

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 141-150

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

Namgung Jong was left speechless, flustered not just from losing the duel, but also from being given advice on martial arts.

But I was being sincere.

“In my view, the sword of the Namgung Clan ultimately seeks to reach the heavens, to become the heavens. Am I wrong?”

“You're not.”

“And the Limitless Sky Blade Art and the Sovereign Sword Form—they must all be different interpretations of what the ‘heavens’ mean, correct?”

“That too is true.”

“Then, Brother Namgung, what do the heavens mean to you?”

“Perhaps... because the Sword King uses the Sovereign Sword Form, you thought you should primarily master that form as well, since you'll be clan head someday—”

“Guh!”

Namgung Jong faltered, swallowing hard as if struck.

But I wasn't finished yet.

“It's presumptuous of me to speak on the Namgung Clan's martial arts or about you, the future clan head, but... as a fellow swordsman, allow me to say this: the sword hilt must always be held in your own hand.”

“My own?”

“Yes. Following in the footsteps of a great father like the Sword King is admirable. But that must be a choice made wholly by your own will.”

“I have always wielded my sword by my own will.”

“Do you truly believe that? Could it be you never gave it much thought—believing that, as the future clan head, you had to master the Sovereign Sword Form, since only the clan head may learn it?”

“...Kuh!”

“And perhaps... somewhere in your heart, you wanted the Sword King to acknowledge you.”

“S-Stop!”

“Why did you falter just at the end, after doing so well? Doesn’t this feel like an anticlimactic conclusion?”

“Of course, it's not wrong to desire recognition, or to want to carry the Namsung Clan's legacy. Nor is it wrong to admire someone and wish to emulate them. What I'm asking is—was that truly a decision made by your own desire?”

“I...”

“If it was simply inertia from childhood, a vague habit taken for granted—then I’d say it’s worth reevaluating. Just like you did today.”

“Do not be swayed by anything. Just hone the sword you hold within your heart, with complete will. And the moment you grip that blade forged by your true self...”

That is the path that leads to Divine Sword Unity.

I didn’t say that last part aloud.

Partly because I felt I was forcing too much of my own path onto him, and partly because I knew—had known from before regression—that Namgung Jong would eventually find his own way.

Also, a small part was due to Seorin, who, off in the distance, was flapping her short arms and motioning for me to zip my lips.

The mood had quieted. Seorin cautiously stepped forward and cleared her throat.

“Kuheum. From what This One sees, Sword Dragon, you’re not entirely in the wrong. Everyone must pass through such trials once... But your approach to martial arts is just far too different from Hwi’s.”

“Pardon?”

“The wall you just hit—Hwi had to overcome that one first. Meanwhile, what you passed easily may appear to Hwi as a towering cliff.”

Namgung Jong had grown up in a good home, learned excellent martial arts, and carried the expectations of his family. He worked to meet those expectations—and produced real results.

“Meanwhile, Hwi found himself suddenly cast among bloodied blades. He swung his sword to survive. It was the same for This One, and probably the same for most of the unorthodox faction.”

“Well, yes. My first wish when I picked up a sword was just to have a full meal.”

As I nodded, Seorin shrugged as if to say, “See?”

“People like Hwi or This One know all too well why we train in martial arts—feel it with every breath. We had a reason first, and martial arts were merely the method to reach it. But Sword Dragon, you were the opposite.”

You start by picking up the sword. You build a body fit for martial arts while your energy channels are open. You train quickly to get ahead of others. Why you wield the sword—that comes later.

“That’s how most prestigious clans pass on and develop their martial arts. In a sect, if things go wrong, they can just name another promising disciple as the successor. But in a clan, direct bloodline is everything.”

Come to think of it, that was true. A sect can just accept a new disciple or choose the next strongest.

But a clan is different. Having more children isn’t easy, and even if they did, power struggles would only intensify.

Failure in raising a successor isn’t an option. So, they start by placing a sword in the child’s hand. It all makes sense now.

“It was the same in the Seo Mun Clan. This One learned the basics, but didn’t take interest beyond that. Because This One didn’t understand why continuing into the clan’s sword arts mattered.”

“I wasn’t in line to become the clan head, and as a woman, few reprimanded me... But it’s a different story for you, Sword Dragon.”

He probably charged forward without even the luxury to question it—and only when he hit a wall did he stop to look back and wonder where things had gone wrong.

“If you find your own reason, Sword Dragon, you’ll leap over your current wall in an instant. But with Hwi, it’s the opposite.”

“What do you mean, the opposite—?”

I answered in Seorin’s place.

“He wields the sword with complete will. But... he doesn’t know what to put into that sword.”

“What are you saying? Brother Cheon, the martial art you showed at the end was ferocious, but it wasn’t shallow. Surely it had meaning at its core...?”

“It doesn’t.”

“...?”

“To me, a sword is simply a tool to kill. Swordsmanship is just the technique used to cut people down.”

“What do you...?”

“Of course, some martial arts I’ve learned do carry intent, meaning. But that’s the creator’s, not mine.”

If I had to say what lies at the heart of my martial path—it’s kill. But I have no desire to become a bloodthirsty demon.

“I like swords. I wield them by my own will. But if you ask why—there’s no grand answer. I swing because it’s necessary.”

“Wait—don’t tell me...?”

Namgung Jong looked flabbergasted, and Seorin nodded beside him.

“Now do you see? If you were too focused on your destination to look back, Sword Dragon, Hwi is the one who stood up by himself but has no idea where to go or how to get there.”

“Isn’t that much more difficult?!”

“Which is why, more Flowering Stage martial artists appear from the orthodox side.”

“Still... even in the unorthodox factions, you see Flowering Stage experts emerge.”

“Exactly. Like This One, who reclaimed the clan’s martial arts, resumed training, and reached the Flowering Stage. Most who make it do so by finding some secret art somewhere.”

After saying that, she started throwing glances at me.

Even so, I had no intention of learning the Seo Mun Clan’s techniques seriously. If she offered, I might reference them—but that’s it.

When I gave no reaction, she sagged her shoulders in disappointment and continued in a pouty voice.

“If not that, then you’d have to reach enlightenment on your own. In that case, your martial arts would already be entering the realm of divine arts.”

“That was my plan from the beginning.”

I shrugged. Seorin pouted even more.

But it’s not mere stubbornness. Okay, maybe a little, but I arrived at that conclusion for a reason.

Ultimately, the final wall I have to overcome is not about cultivation level—it’s the Heavenly Demon himself.

And the Heavenly Demon was a being even combined Flowering Stage martial artists couldn’t handle.

Let's say, for example, that I managed to learn the Limitless Sky Blade Art or Sovereign Sword Form here in the Namgung Clan and reached the Flowering Stage.

Would that change anything? I don't think so.

The Sword King was a great martial artist, but not even he could stop the Heavenly Demon.

Even if I swung my sword with madness until that day of invasion, could I surpass the Sword King?

The Heavenly Demon Divine Art... I'm not even sure that thing qualifies as martial arts.

Sure, it used internal energy, but the scale was monstrous—it could cover the sky, and precisely harm targets without damaging buildings. Is that even really internal energy?

No matter how powerful he was, to defeat so many Flowering Stage masters without leaving a scratch—it's just too suspicious.

In the past, I thought maybe he was just some godlike genius or perhaps had reached a level even beyond Flowering Stage, like those legends of transcendents.

But after regression and slowly uncovering the schemes of the Demonic Cult, I realized the truth.

The Heavenly Demon must've spent years preparing for the invasion—finding weaknesses and counters to other martial arts, perhaps through some unknown method.

Which means I need to become the variable he didn't account for. As many variables as possible.

That includes my martial arts too, of course.

The problem is, all of this assumes I can build that kind of martial power before he arrives.

I know it's difficult. But I must do it.

Though Seorin once told me not to rush... I could feel myself getting anxious again and had to force it down as I opened my mouth.

“Shall we spar once more? This time, from the start—at full strength, with the sword we’re most confident in.”

“That’s quite tempting. But... since there are others waiting, how about we save that for a bit later?”

“Others waiting...?”

Even after losing in pure swordsmanship, even after realizing what had been unconsciously holding him back all this time, Namgung Jong’s eyes hadn’t dimmed.

He stood there like the open sky—accepting everything and ready to move forward again.

Seeing that, I became even more certain.

Namgung Jong is better suited for the Limitless Sky Blade Art than the Sovereign Sword Form.

“Very well. After you’ve made a round and come back for a second bout with me, it’ll be just about sunset.”

“And tomorrow?”

“If you’re available, I’d like to spar all day tomorrow too... Will that be alright?”

“I can spar all day, no problem.”

We exchanged glances and nodded in sync.

Afterward, Namgung Jong sparred with Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, then fought me again, even seeking advice from Seorin.

The next day followed a similar pattern. And the day after that. And the one after.

In the middle of all that, Tang Sowol would ask whether the duel or she was better, Seol Lihyang would freeze the door handle of my room demanding my attention before lunch, and even elders of the Namgung Clan would occasionally peek into the training grounds upon hearing that Namgung Jong was spending the entire day there with a guest...

But those things weren't what mattered.

What mattered happened on the fourth day of our stay as guests of the Namgung Clan.

Hwangbo Gwang, who we thought had already left, came crashing through the front gate.

With a presence utterly different from before—and both fists soaked in blood.

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

My days of endless sparring in the Namgung Clan came to a sudden halt.

I was about to head to the training grounds as usual when Tang Sowol abruptly grabbed my hand.

“Brother Cheon, there’s something important I need to discuss. Could you spare a moment?”

“What is it?”

As I stopped walking, Tang Sowol silently pulled me away from the training grounds. Then, as I tried to leave the room, she backed me into a corner and slammed her hand against the wall with a dull thud.

**Thump!**

It was a pose full of pressure... but since she was now shorter than me, it just looked cute.

Though her next words were less so.

“Brother Cheon, I’m disappointed in you.”

I had no idea what she was suddenly talking about.

“To think that I followed my betrothed all the way to a distant province, only to be treated so coldly.”

“Coldly? That’s unfair. I even spent all night with you yesterday when you were upset.”

I flinched inwardly, wondering if this was yet another reenactment of her “Brother Cheon, do you like sparring more than me?” routine after just one day.

But then, Tang Sowol smiled slyly and continued.

“Well, that’s been settled. But don’t you think you’re sparring a bit too much with Sword Dragon lately? Why don’t you test your skills with me once in a while too?”

“Oh, if that’s all, then sure. Thanks to you, I’ve built a decent resistance—how about we try something other than paralysis poison today? Though if the symptoms really kick in, I’ll consider that my loss.”

“At your current level, I suppose you could withstand something a bit stronger. And if it gets bad, I can always suck the poison back out. Oh, speaking of which, today’s dose of Hakryeong Grass—”

Still holding the wall with one hand, she raised the other.

Perhaps due to her skill with hidden weapons, her fingers were long and elegant, regardless of gender. Tang Sowol’s fingers were no exception.

Her index finger, delicate like a polished jade branch, matched the phrase slender jade hands well. She held it right up to my lips.

“Lick it.”

“...Are you serious?”

I'd gotten used to her dissolving medicine in tea or water, but this—direct intake from her fingertip—was a bit much.

But as if she had predicted my reaction, she pouted with a wounded voice.

“Oh my? I rush over to lick your wounds whenever you're hurt, and yet this embarrasses you?”

Fine. If you're going to say that...

I sighed inwardly, convincing myself with excuses like “it's a precious medicinal extract” and carefully opened my mouth.

“There.”

Her fingertip slipped into my mouth the moment I did.

The soft touch of her skin. A fingernail teasing my tongue as if urging me on.

As I gently touched the tip with my tongue, a bitter poison, tinged with a faint numbness, began to seep into my mouth.

“Ehehe.”

Tang Sowol’s smile looked strangely suggestive today... but surely, that was just my imagination.

After finishing today’s dose of Hakryeong Grass extract directly from her finger, I finally released her hand from my mouth.

“Are we good now?”

“Yes~. Now, let’s head to the training grounds.”

She cheerfully hummed a tune as she wiped her now-wet finger on my sleeve.

There were many things I wanted to say, but instead, I simply sighed.

“Haa... Let’s go, then.”

We were walking toward the training grounds with Tang Sowol happily tagging along when—

**Booom!**

A loud crash rang out from a distance—not far, but not exactly nearby either.

Tang Sowol and I exchanged glances silently, nodded once, then launched into a sprint.

At first, we passed by confused-looking servants, but as we neared the source of the sound, fear began to etch itself onto their faces.

“W-What the hell is that?!”

“Forget that! Run for your life!”

“Call the warriors! Call the guards!”

I grabbed one of them.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, heavens! Aren’t you one of the young lord’s guests?! You shouldn’t go that way! Please, flee while you can!”

“I’m asking why I need to run.”

“It’s Hwangbo Gwang! That mad dog’s lost it! He and his men are killing people left and right!”

“...What?”

That never happened in my previous life. If the heir of the Hwangbo Clan went on a rampage in the Namgung Clan’s territory, no matter how much they tried to cover it up, rumors would’ve spread like wildfire.

I didn’t know what went wrong this time, but if what he said was true, I had to act immediately.

Not just to stop the needless deaths of the untrained servants and weaker guards...

But because Hwangbo Gwang—and the Hwangbo Clan—was one of the rot-infested limbs of the orthodox Murim.

Now I had both the reason and the opportunity to cut it off. I couldn’t let this chance pass.

“I’ll go ahead. Sowol, you—”

“I’ll follow. I can’t match your speed, but I won’t be far behind.”

Right. With this much commotion, news would spread on its own.

Maybe because we were getting closer, but I could now faintly hear screams mixed among the sounds of destruction.

I let out a deep sigh—different in tone from before—and unleashed my full lightness technique.

As I dashed through the rapidly changing scenery, I soon began seeing victims—some missing limbs.

It wasn't long before I arrived at a wide-open clearing.

Or rather, it had become a clearing because someone had smashed the Namgung Clan's front gate and surrounding buildings to bits.

The massive gate, the solid walls, and the once orderly rows of disciplined guards—now all reduced to rubble, stained red.

Even though I responded as quickly as possible, I had still arrived too late—bodies lay scattered everywhere.

Nearly twenty guards who had been stationed at the gate were dead, along with a similar number of passing servants. Including the wounded, nearly fifty people had been harmed in just a few minutes.

“Mn.”

I was used to corpses, but I hadn’t grown numb to them entirely.

Swallowing a breath, I drew my sword. That sound drew the attention of several silhouettes scattered around, who had been beating the remaining guards to death.

They turned their gazes toward me.

“So it really is Hwangbo Gwang.”

The same face I’d seen when we first arrived at the Namgung Clan—Hwangbo Gwang and his bodyguards. The atmosphere around them was vastly different now.

The bloodlust was understandable, since they were actively killing people, but more than that—they looked like they had completely lost their minds.

Bloodshot eyes. Blackened, necrotic skin. Foam bubbling from their mouths like rabid dogs. Their qi felt wildly unstable, ready to explode at any moment.

Qi deviation? No... something else.

I didn't feel any demonic energy, so it wasn't a Demonic Explosive Pill. But who outside the Demonic Cult could induce such extreme rampage?

It didn't matter. I could think about the cause later. Right now, I needed to deal with Hwangbo Gwang and his men, who were more unhinged than I had anticipated.

**Kkkraang!**

A burst of qi from my feet propelled me forward.

With just three steps, I was within striking distance. I slashed at Hwangbo Gwang's wrist—and—

**Kadeuk!**

Instead of severing the tendons, I only left a deep gash in his forearm.

“...Huh?”

I hadn't held back. I had coated my blade in energy, intending to subdue him immediately for interrogation.

But Hwangbo Gwang reacted.

Though he didn't completely evade it and his arm was shredded, he could still move.

His flesh had felt far tougher than expected.

At best, he should've just barely reached Peak Stage, thanks to a powerful body and loads of elixirs.

Even during the Demonic Cult invasion later, he had only barely scratched Sub-Perfection.

“You must've scavenged something useful.”

The old Hwangbo Gwang wouldn't have been able to respond. He'd have frozen from the killing intent alone.

But now, he wasn't fazed by my bloodlust, and his movements were sharper than before.

That didn't mean he was a threat to me, of course.

As soon as I retracted my sword, I spun and struck again.

**Chwak!**

He reacted again, but not in time. I ripped open his side.

“Guaaagh!!”

Hwangbo Gwang screamed—but not from unbearable pain. It was more like a battle cry.

The blood that sprayed out slowed, then stopped entirely.

It wasn't a superficial cut—his guts weren't spilling out, but it should've caused significant bleeding.

Focusing my senses on him, I realized what was happening.

“What the hell...”

His wounds weren't healed. His massively swollen muscles were forcibly plugging the slashes shut.

Same with the cut on his arm earlier.

I'd heard of external-type martial artists doing similar things, but Hwangbo Gwang was nowhere near that level.

This had to be a result of whatever had driven him into this frenzy.

Just then, two of his bodyguards lunged from both sides.

They were about as strong—or even slightly stronger—than Hwangbo Gwang had been originally. But their rampaging state seemed to affect each of them differently.

They were noticeably slower.

**Sskuk!**

I lopped off both their arms in a flash.

“Uwaaaaagh!!”

“Ggrugh!”

Even with an arm lost, they didn’t hesitate—roaring like beasts and charging again.

They looked more like animals than humans.

Hwangbo Gwang joined them, swinging his fists at me—but—

“Don’t make this annoying. Just get cut.”

Calmly, I began slicing them down, starting with the closest one.

Arms, torsos, thighs, fingers, ankles—my blade slashed through it all.

It was a rapid flurry of strikes, using the principles of Slash-the-Drop Sword—essentially, unleashing as many fast strikes as possible.

In the blink of an eye, the bodyguards were left covered in blood, writhing on the ground. Even Hwangbo Gwang, who had endured better than the rest, was staggering.

He seemed to feel no pain, but even so, he tried to raise his battered body and throw another punch.

Just then—

“Brother Cheon!”

Tang Sowol arrived slightly late and unleashed her Soul-Chasing Flying Butterflies. The graceful butterflies scattered poisonous mist in the air.

Unlike my killing intent, the poison seemed to work.

The bodyguards collapsed. Hwangbo Gwang, who had grown more frenzied the more he was injured, began to slow down.

Taking the opening, I closed in and swung my sword.

“Huup!”

**Kadeuk!**

This time, I cleanly severed Hwangbo Gwang’s wrist.

Perhaps I went overboard—it wasn’t just the tendons, but the entire hand. But that was fine.

I didn’t need his hand to interrogate him or hold the Hwangbo Clan accountable.

As long as he was alive.

Even Hwangbo Gwang couldn’t recover from that. He collapsed, blood pouring from the stump.

I pressed an acupoint on his wrist to stop the bleeding, then struck his energy center directly.

“Khuugh!”

As he coughed up a basinful of blood, the raging qi in his eyes faded.

“Is... is he dead?”

Tang Sowol asked with an ominous tone, but thankfully, Hwangbo Gwang didn't suddenly revive.

“...Father... why...?”

He was muttering nonsense, but at least he was alive.

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“Is... is he dead?”

Tang Sowol voiced a rather ominous question, but thankfully, Hwangbo Gwang didn't suddenly come back to life.

He still lay on the ground, missing both hands and with a shattered energy center.

The only difference now was that his eyes, which had been blood-red with madness, had returned to their original color—though it was clear he wasn't in his right mind.

When a bit of time passed with nothing happening, Tang Sowol cautiously approached. She inspected the dazed Hwangbo Gwang, who was now simply staring blankly at the sky.

“At the very least, it doesn't seem to be poison... Brother Cheon, do you have any guesses?”

“No, none. At first, I thought it was the Demonic Cult again, but after fighting him directly, I can say for certain—it's not a Demonic Explosive Pill.”

There was no demonic energy at all. More importantly, those pills make the energy center and meridians run wild—but they don't erase reason.

They might dull judgment due to euphoria, but not reduce someone to a beast like this.

Well, once the drug wears off, they do go completely insane, but that's a separate issue.

We were exchanging thoughts beside the collapsed Hwangbo Gwang when, like a leaking gust of wind, a small voice rose up from the ground.

"...Father... why..."

"I'm not your damned grandfather."

I reflexively responded to the sudden nonsense. But Hwangbo Gwang showed no sign of hearing me—perhaps he wasn't even talking to me in the first place.

"You said we were family... So why... why did you abandon me..."

"Brother Cheon."

"Yeah. We'd better find out who this 'grandfather' of his is."

I lightly kicked Hwangbo Gwang's side and spoke.

“Hwangbo Gwang. Can you hear me?”

“I did everything, didn’t I... You said it was all for the Hwangbo Clan...”

**Puok!**

“Guhuk!”

I struck a little harder this time. Of course, he was already near death, so I channeled energy to protect his bones and organs—just enough to wake him up.

And it worked. His drifting gaze finally returned to focus.

After spotting Tang Sowol and me, Hwangbo Gwang quietly shut his eyes.

“So that’s how it is...”

“Don’t have your dramatic moment alone. Aren’t you curious why I didn’t just kill you?”

He kept his mouth tightly shut, as if he had nothing to say.

Fair enough. Hwangbo Gwang might be lazy, violent, and now apparently driven mad by whatever that “grandfather” gave him—but he wasn’t a complete idiot.

At least politically, he should be competent enough to fit the image of a prestigious clan.

He had to know why I spared him: because there was still information to be extracted from him, and because I could use that to hold the Hwangbo Clan accountable.

So, he chose to stay quiet. Thinking I wouldn’t kill him until his usefulness ran out.

Or maybe... he was too afraid of something even scarier than me to speak.

“Hwangbo Gwang. I don’t know much about you. Only that you’re a thug who bows to the strong and bullies the weak. That you either lack talent or were too lazy to train properly, and thus failed to reach a level befitting your clan’s name.

...And that when a father and daughter came to plead for help, you killed the father and tried to take the daughter.”

At that last part, his eyes twitched ever so slightly.

Of course he was shaken. That incident must’ve been so shameful the clan buried it completely.

Looking directly at the rattled Hwangbo Gwang, I continued in a steady voice.

“I may not know much about you. But I know your type very well. In the unorthodox world, you’re a common archetype. And I bet you think that if you say nothing, you’ll at least survive—even if it means enduring a bit of pain.”

“Well, it won’t even be painful. The Tang Clan has poisons that dull the mind and make people obediently answer whatever they’re asked. Think of it like taking a nap.”

I gave Tang Sowol a look. She nodded and brought her fingertips together before conjuring a gray liquid on her palm.

Just as she was about to let it drop onto Hwangbo Gwang—

“...Heh.”

A small, bitter laugh escaped his lips.

“Do as you please. But don’t you find it strange? Why hasn’t anyone come here yet?”

“...Damn.”

Now that he mentioned it, it was strange.

It was true that I subdued him quickly, but by now someone from afar should’ve arrived after hearing the commotion.

Yet the only ones here were Tang Sowol, me, and a handful of second- or first-rate martial artists.

Despite the incident happening at the main gate, no master-level fighters or sect leaders had shown up. That could only mean something else had happened.

“Ah. A diversion, huh?”

“That’s right. I don’t know how strong that poison is, but if it doesn’t completely reduce me to a fool and just clouds my thoughts, then you’d need a very precise dosage. You could get info out of me, but it would take time.”

“Keep talking. I’m curious how grand this plan must be to use the young lord of a clan as bait.”

“Even without the Sword King, the Namgung Clan is strong. But not invincible. As long as there’s no Flowering Stage master, there are ways to find openings.”

“...Huh?”

Was he being serious?

**KWAANG!**

A loud explosion rang out in the distance—farther than when Hwangbo Gwang rampaged, but somehow louder.

That meant the impact was even greater.

Hwangbo Gwang grinned and continued.

“If you guarantee my safety, I’ll tell you right now what’s going on over there—and what they’re after—”

“Utter nonsense.”

I raised my sword. His tone had remained composed despite the pain, but now Hwangbo Gwang’s voice quickened.

“W-Wait! If something happens, how will an outsider like you—”

**THWACK!**

I smacked his head with the flat of my blade.

Finally, he lost consciousness.

Once I confirmed he was out cold, I sheathed my sword. Tang Sowol, tilting her head, asked hesitantly.

“Um... Brother Cheon? Are you sure that was okay?”

“Of course. That bastard’s words were lies from the beginning.”

“What? But... didn’t we really hear that sound just now?”

“The diversion part might be true. But everything after—like giving us information if we kept him alive—that was all nonsense. Hwangbo Gwang probably knows nothing about what’s really going on. He’s just a pawn.”

“A... discarded pawn?”

“Yeah. Even while he was talking, he kept glancing around nervously instead of at me—the one holding the blade. That means he’s more afraid of someone else.”

“That... did seem to be the case.”

“Besides, just now he said the Namgung Clan was vulnerable because they lacked a Flowering Stage martial artist. But there is one here. She had two bowls of rice just this morning.”

“Ah! Sister Hwarin!?”

“Exactly. To stir up trouble using the young lord as bait, in the Namgung Clan no less, is an act so brazen everyone will assume the Hwangbo Clan was behind it. They’ll get scorned, and when the Sword King returns, they’ll suffer his wrath. You think they wouldn’t have checked for a master’s presence first? It’s not like we just arrived today.”

In short—Hwangbo Gwang’s story was riddled with holes.

Most likely, he was just trying to survive or buy time by telling whatever lies came to mind.

“Honestly, his half-crazed muttering earlier about his ‘grandfather’ was more believable. Know anything about the Hwangbo Clan’s previous patriarch?”

“Not in detail, but I’ve heard he died fighting an unorthodox demon.”

“Are you sure? He didn’t fake his death and survive in secret or anything?”

“It’s certain. His death was actually what triggered the decline of the Hwangbo Clan.”

“Decline?”

“Yes. They weren’t quite one of the Five Supreme Clans, but they were prestigious enough to occasionally produce Flowering Stage masters. But at some point, they stopped doing so.”

To prove their strength, the then-clan head—who was at Peak Stage—began hunting down local unorthodox martial artists.

“But before long, he was decapitated by one of them instead.”

“What was meant to show the Hwangbo Clan’s power only hastened their fall.”

“So the martial world publicly confirmed his death?”

“Yes. That’s why it’s unlikely this ‘grandfather’ is just Hwangbo Gwang’s literal grandfather.”

After the death of that former clan head, the Hwangbo Clan shrank rapidly.

They were still a known name, but a shadow of what they once were.

And just because they’re an orthodox clan doesn’t mean they’re full of good people.

They began to be quietly mocked by other clans at their level, and the family culture changed entirely.

“No more talk of justice or advancing the family’s martial arts. Instead, their twisted pride manifested in openly trampling the weak. Naturally, their reputation within the orthodox factions plummeted.”

Still, they’d survived this long by hiding their crimes cleverly.

And though weakened, they still had power.

“But as you said, Brother Cheon... they might be far worse than anyone realized.”

“If we dig deeper, I’d bet they’re among the most vicious even by unorthodox standards.”

“How do you know all this?”

“...Let’s just say I have my reasons.”

I brushed aside her regression-related question and let out a deep sigh.

“Anyway, the main point is this: Hwangbo Gwang is just a disposable pawn. Whoever planned this exposed the Hwangbo Clan’s dirty secrets and knowingly risked turning the Namgung Clan into an enemy. A bold gambit.”

“That does seem to be the case.”

“In that case, what’s the point of keeping Hwangbo Gwang alive? He’ll just be a burden later.”

“...Huh??”

Tang Sowol’s eyes widened. I gently pushed her shoulder—imbuing the motion with significant internal energy.

She flew back smoothly and landed beside a group of Namgung Clan martial artists, confirming her safety.

Only then did I draw my sword.

I’d left my usual black iron sword with the Namgung Clan’s smiths, so I was currently using a decent spare they’d provided.

Still dissatisfied, I tapped the hilt lightly with my finger and muttered.

“Whether or not they expected another Flowering Stage master, it doesn’t change the fact that Hwangbo Gwang needs to be eliminated... Right?”

I pointed my sword at the old man slowly walking through the ruined gate.

“Kehkeh. Young ones these days sure are sharp.”

A twisted smile curled on the old man’s lips.

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

I shoved Tang Sowol far away behind me.

Then I leveled my sword at the old man slowly walking through the shattered main gate. Or more precisely, from beyond it.

“Kehkeh. Youngsters these days have sharp instincts.”

The old man’s lips curled into a twisted smile as he looked at the tip of my blade.

At a glance, he seemed like an ordinary old man. No, among old men, he looked especially decrepit.

His back was so hunched it was practically folded in half, making his originally tall frame meaningless.

His body, skin taut over bones, was so emaciated you could trace his skeleton through his wrinkled skin.

Time had struck him so cruelly that wrinkles had taken the place of facial features.

With his hands clasped behind his back, he stepped over the remnants of the gate—he looked like someone who could drop dead at any moment.

And yet, there was something ominous about his presence.

Though he hadn't reached the level of a Flowering Stage master—who harmonizes mind, energy, and body—he had certainly reached a considerable level of mastery, enough that his presence alone exuded a distinct aura.

Sword masters and saber users emitted sharp, slicing energy. Fist and leg martial artists gave off the presence of immovable stone. Some martial artists radiated overwhelming dominance.

The higher one's cultivation, the more blatant and unmistakable their aura became.

That was because martial arts deepened in proportion to how much of one's life had been devoted to them.

By that standard, the old man in front of me exuded a bizarre and off-putting aura.

Not in a way that made him feel dangerous or powerful—just fundamentally wrong.

An instinctive sense of rejection, one difficult to articulate.

It was the kind of aura often found in those who had practiced forbidden martial arts—taboo arts that required extreme cruelty.

Like eating a person's heart raw to absorb their innate qi, or martial arts that only grew stronger by killing others instead of training.

Such arts differed even from demonic martial arts, which often focused on inflicting pain on oneself for rapid growth.

Taboo arts, on the other hand, were predicated entirely on the suffering and sacrifice of others.

Just learning one could brand you as a criminal across the martial world. Even the Demonic Cult and Outer Murim treated such arts with extreme caution.

But they offered power. Power that rivaled demonic arts.

And since their side effects could be forced onto others instead of the practitioner, there was always someone willing to take the risk.

This old man was, in all likelihood, one of them.

“But in the end, your sharp instincts have hastened your doom. A twist of fate, as they say.”

“So what? Are you telling me to blame heaven instead of you?”

With a dry laugh, I exploded my internal energy and shot forward, kicking off the ground.

Judging by the situation, this old man had to be the “grandfather” Hwangbo Gwang had spoken of—the mastermind behind today’s events.

Even if not, he was clearly an enemy—and one who had learned taboo arts. There was no point talking.

**KRAANG!**

With each step, thunder rumbled beneath me as I changed speeds mid-run to throw off his timing.

Then, a beat later than expected, I slashed my sword.

It was aimed straight for his throat, the blade wreathed in violent flames that resembled the bite marks of a beast.

He was a moment too slow to dodge completely, and if he tried to block, he’d likely lose an arm.

Though his aura was intense and foreboding, it wasn't Flowering Stage level.

This strike should have forced a wound—no matter how small.

Or it should have.

“How hasty.”

The old man’s arm twisted into an unnatural angle.

And I don’t mean it moved in a way I didn’t understand—I mean it moved in a way no human body could.

His entire forearm bent, not just at the joints, but like a snake.

A grayish qi-covered fist struck the blade directly.

**PUUOK!**

Our inner energies clashed. My sword and his fist both recoiled from the backlash.

I hadn't expected it to be blocked, but I never thought a single strike would end it either.

I unleashed the killing intent I'd suppressed for the ambush, pouring it all into him.

His eyes widened at the intense pressure bearing down from all sides.

But it didn't seem to restrict his movement.

Like Hwangbo Gwang, it was as if his senses were too damaged to even feel fear.

That didn't matter. Killing intent becomes less effective the stronger the opponent anyway.

Reminding myself of its true purpose, I twisted my body violently—letting the sword move first and my body follow.

My blade, reinforced, cut toward the pull of my killing intent.

“Huup!”

**Ssswaeek!**

Sharper and more vicious than before, the sword slashed down toward his collarbone.

It wasn't quite his neck, but it would certainly sever an arm.

That certainty lasted only a moment.

The wrinkles on the old man's face twisted into something like a grin.

Then came his satisfied voice.

“So ferocious. You're exactly the kind of talent I've been seeking.”

And then I understood how his arm had moved that way.

**UDUK!**

His right arm suddenly swelled.

Once thin like a dead tree branch, it now looked like it belonged to a robust warrior.

A grotesquely muscular limb that didn't match the rest of his emaciated frame.

That arm, now wrapped in gray internal energy and resembling a stone pillar, blocked my sword.

**PUOK!**

The impact felt like hitting solid rock. Despite my blade's edge, all it did was nick the skin.

Even for me—someone who'd faced countless demonic cultivators—this was shocking.

“What the hell...?”

What kind of martial art allows this? No, is this even martial arts?

Martial cultivation is usually gradual. Even the most unorthodox arts require steady progress.

But this—his sudden transformation—was beyond unnatural.

I quickly pulled my sword back before it could be caught and continued to strike.

Neck, chest, eyes, ribs, thighs—I aimed at every vital spot I could.

But each time, his body grotesquely swelled to protect itself, his physique growing more monstrous.

With cracking bones and expanding flesh, his form warped further.

Even when I backed off, the transformation didn't stop.

The deep wrinkles on his face smoothed out, revealing distorted but clearer features.

His hunched back straightened—he now stood two heads taller than me.

A body bursting with pulsating muscles—no longer that of an old man.

It was like he had reversed aging itself.

“Rejuvenation? Rebirth?”

A voice now smooth and youthful—yet disturbingly familiar—emerged from the face that vaguely resembled Hwangbo Gwang.

“Kehkeh. I haven't reached True Steel Defense, but to think you could wound me through such dense inner energy...”

How absurd.

So that's why my sword couldn't pierce him.

His transformed physique alone was formidable, but on top of that, he'd coated himself in thick internal energy—Qi Flame—to further protect himself.

You can cut through a twig with no qi, but a massive tree requires energy and precision.

Even with my refined sword aura, cutting through his thick defense and reinforced body in one strike was a tall order.

But this wasn't true Willpower-Forged Energy.

It was pure inner power, forcibly molded and shaped.

A foolish, wasteful technique that drains your core immensely—something even the Blood Flame Fist Demon would only use as a desperate last resort.

Yet the old man wore this terrifying armor with ease, smiling calmly.

When I scoffed, he chuckled mockingly.

“Jealous, are you? But this much is easy. I’ve been building this inner power for over a hundred years—eating every kind of elixir... and person.”

“...A hundred years? Did you just say people?”

So he had studied taboo arts.

The youthful vigor in his body, his immense inner energy, and now the mention of consuming people—it had to be a form of Qi Absorption Art.

“Correct. Blood Flame Sword Demon, your talent will feed mine next.”

“You think talent can be taken by force just because you have enough qi? That’s laughable.”

“You misunderstand. When I say ‘talent’, I mean true talent. In its rawest sense.”

He shook his head cryptically and picked up one of Hwangbo Gwang’s guards lying on the ground.

The grotesquely swollen old man hoisted the barely conscious man—missing an arm and leg—like he weighed nothing.

Apparently still clinging to awareness, the guard twitched at random intervals.

He hadn’t reacted at all to my killing intent.

But as soon as the old man approached—he began spasming violently.

As if he instinctively knew what was about to happen.

The old man watched the pitiful resistance with a kindly smile.

“Young Yu Cheong-hyeon was a promising man. He heard the rumors—that the Hwangbo Clan offered martial arts and titles to anyone with talent and loyalty—and came running. Brave, yes. Foolish too. But it meant no one suspected when he received the Great Method.”

“The... Great Method?”

My face twisted instinctively. I didn’t like the sound of that.

The old man didn’t care. He kept talking.

“He was passionate. Gifted, too. His footwork was particularly excellent. Both his body and technique showed rapid improvement.”

“...A shame he won’t run again on those legs.”

Exactly. That’s why I cut off both.

Still wearing that grandfatherly smile, the old man continued.

“Kehkeh. It’s fine now. Your talent will help rebuild the Hwangbo Clan, alongside Hwangbo Yeongcheon.”

“AAAAAAH! AAAAGH!”

As the old man uttered his name, the guard flailed in utter terror, using his remaining limbs to resist.

But Hwangbo Yeongcheon easily pinned him, then opened his mouth—and bit into the guard’s head.

**CRACK.**

Of course, a human jaw can’t swallow a whole head.

So he chewed.

Bit by bit.

**Crunch. Crunch.**

Ignoring the horrified stares, he carefully chewed every drop of blood and scrap of flesh.

Then he tossed aside the headless corpse like garbage.

His blood-soaked eyes glittered with satisfaction.

And his gait now mirrored the twitching spasms of the man he had just devoured.

Now, I understood.

“...You’re insane.”

This bastard wanted to devour me—to make my talent his own.

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

Talent, by its very nature, is unkind.

You have no way of knowing what you're talented at until you try it for yourself. Even if you do discover a talent, there's no guarantee it will be something you actually want. And even within the same field, the disparity between talents is undeniable.

This is what they call inborn talent.

It's something designated solely by the heavens, and all one can do is accept it and diligently refine what they've been given.

To me, talent is exactly that.

No different from a fortuitous encounter stumbled upon by chance—neither something to boast about, nor something to feel inferior over.

But what if you could increase your talent at will?

If your internal energy felt lacking, you could supplement your talent related to qi control. If your sword strikes felt dull, you could acquire swordsmanship talent. If you couldn't reach your opponent, you could simply add footwork talent.

Without a doubt, countless martial artists would become frenzied with excitement, eager to remake themselves into their ideal version.

Even if that method involved eating someone's head while they were still alive.

"Don't tell me... it's not internal energy, but talent that was absorbed?"

"Kliklik. Now you see clearly. If properly refined, one could even absorb innate qi, but that's currently beyond reach. For now, only the talent was devoured as a compromise."

Only then did I clearly understand the source of unease I'd been feeling from Hwangbo Yeongcheon.

Something was off. It was undoubtedly the awkwardness caused by hastily stitching together talents that weren't his own.

I see. So you believed my talent was worth enough to reveal your true nature, huh?

“Of course. Blood Flame Sword Demon. Ever since the Black Lotus Lord granted a nickname to a mere late-stage practitioner, I’ve been watching. When you publicly humiliated that Gwang at the Dragon-Phoenix Gathering, I was fully convinced—that you were born with talent greater than even the successor of the Namgung Clan.”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon traced the air with his gaze, as if recalling the scene. The twisted pleasure pulling at the corners of his lips was repulsive.

Still, I was now certain—certain why Hwangbo Yeongcheon in my previous life had quietly met his end alongside the fall of the Hwangbo Clan.

And why in this life, instead of laying low, he openly turned against the Namgung Clan and flaunted his Golden Bell Technique to the world.

Originally, what he was aiming for must’ve been Namgung Jong—the Sword Dragon praised for his sword talent.

But Namgung Jong disliked Hwangbo Gwang and kept his distance, denying him any true opportunity. As a result, time simply passed without progress.

It’s true that innate qi is closely tied to physical vitality, but it doesn’t grant limitless longevity.

Seeing how even now, when there's no need to block a sword strike, he cloaks himself in qi flame from head to toe, I'm guessing this robust body is merely a temporary shell—a form sustained by consuming a tremendous amount of internal energy.

He's well over a hundred years old now. Time would have caught up to him long before he could execute any grand scheme. He likely died of old age or became so debilitated he couldn't move.

So the Hwangbo Clan of my past life... and Hwangbo Yeongcheon, crumbled quietly before the Demonic Cult's invasion.

Though this time, things have unfolded a little differently.

I admit I have outstanding talent, but not to the extent of defying the entirety of the martial world just to claim it.

However, to Hwangbo Yeongcheon—who knows nothing of my regression—I must've appeared as a once-in-a-century prodigy.

With so little time left to live, I was a gamble worth making.

“So I was your target from the beginning. Hwangbo Gwang wasn’t the real bait, huh. I suppose you stirred up every corner of the Namgung Clan?”

“Kukuk. Right again. No matter which bait you bit, I planned to follow. I didn’t expect you to head toward that foolish great-grandson, but... well, since you brought along the Tang girl, all the better. I can now test whether I can absorb constitutions as well.”

“...Heh.”

So he really is a great-grandfather, and that’s why he was called "grandfather."

And now, he’s even planning to rip off Tang Sowol’s head too?

I didn’t bother hiding the murderous intent that surged up from the depths of my chest. I let it loose.

The killing aura bore down heavily across the entire area. No matter how unhinged this bastard might be, even he wouldn’t be able to ignore this.

“Just as I thought...!”

Contrary to his slight twitch, Hwangbo Yeongcheon nodded in satisfaction, a pleased expression on his face, deepening the scowl on mine.

“You disgusting wretch. Even if you become strong through such means, what meaning is there in that?”

“Hmph. A child like you wouldn’t understand. The feeling of helplessly watching your clan crumble because you had no talent or strength. The frustration of not being able to avenge your children even after their deaths! If only there had been a Flowering Stage master... If only I had reached the Flowering Stage...!”

“Whether it’s you or anyone else, even if someone from the Hwangbo Clan reached the Flowering Stage, what difference would it make? You people are already no better than beasts, feeding on human flesh. Thugs who stab peasants in the back when they come seeking help. No one in the martial world will ever acknowledge you. Well, perhaps you could be recognized... as public enemies of Murim.”

“How dare you! You little whelp, not even of age, trying to lecture me about Murim?! Murim is a forest of blood! Only strength—only power determines everything!”

“Well, you don’t seem all that strong... But even setting that aside, what you just said doesn’t sound like the words of someone from an orthodox sect.”

Ever since my regression, as I observed the still-functioning orthodox world of Murim, I realized something.

“It’s not about how great your power is. What matters is what you wield that power for.”

If you swing your sword for personal gain and desire, that’s a path I know all too well—the path of the unorthodox.

But if you can raise your sword for something beyond yourself...

If you can wield it not for short-term gain, but for what you truly believe is right...

That is what I’ve come to know as the true essence of an orthodox martial artist.

“First, protect your family. If you have more strength to spare, shelter your people and comrades. Only after that should you seek glory.”

What meaning is there in pursuing glory if you discard your own family to get there?

If someone abandons their principles and casts aside even their loved ones in the pursuit of personal and clan honor—

“That’s the kind of scum that even the unorthodox world reviles. Did you know even the unorthodox despise those who stab their own brothers in the back?”

“This conversation’s gone on long enough. I didn’t stand idle just to humor you. I’ve already adapted, so now I’ll devour you in one bite.”

Feigning calm, Hwangbo Yeongcheon replied. But did he realize how much he resembled Hwangbo Gwang, who used to flare up at the Namgung Clan?

I gave a hollow laugh as I raised my sword once more, crimson flames dancing along the blade.

“You weren’t the only one stalling for time.”

“Ha! As if this would be enough to gather the scattered strength of the Namgung Clan in one place.”

“I never counted on their help to begin with.”

Of course not. If you don't know how thoroughly the enemy prepared their trap, you have to assume the worst.

I had long since given up on any help from the Namgung Clan. If it were Seo Mun-Hwarin, it'd be a different story... but I couldn't wait forever for her.

What I'd placed my faith in was Tang Sowol, who I'd pushed far out of the fight.

A faint acrid scent brushed the tip of my nose. Yes, it should be about time for her potent, concealed poison to start taking effect.

The Tang Sowol I know wouldn't just sit on her hands, no matter how bad the situation.

There was no need to turn around or exchange secret signals.

Hwangbo Yeongcheon's body, cloaked in an unnaturally thick gray qi flame that felt more like stone than skin, started to blur at the edges.

More precisely, the qi flame of Hwangbo Yeongcheon—unknowingly poisoned by Mountain Empty Poison—began to slip out of control.

“Impossible...!”

His face twisted in shock. Likely because he never expected to be poisoned through such overwhelming qi, or perhaps because the poison was so subtle he never noticed it.

Whatever the case, one thing was certain—my sword would now reach him.

I pushed off the ground toward the still-flustered man.

**Kkwaang!**

With a single step, my body accelerated to top speed. Since we had already clashed once and put a bit of distance between us, one step was all it took.

I drew upon every last drop of internal energy I could muster.

There are many types of Mountain Empty Poison, so I had no idea what specific blend was used. But—wasn't Tang Sowol the one managing my poison resistance?

Even if I didn't know the details, it had to be a combination safe for me.

**Ffwoosh!**

As if confirming my assumption, my internal energy moved just as usual and surged through the blade, turning it into a blazing inferno.

It was consuming more than twice the usual amount of qi, but that was fine—I didn't intend to drag this out anyway.

The crimson flame-wreathed sword came down toward Hwangbo Yeongcheon's crown.

“Let's see you block this too.”

“You insolent...! Did you really think this alone would be enough?!”

His movements had dulled slightly, but he still managed to raise both arms in time, thanks to his grotesquely twitching body.

My blade fell upon his crossed forearms.

**Puuhk!**

It pierced through the unstable qi flame, cutting into his flesh, embedding deep into the muscle.

A stark difference from before, when I'd only grazed the surface.

I sneered at Hwangbo Yeongcheon's startled expression beyond his bleeding arms.

"Now we can finally kill each other. Isn't that fair?"

"Guh! But this changes nothing!"

Murderous intent surged in his eyes, and his thigh muscles twitched.

His foot shot up with explosive force. A strike that would shatter my jaw if it connected—and if it did, it surely would.

Unlike me, who had concentrated all my qi into the sword and left the rest of my body vulnerable, Hwangbo Yeongcheon still had unstable, flickering qi flames around his entire body.

That was likely why he remained confident of victory.

Even if slashed, he wouldn't suffer more than surface wounds—but I'd be in grave danger if I took even one hit.

Then again, I just have to avoid being hit at all.

The moment his leg surged between my arms, I shifted my grip from two hands to one and twisted my waist.

**Pang!**

His foot barely missed my ear as it swept through the air with a thunderous boom.

My ear rang, but I spun my body in rhythm with my twisted waist.

I naturally rotated to the side, my right hand drawing a tight circle with the sword as I thrust it from below toward Hwangbo Yeongcheon's calf.

**Ssskuk.**

With only one hand, I couldn't apply full strength, so I couldn't cut deep. Still, I managed to slice through his skin and some of the muscle beneath.

Having been wounded twice now, Hwangbo Yeongcheon flew into a frenzy, charging in wildly.

“Krragh! Aaaagh! Give me that power! That talent!”

“Who knows. Even if you had it, I doubt anything would change.”

Through our exchanges, I was sure of it.

He really was absorbing talent—but he couldn't properly utilize it.

“With that kind of martial art, you'll never reach the Flowering Stage.”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon's path was the wrong one.

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

“With that kind of martial art, you'll never reach the Flowering Stage.”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon's path was flawed.

Though I've never personally reached the Flowering Stage, this much I can say with certainty:

Those who attain the Flowering Stage are, without exception, people who look to the end of their own path.

No one claims to have reached the ultimate end, but at the very least, they stand on a road that is undeniably their own.

But from Hwangbo Yeongcheon, I can feel no such path.

Though he himself likely refuses to admit it.

“Nonsense! The reason I failed to reach the Flowering Stage despite my relentless training over the decades is due to the declining bloodline of the Hwangbo Clan! The talent passed down has weakened with each generation!”

“If you’ve lived that long, surely you should’ve realized something by now while watching the affairs of Murim. Talent doesn’t guarantee enlightenment.”

Yes. Those who are called geniuses have always been like that. They never know how to look beneath their feet, or how hard others are struggling to climb.

“Are you saying I don’t know what it means to struggle?”

My entire life has been a struggle. From the moment my father died and my mother had to serve our enemy, through the time I died at the hands of the Heavenly Demon and was given a second chance—

Not once have I stopped struggling.

To save those I once couldn't, and to someday stand against the Heavenly Demon.

A dry laugh escaped me. But perhaps Hwangbo Yeongcheon mistook it for mockery.

“How dare you! I'll tear that mouth of yours apart!!”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon charged forward with a roar, as if he no longer intended to listen to anything I had to say.

Despite the Mountain Empty Poison draining his internal energy, it seemed his reserves—accumulated from devouring who knows how many people—still showed no sign of depleting.

But perhaps because he couldn't properly control the energy constantly leaking from his body—

**Thud! Thud!**

The ground shook with each step. The rough, cracked footprints he left behind were like tails dragging through the dirt.

All signs of wasted strength.

Sure, his internal energy still overflowed, and his temporarily rejuvenated body was powerful.

But what of it?

Unfocused power is no different than swinging a sword like a club.

In other words, Hwangbo Yeongcheon couldn't properly wield his own martial arts.

I twisted the corner of my mouth into a crooked smile and this time, focused my killing intent squarely on him.

Not to pressure him as usual—but to wrap around his massive frame.

To me, killing intent is also a kind of sensation.

The flow of breath, the subtle twitches of muscle, the shifting gaze of darting pupils, even unconscious habits—

Perhaps because he couldn't control his own power, Hwangbo Yeongcheon didn't even try to hide his condition. And so, information about his state poured in like a flood.

Whether he realized it or not, Hwangbo Yeongcheon launched into a series of wide, powerful strikes with fists as large as pot lids.

A heavy punch aimed at my heart. A sweeping leg strike meant to break my legs. And even a shoulder charge meant to turn the tide in his favor—Mountaintop Crash.

Each of his moves carried intense killing intent, making them easy to predict from the slightest signs.

I spun my blade to deflect the punch aimed at my heart, stabbed his thigh before the low kick could begin to twist its path, and narrowly evaded the shoulder charge by moving half a beat earlier.

Then, planting my left foot firmly into the ground, I channeled my qi into my right foot in line with the principle of Thunderclap Step.

**Puuhk!**

It made a dull thud like striking the ground, perhaps because it wasn't properly executed, but that was my intention.

The recoil sent my body into a rough spin, and I used that momentum to swing my sword at the back of Hwangbo Yeongcheon's neck.

“Guh!”

Even with his toughened body, it seemed he couldn't easily offer up his neck. He panicked and slammed his feet into the ground with greater force.

**Fwap.**

He still couldn't completely avoid it, though—a faint line was drawn across his neck, and blood began to bead at the surface.

As he staggered from his broken posture, I was the one to charge in this time.

I swung my sword again. The crimson flames of my blade scorched through the gray qi flame, and the sharp edge continued to carve away at the revived flesh of his former glory.

Without pause, we exchanged strikes over and over.

Sometimes I pressed the attack, sometimes he did—but one thing remained constant through dozens of exchanges.

I read Hwangbo Yeongcheon's moves every time.

He, on the other hand, couldn't read mine. And the small wounds he accumulated began to add up.

Eventually, with several sword cuts on his limbs, Hwangbo Yeongcheon shouted in rage.

“Why!? No matter how much of a peerless genius you are, you're still only at the Sub-Perfection level! I've absorbed the talents of so many, and yet I can't land even a single hit...!?”

“I told you, didn’t I? No matter how great the talent given to you, it changes nothing.”

“That can’t be! No genius can unleash their full potential before they’ve matured! ...Wait, this overwhelming killing intent...! Don’t tell me... Your martial talent rivals the Heavenly Martial Body... You’re the Heaven-Killing Star...!”

“Disgusting and slow-witted, too. I can’t imagine how you managed to grow this old. It’s not that I’m amazing—it’s that you still can’t accept that you’ve gone astray.”

From fighting Hwangbo Guang and his escorts, and then facing Hwangbo Yeongcheon, I’ve come to a conclusion—

The martial arts of the Hwangbo Clan were originally upright and honest.

A straightforward punch that sought to shatter whatever blocked its path.

Their ideal form likely resembled Seo Mun-Hwarin’s relentless, unyielding strikes, yet carried a more righteous aura.

A martial art that's completed entirely within the self.

Which means it's the sort of orthodox martial art that grows more refined the longer it's cultivated.

Hwangbo Guang was weak because his training was shallow.

“You've added unnecessary trickery.”

“What!?”

The reason Hwangbo Yeongcheon can't fully utilize his strength is simple: he's no longer extending his strikes straight and true.

“Talent doesn't make up the entirety of martial arts. It's only the starting line—the initial speed. Those who become intoxicated by talent inevitably lose their way. Just like you.”

He mixes unnecessary flourishes into punches that only needed to go straight.

Each strike sparkled with potential, but potential alone is just a glimmer. A strike that dazzles is not the same as one honed to perfection.

That's not enough to reach someone like me, who has polished his skills through battle.

The same applied to his other techniques.

His sweeping leg strike, which should've dominated a broad frontal area, lost its pressure due to sloppy speed techniques.

His hand technique, used to grab my embedded sword, relied too heavily on fingertip sensitivity, failing to distinguish my feints.

Hwangbo Yeongcheon was ruining a perfectly good martial art with half-baked talents gathered from others.

"No matter how brilliant a genius may be, the legacy a single person can build has its limits."

I'm confident I won't lose in swordsmanship, and I am stronger than Namgung Jong in direct combat...

But if you ask me whether my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art is better than his Boundless Sky Piercing Sword, I would never say yes.

My art is built around my unique traits and killing intent.

It fits me better than anything else—but that doesn't mean it's deep.

The strength of a martial artist and the depth of their martial art are two different things.

Why are certain clans and sects revered as prestigious even after centuries?

Why are their martial arts still acknowledged, even if their political power wanes?

The answer is simple: their martial arts are the essence of countless practitioners, refined over generations of geniuses.

The Hwangbo Clan may have declined. Perhaps, as Hwangbo Yeongcheon said, their blood has thinned and talent has faded.

But does failing to reach the Flowering Stage make them all fools?

Of course not. Even Sub-Perfection masters are incredible martial artists.

And the martial arts that the Hwangbo Clan slowly improved over generations? They could only have grown stronger.

Yet Hwangbo Yeongcheon disregarded all that effort and time.

As I watched his needlessly overgrown, misdirected martial techniques, I felt not joy at finding an opening—but a deep, frustrating pity.

“You say you want to restore the Hwangbo Clan’s greatness, yet you’ve lost sight of what your clan’s martial art truly sought.”

“What the hell... what do you think you know!?”

“I know what must never be compromised.”

I wasn't parroting Seo Mun-Hwarin's words like a parrot.

The compromise I refer to isn't being content with where you are—saying this is strong enough or that this is my limit.

I mean the importance of not straying from your path and staying true to it, no matter how difficult.

“Why do you think a martial artist's presence becomes more defined as their level increases? It's because they begin to resemble what they pursue.”

So what about you, Hwangbo Yeongcheon?

I'm not asking whether you achieved something. I'm asking: what do you pursue?

“Obviously, I pursue reaching the Flowering Stage...!”

“Is that all? That's exactly why you've failed. A realm is just part of the journey. If you look back on the walls you've overcome, it's easy to see that.”

I didn't reach the Sub-Perfection stage just to reach it.

I poured vengeance and hatred—left over from losing everything—into my blade until it naturally began to speak for me.

That was the essence of Divine Sword Unity, and the path toward Sub-Perfection.

It was the same when I reached the Peak Stage.

To cut down the opponent before me, I needed a sharper blade.

With my sword chipped and dulled, I honed my qi until it became a blade of its own—that was the moment I became a Peak master.

The Flowering Stage will be no different.

“Hwangbo Yeongcheon. What do you wield your fists for? Don't say it's for your clan. You threw away its future—Hwangbo Guang—as bait.”

“I...”

“Exactly. You don’t know. Of course you don’t. You’re just drunk on the fleeting freedom that stolen talent provides.”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon clenched his teeth. But he said nothing. He must’ve felt it too—deep inside, he knew.

“So I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

“What you, and the Hwangbo Clan, have lost.”

I stepped forward with my left foot, drawing my right arm and sword all the way back.

My straightened back formed the bow, my fully bent arm the string. It was an extreme stance, designed for a single thrust—and nothing else.

An entirely vulnerable posture, prepared solely for one strike.

Yet, it closely resembled the stance Hwangbo Yeongcheon always took between his techniques.

“No...!”

His eyes widened. Anger began to cloud them, and he mirrored my posture—or perhaps, made it even more complete.

A stance perfect for punching. No visible openings.

His eyes twisted in humiliation. Mine remained calm as our gazes met briefly in the air.

No signal was given, yet we moved at the same time.

A simple, direct thrust with no embellishment.

A decorated straight punch, packed with technique.

The two collided at the point where our eyes had met moments earlier.

**Kkwaaang!**

The qi flames coating our sword and fist clashed, releasing a deafening roar.

But the balance didn't last.

Slowly—yet surely—my sword pierced through Hwangbo Yeongcheon's internal energy.

“H-how...!”

His voice trembled in shock.

But I barely heard it.

My mind was filled with a familiar, yet still inexplicable, exhilaration.

The same sensation I'd felt when I cut down the Bloodflame Fist Demon—and the one Seo Mun-Hwarin called the beginning of Willpower.

What was I thinking, back then?

Nothing.

Only one thought remained—to cut down the opponent in front of me. The sword followed that intention without hesitation.

Now was no different.

**Thrust.**

That single resolve powered my sword forward, ignoring all obstacles.

Because I wanted to stab. Because I decided to stab.

“Ah...”

A voice, filled with despair and realization, leaked from Hwangbo Yeongcheon’s lips.

And then—

**Puuhk!**

The blade pierced his massive fist, arm, shoulder—and finally, his neck.

Hwangbo Yeongcheon’s large body began to crumble.

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

**Puuhk!**

The sword that had pierced through that massive fist and arm, and even the shoulder, finally stabbed into Hwangbo Yeongcheon's neck.

“Kuhugh...!”

Even if his energy had become unstable, the absurdly thick qi flame and external energy that had regained its prime—

None of it could withstand my sword.

Or rather, the will contained in that strike.

The ash-gray hue covering Hwangbo Yeongcheon's body from his internal energy faded, and his skin began to return to its original color.

His gigantic frame started to collapse, deflating like a punctured balloon.

In the blink of an eye, he returned to the appearance of an old man.

He tried to press his hand against the blood gushing from his neck, but eventually gave up and let his arm drop.

Was it because his aged body could no longer apply enough force?

Or had he realized that stopping the bleeding now would not save his life?

It didn't matter.

What mattered was that Hwangbo Yeongcheon had accepted his death.

His face, full of liver spots and wrinkles, opened its mouth.

“...Just now. What was that...?”

“What do you think? I simply tried to reproduce the Hwangbo Clan's martial arts in my own way.”

“To think... that technique... had such power...”

“If you hadn’t turned away from it, it’s a strike you could have reached. You’ve trained in the Hwangbo Clan’s martial arts far longer than I have.”

“...Yes. Perhaps you’re right. Had I not abandoned the clan’s martial path... maybe even I could have...”

**Kuhak!**

Hwangbo Yeongcheon coughed up a mouthful of blood and let out a deep sigh.

“...A meaningless what-if... In the end, it was I who chose the unorthodox path...”

“Well, then use what you learned properly in the next life.”

“Kuhk. Geniuses, huh... All of you are equally unpleasant...”

He forced a laugh through a throat bubbling with blood.

As his laughter faded, so too did the sound of his breathing.

“What do you think will happen to the Hwangbo Clan now?”

“No matter how untouchable by local authorities your family might be, the evil you and your descendants committed won’t be overlooked. Once word of this spreads, the royal court will surely intervene. Your clan will be wiped out.”

“Wiped out... Well, we were practically there already... But hearing it out loud hits differently.”

“Practically? ...Ah.”

A thought flashed through my mind.

Hwangbo Yeongcheon had stirred up chaos in various corners of the Namgung Clan to scatter their forces.

In that gap, he planned to devour talented late-stage practitioners—People like me, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang... and, if possible, even Namgung Jong.

But how had he managed to stir up that chaos?

The Namgung Clan is powerful.

Even without the Sword King, its internal strength alone makes it worthy of being called the strongest family under the heavens.

A crumbling clan like the Hwangbo could never hope to contend.

They would have had to commit everything they had.

“...Don’t tell me you brought the current head and all the elders with you.”

“Heh...”

Hwangbo Yeongcheon silently closed his eyes, and I couldn’t help but sigh.

He must've thought: if he were to become enemies with the Sword King anyway after this, he might as well hide the rest of his clan's members until he reached the Flowering Stage.

But his plan had no chance of success from the start.

First, no matter how much power Hwangbo Yeongcheon gained, it was clear he couldn't surpass even me.

And even if the clan's full power had been scattered to cause disturbances across the Namgung territory, it would all be quickly cleaned up by Seo Mun-Hwarin, a master of the Flowering Stage.

It wasn't just a metaphor—he truly intended to sacrifice his entire clan for his warped ambitions.

“...He really was insane.”

I shook my head.

Then came his barely audible whisper, slipping between fading breaths.

“Taesan Great Fist...”

“Huh?”

“That’s the name of the technique you stole.”

“You’re trying to claim that now?”

“...Through my foolishness, the name of the Hwangbo Clan will be tarnished and forgotten...But the martial art itself bears no sin...From now on, that sword technique... will be called Taesan Piercing Sword...”

No reply came after that.

At some point, Hwangbo Yeongcheon had quietly breathed his last.

I looked down at his pitiful corpse for a moment, then lifted my head.

From a distance, I saw Tang Sowol running toward me, realizing the battle was over.

“Brother Cheon!”

I sheathed my sword and waited.

But something felt off.

Even after getting quite close, Tang Sowol didn’t slow down. In fact, she sped up.

“Ah, wait—??”

In the blink of an eye, she crashed into me at full speed—no, not a tackle. A hug.

By the way, I was still physically and mentally drained from trying to use a half-formed realization in actual combat.

**Puuhk!**

“We won!”

“Gguhk!”

The impact struck my unguarded body, knocking the wind out of me.

“Are you hurt anywhere? Was the poison too strong—did it affect you too, Brother Cheon?”

Nope. I hadn’t been hit. The poison didn’t affect me.

Just... that impact from a moment ago really hurt...

“Thank goodness! When his body started getting younger, I was really worried...”

“...Are you listening to me?”

“But I believed you’d win, Brother Cheon!”

“Definitely not listening.”

Was it because it was her first time facing someone who had mastered Golden Bell, or the crushing pressure from a giant cloaked in qi flames?

Now that the tension had left her body, Tang Sowol hugged me and bounced like an unbridled foal.

With all my strength drained, I had no choice but to be shaken helplessly.

It probably left a bruise... and my vision was still swimming from earlier. But even so—

Maybe it was the warmth and clarity of the contact—

A bit of strength returned to my exhausted body.

I gently wrapped an arm around her slender waist. Tang Sowol flinched.

I slowly released her and spoke.

“It’s too early to celebrate. From what I heard, there are still attacks going on in other areas.”

“What?! Don’t tell me there are more man-eating monsters like him?! Then what about Lihyang...!”

“‘Man-eating monster’... not wrong. But there probably aren’t any others. This guy seemed to be the mastermind behind it all.”

Tang Sowol looked between me and Hwangbo Yeongcheon’s corpse with surprise.

I gave a faint smile and continued.

“Don’t worry too much. Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin is there, so Seol Lihyang will be fine. The other areas should be held down well by Namgung Clan’s warriors. I’m just saying we should try to minimize unnecessary injuries. Also, it seems some in the Hwangbo Clan were forced to take part.”

“Now that you mention it, once Hwangbo Guang came to his senses, he looked terrified of someone. If that ‘grandfather’ of his was this man...”

“Then Hwangbo Yeongcheon’s death will bring this fight to a swift end.”

Even weakened, the Hwangbo Clan was still a prestigious name.

They brought enough force to cause serious damage to the Namgung Clan.

If casualties can be avoided, they should be.

I exchanged a glance with Tang Sowol and nodded.

While I sliced off Hwangbo Yeongcheon’s head and held it tightly—

Tang Sowol instructed the hesitant Namgung Clan warriors to gather the fallen Hwangbo Guang and his escorts in one place.

Quite a few were dead, but since the clan was known for its physical toughness, many were still alive.

Of course, abolishing their dantian was standard procedure.

I wasn't sure what they'd taken to cause such a frenzy, but internal energy was clearly the cause.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Yes. We should probably head to the place furthest from where Sister Hwarin was.”

To get to the conclusion: we managed to resolve the whole situation without much trouble.

As expected, the truly dangerous targets—like the Hwangbo Clan Lord and the elders—had been handled swiftly by Seo Mun-Hwarin, who shattered their limbs.

The others were either subdued by the Namgung Clan or surrendered the moment they saw Hwangbo Yeongcheon's severed head.

The only real surprise was how well Seol Lihyang performed.

The Hwangbo Clan had thrown their full force into attacking the Namgung Clan.

The Sub-Perfection masters were stopped by Seo Mun-Hwarin and Namgung elders, but there were still many other warriors.

Seol Lihyang's martial arts combined demonic sound techniques and yin-cold internal energy.

Her attacks were hard to block, and once hit, enemies froze almost instantly, unable to move.

And with her Pure Yin Physique, she wielded absurdly pure and powerful yin energy.

So, what happened was obvious—

No matter how many enemies stood before her, if they weren't Peak Stage or higher, they fell helplessly.

Once things settled, we questioned Hwangbo Guang and the other survivors.

And then—

“...This situation was worse than I imagined.”

“What do you mean?”

Namgung Jong had gathered our group to share what he'd discovered. He let out a deep sigh.

“It seems the entire Hwangbo Clan had been under the control of Hwangbo Yeongcheon, that ghost from the past.”

“We already figured as much.”

“But anyone who learned the clan's martial arts was required to meet him at least once. Using certain drugs and sorcery, he planted a deep-seated fear of himself in their unconscious minds.”

“...I see. That would work.”

Martial artists are prideful by nature.

Even if suppressed by power and fear, someone would eventually overcome it.

But if their rational mind is suppressed to the point where they don't even try to resist—That's a different story.

Not everyone, of course, but many would live in terror for the rest of their lives.

“He especially made sure to reinforce that fear in the Clan Lord and his successor. That might explain the rumors of the Hwangbo Clan's increasing violence.”

“But fear doesn't erase humiliation and shame.”

The most direct way to release such humiliation is to kill the source. But the easiest method is to lash out at others—those more vulnerable.

“On top of that, if someone got injured, stood out, or made a small mistake, they were immediately eaten. Especially outsiders who came hoping to join the Hwangbo Clan— None of them lasted a day before becoming a meal.”

“...How many people did they eat?”

“I don’t know the exact number. But according to the Hwangbo Clan Lord—who had been closest to Hwangbo Yeongcheon for the longest time—he personally knew of over a hundred.”

“...Maybe I let him die too easily.”

“You pierced his throat and let him bleed out slowly. That’s more than enough. No need for us to become cruel just because our enemy was.”

Namgung Jong shook his head, then cleared his throat.

“Anyway, most of them were forced into battle under threat of being eaten. They did harm Namgung Clan members, so I don’t intend to forgive them—But since they’re all falling over themselves to reveal the Hwangbo Clan’s secrets, we’ve locked them in the prison for now.”

“What will you do next?”

“First, I’ll wait for my father to return. The urgent part is over, and the final decision must come from the Clan Lord.

Oh, and of course, your contributions will be formally recognized then, Brother Cheon.”

He smiled as he glanced between me and Tang Sowol.

“And we’d best calculate the Tang Clan’s contribution and debts carefully... otherwise, it could turn into a mess.”

“Ehh... Let’s hope not...”

“Haha...”

Tang Sowol and I laughed awkwardly.

Then Seo Mun-Hwarin, who had been silently listening, began poking me in the back.

“Hey, you. Hey, you.”

“What is it, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin? If it’s about refreshments, I should remind you—you already ate mine too.”

Crumbs still clinging to her mouth, Seo Mun-Hwarin shook her head with a pout.

“That’s not why I called you. The master of the house has returned. I thought I should let you know in advance.”

“...Huh?”

I turned around, confused—

**Thud.**

Something heavy hit the ground, followed by the door flying open.

A middle-aged man entered, his expression sharp and icy.

Though it was my first time seeing his face, the atmosphere around him was as cutting as a drawn blade.

The Sword King.

The head of the Namgung Clan had finally returned.

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

**Clatter.**

The door to the room we were sitting in burst open, and a middle-aged man with a cold, stern face strode in.

There were few who could freely enter a room where Namgung Jong, the young lord of the Namgung Clan, resided.

But beyond that, there was another reason we could be certain of the man's identity.

The sharp aura reminiscent of a finely forged sword. Even though his height wasn't imposing, the pressure he exuded felt as if he were looking down from the heavens.

A man who carried such a presence could only be one person in all of the Central Plains.

The Sword King.

The head of the Namgung Clan had finally returned.

While we were overwhelmed by his aura and could only swallow silently—

“Father?”

“It seems you've made some progress.”

The Sword King suddenly smiled with satisfaction. For a moment, I wondered what I had just heard.

No, on his way here, he must've seen the ruined buildings and the chaotic state of things. Yet the first thing he mentioned was Namgung Jong's progress?

Sure, considering how he'd been sparring with me and others all day, occasionally receiving advice from Seorin, and now even experiencing real combat, it was only natural that he'd have improved to some extent.

Still, he was the head of the Namgung Clan and Namgung Jong's father. Shouldn't he have first asked what happened, or whether his son was hurt?

I didn't think they were a family overflowing with affection like the Tang Clan, but I hadn't expected that Namgung Jong's progress would be his first concern above all else.

Not that it was wrong per se, but... there was something oddly off-putting about it.

So, both Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and I were briefly taken aback, unsure how to respond.

Namgung Jong, however, showed no trace of resentment. Instead, he simply nodded, full of sincere joy and pride.

"It was thanks to the help of new friends."

“Indeed. All of them seem to be remarkable post-peak stage warriors.”

Only then did the Sword King turn to look our way and nod. Seeing that, I realized—

Ah, this is just how this family is.

I briefly nodded to myself. Then, Seorin gave a soft laugh and spoke up.

“It’s been a while, Namgung Dowi. Don’t tell me you see this one as just another post-peak junior?”

“What kind of nonsense is that to blurt out as soon as you appear?”

The Sword King snorted and shook his head. He didn’t act like this was our first meeting. Curious, I nudged Seorin lightly and asked,

“Senior Seorin, could it be that you’re acquainted with the Lord of the Namgung Clan?”

“Acquainted... is a bit of a stretch. He came to me once, made an absurd request, so I threw him out.”

“I’d heard a bit about it, so I figured you wouldn’t trouble me this time.”

“Ha! So you did know you were being a bother back then.”

She snorted in the same way and... hid behind me? No, more like she kept pressing into my back. She was practically pushing me forward.

Pretending I had no choice, I took a few steps ahead and asked,

“A request for the sword of the Seomun Clan, of all things... what was the nature of that connection?”

“It was nothing much. A few months after I had avenged my clan and gone into seclusion to reorganize our martial arts, he suddenly showed up and asked for the Seomun Clan’s sword techniques. Specifically, the sword forms.”

“Excuse me...??”

That was practically the behavior of a thug.

It felt like I had just glimpsed a side of the Sword King, a martial artist revered by swordsmen everywhere, that was deeply disappointing.

Perhaps realizing how that sounded, Seorin added a correction.

“Mn. I may have phrased it too maliciously. To be precise, he politely requested it. Though I refused, of course.”

“Well, if it was like that... Still, he really wanted the Seomun Clan’s sword techniques?”

“That’s right. I never learned the clan’s fist techniques anyway. And since I have no children or disciples, the Seomun Clan’s swordsmanship would end with me. He said it was a waste to let it disappear and asked me to pass it on to him.”

“I see... I’ve heard that the Seomun Clan was renowned for its swordsmanship, but was it enough for the Namgung Clan to come seeking it?”

When I asked that, the answer came not from Seorin, but from the Sword King himself.

“Not to that extent. The Seomun Clan’s sword was certainly excellent, but it could never compare to the Namgung Clan’s... still, it was a sword art I didn’t know.”

...Huh?

“The first reason was simply because I wanted to learn a sword I didn’t know. The second was that, even if it couldn’t match the Namgung Clan’s, the excellence of the Seomun sword was undeniable. Letting it vanish would be a shame. So, I went and asked.”

“Ha! Just because it’s a path I didn’t take, did you really think I would hand over the clan’s martial arts so easily?”

Seorin growled with as much ferocity as a puppy robbed of a bone.

But wait, didn’t she once say she’d teach me everything if I just changed my name to Seomun Hwi?

I quickly shook my head to clear that inappropriate thought and jabbed her in the side again, this time a little harder.

“?!”

“So, what ended up happening? I doubt the Sword King would’ve given up so easily.”

“You’re awfully persistent today... It really wasn’t a big deal. He tried to bribe me with a box full of gold, offered to help rebuild the Seomun Clan, and so on. It was bothersome.”

“I see. That does sound annoying.”

Back then, Seorin had just completed her revenge and was disillusioned with the martial world.

No wonder she was indifferent to promises of money or rebuilding the clan.

“In the end, I told him to take the martial arts I’d collected from my defeated enemies and get lost. This is the first time we’ve met since. I should’ve given them to you instead of throwing them at that sword-maniac.”

“Sword-maniac, really... Still, he is the owner of the house we’re staying in.”

“You saw it yourself. He returned to find his home in ruins and still brought up martial arts first.”

“Well... that’s true...”

I nodded before I realized it, and the Sword King let out a long sigh.

“What’s the point of asking things you already know? It’s clear there was a surprise attack, but you fended them off and threw them all into the dungeon. So the situation is mostly resolved. Judging by how many Namgung warriors were injured but few died, it wasn’t a major threat.”

“That’s all thanks to this one and Hwi.”

“Whoever contributed most, at least things didn’t get too serious.”

Look at that sharp tongue...

Whether or not Seorin sighed in exasperation, the Sword King continued speaking.

“How many times do you think the Namgung Clan gets attacked each month? From lunatics who want fame and swing their swords recklessly, to scoundrels trying to extort something, to idiots who don’t even realize we’re the Namgung Clan and just attack blindly. Even now, our trade caravans and businesses are probably under minor attacks.”

“T-That much?”

“Being known as the greatest clan under heaven means being at the top. You wouldn’t understand, being little more than a wandering rogue.”

“Kuh!”

Seorin’s expression contorted, while the Sword King Namgung Dowi smirked in satisfaction—though only briefly.

He soon let out a deep sigh.

“Of course, it’s rare for the main house to be attacked directly. I’ve never seen this much damage before. I don’t know exactly what happened while I was away, but it

couldn't have been ordinary. Still, you managed to handle it well. Then praise comes first. We can hear the details afterward.”

“Ah! So that's why you said Young Lord Namgung had made progress the moment you saw him!”

Tang Sowol clapped her hands as if she finally understood. But the Sword King twitched an eyebrow and shook his head.

“No. I simply saw that he had taken a step forward, so I praised him. As for the credit for handling the attack, I was just about to acknowledge that.”

Tang Sowol clamped her mouth shut. He really was... a strange one.

Ignoring our stunned expressions, the Sword King casually patted Namgung Jong's shoulder and finished his earlier compliment.

Then he turned to us and introduced himself.

“I am Namgung Dowi. As for you all... You seem to be of the Sichuan Tang Clan. The girl over there looks familiar, but I don't quite recall the others.”

He glanced briefly toward Tang Sowol, and we bowed politely in response.

“It is an honor to meet the Sword King, sir. I am Cheon Hwi-da, who recently became a son-in-law of the Sichuan Tang Clan.”

“S-Seol Lihyang, at your service.”

Namgung Dowi’s eyes widened slightly.

“Ah, the one the Black Lotus Sect Master gave the title of Blood Flame Sword Demon?”

“Yes. I am that Blood Flame Sword Demon, Cheon Hwi.”

A martial artist from a righteous sect would usually avoid mentioning such a nickname—especially one given by the Black Lotus Sect Master, and a name so ominous.

But now I knew. The reason Namgung Dowi confirmed whether I was the Blood Flame Sword Demon was not to reprimand me for it, but simply because he was impressed I had earned such recognition.

“I see. You and the white-haired one... Come to think of it, the Lord of the Murim Alliance told me not to use her old title. What should I call you, then?”

“Call this one the Head of the Seomun Clan.”

“Mn. Though you have no home or family, I don’t know why you insist on that title—but if that’s what you prefer.”

“Eeit! We helped you when you were attacked, and this is the thanks we get?”

“I meant no offense. Regardless, it makes sense now. With the Blood Flame Sword Demon and the Seomun Clan Head here, it’s no wonder things were resolved smoothly.”

Namgung Dowi nodded. Sitting beside Namgung Jong, his face remained expressionless, but his tone grew markedly more serious.

“Well then, tell me in detail what happened.”

Namgung Jong began.

“The attackers were from the Hwangbo Clan, Father.”

And with that, everything we had compiled spilled forth.

What had happened at the Dragon and Phoenix Assembly. The arrival of Hwangbo Gwang at the Namgung Clan. Our party’s visit to fulfill our prior promise of a match.

The crazed martial artists who later breached the Namgung walls.

Both Seorin and I added explanations from our perspectives. Since we had been thinking about and dealing with this for days, the explanation didn’t take long.

As Namgung Jong finished, he took a breath and concluded,

“It’s absurd. To think someone believed they could truly raise their martial realm like that.”

“The cleanup is mostly complete. From here, it’s just a matter of your decision, Father.”

“What decision? Most of the Hwangbo Clan’s forces are either dead or in the dungeon, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Then their main house in Shandong should be empty.”

“So we heard under interrogation.”

“Then there’s no need to go all the way to Shandong. I’ll be entering the palace in ten days to assist the Imperial Prince’s training. I’ll explain the situation to His Majesty then. He’ll take care of it. Oh, but we should transcribe the Hwangbo Clan’s martial arts first.”

“Already underway. As for the prisoners, I’ll await the royal decree.”

“Well done. Now, about you all...”

Namgung Dowi looked our way and hesitated briefly before speaking.

“If it were up to me, I’d ask what you wanted. But the current situation doesn’t allow for much. Funds and elixirs are needed in many places now.”

Rebuilding destroyed buildings and compensating injured warriors would cost a lot. There weren’t many deaths, but many were wounded and would need elixirs to heal their internal injuries.

“Besides, I doubt gold or elixirs mean much to you now.”

He was right. The Tang Clan had plenty of money, and we had recently received elixirs from Clan Leaders Paeng and Eon, so we weren’t lacking.

It would be nice to have more, but what we needed was something else.

“So I thought about it... and decided it’s best to give what I’m best at.”

“And that is?”

The Sword King looked me straight in the eye and said,

“I cannot teach you the Namgung Clan’s martial arts—but I can show you. That much should be fine.”

“That’s more than enough.”

For someone like me, who had barely grasped the edge of willpower, the chance to experience the Sword King’s blade was more valuable than anything.

Seorin sometimes helped with my training, but a swordsman and a fist-user had fundamental differences.

As I answered with a satisfied smile, Tang Sowol, Seol Lihyang, and Seorin slowly raised their hands behind me.

“Um... any chance there are rare poisons, or maybe a venomous spirit beast nearby?”

“Ah, I’m fine with just elixirs...”

“This one plans to one day rebuild the Seomun Clan, so she needs money. Lots of it.”

Their cautious but firm requests made Namgung Dowi avert his gaze.

Then, with a grimace, he shut his eyes tight.

“Hey, will the wound be okay?”

It was autumn.

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

The Namgung Clan was the current era’s Supreme Clan Under Heaven.

No one could deny this.

Not only was their raw power immense, but the name itself—Supreme Clan Under Heaven—drew all manner of people and resources toward them.

That talent and wealth constantly circulated around the Namgung Clan was, in a way, only natural.

Tang Sowol, who said all this, smiled softly and spoke.

“So, don’t worry. Even if it takes a bit of time, they’ll send it eventually. It’s just that, right now, there are too many things that need to be handled immediately.”

“You make it sound like they owe us a debt.”

“Eh? Surely the Sword King wouldn’t just turn his back and pretend none of this happened, right? You don’t need to worry.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Maybe it’s a kind of prejudice... but orthodox martial artists usually act all humble at times like this, saying they’ve only done their duty as people.”

“Oh, and after that, were you expecting some kind of back-and-forth bargaining, both sides pretending and negotiating with roundabout words?”

“Something like that? It’s a bit different from what happened with Clan Leader Paeng and Clan Leader Eon.”

Back then, I’d already given notice to Paeng Woojin and Yeon Gahye. Everyone understood the situation, so it was natural to get straight to the point.

Tang Sowol nodded, seeming to understand.

“Usually, it goes just like you said. Maybe not for someone in logistics, like a branch head, but for someone at the top—like a clan head or sect leader—they’re always conscious of how they appear to others.”

“Then why...?”

“Because our Tang Clan isn’t exactly ‘usual,’ is it?”

For a moment, I was speechless, but thinking it over—it was true.

The Tang Clan was sensitive to debts. Whether they gave or received.

Grace and resentment alike were debts of the heart.

In other words, you could say that the Tang Clan's family tradition was to leave no debts of the heart behind.

Meanwhile, the Namgung Clan simply seemed to dislike paying attention to anything outside of the sword.

You could call it a mutual understanding, in a way.

“That’s a relief. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if this was okay... so I was a little anxious.”

“Whaaat?! Are you saying you were thinking about our reputation, Brother Cheon?!”

Tang Sowol looked at me like she’d just seen a raccoon writing calligraphy.

Why are you so surprised?

“Well... You’re the kind of person who shows up to the Dragon and Phoenix Assembly looking like you’re ready to fight someone, talks informally to enemies regardless of their status, and then draws your sword mid-conversation.”

“Okay, all of that is technically true, but saying it like that makes me sound like some kind of brute.”

Everything I did had a reason.

While I was sighing at the ridiculous slander, Tang Sowol covered her mouth with a lightly clenched fist and giggled.

“Well, even if I was joking, I was a little surprised. I don’t think you’re the kind of person who would do anything for gain, but... I thought you were someone who valued honesty more than appearances.”

“You’re not wrong. But there’s one thing you’re misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“I am someone who becomes honest in front of gain. But Tang Sowol, you’re more precious to me than gold—so isn’t it natural that I’d care?”

“Oh my...”

Tang Sowol’s emerald eyes widened. She stared at me for a long time before narrowing her gaze and starting to circle around me.

Once she had gone around three times, I couldn’t take it anymore and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck.

“Kyaa!”

Her scream had a hint of amusement. I let it pass through one ear and out the other and asked,

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“What else? Lately, unless I cling to you first, you barely pay me any attention. And now you suddenly say something sweet, so I had to check if you ate something weird... or if you’re some impostor in disguise.”

“Isn’t that an unfairly harsh evaluation of me?”

“Well, you haven’t really done anything to raise your evaluation, have you?”

At her words, I thought back over the past few months.

Aside from a few idle moments together, I hadn’t really taken any time to be with her.

Training, fighting, more training, and getting wrapped up in one incident after another.

That was all I’d been doing. Realizing it again, even I started to feel a bit frustrated.

It wasn’t like I had no desire for martial prowess—but more than that, I also wanted to live well with my people.

“If so, how about this—after I finish the sparring session with the Sword King, let’s stop by a few places on our way back to the Tang Clan.”

“A few places? Where exactly are you thinking?”

“Mm.”

I flipped through the mental map in my head before nodding.

“Last time, we passed through Hubei on the way to the Murim Alliance. So this time, why don’t we take a little detour and stop by Henan?”

“Henan?”

“Yeah. If we’re lucky, we might even get a glimpse of Shaolin Temple.”

“You do know Shaolin is a restricted zone for women, right?”

“Of course I know. I’m not saying we go to the main temple, just that we visit the parts open to pilgrims.”

“Hmm. That’s not a bad idea, but...?”

Tang Sowol lightly grabbed my side—not painfully, but in a way that said she could pinch me at any time—and gave me a sidelong glance.

“Let’s be a bit more honest, shall we?”

“Well, we visited the Taoist sects when we went to Zhongnan Mountain. Now I’m curious about what the Buddhist sects are like.”

Haah. Well, it should be fine. It’s not like we’re the only ones having fun—this seems like a fair balance.

“Alright then. We’ll go through Henan on our way back.”

Tang Sowol gave a wry smile and nodded, as if she had no choice.

Instead of removing the hand from my side, she started poking at my stomach.

“Ahem. By the way, the elixir Clan Leader Paeng gave you must’ve worked well.”

“What are you talking about now?”

“I mean... the way your abs have gotten more defined and firmer—wait, what are you making me say?!”

**Smack!**

Tang Sowol suddenly smacked me in the chest. It didn't hurt. I was just dumbfounded.

“You're the one who brought it up, and now you're blaming me? And wait—have you been checking out my external training progress? How would you even notice the difference—?”

“Ahhh! I can't hear anything anymore!”

She clamped her hands over her ears and shrieked.

Her eyes snapped open.

“Brother Cheon! You didn't hear anything I just said, right?!”

Her desperation was clear. Taking that into account, I chose my words carefully before replying.

“How lewd.”

“Hiiiiiaack!”

Tang Sowol collapsed with a wail. She had brought it on herself.

She crouched down in the middle of the path, trembling. I crouched next to her and poked her in the side.

It was soft.

“Hmm... not sure.”

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

“Same as you did to me. You checked my stomach, so I did the same. ...Now we’re even. Let’s call it off, shall we?”

“ ”

Her expression softened, as if realizing I was trying to ease the awkwardness.

Still sitting on the ground, she leaned her head on her arm.

Her soft cheek was pressed against her forearm, making it puff slightly to the side.

For the same reason, my gaze kept being drawn to the chest that bulged slightly under her knees—but I managed to resist.

Then came her teasing voice.

“Heheh. Brother Cheon, now you’re an accomplice too.”

“You could say that.”

Our eyes met, and we both burst into laughter.

After giggling for a while, Tang Sowol finally stood up.

“Alrighty. Anyway, I like your plan, Brother Cheon. If you promise not to stick your nose into any unnecessary trouble this time.”

“I promise. Honestly, I’m getting a little tired of constantly getting caught up in all this.”

“Good! Then I’ll go tell Hyang and Sister Hwarin. Oh, and I’ll also tell them not to gather in your room tonight.”

“Don’t treat gathering in my room every night like it’s some natural law.”

I chuckled and shook my head as we parted ways.

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How long had I been holed up in my room, sharpening my focus?

Before I knew it, the setting sun had completely vanished beyond the ridgeline, and a soft, gentle moonlight now bathed the sky.

My senses had grown sharp—heightened from repeatedly recalling the sensation of embedding willpower into my sword. Maintaining that focus, I made my way toward the training hall that Namgung Dowi had mentioned.

Had he given advance notice?

A martial artist in a deep navy uniform greeted me as if he had been waiting. Judging by the intensity of his presence—reaching the very edge of the Peak Stage—he was clearly no ordinary warrior. Likely, he held a considerable position within one of the Namgung Clan’s martial units.

The fact that such a master, not a mere servant, had come to guide me meant only one thing—this training hall I was heading to was no place an outsider could enter casually.

I was being led far, far beyond the areas allowed for guests, into the very heart of the Namgung Clan.

There, lit by dozens of lanterns, was a training ground that shone as brightly as day even in the night.

Its exterior appeared old and weathered. But the moment I stepped inside, I understood why the Namgung Clan had left such a decrepit place untouched, why it was kept so tightly hidden.

Sword marks.

Countless sword strikes were etched into the floor and walls of the training hall.

Some bore the traces of fairly basic forms, while others contained mysteries that couldn't be matched even by advanced martial arts techniques.

But what drew my gaze more than anything was the man standing at the center of it all.

A middle-aged figure radiating a presence sharper than any famed blade.

His back—like a sword given human form—I called out to him softly.

“Sword King, sir.”

“You’ve come.”

The martial artist who bore the essence of every sword within this hall turned to face me.

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

A training hall engraved with countless sword marks.

For any seasoned swordsman, just glancing around would be enough to roughly gauge the nature of these strikes.

Indeed, this was a place surrounded by swords—swords without number.

And at the center stood the master of all those swords.

“Sword King, sir.”

“You’re here.”

Namgung Dowi slowly turned to face me. After giving me a brief once-over, he nodded in satisfaction.

“It’s truly curious. Still in your post-peak stage, yet bearing such a savage sword within you. And to think, you’re a martial artist of the orthodox sects—not from the Demonic Cult or the Unorthodox Factions.”

“What did you see in me?”

“I didn’t see anything in particular. I merely sensed a bit of your sincerity.”

Namgung Dowi lightly tapped the back of his neck with his fingertips and continued.

“You came here intending to cut me down for real.”

“This kind of opportunity doesn’t come often. Of course I’ll give it my all.”

I never even heard the sound of his blade being drawn. I didn't know when it had been unsheathed—it was that natural.

The Changcheon Sword, a treasured blade of the Namgung Clan, glimmered crimson in the light.

“No need for lengthy talk. Come at me. As long as you don't collapse from exhaustion, I'll go along with you until the morning sun rises.”

“I came well-rested just for that, so don't worry.”

With a slight smirk, I drew my sword.

It wasn't the temporary blade I had used against Hwangbo Yeongcheon.

This was a black sword newly forged while the Hwangbo Clan's warriors were being captured and interrogated.

A sword refined and perfectly balanced just for me.

The weight distribution, the length, even the feel of the grip—it all felt effortlessly natural in my hand.

The sensation of the blade rooting itself from my hand as if it were part of me—without any need to focus on it.

Entering the state of Divine Sword Unity with far less resistance, I assumed my stance.

I kept my shoulders relaxed and raised my sword to a moderate height. My body leaned forward slightly, as if ready to spring at any moment, while my soles remained firmly planted on the ground.

Dark-red sword aura flared across the blade.

“I’ll begin, then.”

Before I even waited for Namgung Dowi’s reply, I pushed off the ground.

**Boom!**

The Raging Thunder Steps, modified once by the pre-regression Seorin to suit me, then refined again post-regression after I saw the original technique with my own eyes.

Namgung Dowi, already settled and emanating a heavy, pressurized presence, calmly evaluated my sword.

“Fast. But—”

“It’s not enough yet.”

I clenched my teeth and twisted my body again.

Through repeated bouts with Namgung Jong, I revisited my old martial arts. Much of it was simple recollection, but some techniques revealed new insights.

One such insight was my own version of Chamjeok Sword, a technique originally meant to cut falling raindrops.

Raindrops don’t fall singly—they come down in countless, unending streams.

To cut them all, speed alone wasn't enough—I needed continuous strikes, unrelenting swordplay.

Just like now.

“Hrrgh!”

The moment my sword clashed with Namgung Dowi's, the shock was enough to fling my body back.

I twisted my muscles and joints to absorb the force, then refocused entirely on my sword.

**Sswaek!**

My blade moved even faster than before. Namgung Dowi's gaze shifted slightly.

“This... this is a Daoist method.”

He was right. I didn't have the breath to reply, but he was correct.

The uninterrupted, flowing rhythm I had learned from the Zhongnan Sect.

It was truly a refined method, but not one I could fully embrace.

A martial art that begins and ends with the self—common in orthodox sects, but something I never truly understood.

After all, a swordfight involves at least two people, not one.

If I was to generate a “flow,” then it had to be a current that consumed not just me, but my opponent as well.

That conviction became the heart of my sword.

**Cheng! Chaeng! Cheng!**

The ringing of clashing metal filled the air without pause.

Since Namgung Dowi was matching my sword energy perfectly, there was no eruption of internal energy—only the pure clash of blades.

He continued to deflect my unrelenting strikes.

To an outsider, it might sound like rainfall—countless clashes like drops striking stone.

Then, for the first time, Namgung Dowi swung his sword.

A single, simple slash from left to right. But within it lay the subtlety of Absorption.

The torrent of sword strikes I'd unleashed clung to his blade as if drawn in—then were completely scattered.

With just one swing, he swept away the storm of attacks and nodded.

“Impressive. You’re fast, precise, and you leave few openings. Most opponents would be overwhelmed by your continued assault before they even understood what was happening. But it’s a tiring sword style.”

“Phew. You saw through it exactly.”

A sword style that began as the fastest blade I could swing—feeding off the clash to grow even faster, drawing strength from my opponent's power.

In other words, the burden on my body would only increase as the fight went on.

It wasn’t just tiring—if pushed too far, it could tear muscle or melt flesh.

“A sword like this must be used with a set limit. Otherwise, you’ll collapse before your opponent does. Hmm... if it were me, I’d blend in the principle of Explosion once your blade reaches a certain peak.”

“You mean... Explosion?”

“Yes. I don’t know the name, but your footwork—it gains speed by detonating internal energy, yes? Apply that to your sword. With this blade, it should be possible.”

“Thank you. I’ll take that into account.”

I’d been thinking of something similar, but what I had in mind was the principle of Rotation—a spiraling blade that maximized destructive force.

It was meant to grind down a panicked opponent, weapon and all.

But with this sword, forged of solid blacksteel and unmatched in durability, simply detonating my energy might be the better option.

As I bowed my head, Namgung Dowi flicked his sword tip and spoke.

“It’s a fine sword, but you weren’t planning to show me only this one, were you? Let’s see the others too.”

“I was planning to.”

Channeling internal energy through my slightly fatigued body to restore vitality, I raised my sword again.

I aligned the blade's center with my line of sight, its tip resting just within view. My stance was wide, feet shoulder-length apart, weight centered low and solid.

Unlike before, this was a standard, textbook stance. But Namgung Dowi didn't criticize—he simply watched quietly.

Before swinging again, I spoke.

“Just so it's clear, I hold no personal grudge against you, Sword King. This technique is simply... that kind of martial art.”

“What exactly are you about to show me that requires such build-up?”

“Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.”

Strictly speaking, Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art was a mental technique, not a sword art. But having never properly learned martial arts, the line between the two was blurred for me.

The rapid strikes from earlier were a sword born from recent enlightenment—I simply wanted to show it and receive feedback.

But the sword I was about to swing now—wasn't for showing.

**Ffwoosh!**

A murderous aura spread outward from me like a wildfire, engulfing the entire training hall.

Namgung Dowi's eyes widened slightly, surprised by the density of the killing intent.

“This is my true martial art.”

“I see. I already knew you came with the intent to cut me down, but I didn't expect it to be this serious.”

With a pleased chuckle, Namgung Dowi shifted his stance.

“If you’re coming at me with that, it’s only right that I respond in kind. ...After all, isn’t that what you wanted to see when you challenged me to this duel?”

With that, Namgung Dowi naturally lowered his sword toward the ground.

At a glance, it didn’t even look like he intended to swing. But I’d seen it before, through Namgung Jong.

Even like this, he could swing any blade with absolute ease.

Realizing that, I suddenly felt a suffocating weight settle over me.

It was the subconscious battle of perceptions that all high-level martial artists waged. The difference lay only in how far and how clearly each could perceive—but it never stopped.

And right now, mine ground to a halt.

No matter how I swung, I felt I couldn’t reach him.

As that hopelessness set in, Namgung Dowi's presence began to push back against my killing aura.

His sheer aura forced mine back into my body, becoming a pressure that crushed down on my shoulders.

When Namgung Jong used it, it wasn't like this. His force was powerful, but it was simply a sword meant to overwhelm—something closer to a brute-force blade.

But now, experiencing it from Namgung Dowi directly—I understood.

This despair, which made the opponent feel so overmatched they would bind their own hands and feet and merely look up—This was the true Imperial Sword Form.

But I was too stubborn to bow before it.

I reignited the killing intent I had been forced to swallow—stronger, fiercer.

Even knowing nothing would work, I still burned everything I had just to cut down the man before me.

Smelling the faint scent of burning from the tip of my nose, I gripped my sword tighter.

Namgung Dowi nodded, pleased.

“I see. So this is the savage sword you carry within.”

I answered not with words, but by swinging my sword.

For those like us, the sword was a clearer expression of intent than words could ever be.

**Kkaang!**

To my sword-thrown question, his sword delivered an answer.