take her down forcefully!”

I looked over at Seol Lihyang again. She seemed a bit guilty, shrinking her neck and glancing at us with a sidelong gaze.

“So there was something. Now I’m honestly curious—what exactly happened?”

“Well...”

Tang Sowol trailed off and began explaining what had happened earlier today.

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While I was sparring with Seo Mun-Hwarin, as expected, Tang Sowol had been chasing down Seol Lihyang, who had been avoiding us lately.

She went to Lihyang's room, searched around places she might visit, and even asked the servants where she might be hiding. Eventually, she found her in a surprising place—near the old training hall of the Yeon Clan.

It was the old hall from the days when the clan specialized in jiangshi techniques, with a completely different structure from the current martial training ground.

Though now closed off, it still bore the traces of the Yeon Clan, and so outsiders were not permitted entry.

“She was sitting alone in a corner not far from the hall. Just quietly, with a troubled-looking servant beside her.”

“What's that about...?”

I turned to look at Seol Lihyang, who averted her gaze and spoke, looking into empty air.

“I didn't realize it when my body wasn't normal, but once I got better, I could tell—circulating internal energy became unbelievably easier.”

With that, she lifted the whip from her waist. It shimmered with frost-white qi as if covered in ice, and faint white haze rose from its surface.

Though the output was weak, the flow of sword qi was stable. It wasn't forced—she had clearly reached Peak Stage.

“I see. So the reason you've been avoiding us, and seeking places filled with demonic aura—or more precisely, yin qi—was to sort through your enlightenment. But if that was the case, why didn't you just tell us? I spent the whole day sparring with Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin for the same reason.”

I nodded with admiration.

I already knew, better than anyone, how talented Seol Lihyang was, even in my past life.

With the right martial arts and the right environment—and though it was a bit reckless, she had gone through an experience that shattered her limits—it wasn't surprising she had broken through the Peak Stage barrier so suddenly.

Even before, she had reached Peak Stage at a young age using self-taught martial arts and a half-finished cultivation technique focused only on inflating her internal energy.

However, her next words caught me off guard.

“No? I just... woke up and could do it. I was drawn to that place because of the yin qi and went there to cultivate, but I had already sorted through my enlightenment by then.”

Back in my past life, when I first reached Peak Stage and awakened sword qi, I spent three sleepless days and nights swinging my sword nonstop, barely eating, in an attempt to internalize the feeling before it disappeared from my fingertips.

That allowed me to reach a fully realized Peak Stage quickly—but it seemed Liyang didn’t even need to go through that.

Her natural constitution really was something else. Feeling a surge of bitter jealousy, I pinched her other cheek—a little harder this time.

**Streetch.**

“Ow! What—what was that for?!”

“You just piss me off.”

“You—you’re saying that?!”

Seol Lihyang stared at me in disbelief. I just shrugged and steered the conversation back on track.

“If it wasn’t to sort out your enlightenment, then why were you avoiding us?”

“I needed time to sort out... something else.”

I didn’t need her to say it—I could guess.

Maybe she thought she hadn’t been obvious, but since the Dragon and Phoenix Summit, Seol Lihyang had been more openly showing her feelings toward me.

Considering the time we spent apart after the ship flipped and I was separated from the others, and everything that happened after I defeated the Blood Flame Sword Demon...

She was probably feeling exposed—maybe even frightened by how obvious her feelings had become.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who thought that. Sitting beside me, Tang Sowol spoke in a serious tone.

“Hyang, I—”

“No.”

She was cut off immediately by Seol Lihyang.

Lihyang shook her head, turned to face Tang Sowol directly, and said,

“I can already guess what you want to say. You've hinted at it before, even if you never said it outright.”

She added,

“But what I want to say is a little different.”

Then she summoned a chilling cold over her palm.

“When I was lying there, sorting out my enlightenment—I thought about what pushed me to that point. And the answer was simple.”

She clenched her fist, and the swirling cold air gathered all at once. Then she turned to face me.

“It was when I saw Cheon Hwi being overwhelmed by the Blood Flame Sword Demon. I suddenly thought... he might die.”

A faint gleam flickered in her eyes—sharp like a blade, cold like a winter wind.

It was the look I knew well from the Demonic Sound Witch.

“I was scared of losing Cheon Hwi. Much more than I was afraid of dying myself.”

Though it wasn't directed at anyone, the sincerity behind her words was tinged with something close to killing intent. Everyone in the room went still.

Now I understood.

Why Seol Lihyang had gained enlightenment so suddenly. Why her atmosphere had become more like it was in the past life.

Those who have faced the deepest depths of life often develop a peculiar intensity, a kind of aura of despair.

And apparently, I occupied a larger place in her life than I'd thought.

As the tense atmosphere lingered, Seol Lihyang softened her expression and gave an awkward smile.

“Hehe... Once I realized that, it kind of scared me. I felt like I had to step back and sort out my thoughts, at least once.”

“So while Sowol and I were taking turns looking for you, you were desperately running away—because she decided to drag you back by force this time.”

“Yeah. I got strong enough that unless Sister Tang used her full power, she couldn't catch me. What you saw earlier was me getting caught after a long chase.”

Seol Lihyang gave a self-deprecating shrug and smile.

Before her fight with the Blood Flame Sword Demon—back when she captured a demonic cultist and still hesitated, unsure if she could kill...

That same girl had now been willing to risk her life, without hesitation, to kill someone.

The sudden depth of her emotions probably frightened even herself, prompting her to take some space.

For her, I wasn't the only one. Tang Sowol was also someone who had saved her.

Tang Sowol, who had been quietly listening, finally opened her mouth in a low voice.

“Since Hyang told her story, I'll share mine too... just briefly.”

“Sister Tang's...?”

Seol Lihyang looked confused, but Tang Sowol seemed more nervous than anyone. She looked to me for reassurance, then took a deep breath and said, with a serious face—

“The truth is... I may not be able to bear children.”

“Wait. I thought we already talked about this.”

Three years ago, even before I became Tang Sowol’s fiancé, I had shared with her a special chant—a Secret Art—created by the Poison Queen in her previous life and verified by Tang Jincheon in this one.

A technique meant to mitigate the effects of the Poison Spirit Constitution, which worsens fertility as one’s martial cultivation grows and internal poison intensifies.

At my words, Tang Sowol flinched like a child caught hiding something and spoke cautiously.

“I didn’t tell you before, but... there’s been a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“It was fine at first. But as I advanced and mastered the chant, I started feeling... something was off.”

“That’s impossible.”

That chant had been designed by no one other than Tang Sowol herself, tailored to her own body. It shouldn’t be wrong.

But her next words made it all make sense.

“After I absorbed the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass, the poison inside me grew much stronger. The chant alone can’t control it anymore...”

“Ah.”

The chant was fine. But unlike in her past life, this Tang Sowol had absorbed the Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass—a rare and potent herb potent enough to alter the very nature of her condition.

Even if she fully mastered the chant, it might not be enough to suppress the side effects.

Tang Sowol bit her lip and sighed.

“It’s not like I don’t want to monopolize my fiancé. But there’s already someone in his heart—even if she’s no longer in this world. And with my condition unresolved, how could I greedily cling to him without any plan?”

“That’s...”

“Thankfully, Hyang is a very good person. That’s why I mentioned all this to you before.”

So that’s what it was. I’d assumed the infertility issue had been resolved.

Knowing how much it bothered her, I was lost for words—but before I could say anything, Tang Sowol acted first.

She got up, sat down in front of Seol Lihyang, and gently took her hands.

They didn't exchange any words. Only small, soft gestures and eye contact passed between them.

As the atmosphere grew unexpectedly tender, I found myself wondering if I should reach out and join their hands too—but then—

“I-I have nothing to do with any of this...!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had unintentionally heard a rather delicate conversation, looked like she was about to cry.

“Why am I even in this room...?”

She looked like she wanted to go back to her own room. But it was too late—she'd already heard everything.

I shrugged and whispered quietly.

“I'll let you go after dinner.”

“...!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s eyes filled with betrayal.

Three days after Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang made up—

The long-awaited Yeon Clan Head and Paeng Clan Head finally arrived.

Even Tang Jincheon, who now looked ten years older, had come with them.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

The Jinju Yeon Clan, which had been under a subtle tension for some time, was finally thrown into chaos.

Not because Yeon Ga-hye, who had vanished without a word, had returned.

Not even because she had returned after exposing a plot by the Demonic Cult.

And certainly not because she had become part of the group that defeated a major figure like the Bloodflame Fist Demon.

“What?! A marriage with that simple brute’s son from the Peng Clan?!”

“Ha! What’s so wrong with my son, huh?! But, Woojin... what you just said—was that true?!”

No, the real cause was that the two masters at the Flowering Stage, who had been quietly measuring each other, finally began to growl openly.

Of course, there were people around, and it wasn’t something worth a real fight, so neither drew weapons nor released their auras.

The atmosphere, however, was undeniably grim.

Masters who’ve reached the Flowering Stage often emanate a certain presence reflective of their lifelong pursuits.

What the people nearby saw now felt less like an argument and more like a confrontation between a massive tiger and a ghost wreathed in terrifying Demonic Aura.

Normally, fear would be the natural response.

And yet, even amid that tension, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye stood there tightly holding hands.

Those two... they really were something else. Their courage and resolve were far from ordinary.

Well, I guess we weren't that different either.

“So? Can you explain what happened, son-in-law?”

It wasn't animosity per se. Just a bit of pent-up frustration that had spilled out with a bit of force.

Understandable. His only daughter nearly died out there, and the son-in-law who saved her is constantly sticking his neck into danger.

Even a supreme master at the Flowering Stage is still human. He has feelings.

Sometimes, those feelings get the better of you.

Still, even that small burst of emotion was enough to make it feel like I'd stuck my head into the fanged jaws of a venomous snake.

Not that it works on me. After all, even the Heavenly Demon, hailed as the greatest of all, hadn't drawn his sword on me.

Though, to be fair, he did die immediately afterward.

"I believe there's been a misunderstanding, Father-in-law. It wasn't me who ran away, but Tang Sowol. I was merely dragged into it."

"Brother Cheon?!"

So no, I wasn't scared or running from Tang Jincheon's anger.

I just couldn't bring myself to lie to my father-in-law as his son-in-law. I had to tell the truth.

“You’ve betrayed me, Brother Cheon...!”

“Betrayal? That’s a harsh word. How could I lie to Father-in-law, who was so worried and has helped us so much behind the scenes? Certainly not just because he said through sound transmission that he’d go easy on us if we were honest.”

“Father?! You told me the same thing via sound transmission! What kind of cross-examination is this...?!”

Tang Sowol covered her mouth with a slightly shocked expression.

But having watched her closely both before and after regression, I knew.

She was faking that surprise. She was trying to soften her father’s anger, even if just a little.

Though, maybe “scheming” isn’t the right word.

She probably picked up on my intent as soon as I spoke. So, “spontaneous teamwork” might be more accurate.

But we overlooked one thing.

No matter how much time I'd spent with Tang Sowol over multiple lives, Tang Jincheon had been her family for over twenty years—since she was a baby.

Our little trick was seen through instantly.

“Hah! So you think you can smooth things over like this? They look busy over there, so let's have our talk separately. This isn't something others need to hear.”

Tang Sowol and I clamped our mouths shut like mute idiots. And then—

“T-then we'll excuse ourselves for a bit, Clan Head.”

“Kuheum. Yes, that's best. Even family needs time to catch up.”

Taking the opportunity, Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin tried to sneak out quietly.

Naturally, I wasn't about to let just the two of them get away.

“Father-in-law. Seol Lihyang was instrumental in helping us defeat the Bloodflame Fist Demon.”

“And Sister Harin stayed with me while I was separated from Brother Cheon. She protected me and helped wipe out the remaining Demonic Cult forces in Hubei. No matter what is discussed, both of them played vital roles.”

Whether she read my mind or not, Tang Sowol backed me up again, perfectly in sync.

And the response was... dramatic.

“Cheon Hwi, you...!”

“A-again, you’ve...!”

Seol Lihyang trembled from the sting of betrayal, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, clearly still bitter, twitched from being dragged into another serious conversation.

That's right. You think you can slip away alone? No way. We're all going to be uncomfortable together now.

As Sowol and I exchanged satisfied looks, we suddenly heard a deep sigh.

“Fine. Everyone, just come along.”

For some reason, his voice was softer now, less sharp than earlier.

I didn't know why, but I was grateful for it.

The place Tang Jincheon led us to was... my room.

No special reason—my room had somehow become a sort of communal area.

The guest room given to me by the Yeon Clan was large enough for everyone.

So Tang Jincheon sat in the center, and the others gathered before him like children facing a stern elder.

Then he asked with genuine confusion:

“The White-Haired Rakshasa... no, why are you sitting there, Lady Seo Mun?”

“Uh... the flow of the conversation?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin awkwardly scratched her head and scooted over to the side.

Well, it made some sense. They’re both from powerful lineages and both Flowering Stage martial artists.

Though Seo Mun’s clan had fallen, she was once the head of a thriving house.

“Really, why were you sitting there, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

As I asked, honestly puzzled, she waved her arms in frustration.

“It’s because you keep treating me like a peer! The kids from the Peng and Yeon Clans show me proper respect, but you...!”

“That’s only because if we treated you like an actual elder, you’d get depressed.”

“Kuh...!?”

Flinching like I’d struck a nerve, she lowered her flailing arms quietly.

Well, I suppose that’s one of the side effects of Rejuvenation.

Even if I haven’t experienced it, everyone knows it messes with your self-image.

Tang Jincheon, understanding this, brushed it aside and finally spoke up.

“Anyway, I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“It was pure luck.”

“No. That’s not your usual humility talking—it really was luck. Don’t forget that.”

He looked over me and Seol Lihyang, checking carefully.

After confirming that neither of us had major injuries, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Huuu. There’s so much I wanted to say to you and Sowol. I even debated for a while what to bring up first...But in the end, the first question was obvious.”

“What is it?”

“Please, go ahead, Father.”

“Why did you run away in the first place? Did you think I wouldn’t approve? If you’d told me, I wouldn’t have stopped you. I had to come up with excuses to tell the Peng and Yeon clan heads... do you know how hard that was?”

A voice tinged with disappointment and frustration.

From the way he glanced to the side, he was probably thinking, “You brought Seo Mun-Hwarin but kept it secret from me?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin shot a sharp look at us, but... we had our reasons.

“Father-in-law. Actually, it wasn’t that we decided to sneak off without telling anyone after coincidentally hearing about the Demonic Cult from Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye at the Yongbong Gathering...”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember the strange medicinal incidents in Hubei you mentioned? They bothered me. So we kidnapped the two and interrogated them.”

“Did you just say... kidnapped?”

“The information we got turned out to be extremely dangerous. And we learned the cult was already targeting Woojin and Ga-hye. We had to act fast and discreetly.”

“Then you could’ve just discreetly and quickly told me.”

“You’re too well-known, Father-in-law. Plus, you already helped stop one of their plots with Hao Sect’s help. They probably got suspicious.”

“You could’ve just been honest.”

“Honestly? We figured you wouldn’t give permission since we always cause trouble every time we leave.”

“You damned son-in-law.”

“Oh, and the whole plan to leave a letter and sneak out while calling it a ‘runaway’—that was Tang Sowol’s idea.”

“You damned daughter.”

Should he hit us both or not? In the end, Tang Jincheon could only let out yet another deep sigh.

“Huuu... well, I understand why you did it now. No one expected you to encounter the Bloodflame Fist Demon.”

“Actually, about that—I have something to share.”

“More important than how you beat him?”

Both you and Lady Seol feel like your presence has changed significantly.”

“That’s important too, but this is about something we found after defeating him.”

I stopped speaking and took out the letter from the Bloodflame Fist Demon, which I’d kept carefully tucked away.

Tang Jincheon read it slowly, his expression hardening as he went, until eventually, he became expressionless.

The pressure in the air grew heavy—far stronger than before.

And then, letting his killing intent flow freely, he spoke.

“Is this letter real? Are they really turning people into man-eating ghosts?”

“We believe it’s true.”

“This is escalating quickly. I’ll stop by Wuhuan again on my way back to Sichuan and meet the Alliance Leader.”

“Since you’ll already be in Wuhuan, would you mind stopping by Anhui before heading to Sichuan?”

“Why Anhui, all of a sudden?”

“I made a promise to have a sparring match with the Young Lord of the Namgung Clan.”

“If there’s no set date, can’t it wait?”

“Well, actually...”

Before I could answer, Seo Mun-Hwarin spoke up first.

“Poison King. From what I’ve seen, Hwi needs broader exposure to sword techniques right now.”

“Sword experience, you say?”

“Yes. The Tang Clan is a fine house with its own swordsmanship, and I’m sure they’ve trained him well, but...

You and I are not swordsmen.”

She continued with a somewhat regretful tone.

“I offered to teach him the Seo Mun Clan’s techniques, but he declined. So he should at least duel another swordsman. That way, the willpower he just awakened can grow sharper and stronger.”

“Did you say willpower?”

“He’s found the beginning of it. Though he can’t fully control it yet…”

“I only felt his presence get a bit stronger.”

“You know better than anyone that your son-in-law isn’t someone who can be judged by appearances. His internal energy is still unstable, so you probably missed it.”

Tang Jincheon looked at me, eyes filled with awe, surprise, and a touch of guilt.

I smiled and shook my head.

“Even if there’s still more to grow, the inner energy problem will be resolved soon.”

“Most Tang Clan elixirs contain poison. They’d be dangerous for you.”

“Which is why I arranged to receive them from the Peng and Yeon Clans.”

“???”

As Tang Jincheon blinked in confusion, I added proudly:

“As thanks for saving their lives, Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye promised to request elixirs on my behalf from their clan heads. Since I’m technically their savior, they’ll probably oblige.”

“Hmm. I understand now. So you're saying... you kidnapped people, then saved them, and now you’re getting elixirs in return?”

“You make it sound like I’m some vicious criminal...”

Tang Jincheon finally relaxed, letting out a laugh as he raised the corners of his lips.

“I was joking.”

It was a joke, right?

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

It had been four days since the heads of the Yeon and Peng Clans returned.

At first, the two of them acted like they were just itching to fight, and the atmosphere around them had been nothing short of bloodthirsty.

But once they learned of the Demonic Cult's plan targeting all of Hubei Province, and how Peng Woojin had risked his life to protect Yeon Ga-hye—escaping with only an injured arm—their attitudes started to change.

They still bickered, but it no longer had the sting of real hostility.

In that context, the two clan heads summoning me and Seol Lihyang separately was likely because the situation between Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye had reached a resolution.

Their eyes, now calm and composed, were different from when we first met. Not cold—on the contrary, their gazes now held clear friendliness and curiosity.

In fact, when looking at me, there was even a bit of admiration.

“Honestly, when Woojin first told me, I thought he might be exaggerating a bit... but now, I’m a little jealous of the Poison King.”

“Ha! It’s not that your son is lacking, it’s just that Young Hero Cheon is exceptional. Why are you getting so sensitive about your own son?”

“Because, unlike some people’s sons, he’s a well-mannered young man. And besides, just as he’s your son, he’s my future son-in-law.”

“Ga-hye also turned out to be a very kind and well-raised child—unlike someone else’s daughter.”

“Of course she is. She’s my daughter, after all.”

Clan Head Peng let out a long sigh with a face that said he had a lot to say but was holding back.

It seemed the marriage between Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye was being resolved in a positive direction.

Well, considering the various circumstances and conditions, forcing them apart would have been a poor choice.

After all, while the Peng and Yeon Clans were busy feuding, the Demonic Cult tried to use that opportunity to wreak havoc in Hubei.

For the sake of justice—which the orthodox sects treasure so highly—letting go of old grudges and joining hands was the wise move.

And Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye now had a history of running away from home together (which, well, Tang Sowol and I may have encouraged—secretly).

On top of that, the fact that the two of them had already “done everything” had started to circulate quietly.

Given all that, uniting them was the best choice for both them and their clans.

Just as I felt quietly proud of how differently things had gone compared to my past life, Clan Head Peng turned toward us.

“We’ve gone on long enough. The reason we called you two here is to thank you.”

“Thanks to you, both my daughter and Yeon Ga-hye avoided great misfortune. As a father, and as a clan head, I bow my head in gratitude.”

With that, Clan Head Peng bowed deeply. Clan Head Yeon followed a moment later.

For a martial master at the Flowering Stage, and a leader of a powerful clan, bowing to someone not yet even in his twenties was no small gesture.

Even Seol Lihyang, unfamiliar with the customs of Murim, looked flustered and quickly bowed in return, her face showing the weight of the moment.

“N-no, really! If we’d known and didn’t act, that’d be different—but once we knew, of course we had to do something. And honestly, we were just really lucky this time...”

“Exactly. If you continue like this, we’ll feel too burdened. Please raise your heads.”

As I bowed as well, the two clan heads finally lifted their heads.

“Then let’s end the sappy part here.”

“What do you mean ‘sappy’? You’re trying to gloss over proper etiquette again. This is exactly why people think the Hubei Peng Clan is so crude.”

“And yet they also say we’re refreshingly bold. Anyway, in this case, I just thought showing our gratitude in another way would be more appropriate. You stubborn Yeon bastard.”

“Ah, right. That.”

Nodding, Clan Head Yeon pulled out a wooden case from his sleeve.

“From what my daughter told me, your martial techniques are excellent, but your inner energy is lacking, making it difficult to fully spread your wings. I also heard you’ve learned a form of Yin-based Qi cultivation, which has some parallels with the Yeon Clan’s techniques. So I prepared this.”

He opened the wooden case slowly, and immediately, a chilling energy poured out from within.

“Dark Spirit Yin Pill. An elixir made to enhance Yin energy and guide Demonic Aura into the dantian.”

“Wow...”

As if drawn to it, Seol Lihyang stared blankly at the dark violet pill.

Clan Head Yeon, with a proud smile, pushed the box toward us.

“As you likely know, most of the Yeon Clan’s martial arts are based on demonic energy—remnants from our past days of using jiangshi techniques. But absorbing demonic energy into a living body is difficult. That’s why this pill was created—to prepare the body before practicing our core martial arts. I thought it’d be perfect for a young lady like yourself who just reached the Peak Stage.”

“Tsk tsk. He talks like it’s just a basic body-prep elixir, but that’s a rare pill usually reserved only for direct bloodline training. If he had one more child, he probably wouldn’t have had a spare.”

At Clan Head Peng’s comment, Seol Lihyang’s dazed eyes refocused.

“Huh?! Is it really okay for me to accept something that valuable...?”

“Of course. You’ve more than earned it. Unfortunately, most of the Yeon Clan’s elixirs are infused with Yin or Demonic energy, so we couldn’t find one suitable for Young Hero Cheon. Instead, we recently captured a spiritual creature—one that uses an extremely potent poison. So we’ve brought the elixir from that.”

He handed me a different wooden case—larger, heavier, and tightly sealed, much more secure than the box with the Dark Spirit Yin Pill.

From the way it was sealed, it was clear this was a pill so toxic that just exposing it to air could cause poisoning.

Even if I couldn’t use it myself, it would be incredibly valuable for Tang Sowol and the Tang Clan’s research.

“Thank you. While spiritual centipedes appear from time to time, it’s rare to find one with a toxic core, and even rarer for it to be refined into an elixir. Father-in-law will be pleased.”

“We owe the Poison King quite a bit for this incident. I’m glad it’ll be appreciated.”

Clan Head Yeon smiled warmly.

I never thought Tang Jincheon's behind-the-scenes efforts to keep things smooth would pay off like this.

I'd originally planned to give it to him directly, but now I'll pass it to him quietly instead.

He can either use it for research or prepare it himself and give it to Sowol later.

Since he's had a rough time with all of this, I should give him a moment to save face now and then.

As I nodded inwardly, Clan Head Peng smirked and spoke.

"Don't look so disappointed. What I brought is specifically for the Blood Flame Sword Demon himself."

"You mean me?"

"Don't play dumb. Didn't Woojin specifically say to thank you with Heavenly Tiger Pill? I'm not blaming you—after all, you've more than earned it."

“I only pretended to be surprised out of politeness. But wait, didn’t you say you were just going to consider it? How did you find out?”

“Well, neither my son nor I are good at lying. It was written all over our faces. I just asked a little, and he spilled everything.”

He chuckled, then pulled out a case and a hefty pouch as if he’d had them ready.

“I’d gladly give you a couple Heavenly Tiger Pill, but unfortunately I only have one on hand. I brought it as an emergency pill just in case. Instead, I’ve included a Body-Fortifying Pill I personally use.”

“A Body-Fortifying Pill?”

It wasn’t the name of any specific elixir—just a general term for pills that strengthen the body. Useful only when one's health was failing, but not particularly helpful to most martial artists.

Seeing my doubt, Clan Head Peng shrugged.

“I get why you’re unsure, but the Peng Clan’s version is a little different.”

“I’m not disappointed—just surprised.”

If it’s a pill used regularly by someone with Peng Clan’s natural physique, it’s probably no ordinary thing.

“That’s good. You know how some energy-retention pills taste better than others? This one’s like that. Among all our body-fortifying pills, this one’s especially effective.”

“Even useful for the Poison King?”

“Heh. Absolutely. But it’s not like a regular pill that boosts stamina the moment you eat it.”

“Then how does it work?”

“Take one before and after your training. Your physical development will progress at a different pace entirely.”

“Ah...”

So it's a supplement for external martial training.

While the name fits, it works on a different principle than traditional energy-replenishing pills.

"Of course, it's tailored for Peng Clan's physique and techniques, so I don't know how effective it'll be for you.

It's not something we normally let outside our clan.

But it's good for your body regardless, so I brought it in hopes it'd help."

"It's exactly what I need right now."

"At first, I wasn't sure, but after seeing you a few times, I figured it out. Your body and inner energy just haven't caught up to your recent realizations, right?"

"That's right."

“The Poison King really has his hands full. Given your age, your marriage into the Tang Clan, and their unique practices, I’m sure they didn’t hold back their support.”

“All I feel toward my father-in-law is gratitude... and guilt.”

The Tang Clan was fiercely loyal to its own. While wary of outsiders, they were warm and generous once someone entered their circle.

After my formal engagement to Tang Sowol, I’d frequently received elixirs.

Even so, the speed at which I recovered my former strength was extraordinary.

Especially considering Tang Clan’s elixirs were usually poison-based and had to be substituted with externally sourced ones for me.

“With the Heavenly Tiger Pill and Body-Fortifying Pill, you should be able to address your current issues.”

“Yes. These are exactly what I need. Thank you.”

“Not so fast with the thanks. They’re some of the best we can offer outside the clan, but... don’t you think it’s a bit unbalanced if we end it here?”

Raising a finger, Clan Head Peng continued:

“One request. As long as it doesn’t harm the clan or go against justice, I’ll grant a single favor.”

Even with limitations, this was a promise of help from a master at the Flowering Stage.

Various thoughts flashed through my mind, but—before I knew it—my mouth moved on its own.

“Then... would you spar with me sometime? Not right away, of course. I’ll need time to absorb the pills properly.”

For a moment, Clan Head Peng looked stunned—but then he burst into hearty laughter and nodded.

“Hahaha! Of course! Right now, we’re all busy with the Demonic Cult situation, and you’ll need time to absorb the Heavenly Tiger Pill. But contact me when you’re ready—I’ll prepare a full feast and be waiting!”

Good. I thwarted the cult’s plans, revealed their danger, helped mend the Peng-Yeon feud, and now secured a future sparring match with the Peng Clan Head.

I’d say the goals of this trip to Hubei were more than achieved.

Feeling proud, I nodded to myself—only to hear Seol Lihyang grumble beside me in disbelief.

“Honestly, how can someone be this consistent? If only you gave even half as much attention to other people as you do to martial arts...”

I could guess exactly who she meant by “other people,” so I quietly pretended not to hear.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

With everything wrapped up at the Yeon Clan, it was finally time to depart.

But not to Sichuan, where the Tang Clan resided, rather to Wuhuan City, home of the Murim Alliance.

When Seol Lihyang and I quietly handed over the poisonous spirit core, Tang Jincheon received it with a pleased smile and said:

“We plan to depart tomorrow, but Clan Heads Peng and Yeon won’t come themselves. They’ll only send a few people along with the Blood Vitality Pills to oversee those who’ve taken them.”

“I expected as much. It makes sense.”

Even though the Demonic Cult’s infiltration had been rooted out, the Blood Vitality Pills had already spread across Hubei Province, and many martial artists from various clans had likely taken them.

The two clan heads would be busy handling the aftermath, so their external activities would probably be limited for a while.

“Don’t you feel anything about this, son-in-law?”

“Hm... That nothing in this world comes free, so we should never rely on luck and must always use our own will as a guiding light?”

“Nice words, but what I mean is—once again, I’m the one stuck with all the troublesome follow-up!”

“Isn’t that a good thing? It means the Tang Clan’s contributions are being recognized and your influence within the Murim Alliance is growing.”

“The Tang Clan is already strong, with or without that. It’s not like we’ve been politically active, so what’s the point of having more say?”

That was true. The Tang Clan was inherently an insular family, maintaining its status as one of the Five Supreme Clans with only the bare minimum of external interactions.

There was even a saying that the Tang Clan’s greatest external activity was revenge missions.

The exact opposite of the Namgung Clan, who were always eager to show off.

Tang Sowol called the Namgung Clan excessive, but honestly, the Tang Clan was just as eccentric in its own way.

So it was understandable why Tang Jincheon was grumbling.

But really—what could he do at this point?

“In any case, your son-in-law has done a good thing. You can be proud of him, father-in-law.”

“Huh??”

Tang Jincheon grabbed his forehead, looking baffled.

“How did I end up like this...?”

“Speaking of which, what were you like back in your youth, Father-in-law? I mean, when you were our age and went on your own martial journey.”

“Why bring that up all of a sudden?”

“We’ve only experienced martial adventures like this, and we know this isn’t exactly normal. I’m just curious what the typical journey was like. I remembered the Head of the Zhongnan Sect once mentioned traveling with you back in the day.”

“What exactly did that brat tell you?”

“Just that the two of you wandered Murim together, and that you met my late mother-in-law during those days.”

“Hmm. That’s about it. We wandered around, beat up any villains we saw, avenged our injured or fallen friends when needed...and when it came time to inherit the clan, I returned home.”

“That sounds pretty similar to what I’m doing now.”

“The enemies I fought were different, you reckless brat.

Sure, I wasn’t as strong as you at your age, but I wasn’t as foolhardy, either.”

“Foolhardy? I only take action when I see a chance of winning....Even if that chance is a bit slim.”

“We call someone who throws himself into danger on a sliver of hope a reckless fool.”

Clicking his tongue in exasperation, Tang Jincheon continued with a look that said he truly didn't know what to do with me.

“In any case, considering the situation, you should take your elixirs today. I can assist with energy guidance if needed.”

“I'll be fine, but—”

“I was asking Miss Seol, not you.”

“Eh? Me?”

Seol Lihyang blinked wide-eyed, then quickly shook her head.

“I appreciate it, but I think I'll be fine.”

“I know your physique is unique, but handling vast energy is a different matter. Are you certain?”

“Hmm... It’s hard to explain, but I really feel like I’ll be okay.

In fact, I think it might be easier if I do it alone.”

“Very well. Sowol’s Poison Spirit Body also reacts better without my guidance when handling poison. You’re probably the same. Trust your instincts—but make sure you have someone watching over you just in case.”

“Yes! I was thinking of asking Sister Seo Mun.”

“If it’s Clan Head Seo Mun, she’s reliable. But... the way you address her...”

Tang Jincheon shivered slightly at the idea of Seo Mun-Hwarin, who was around his own age, being called “sister” (or ordering others to call her that). Still, he ended with a short sigh.

“If you’re sure, I won’t say more. I have some matters to discuss with the others about this incident, so I’ll be off.

I wish both of you great success.”

Waving his hand, Tang Jincheon walked off.

Seol Lihyang and I gave a polite bow, then returned to our room.

I decided to take the elixir while under the protection of Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

The initial consumption was the toughest part—afterward, I'd be able to absorb it gradually, even while on the move.

“Open it up already, Cheon Hwi! I already saw mine, remember?”

“Judging by the nature of Heavenly Tiger Pill, it won't give off a unique aura like the Dark Spirit Yin Pill did.”

“Still, I'm curious! Right, Sister Tang? Sister Seo Mun?”

Seol Lihyang turned to the two with a grin. They both nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s rare to see secret elixirs from other clans. Each one is fascinating!”

“Indeed. I’ve consumed many elixirs, but I’ve rarely seen one worth truly studying.”

“In that case…”

Since they were all so curious, I nodded and opened the box alongside Seol Lihyang.

From hers, the same cold aura I’d sensed earlier poured out again—filled with Yin and Demonic energy.

Mine, on the other hand, was much subtler.

A refreshing, mind-clearing fragrance.

It had a mild, calming energy—abundant, but not sharp or overwhelming.

In fact, elixirs that leak too much energy tend to be less effective.

Even the Dark Spirit Yin Pill would only release a faint aura. Its chilling presence was due to its Yin nature, not because it was actively dispersing energy.

“All done? I’d like to take mine now.”

“Ah! Yes! I’ll watch with Sister Harin, so don’t worry, Brother Cheon!”

“That was my plan from the beginning.”

Chuckling softly, I popped the Heavenly Tiger Pill into my mouth—and immediately understood why it was considered a top-tier pill even among the Peng Clan.

The moment it touched my tongue, it melted like water.

At the same time, a massive wave of energy erupted from within it.

**Kkkraang—!**

A roar of energy so fierce it almost made a sound.

Like a slumbering tiger awakening, it surged down my throat, racing toward my dantian.

Too impatient.

I activated the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art at full strength, wrapping the incoming energy.

Rather than wrapping—it was more like reining it in.

I forcefully restrained the energy from rushing into my dantian, guiding it instead through rhythmic qi circulation in line with the art's formula.

One cycle. Two cycles. Then three.

By that point, the once unruly energy—intent on charging toward my core—began to settle.

Like a tiger slowly bleeding under relentless attacks from a pack of wolves, the energy shrank.

As the energy of the Heavenly Tiger Pill weakened, the Death-Stealing Art grew stronger.

My internal energy continued to cycle and reshape the Heavenly Tiger Pill's force until it turned the same "color" as my own.

Until the once-pristine tiger was dyed red in blood—matching my own hue.

**Huu...**

Only then did I guide the refined energy to my dantian and opened my eyes.

I had successfully absorbed around eighty percent of the Heavenly Tiger Pill.

The rest had dispersed into my body early in the process but would be slowly absorbed through future meditation.

The real issue wasn't the missed portion—it was how the absorbed energy would affect my body.

**Crack.**

A sensation of something breaking inside me.

But not a bad sign—this wasn't damage or internal injury.

It was the sound of constraints, consciously or unconsciously placed to protect my body, finally being released.

For the first time in ages, my dantian felt full—and that fullness transformed my entire body.

The energy stretched beyond major meridians into even the smallest of vessels, sharpening my senses to the extreme.

It was like perceiving the world not through my eyes, but through my skin.

Thanks to this energy reaching my micro-meridians, my entire system became interconnected—efficient and unified.

The energy spread naturally through my limbs, enhancing my tactile awareness of the world.

Meridians are different from blood vessels.

Though invisible, they serve as channels for qi—intangible yet real.

But if qi flows throughout the body, like blood through veins, the two become nearly indistinguishable.

Though my dantian remained the energy's base, the new core of circulation had shifted slightly.

Toward the center of the body—near the heart.

This was what Murim called the Middle Dantian.

A realm where qi and body unite.

Where one moves qi as if moving the body—and the body as if moving qi.

The result was a body naturally fortified with energy, even without conscious effort—like something beyond human.

This was called Sub-Perfection Master.

“Finally...”

I had reached Sub-Perfection.

A balanced, stabilized form that I could sense instinctively.

My body felt lighter, filled with energy.

Now I could use Sword Flame without strain, and I no longer needed to worry about injuring myself from uncontrolled enlightenment.

Of course, I wasn't quite at the peak of my past life.

Back then, I stood at the very end of the Sub-Perfection stage.

Now, I had just stepped into its beginning.

Still, reaching the same realm carried great meaning.

Though I lacked the endurance and raw strength of my former self, I could now do everything I used to.

In fact, thanks to the sword techniques I'd gained post-regression, I might even surpass myself in certain ways.

This was a turning point.

Not a restoration of my old martial strength—but the beginning of something greater.

“Flowering Stage...”

In this life, I had to reach it.

At the very least, I needed that level if I hoped to stand a chance against Cheonma, the Heavenly Demon.

That resolve stirred briefly within me—until I noticed Seol Lihyang seated in meditation nearby.

Frost had formed over her body.

Each breath she exhaled froze the air, and yet—she wore a serene smile.

Summer wasn’t even over, and she was already forming a winter of her own.

Wait, she's not going to surpass me before I even reach the Flowering Stage, is she?!

Apparently, I wasn't the only one thinking that.

Tang Sowol approached, sweating nervously, and whispered:

“Brother Cheon! At this rate, Lihyang's going to surpass me in a few years! How's that going to look? I'm her older sister, you know!”

“Shall we begin a top-secret training regimen together starting today?”

“Secret training...!”

Tang Sowol's eyes lit up with anticipation.

So devious.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After Seol Lihyang and I absorbed our elixirs, we gave a brief farewell and left the Yeon Clan.

Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye said their final goodbyes with serious expressions, declaring that next time, they would be the ones to help us...

But honestly, I'm not expecting much. Even if those two grow rapidly, by the time the Demonic Cult launches its invasion, they'll be somewhere around the late Peak Stage or just reaching Sub-Perfection.

After all, even Tang Sowol—who reached the Flowering Stage before turning forty and after the Tang Clan had been annihilated—was an extreme outlier.

So I don't expect much from Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye.

It's more than enough if they simply become a symbol of alliance between the Peng and Yeon Clans, just like now.

In my previous life, Hubei Province was the final bastion during the Demonic Cult's invasion.

But back then, the Peng and Yeon Clans were destroyed in the blink of an eye, like beans roasted over lightning, and over half the province was breached before we even realized it...

That won't happen in this life.

What remains now is to report our findings to the Murim Alliance, and ensure no one dares laugh off the Demonic Cult again—

“So, Brother Cheon. You'll be doing it tonight too, right? You'll let me, won't you?”

Right. There was still one more daily task left—“secret training” with Tang Sowol.

“What are you even saying? Also, could you stop using wording that causes misunderstandings?”

Tang Jincheon's gaze is terrifying right now.

Tang Sowol giggled as if that reaction was exactly what she'd hoped for. Then, rising on tiptoe, she leaned in to whisper into my ear. Her warm breath tickled.

“My goodness. What exactly were you thinking? I was just asking how tonight’s secret training would go.”

“It’s not really a secret anymore, is it...”

The so-called “secret training” was a promise I’d made to Tang Sowol when she felt a bit neglected.

But during group travel, it’s nearly impossible to sneak off at night with just the two of us without anyone noticing.

Now, it’s become something everyone knows.

Even knowing that, Tang Sowol smiled as if she were thoroughly enjoying herself. She pulled away slightly.

A soft sigh escaped me at the sudden loss of warmth—only for her to link arms with mine and cling to my side.

“Still, it’s been a while since we’ve had some quality time together. Naturally, I’m excited.”

“Quality time... If that’s what you call trying to kill me every night.”

The only kind of training we could do together was sparring, and there was a considerable gap between us.

Which meant most of our matches on the road from Hubei to Wuhuan took the form of instructional sparring.

Typically, I would counter and break through Tang Sowol’s techniques, after which she would exhaust herself trying new ways to land a hit.

It wasn’t just because I’d just entered Sub-Perfection—I also knew her martial arts extremely well.

Yet, even knowing she couldn’t defeat me, Tang Sowol always came at me seriously.

So yes, “trying to kill me” wasn’t just a joke.

Though to her, it was clearly seen as a lovely nightly date.

“Good heavens! You have such a beautiful fiancée obsessed with you. Aren’t you the least bit happy?”

“Aren’t you embarrassed saying that about yourself?”

“Hmm.”

Tilting her head, she stretched her neck toward me.

Close enough that her green-tinted eyes reflected my startled expression.

So close I could hear her breathing. Maybe even her heartbeat.

Her eyes curved into half-moons as she smiled.

“So? Do you think I’m pretty or not, Brother Cheon?”

Long lashes, playful smile, and unmistakable affection radiating from her eyes.

For a moment, my brain stuttered like it had short-circuited. Then I replied:

“You don’t have to get that close. I already know—don’t worry.”

“Hmm. You still didn’t say I’m pretty. So shy~”

Tang Sowol giggled openly, like she’d seen something unbearably cute.

Tang Jincheon’s gaze grew more intense—but Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin’s looks weren’t any less sharp.

The difference was: Tang Jincheon’s eyes held a mixture of affection and resentment.

Seol Lihyang’s gaze had a hint of jealousy, while Seo Mun-Hwarin’s was filled with admiration and longing.

Noticing their reactions, Tang Sowol smiled meaningfully. A kind of “pecking order established” smile.

As if she’d gotten her full dose of self-satisfaction, she nudged me toward them, continuing in a bright voice.

“Anyway, isn’t it amazing how strong Brother Cheon became from just one elixir? Sister Harin, did you expect this? You two spar often, right?”

“Well, I more or less anticipated it. His comprehension had already reached Sub-Perfection—it was only his inner energy holding him back. I doubt anyone in our party, aside from myself or the Poison King, could even touch Hwi’s sleeve now.”

“W-wow...”

Tang Sowol gaped in disbelief.

Then again, our whole group just consisted of her, Seol Lihyang, and six martial artists from the Yeon Clan—three Peak Stage users who had taken the Blood Vitality Pill, and three first-class martial artists.

I could easily handle even people like the Master of the Black Sky Sword Sect or the Bloodflame Fist Demon, who I'd already defeated once.

As you ascend the martial path, even minor differences in level lead to massive disparities.

And between Peak Stage and Sub-Perfection, that gap was vast.

Lost in thought, Tang Sowol suddenly rushed over to Tang Jincheon and asked:

“Father, Father! Could you spar with Brother Cheon sometime?”

“Huh? That’s sudden.”

“Well, I’ve sparred with him so much, and since he’s seen so much of the Tang Clan’s techniques, he counters poison and hidden weapons effortlessly. I can’t even figure out how to beat him anymore!”

“That is a bit problematic. But honestly, it’s best to just consider him an exception.”

“Huh? Even you, Father...?”

Seeing her skeptical face, Tang Jincheon spoke seriously.

“Of course not. I could still beat him using Tang Clan techniques. I’m just saying—I could only do it once.”

“What do you mean, only once...?”

Tang Sowol tilted her head, and Tang Jincheon explained calmly.

“You’ve been feeding him all kinds of poisons and herbs since he entered the Tang Clan, right?”

“That’s true.”

“By now, minor poisons won’t work on him at all. Even if they do, they wouldn’t be strong enough to take him down.”

“Then... you mean if you used a real poison...?”

“If I used extreme poisons, they’d work. But I couldn’t guarantee his safety.”

“No way! Sparring with Brother Cheon is forbidden, Father!”

Tang Sowol crossed her arms in an “X” over her head and shook her head furiously.

Tang Jincheon let out a helpless laugh but pressed on.

“Same goes for hidden weapons. Surprisingly, for someone his age, he uses sword techniques on par with the best swordsmen I’ve seen. Unless I unleashed a lethal move like Ten Thousand Petals of Death, I doubt I could defeat him.”

“What kind of person turns Brother Cheon into a pincushion during sparring!?”

“I said I could, not that I would. Also, I don’t remember you ever raising your voice at me like this—except now. Raising a daughter really is thankless.”

Though clearly a little wounded, Tang Jincheon kept walking without slowing.

And so, for several days, we continued traveling—absorbing the lingering energy of our elixirs, training when we could, and occasionally cheering up a sulky Tang Jincheon.

Until at last, we reached Wuhuan City, and returned to the Murim Alliance.

“Is this really true, Poison King?”

“If you're unsure, examine the handwriting in the letter. An organization like the Murim Alliance must have dossiers on someone like the Bloodflame Fist Demon. And we've brought plenty of Blood Vitality Pills for separate analysis.”

“I'm not exactly doubting you... It's just so unbelievable I'm having trouble processing it.”

The Alliance Leader re-read the letter several times. With each pass, his expression grew more grim.

Though he was now better known as the Leader of the Murim Alliance, in the past, he was famed as the Righteous Heavenly Saint, a warrior of unshakable chivalry.

To someone like him, the Demonic Cult's scheme in Hubei—and the actions of the Bloodflame Fist Demon—would be absolutely intolerable.

As if coming to a decision, the Alliance Leader nodded.

“We need to investigate this matter thoroughly. Perhaps we've underestimated the Demonic Cult for too long.”

Finally.

The fact that those words had come from the mouth of none other than the Alliance Leader himself...

In my previous life, not even half of the orthodox Murim had been wiped out before they started to take it seriously.

I struggled to suppress the overwhelming sense of accomplishment—but even so, it was too early to be pleased.

This wasn't yet a matter of life and death to him. He was merely enraged by the Demonic Cult's cruelty, acting from a sense of duty as a righteous warrior.

He wouldn't form an alliance and strike preemptively—nor would he ready Murim for war.

Still, at the very least, he would raise the alert level.

“More than simply keeping an eye on things, we'll send those skilled in stealth to gather intelligence on the Demonic Cult's recent movements.”

Exactly like that.

“If the situation is worse than we thought...The Murim Alliance will have one more war to fight.”

Sharp eyes. A firm voice. The Alliance Leader was declaring his readiness to act if necessary.

We'd gone through so much to reach this point.

Of course, when compared to the Demonic Cult's meticulous preparation and the Heavenly Demon's overwhelming power, this was only the beginning...

But every great endeavor begins with a single step.

Just as I nodded in quiet satisfaction, the Alliance Leader's hardened expression softened.

"In any case, you've accomplished something tremendous.

White-Haired Rakshasa—no, Clan Head Seo Mun, you as well."

"What?"

"Honestly, while I knew you sincerely wanted to leave the demonic path behind...I thought at best you'd remain neutral or mildly friendly toward us."

"Hmph. I'll admit, I'm a bit offended that you only half-believed me. But it's also true that I got involved mainly because of Hwi's request. So if you're giving out credit, give it to him."

"Then Young Hero Cheon Hwi must be a blessing to Murim itself."

“You flatter me.”

I bowed lightly, and the Alliance Leader chuckled, patting me on the shoulder.

“Flattery? Hardly. You uncovered and crushed the Demonic Cult’s sinister plan. You defeated the infamous Bloodflame Fist Demon. And you even brought Clan Head Seo Mun into the fold. You deserve the recognition.”

“Actually, it was Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye who first uncovered the plan. And I only defeated the Bloodflame Fist Demon thanks to Seol Lihyang’s help. As for Clan Head Seo Mun—she’s always had a good heart. All I did was bring people together.”

“Hmm. I see. Then, shall we cancel your reward?”

“But if a senior offers a gift, wouldn’t it be impolite to refuse?”

If possible, I’d like to request one martial art from the Murim Alliance’s library.”

“Hah! I was only joking. Don’t worry. So, what kind of martial art are you looking for?”

Truth be told, I had been hoping for this.

After all, I had done something that helped steer all of Murim in a better direction. With the ideals the Murim Alliance was founded on, it wasn’t unreasonable to hope for a reward.

And I already had something in mind.

“Do you happen to have any sound-based martial arts?”

If Seol Lihyang would eventually cultivate a sound-based art like in my previous life, then I wanted her to learn the best from the start.

As I’d told Tang Jincheon earlier, we left for Anhui Province right after obtaining a sound art for Seol Lihyang.

And in front of the Namgung Clan, I saw a familiar face.

Familiar—not in the pleasant sense.

“What was his name again? Something Hwangbo, I think...”

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

Tang Jincheon remained behind at the Murim Alliance, stating that he needed to investigate the Blood Essence Pill and the martial artists who had consumed it.

So, as previously discussed, the rest of us headed to Anhui Province, and we arrived at the Namgung Clan without any issues.

Well, to be more precise, it would be better to say the problem arose after we arrived at the Namgung Clan.

Just as we stood before the main gate to notify the gatekeeper of our arrival, we locked eyes with another group who had arrived ahead of us.

A familiar face.

Not quite as large as Peng Woojin, but still a massive frame. However, despite his fine clothing, he lacked any sense of nobility, and his aura was unmistakably unimpressive.

“What was his name again? Hwangbo something...”

As I watched him furrow his brows anxiously, the name slipped out unintentionally. At that, Seol Lihyang widened her eyes and shouted:

“Ah! The one who wet himself at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering—!”

“Hup!”

Realizing a beat too late that she’d spoken far too loudly, she quickly covered her mouth, but it was already too late. Everyone who could’ve heard, had heard.

Hwangbo-something glared at Seol Lihyang, his face flushed red and pale by turns.

“You wench! How dare you slander the heir of the great Hwangbo Clan!?”

Slander?

I may have mocked him as “Hwangbo-something” earlier, but I knew his name well.

Hwangbo Gwang. Even in the already poorly reputed Hwangbo Clan, he stood out as one of the worst. In my previous life, he had died at the hands of the Shadow Ghost, and all his filthy deeds had been exposed.

In this life, he was the one who fled the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering after wetting himself in terror when I released my killing intent.

The strange thing was this: even if Hwangbo Gwang was all show and had neglected his training, he should still recognize killing intent when it’s right in front of him.

Then what's with this reaction that seems genuinely enraged?

“Oh.”

Don’t tell me... he knows exactly what happened, but is gritting his teeth and pretending it never occurred?

It's a common human tendency—to mask humiliation with anger.

It's not an act that would fool me, or Tang Sowol, or even Seo Mun-Hwarin, but it seemed to have worked on Seol Lihyang, who hadn't been at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering and was still somewhat naive.

“I-I'm sorry. I must have heard a false rumor...”

“Ha! You think an apology is enough?! Words alone aren't enough—show me sincerity through action!”

With that, Hwangbo Gwang swept Seol Lihyang with a lecherous gaze, making his disgusting intentions clear.

This bastard.

He was thoughtlessly acting the same way he did back home in Shandong Province.

Most likely, he didn't even consider someone a person unless they belonged to a prestigious clan or sect.

And accusing someone of slander to pressure and take advantage of them—ironically, it was the exact tactic he had once used on the woman who later lost her daughter and became the Shadow Ghost.

Anger surged through me, but was this enough to justify drawing my sword?

The corruption of the Hwangbo Clan was well known, and Hwangbo Gwang's depravity was worse than most demonic sects. But without solid proof, there wasn't much we could do.

That is, unless I responded in a way that left no evidence.

He'd pissed himself once—he could do it again. I could also leave him with a fear so deep, he wouldn't be able to meet anyone's gaze for a while.

As I began sharpening my killing intent, it was Seol Lihyang who stepped forward half a beat before I could act.

Come to think of it, she was never particularly docile.

Around allies like me, Tang Sowol, and Seo Mun-Hwarin, she could be a bit snippy. But with others, she was either perfectly polite or coldly hostile—nothing in between.

I couldn't forget. Even when she had nothing, she once stood before a group of assassins from the Hao Clan, gripping a rock and ready to fight to the death.

As we hesitated, Seol Lihyang narrowed her eyes.

“So, you're the heir to the Hwangbo Clan?”

“That's right. Surely you've heard of me? I'm none other than Hwangbo Gwang, the Ironbone Fist Hero.”

“Really? You're not lying?”

“Lying? What nonsense is that?!”

Snarling as if he might leap forward at any moment, Hwangbo Gwang tried to look intimidating. But Seol Lihyang, who had felt my killing intent firsthand before, simply scoffed.

“The Hwangbo Clan might not be one of the Five Supreme Clans, but it’s still a prestigious one.”

“Ha! So now you're scared—”

“Doesn’t seem very impressive, though.”

“You look like you're in your early thirties. And if that’s all you’ve got, aren’t you just some branch family member or something? Let me tell you, mister—faking your identity like that can get you in real trouble.”

“You insolent little...!”

“And you've been speaking so rudely this whole time. What if you run your mouth like that to someone stronger than you and end up in a fight you can’t handle?”

“Ha! Who could possibly lay a hand on a Hwangbo Clan heir? Maybe a member of another prestigious clan—but if that were the case, I’d know them by face!”

Hwangbo Gwang snorted mockingly, clearly thinking he was making sense. Seol Lihyang tilted her head in genuine confusion.

“But... if everyone dies, there’d be no one left to report anything. Who’d know it was the Hwangbo Clan?”

Hwangbo Gwang stared blankly at her, dumbfounded by her casual mention of massacre.

With her petite frame and soft appearance—amplified by the heavy yin energy in her body—Seol Lihyang looked the picture of fragility, which only made her words more jarring.

But then again, every conflict she’d experienced had ended in death.

From the Hao Clan’s branch leader to the Bloodflame Fist Demon, her battles had always been life or death.

To her, actual combat wasn’t about sparring—it was about survival. A fight ended when someone died.

To outsiders, her words probably sounded like she was ready to kill them all without hesitation.

“You little—!”

Before Hwangbo Gwang could react, one of his guards stepped forward, raising a fist surging with internal energy.

At that exact moment, I unsheathed my sword, and Tang Sowol followed suit, hiding her fingertips beneath her sleeve.

A tense standoff.

But honestly, I wasn't even nervous.

Not just because this kind of petty conflict was common in the martial world, but because Hwangbo Gwang and his guards weren't strong enough to warrant concern.

Even without me, Tang Sowol alone could handle them easily.

What happened to this once-proud noble clan?

Had they become drunk on power and neglected martial arts? Or had they lost their martial strength and begun abusing what little authority they had left?

Either way, I didn't care.

Just as things were about to explode—

**Creeaak!**

“What the hell is going on out here? And Hwangbo Gwang—I told you not to come back, you're disturbing my training.”

Sword Dragon Namgung Jong appeared, drenched in sweat and dragging his feet with a sword at his waist, looking as if he'd just finished training.

His face was filled with annoyance and disdain—until his eyes met mine, and his expression instantly turned into a broad smile.

“Well, if it isn't Brother Cheon! What brings you here without warning?”

“Didn’t you say to visit whenever it was convenient for you, Brother?”

“Of course! I’ve always wanted to cross swords with you someday!”

With Namgung Jong's warm welcome, the tense atmosphere from just moments ago vanished completely.

It helped that he and I addressed each other as brothers and that since walking out, he hadn’t spared Hwangbo Gwang a single glance.

“Brother Namgung... Why...?”

Hwangbo Gwang wore the expression of a man betrayed. But Namgung Jong remained firm.

“I’ll say it again. I’m younger than you. And I already rejected your crazy suggestion to hold another Dragon and Phoenix Gathering just to save your face.”

“I said the Hwangbo Clan would cover the cost!”

“I said we don’t need it.”

Namgung Jong cut him off at every turn, while Hwangbo Gwang desperately tried to keep the conversation going.

I was starting to get the picture.

The Namgung Clan, among the Five Supreme Clans, currently enjoyed the most prestige.

Hwangbo Gwang was trying to force a connection, offering bribes to make up for the embarrassment he suffered at the last Dragon and Phoenix Gathering.

But the Namgung Clan wouldn’t ally with the Hwangbo Clan just for money.

They had likely rejected him several times already. He just kept showing up, refusing to give up.

“And tell me—if you came to ask for a favor, why were you causing trouble at the inn? Did you really think we wouldn’t notice what was happening right outside our gates?”

Watching Namgung Jong seethe in irritation, I suddenly had an idea and sent him a sound transmission.

If it’s alright, could you loudly issue an official expulsion?

...Seriously? Actually, that’s not a bad idea.

He seemed shocked at first, but after a subtle nod, Namgung Jong raised his voice.

“Still don’t get it, Hwangbo Gwang? I want nothing to do with you! Now get lost!”

As he shouted, I focused my killing intent discreetly and aimed it straight at Hwangbo Gwang.

“Kuhugh!”

He fainted before he could even cry out in pain, his pants soaking wet again.

“Y-young master!?”

“No way...”

Hwangbo Clan’s guards panicked, rushing to pick him up. Then, without another word, they bowed and retreated the way they came.

Namgung Jong chuckled.

“Hah! That felt great. You wouldn’t believe how annoying he’s been these past few days. I don’t know how he found out Father wasn’t home.”

“You mean the Sword King?”

“Right. With Father here, no one would dare act so blatantly repulsive. I suppose the world is big, and there's always someone stupid enough—but it sure wasn’t Hwangbo Gwang.”

Well, he is someone who values background more than skill, and he clearly preys on the weak. No wonder he wouldn't even dare approach the Sword King.

As I nodded, Namgung Jong smirked and fully opened the half-closed gate.

“You've all had a rough trip. I'll do my best to make sure you're comfortable while you're here. Please, come in.”

And like that, we became the guests of the Namgung Clan.

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“You useless fools! You just came back like that?!”

Hwangbo Gwang kicked his guards' shins furiously. Still unsatisfied, he began hurling nearby objects in rage.

Among the things he tossed were the corpses of the innkeeper and his daughter.

Only after his tantrum subsided did he crouch in a corner and start anxiously biting his nails.

“Damn it... With this, those creepy bastards won’t leave me alone...”

Gone was the arrogant man from earlier—now he trembled in fear.

His guards, seemingly used to this, calmly began cleaning the room.

But it didn’t last long.

Suddenly, the guards stopped and silently stepped aside, as if terrified to even be in the same line of sight.

Through the path they made, an old man with a hunched back walked in.

“Tsk tsk. So you’re not completely brainless. Of course we can’t leave you alone.”

“E-elder...”

Despite his massive frame, Hwangbo Gwang trembled like a leaf.

The old man gave a deceptively kind smile.

“But don’t worry too much. We’re family, after all. I’ll give you one more chance.”

He extended a liver-spotted hand. Resting in his palm was a round pill, the size of a fingertip, reeking with a foul stench.

“Swallow it.”

Hwangbo Gwang’s trembling hand took the pill.

His father—and his father’s father before him—had never disobeyed this man.

Hwangbo Gwang was no different.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

As I had already sensed during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, the Namgung Clan was absolutely sincere when it came to flaunting their power.

The Tang Clan, the Zhongnan Sect, and the Yeon Clan all had vast estates as well.

Each was practically the size of a small village—enough to make one instantly understand why the masters of such powerful forces, those at the Flowering Stage, were sometimes given the honorary title of “King.”

But then again, what could you say about a clan that had gone so far as to embed “Emperor” directly into their martial arts?

“Brother Namgung, I’m asking out of sheer curiosity—but how exactly do you manage a clan of this scale?”

It was enormous. So much so that even the errand boys were trained in moment techniques to a decent degree.

And it made sense, really. If you sent a servant to fetch something and it took them forever to get there, what use would that be?

But still, a household so large that even its servants had to train in martial arts... It was difficult to wrap my head around.

At this scale, it wasn't just a household. This city was practically the Namgung Clan itself.

"What do you mean, how? If you're asking about daily operations, it's not that different from other clans. We simply employ more people, and only take in thoroughly vetted retainers."

"That's not what I meant. With this much land and this many martial artists, isn't it basically a small country?"

"Ahh, you mean that. Well, again, not that different from other clans. Any Flowering Stage master has the capacity to build their own little nation on the frontier. From the imperial family's perspective, the number of people beneath you isn't that big a deal."

"Is that so?"

The Imperial Court had always been largely indifferent to the martial world. Not because they had no reason, but because the previous dynasty had tried to control the martial world, caused all sorts of chaos, and had been overrun by barbarians during that moment of weakness.

Later, martial artists and survivors banded together, drove out the invaders, and helped reestablish the current imperial lineage.

So the policy of non-interference was both a courtesy extended to their founding allies and a promise not to repeat past mistakes.

Thus, the court refrains from interfering in martial disputes unless the scale is massive, innocent civilians are harmed, or clear evidence of treason emerges.

Of course, there are always exceptions.

When the Demonic Cult invaded, the court belatedly allied with the Orthodox Alliance... and then died together with them, so that wasn't of much use.

In any case, my point was this: even if the court claimed to follow non-interference, didn't the Namgung Clan's overwhelming scale provoke suspicion or attempts to rein them in?

The one who answered wasn't Namgung Jong, but Tang Sowol.

“Brother Cheon, I mentioned this before, but you might not remember. The Namgung Clan is a rather unique case among noble families.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are actually of royal blood, descended from a line of feudal lords. The Imperial Court grants them certain privileges because of that.”

Come to think of it, I had heard something like that before.

So that’s why they were able to rule over Anhui Province like kings without facing serious opposition...

“Ah, that part is a bit of an exaggeration.”

“Pardon?”

At Namgung Jong’s casual comment, Tang Sowol’s eyes widened.

“Our clan is indeed a branch of the old Zhou royal family, and we did rule Anhui from ancient times, but... that’s not the only reason.”

“Then what made the court set aside its suspicions of the Namgung Clan?”

“Those who know, know. It’s no great mystery—we simply handed over the Namgung Clan’s martial arts to the Imperial Court.”

“Wait, what? You mean the Imperial Sword Forms?”

“And the Sky-Cleaving Free Sword Art as well.”

Not only I, but also Tang Sowol and Seo Mun-Hwarin were shocked. Even Seol Lihyang, though less knowledgeable about martial affairs, paused mid-gasp to ask carefully:

“Um? Young Lord Namgung... no, Sword Dragon... you’re really okay with that? I was taught that passing down secret arts—whether from a sect or family—should never be done lightly. You gave them everything?”

Namgung Jong, who had initially looked regretful at being called “Young Lord,” now wore a pleased smile at the title “Sword Dragon” and shook his head.

“There’s nothing to regret. And when I say we handed them over, it was more like teaching them to a royal prince. It’s a rather honorable arrangement.”

“Like a royal martial tutor?”

“Something like that. Though our duty is strictly to instruct in martial arts.”

To teach the imperial heirs personally... and it’s not like the court would go around spreading those techniques far and wide. There was little to worry about.

Namgung Jong nodded with a proud expression and continued:

“Thanks to that, we expanded the clan’s size, gained a more prosperous environment for training, and in doing so, drew closer to the end of the sword. It was a net gain.”

“The end of the sword...”

Seol Lihyang murmured in a daze. Namgung Jong added a brief explanation:

“It’s a fairly well-known saying. I’m sure the Pure Sound-Frostflower swordswoman has heard it too. The Namgung Clan is said to never be satisfied with anything less than the best.”

“Y-yes. And that they spare no effort in their pursuit of it.”

“That’s good to hear. In essence, what I mean is simple. Everyone in the Namgung Clan suffers from a disease—a refusal to be content with anything short of the best. And we’re all obsessed with the sword.”

“With... the sword...”

Seol Lihyang slowly turned her gaze to me.

“What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was wondering if there were more people like you in the world.”

“Hahaha! So Brother Cheon is also that obsessed with the sword? No wonder I felt a strange affinity the moment I saw you!”

Namgung Jong laughed heartily. I couldn't laugh with him.

Up until now, I had brushed off the Namgung Clan's unique disposition as just another inherited trait.

But the truth was more interesting than I thought.

It wasn't about hoarding martial arts. It was about climbing higher, wielding a more perfect sword.

Praise and recognition were fine, but they were just accessories. What I truly desired was one thing:

To see the end of the sword.

From the court's perspective, it was like raising a vassal prince who stayed loyal, developed powerful martial techniques, and willingly presented them—how could they not adore the Namgung Clan?

And since they posed no threat and responded well to simple flattery, it was more beneficial to let them be.

That was from the imperial perspective.

But as a fellow swordsman, I couldn't help but think—it was honestly kind of cool.

To live for nothing but the blade.

My opinion of Namgung Jong soared—only to be followed by a sudden question.

If the Namgung Clan was so focused on sword training, what kind of situation would require the Sword King, their clan leader, to leave his post?

“Thank you for broadening my perspective, Brother. By the way, you said the Sword King is currently away—do you know when he'll return? If he's not too delayed, I'd like to greet him before I leave.”

“Ah, Father is on a light inspection tour. He's just making a round through Anhui Province. It's been six days, so he should be back within ten. I really want to introduce you—could you wait?”

“Of course. I’d like to meet the famed Sword King myself. Still, I didn’t expect a Flowering Stage master to personally inspect the province.”

“Well, he is a Namgung, so it’s only natural.”

“I suppose so. The sword is important, but so is fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities—”

“I’m sure staying cooped up swinging a sword all day is suffocating. It’s good to get some air, hear some applause, loosen up a little, don’t you think?”

“...?”

Wait, did he just say the inspection tour was for applause?

Maybe the Namgung Clan are just attention-hungry geniuses born with sword talent...

I mused silently as we walked, and soon arrived at a building even more splendid than the one where the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering was held.

“These are the guest quarters. There are plenty of rooms—use whichever you like.”

“Thank you. I’ll just drop off my things.”

“Hm?”

Namgung Jong looked puzzled. I gave him a knowing smile.

“You invited me here. I rushed over right after wrapping up my business. There’s only one reason for that, isn’t there?”

“Indeed.”

“And if I’ve only got ten days to spare, then I believe in cherishing today rather than wasting it. Don’t you agree?”

Namgung Jong’s smile mirrored mine.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who was looking forward to this. Very well. I’ll wait here. Take your time.”

Next stop: the training hall.

Despite all the detours, my reason for coming to Anhui and visiting the Namgung Clan remained the same.

A duel.

Or rather, to see the Namgung Clan’s swordsmanship for myself.

Sure, Namgung Jong had won the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, held the title of Sword Dragon, and was praised as one of the top late-stage juniors. But he was still far below me.

However, he was strong enough to properly demonstrate the Namgung Clan’s martial arts.

As Namgung Jong and I smiled at each other like mischievous kids, Tang Sowol sighed and asked:

“Hyang-ah, I’ll be following Brother Cheon. What about you?”

“Hmm. Should I come too? That is, if Sword Dragon Sohyeop is willing.”

“Haha! If you’re my brother’s fiancée and friend, then you’re like family to me as well. Of course you’re welcome. In fact, how about we take turns and all have a sparring session?”

“Oh my. That’s not a bad idea. Hyang-ah, it would be a great help to you too. You’ve only recently reached Peak Stage, haven’t you?”

“Oh? When I last saw her at the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, she was still just first-class. What happened? I guess it’s true—great people attract other great people. Isn’t that right, Brother Cheon?”

“You flatter me. Though it’s true that Seol Lihyang has great talent.”

As we young people chatted and laughed, my eyes drifted and spotted Seo Mun-Hwarin, standing alone and awkwardly nudging the ground with her toe.

Right. Last time, she'd grumbled about being dragged into every major moment...

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, what will you do? You don't have to come—feel free to rest if you'd like.”

“Th-then I'll come too!”

“Eh? But I doubt our little duel will be up to your standards.”

“Ehh?! You drag me around all the time, and now you're trying to exclude me?!”

“You told me not to bring you last time...”

“I have no memory of that! In any case, you can't leave me out! I'll come watch and offer a few tips if needed!”

“...If you say so.”

Still unsure of what she wanted, I nodded vaguely. Meanwhile, Namgung Jong, currently the de facto head of the Namgung Clan in the Sword King's absence, grinned.

“Ttaap! To think I'll receive guidance from another Flowering Stage master besides my father... Brother Cheon, this is all thanks to you!”

He just smiled—like someone who had struck gold on a good investment.

## **I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan**

After dropping off my belongings in the guest room, I followed Namgung Jong to the training grounds, a satisfied expression on his face as he walked ahead.

“By the way, you looked like you were training just a moment ago. Aren't you tired?”

“I'm fine. I sweated a little, but not enough to say I'm tired. And even if I were, I wouldn't want to miss an opportunity like this.”

“Well, it's not every day you get the help of a supreme master.”

Before or after regression, I had regularly sparred and received instruction from Seorin. After Tang Sowol reached the Flowering Stage, she too had taught me.

So, while I consider it somewhat routine, in truth, receiving instruction from a Flowering Stage martial artist is an incredibly rare experience.

It's not just because they are hard to come by in the vast Central Plains. Each one of them has reached the pinnacle in their respective fields. Their pride, as well as the circumstances of their families or sects, often make them hesitant to offer their guidance freely.

Take the Sword Demon, for instance. By now, he's probably quietly gaining power in the Demonic Cult's territory. On the surface, he seems like a perfectly normal person.

Though whether a person who does nothing but eat and swing a sword can be considered normal is up for debate, he's still about average by Murim standards.

Back when the Orthodox Alliance was being pushed back by the Demonic Cult, he had even hidden himself within the Namgung Clan disguised among martial artists on the run.

Still, a cultist is a cultist. While the Sword Demon is an odd one, he definitely harbors a darkness deep in his heart.

He waited for the right time, opened the back gate, and lured in other cultists—eventually revealing his true colors.

Though the Heavenly Demon at the time was off battling Shaolin alone and wasn't there...

The Sword Demon was one of the most powerful martial artists even within the Demonic Cult. The cultists are known for their tricks and temporary power boosts.

The Sword King, who had once been wounded after being overwhelmed by the Heavenly Demon despite setting up a joint formation, as well as Namgung Jong—then known as the Azure Sky Sword Master—and other key members of the Namgung Clan all joined forces.

Yet, they were unable to overcome the Sword Demon and his assisting demons, and in the end, the clan was annihilated.

There's still a long way to go before that happens, and I intend to prevent it as much as possible...

Still, the fact that the prestigious Namgung Clan, famous for its swordsmanship, was wiped out and that I'd never again witness their blades—that part was truly regrettable.

That's why having the chance to experience it firsthand like this is quite exciting.

I did watch from afar during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering, but... facing them directly is an entirely different matter.

As I was inwardly brimming with anticipation, Namgung Jong slowly shook his head.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Hmm? Then...”

“I meant the opportunity to cross swords with a martial artist like you, Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

Startled for a moment, Namgung Jong quickly added when he noticed my reaction.

“Oh, that’s right. Didn’t you say you dislike that nickname?”

“I wouldn’t say I dislike it. So it’s fine.”

It's the same nickname I had in my previous life. And even now, it was given by the same person. So, I do feel strange hearing it, but that's all.

Unlike Seorin, who truly dislikes being called by her nickname, I don't mind.

"I was just surprised that you'd evaluate me so highly."

"Huh. What nonsense. If someone has even seen you fight once, they'd say the same as I did. Anyone with some discernment would."

"That's a little embarrassing."

"I mean it. I might be wrong, but... Brother Cheon, haven't you become much stronger than you were during the Dragon and Phoenix Gathering?"

"How did you know?"

That caught me off guard. I've indeed reached full Sub-Perfection Mastery, but I've never been the type to exude my presence everywhere I go.

Whether then or now, the energy I release externally hasn't changed. That means he didn't sense it from my aura alone.

And it's not like it was my first time reaching this stage, so things like steady footsteps or balanced movement wouldn't be obviously different.

Unless we had already crossed swords, figuring it out this fast shouldn't be easy unless he's someone of a higher realm than me.

As I tilted my head in puzzlement, Namgung Jong gave an awkward smile and spoke.

"It's nothing special. It's just that both the Sky-Winged Poison Phoenix and the Pure Sound-Frostflower were clearly stronger than when I last saw them, so I figured you must be as well."

"Ah, I didn't expect you to deduce that much."

Well, rumors probably spread quickly about how our group ran off with Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye.

The clan heads, having no way to contact us, must've been panicking. Then they all suddenly gathered in the Yeon Clan and, a few days later, showed up looking for us.

And now, if the growth of my companions is noticeable... it clearly means something happened.

Something they overcame successfully.

Martial artists are like seeds that bloom under hardship. Namgung Jong's guess was quite sharp.

Though what he really cared about was something else entirely.

"Now that we've finally met, there's something I've been meaning to ask... Is Woojin all right? What happened to him?"

"Oh, he got a little hurt, but with treatment, he'll be fine. As for what happened... let's save that for later. Either rumors will reach your ears soon or Brother Peng will come greet you himself."

"Rumors? Brother Peng? ...Well, as long as Woojin's alive and well, that's what matters. If he's alive, he'll reach out before dying."

Namgung Jong exhaled deeply, visibly relieved. Around that time, we arrived at the Namgung Clan's training grounds.

I've been to the training grounds of the Tang Clan, Zhongnan Sect, the Murim Alliance, and the Yeon Clan, but the Namgung Clan's grounds were far wider—and more extravagant.

Why a training ground needed to be fancy, I had no idea.

As Namgung Jong stepped into the ring and placed a hand on the hilt at his waist, he asked,

“Shall we begin right away? Brother Cheon, if you need time to rest after the trip, I can wait an extra quarter-hour.”

“A quarter-hour sounds too short. Still, I'm fine.”

With a light smile, I drew my sword and stood across from him.

Namgung Jong's eyes lit up as he observed my blade.

“Heavens. Is that sword really made of solid black iron?”

“It is. You’re the first to recognize it.”

“Haha! Well, there aren’t many sword users around you. But the sword looks excellent... it doesn’t quite suit you.”

“It’s not originally mine, so it can’t be helped.”

“It wasn’t originally yours...?”

“It belonged to the Master of Black Heaven Sword Sect, the one who gave me my nickname. I’m planning to have it reforged by a Tang Clan blacksmith to suit me.”

“I see. So that’s the story. Brother Cheon, how about a little wager?”

“A wager?”

“I already know I can’t beat you in a duel. Our realms are different, after all. But don’t you wonder what would happen if we fought using only pure swordsmanship?”

“...Huh?”

Blinking at the unexpected words, Namgung Jong continued with a confident smile.

“Let’s duel using only the bare minimum of inner strength—focus purely on swordplay. If you win, our clan’s blacksmiths will reforge that sword for you. I know the Tang Clan’s smiths are more skilled in general, but when it comes to swords, I believe the Namgung Clan is a step ahead.”

I glanced at Tang Sowol. She nodded vigorously.

So Namgung Jong’s claim must be true—while Tang blacksmiths may be better overall, swords are the Namgung Clan’s specialty.

“Alright then. If you win... hmm.”

Come to think of it, I don’t have much to offer.

Sure, I could ask Tang Sowol to give him something, but with his status, he could probably get anything the Tang Clan offers on his own.

He's not just a beloved son of his clan like Sowol is—he's the next head of the Namgung Clan.

And of the Five Supreme Clans, the Namgung Clan is currently the strongest. He lacks for nothing material.

There's only one thing I truly own that he might want.

“If you win this duel, I'll teach you a sword technique of mine.”

His eyes sparkled—just as I expected.

“How much are you willing to teach?”

“I'll show you during the match. You may choose any except the final technique.”

“Perfect! You’re saying you’ll show me all your sword techniques, aren’t you?”

“Not all, really.”

“No worries. I wasn’t expecting everything to begin with. But if you’re going that far, I’ll do the same—I’ll show you everything I’ve got!”

Ever since I learned the Namgung Clan served as the imperial family’s sword instructors, I had suspected it.

If it meant improving his swordsmanship, Namgung Jong would be willing to reveal some of his clan’s techniques.

The same goes for me.

The real problem comes only when one’s true martial art spreads and people learn how to counter it. Hiding everything else is just selfishness.

Most don’t share their techniques because they want to use them to gain power or status.

In my case, even if someone learned the key phrases of the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, they'd probably end up losing their mind before they ever got to use it properly.

Anyway, from what I've seen, Namgung Jong is someone who obsesses over the sword, not profit. So, this approach should work—and it did.

Smiling brightly, he assumed his stance. His well-maintained blade gleamed as he spoke.

“I'll begin with the Great Evolution Sword Art. It's the first sword technique we learn after mastering the basics. Every member of the Namgung Clan learns it at least once.”

“Then I'll show you the Blood Wolf Sword. It's nothing special. I learned it from a drunk third-rate martial artist after buying him some honey water.”

It's the matching sword technique to the Blood Wolf Art—the first martial art I ever learned.

Honestly, the original Blood Wolf Sword was absolutely pathetic. A third-rate technique that matched its third-rate foundation.

Compared to the Great Evolution Sword Art, which is low-grade but well-grounded in fundamentals, it's no match.

But in the end, more important than a strong martial art is the strength of the person wielding it.

I've seen swords stronger, faster, and more precise than mine—but most of those wielders died by my hand.

“It should be somewhat useful, at least.”

“Heh. I'm sure it is.”

With a smirk, Namgung Jong suddenly kicked off the ground.

**Paht!**

A step focused on maintaining balance, with little in the way of flourish.

His sword cut through the air in a clean arc—

**Kkang!**

—and my roughly swung blade deflected it cleanly.

Thus, the duel began.

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“Big Sis Tang, is there any real point in dueling with those outdated, low-level sword techniques?”

“Of course there’s value. Though not necessarily great. Martial arts branch out like trees—your current skills usually encompass your past ones.”

“Hmm... So you’re saying that if they use their strongest martial arts from the start, they’ll already understand everything they could’ve learned from the weaker ones?”

“Something like that. In Cheon’s case, his martial background is quite mixed, so it’s hard to tell—but at least in Sword Dragon’s case, that holds true.”

“Then why are they doing this?”

“Because it’s fun.”

Saying this with a questioning tone, Tang Sowol's comment made Seol Lihyang’s expression twist.

Yet even then, Tang Sowol didn’t take her eyes off the duel, smiling softly.

“Just let them enjoy themselves.”

“Okaay...”

Seol Lihyang nodded, though her face showed clear confusion.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Great Evolution Sword Art.

Namgung Jong had said it was a simple technique, the first to be learned after mastering the basics. But having now experienced it directly, I could say with certainty—it was anything but simple.

**Kkaang!**

A sharp metallic clang echoed throughout the training grounds. The sword trajectory, which should have been clean and simple, felt particularly fierce.

Neither of us was using sword qi, and we had matched our physical capabilities after a few exchanges, yet Namgung Jong's sword carried something beyond just strength.

No, it definitely did.

His obsession with the sword, his deep understanding of it, flowed through each stroke.

That is what made it Great Evolution.

A technique that becomes heavy when it must be heavy, light when it must be light, and flashy when it must dazzle.

And all of this felt... strangely familiar.

While I don't have any set sword forms, my basic combat style shares several similarities with the Great Evolution Sword Art.

**Kagak!**

I struck the flat side of his sturdy downward stroke with a sideways blow, pushing it aside with force. Then, I lightly pushed off the ground.

It wasn't to throw Namgung Jong off balance. If all other conditions were equal, that sword would be unstoppable.

So instead, I used the recoil to propel myself to the side, avoiding the clash and immediately thrusting forward.

It was a modified technique—originally meant to deflect the opponent’s sword and immediately follow up with a thrust.

The sword, rising from below the waist like a wolf that never missed its chance, resembled the fang of a predator...

“Huup!”

Namgung Jong pulled back, spinning in a wide arc.

My sword lost its power and momentum against the silvery arc his blade traced.

Like a wolf getting smacked before it could even bite.

That was the general feel of the clash between his Great Evolution Sword Art and my Blood Wolf Sword.

I would respond to each of Namgung Jong’s techniques with counterattacks. At times, I initiated the offense, only for him to face it head-on.

Though our combat styles were similar, the gap in our martial arts' level was too wide.

Namgung Jong swung using the forms of Great Evolution exactly as they were taught, while I subtly modified each of my moves.

Perhaps because we understood so well when and how to swing the sword, and which technique to use, the duel felt more like a stage performance.

Still, it was enjoyable.

Of course, neither of us could stick to just one martial art forever.

Perhaps thinking the same, Namgung Jong stepped back and opened his mouth instead of charging in again.

“I think that’s enough for now. Shall we move on to the next?”

“Very well. The technique I’ll use next has no name. The martial artist who taught it to me said it was still incomplete and died before naming it.”

“Still, for a martial art not to have a name—especially one someone remembers and practices—that's too sad, isn't it? How about giving it a temporary name at least?”

That made sense. “Then, following its original purpose, I'll call it Slash-the-Drop Sword.”

It was an incomplete second-rate sword technique I had learned by offering up everything I owned at the time.

Of course, what I had may have been everything to me, but to him, it was likely pocket change.

Even so, he'd willingly passed it down to me. Why?

He believed that one day, he would create an exceptional martial art and, with it, found his own sect.

His only condition for teaching me was that if he ever founded that sect, I'd be its first disciple.

The technique he taught was actually quite decent. Had it been completed, it might well have been recognized as first-rate.

But he died before achieving that dream—cut down during a merchant escort job by Green Forest Bandits.

Though he was greedy for money, he was one of the more decent sorts among the unorthodox faction...

Anyway, his life goal had been to complete that martial art.

A technique that could slice even falling raindrops.

That's why I named it Slash-the-Drop Sword.

“To cut raindrops... it must be an exquisite speed-based sword.”

“I'll show you now, so you can feel it for yourself... Oh, I've filled in a few gaps since it was too incomplete—will that be all right?”

“That’s still your sword, Brother Cheon. I want to see your sword, not that of some nameless swordsman.”

“In that case—”

I smirked and stepped forward. At the same time, I lowered my upper body and twisted sideways.

Namgung Jong’s eyes gleamed as he adjusted his stance in response to my peculiar posture.

“As I thought, a speed sword. Then I shall face it with a speed-based sword as well.”

He dropped his shoulders, the tip of his blade lowering as a result—a perfectly relaxed stance. In that state, any stroke of the sword would flow naturally, no matter the direction.

As I tensed every muscle, Namgung Jong assumed a posture that was the complete opposite of mine.

“This technique is called Heavenly Wind Sword Art. It’s also focused on the mystery of speed.”

“...I don’t think that’s all it is.”

“Then you’ll just have to find out what else is hidden within.”

Namgung Jong chuckled, and that chuckle signaled the start.

We swung our swords simultaneously.

Ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, elbows, and wrists—every joint and muscle in my body moved solely for the purpose of slashing.

Right now, I was a bow, firing the sword like an arrow.

My twisted joints unwound, my muscles added recoil, and I unleashed a speed slash so fast it was hard to follow with the eyes—

**Kaaang!**

It was blocked by Namgung Jong's sword—slightly slower than mine but fast enough to counter.

Had this been the original Slash-the-Drop Sword, it would've ended here. A technique built for a single, fastest strike to split a raindrop—nothing beyond that.

In other words, it had no follow-up.

That's why I never used it on its own, despite incorporating bits and pieces of it elsewhere.

But now, things were different.

After studying the seamless flow of Zhongnan Sect's techniques and imitating them even just a little, I had changed.

“Huup!”

I forcefully connected a technique that was meant to end in one strike.

“Huh?!”

A startled Namgung Jong hurriedly deflected my next slash.

But that wasn't the end.

Even my broken posture became a stepping stone for the next strike, and the onslaught continued.

Controlling one's body to perfection and always seeing at least one move ahead—only then could one wield this kind of swordsmanship.

Slash-the-Drop Sword was designed to slice raindrops.

But rain doesn't fall in single drops.

It fills the heavens and earth in countless uncountable streams.

To cut all of that, one must strike again and again—like a torrential downpour of sword strikes.

“This... How can you call this an unfinished technique?”

Namgung Jong let out a wry chuckle, arms working overtime to match my strikes.

No matter how quickly or from what angle I attacked, his sword responded aptly.

This was beyond a simple speed sword.

“I see now. Heavenly Wind Sword Art... so that’s what the name meant.”

“Oh? You already figured it out?”

“After seeing that much, how could I not?”

Heavenly Wind. Just like its name—wind that roams the sky—Namgung Jong’s sword was free and unbound.

Speed was just a means to reach that freedom, not the goal.

Unlike Slash-the-Drop, which aimed solely for the fastest cut, Heavenly Wind was fundamentally different.

But so what?

A sword that mimics the wind may be noble, but swords were never created for noble purposes.

More importantly, Slash-the-Drop Sword was made to cleave through such lofty ideals.

“Try taking this one too.”

This was a friendly duel, not a life-or-death match, so I gave a slight warning—and then accelerated even further.

A sword aiming to resemble wind, and a sword that had to become the rain to slice it—our blades collided chaotically.

Like a violent storm, neither side giving an inch.

And it was I who gained the upper hand.

**Teuhng!**

Namgung Jong's sword flew back as he took a half-step back.

Not enough to decide victory—but proof that my Slash-the-Drop Sword had surpassed his Heavenly Wind Sword Art in that exchange.

Namgung Jong lowered his sword instead of continuing.

“Excellent. Truly excellent. That sword was definitely incomplete. At first, I thought you had just mixed in some other techniques... but to complete the incomplete with your own hands...”

“Thank you. Your Heavenly Wind Sword Art was also outstanding. It truly lives up to the Namgung name.”

“You flatter me. Honestly, I thought I’d take the upper hand.”

“Well, everyone thinks that.”

I had indeed completed Slash-the-Drop Sword in my own way.

If it was a sword with no follow-up, then I’d just keep repeating it endlessly.

Still, this was merely a rushed patchwork.

It couldn’t compare to the refined and time-tested Heavenly Wind Sword Art.

If we were to compare purely the level of swordsmanship, his technique was far superior.

After all, it was a definitive advancement-type martial art.

And Namgung Jong's mastery over it was no joke.

The only reason I had beaten him was simple—

My understanding of the sword surpassed his.

“Brother Cheon, you wield the sword better than I do.”

“You flatter me.”

“It’s no flattery. I’ve known people with more strength, more intelligence, or deeper internal energy than me—but I never thought I’d meet someone who understands the sword better.”

Namgung Jong’s admiration was sincere. His eyes made me feel just a little guilty.

After all, strictly speaking, I’m not young enough to be considered part of the younger generation.

I’ve wielded a sword longer than he’s even been alive—of course I should be better.

Not that I could ever say that aloud. So I'll let him keep misunderstanding.

Guilt aside, the duel with Namgung Jong was deeply rewarding for me as well.

I think I caught a glimpse of what the Namgung Clan's swordsmanship aims for.

Seorin had once told me not to compromise, to aim higher.

I hadn't understood her fully then, but now... seeing the Namgung style in action, I think I get it.

The Great Evolution Sword Art, which manifests only when understanding overflows and translates into the power of forms.

The Heavenly Wind Sword Art, which seeks freedom, striving to become wind itself through swift strikes.

To me, they sounded like lofty ideals... but maybe, just maybe, they're meant to help one see beyond the immediate opponent.

Just like Seorin said—so that you aim higher, never compromising or yielding, always advancing.

If the scenery at the end of that path becomes your singular will...

Then Namgung Clan's swordsmanship must be seen as a whole to be truly understood.

Feeling a bit thrilled, I opened my mouth.

“I still have several techniques left. What about you, Brother Namgung?”

“Hmm? I've only got Thirteen Lightning Strikes of the Sacred Sword and Solitary Soul Blade. After that, only Limitless Sky Blade Art and Sovereign Sword Form remain.”

“I have a few more than that. Would it be alright if I proceed at a slightly faster pace?”

“I didn’t expect that. By all means. I’ll switch to the next technique at the right moment myself.”

“Understood. Then, let’s continue.”

Thus, our duel continued for a long while after.

From the miscellaneous techniques I had picked up, to solid advancement-type martial arts.

Traces of my past life, where I had struggled to make up for my shallow foundation, began to show.

And Namgung Jong responded to each of them joyfully, countering with his own techniques.

Sometimes I was pushed back, sometimes he was—but overall, I had the clear upper hand.

Even when he moved on from Limitless Sky Blade Art to the Sovereign Sword Form, the result didn’t change.

The pressure from all directions, the overwhelming aura of his sword—worthy of the title “Sovereign”—was intense...

But to me, who had now fully wielded the Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, it felt... clumsy.

No matter how domineering the presence, it couldn't suppress my killing intent.

And his overwhelming technique that aimed to crush opponents head-on... fell apart when my sword found the slightest opening and tore into it.

The final clash ended with a whimper.

The duel ended in my victory—but instead of celebrating, I blurted out something before I realized.

“Brother Namgung.”

“You are better suited for Limitless Sky Blade Art than the Sovereign Sword Form.”

“...!”

I now understood why, in my previous life, he had been known as the Azure Sky Sword Master.