

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 51-60

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

A thick layer of poison dust piled up above me as if snow had fallen.

My body was slowly going numb, and in the distance, Tang Sowol was looking this way with teary eyes, filled with worry. At the same time, I became acutely aware of the dense, oppressive killing intent surrounding me.

This... To an outsider, it would look like a perfect case of deviation into demonic cultivation.

So, to reassure Tang Sowol, I opened my mouth to speak.

"Oh...!?"

I was going to say, "*This is a misunderstanding. This isn't deviation, just a side effect of my martial arts. It'll settle on its own after a while.*"

However, due to the unnecessarily potent paralytic poison, I only managed to get out the first syllable before my body froze completely.

In the end, I stood still in an awkward posture—one hand loosely holding my sword, the other stretched out toward Tang Sowol.

Had I neglected lower body training even slightly, I would have toppled over right then and there.

As I sighed inwardly, Tang Sowol started stomping her feet in panic.

"W-What should we do?! Brother Cheon has fallen into deviation...!"

"Calm yourself, young lady. It is true that Brother has succumbed to deviation, but it doesn't seem to be at a severe level."

"What do you mean it's not severe?! Can you really say that after seeing that thick killing intent, Vice Commander?! That's not just mere presence—it's *killing intent!* He's practically pouring out his will to kill! Does that look sane to you?!"

That's a bit much.

I understood the point she was making. After all, this killing intent was indeed a result of the deviation I had swallowed whole without overcoming.

But still, that doesn't mean I wasn't hurt by those words. *Not in my right mind?* That's going too far.

Just as I was inwardly grumbling, Ghost Shadow Thief let out an exhausted sigh and sided with the vice commander of the Blood Venom Unit.

"The vice commander is correct. That child may be radiating a monstrous killing intent, but it's not too late. Do you remember the last thing he tried to say?"

"He was going to say, *Don't come near.* Right?"

"Correct. And he raised an empty hand instead of his sword, as if to stop us. Even while being consumed by that overwhelming killing intent, there's still something precious to him that he refuses to forget."

"...Ah!"

Tang Sowol's eyes widened as if she had been struck by a realization.

But really, there was no reason for her to be so moved.

That outstretched hand wasn't meant to tell her *not to come closer*. It was telling her to stop spreading poison.

Even with an antidote pill in my mouth and my inner energy actively working to counteract the effects, the poison was still strong enough to paralyze me. Just how potent was this poison, anyway?

As I sighed repeatedly, the Soul-Chasing Flying Butterflies finally stopped scattering poison—whether because they had exhausted their supply or because they decided it was enough.

Tang Sowol retrieved them and looked at me with a distant expression before slowly stepping closer.

Even as she grew pale from coming into contact with the rampant killing intent, she didn't give up and stubbornly approached one step at a time.

It was oddly admirable.

Even though she was choosing to suffer unnecessarily...

I had long since suppressed my intent deep within myself. The killing intent spilling out now was merely residual emotion.

It was the same as someone shouting when frustrated—loud and disruptive for a moment, but ultimately cathartic and soothing once it passed.

Once I had let out enough, it would settle naturally.

Yet, Tang Sowol insisted on pushing through.

With careful hands, she reached out and gently caressed my face.

“It’s alright, Brother Cheon. I will definitely bring you back to your old self.”

“No matter how many years it takes.”

With those words, she slowly pulled me into an embrace.

The lingering tension of battle left my body hypersensitive, making her warmth even more pronounced.

The softness pressing against me through her robes, her unique scent enveloping me, and the heat radiating from her skin—all of it dulled the sharp edge of my aura.

Right.

If my personal hell was created when I lost Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin...

Then the one who pulled me out of that hell was none other than Tang Sowol.

This outcome was only natural.

My emotions calmed faster than expected. Whether she knew this or not, Tang Sowol rested her forehead against my shoulder and whispered.

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? That you seem like a sword without a sheath—always on edge, never at rest.”

Her soft hair tickled my cheek, and her faint breath brushed against my ear as she continued.

“Then I will be your sheath. I will be the place you can return to. So, for now, rest in my arms.”

After saying this, she slowly pulled away.

Then, she raised her hand, gathering inner energy into her fingertips as if preparing to perform acupuncture for energy circulation.

But by then, I had already been neutralizing the poison myself.

With my strengthened Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art, I could efficiently burn away the toxins within me.

The high-grade antidote pill hidden under my tongue was still diligently absorbing the remaining poison.

And when combined with my precise inner energy control, even the poisons enhanced with Purple Flower Poison Enhancing Grass weren't enough to keep me from moving.

It wasn't as if I had actually fallen into deviation and lost control over my inner energy.

With a determined motion, I bent the arm I had previously extended.

*Poof.*

"...Huh?"

Despite only using one arm, it resulted in an embrace.

Caught off guard by the unexpected movement, Tang Sowol fumbled in confusion, but I simply pulled her closer.

"D-Deviation... No."

"Ack—Hyaa!?"

She let out a strange hiccuping noise.

"Hurry up. Antidote."

"Y-Yes!"

Still dazed, she hurriedly reversed the effects of the paralytic poison she had injected into me.

I could finally breathe again.

"Whew."

"Hiik!"

As I let out a sigh of relief, Tang Sowol trembled for some reason. Her eyes spun dizzily as she asked in a flustered voice.

“Brother Cheon, could you please explain what just happened?”

“There’s nothing to explain. I was never in deviation to begin with.”

“...What?”

“The killing intent was just a side effect of my martial arts. I may have overexerted myself, causing it to run rampant, but I was always in full control.”

“T-Then, everything I just did...”

“Mm. I can only say that I appreciate your concern.”

Tang Sowol’s face turned red as she realized her mistake.

I chuckled at her embarrassment and teased, “Didn’t you say you’d be my sheath?”

"Kyaah!"

Flustered, she lightly pounded my back with her fists.

When she tried to pull away, I tightened my hold and pulled her back in.

"Where do you think you're going? Didn't you promise to be the place I return to?"

"F-Forget that! Please, just forget it!"

"No can do. You dramatically declared it and even told me to rest in your arms. How could I possibly forget such a devoted fiancée?"

"Kkyyaaaaaaa!"

Tang Sowol let out a near scream, trembling with sheer embarrassment.

I smirked.

"I see. So if I ever really fall into deviation, this is how you'd react. Seems like I must never let myself be consumed by it."

"Enough! And it's not just me who misunderstood! Even the vice commander and Ghost Shadow Thief—!"

"True, they were mistaken too. But unlike you, they didn't recklessly charge into my killing intent just to hug me."

"Eeek! Eeeit!"

Tang Sowol let out a sound—not just from embarrassment but mixed with a bit of frustration as well.

No, she wasn't just making noises. She had buried her face against my neck and was now biting it.

Not hard enough to draw blood, but firm enough to sting as she gnawed at my skin.

With an exasperated chuckle, I lightly patted her back.

“Alright, enough with the bite marks. Let go. The fight is over—we need to wrap things up.”

“I won’t forget this, Brother. One day, I *will* get my revenge.”

“Oh, how terrifying. But don’t forget—I’m part of the Tang Clan now too. You think I’ll forget the grudge of having paralytic poison dumped on my head? I’ll remember this forever. Every time I’m feeling down, I’ll think about it and laugh.”

“Can’t you just lose once? Just once?! I *am* five years older than you, you know?!”

“If I did, I wouldn’t have a reason to be holding you like this now, would I?” I smirked. “Besides, even though it was a misunderstanding, the way you stepped up for me was quite... impressive.”

“Ugh!”

Tang Sowol swallowed hard, her face reddening for an entirely different reason now.

I found myself unable to look away.

But, of course, we couldn't stay like this forever.

The oppressive killing intent I had been exuding had completely faded by now, and at some point, the vice commander of the Blood Venom Unit had approached.

Her expression was as calm as ever, but the slight upward curve of her lips gave away a mix of relief and satisfaction.

"I'm glad you're safe. While you rest with the young lady, I'll finish searching the bodies."

"That would be helpful, thanks. You're not injured, are you?"

"I used up most of the poison I brought, but I have no serious wounds. I appreciate your concern, Brother."

She bowed slightly before stepping away to inspect the corpses of the assassins.

Tang Sowol, perhaps still too embarrassed to meet my eyes, had lowered her head.

I reached out and lightly tapped the back of her head with my fingertips.

“I told you to rest. You’re actually exhausted, so sit down for a bit.”

Without a word, Tang Sowol nodded and stepped back.

This time, I let her go.

She wasn’t the only one who needed to take a break. I finally sheathed my sword and let myself sink to the ground.

A little farther away, Ghost Shadow Thief had completely sprawled out, lying flat on his back.

He was covered in bloodstains here and there, but none of it seemed to be his own. Still, given how weakened he was, I couldn't help but be a little concerned.

I pulled out a bundle of jerky from my robe and tossed it toward him.

*Whiik—Thup.*

Without getting up, he reached out and snatched it from the air, glanced at me briefly, then nodded in thanks.

I nodded back before shifting my attention to Tang Sowol, who was sitting beside me, sighing heavily.

“I worked up an appetite.”

“Would you like some pork jerky?”

“If you’re offering, I won’t refuse.”

Tang Sowol pulled out another portion of jerky and handed it to me. She also set aside a share for the vice commander.

As we quietly chewed, she spoke first.

“Well, we managed to put out the immediate fire, but... things are getting complicated.”

"Yeah. It would be nice if this was the end of it, but Sal Valley isn't the kind of group to just back off."

“I heard that even among them, Soul Reapers are considered valuable assets.”

“Which means they'll be even more determined to hunt us down. There's a huge difference between losing five Soul Reapers and failing a mission, versus sacrificing five Soul Reapers but *still* succeeding in their mission.”

“If we're unlucky, the King of Assassins might come after us himself.”

“‘A mission must always be completed’—that's the pride of Sal Valley, after all.”

And those Soul Reapers had swallowed Demonic Explosive Pills at the end. That was a secret technique of the Demonic Cult.

That meant there was a chance they weren't just working for the cult on a hired mission.

Thinking back, just a few months before the Demonic Cult's invasion, several renowned experts from the Murim Alliance had been assassinated by the King of Assassins himself.

The final victim managed to kill the assassin in a mutual death blow, bringing an end to the incident—but the event had caused an uproar big enough that even in distant Guangdong Province, the news had spread.

At the time, I had thought, *Ah, so Assassin King must have taken on a mission that was too much for him and died in the process.*

But now I wondered...

What if the Demonic Cult had been the one who issued that mission?

Or worse—what if Sal Valley had already sworn allegiance to them?

Either way, it was an extremely bad situation.

But at least this time, I knew about it in advance.

In my past life, I had been ignorant and caught completely off guard. And that was what led to... well, that ending.

But this time is different.

Ghost Shadow Thief could serve as a witness, and the Soul Reapers we killed were solid proof.

Things were about to get busy.

“We’ll have to move quickly.”

“Yes. We need to act before they send another wave of assassins.”

Though I had meant something different, she wasn’t wrong. If we were constantly on the run, unable to rest properly, we would gradually wear down.

And if things got any worse, we might end up unintentionally contributing to Sal Valley's infamy.

After a brief moment of thought, I spoke.

"We'll stick to the plan. We're heading to Zhongnan Mountain."

It was the closest place with the power to protect us from Sal Valley—and the only group that might be willing to help us. The Wudang Sect.

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The Blood Venom Unit's vice commander rummaged through the corpses and retrieved two unused Demonic Explosive Pills.

They weren't just from any assassins but specifically from the Soul Reapers I had slain in an instant. That alone showed how valuable they were.

In addition to that, she collected black-coated throwing daggers and poison-filled incense beads.

Unfortunately, there was no command scroll or a map indicating the location of their base.

After inspecting the items she handed over, I divided them between my robe and satchel—just in case I lost one, I wouldn't lose everything.

“This should be enough.”

Honestly, this alone wasn't enough to irrefutably prove they were from Sal Valley. But then again, those bastards were never foolish enough to carry incriminating evidence.

The reason Sal Valley's infamy was so great came down to one thing—their martial arts were exceptionally strong for an assassin organization.

Typically, martial arts develop over generations, steadily improving over time. That's why old and prestigious sects tend to be powerful.

But assassins?

The moment they get even slightly stronger, they're sent out on missions—where they die like flies. Structurally, it's impossible for an assassin group to develop powerful martial arts.

That's what made Sal Valley so terrifying.

They had somehow broken that norm.

With a light sigh, I checked my own condition.

I had minor injuries but nothing serious. However, my Qi pathways were still unstable from the strain of my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

I could circulate my inner energy just fine, but I wouldn't be able to exert full strength for a while.

“Tang Sowol, are you alright?”

“Yes. I'm a bit drained from overusing my inner energy, but it's nothing serious.”

“The vice commander said she had no injuries either. That’s a relief. As for you, Elder—”

“My legs are still gone, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“...Weren’t they always?”

“I meant there’s barely anything left intact to begin with. But I suppose I feel a bit better now. Eating something helped.”

Ghost Shadow Thief chuckled and tossed me his now-empty jerky pouch.

There hadn’t been much inside, but given that he had been starving before, it must have been a satisfying meal.

He even struck a ridiculous pose, flexing his arms as if to show off newfound strength.

Shaking my head with an amused sigh, I continued.

“We’re heading to Zhongnan Mountain to seek help from the Wudang Sect. Elder, will you still be heading to the Murim Alliance?”

“Why even ask? Of course, I’m going with you. Besides, you’re the one carrying all the evidence. What am I supposed to do, walk into the Murim Alliance empty-handed?”

Now that I thought about it, the North Sea Ice Palace’s cultivation technique and the elixirs made from human lives were still in my possession—the very things Ghost Shadow Thief had entrusted to me when he thought he was dying.

“I should return these to you.”

“Forget it. Better that you keep them. Honestly, it seems like they’re safer with you than with this old man.”

Ghost Shadow Thief waved me off, looking oddly relieved.

“...Understood. I’ll hold onto them, then.”

“Good. I’m counting on you.”

Most likely, he was telling me to deliver them to the Murim Alliance on his behalf if necessary.

I briefly considered handing them back but settled for patting the wooden case lightly.

Then, glancing at the others, I spoke again.

“Since our course is set, let’s head to Zhongnan Mountain. Vice commander, I know you haven’t had much time to rest, but could you guide us immediately?”

“That’s my job.”

With a brief nod, the Blood Venom Unit’s vice commander turned and retraced our path.

This time, we erased our tracks as we moved—per Ghost Shadow Thief’s advice.

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After three days of near-constant movement, taking only minimal breaks, the once-distant mountains had drawn much closer.

We even began seeing lines of commoners making their way toward Wudang.

Most importantly, there had been no further ambushes along the way.

“Brother Cheon, can we finally take a breather?”

“Yeah. From here on, we’re basically at Wudang’s front yard. We should be safe.”

“Phew....”

The moment I nodded, Tang Sowol let out an exaggerated sigh, as if she were expelling every last bit of air from her lungs.

People passing by gave us brief glances before shaking their heads in pity and hurrying along.

Noticing their looks, Tang Sowol blinked in confusion—but honestly, I couldn't blame them.

We looked horrible.

We had been using lightfoot techniques constantly, with no time to rest or wash.

Everyone was covered in dirt, looking utterly disheveled.

And to top it off, one of us had a missing leg.

From an outsider's perspective, it must have looked like we were desperate refugees, barely holding on as we dragged ourselves to Zhongnan Mountain.

Tang Sowol finally seemed to realize this, letting out a helpless chuckle.

But Ghost Shadow Thief paid no attention to the stares. Instead, he gazed at the stairway leading up to Wudang, a nostalgic look in his eyes.

“It’s been a long time.”

Tang Sowol’s expression stiffened. “...Elder, don’t tell me you’ve stolen something from here before, too?”

Ghost Shadow Thief puffed up his chest and proudly declared,

“I once borrowed the scabbard of Yoon Sword from the headmaster’s room.”

“A fine sword should have a fine scabbard. And it did. Haha.”

Tang Sowol’s mouth hung open in shock.

I was probably making a similar expression.

The Yoon Sword was the symbol of the Wudang Sect—its name taken from the Yoon Sword Style, a technique only the sect leader and their successor were allowed to learn.

And this man had stolen its scabbard.

Which meant he could have stolen the sword itself if he had wanted to.

Maybe this was what it took to earn the title of Ghost Shadow Thief.

I couldn't help but admire him.

At the same time, I wondered—what if he didn't have that self-imposed rule about never stealing things as valuable as a person's life or dignity?

If he hadn't, he might not just be a legend known only to a few but a figure recorded in the history of Murim itself.

If he had chosen to pass down his martial arts, the title of Ghost Shadow Thief could have been as renowned as Sword King or Poison King.

But he had chosen neither path.

In my past life, he had died alone in a cave, leaving behind only a ruined martial arts manual from the North Sea Ice Palace and discarded elixirs.

I never knew why he had torn up his own martial arts manual, but I could guess—it was probably to prevent his true techniques from being passed down.

Most martial artists, when facing death, loosen their grip on their knowledge, wanting to leave behind a legacy rather than let it vanish.

That's how clans are born. That's how sects are founded.

But Ghost Shadow Thief rejected that idea entirely.

He took pride in his thievery, but he didn't see it as something worth passing down.

I never asked why.

But to be honest, his footwork intrigued me.

I already had a footwork technique personally designed for me by the Ironblood Hall Leader, one that perfectly complemented my Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art.

Still, that didn't mean there was no room for improvement.

What intrigued me most was that despite their vastly different intents, his footwork and mine shared a certain profound principle.

If I could combine them...

“Why are you staring at this old man instead of your fiancée?”

“...Nothing important.”

“Cheh. How dull.”

His voice yanked me out of my thoughts.

Despite his casual chuckling, his gaze was firm—like he had drawn a line.

As if he already knew what I was thinking and was shutting it down in advance.

With a bitter smile, I spoke.

“There may not be many left who remember you, Elder, but just in case... it would be best to keep a low profile in Wudang.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t have a habit of robbing the same place twice.”

...What an absurd yet oddly reassuring statement.

As we ascended the stairs to Wudang, I finally voiced something that had been on my mind.

“By the way, about the martial arts you promised me.”

“Ah, you mean the deal we made—you save my life, and I let you take one martial art from my grave? I remember.”

Ghost Shadow Thief nodded nonchalantly.

Tang Sowol, however, widened her eyes.

“...Wait. You made that deal during a fight?! Brother Cheon?!”

“Well, if I’m going to risk my life, I might as well get something out of it.”

“But that’s...!”

Tang Sowol fidgeted, clearly unsure how to phrase her next words.

Before she could speak, Ghost Shadow Thief waved her off.

“It’s fine. Chivalry is admirable, but to me, it would have been a burden. I don’t have much time left—how could I ever repay such a debt?”

“I didn’t do it expecting repayment. We were in danger as well.”

“And yet, because of you two, I survived. If you hadn’t been there, I would have either starved to death in that cave or died fighting assassins.”

Ghost Shadow Thief let out a chuckle, as if speaking of his own death was amusing.

Then, he turned to me.

“So? What martial art do you want? Ideally, I’d take you to my grave and let you choose, but that would expose its location. If you tell me what you need, I’ll retrieve it for you later.”

“Before that, I have a question. Where does Glacial True Qi stand among the martial arts of the North Sea Ice Palace?”

“Ah... Are you looking for a yin-based cultivation technique? I wouldn’t recommend it. It’s considered a superior art, but it’s more of a double-edged sword.”

“A double-edged sword?”

“Yes. Glacial True Qi is the oldest technique of the North Sea Ice Palace. But that also makes it the most unrefined.”

Humans are meant to live in balance between yin and yang.

Men naturally lean toward yang, and women toward yin, but that balance must be maintained.

If the balance is broken, the body collapses.

“But Glacial True Qi ignores that entirely—it only focuses on accumulating the purest form of extreme yin energy.”

Without the freezing conditions of the North Sea, it can't be properly cultivated. And even if one somehow manages to learn it, the more their inner energy grows, the weaker their body becomes.

“You could cultivate the purest form of yin energy, but unless you're born with a special constitution like the Extreme Yin Pulse, you'll start wasting away once you reach the level of a top-class expert.”

“...Pure yin energy?”

“...A special constitution?”

Tang Sowol and I exchanged a very meaningful look.

Seol Lihyang.

Ghost Shadow Thief, unaware of our thoughts, continued explaining.

“On top of that, Glacial True Qi uses pure yin energy itself as a weapon. Think of it like a hard energy technique. Not just anyone can handle it—it’s already a dangerous energy to wield, and this technique manipulates it in large quantities.”

That was why, despite being a symbol of tradition and power in the North Sea Ice Palace, Glacial True Qi was gradually fading into obscurity.

“Several generations ago, the Palace Lord created Glacial White Divine Art, a new and improved yin cultivation technique. That completely overshadowed Glacial True Qi, reducing it to little more than a historical relic.”

That meant Glacial White Divine Art had become the Palace Lord's secret art, while Glacial True Qi was dismissed as obsolete.

However, if Seol Lihyang were to learn it, none of that would matter.

No matter how pure Glacial True Qi's yin energy was, it wouldn't compare to her Pure Yin Physique.

The only real problem was...

"If the North Sea Ice Palace finds out someone is cultivating Glacial True Qi, won't that cause trouble?"

"Well, it's rare for someone strong enough to recognize it to leave the North Sea. But even if they did find out, I doubt it would be a problem. The Ice Palace is slowly declining."

"...Declining?"

"Yes. They've been using a technique that absorbs extreme yin energy from one location for centuries. No matter how abundant nature's energy is, it was bound to run dry eventually."

“...I see.”

“They’re trying to come up with solutions, but who knows if it’ll work? Either way, if someone outside learns Glacial True Qi, they’d probably recruit them rather than attack them.”

That made sense.

If a martial sect was struggling to preserve its legacy, they wouldn’t be picky about who carried it on.

In that case, there was no reason not to give it to Seol Lihyang.

“I didn’t sneak into their vault and steal it for nothing. If you want a yin cultivation technique, there are other—”

“I’ll take Glacial True Qi.”

“...Did you even listen to a word I just said?”

“There’s no need to consider alternatives. Glacial True Qi it is.”

After my second firm declaration, Ghost Shadow Thief sighed.

“...Fine, fine. But don’t come complaining if it causes problems later, got it?”

“Understood.”

As his grumbling continued, we climbed the final steps.

The Wudang Sect’s plaque loomed before us.

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“CATCH THAT DAMN THIEF!”

“...Oh.”

I wasn't expecting them to recognize him instantly.

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

The Wudang Sect.

The large signboard, bearing its name in elegantly bold calligraphy, loomed over the long line of visitors waiting to enter.

There was an odd sense of pressure emanating from the sect's grand entrance. Yet, no matter how much I scrutinized it, I couldn't find anything specific that caused this feeling.

It wasn't particularly large—perhaps due to being built on the mid-slopes of Zhongnan Mountain.

It wasn't extravagantly decorated—likely because Wudang was a Daoist sect.

Even the disciples standing by the gate, serving as both guards and greeters, weren't particularly imposing.

So what was it?

What was creating this overwhelming presence?

As I pondered this, I realized something.

My gaze had been fixed on the signboard this entire time.

More precisely, I couldn't look away from it.

"That signboard..."

"Hm? What about it, Brother Cheon? Do you see something unusual?"

"...It contains a sword technique."

Yes.

The bold, flowing strokes weren't merely written—they had been wielded like a sword.

At first glance, the brushwork appeared soft and unrestricted, as if it could move freely in any direction.

But if one were to reach out and touch it, they would surely be cut.

Soft outside, steel within. A concept often seen in Daoist martial arts, but the depth within this inscription was on another level.

It felt akin to the weight of a legendary martial art—one refined by countless generations of geniuses.

An accumulation of centuries of knowledge and philosophy.

The kind of history that my martial arts—something crafted solely for myself—could never possess.

I found myself standing still, staring blankly at the signboard.

Beside me, Ghost Shadow Thief (귀영신투) chuckled while using a thick tree branch as a makeshift cane.

“Heh. Completely entranced, aren’t you?”

“Hmm... I don’t really see anything unusual, but do you, Ghost Shadow Thief?”  
Tang Sowol asked, tilting her head.

“Oh, I see it. Not as well as your fiancé, but I do. Something like this relies more on sword talent than on insight or enlightenment.”

“...Sword talent?”

Tang Sowol muttered absently.

Hearing that, I snapped out of my thoughts and shrugged.

“Well, I’d prefer not to look at it too deeply. Otherwise, I might start mistakenly thinking I’m some kind of genius.”

“Haha, but weren’t you one? Just listening to the stories about your past makes it sound like you were truly remarkable.”

Tang Sowol smirked and nodded, recalling the embarrassing tales I had shared before.

After chuckling for a moment, she lowered her voice and asked,

“So? What exactly did you see in that signboard, Brother Cheon?”

“Flow. And an endless cascade of transformations. But more importantly, it’s not about what principles it contains.”

Continuity.

That was the true essence of what I saw.

The softness, the variations, and the countless paths the strokes could take—those were merely means to an end.

Whether it manifested as a sword, as martial arts, or something entirely different, it was all in service of this continuous flow.

“The sword technique inscribed in the signboard is likely just a fragment of a greater art, so I can’t say for certain... but if someone were to wield it properly, I imagine it would feel like an endless chain of movements, seamlessly connecting from one to the next.”

Thinking back, all Daoist sword arts had a similar sensation.

In my past life, during the final battles when the righteous and demonic factions clashed, the Nine Great Sects and the Five Supreme Clans had already suffered immense losses.

But not everyone had died.

The survivors had joined forces, and as a result, I had fought alongside them, witnessing their martial arts firsthand.

Even though hatred and killing intent had tainted their swordsmanship, their techniques all shared one key characteristic:

Their movements flowed together in perfect harmony.

The Tai Chi Sword of Wudang.

The Plum Blossom Sword of Mount Hua.

All of them ensured that no matter what techniques were used or in what order, their effectiveness was never diminished.

Hearing my thoughts, Ghost Shadow Thief laughed and nodded.

“You’re exactly right. If you notice a commonality in Daoist martial arts, it’s because they all pursue the same Dao (道).”

“...The same Dao? That’s interesting, but I don’t quite understand.”

“Neither do I. I’m a thief, not a Daoist. But according to an old friend of mine, most Daoist sects descended from a single origin—the Quanzhen Sect.”

The Quanzhen Sect.

It was the first sect that sought to attain the Dao through martial arts.

Long ago, it had fallen apart, splintering into many factions before being wiped out entirely.

However, its teachings had spread, eventually forming the foundation of many modern Daoist sects.

“This mountain—Zhongnan Mountain—has great historical significance. It’s where Laozi, the founder of Daoism, once taught his disciples. And it’s also where the Quanzhen Sect was first established.”

“...That significant?”

“That’s right. And that signboard you’ve been staring at? It’s part of that history.”

In the past, when Wudang wasn’t yet as renowned as it was today, their sect leader had inscribed part of his martial insights into that signboard.

He had done this in order to find a worthy successor—someone who could decipher the sword technique from the inscription.

However, as the sect grew in power and disciples became plentiful, the tradition had faded.

Now, the signboard remained not as a test, but as a declaration of confidence.

“A show of pride. Wudang is this great—they can afford to display something like this openly.”

“Well, I’ve certainly gained something from it. I should be thankful.”

In my past life, I had never understood why those from the Nine Great Sects clung so tightly to their lost traditions.

But now...

Now, after witnessing the Tang Clan’s pride and Wudang’s dignity, I was starting to understand.

As I silently nodded to myself, Tang Sowol suddenly tugged on my sleeve.

“Brother Cheon, stop daydreaming and hurry up. It’s almost our turn.”

“Alright, I’m coming.”

With a chuckle, I followed her and rejoined the line.

Everything went smoothly after that.

We looked disheveled, but proving our Tang Clan (당가) affiliation was easy.

Once we explained our situation, we were escorted inside to meet with the sect leader.

Since Sichuan and Shaanxi were neighboring regions, Wudang and the Tang Clan had long maintained close ties.

Now, all that remained was to explain our circumstances to Wudang's leader and send a letter to the Tang Clan for assistance.

As we passed through the inner quarters of the Wudang Sect, our eyes unexpectedly met with those of an elderly man.

His white beard stretched down to his navel, his daoist robes were immaculate, his posture was upright, and his presence, though gentle, was undeniably formidable.

Perhaps he found it unusual that outsiders like us had made it so deep into the sect. His eyes widened in surprise.

It didn't take long for the face of this dignified old daoist, as if drawn in a painting, to twist into an expression of sheer fury.

"You bastard! No matter how old you've gotten, that shameless face of yours remains the same!"

"Huh? What...?"

Tang Sowol flinched in surprise, momentarily shaken. But the old man's gaze wasn't directed at me, at her, or even at the commander of the Blood Venom Unit.

It was locked onto Ghost Shadow Thief, who was subtly trying to hide behind us.

The old man's face turned red and blue in fury as he bellowed.

"Disciples of Zhongnan, hear me! Seize that thief at once!"

"Ah."

That was when it clicked.

This old man had lived in the same era as Ghost Shadow Thief—and he even remembered his face.

I had considered the possibility that someone might recognize him, but I hadn't expected to run into someone who would recognize him instantly.

For a brief moment, both we and the Wudang disciples hesitated, caught off guard by the sudden order.

Seeing their indecisiveness, the old man clutched his chest in exasperation.

"Agh! This is too frustrating! You fools! Fine! I'll handle it myself—just stand there and watch!"

And with that, he lunged forward.

He barely seemed to take a step, yet in an instant, he closed the distance.

I had already sensed his imposing presence, and sure enough, he was an expert.

He had undoubtedly reached the peak of transcendence long ago but had never managed to break through the final wall of the *Flowering Stage*.

"Living this long has finally paid off! To think I'd get this opportunity before I die!"

"Hey! Is that any way to treat an old friend after so long?!"

"From that day forward, you were no friend of mine!"

His explosive movements belied his aged body, making it impossible to believe he was so old.

Ghost Shadow Thief tried to evade with his signature elusive footwork, but given his accumulated exhaustion—and the fact that he was missing a leg—it was only a matter of time before he was caught.

As the old man reached for the sword at his waist, I instinctively gripped my own hilt in alarm.

But instead of drawing his blade, he lifted the entire sheathed sword and swung it like a club.

The tension drained from me instantly.

"Since you love sword sheaths so much, why don't you take a good beating with one?!"

"Aaagh! Are you seriously doing this?! Would you really torment a poor old man who's lost a leg?!"

"You dare call yourself my friend?! And where the hell did you leave your other leg?!"

Despite his words, the old man showed no hesitation in continuing his relentless assault.

Ghost Shadow Thief swung his makeshift cane, trying to deflect the attacks, but it was useless.

The sheathed sword traced smooth, flowing arcs before abruptly shifting at sharp angles, evading the cane and striking Ghost Shadow Thief's body again and again.

Fast, unpredictable, and fluid swordplay.

To an outsider, it might have looked like Ghost Shadow Thief was getting utterly overwhelmed.

But I had fought alongside him before—I could tell.

He was letting himself get hit.

Judging from their conversation, Ghost Shadow Thief must have done something to wrong this old man in the past.

It was almost certainly theft-related, so he was getting exactly what he deserved.

Still, I couldn't just stand by and watch.

Not only was Ghost Shadow Thief a member of our party, but he was also the key witness we needed to explain our situation.

So, I stepped forward and clasped my hands respectfully toward the elderly man.

"Sir, may I have a word with you?"

"Hmm? And who might you be...? Ah, children of the Tang Clan, I see."

"I am Cheon Hwi-da, recently engaged to the Tang Clan."

"I am Tang Sowol."

Tang Sowol, slightly behind me, belatedly followed suit in offering a formal greeting.

The old man's eyes gleamed with interest.

"To think that child has grown so much already. Time truly flies."

"You know me?"

"I once visited the Tang Clan as a representative of the Wudang Sect to celebrate the birth of their youngest daughter. I caught a brief glimpse of you then."

"That... I don't remember at all."

"Just consider it the ramblings of an old man and let it pass. Ah, I am Jeon Il-bi, the Third Elder of the Wudang Sect."

"So you're the Third Elder."

"Hoho. I must have made a terrible first impression. I got too excited after encountering an unexpected acquaintance."

The Third Elder, who had been going wild just moments ago, awkwardly smiled as he discreetly hid his sword behind his back and turned to face me again.

"So, you were asking me to let this thief go?"

"Yes. I can tell there's a complicated history between you two, but could you grant us a moment? Ghost Shadow Thief is crucial to explaining our current situation to the Wudang Sect's leader. Once that is settled, we will return him to you properly."

"What?! After all these years together, how can you be so heartless?!"

Ghost Shadow Thief cried out in protest, but no one paid him any mind.

After a brief moment of contemplation, the Third Elder nodded.

"Very well. However, knowing this rascal, he might slip away unnoticed again, so I shall accompany you."

"That would be most welcome."

Finally, the Third Elder returned his sword to his waist, let out a long sigh, and—seeing that Ghost Shadow Thief's makeshift cane had broken—offered his own arm to support him.

"Let's go for now. We can settle the rest of our stories later."

"Hmph. Indeed. I have plenty to say to you as well."

Watching the two men walk side by side, bickering as if nothing had happened, Tang Sowol murmured quietly.

"Good thing he only stole the sheath."

"Mm. Agreed."

Had he stolen the *actual* sword, he wouldn't have just been beaten with the sheath—he would've been cut down on the spot.

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

The impression of the Wudang Sect's leader was quite different from what I had expected.

The current sect leader was known by the title *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* and was one of the few *Flowering Stage* martial artists in all of the Central Plains.

Though he would eventually meet his end at the hands of the Heavenly Demon, until that day, he was an undisputed master whom few could stand against.

I had expected someone with an aura befitting such a title.

Yet...

"Third Elder. Have you brought me more trouble to deal with?"

"Haha. This time, I did nothing at all. If anything, trouble has rolled in on its own."

"Haa..."

A deep sigh escaped from a man who looked to be somewhere between middle-aged and elderly.

His hair was half-gray, and dark shadows rested beneath his eyes, contrasting sharply against it.

For someone leading the great Wudang Sect, his appearance was far too worn and exhausted.

He seemed more like a weary scholar than a warrior—one who had been assigned to the wrong department by mistake.

Encountering a *Flowering Stage* master in this vast Central Plains was a rare feat.

Yet, whether due to luck or misfortune, I had met quite a few absolute masters.

Tang Sowol in my past life, once called the *Venomous Dance Empress*, *Poison King* Tang Jincheon, *Ironblood Hall Master* Seo Mun-Hwarin, and even the *Black Lotus Sect Master*.

Each of them, regardless of how close I was to them, had always seemed impossibly distant.

Their every movement carried traces of the martial arts they had perfected over a lifetime.

So seeing the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* in this state was even more surprising.

Just how much had they overworked a master capable of fighting for days without rest to reduce him to such a state?

Even Tang Sowol, who had grown up witnessing *Flowering Stage* masters firsthand, seemed slightly taken aback, her eyes widening.

The *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal*, however, merely smiled faintly, as if used to such scrutiny, and spoke.

"My apologies. I've had a lot on my mind lately, so I must look rather unsightly. Though, I imagine it's the same for all of us."

"Ah! It's an honor to meet you, *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal*. I am Tang Sowol of the Tang Clan."

"I know. I was informed in advance, and besides, you bear a striking resemblance to your mother in her younger days."

"You knew my mother?"

"A long time ago. Back when that brat Jincheon was still called the *Dark Dragon*, I traveled the martial world alongside him. I met her a few times back then."

"Ah."

Tang Sowol's expression turned blank for a moment, likely stunned by the unexpected mention of her parents.

The *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* smiled warmly at her and nodded.

"I heard there was trouble on your first journey into the martial world. I'm glad to see you've resolved it and returned safely. I'll arrange a fine room for you, so take your time to rest and explore at your leisure."

"I appreciate the offer, but we stand before you today for another reason."

"Another reason?"

Tang Sowol gestured to our group before continuing.

"First, this is my fiancé and our escort, the Commander of the Blood Venom Unit."

"I am Cheon Hwi-da."

"It is an honor to meet the leader of Wudang."

"An escort, I understand given recent events, but a fiancé?!"

The *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* looked surprised, but Tang Sowol was not finished.

"And this here is a grandmaster from the previous generation, Ghost Shadow Thief."

"...What did you just say? You mean *that* Ghost Shadow Thief?"

The *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* widened his eyes in shock and turned to look at Third Elder Jeon Il-bi, who was either restraining or supporting Ghost Shadow Thief.

Jeon Il-bi nodded.

"That's right. You were probably too young back then to remember, but this is the very thief who stole the scabbard of *Flowing Cloud Sword*."

"I don't recall the exact details, but I do remember the commotion. Later, when I became sect leader, I read about it in the records... but wasn't that matter settled long ago?"

"Indeed. Because he only stole the scabbard, not the blade itself, and in return left behind the lost martial arts of Wudang's *Advance Step Swordplay*, the previous sect leader chose not to hold him accountable."

"Then bringing him in now would go against the principles of righteousness, wouldn't it?"

"Of course. I am only holding onto him for old times' sake. The real matter at hand is what these children have to say."

"Haa..."

Letting out a sigh that was somewhere between exhaustion and resignation, the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* turned his attention back to us.

Tang Sowol spoke first.

"Allow me to explain from the beginning..."

In a calm voice, she detailed the attack orchestrated by Haomen, our unexpected discovery of Ghost Shadow Thief's hideout at Daemang Mountain, and what we learned from him. Finally, she explained the demonic elixirs consumed by the *Soul*

Reapers and presented both the *Demonic Explosive Pills* and the medicine Ghost Shadow Thief had stolen from the Demonic Cult.

At first, the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* looked somewhat indifferent, but as the explanation continued, his expression grew increasingly rigid.

The pressure in the room mounted.

The once-faint presence he had concealed swelled like a rising storm.

Of course, his killing intent wasn't directed at us.

His expression only darkened after hearing about the Demonic Cult's use of human bodies to refine their elixirs.

It became clear—he was not weaker than other *Flowering Stage* martial artists, nor was he deliberately concealing his abilities.

He was like a drifting cloud—harmless when at peace but capable of unleashing a storm at any moment.

That variability was the essence of his enlightenment, the very martial path that Wudang had cultivated through generations.

In that instant, I recalled the sword scripture engraved on the sect's entrance plaque.

If those words had taken human form, they would be the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* himself.

What kind of swordsmanship would someone like him wield?

How far could my own swordsmanship measure up against it?

I tried to envision it, drawing from what I had seen of Wudang's survivors in my past life.

But I couldn't grasp it.

It wasn't about arrogance or competitiveness.

It was pure curiosity.

Wasn't it natural to be intrigued by a sword I had never seen before?

Initially, I had planned to visit Wudang and Mount Hua purely to obtain elixirs and restore my past strength.

I hadn't expected much from the visit itself.

After all, in my previous life, the only Wudang and Mount Hua warriors I saw were those barely clinging to survival after their sects had been destroyed.

But now, seeing the sect in its full glory, my thoughts had changed.

Even in the Tang Clan, I had often been impressed.

But this was different—Wudang was a sect devoted to the sword, something far more familiar to me.

There was so much more to see.

If I had never read the scripture on the plaque, I would have merely thought the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* had remarkable control over his presence and left it at that.

My thoughts were interrupted by an awkward silence, as I realized the room's attention had shifted toward me.

Ghost Shadow Thief chuckled.

"See, Il-bi? Didn't I tell you? That kid read the plaque's sword scripture."

"That and this are different. How many people do you think could link them together through presence alone?"

"Well, we have at least one standing right here."

I now understood how I must have looked.

Turning to the *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal*, I bowed slightly.

"My apologies."

"Hm? Ah, it's fine. The plaque is there for all to read, and my presence was exposed simply because I failed to fully suppress my anger. Whatever you gained from the two is entirely your own ability—I have no right to interfere. ...However, I am curious. Did you realize something?"

"It's nothing profound. I merely reaffirmed how many swords I have yet to understand."

"Recognizing the unknown is often the first step to true understanding. My previous offer still stands. Wudang will protect you from the *Soul Reapers* until the Tang Clan's envoys arrive, so take your time, rest, and explore at your leisure. Expanding your horizons and growing from experience—that is a privilege of youth."

"Thank you."

"No need for thanks. It is simply my duty as a senior in the martial world. In fact, I have a request of my own."

"A request, you say?"

The *Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal* cleared his throat before continuing.

"If Wudang's martial arts were something new to you, then the same must be true for my disciples. Would you be willing to engage in some friendly sparring during your stay?"

"That would be no trouble at all. In fact, I would welcome it."

"Excellent. Take a few days to rest, and when you're ready, come to the training grounds. I will inform my disciples in advance, so you may come at any time."

"I shall do so. Thank you for the consideration."

"I feel as though I've detained you for too long. I'll have someone escort you to your quarters—ah, but Ghost Shadow Thief, would you mind staying for a moment?"

"I'm tired too, you know. And I'm old."

"It won't take long. I simply wish to hear a little about your encounter with the Demonic Cult Leader."

"...Well, I can't really refuse that, can I?"

Though grumbling, Ghost Shadow Thief nodded in agreement.

With a heavy sigh, Third Elder Jeon Il-bi dragged over a chair and carefully seated him.

They seemed busy with their own matters. That meant it was time for us to focus on ours.

I confidently turned to the nameless Wudang disciple leading the way and asked,

"Does Wudang serve meat dishes?"

Though Daoism does not forbid meat consumption as strictly as Buddhism, I knew they tended to avoid excessive indulgence in rich foods.

That was why I asked... yet for some reason, Tang Sowol sighed and covered her face as if embarrassed.

"Haa... Where did the person who once claimed *Bigu Pills* were enough for sustenance go?"

"Who was it that introduced me to the joy of eating in the first place? None other than you, Tang Sowol."

Besides, my body is still growing—I need to eat well.

If I couldn't obtain any miraculous elixirs, then at the very least, I had to eat and rest properly.

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

Over the past two days, I had eaten well, washed up properly, and slept soundly.

Tang Sowol had sent a letter to the Tang Clan, but considering the distance, even at the fastest pace, it would still take a few more days for a response to arrive.

So, I had woken up early with the intention of exploring the Wudang Sect's grounds and taking care of the friendly sparring match that had been proposed earlier.

“Are you awake, Brother?”

Tang Sowol, who should have her own room, was standing in mine as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Even though we were engaged, this was still an unmarried man's room. Was it really okay for her to just barge in like this?

“What are your plans for today? If you're planning to laze around like you did the past two days, I've found something fun we could—”

“No. I plan to look around the area and then visit the training grounds. I have an agreement with the Flowing Cloud Sword Immortal, remember?”

Tang Sowol, who had been about to pull out a set of game tiles from her sleeve, quietly tucked them back in at my words. Her disappointed expression made me chuckle.

“But there will be time left in the evening, right? Can you spare a moment to play then?”

“Yes! As much as you’d like!”

Tang Sowol’s face brightened instantly, and she even began humming a little tune. She was so easy to read.

Stretching out my arms to loosen my stiff body from the night’s rest, I got out of bed.

Tang Sowol, still looking pleased, stood there watching me. When I tilted my head at her in question, she just cocked her head in response.

So, I loosened my robe halfway.

“I’m about to change now... Are you planning to stay there?”

“H-Heek! I-I was just about to leave!”

With her face turning bright red, Tang Sowol bolted out of the room.

Chuckling at her flustered retreat, I changed into fresh clothes.

After tidying up my bedding, I finally stepped outside to find the Blood Venom Unit's leader standing as stoic as ever—while Tang Sowol peeked out from behind her.

No matter how slender Tang Sowol was, an adult hiding behind someone else wasn't exactly effective.

Ignoring the strands of hair and the puffed-up fabric of her robes sticking out from behind the Blood Venom Unit's leader, I greeted her.

“Good morning, Unit Leader. Was there any trouble last night?”

“No, sir. Although the young lady stayed up late practicing how to cheat at tile games, there was nothing else of note.”

“...What.”

When she had said she found something fun, I had assumed she meant playing tiles together, not secretly practicing to cheat on her own.

As I narrowed my eyes at her, Tang Sowol, startled, began patting the unit leader's back in protest.

“Why would you tell him that?! And how did you even know? We have separate rooms!”

“We're right next door. I could hear you mumbling to yourself all night.”

“Did I talk that much to myself?”

“You usually don't, but last night was an exception. It seems you were quite excited. You even practiced how you would tease him after winning.”

“Kyaaah! You didn't have to say that much!”

Tang Sowol was now outright smacking the unit leader's shoulders in an attempt to silence her. But by now, her embarrassment had already betrayed the truth.

I shrugged and asked, “Did you really want to beat me that badly?”

“Well... yes, I suppose so.”

“That works out, then. If the category doesn’t matter, there’s actually something you’ll always beat me at.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

Tang Sowol peeked out from behind the unit leader, curious. I extended a hand toward her.

“You know, if I hold hands with someone, I get so embarrassed I can’t handle it.”

“...?”

“I’m about to walk around the Wudang Sect’s grounds. If someone were to grab my hand, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Tang Sowol looked between my hand and my face before she suddenly grinned.

Then, she placed her hand on mine—and even interlaced our fingers so I couldn't escape.

“Wait. Now that we're actually walking around like this, it's really embarrassing.”

“That's the point. So? Do I finally seem like the older one here?”

“...A little.”

At my nod, Tang Sowol beamed with satisfaction and pulled me forward.

“Then let's get going. I met a few Wudang disciples when I was young, but this is my first time inside the sect's grounds. I'm looking forward to it.”

“I was thinking of starting with the route the pilgrims take. What do you think?”

“Hmm. Seems like a safe and reasonable choice.”

As one of Daoism's sacred sites for centuries, Zhongnan Mountain had many famous landmarks. The Wudang Sect had absorbed these into its territory and used them as a source of income.

Thanks to that, there were many rare sights to see. Among them, the most striking was the ritual offerings.

Lighting candles, burning talismans—it all resembled the long-forgotten art of talismanic magic.

If it were an ordinary Daoist performing this, I would have dismissed it as a charlatan trying to make money.

But this was a ritual hosted by none other than the Wudang Sect.

As a direct successor to the Quanzhen Sect alongside Mount Hua, Wudang was renowned for its strict adherence to orthodox Daoist traditions.

So maybe... just maybe, these rituals really did have some effect.

However—

“It doesn’t seem to be doing anything.”

“Yes. That’s how it looks to me, too.”

There was no visible change in the flow of energy. No discernible effect of any kind.

Of course, it was possible that our eyes simply couldn’t perceive the ritual’s deeper mysteries.

But from what I could see, there was nothing happening at all.

As we tilted our heads in confusion, a familiar voice came from behind us.

“It can’t be helped. The Wudang Sect, no, many Daoist sects have strived to preserve the true teachings of Daoism, but in the end, only martial arts have remained.”

“...Third Elder?”

“I’m here too, you brat.”

Turning around, I saw the Third Elder shaking his head while Ghost Shadow Thief stood beside him, this time with an actual staff instead of some stolen object.

“You two seem to be getting along well.”

“Getting along? Hah! I still have plenty of grievances against this thief.”

“This guy has so many grudges he won’t be able to let them all go before he dies, so I told him to just forget about it.”

“Hmph! I don’t recall saying that.”

These were two of the oldest people in the Wudang Sect, yet they bickered like children.

Well, at least they seemed to have made peace. That was a good thing.

Suppressing the urge to laugh, I asked, “Third Elder, what do you mean by saying that only martial arts remain in Daoist sects?”

“It’s exactly as I said. Have you heard of the Mosan Sect?”

“I’ve heard of them. Weren’t they a sect that specialized in talismanic magic?”

“Then do you know why they were wiped out?”

“...Because talismanic magic was weaker than martial arts?”

“No. It wasn’t that the magic was weak—it was that there were no longer any practitioners skilled enough to use it.”

For similar reasons, the Jinju Eon Clan also lost its mastery of corpse arts and was left with only martial techniques, barely maintaining its lineage as a martial family.

According to the Third Elder, there were once grandmasters in the Mosan Sect who could overturn the earth with a single talisman, summon rain, and conjure massive flames.

However, the number of such masters steadily declined, and eventually, there came a time when no one could be called a true grandmaster.

Thus, despite possessing extraordinary sorcery, the sect withered away, for there was no one left who could wield its techniques.

“There was even a time when the Mosan Sect’s name was listed among the Nine Great Sects. Of course, this is merely a tale I heard from my master—I never witnessed that era myself. But the important thing is that this phenomenon wasn’t unique to the Mosan Sect.”

The Third Elder explained that the Mosan Sect was merely the last to survive; before it, many other sects that had focused on mystical arts had declined and vanished into history.

In other words, there was once a time when talismanic arts and sorcery were the foundation of Daoist sects, more so than martial arts.

“This is precisely why the Quanzhen Sect was founded. Even though the divine arts of ancient Daoist sages had deteriorated into mere sorcery and formations, there were those who could not give up on the pursuit of immortality.”

They turned their attention to Lü Dongbin, the last recorded immortal to ascend.

He had cultivated the Dao through a single sword, reaching the realm of the Sword Immortal.

Thus, the Quanzhen Sect abandoned the traditional Daoist arts that their predecessors had clung to—discarding spellcraft and incantations in favor of martial arts.

Of course, seeing as Lü Dongbin remains the last recorded immortal to this day, it seems they ultimately failed.

“This is also why most Daoist martial arts originate from the Quanzhen Sect. They were the first to attempt embedding the Dao into martial techniques, so it was only natural that their influence spread.”

“What I find hard to believe is the idea that ‘ascending to immortality’ actually means becoming a true immortal. Until now, I had thought it was merely a poetic way of saying someone passed away peacefully.”

“Haha. I won’t deny that possibility. After all, this story goes so far back that even my master’s master’s master wouldn’t have lived to see it. Whether it’s true or

not—no one in this era can say for certain. Perhaps that’s why so many Daoist sects have grown closer to the secular world.”

As he spoke, the Third Elder, Jeon Il-bi, gazed up at the sky with narrowed eyes.

“But still, I want to believe it’s true. Otherwise, wouldn’t a lifetime spent as a Daoist feel too empty and meaningless?”

Perhaps because he was one of the oldest surviving Daoists, his words carried a profound weight.

“Ah, I ended up rambling. This happens when you get old. Whenever I get the chance to talk to a younger person, I get carried away and start saying all sorts of unnecessary things.”

Then, he turned to me.

“So, what were we talking about again?”

“We were discussing whether these ritual offerings actually have any real effect.”

“Ah, right. Here’s what I wanted to say: Perhaps in the past, they had a genuine effect, but in this era, their power may have faded. That said, that doesn’t mean they are entirely meaningless.”

“Why not?”

“Because they still bring comfort to those who seek them.”

The elder shrugged playfully before adding,

“And more importantly, they’re quite beneficial to the Wudang Sect’s finances.”

He was probably referring to the donations given by worshippers.

No matter how secularized they became, Daoists were still Daoists.

Like the noble families, they couldn’t establish full-scale trading businesses, nor could they extort protection fees like the heretical sects.

Thus, the offering fees, disguised as donations, were crucial for their sustenance.

For a sect that prided itself as a sword-bearing order, Wudang still upheld these rituals—likely in no small part due to financial reasons.

Afterward, the Third Elder, claiming he was bored, led us on a tour of the inner quarters where the Wudang disciples lived and trained.

But my mind remained clouded by a single, persistent doubt.

If there had once been powerful sorcery in the distant past—if individuals had truly reached a state of ascension—

Then wouldn't reversing time also be within the realm of possibility?

Perhaps my regression wasn't a mere accident.

Perhaps someone had orchestrated it.

As I turned these unanswerable questions over in my mind, we wandered the sect's grounds for some time.

Eventually, we arrived at the training grounds.

“...Ah.”

The moment I stepped inside, the complicated thoughts weighing on my mind cleared away.

No matter what the truth of my regression was—

In the end, the only thing I could do was wield my sword.

And before me stood warriors, one after another, wielding swords I had never seen before.

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

The Third Elder paused his training session to announce the upcoming duels. He turned to us with a slightly awkward expression.

“I feel a bit bad saying this, but during the duels...”

“We’ll hold back accordingly.”

“As long as we don’t use poison, right?”

“That would be greatly appreciated. That should be more than enough.”

It was about what I expected. If we fought at full strength, it wouldn’t be a proper match.

The third-generation disciples were still young and, at best, at a second-rate level. Even most of the second-generation disciples, their instructors, were only first-rate warriors, with only a handful of the older ones having reached the peak realm.

Of course, victory and defeat weren’t determined by martial prowess alone.

But I retained the enlightenment I had gained before my regression.

It would be strange for me to struggle against a warrior at my level.

The same went for Tang Sowol. Though it had taken some effort, she had once managed to briefly paralyze me—even when I was using the *Raging Wave Death-Stealing Art* at full force. Not to mention, she had fought against a berserk *Soul Reaper* who had consumed a *Demonic Explosive Pill* and lived to tell the tale.

It wasn't that Wudang's disciples were weak. They carried the dignity befitting a sect of the *Nine Great Sects*.

It was just that Tang Sowol and I were far too strong for our age.

The Third Elder, having observed our aura and heard from the *Ghost Shadow Thief*, was clearly aware of this.

It was unfortunate that I wouldn't get to test my full strength, but the purpose of this duel was to witness the pure, untainted swordsmanship of Wudang.

And for that, my current opponent was not a bad choice.

More importantly, the condition of this arrangement was that I could study anything I wished from Wudang's techniques in exchange for sparring with their disciples.

At the very least, I needed to confirm the insight I had grasped yesterday.

As I nodded to myself, the Third Elder gestured toward the training grounds, where the disciples had stepped aside, leaving the center open.

“Then, let’s begin. How shall we decide the order?”

“I’ll go first,” Tang Sowol volunteered. “I know Sir Cheon is looking forward to this match quite a bit, but...”

“It’s fine. You’ve been just as eager, haven’t you?”

“...Was it that obvious?”

“No. I just assumed as much.”

It seemed Tang Sowol would be returning to the Tang Clan soon without getting to experience much of the martial world.

Though the encounters she had during this journey were far more intense than what most young martial artists ever faced, the duration had been far too short.

So now, with the opportunity to engage in friendly duels with the Wudang disciples—a proper martial experience—she was bound to be excited.

Smiling sheepishly, she adjusted her hidden weapons and stepped onto the training grounds.

Watching her, the Third Elder turned to the gathered disciples and called out.

“Well then! Who among you will be the first to showcase Wudang’s sword?”

The disciples had been watching eagerly, exchanging glances with excitement. After a brief moment, a young woman confidently raised her hand and stepped forward.

“I will go first!”

She seemed a little older than Tang Sowol, with an aura indicating a solid mid-first-rate level. Judging by the slightly worn grip of her sword, she was someone who diligently trained every day.

For her age, that was quite impressive.

And judging by the confident and expectant expression on her face, she knew it, too.

She reminded me of how Tang Sowol had been when she first left the Tang Clan—before I kidnapped her, that is.

And even I had once been just as confident.

Well, unless one was born with *Heavenly Martial Physique*, any martial artist would inevitably experience failure at some point.

If she could face that setback in a spar rather than a real battle, it would be a fortunate experience.

As I nodded in understanding, the two women faced each other and exchanged respectful salutes.

“I am Tang Sowol of the Tang Clan. Please take care of me.”

“I am Jin Yuryeon, a second-generation disciple of Wudang. It is an honor to witness the renowned martial arts of the Tang Clan.”

At the call of the Third Elder, who had taken the role of referee, the duel began.

Tang Sowol immediately pulled back to widen the distance, while Jin Yuryeon quickly closed in.

Though Tang Sowol primarily specialized in poison arts, that didn't mean she lacked proficiency in hidden weapons.

Especially recently, after absorbing the *Self-Replenishing Venomous Herb*, she had been training extensively in her throwing techniques as a contingency for situations where she couldn't use poison.

Thanks to that, their duel was exceptionally dynamic, offering valuable lessons for both the participants and the spectators.

Tang Sowol's footwork, characteristic of the Tang Clan, made it seem like she was barely moving her feet, yet the distance between them rapidly shifted.

At the same time, a flurry of throwing weapons rained down, twisting mid-air in unpredictable arcs toward Jin Yuryeon.

From her perspective, it must have felt like an assault from all directions.

The bladed projectiles streaked toward her at high speed, while the blunt ones ricocheted unpredictably to create irregular trajectories.

Against an ordinary opponent, such an attack would have left them skewered like a porcupine.

But Wudang's martial arts were on an entirely different level.

“Hup!”

Jin Yuryeon took a deep breath and swung her sword in rapid succession.

At first glance, her swordplay seemed disorderly, as if she were striking at random.

But each swing served as the foundation for the next attack, forming an unbroken sequence.

Of course, she was occasionally forced into awkward stances while deflecting the projectiles, and sometimes her judgment was a little slow, causing her to miss a few.

But she compensated for those weaknesses with her footwork.

Much like her swordsmanship, her movements allowed her to shift directions freely, enabling her to evade the weapons she couldn't block.

And so, the exchange continued—Tang Sowol maintaining distance while attacking with hidden weapons, and Jin Yuryeon deflecting or dodging them as she advanced.

Yet, surprisingly, Jin Yuryeon was gradually gaining the upper hand.

It was a matter of compatibility.

Tang Sowol was trying to pressure her opponent with a relentless barrage to set up a decisive strike.

But Jin Yuryeon's Wudang swordsmanship seamlessly wove every movement—whether swinging her sword or hesitating after blocking—into the flow of her next move.

She showed no hesitation, no openings.

She simply continued her pursuit of Tang Sowol with steady determination.

Tang Sowol's footwork was excellent, so she wasn't easily caught.

But if she made even a single mistake, the balance would collapse instantly.

Meanwhile, even if Jin Yuryeon made a mistake, she could simply incorporate it into her next movement.

In a prolonged war of attrition, Tang Sowol was at a disadvantage.

As a swordsman, I couldn't help but notice Jin Yuryeon's minor imperfections, but I could also see the deeper truth within her technique.

Most martial arts focus on minimizing mistakes through rigorous training.

But this was different.

It didn't matter if a mistake was made.

No—mistakes didn't exist in the first place.

Everything was simply part of the flow, seamlessly linked to the next move.

That technique...

“That isn't a sword meant to kill an enemy. It's a sword meant to perfect oneself.”

“Indeed. What does it matter how one swings the sword? In the end, it is the swordsman, not the technique, that wields the blade.

Thus, one must neither despair nor become overly elated.

One must simply continue refining oneself.”

“I agree that techniques shouldn’t be overly fixated upon. Though my conclusions lead elsewhere. What is the name of this martial art?”

“It is called *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword* (九宮神行劍法) and *Nine Palaces Step*(九宮).”

I had heard of both techniques before, but I had never actually seen them in practice.

After Wudang's downfall, the survivors I encountered were all too preoccupied with mastering techniques that would make them stronger as quickly as possible.

In that sense, a technique like the *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword*—which required years of dedication for the practitioner to grow stronger rather than granting immediate power—had naturally fallen out of use.

So this was how it was originally meant to feel.

I agreed with the idea that the swordsman, rather than the technique, should be the one to grow stronger. But the reason for that growth—the ultimate goal—was vastly different from my own martial path.

For me, the sword had always been a tool to kill my enemies, never a means of self-cultivation.

Even if two martial arts originated from a similar concept, focusing on the self rather than the opponent, the end result could be entirely different.

My sword was like a starving wolf—piercing into the enemy’s space, breaking their stance, exploiting their openings, and relentlessly closing in until their last breath was snuffed out.

But the *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword* that Jin Yuryeon wielded did not concern itself with the opponent’s actions.

It began and ended with the swordsman alone.

That was why it remained unaffected by external pressure, unwavering in its path—just as Jin Yuryeon continued to close the distance despite Tang Sowol's relentless barrage of throwing weapons.

No warrior, no matter how strong, could always control the flow of battle. Any martial art that relied on dictating the opponent's movements would become exceedingly vulnerable in such situations.

I wasn't sure exactly how yet, but I could already see that this philosophy could be quite useful in refining my own techniques.

Instead of merely following the sword's trajectory, I focused on the intent behind each movement, repeating the process over and over.

Meanwhile, Tang Sowol, realizing that she would eventually lose at this rate, took a desperate gamble.

She abandoned her previous strategy of maintaining distance and using hidden weapons for suppression.

Instead, she dashed forward, swinging her wide sleeves dramatically.

**Flutter.**

A grand motion.

The flowing fabric of her robe painted elegant curves in the air, almost like a dance.

And from within those billowing sleeves—

A torrential downpour of deadly projectiles erupted.

There was no precise targeting, no calculations.

She simply focused on unleashing as many as possible.

Many of them missed completely, flying off in random directions.

Yet, paradoxically, that randomness worked in her favor.

Jin Yuryeon, who had thus far been focused on deflecting each projectile one by one while maintaining pursuit, suddenly found herself unable to block or evade the overwhelming flood of weapons.

A careful observer might have noticed that most of the projectiles were meaningless, scattered without aim.

But caught off guard by the abrupt shift, Jin Yuryeon instinctively did what she had been doing all along—she prepared to deflect them.

“Ah... good grief.”

The Third Elder let out a weary sigh, rubbing his temples.

At that moment, Jin Yuryeon’s sword moved.

Unbeknownst to her, hidden among the scattered projectiles was a *Feather Needle*, aimed precisely at one of her acupoints.

Since internal energy use was minimized in this duel, it wasn’t life-threatening.

But if it struck, it could still cause a serious injury.

This was exactly why a senior expert was acting as the referee.

Before the needle could land, the Third Elder had already drawn his sword and stepped between them.

**Woosh!**

With a single swing, the sheer force of his internal energy sent out a powerful gust.

The thrown weapons, rather than being sent flying wildly, simply fell harmlessly to the ground as if pressed down by an invisible hand.

Both combatants, stunned by the overwhelming display of martial prowess, flinched.

Then, the Third Elder calmly declared,

“That’s enough. The winner is Tang Sowol of the Tang Clan. I trust you understand why.”

“...Yes.”

Jin Yuryeon, now noticing the *Feather Needle* gleaming on the ground, nodded with a sullen expression.

She sheathed her sword and offered a respectful salute.

“It was an excellent match. I had the privilege of experiencing firsthand just how formidable the Tang Clan’s hidden weapon techniques are.”

“Ah! I feel the same. The swordsmanship of Wudang is truly remarkable.”

A proper exchange of martial arts, a fierce yet respectful battle, and a conclusion where both sides smiled in mutual appreciation—

This was the ideal form of a friendly duel.

Of course, after that, Tang Sowol, the Blood Venom Unit leader, and I had to crouch down and gather up all the scattered projectiles.

But overall, the atmosphere was warm and lively.

Which was why I wasn't expecting what came next.

“I am Jin Baek, a third-generation disciple of Wudang! It is an honor to duel you, young master!”

I had anticipated facing someone of similar martial prowess.

What I didn't expect—

Was that my next opponent would be someone my age.

And even more surprising—

It was a face I recognized.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

A duel isn't necessarily limited to warriors of similar strength.

If there is a significant difference in skill, it can also serve as an instructional match, where the stronger fighter guides the weaker one through direct combat.

Of course, in a friendly duel meant to showcase each other's martial arts and foster camaraderie, it makes sense to pit opponents of comparable levels against one another...

That said, it wasn't unreasonable for them to misjudge my abilities.

I didn't normally exude my aura recklessly, so they could have easily underestimated me.

The Third Elder had warned them in advance that I was far stronger than I appeared, but considering my unimposing presence and young age, they must have assumed I was at best at the early first-rate level.

As for my opponent, Jin Baek, he was at the peak of the second-rate level, meaning our difference in martial prowess wasn't glaringly obvious.

Furthermore, he was a third-generation disciple, around the same age as me, making him a seemingly well-matched opponent.

The Third Elder looked a bit troubled by the situation, but while the pairing was unexpected, it wasn't something I found unreasonable or frustrating.

What truly surprised me was that Jin Baek was a familiar face.

"...Hmm. Young master, it seems I didn't explain things properly..."

"It's fine."

I shook my head at the Third Elder's cautious tone, then turned to my opponent and gave a polite salute.

"My name is Cheon Hwi-da. Pleased to meet you."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Jin Baek, sensing something was off, hesitated for a moment, glancing around at the others before giving a small nod and drawing his sword.

Despite already exchanging greetings, he awkwardly repeated his bow.

It was a clumsy habit of his—one he still hadn't outgrown even years later, when he was nearly thirty and could no longer be called a youthful prodigy.

As I drew my own sword, I took a closer look at Jin Baek.

His face was noticeably younger than I remembered, yet his features were undeniably the same.

The memories came rushing back.

Before my regression—when the *Demonic Cult* had begun its invasion, when the *Nine Great Sects* and the *Five Supreme Clans* started to collapse one by one, when the *Murim Alliance*, in desperation, formed an uneasy alliance with the *Black Lotus Sect*.

At the time, I was still within the *Black Lotus Sect*, but I wasn't affiliated with any particular faction within it.

After *Ironblood Hall* fell, after I lost *Seo Mun-Hwarin* and *Seol Lihyang*, after I somehow managed to avenge them and, in the process, reached the transcendent realm—earning the title *Sword Demon*.

Despite that, I had never led a military unit nor held a high-ranking position within the sect.

Just as *Seo Mun-Hwarin* had once served as the *Ironblood Hall Master*, only fulfilling the bare minimum of responsibilities without deeply involving herself in the sect's affairs—

I had done the same.

Aside from carrying out a few personal tasks assigned by the *Black Lotus Sect Master*, I had spent my days wholly devoted to the sword.

At that point, my title suited me—I had nothing left but the sword.

Though the Sect Master had always been wary of Seo Mun-Hwarin, myself, and Seol Lihyang, he had still been the first to rush to *Ironblood Hall's* aid when it was attacked.

The man had no tolerance for anyone who could potentially challenge his authority.

But if someone did challenge him, he was swift and ruthless in his response.

Seo Mun-Hwarin had undoubtedly been a potential rival, but she was also a member of the sect, and she had dutifully fulfilled her role.

No matter how personal his grudge, the *Black Lotus Sect Master* could never forgive the *Black Sky Sword Emperor* and the warriors of *Black Sky Sword Sect* for invading his own territory and massacring *Ironblood Hall*.

Even when I was half-mad, consumed by my internal demons, he had aided me.

The *Black Lotus Sect Master* could never be considered a good person, but he was an excellent leader.

That was how he had managed to unite the heretical martial world for the first time in history.

But the important part of all this was that at the time, I had already lost Seo Mun-Hwarin and Seol Lihyang—before I met Tang Sowol.

In other words, it was the period when I had sharpened my edges against everything around me, when my very presence was like a drawn sword.

And that was when I first met Jin Baek.

A survivor of Wudang's destruction, one of the scattered remnants of the fallen sect.

He had answered the *Murim Alliance's* call and volunteered to participate in the uneasy, experimental coalition with the heretical sects.

At the time, he was at the entry-level of the peak realm—a remarkable achievement considering that many warriors remained first-rate their entire lives.

But it was far from enough.

Not enough to avenge Wudang.

Not enough to restore its name.

And standing before him was someone his age who had already reached the transcendent realm—the *Sword Demon*.

Jin Baek had begun relentlessly asking me to teach him.

Sometimes he followed me for an entire day, pestering me.

Other times, he knelt before me, pleading.

But back then, I had no patience for such things.

There was nothing in my mind but the sword.

I lived for the sword, and I knew I would one day die by it.

That was why they had given me that title.

I had ignored Jin Baek's requests.

Every moment spent teaching was a moment I could have been swinging my sword instead.

Even if I had agreed to teach, my techniques were meant for me alone.

They would have been ineffective in the hands of another.

And more than anything—

At the time, there had been nothing for me to learn from Jin Baek's sword.

But he had been desperate.

With Wudang's sudden destruction, most of its treasured techniques had been lost.

The martial arts Jin Baek had learned were decent, but they were far removed from the legendary techniques that once defined Wudang.

To one day defeat the *Heavenly Demon* and destroy the *Demonic Cult*, to rebuild the name of his fallen sect, he needed a new *divine technique* to replace the *Flowing Cloud Sword*.

He had humbled himself before many swordsmen, seeking their guidance.

But the results had been poor.

Few were willing to share their techniques.

And Jin Baek himself had struggled—torn between his Daoist roots and the hatred and killing intent that had tainted his blade.

His grand ambition was commendable, but his skills and circumstances had not aligned.

And in the end, he remained stuck in place.

That was when the *Murim Alliance* and the *Black Lotus Sect* fully joined forces.

All the remaining peak-stage masters of the orthodox world set a trap to kill the *Heavenly Demon*.

Jin Baek and I were among the warriors assigned to keep the rest of the *Demonic Cult* at bay.

It should have been a simple task.

No one—not even the *Heavenly Demon*—could withstand an assault from eight peak-stage masters.

Or so we thought.

But things never go as planned.

The *Heavenly Demon* slaughtered every single one of them.

And soon, we found ourselves trapped—facing the *Demonic Cult* from the front and the *Heavenly Demon* approaching from behind.

Desperate and with no escape, Jin Baek burned his *Primordial Origin Qi* to carve a path through the cultists—giving me a chance to flee.

When I asked him why he would throw his life away for me, his answer was simple.

*"Because you're stronger."*

*"If I survive, it changes nothing."*

*"But if you survive, there's still a chance to avenge us."*

So instead of saving himself, he asked me to avenge him.

In the end, I couldn't withstand even a single strike from the *Heavenly Demon* and was defeated.

But the fact remained—I owed my life to Jin Baek.

It was a debt I had never repaid, one that had lingered in the back of my mind for years.

And now, unexpectedly, I had the chance to settle even a small part of it.

**Srrng—**

I slowly drew my sword and settled into a stance.

Feet shoulder-width apart, arms centered, and the sword tip aligned with my line of sight.

The most basic stance.

But that was all I needed.

The sword I was about to wield carried no complex techniques or profound mysteries.

I wasn't sure how strong the present Jin Baek was, but before my regression, neither of us had anything to gain from each other's swordsmanship.

But now, things were different.

Jin Baek, his expression a mix of tension and anticipation, waited only until I had fully assumed my stance—then charged forward.

“Haaah!”

His speed wasn't particularly fast or slow.

But his movements were light—just as I had seen in his previous duel—ready to change direction at any moment.

I watched his blade sweep diagonally toward me and responded with a simple horizontal slash.

**Chaaang!**

His sword was deflected in an instant.

His arm and shoulder twisted from the force, throwing his stance off-balance—but it wasn't enough to neutralize him completely.

Jin Baek barely managed to correct himself and launched another strike.

Considering he had just lost his footing, the power behind this next attack was impressive.

I recognized this technique.

Jin Baek must have trained in the *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword*.

This time, his blade came down in a vertical slash aimed at my head.

But I noticed something—the slight tremor at the tip of his sword.

He was still shaken from how easily his previous strike had been repelled.

So I simply raised my sword slowly and let his blade rest against mine.

**Kagakak!**

A sharp scraping sound filled the air as our swords locked in place.

But this wasn't a contest of strength.

“...Huh?”

Jin Baek's sword had become stuck against mine, as if glued in place.

Whenever he tried to thrust, I subtly pulled back in sync with his movement.

And whenever he tried to retract, I pressed forward, maintaining close contact.

That didn't mean he could freely control his sword's movements.

Every time he attempted to swing, the influence of my blade subtly altered its trajectory, steering it off course.

It was the principle of *adherence*.

With internal energy, I could have easily turned this into an outright counterattack.

But there was no need for that.

“Ugh! Ngh!”

Jin Baek struggled, swinging his sword wildly in an attempt to break free.

I decided to speak.

“A vertical slash is better executed with decisive force rather than half-hearted variations. And no matter how flustered you are, your sword tip must never waver.”

“...What?”

Jin Baek blinked in confusion.

I gave him a slight smile before continuing.

“It’s the same principle now.

If something isn’t working, don’t stubbornly force it—find another way.

Stay calm.

Don’t panic.

Never stop thinking about how to change the situation.”

“...Huh?”

Jin Baek’s confusion deepened.

I chuckled and added,

“What’s the point of having footwork if you’re not going to use it?

If you can’t win with the sword, then create distance.”

“...Oh.”

A look of realization dawned on his face, and he quickly leaped backward.

From that moment on, the duel followed a predictable pattern.

Jin Baek swung his sword at me.

I deflected his attacks and pointed out his weaknesses.

I wasn't entirely familiar with the *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword*, but I could tell it wasn't just some light and flashy technique.

At first, Jin Baek seemed irritated by my interference.

But as our exchanges continued, his expression grew increasingly serious.

He had realized that I wasn't mocking him—I was genuinely trying to teach him.

After about forty exchanges, I had corrected every obvious flaw I could see.

And Jin Baek was beginning to tire.

So I ended it.

With one final, powerful swing—

**Kaaaang!**

A sharp metallic ring echoed through the air as Jin Baek's sword was sent flying, landing far away.

“...Ah.”

For a moment, Jin Baek just stared at his empty hand in a daze.

Then, as if he had just awoken from a long dream, he quickly lowered his head and clasped his hands in a respectful salute.

“I lost. Thank you for the guidance.”

“It was a good duel.”

At the very least—

I had done my part.

I could only hope it was enough.

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

Jin Baek walked off the training ground in a daze, his expression still blank, as if he hadn't fully processed what had just happened.

What I had shown him wasn't anything extraordinary.

Individually, they were all just basic principles.

But when put together, their meaning shifted.

One must wield the right sword at the right moment.

That was the core of my martial arts philosophy.

And for Jin Baek—who had learned the *Nine Palaces Divine Traversing Sword*, a style built on seamlessly linking countless techniques in countless ways—it would serve as valuable insight.

As I sheathed my sword, I finally became aware of the murmurs from the surrounding Wudang disciples.

“He looks about the same age as Baek... How is he this strong?”

“The Elder did warn us, but still... I didn’t expect this.”

“Even among the second-generation disciples, how many could match that?”

It was understandable that they were astonished.

From what I had observed while touring Wudang, most third-generation disciples were still in their teens and generally ranged from third-rate to second-rate in skill.

That meant they were around my apparent age, which was likely why Jin Baek had been chosen as my opponent.

The second-generation disciples, on the other hand, were mostly in their twenties and thirties, with the majority being first-rate and a few reaching the peak realm.

But even those at the peak realm were still far from the level I had attained before my regression.

For those unaware of my secret, I must have seemed utterly incomprehensible.

Now that things had turned out this way, was the sparring over?

Jin Baek had been an exception—I had used the duel as an opportunity to teach him, which made the match look unusual.

But against a second-generation disciple, I could hold back appropriately and have a proper duel.

I waited for a while, hoping for another challenger...

But when no one stepped forward, I sighed internally and began stepping down from the training ground.

It was at that moment—

“Haha. Didn’t I tell you all? This young master is far stronger than you expected.”

The Third Elder, Jeon Il-bi, approached me, placing a firm hand on my shoulder as he addressed the disciples.

His grip was strong, as if to stop me from leaving.

I halted, curious, and the Elder chuckled.

“First, let me thank you. I didn’t expect you to go that far. Thanks to you, that rascal Baek will grow significantly from this experience.”

“It wasn’t anything special. It just happened that way.”

“Ha! You’re being modest. But isn’t this a good thing?”

Watching old friends leave one by one over the years is a sorrowful thing...

But seeing young ones forge new bonds is always a great joy.”

“...Why are you suddenly making this embarrassing?”

“I just hope Wudang can be a good connection for you.”

“I think it already is.”

“I’ve heard many things these past few days from that *Ghost Shadow Thief* friend of yours.

I’ve also seen it with my own eyes.

No matter who steps forward, I doubt you’ll find this duel satisfying.”

“That’s not necessarily true.”

“You say that, but you must be feeling unsatisfied, no?”

I remained silent, and the Elder continued,

“Don’t worry. I have something in mind.”

“I really don’t mind if it ends here.”

From the start, I had never expected anyone at the disciple level to be a true match for me.

Perhaps the *great disciple* chosen as the next sect leader, currently training in the *Flowing Cloud Sword*, could provide a challenge.

Or maybe one of the Elders.

My martial skills before regression had already reached a level where only individuals of that caliber could stand against me.

And right now, there were only second-generation disciples present.

I had known this from the beginning, so I had long abandoned the idea of a balanced duel.

But—

“As I see it, the disciples of Wudang are not lacking. It’s just that your talent surpasses your age. Isn’t that so?”

“...That’s a rather burdensome compliment.”

“And yet, despite that talent, you still chose to share your martial knowledge with Wudang’s disciples. Even knowing there was no direct benefit to you.”

“I’ve received things from Wudang, too. It’s only fair to give something back.”

“Haha. You speak of fairness? Then consider this—If Wudang were to be too rigid with a young master not even past his coming-of-age, what would that do to our reputation?”

The Third Elder suddenly spoke in a loud voice, making sure the surrounding disciples could hear.

I tilted my head in confusion.

Then, with a sly grin, he said something completely unexpected.

“So, this time, I shall be your opponent.”

“...What?”

“Just as you shared something with Jin Baek, I wish to impart something to you.

And I seem to be the only one here capable of doing so.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Of course.

Truthfully, I didn’t say much at the time, but I was quite curious.

How is it possible for someone as young as you to possess such martial prowess?”

A duel between junior disciples and a duel against an Elder carried entirely different weight.

That was why I hadn’t expected it from the start.

But now—

The Third Elder, Jeon Il-bi, had personally offered to duel me.

The dull disappointment I had been feeling instantly vanished.

Excitement surged within me.

“Let’s begin immediately.”

“Ha! No hesitation at all?”

Jeon Il-bi let out a disbelieving chuckle before stepping to the opposite side of the training ground, drawing his sword from his waist.

**Srrng.**

The sword’s scabbard was old and worn, and its hilt had been smoothed down from years of use.

It looked almost pitiful.

But the blade itself gleamed with a sharp, freshly-honed edge.

A well-maintained sword.

And proof that its wielder had not neglected his training.

As I drew my own sword and took my stance, the Elder spoke.

“I’ll grant you three moves.”

“I won’t hold back, then.”

The moment I finished speaking—

**Boom!**

I kicked off the ground.

Not just an ordinary burst of speed, but an explosive acceleration, strong enough to create a small shockwave near my *Yongcheon* acupoint.

With a loud impact, the ground cracked slightly beneath me.

And in just two steps, I reached my maximum speed.

“Hm.”

I closed the distance in an instant.

Then, I stomped down powerfully, converting all my momentum into raw force, channeling it directly into my sword.

A diagonal slash—

A strike imbued with the essence of *Force*, aimed at Jeon Il-bi’s chest.

However—

**Chang!**

Though I had swung first, his blade struck mine an instant earlier, hitting the base of my sword.

It didn't matter how much force I had concentrated into a single point.

If the direction of that force was disrupted, it would scatter.

Before my attack could fully manifest, he had dispersed its power.

It was a technique I often used myself, but experiencing it firsthand after so long was startling.

“Hoo. That was quite the powerful strike.”

“And you're incredibly fast for an old man.”

“This is the *Taiyi Scattering Light Sword*.

One of the oldest techniques in Wudang, dating back to when Zhongnan Mountain was still called *Taiyi Mountain*.”

“...Is it really okay to reveal that?”

“This isn’t a battle to the death, just a friendly duel. At worst, I’m only giving you the name of the technique.”

Jeon Il-bi shrugged as he spoke, but even if it was just a name, I couldn’t take it lightly.

A martial art’s name often contained the essence of its philosophy.

From his sheer speed alone, combined with the name *Scattering Light Sword*, it was clear that his technique focused on rapid swordplay.

That meant my response was simple.

**Thud!**

I stomped down again, raising my sword—not to channel power into it this time, but to solidify my stance.

With my lower body firmly rooted, I swung my sword straight down.

Heavy. Even heavier.

No matter how fast a blade was, if it clashed with mine, I would force it back.

Rather than concentrating power into a single point, I distributed it throughout my entire body and unleashed a strike fueled by raw weight.

Speed often meant lightness, and lightness could never overcome heaviness.

Unless—

**Boom!**

A dull impact.

Once again, Jeon Il-bi aimed at the base of my blade, but this time, my sheer force prevented him from disrupting my strike.

Instead—

**Srrng—**

He smoothly redirected my sword, guiding its trajectory away from him and into the ground.

Exactly as I had expected.

For a martial artist of his caliber, this level of counterplay was natural.

And since he was deliberately allowing me three free strikes, his options were limited—his only real choice was to redirect my attack.

A grin crept onto my lips as I took a bold step forward—

Right into Jeon Il-bi's personal space.

So close that it was no longer a swordfight, but practically a hand-to-hand combat range.

Twisting my body, I adjusted my grip.

With the blade held horizontally, I aimed the bottom of my sword's hilt directly at his solar plexus.

At this distance, he wouldn't have time to parry or counter with his own sword.

“Hooh!”

With a short exclamation, Jeon Il-bi suddenly leaped back, swinging his sword—not to strike me, but to deter my pursuit.

**Swish.**

His blade grazed my bangs, neatly slicing off a small portion of my hair.

Even though I had already taken a step forward, putting me in the perfect position to press the attack, I remained still.

That was why.

He hadn't managed to fully endure my three strikes.

In the end, he had been forced to swing his sword at me.

Jeon Il-bi clicked his tongue, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Well, now. I've wielded a sword for decades, yet here I am...”

“I believe you only conceded two strikes. Would it be too much to ask for one more?”

“Ha! That's all you're getting. Enough stalling—come at me properly now.”

“How unfortunate.”

He grumbled, but the smile tugging at his lips was impossible to hide.

I was likely wearing the same expression.

We shared a brief laugh before straightening our stances once more, raising our swords toward each other.

And then—

**Pa-bat!**

This time, Jeon Il-bi moved first.

His long beard fluttered as he charged, exuding an aura of a Daoist sage—

But in his hands was a deadly, razor-sharp blade.

**Sswaeeek!**

His sword slashed toward me at a speed almost too fast to track.

Unlike before, when he had merely received my attacks, this time, his intent was clear—

He aimed to cut me down before I could even react.

That said, it wasn't beyond my ability to counter.

As his sword raced toward my chest, I twisted my body and took half a step back.

His blade narrowly missed, skimming past my robes.

And in that fleeting moment when his defenses were open, I thrust my sword forward.

Not a slash—

A stab.

A direct, linear strike aimed at his shoulder.

Difficult to recover from if it missed, but the fastest way to reach the target.

Just as my sword was about to pierce his shoulder—

**Kaaang!**

A diagonal flash of steel abruptly intercepted my attack, knocking my sword aside.

“...What?”

Rather than retrieving his sword for another strike, he had continued rotating with his previous motion, using the momentum to accelerate his next attack.

Was it even possible to execute such a large movement so quickly, without any prior preparation?

For a brief moment, I was caught off guard.

But then—

**Ah.**

This was Wudang's swordsmanship.

Techniques I once thought impossible to chain together—

In the hands of a true master, they seamlessly connected, flowing like a river.

Unlike me, who wielded the sword to strike at the opportune moment—

His sword made every moment the opportune moment.

“Haha!”

A laugh escaped me.

We were alike, yet so different.

“You can laugh in a fight?”

Jeon Il-bi blinked, looking somewhat exasperated.

But come on—wasn’t this too much fun?

Chapter 59

“...You can laugh like that?”

Jeon Il-bi looked at me with a puzzled expression.

That was a bit much.

For a moment, I felt an urge to argue, but instead of words, I chose to respond with my sword.

**Thud!**

I steadied my stance with a sharp step, regaining my balance after my sword had been deflected.

Drawing power from my legs, waist, back, and arms, I lifted my sword in an upward slash.

“You sure are impatient.”

Jeon Il-bi countered calmly, his sword moving with precision.

No matter how fast his sword was or how versatile his techniques were, completely blocking this attack would be difficult.

He would have no choice but to retreat, and that would allow me to seize the initiative.

As I considered how to continue my assault—

Jeon Il-bi’s sword suddenly flicked upward and tapped the spine of my blade.

No, *tapped* wasn’t the right word.

What followed was another relentless exchange, not much different from before.

A true contest of swordsmanship, a battle of pure technique.

My judgment wasn’t lacking, nor was my ability to execute my decisions.

But as our swords clashed again and again, the gap in depth became clear.

For a moment, I seemed to hold my ground—only for my sword to be deflected or redirected yet again.

A distance that felt just within reach, yet he always remained a step ahead.

It was frustrating, yet at the same time, awe-inspiring.

No matter how I tried to exploit openings, his sword never faltered.

Like a stream of light, his swift and fluid swordplay adapted seamlessly.

Even when I boldly attempted to break through, the outcome remained the same.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't as if my attacks weren't landing.

At times, I managed to thrust my sword at just the right moment, or force him into a defensive position with a deep slash.

Under normal circumstances, I would have broken my opponent's momentum, cut off their escape routes, and slowly cornered them—until I severed their breath entirely.

But against Jeon Il-bi, all my attempts were absorbed into the overwhelming *flow* of his sword.

Even when I disrupted his rhythm, he effortlessly incorporated the break into his own movement, as if it had never happened.

No matter what I did, I couldn't stop his flow.

Inevitably, the more exchanges we made, the more I found myself being pushed back.

It felt as if I had been caught in a massive whirlpool, completely trapped—yet I had no way to escape.

I finally understood.

The person I was fighting wasn't just Jeon Il-bi.

I was facing *Wudang itself*.

What I was truly up against was the legacy of Wudang's martial arts, which had begun with the *Quanzhen Sect* and evolved over countless generations.

It was a technique refined by the hands of many masters, honed and perfected over time—and now, it was being wielded through Jeon Il-bi.

He wasn't the one swallowing my sword.

It was *Wudang*.

If even a Wudang Elder was at this level, I couldn't begin to imagine how strong the Sect Leader must be.

It was suffocating.

Yet, at the same time, exhilarating.

How long had it been since I was this completely immersed in swordplay?

Still—if this continued, I would soon lose.

Which meant it was time to *show him something*.

Wudang's martial arts were indeed remarkable.

But my sword—my life embedded within it—was not so fragile that it could simply be swept away.

Just in case, I decided to warn him first.

“I hold no resentment toward you, Elder.”

“...What's this about all of a sudden?”

“It's simply the nature of my martial arts. Please understand.”

Gripping my sword tightly, I unleashed the *killing intent* I had been suppressing.

A thick wave of murderous energy spread across the training ground.

An ordinary person would struggle to even breathe under its weight.

For me, however, it felt like a breath of fresh air, as if an oppressive seal had finally been lifted.

“This... What in the world...?”

Jeon Il-bi's face twisted in shock.

But his composure quickly returned.

He had spoken with *Ghost Shadow Thief*, so he must have already known that I practiced a technique steeped in killing intent.

What he hadn't expected was *this level* of it.

“...Such a sinister aura. Who in the world taught you this swordsmanship?”

“No one.”

“If no one did, then what in the world turned you into this?”

“I’ll show you now.”

With eyes wide open, I charged toward him.

I used the same vertical slash I had demonstrated before, fully embodying the principle of *Adherence*.

As expected, Jeon Il-bi moved to parry, disrupting the trajectory to redirect my strike.

However, this time—

I altered my attack at the last possible moment, slightly twisting my sword’s tip.

Through my killing intent spread like a mist around us, I sensed his movement an instant earlier.

That tiny adjustment was enough.

I couldn’t fully maintain the force behind my strike, but it also disrupted his ability to deflect it cleanly.

**Boom!**

For the first time in our duel, our swords clashed head-on, unleashing a deafening explosion of force.

Jeon Il-bi’s eyes widened.

A split second later, a sharp shock coursed up my arm.

If I had been even slightly careless, I might have dropped my sword entirely.

I clenched my grip tightly, forcing myself to endure it.

A damp sensation spread across my palm.

Blood—probably from a slight tear in my flesh.

But that didn’t matter.

What mattered was that, for the first time, Jeon Il-bi had shown a *true opening*.

He had been forced to block an attack head-on, disrupting his stance ever so slightly.

Even in that unstable position, his sword remained swift and precise.

He immediately retaliated, slashing toward my face.

He intended to use my reaction time to reset his stance.

So—I stepped *forward*.

Deeply.

Lowering my upper body until it was nearly parallel to the ground.

Executing *Iron Bridge Stance* mid-charge.

A technique that required impeccable balance and strength—if I slipped, I would fall, completely exposing myself.

But as long as I didn't make a mistake, it would be fine.

**Sswhaeek!**

The cold steel blade sliced *just* above my nose.

And the moment it passed—

I straightened my posture and lashed out with a lightning-fast thrust.

But Jeon Il-bi wasn't just a master of swordplay.

With perfect footwork, he stepped just out of my sword's range.

His upper body remained completely stable, allowing him to transition seamlessly into his next technique.

A rising diagonal slash from below.

If I dodged or blocked, the endless chain of swift strikes would resume.

So this time—I neither dodged nor blocked.

Instead, I gripped the bottom of my sword's hilt like a hammer—

And slammed it down onto his incoming blade.

**Thud!**

Jeon Il-bi's sword struck against the broad side of my blade and was driven straight into the ground.

Had I been even a fraction too slow, or had my aim been slightly off, this duel would have already ended.

But I had succeeded, and that was all that mattered.

After all, merely responding to his techniques in a conventional manner would only result in me being devoured by the flow he created.

Thus, I had no choice but to *deny* his sword.

A rejection purely for the sake of rejection.

I continued to swing my blade relentlessly, at times throwing my entire body into the attack.

A scene of utter recklessness.

But that was *my* sword.

It didn't need to be elegant or refined.

I could bear any number of wounds as long as I didn't die.

The only thing that mattered was ensuring that my opponent perished first.

I took pride in my swordsmanship, but in the end, my blade was merely a tool for efficient slaughter.

As my killing intent surged, it naturally converged upon Jeon Il-bi.

At first, as befitting a supreme martial artist, he showed little reaction to the overwhelming bloodlust.

But as it built up—again and again—it eventually began to weigh on him.

And then, for just a fleeting moment—

The tiniest hesitation crept into Jeon Il-bi's swordplay.

He didn't stop. His speed didn't slow. He didn't even swing in the wrong direction.

But for a brief instant, there was a flicker of *doubt* within his strikes.

His first true opening.

I clenched my teeth and lunged forward.

Fiercely. More fiercely.

Like a starving wolf that would die if it didn't feast.

Like a rabid beast, baring its blood-stained fangs.

Jeon Il-bi's sword was still blindingly fast.

His techniques still flowed endlessly, seamlessly connected.

But I no longer allowed myself to be swept away by them.

Even as wounds accumulated across my body, I thrashed and clawed my way toward his throat.

There was no longer a single dominant flow dictating the battlefield.

Instead, the training ground was now a battleground between two forces—

One, an endless stream of sword light, weaving a web of small whirlpools.

The other, a storm of chaos, raging violently against it.

The more I swung my sword, the sharper my focus became.

At that moment, the only things that existed in the world were myself and my blade.

How many times had I lost myself to this instinct, to the rhythm of the fight?

"Enough!!"

Suddenly, an overwhelming surge of sword energy erupted from Jeon Il-bi's blade.

A sword aura that would have normally flickered like heat haze—

Now layered upon itself over and over, until it burned like a raging inferno.

With a mighty swing, he drew a clear line between himself and me.

And just like that, it was as if I had been yanked from the depths of water, forced to take a breath.

My heightened focus shattered.

Half-submerged in the trance of battle, my mind now fully resurfaced.

At last, I took in my surroundings.

The hushed stillness of the training ground.

My own body, covered in cuts and bruises.

And Jeon Il-bi, standing across from me, his robe slightly nicked by my blade.

Pointing at the faint tear in his garment, he smirked.

“This is enough. Surely you’re satisfied now?”

I stared at the mark I had left before exhaling deeply.

Then, sheathing my sword, I clasped my hands together and bowed in respect.

“Thank you for your guidance.”

“Haha! It’s been a long time since I’ve had such an exhilarating match.”

And with that, the duel was over.

Of course—

“Brother Cheon. A word with you, please.”

Standing with her hands on her hips, half-worried and half-scolding, Tang Sowol was still waiting for me.

# I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After the duel ended, I stepped down from the training ground, leaving behind the murmuring disciples of the Zhongnan Sect. It seemed my fighting style had left quite the impact on them.

And yet—

"Brother Cheon, a word with you, please."

Tang Sowol stood before me, one hand resting on her hip, her expression caught between concern and reprimand.

I hesitated, glancing in her direction, but before I could even acknowledge her, she was already striding toward me with firm steps.

Her eyes were wide open, her brows raised, her lips slightly pouted, and her cheeks puffed out just a little—

Not exactly threatening, but unmistakably the expression of someone *angry*.

Once she reached me, she planted both hands on her hips again and called out in a sharp tone.

"Brother Cheon."

"Mm."

"That was a *friendly* duel, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"Then why, pray tell, did you allow yourself to get so injured?"

"Well, as you know, my martial arts have always been like this."

I cautiously defended myself, but Tang Sowol's dark eyes flashed with a glint of green as she took another step closer.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. You *do* seem to think of self-sacrifice as a given in combat."

“Then—”

"But as you said yourself, this wasn't a life-or-death battle—it was a *duel*."

"Th-This was a duel with a Zhongnan Sect elder. An opportunity like this doesn't come easily."

I reflexively countered, but Tang Sowol simply stared at me in silence.

Then, she stepped even closer.

Perhaps because she was still slightly taller than me, my vision was suddenly filled with the sight of her chest drawing near.

I knew this wasn't the time for such thoughts, but keeping my gaze in check was proving to be a challenge.

Oblivious to my internal struggle—or perhaps enjoying it—her pout deepened.

At that moment, I instinctively knew.

No matter what I said, I wasn't getting out of this.

So, instead of answering, I chose to act.

I carefully reached out and cupped her cheek, pressing my thumb gently against her protruding lips.

"I'm sorry."

"From now on, I'll try not to get hurt in front of you."

"And if it *is* unavoidable, I'll at least let you know in advance."

Her sharp gaze softened slightly, but not enough to be fully convinced.

Sensing that my apology was still lacking, I thought for a moment before adding—

"A-And tonight, I'll spend time with you however you like. Whether it's playing dice or whatever else."

"Hmm..."

At last, she broke into a bright smile.

As soon as I withdrew my thumb, she placed her hands over mine, pressing them against her cheeks for a brief moment before slowly pulling them away.

Then, she wrapped my hands in both of hers and said—

"It's a promise, then?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"And just so you know, this trick won't work next time."

"Of course not."

"Good. Now, let's take care of your wounds first."

"H-Here? In front of everyone?"

Tang Sowol tilted her head slightly in confusion, then suddenly smirked as if she had caught onto something.

"Brother Cheon, what exactly were you imagining just now?"

"I wasn't imagining anything."

"Hmm. You weren't perhaps thinking that, in front of all these people—and the esteemed Elder Jeon—I would *lick* your wounds clean, were you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Well, the injuries aren't too deep, so using my fingers to apply the poison should be enough. But if you *insist* on using my mouth..."

"Not in front of others!"

I had intended to protest more firmly, but before I could, Tang Sowol simply shook her head with a bright smile.

"I'm joking."

"What—"

"No need to look so flustered. Like I said, this level of injury can be treated just fine with my hands. Though, if you don't want scars, you should properly apply medicine later."

With that, she started gently running her fingers over my wounds.

The minor bleeding stopped almost immediately, and the pain dulled into a faint ache.

At the same time, my heightened senses—sharpened by the duel—began to relax.

Not enough to be dangerous, but enough to make a difference.

As she continued treating my wounds with a small smile, she finally spoke again—

"So, what was it you were about to say earlier? I'd like to hear the rest."

"No."

Ignoring my refusal, she grinned mischievously.

"Something about not wanting to show a certain side of yourself in front of others? Hmm. It's only natural to want to *monopolize* your betrothed's tongue, isn't it? Hehe."

"Did you just laugh in the middle of that?"

"Not at all. But in that case, you're saying that as long as there are *no* other people around, you'd be perfectly fine with it, right?"

"I have no idea how we got to this point in the conversation."

"That means tonight, after your long and exhausting day, I'll have to *properly* take care of you, won't I?"

"Can't we just play a few rounds of dice and go to sleep...?"

The more flustered I became, the wider her smile grew.

Well... As long as she was happy.

Just as I was grumbling to myself internally, Elder Jeon Il-bi returned, having calmed the murmuring disciples.

With a chuckle, he remarked—

"It's hard to believe that the same person radiating such murderous intent earlier is now acting like this."

"Are you here to tease me?"

"Perish the thought. I meant it sincerely. The last time I felt killing intent of that magnitude was forty years ago, during the subjugation of the *Heaven-Slaying Star*."

"Just so we're clear, I have *no* connection to the Heaven-Slaying Star."

"Oh, I know. I've crossed swords with him personally. I can say with certainty that you are not him. Besides, if you were, you wouldn't be acting like such a docile lamb in front of your betrothed."

"Are you *sure* you're not teasing me?"

Jeon Il-bi merely chuckled in response.

Meanwhile, Tang Sowol finished tending to my wounds and straightened my slightly disheveled clothes before stepping back to admire her handiwork.

Then, with a satisfied smile, she nodded.

"There. That should do."

"Should do *what*, exactly?"

"Were you *intentionally* ignoring Elder Jeon?"

At that, she finally turned to face the elder and bowed.

"Thank you for guiding my betrothed, Elder Jeon."

"Haha, well, I may have been a bit harsh, but I didn't expect him to be *that* relentless. Nor did I expect him to become so mild-mannered the moment you appeared. You truly found yourself a fine match."

"I do think so, yes."

For a moment, Jeon Il-bi looked nostalgic—perhaps remembering the young Tang Sowol he had met once before.

Meanwhile, she simply looked pleased, shoulders ever so slightly lifted.

It was an annoyingly smug expression, but for some reason, it also felt... strangely endearing.

As I found myself staring at her absentmindedly, Jeon Il-bi spoke again, his tone more serious this time.

"May I ask you something about your martial arts?"

"Huh? Oh, of course, Elder."

"First, I've already explained to the disciples that your killing intent was merely an aspect of your martial arts, not a genuine attempt to kill me. Your swordsmanship was fierce, yes, but there was no true intent to take a life."

"Ah, I appreciate that."

Even though it had been just a duel, my overwhelming killing intent had filled the training grounds as I clashed blades with a Zhongnan Sect elder.

If left unchecked, it could've easily led to the misunderstanding that I had actually attempted to kill Elder Jeon Il-bi. Knowing that he had cleared that up was a relief.

As I let out a quiet sigh of relief, Jeon Il-bi continued.

"Now, onto the main topic. Your martial arts—you didn't learn it from anyone, did you?"

"The way you phrase it makes it sound like I figured it all out myself. I did have help, you know."

"Even so, the one who completed it was you."

"Well... that's true."

Even though we had only tested our swordsmanship without using sword energy, it seemed Jeon Il-bi had already noticed something.

"What is your martial art called?"

"Gwangrang Talmyung Gong (Wolf Seizing Life Technique)."

"That name reeks of the Unorthodox Sect."

"That's because it's based on unorthodox martial arts."

Jeon Il-bi went silent for a moment, seemingly in thought, before carefully speaking again.

"Would you consider becoming my disciple?"

"...Excuse me?"

"Of course, I mean as an informal disciple. We can't have Tang Family's future son-in-law bound to Zhongnan Sect, now can we? I'm simply asking if you'd like to learn our martial arts instead of the one you currently use."

Caught completely off guard, I hesitated. Sensing my confusion, Jeon Il-bi patiently elaborated.

"You've likely noticed it too. Even though the roots and philosophies differ, your martial arts and Zhongnan's share some similarities."

"Well... I suppose so."

"Even if you had to start from scratch, regaining your current level wouldn't take long. Not to boast, but my skill level far surpasses even our sect leader's. That means I could push things a little further than normal—whether through advanced martial arts, elixirs, or other methods."

Put simply, he was offering to personally train and refine my martial arts.

Yet, I sensed no ambition from him, no desire to claim a prodigy for his sect.

Rather, it felt like... regret.

"It seems, Elder, that you want me to abandon my current martial arts."

"To be honest, yes."

"May I ask why?"

"You may be fine now, but one day, your martial arts will consume you. Don't take this lightly—I've lived long enough to see it happen to several others."

Jeon Il-bi's words weren't unfounded.

There was a reason why so few unorthodox martial artists reached the highest levels.

Without a firm foundation, their techniques—crafted solely to gain strength—would eventually spiral out of their control.

I knew of many powerful warriors who had succumbed to madness—memories from my past life.

But I... was different.

I might one day hit an insurmountable wall, but I would never lose myself to *qi deviation*.

And for one simple reason—

"Zhongnan's sword contains the teachings of its sect. A vast, unbroken flow of knowledge."

"If you want to know more, become my disciple."

"But my sword contains my life."

Because ever since I had carved hell into my very soul, I had already crossed that threshold.

I understood my own nature better than anyone.

With the amount of killing intent I carried, I was already no different from a lunatic.

Even so—

"This is my life. How could I possibly run from it?"

Jeon Il-bi silently mulled over my words before letting out a weary smile.

"That's true. A man cannot abandon his own life."

"Thank you for understanding."

"I never intended to force you. But—"

He paused, carefully choosing his next words.

"Just remember that this path exists, should you ever need it."

With that, I left the training grounds.

For some reason, Jeon Il-bi's back looked *exhausted*.

\*\*\*

## Returning to the Guest Room

After the duel, I returned to my guest room.

Tang Sowol, who had followed me in, immediately lit up with excitement.

"So! What should we do? What should we do for fun?"

I glanced at the door.

The latch was securely locked, and the Venomous Blood Brigade Commander was resting in the neighboring room.

In other words, in this room—

It was just the two of us.