Chapter 161 : Chapter 161

Chapter 161 : Rumors

Ripples formed on the smooth surface of the Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection.

As I injected my pure inner qi, which had fused the nine energies through the Ten Thousand Year Heavenly Poison Liquor, the mirror began to read the energy of the world.

Ooooong—!

Strands of light rising from the mirror began to draw a three-dimensional map in the air of the training ground.

Rugged mountain ranges, winding rivers, and at the end, the shape of a massive snow-capped mountain piercing through the clouds.

"That place is...."

Tang Mu-myeong, who was kneeling, looked up at the map in the air and groaned as he spoke.

"Is it not Kunlun, the end of the Central Plains?"

Mount Kunlun, known as the place where heaven and earth meet and the Ancestor of Ten Thousand Mountains.

Specifically, the vicinity of Jade Lake, where the legend of the Queen Mother of the West resides and the ice never melts all year round, was flickering with a red dot.

-Keke, so the end is that place after all. The summit of Kunlun, known as the Gate of Heaven. For an arrangement of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens, it is truly troublesome.

-Master, it is not troublesome; it is natural. Because the tenth divine object contains the energy of 'Heaven' that binds the nine powers into one. It is only right to hide it in the highest place.

Listening to the conversation between the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen, I put away the Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection.

Mount Kunlun was significantly skewed to the west from the path leading to the North Sea Ice Palace, but it was not that far away.

However, the problem was the place itself.

Kunlun is the pride of the Orthodox Murim and the location of the main mountain of the Kunlun Sect, the pinnacle of Daoist martial arts.

“I should stop by there after receiving all the wedding gifts and before heading to the North Sea.”

A smile played on my lips.

“First, we will leave Sichuan and head north. Since we will pass through Shaanxi before turning toward Kunlun, we should stop there first.”

At my words, Tang Mu-myeong, who was kneeling, snapped his head up.

“Did you say Shaanxi? Shaanxi is the place where the giants of the Orthodox factions, the Mount Hua Sect and the Zhongnan Sect, are entrenched. Do you intend to receive wedding gifts there as well?”

“Of course. Think of how much grace I bestowed upon the Mount Hua Sect Leader, Hyeon Cheon-jin-in, and the old man Baek San, the Plum Blossom Sword. Furthermore, those Zhongnan Sect bastards have the sin of attacking our group at the Yulin Inn in the past and picking fights at every turn, so I must collect it with heavy interest.”

Tang Mu-myeong clicked his tongue at my shameless yet dignified declaration.

It felt as if the liege before his eyes was much scarier than the Demonic Cult or the Blood Cult that used to dye the Murim in blood in the past, seeing as I was going around legally pulling out the pillars of the Orthodox sects with such a bright expression.

“Wi Ji-yeong, prepare the ledger. This time, I am going to sweep everything up until the carts break.”

“I shall follow your command, Captain! I will strip the pockets of those stingy Shaanxi Daoists down to their very souls!”

Wi Ji-yeong excitedly mimicked wielding a brush, and Baek Mu-yong and Tae Un-seo also began packing their bags as if they were used to it.

Tang Mu-myeong took a deep fist-clasping position toward me.

“Captain. The Tang Clan will now perfectly follow your orders. Whenever you call from the North Sea, I will lead the poison men of the Tang Clan and come running.”

“Right. Mu-myeong, protect Sichuan firmly. Soon, once I collect the divine object from Kunlun, a great battle that will truly turn the world upside down will begin.”

***

The next morning.

The massive carriage procession carrying me and my party set off grandly toward Shaanxi Province, leading dozens of treasure carts donated by the Sichuan Tang Clan.

The damp humidity of Sichuan gradually cleared, and the dry wind of the Central Plains began to blow over the rugged mountain terrain.

However, the air inside the carriage was fluctuating between hot and cold regardless of the weather outside.

“Young Master, the Shu Path leading from Sichuan to Shaanxi has such rugged mountains that it is easy for qi and blood to become tangled. I will check your pulse and loosen up your congested acupoints.”

Seong Sang-ah spoke with a languid smile as she took out her silver needles and sat down close to my shoulder.

Then, Cheon Deung-jin narrowed her eyes and suddenly thrust forward a teacup.

“Miss Seong, for loosening acupoints, a warm spiritual medicine tea roasted with my Fire Spirit Qi is the best. Young Master, please drink this quickly. Your fatigue will vanish completely.”

As the subtle offensive from the two women continued, the transparent eyes of Seol Ye-rin, who had been keeping silent while looking out the window, sank.

Crackle—!

Thin frost began to form from the floor of the carriage, and the temperature inside the carriage plummeted in an instant like a blizzard in the North Sea in midwinter.

“The Third Young Master's qi center is already full of the heat emitted by the nine divine objects. If you add unnecessary heat, a qi deviation might occur. Third Young Master, come here; I will cool down your qi center with my cold ice qi.”

As Seol Ye-rin spoke firmly while fiddling with her ice sword, the gazes of the three women clashed violently in the air with a crackling sound.

I, sitting on the roof of the carriage and feeling this entire situation perfectly, let out a deep sigh.

It was certainly a hundred times more exhausting to endure the nerve war between these three women than it was to face the Ten Venerables under the Heavens or to chew and swallow the Heart of the Heavenly Demon.

-Kekeke! Following the ice of the North Sea and the flames of the West, now even the Divine Physician of the Central Plains! Your qi center is insufficient, so your chest must be about to burst!

-My, my, our Captain's skill is incredible. I wonder if you might die from your back breaking before arriving at Kunlun soon.

At the telepathy from the Sword Venerable and the Illusion Venerable snickering inside my qi center, I gave a hollow laugh and tapped the roof.

“Seniors, please be quiet. My head hurts as it is.”

After such a noisy and arduous (?) journey, the carriage procession finally entered the border of Shaanxi Province.

***

Shaanxi Province, the entrance to Mount Zhongnan.

The atmosphere of the Zhongnan Sect's main mountain, which had taken a huge blow due to my intervention in the past power struggle with the Mount Hua Sect and where even Elder Byeok Ra-jung had been miserably crushed by me, was no different from a funeral home.

“Sec-Sect Leader! It is a disaster! A massive carriage procession has arrived below the mountain gate!”

A first-generation disciple of the Zhongnan Sect rushed into the great hall, his face pale with fright.

“A carriage procession? Don't tell me those Mount Hua bastards are playing tricks again!”

“N-No! The Black Dragon Flag and the snowflake flag of the North Sea Ice Palace are hanging side by side at the front! It is an allied procession of the Demonic Cult and the Ice Palace!”

“Wh-What?!”

The Zhongnan Sect Leader and the elders lost their wits and rushed out of the mountain gate, grabbing their weapons.

The sight unfolding before their eyes was truly a disaster.

Dozens of treasure carts plundered from the Sichuan Tang Clan and the Small Snow Squad members emit a menacing aura. And the man sitting on the roof of the carriage at the head of that procession.

It was the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, Hyeokryeon Yeom, who had thoroughly trampled the Zhongnan Sect in the past.

“The-The Zhongnan Sect Leader asks! Why are the Ice Palace and the Demonic Cult invading the heart of the Central Plains, breaking the peace of the Murim!”

The Zhongnan Sect Leader shouted while drawing his sword, but his voice was trembling miserably.

I lightly jumped down from the roof of the carriage and leisurely walked in front of the Zhongnan Sect martial artists.

With every step I took, the black-gold light waves emitted by the nine divine objects stored in my qi center heavily weighed down the entire Mount Zhongnan.

Before that overwhelming power, the disciples of the Zhongnan Sect dropped their swords and slumped to the ground, and even the elders gasped for breath, unable to breathe.

“Invasion? Your words are quite disappointing.”

I took out a red letter lavishly covered in gold leaf from my robe and tossed it right in front of the Sect Leader's nose.

“It is a wedding invitation.”

“A we-wedding invitation……?”

“I am scheduled to officially hold a wedding ceremony with the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace soon. That offensive matter of your Elder Byeok Ra-jung attacking and trying to assassinate our group at the Yulin Inn in the past... I have come in person to cover it up with a generous ‘wedding gift’ this time.”

My purple eyes flashed.

“What will you do? Will you open your clan's treasury to bless the wedding, or will you take down the Zhongnan Sect's sign in Shaanxi forever as of today?”

This was not an invitation, but clearly blackmail and robbery.

“Op-Open the Treasure Pavilion! Fill ten carts with the most precious spiritual medicines and armaments right now!”

As the Sect Leader shouted while shedding tears of blood, Wi Ji-yeong spread open her ledger while humming.

“Zhongnan Sect, a wedding gift worth ten carts! I have recorded it meticulously, Captain!”

After cleanly pulling out the pillars of the Zhongnan Sect, my party leisurely turned our steps toward the next destination with our luggage carts even more heavily loaded.

***

The atmosphere of Lotus Peak on Mount Hua, another famous mountain in Shaanxi Province not far from Mount Zhongnan, was reminiscent of a feast house, quite the opposite of Zhongnan.

“Hahahaha! Young Master Hyeokryeon! You were alive and well!”

In front of the Mount Hua Sect gate, the Mount Hua Sect Leader Hyeon Cheon-jin-in and Elder Baek San, the Plum Blossom Sword, rushed out in their socks to welcome my group.

In the past, I had made a deal with the Mount Hua Sect using Baek San's token as a medium.

It was a promise that the Mount Hua Sect would take the lead in changing the Central Plains' negative perception of the Ice Palace, while the Ice Palace would help the Mount Hua Sect suppress the Zhongnan Sect.

Thanks to me completely breaking the spirit of the Zhongnan Sect, the Mount Hua Sect was currently enjoying its prime, having firmly established itself as the number one sect in Shaanxi Province.

“It has been a long time, Hyeon Cheon-jin-in, and Elder Baek San. I have heard well the news that the Mount Hua Sect has come to command Shaanxi.”

When I took a polite fist-clasping position, Hyeon Cheon-jin-in felt the energy flowing out of my entire body and widened his eyes in shock.

'Th-This cannot be.... He was like a monster when I met him before, but now he is on an entirely different level. Can that perfect aura, as if he has become one with nature and achieved Oneness with All Things, truly be a realm a human can reach!'

Hyeon Cheon-jin-in instinctively realized that the weight of the world had already tilted completely toward the North Sea rather than the Central Plains Murim Alliance.

“Thanks to you, Young Master, Mount Hua has regained its past glory once again! Our Mount Hua is staking our lives to keep the promise with the North Sea Ice Palace. The Ice

Palace is no longer called barbarians, but is being praised as a dependable ally protecting the peace of the Central Plains!”

Elder Baek San also bowed his waist deeply to express his gratitude.

“I am glad to hear that. Since you have kept the promise well, I have also come to deliver happy news.”

When I handed over the wedding invitation, Hyeon Cheon-jin-in received the letter with both hands as if he were receiving a royal decree.

“A wedding! How can this not be a celebration for the entire world! We will offer the most grand wedding gift befitting the status of the Ice Palace!”

While it was a collection forcibly extorted from the Zhongnan Sect, in the Mount Hua Sect, vast treasures were voluntarily offered along with a generous reception to fill the carts.

After being treated to top-quality Jade Dew Liquor and mountain and sea delicacies at the great hall of the Mount Hua Sect, my party set off again the next morning amidst the enthusiastic send-off of the Mount Hua Sect disciples.

***

The Yellow River Inn, located at the junction where the Yellow River flows through the middle of Shaanxi Province.

As befitting a transportation hub connecting the north and south of the Central Plains, this place was crowded with peddlers and Murim people flocking from all over.

“Did you hear? The news about the Zhongnan Sect!”

A fierce-looking wanderer chewing meat at a corner table grabbed the sleeve of the person next to him while spitting.

“Zhongnan? Why are there again? I heard they were about to close down after being pushed aside by the Mount Hua Sect.”

“It is not just about closing down! A few days ago, the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, Hyeokryeon Yeom, led dozens of carriages and rammed into the mountain gate of Mount Zhongnan. They say he threw a wedding invitation and then plundered Zhongnan's secret vault entirely!”

At those words, the eyes of everyone nearby turned to the wanderer all at once.

A seasoned merchant who had stopped using his chopsticks asked suspiciously.

“A wedding invitation? What kind of robbery talk is that?”

“It is called an invitation, but it is effectively a ‘price for their lives’! He told them to pay the price for the crime of the Zhongnan Sect touching the Third Young Master's party at the Yulin Inn in the past as a wedding gift, and they say the Zhongnan Sect Leader handed over ten treasure carts while trembling. Now, in the Shaanxi Province area, there are ominous rumors that not even a blade of grass remains on the path that Third Young Master passes!”

“Huh, a Demonic Cult fellow is openly going around collecting money from a leader of the Central Plains Orthodox sects? Just what is the Murim Alliance doing!”

“Shh! Lower your voice. What is even more mind-boggling is the Mount Hua Sect. There, the Sect Leader even rushed out in his socks and served the Third Young Master as if he were an older brother. They provided mountain and sea delicacies as a base and even scraped together all of Mount Hua's spiritual pills, so that says it all.”

The inside of the inn instantly became as noisy as a poked beehive.

And those rumors reached the ears of the Murim Alliance and Saphaeryeon, who divided the Murim into two.

Chapter 162 : Chapter 162

Chapter 162 : Murim Situation

The air in the great hall of the Murim Alliance, the heart of the Central Plains Orthodox factions, was heavy as if frozen.

While the Alliance Leader, Buddhist Venerable Grandmaster Hye-gwang, was away, urgent letters from Shaanxi Province were piled high before the Strategist Zhuge Myeong, who was in charge of practical affairs.

“What a disgrace this is!”

Namgung Ho, the Captain of the Exorcism Sword Squad sitting in the seat of honor in the great hall, struck the table, causing the teacups to shake violently.

“That fellow, who is said to be the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, is tearing through Shaanxi, the heart of the Orthodox factions, plundering the Zhongnan treasury and receiving spiritual medicines as tribute from Mount Hua! Is this the price we pay for our Exorcism Sword Squad failing to finish him at the engagement ceremony?”

Zhuge Myeong calmly folded his fan and answered.

“Captain, responding emotionally only invites disaster. He is already a monster who even executed the Saphaeryeon Leader, Yong Il-gang. When Yong Il-gang went on a rampage using the power of the Blood Cult, it was Hyeokryeon Yeom who suppressed him. Currently, even the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Phenomena, our Alliance’s intelligence agency, cannot rank his martial prowess.”

“So you are saying we should just sit and watch while Kunlun is plundered? Where is he heading now!”

Zhuge Myeong pointed to the map.

“It is said he passed through Shaanxi and is heading west toward Kunlun. Since Grandmaster Hye-gwang is also viewing this situation gravely, we must cooperate with the Kunlun Sect to build the final line of defense.”

At Zhuge Myeong's firm voice, the atmosphere in the hall sank even more heavily.

Namgung Ho breathed roughly, unable to control his boiling anger.

“Cooperating with the Kunlun Sect! Aren't the Kunlun Daoists people who have turned their backs on the secular world? Do you think they will obediently follow the Murim Alliance's command?”

“They will have no choice.”

Zhuge Myeong spread his fan and smiled.

“Hyeokryeon Yeom’s goal is not plundering wealth. According to information from the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Phenomena, he has been tenaciously tracking the legacies of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens. He took the divine objects of the Beggar Venerable and the Buddhist Venerable from Shaolin’s Dalma-dong, seized the Illusion Venerable’s mirror from the Sichuan Tang Clan, and even recovered the Twin Venerables' bracelets from Dongting Lake. Now, only one remains: the final divine object containing the energy of ‘Heaven’ that will bind the nine energies into one.”

“Is that in Kunlun?”

“Yes. There is a legend that it sleeps under the frozen lake of Jade Lake, the highest peak of Mount Kunlun, known as the Ancestor of Ten Thousand Mountains. From the Kunlun Sect’s perspective, they cannot just watch as Jade Lake, their sanctuary, is trampled under the feet of a demonic practitioner.”

Zhuge Myeong placed a go stone on the location of Mount Kunlun.

“Exorcism Sword Squad Captain. Lead the sword squad to Qinghai Province immediately. You must bind his feet using Kunlun’s formation, the Taiji Cloud Dragon Great Formation, as a shield. And……”

Zhuge Myeong’s eyes glittered craftily.

“We have one more excellent meat shield left.”

“A meat shield?”

“It is the remnants of Saphaeryeon whose leadership was annihilated at Dongting Lake. After the Leader Yong Il-gang died, the General Manager Sa Ma-yun barely survived and is gathering the defeated soldiers. They are currently blinded by a desire for revenge against Hyeokryeon Yeom. Secretly send someone to open the path to Kunlun for them. If the trash of the unorthodox sects can slightly drain Hyeokryeon Yeom’s strength, our Orthodox faction can just take the fisherman's profit.”

While Namgung Ho was taken aback by Zhuge Myeong’s snake-like scheme, he soon nodded with a murderous smile.

“Truly, you deserve to be called the brain of the Murim Alliance. Fine. I will dispatch the Exorcism Sword Squad immediately. This time, I will truly cut off that demonic cult fellow's head and set the pride of the Orthodox factions right!”

***

At that time, a quiet outskirt of Dongting Lake in Hunan Province.

Yueyang Tower, which once boasted of its splendid pavilion, had only its skeleton remaining after being burned by Hyeokryeon Yeom’s demonic fire.

The base that symbolized the prosperity of Saphaeryeon had now fallen into a wasteland where only the smell of blood and ashes remained.

“Leader……”

Sa Ma-yun, the General Manager of Saphaeryeon, was kneeling before the collapsed ruins, shedding tears of blood.

The Supreme Ruler Yong Il-gang, who dreamed of being the world's best and even swallowed the Blood Cult's pills.

However, without even being able to handle the divine objects of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens, his right arm was cut off by Hyeokryeon Yeom’s Ice White Divine Spear, and he met a gruesome end.

Behind Sa Ma-yun, who survived after losing his liege were hundreds of survivors from the Iron Sand Squad and the Sound Demon Blood Group dressed in black martial arts uniforms, keeping silent with eyes full of resentment.

“General Manager Sa Ma. Are you resentful?”

Then, a man wearing a deep red long robe silently approached through the bloody mist.

Sa Ma-yun was startled and drew his weapon.

“Who are you!”

“There is no need to be on guard. Since we are allies with the same enemy.”

When the man took off his hood, a pale face with a blood-colored lotus pattern engraved on the forehead was revealed.

It was the Second Blood Lord, Blood Demon Monk Mu-gi, one of the high-ranking blood lords of the Blood Cult.

“You monster of the Blood Cult……! Weren't you the ones who gave the cursed pill that turned our Leader into a monster!”

Sa Ma-yun shouted in fury, but the Blood Demon Monk gave a light snort.

“How can you blame us for the self-destruction of a person who tried to seize a divine object beyond their capacity? However, General Manager Sa Ma. Now is not the time to weigh past responsibilities, is it? Saphaeryeon has collapsed, and the Murim Alliance is constantly watching for a chance to use you as hunting dogs.”

The Blood Demon Monk took out a pill bottle emitting a dark red light and threw it at Sa Ma-yun's feet.

“Hyeokryeon Yeom, the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult. If you wish to kill that monster and rebuild Saphaeryeon, feed these True Blood Demon Pills to your remaining subordinates. At the cost of losing a bit of their reason, they will obtain bodies of Diamond Invincibility that can tear apart even martial artists of the Realm of the Profound.”

Sa Ma-yun's hands trembled slightly.

The moment he fed this, his subordinates would fall into being Blood Poison Demon Men, the slaughtering weapons of the Blood Cult, rather than martial artists of Saphaeryeon.

However, Hyeokryeon Yeom’s overwhelming purple flames and blue spear strikes engraved in his mind paralyzed his reason.

“……Where is he heading now?”

“Kunlun, at the end of the west in Qinghai Province. Before he takes the final divine object, try to dye the snowfields of Kunlun red with the blood of Saphaeryeon.”

The Blood Demon Monk's whisper was like a devil's temptation.

Sa Ma-yun slowly picked up the pill bottle that had fallen on the ground.

His eyes turned bloodshot and burned with a desire for revenge.

“Listen, all members……! Swallow this medicine and march to Qinghai. Even if we sell our lives to the Yaksha of hell, we will gouge out the heart of that fellow, Hyeokryeon Yeom!”

***

The rugged wilderness path stretches through Shaanxi to Qinghai Province.

A massive carriage procession fluttering the flags of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild and the snowflake patterns of the North Sea Ice Palace side by side was racing through, raising clouds of dust.

The scale of the procession was truly a spectacle.

Dozens of treasure carts swept up under the name of ‘legal wedding gifts’ from the Sichuan Tang Clan, the Mount Hua Sect, the Zhongnan Sect, and even the Shaolin Temple followed endlessly with a rattling sound.

In the center of that procession, I was sitting in a lotus position on the roof of the most lavishly decorated large carriage with my eyes closed.

Ooooong—!

A vibration was endlessly pulsating deep within my qi center.

Iron, Fighting, Poison, Buddhist, Jade, Dark, Twin, Illusion, Beggar.

The essences of as many as nine of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens were forming a massive microcosm using my Extreme Yang Body as a furnace.

Whenever energies of different natures clashed and tried to expand, I ruthlessly compressed them using the demonic qi emitted by the Heart of the Heavenly Demon and my extreme yang power.

-Kekeke! You viper-like fellow. To think your body doesn't explode even after sweeping nine suns into your belly, your vessel is truly not that of a human.

Sword Venerable Baek Un-han, who was coiled inside my qi center, chuckled and sent a telepathic message.

-Oh my, Master. Our Third Young Master cast off the shackles of humanity long ago. Once the final tenth piece, the energy of ‘Heaven’, is added to this perfect microcosm, that arrogant fake God-Demon fellow, Hyeokryeon Geuk, will be blown away by a single snort.

Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong also chimed in with a voluptuous voice, and the Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin, who was silently managing the energy on one side, added a heavy telepathic message.

-Do not be careless. The final divine object carrying the energy of heaven is sleeping in Jade Lake, the highest place in Kunlun. It is a place where even the First Founder, Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u, left his most difficult arrangements during his lifetime. There is no way those Kunlun Daoists will obediently make a path.

I snapped my eyes open, emitting a purple aura.

‘If they don’t make a path, I’ll just create one even if I have to burn and freeze them. I have no intention of showing courtesy to those who threaten my family and people.’

At that moment, the sound of bickering was heard from inside the carriage.

“Oh my, Young Master! Don't catch the cold wind on the roof and come down quickly! I have brewed a medicinal tea that is incredible for blood circulation by adding special spices from the West!”

Cheon Deung-jin, who poked her head out of the carriage window, smiled brightly and waved her hand.

Being born with the Fire Spirit Body, even the north wind of midwinter was melting like a warm spring breeze around her.

However, immediately, a sharp chill was emitted from the window on the opposite side of the carriage.

“Miss Cheon. The Young Master’s qi center is currently in a state of overload from the extreme yang energy and the heat of the nine divine objects. If you add heat to that, his qi and blood might become twisted. Young Master! I will serve you North Sea ice snow tea that has been brewed cold, so please come this way.”

Seol Ye-rin, the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace, spoke firmly while looking up at me with transparent eyes.

The extreme yin qi rising from Seol Ye-rin's toes bloomed white frost on the carriage wall.

“My, my, both of you should calm down. What the Young Master needs right now is a Clear Mind Pill containing the Divine Physician’s prescription. Young Master, I will lend you my lap, so please come down and close your eyes for a moment.”

It was Seong Sang-ah, the granddaughter of the Holy Hand Divine Physician, who cut in with a languid smile.

At Seong Sang-ah's sly provocation, the gazes of Seol Ye-rin and Cheon Deung-jin clashed violently in the air with a crackling sound.

Looking down at this dizzying three-way battle from the roof of the carriage, I touched my forehead and let out a deep sigh.

‘No matter how much I have reached the Realm of the Profound and come to look down upon the world, it seems I cannot do anything about the calamity of trouble with women with even my power.’

At that moment, Wi Ji-yeong and Baek Mu-yong, who had been scouting at the very front of the procession, hurriedly rode their horses toward me.

“Captain! A messenger from the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild has been dispatched from ten li ahead!”

At Wi Ji-yeong's shout, I stood up from the roof.

At the end of my gaze, I saw a horseman running while raising white dust.

On the flag fluttering beside the rider was the emblem symbolizing the Moyong Clan, along with the personal seal of Moyong Geum, which now carried the aura of the ‘Merchant King’ who controlled the Central Plains market.

I lightly waved my hand, and the procession of dozens of treasure carts stopped all at once.

Soon after, the messenger who got off the horse knelt before me, panting for breath.

“Young Master! Merchant Guild Leader Moyong Geum sent me. Having heard the news urgently from the main house in Liaoning Province, he is waiting at the entrance to Qinghai Province!”

“Geum-ie came all the way here?”

A faint smile spread across my lips.

The day I crushed the inferiority complex of the legitimate Young Clan Head Moyong Cheong and his collusion with Saphaeryeon in just two exchanges in Liaoning Province.

I had handed over the right to handle the remnants of the ruined Sa Ma Clan and all the practical power of the family to Moyong Geum, who was of illegitimate birth.

Since then, Moyong Geum had removed all obstacles to the family and fully bloomed his talent as a pure merchant, and was now established as my most reliable ‘source of funds’ and brother.

***

Cloud Sea Pavilion, a giant inn located at the desolate border of Qinghai Province.

A giant merchant guild led by dozens of camels and horses was stationed there.

In the center of the guild, Moyong Geum, dressed lavishly in silk clothes, came running out joyfully.

Chapter 163 : Chapter 163

Chapter 163 : Gansu

“Big Brother! No, should I call you the Consort of the North Sea now? Hahaha!”

Moyong Geum, who came running with his silk robes fluttering, hugged me tightly.

The shrinking appearance of the illegitimate son who had been holding his breath in the shadow of the Young Clan Head Moyong Cheong in Liaoning Province in the past could no longer be found.

The leisure and momentum unique to a great merchant who controlled the Central Plains market surrounded him.

“Geum-ah, what brings you all the way here after leaving Liaoning?”

I chuckled and patted his shoulder.

Moyong Geum leaned back exaggeratedly and pointed behind him.

“Can I stay still when you are going to Kunlun, Big Brother? I have already obtained information through the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Phenomena that the Murim Alliance's Zhuge Myeong has released the remnants of Saphaeryeon as ‘meat shields’. I heard you have fifty carts, but that seems far from enough to hold the final divine object, so I brought a hundred more carts!”

When Moyong Geum gestured, the carts of the massive merchant guild lined up behind the inn created a magnificent spectacle whose end could not be seen.

On every cart, the golden emblem of the Moyong Clan was shining brilliantly.

A hundred carts?

It was too many.

Moving while leading so many carts was a bit difficult even for me.

“Geum-ah.”

“Yes, Big Brother.”

“It seems a bit difficult to take all these carts with us. Scale them down for me.”

“O-Oh, I understand! Thanks to you getting rid of that human Moyong Cheong and giving me practical power, the family has grown three times larger. I will prepare things that are small but of high value!”

“Thanks.”

“This level of reward is only natural.”

Moyong Geum checked the surroundings for a moment and then lowered his voice.

“However, Big Brother, the situation is not easy. Zhuge Myeong has truly made up his mind this time. It is said that in Punghyeon-eup at the foot of Mount Kunlun, the remnants of Saphaeryeon have taken the Blood Cult's pills and turned into Blood Poison Demon Men, and they are waiting with traps. Zhuge Myeong plans to persuade the Kunlun Daoists to blockade Jade Lake while you fight them.”

My eyes sank.

Zhuge Myeong's scheme was obvious.

He intended to damage my reputation by framing me as a demonic practitioner crazed for slaughter and to intercept the divine object by using the Kunlun Sect as a shield.

“Zhuge Myeong. That snake-like fellow is using his head.”

“That is why I have come up with a clever plan. My merchant carts do not face strict inspections from the Murim Alliance. Pass through Punghyeon-eup by loading the party and the treasures separately as if they were merchant goods. Isn't hitting them from behind rather than a frontal breakthrough my style?”

Moyong Geum playfully held out a thick ledger.

It was a secret map made by bribing the commercial supply routes inside the Kunlun Sect.

“Thanks, but I don't intend to go straight to Kunlun.”

There were still a whole lot of sects I had to stop by.

“Pardon? Big Brother, I told you the traps laid by Zhuge Myeong are waiting at the foot of Mount Kunlun! If you do not go directly to Kunlun like this, where on earth do you mean to stop by?”

“I receive wedding gifts as a reward. Therefore, if I solve the problems of the sects in the surrounding area that have issues, wouldn't I be able to receive something in return?”

Moyong Geum stared at me with a blank expression for a moment.

Even Moyong Geum, who controlled the world's market, could not open his mouth before this shift in thinking.

“Problem..... you say? There is no way the sects of the Orthodox faction would voluntarily request the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult to solve their problems, is there?”

“If they don't request it, we can just visit them ourselves and solve the problems we find.”

I laughed heartily and pointed to the map Moyong Geum had spread out.

“On the path passing from Shaanxi to Kunlun in Qinghai, there is the Kongtong Sect in Gansu Province.”

“Yes, it is a prestigious Orthodox sect that serves as one of the pillars of the Nine Sects One Gang.”

“Thanks to you handing over the Rogues' Guild informant Cho Gun to me in Liaoning Province, the information network of the Liaoning Rogues' Guild is currently reaching my ears. According to their information, the main mountain of the Kongtong Sect in Gansu is currently swept up in a strange atmosphere. It is said that Hwangbo Jin, an elder of the Murim Alliance, is leading the Alliance's Exorcism Sword Squad and is stationed at the Kongtong Sect, pressuring them strongly.”

Moyong Geum's eyes glittered.

“The Murim Alliance is pressuring one of their own Nine Sects One Gang members?”

“It is Zhuge Myeong's snake-like scheme. That fellow fed the remnants of Saphaeryeon the True Blood Demon Pills and laid them out as meat shields in Punghyeon-eup at the foot of Mount Kunlun. However, he also knows that he cannot fully stop me with just that. That

is why he is aiming for the ‘Heavenly Secret Stone’, the secret treasure that the Kongtong Sect has protected for generations.”

Inside my qi center, the thoughts of the Martial Gods resonated.

-Keke, that fellow Zhuge Myeong intends to take the Kongtong Sect's Heavenly Secret Stone and permanently close the formation of Kunlun's Jade Lake.

-My, the Kunlun Daoists must be burning up inside as they are about to have their precious secret treasure taken by that tiger known as the Murim Alliance. Third Young Master, let's hurry and save (?) them and tell them to hand over their bundles!

-Haven't you already become an expert at stripping the pockets of those old men?

Listening to the snickering voices of Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong and Sword Venerable Baek Un-han, I patted Moyong Geum's shoulder.

“The Kongtong Sect is currently in danger of having its secret treasure extorted with its neck bitten by the tiger called the Murim Alliance. We will go and beat up that tiger, becoming heroes who save the Kongtong Sect. And then we will voluntarily receive appropriate wedding ‘gifts’ and the ‘Heavenly Secret Stone’. Isn't that a perfect justification?”

Moyong Geum was surprised as if his jaw was about to fall at that amazing logic, but soon he let out a cheer unique to a merchant clicking his golden abacus.

“You are truly amazing, Big Brother! Instead of going directly to Kunlun and losing strength to the meat shield trap Zhuge Myeong laid, you strike his weak point, preempt the Heavenly Secret Stone which is the core of the scheme, and even pocket a generous wedding gift! Even I am taken aback by your business savvy!”

Seol Ye-rin, who opened the carriage door and stepped out, stood by my side while emitting a chill.

“You are once again wrapping up robbery very politely, Third Young Master. However, we cannot let things go as that man Zhuge Myeong intends. Considering how the Murim Alliance sent the Exorcism Sword Squad even to our engagement ceremony in the past to interfere, we must receive interest in full.”

Cheon Deung-jin also chimed in while flaring up the heat of her Fire Spirit Qi.

“That's right! As the Young Palace Head of the Potala Palace, I will help too. Let's help the Kongtong Sect Daoists escape the pressure of the Murim Alliance and make them willingly hand over wedding gifts for us!”

I nodded.

“Moyong Geum. A hundred carts will slow down our mobility, so select only the twenty fastest carts and compress them with elite merchant members. Have the rest follow behind, and we will head to the Kongtong Sect at full speed.”

“I shall follow your command, Big Brother!”

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Mount Kongtong, Gansu Province.

The air at the Demon Subduing Plaza, the main mountain of the Kongtong Sect located in the rugged mountain terrain, was heavy enough to be suffocating.

“Elder Hwangbo! No matter if it is the will of the Murim Alliance's Strategist Zhuge Myeong, to tell us to hand over the Heavenly Secret Stone, the thousand-year secret treasure of the Kongtong Sect! Furthermore, to tell us to lead the elites of our sect and act as a shield for Kunlun, this is an act of driving our Kongtong Sect to its death!”

The Sect Leader of the Kongtong Sect, Muun Jinin, swallowed tears of blood while glaring at the Murim Alliance Elder, Hwangbo Jin.

However, Hwangbo Jin snorted coldly while standing behind the sword qi of the Exorcism Sword Squad.

“Sect Leader, this is a sacrifice for the greater good. Hyeokryeon Yeom, the Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, plundered the Zhongnan Sect and the Mount Hua Sect in Shaanxi Province and is now coming west. If that fellow obtains the energy of heaven sleeping in Kunlun's Jade Lake, the Central Plains will be finished on that day. We must permanently seal Jade Lake with the Heavenly Secret Stone. If you do not obediently open the door to the Treasure Pavilion, we will consider the Kongtong Sect as rebels in the name of the Alliance and subjugate you!”

It was clear extortion and a threat of sect annihilation.

Muun Jinin and three hundred Kongtong Sect Daoists gripped their sword hilts in anger, trying to activate the Heaven and Earth Demon Subduing Formation, but they were like a flickering candle before the pressure of the elite martial artists of the Murim Alliance and the Exorcism Sword Squad surrounding the plaza.

With the strength of the Kongtong Sect alone, they had no way to overcome the main force of the Murim Alliance.

“How... can the Alliance, which is supposed to be a union of the Orthodox, commit such a lawless act.....”

It was just as Muun Jinin was about to drop his sword in despair.

“Robbing in someone else's yard under the guise of the greater good. It seems the Murim Alliance is truly having a hard time making a living.”

A relaxed and heavy voice tore through the heavy air of the Demon Subduing Plaza and rang out clearly.

The gazes of the hundreds gathered in the plaza turned toward the mountain gate all at once.

A man fluttering a dark silk long robe and faintly wrapped in black-gold light waves emitting from his qi center.

It was me.

And on both my sides, Seol Ye-rin, wrapped in a chill as sharp as the perennial snow of the North Sea, and Cheon Deung-jin, emitting the energy of red flames like a haze, were walking grandly.

Behind us, along with the giant carriage procession of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild, Wi Ji-yeong, Baek Mu-yong, Tae Un-seo, Eun Bin, Yu So-dong, and other members of the Small Snow Squad were lined up while emitting an ominous murderous intent.

“That man is……”

“Hye-Hyeokryeon Yeom! How are you already here!”

Hwangbo Jin's complexion turned the color of earth as he took a step back.

According to Strategist Zhuge's meticulous calculations, my group should have been normally tied up right now, fighting bloodily with the Blood Poison Demon Men of Saphaeryeon in Punghyeon-eup at the foot of Mount Kunlun.

“Zhuge Myeong's meat shields are probably rotting among themselves in Punghyeon-eup. The smell of blood was so offensive that I turned the path this way.”

I shrugged my shoulders and replied leisurely.

“I've come at a very good time. Since this is a perfect situation to catch thieves and receive a reward.”

I took out a red letter lavishly embroidered with gold leaf from my robe and tossed it toward Muun Jinin.

The letter, carrying a heavy inner qi, fell accurately at Muun Jinin's feet.

“Sect Leader. I am about to hold a grand wedding ceremony with the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace soon, and I happened to be coming by to deliver the wedding invitation. It seems the Kongtong Sect is in the predicament of facing sect annihilation due to the Alliance's threats, so I shall get rid of that trash for you. Instead, you can just give a generous wedding gift befitting the deed.”

Muun Jinin picked up the flying wedding invitation with both hands and wore a dazed expression.

The Murim Alliance was threatening them with sect annihilation while telling them to hand over the thousand-year secret treasure, and the person said to be of the Demonic Cult's bloodline, whom the world feared, was telling them he would save them if they gave a wedding gift while throwing an invitation.

Whichever way it was, both were mind-boggling, but at least the Hyeokryeon Yeom before his eyes was proposing the survival of the Kongtong Sect.

“Shut up, you monster of the Demonic Cult! To think you would dare interfere in the greater good of the Murim Alliance so arrogantly! Exorcism Sword Squad! Strike that fellow right now! To the one who cuts off his head, I will bestow an enormous reward in the name of the Alliance Leader!”

At Hwangbo Jin's desperate command, the elite martial artists of the Murim Alliance and the Exorcism Sword Squad all drew their swords and rushed forward.

Chapter 164 : Chapter 164

Chapter 164 : Heavenly Secret Stone

Shuaaaaa!

The sword qi emitted by the Murim Alliance elite martial artists and the Exorcism Sword Squad members filling the Demon Subduing Plaza surged toward me with a sharp whistling sound.

The silver wave created by hundreds of swords was like a giant wave poised to swallow me whole.

However, I did not even blink an eye.

Instead, the smile hanging on my lips deepened.

-Keke, brat. Those Exorcism Sword Squad fellows are still pushing with numbers. They haven't learned anything even after being disgraced at the engagement ceremony last time.

-My, Master. They simply don't know what a terrible graveyard they are walking into. They don't know that nine dragons are coiled inside our Third Young Master's qi center.

The moment the telepathic messages from the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen mixed with mockery crossed my mind, I slowly reached out my right hand.

“Baek Mu-yong, lead the Small Snow Squad and protect the carts. Miss Seol, Miss Cheon. Will you chase away those noisy flies for me?”

“I was intending to do that anyway.”

Seol Ye-rin stepped forward while readjusting her grip on her ice sword.

The moment Seol Ye-rin took a step, the ground of the Demon Subduing Plaza was covered in white frost in an instant with a crackling sound.

The extreme yin qi spiraled and froze the ankles of the Exorcism Sword Squad members who were rushing forward.

“Ack! My, my legs!”

“Shall I show you a hot taste?”

Cheon Deung-jin also soared into the air while exploding her Fire Spirit Qi.

The crimson flames emitted from Cheon Deung-jin's fingertips interlocked with Seol Ye-rin's ice qi, creating a giant steam storm in the plaza.

The cold ice and hot flames intersected, instantly dismantling the formation of the Murim Alliance martial artists.

“Th-This cannot be! To think our Exorcism Sword Squad is being pushed back by just two girls!”

Hwangbo Jin shouted in shock.

However, the real terror had not even begun yet.

I slowly raised my head.

The moment my purple eyes flashed, the energy of the nine divine objects fused inside my qi center began to boil explosively through my blood vessels.

Ooooong—!

The entire plaza vibrated.

Black-gold light waves emitted from my entire body.

“Elder Hwangbo. Tell Zhuge Myeong this. Before you covet someone else's secret treasure, you should look after your own necks.”

I lightly waved my hand toward the air.

Booom!

The energy wave, mixed with the formless aura of the Fighting Venerable and the destructive darkness of the Dark Venerable, directly hit Hwangbo Jin and the vanguard of the Exorcism Sword Squad.

Without even being able to scream, dozens of martial artists were flung in all directions, and Hwangbo Jin rolled on the ground while spitting blood after taking a heavy hit to his chest.

“Cough! This, this monster-like fellow……!”

A single wave of the hand. The Kongtong Sect Daoists lost their wits at the sight of a high-level expert leading the Exorcism Sword Squad and an elder of the Murim Alliance being swept away like fallen leaves.

I ignored the fallen Hwangbo Jin and approached Muun Jinin, who was standing dazed.

“Sect Leader. As you have seen, I have cleared away the interlopers. I believe it is now time for us to discuss the ‘wedding gift’.”

Muun Jinin tightly gripped the wedding invitation I had thrown with a trembling hand.

While it was a relief to escape the pressure of the Murim Alliance, the man before his eyes was a far more massive and dangerous existence than the Alliance.

“……Third Young Master. Are you saying you will even take the Heavenly Secret Stone, the secret treasure of our Kongtong Sect?”

“It is not extortion. The fact that Zhuge Myeong intended to seal Jade Lake with the Heavenly Secret Stone means that the location of that stone has already been exposed. Since the Alliance has failed, the Blood Cult will come next. Does the Kongtong Sect have the skill to block even the demonic hands of the Blood Cult?”

Muun Jinin bit his lip. My words were correct.

The Heavenly Secret Stone had already become a target for the world.

“Instead of me taking it, the Kongtong Sect will be recorded as an eternal ally of the North Sea Ice Palace, the Demonic Cult, and the West. And the treasures you provide as a wedding gift will become a deposit for me to become a dependable supporter when the Kongtong Sect stands up again in the Central Plains in the future.”

Moyong Geum, who was watching from the side, chimed in while clicking his golden abacus.

“Sect Leader, I promise you in the name of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild. Giving a wedding gift to Big Brother is signing up for the most certain insurance. The Moyong Clan Merchant Guild will take responsibility for the Kongtong Sect's supply routes for a lifetime!”

Muun Jinin eventually let out a deep sigh and bowed his head.

“……I understand. Rather than becoming a dog of the Alliance, having our secret treasure taken, and being driven to our deaths. Open the Treasure Pavilion! Load our family's sincerity along with the Heavenly Secret Stone onto the Third Young Master's carts!”

Wi Ji-yeong excitedly wielded her brush.

“Kongtong Sect, Heavenly Secret Stone secured! Five additional wedding gift carts! Sect Leader, you have made an excellent choice!”

I nodded as if satisfied and looked at the western sky where Mount Kunlun could be seen.

The Heavenly Secret Stone, the core component of the trap Zhuge Myeong had laid, was now in my hands.

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The underground secret chamber of the Treasure Pavilion, the deepest sanctuary of the Kongtong Sect.

I left the collection of money on the surface to Moyong Geum and the Small Snow Squad members and descended the spiral staircase covered in darkness alone.

After melting the old iron door with a light violet flame and entering, a flawlessly clear energy wrapped around my skin.

An old altar placed in the center of the secret chamber. On top of it, the Heavenly Secret Stone, a massive jade stone that held the light of the sky, was faintly floating and pulsating.

-Keke, these Daoist fellows. They stole a spiritual beast carrying the energy of heaven and shoved it into this dark place!

-Oh my, look at that brilliant color. It is even more transparent than my Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection. Third Young Master, that must be the famous Heavenly Secret Stone.

The thoughts of Sword Venerable Baek Un-han and Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong emitted from my qi center filled the secret chamber.

At that moment, the heavy voice of Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin, who had been silently managing his energy, rang strongly in my mind.

-Because that is something the First Founder, Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u, personally left as an arrangement in this Kongtong Sect.

“An arrangement personally left by the Ice Emperor?”

As I approached the altar and asked, the soul of the Spear Saint answered.

-That's right. In Kunlun's Jade Lake, known as the Gate of Heaven, the energy of ‘Heaven’ that binds all things and the energy of the universe into one is sleeping. In the past, the Ice Emperor was very concerned that such a massive power would fall into the hands of wicked demonic practitioners or Murim Alliance Leaders blinded by power. So he carved out a lock that would permanently close the gate of Jade Lake and, at the same time, the only key that could open it. That is precisely the Heavenly Secret Stone before your eyes.

“Why did he entrust such an important item specifically to the Kongtong Sect of Gansu Province?”

-At the time, the Sect Leader of the Kongtong Sect was an old Daoist of true Oneness with All Things, who had absolutely no interest in worldly fame and wealth or Murim hegemony. The Ice Emperor entrusted him with this stone after interacting and drinking with him for three days and nights. While commanding him, ‘Hide it in the deepest place until the true person who will succeed the will of heaven appears.’

Only then could I perfectly understand why a snake-like man called the Murim Alliance Strategist Zhuge Myeong aimed for this place so much.

“Zhuge Myeong, that fellow must have found this anecdote by digging through old texts. While I was tied down in Punghyeon-eup at the foot of Mount Kunlun, bloodily fighting with Saphaeryeon's meat shields, he intended to extort this Heavenly Secret Stone and permanently close the formation of Jade Lake. Was he trying to block me from accessing the Ice Emperor's legacy?”

-That is correct, Third Young Master! If it weren't for the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild's information network and your variable creation, we would have been caught in Zhuge Myeong's trap and would have had to helplessly stare at the permanently closed gate of Jade Lake!

The Demon Queen's hearty laughter followed.

I reached out toward the Heavenly Secret Stone with a deep smile on my lips.

“Zhuge Myeong's shallow petty tricks are settled, so now shall I figure this fellow out.”

My palm touched the cold surface of the Heavenly Secret Stone.

Whaaaaaaa!

The moment my hand touched it, the Heavenly Secret Stone emitted a dazzling blue-white light explosively.

The darkness of the secret chamber vanished in an instant, and the pure Heavenly Qi (天氣), which seemed to purify all the turbid qi of the world, became a massive tidal wave and wrapped around my entire body.

“Ugh……!”

A short and heavy groan erupted from my mouth.

The nine divine objects coiled inside my qi center began to resonate crazily as they welcomed the clear energy of the Heavenly Secret Stone.

They were the heterogeneous and overwhelming energies that possessed different massive natures and had tried to tear apart my qi center by clashing and expanding at times.

However, using the pure heavenly power of the Heavenly Secret Stone as a medium, they began to rotate while biting each other's tails as if it were a lie, and finally fused while forming a perfect sphere shape.

The blood vessels of my entire body screamed as they were purified, and the muscles and bones constituting my body were newly reassembled according to the providence of great nature.

The hot flames of the Extreme Yang Body, the extreme cold qi of the North Sea, and the arrangements of the nine martial gods finally met the heavens.

Crackle— Booom!

The strands of light emitted from the Heavenly Secret Stone mixed with my purple demonic fire, projecting the vast terrain of Kunlun's Jade Lake and the gaps in the formations in three dimensions onto the stone walls of the secret chamber.

The profound principles of heaven were directly engraved in my mind.

Heavenly Qi began to be visible through my eyes.

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The underground secret chamber of the Kongtong Sect's Treasure Pavilion vibrated as if it would collapse.

The blue-white light haze emitted from the Heavenly Secret Stone was sucked into my pupils.

My eyes, which had been swirling with a mixture of purple demonic fire, golden Buddhist power, and the pitch-black aura of the Dark Venerable, were transformed into transparent heavenly light in a split second.

‘I can see it.’

All things in the world were seen as being substituted with the flow of qi.

The grain of the wind, the heartbeat of the earth, and even the massive spiritual vibration flickering at the summit of Mount Kunlun hundreds of li away.

I had also become able to read and govern Heavenly Qi.

-Keke, brat. Congratulations. Only now have you finally become a vessel that can fully hold the legacy of Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u.

Leaving behind the overwhelmed voice of Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin, I looked toward the heavens.

Through the flow of Heavenly Qi, the chaos gathering toward the North Sea began to be visible.

“It seems like... on the wedding day, various problems might occur.”

It seemed the place of the great festival would be transformed into a place of great chaos.

Chapter 165

Chapter 165 : Qinghai

When I emerged above ground through the darkness of the Treasure Pavilion, the Small Snow Squad members and Moyong Geum, who were waiting in the plaza, bowed their heads all at once.

“Big Brother! Your complexion..... it truly does not seem like that of a human! Hahahaha!”

Moyong Geum shouted in shock.

The aura emitting from my entire body now went beyond a sense of intimidation, even carrying a sense of divinity as if one's soul would be purified just by looking at it.

Seol Ye-rin also widened her transparent eyes and approached me.

“Third Young Master, you seem to have changed somehow?”

“Yeah. I was able to see Heavenly Qi.”

I looked down at Hwangbo Jin of the Murim Alliance, who was lying down and groaning, with cold eyes.

“Elder Hwangbo. Tell Zhuge Myeong that I am taking the Heavenly Secret Stone with me. And tell those Exorcism Sword Squad fellows who will be waiting for me at Kunlun's Jade Lake as well. Tell them to prepare to be buried under the perennial snow of Mount Kunlun.”

As my eyes, mixed with purple and heavenly light, flashed, Hwangbo Jin foamed at the mouth and fainted in terror.

“Sect Leader.”

I called out to the Kongtong Sect Leader.

“Did you call?”

“As promised, the Kongtong Sect is now in the same boat as us. Although the pressure from the Blood Cult and the Murim Alliance will intensify soon, do not worry as the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild will take responsibility for supplies and information. I expect you to arrive at the North Sea with dignity in the name of the Kongtong Sect on the wedding day.”

“.....I shall keep it in mind. May the thousand-year Daoist power of Kongtong bless the Third Young Master's future.”

Muun Jinin carefully placed the wedding invitation into his robe with a trembling hand and bowed his waist deeply toward my receding back.

The Kongtong Sect Daoists, who had been suffering under the pressure of the Murim Alliance and facing the risk of sect annihilation until just a moment ago, showed their respect.

My party, having left the Demon Subduing Plaza, boarded the dozens of massive carriages waiting outside the mountain gate again.

The golden flag of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild and the snowflake flag of the North Sea Ice Palace fluttered in the dry wind of Gansu Province.

“Big Brother! The treasures plundered from the Kongtong Sect's vault alone have filled twenty carts! This is enough to fill an entire treasury of the main house in Liaoning Province and still have leftovers!”

Moyong Geum was laughing so hard his mouth reached his ears while clicking his golden abacus.

Having his merchant instincts revived, he seemed to have already finished calculating how to use these treasures to contribute to the trade with the North Sea Ice Palace.

However, my gaze, as I sat in a lotus position on the carriage roof, was directed not at the gold and silver treasures, but toward the northwestern sky in the distance.

Immediately after perfectly absorbing the Heavenly Secret Stone and fusing the nine divine objects of the qi center into one.

A world entirely different from before was unfolding in my eyes.

The flow of qi drifting in the atmosphere, the heartbeat of the earth, and the threads of causality occurring hundreds of li away were clearly visible like a three-dimensional map spread out before my eyes.

My eyes, which were mysteriously mixed with purple and heavenly light, narrowed as I watched in a specific direction.

“Moyong Geum.”

“Yes, Big Brother!”

“You said the Murim Alliance's Strategist Zhuge Myeong laid out the remnants of Saphaeryeon as ‘meat shields’ in Punghyeon-eup at the foot of Mount Kunlun, right?”

“Yes, that is correct. I have confirmed through the information network of the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Phenomena that thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men, who lost their reason after being fed True Blood Demon Pills, have set up camp in Punghyeon-eup and are waiting only for your arrival, Big Brother.”

A thin smile spread across my lips.

“Do you think those thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men, and the main force of the Murim Alliance's Exorcism Sword Squad dispatched to control them from behind, would be able to survive in a barren high-altitude area like Punghyeon-eup by barely making a living?”

At that question, Moyong Geum's finger, which had been clicking the golden abacus, stopped dead.

As the chief manager of a merchant guild, he was someone who knew the nature of logistics and supplies better than anyone else.

“Ah……! Punghyeon-eup at the entrance of Mount Kunlun is a place where food is extremely scarce as it is close to the perennial snow. For that many people to be stationed there, they must surely be forcibly requisitioning food and supplies from a large-scale sect nearby!”

“Right. Because I can clearly see the giant, turbid energy of supplies leading in a line toward Punghyeon-eup right now.”

I reached out and pointed toward the sky.

In my eyes, the trajectory of the energy of rations and meat for thousands of people, and the bloody medicinal ingredients of the Blood Cult, being loaded onto carts and moving toward Kunlun, was shining clearly.

“Passing through Gansu Province and entering Kunlun in Qinghai Province, where is the sect of a size capable of taking responsibility for the supplies there?”

Moyong Geum quickly took out a Murim map from his robe and scanned it.

“It is the Qinghai Sect! If it is that place, the hegemon of Qinghai Province and a neighboring sect of the Kunlun Sect, it is the only supply warehouse capable of providing all the logistics entering Punghyeon-eup!”

“The Qinghai Sect. Good.”

I slowly stood up while fiddling with the hilts of the Blue and Red Twin Swords.

-Kekekeke! You viper-like fellow. Instead of going through Zhuge Myeong's meat shield trap, you intend to cut off the supply route that provides food to that trap!

-Oh my, Master. Would he only cut off the supply route? It is obvious he plans to punish the wicked Murim Alliance and collect a ‘wedding gift’ from the Qinghai Sect again. Our Third Young Master has now truly become an expert at robbery!

I smiled slightly as I listened to the pleasant telepathic messages of the Sword Venerable and the Illusion Venerable inside my qi center.

“Change the destination to the Qinghai Sect's main mountain. I must cut off the food supply of the hunting dogs Zhuge Myeong laid out, and pull out the pillars of the Qinghai Sect for my wedding funds as well.”

“I shall follow your command! All forces march toward the Qinghai Sect!”

Along with Baek Mu-yong's thunderous Lion's Roar, the massive carriage procession carrying my party left the main road leading to Mount Kunlun and turned its trajectory deep into Qinghai Province.

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At that time, the main mountain of the Qinghai Sect was located in the deep mountains of Qinghai Province.

The front yard of the great hall, which should normally be filled with the clear energy of the Dao, had become a complete mess.

“Can't you move faster! Fill the carts with food and spiritual medicines! The Murim Alliance warriors and mercenaries stationed in Punghyeon-eup are starving! If you do not fill the quota by tomorrow morning, I will smash the Qinghai Sect's sign!”

Do Jin-myeong, the Vice Captain of the Exorcism Sword Squad dispatched as a supply officer from the Murim Alliance, shouted while swinging a whip in the air.

At his feet, the Sect Leader of the Qinghai Sect, Cheong-mu-jin, was kneeling while covered in blood.

The Qinghai Sect disciples were being threatened by the blades of the Murim Alliance martial artists while loading even the family's winter food into the carts after being thoroughly stripped.

“Vi-Vice Captain Do! Please, show mercy! We have already plundered the family's vault three times and sent it to Punghyeon-eup! If you take more food than this, all the young disciples of the Qinghai Sect will starve to death in the upcoming cold!”

Cheong-mu-jin appealed with tears while grabbing Do Jin-myeong's pant leg.

However, Do Jin-myeong heartlessly kicked Cheong-mu-jin's chest.

“Shut up! This is an emergency situation where we don't know when the demonic cult bastards will cross Kunlun! It is a natural duty for your Qinghai Sect to sacrifice for the

greater good, yet how can you beg for your private lives! Break open the vault door right now and scrape up every last grain!”

At the tyranny of Do Jin-myeong, who had the massive power of the Murim Alliance at his back, the Qinghai Sect Daoists fell into despair while shedding tears of blood.

The Saphaeryeon Blood Poison Demon Men Zhuge Myeong had laid out in Punghyeon-eup were monsters who had lost their reason.

To control those monsters, an enormous amount of food, meat, and spiritual medicines to stabilize qi and blood were endlessly needed.

The Qinghai Sect, a powerless peripheral sect, was bearing all that burden entirely.

“Ah..... Heaven is also indifferent. To think those who claim to be the Alliance Leaders of the Orthodox faction are committing acts worse than the Demonic Cult, the Qinghai Sect is finished as of today.....”

It was at the very moment Cheong-mu-jin let out a despairing lament.

Rumble—!

The giant iron gate of the Qinghai Sect was crumpled like a piece of paper and bounced backward.

“What, what is happening!”

Do Jin-myeong and the Murim Alliance martial artists were startled and drew their weapons.

Beyond the mountain gate where thick dust rose, a massive carriage procession filling the field of vision revealed its grand appearance.

The golden flag of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild and the transparent snowflake flag of the North Sea Ice Palace flutter at the front.

And from the roof of that carriage, a man lightly landed on the ground while emitting brilliant eyes mixed with heavenly and purple light.

“To think you are plundering someone else's storehouse using the greater good as an excuse. Since when did the Murim Alliance become a union of robbers?”

It was me.

As the aura of the Realm of the Profound flowing from my qi center weighed down the Qinghai Sect's front yard, the Murim Alliance martial artists, including Do Jin-myeong, had their knees buckle under a pressure that felt like their breath was being cut off.

“De-Demonic practitioner……! Why are you here instead of going to Kunlun!”

Do Jin-myeong shouted in shock.

If things had gone according to Zhuge Myeong's perfect plan, I should have walked into the hellish trap of Punghyeon-eup with my own feet by now.

I lightly flicked my finger as if mocking Do Jin-myeong's shock.

“Small Snow Squad. Clean up the trash who are kicking away food bowls in someone else's yard.”

“I shall follow your command, Captain!”

As soon as the order was given, the Small Snow Squad members rushed forward like a storm.

“How dare you handle food and rations carelessly! You bastards don't even have the right to eat!”

Tae Un-seo took out a shining kitchen knife from his robe and accurately struck the wrists of the Murim Alliance martial artists.

At the exquisite knife skill that made them unable to hold weapons without seeing blood, screams erupted from the warriors.

Swish swish swish—!

Wi Ji-yeong's secret flying daggers cut through the air and pierced the knees and acupoints of the warriors trying to escape, fixing them in place.

“Where do you think you're running off to! Everyone stay put and freeze!”

Baek Mu-yong struck his giant heavy sword against the ground, creating a storm-like sword wind that instantly crushed the formation of the Exorcism Sword Squad guarding Do Jin-myeong, and Eun Bin seeped in like a shadow while half-opening his normally closed eyes to accurately suppress the enemies' vital points.

In less than one quarter of an hour, the dozens of Murim Alliance martial artists who were trampling the Qinghai Sect were reduced to groaning while rolling on the ground.

I grabbed the collar of the fallen Do Jin-myeong and lightly lifted him up.

“It's good that Zhuge Myeong laid out plenty of meat shields, but it seems he didn't think about whose necks those starving dogs would bite if their food supply was cut off?”

“C-Cough! You..... If Strategist Zhuge hears of this, he will separate your bones and flesh.....”

“Tell the strategist.”

My purple eyes dug deep into Do Jin-myeong's pupils.

“Tell him to come himself if he wants to catch me.”

Chapter 166

Chapter 166 : Praise

Crunch!

As I tightened my grip, the creepy sound of Do Jin-myeong's jawbone dislocating rang out.

I threw him into the corner of the yard like throwing away trash.

Making a mockery of his title as a supply officer, Do Jin-myeong rolled on the floor and groaned miserably.

"Baek Mu-yong, tie those guys up for now. I'll use them as 'living carrier pigeons' to send to Zhuge Myeong."

"Understood!"

While Baek Mu-yong was subduing the Exorcism Sword Squad members, I approached Cheong-mu-jin, the Qinghai Sect Leader, who was still kneeling in a daze.

Cheong-mu-jin seemed more shocked by the fact that the people he believed to be the leaders of the orthodox sects had trampled his family and that I had saved them, rather than the fact that the man in front of him was the notorious Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult.

"Third Young Master. Why would you save a frontier sect like ours....."

Instead of answering, I took out a wedding invitation wrapped in red silk from my arms and placed it in Cheong-mu-jin's hand.

"Sect Leader, do not misunderstand. I just didn't want to see a food supply line tangled up on my way passing through, so I cleared it away. And I will be having my wedding

ceremony in the North Sea soon, so you just need to receive this wedding invitation and prepare a suitable congratulatory gift for it."

"A congratulatory gift..... you say?"

When Cheong-mu-jin asked blankly, Wi Ji-yeong, who had been watching from the side, quickly opened a ledger and interrupted.

"Hey, Sect Leader, you're slow to catch on! Our Captain protected all the food and treasures that you almost lost to the Murim Alliance bastards. Out of that, half... no, if you just happily offer about three-tenths as a congratulatory monetary gift, it means we will guarantee the safety of the Qinghai Sect!"

I smirked at Wi Ji-yeong's sly supplementary explanation and tapped Cheong-mu-jin's shoulder.

"The Murim Alliance tried to squeeze out your sweat and blood to create a trap, but I want to become your friend and open the path to the North Sea. What will you do? Will you become the Alliance's dog and starve to death, or will you become an ally of the North Sea and the Demonic Cult and eat your fill?"

Vitality returned to Cheong-mu-jin's eyes. The choice was obvious.

".....I will not forget the grace of saving the lives of the three hundred disciples of the Qinghai Sect! I will offer all the remaining spiritual herbs in the Treasure Pavilion and the Cold Iron rough stones, a specialty of Qinghai, as wedding gifts!"

"A good choice."

-Hehehe, brat. You don't even threaten them anymore. You've realized that it's much more efficient to bestow grace and empty their pockets.

-Oh my, Master. Isn't this a threat?

-Is it okay for that Sect Leader, who completely fell for it, to take responsibility for a sect?

Listening to the praises(?) of the Martial Gods, I smiled in satisfaction.

***

One hour later, the supply route on the outskirts of the Qinghai Sect.

Following my orders, the elite warriors of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild and the disciples of the Qinghai Sect moved in perfect order.

Dozens of food carts heading to Punghyeon-eup changed direction and joined behind my procession.

"Big Brother, the Blood Poison Demon Men in Punghyeon-eup will now start eating each other within three days."

Moyong Geum reported while tapping on his abacus.

"Zhuge Myeong will urgently try to open a new supply route, but the commercial power around here is already in my grasp. For those guys to get even a single grain of millet, they will have to send someone all the way to Luoyang."

"Well done, Geum. By the time the dogs, whose supplies have been cut off, go mad from starvation, we will leisurely pass by the side road and enter Kunlun."

My eyes flashed once again, harboring the Heavenly Qi.

"Miss Ye-rin, Jin."

At my call, the two women who were drinking tea inside the carriage poked their heads out.

"The Blood Poison Demon Men in Punghyeon-eup will start coming down the mountain due to starvation. Zhuge Myeong will try to shift the blame onto us. But before that, we must eradicate them first."

Seol Ye-rin replied coldly while fiddling with her ice sword.

"It's a battle of justification. If we deal with the monsters that the Murim Alliance couldn't control, the public opinion of the Central Plains will completely lean towards our side."

"That's right."

Cheon Deung-jin also raised her Fire Spirit Qi and shouted excitedly.

"Great! I will burn all those rotten chunks of meat to ashes with my flames!"

***

At that time, Punghyeon-eup, the Murim Alliance's temporary branch office.

"What?! The supply from the Qinghai Sect has been cut off?!"

Exorcism Sword Squad Captain Namgung Ho roared while grabbing the messenger by the collar.

In front of him, the bloodied Do Jin-myeong, whom I had 'sent', was crawling on the floor.

"T-That is correct, Captain..... Hyeokryeon Yeom..... that monster-like guy took over the Qinghai Sect and intercepted all the supply carts! The Blood Poison Demon Men imprisoned in the underground of Punghyeon-eup are unable to endure their hunger and are throwing fits right now!"

Namgung Ho's complexion turned pale.

Zhuge Myeong's stratagem was perfect, but they never dreamed that I would accurately strike the 'acupoint' known as the supply route.

Boom! Boom!

A massive vibration of smashing into walls was transmitted from the direction of the underground prison.

The roars of the starving monsters tore apart the night air of Punghyeon-eup.

"Captain! The formation cannot hold! The Blood Poison Demon Men are escaping!"

"T-This, damn it! Everyone, prepare for battle! Evacuate the village residents!"

Before Namgung Ho's scream could even finish, the ground of Punghyeon-eup exploded, and monsters surrounded in blood-colored mist started pouring out.

The net Zhuge Myeong had cast to catch me had now returned as a noose strangling the Murim Alliance's own neck.

And watching that pandemonium, I leisurely began to move.

***

"Kuaaaargh!"

"Maintain the formation! You will die if you retreat!"

The streets of Punghyeon-eup had literally turned into a living hell.

The remnants of the Saphaeryeon who had lost their reason after taking the Blood Cult's True Blood Demon Pill.

Even if they were stabbed by swords and had their limbs cut off, they felt no pain, and were only drawn by the smell of blood as they bit and tore at the warriors of the Exorcism Sword Squad.

Even the members of the Exorcism Sword Squad, who usually prided themselves on being the Alliance's elite, had their formations collapse and were falling like autumn leaves in the wind before the indiscriminate rampage of the monsters who had forgotten fear.

"Damn it……! How are we supposed to stop those monsters!"

Exorcism Sword Squad Captain Namgung Ho blew away the neck of a rushing Blood Poison Demon Man with sword flux and breathed heavily.

The situation was already out of control.

The fact that the guys they intended to use as meat shields would go mad from starvation and snap their own leashes was the worst variable that not even Zhuge Myeong, called the brains of the Murim Alliance, could have ever predicted.

"C-Captain! The defensive line has been breached! The guys are heading towards the civilian houses in the town!"

"Stop them! If the civilian casualties increase, the Murim Alliance's face will fall to the ground! Stop them no matter what!"

Namgung Ho shouted as if spitting blood, but the footsteps of the warriors, who were already exhausted to their limits, were only heavy.

A group of dozens of Blood Poison Demon Men broke through the empty defensive line and rushed like beasts towards the commoners of Punghyeon-eup who were fleeing in terror.

"Kyaaaaaah!"

"S-Save me!"

It was that desperate moment when a bloodied demon man raised his blood-colored nails towards a fallen child.

Swoosh-!

A chilling ice qi that flew in from somewhere struck the foot of the demon man, and in an instant, it trapped his entire body inside a thick pillar of ice.

"I-Ice……?"

In the place where Namgung Ho and the Exorcism Sword Squad warriors blankly turned their heads, a woman with blue hair, who looked as if she had descended from the sky, stood there emitting a frost-like coldness.

It was the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace, Seol Ye-rin.

"To think that those who style themselves as the leaders of the orthodox factions are struggling this much and failing to protect the commoners. You should be ashamed."

No sooner had her cold rebuke fallen than this time, crimson flames poured down from the sky like a rain shower.

Booooom-!

A pillar of fire soared from the center of the group of Blood Poison Demon Men heading towards the civilian houses.

"Burn to ashes, you monsters!"

As Cheon Deung-jin, who came down from the void fluttering her red dharma robe, wielded her Fire Spirit Qi like a whip, the hideous bodies of the monsters turned into black ash and scattered.

"Even the wicked woman of Tibet! H-How are you guys here!"

Above the head of the astonished Namgung Ho, someone landed while fluttering a pitch-black long robe.

On top of the roof of the inn rising in the middle of Punghyeon-eup.

From the entire body of the man standing there, a breathtaking black-gold light wave and violet flames were rising up like a haze.

"What are you going to do, turning the whole neighborhood into a wasteland because you can't properly manage your own dogs?"

My calm and arrogant voice cleaved through the night air of Punghyeon-eup.

-Hehehe! It's quite a sight to see the rats struggling after getting caught in their own trap!

-Master, to think they tried to use garbage like that as shields, the inner thoughts of the orthodox faction bastards are darker than the Demonic Cult.

Leaving behind the giggling telepathy of the old freaks, I lightly snapped my fingers.

"Small Snow Squad. Clean this up."

"We receive your command, Captain!"

At the same time my command fell, the members of the Small Snow Squad poured out from the darkness like a storm.

Eun Bin's fast sword drew a trajectory that not even light could reach and slashed the vital spots of the demon men, and Baek Mu-yong's heavy sword cleaved the ground and crushed the charge of the demon men.

Wi Ji-yeong's flying daggers pierced the joints of the demon men with unfailing accuracy, and even Tae Un-seo's kitchen knife ruthlessly claimed the lives of the enemies.

In just one hour.

The group of thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men, against whom the Murim Alliance's elite Exorcism Sword Squad was fighting a bloody battle and being pushed back, was cleanly eradicated before the overwhelming martial arts of my party and the Small Snow Squad, just like dry leaves burning away.

"H-How could this be....."

Namgung Ho blankly slumped down, dropping his bloodstained sword.

He was also afraid of our power that turned the monsters to ashes in an instant, but what was even more terrible was the political meaning implicit in this current situation.

The village people were prostrating on the floor and repeatedly expressing their gratitude towards Seol Ye-rin, Cheon Deung-jin, and me, who had slaughtered the monsters.

"Master! Fairy of the Ice Palace! Thank you for saving us!"

"The Murim Alliance bastards were too busy abandoning us and running away..... how will we ever repay this grace!"

I lightly jumped down from the roof of the inn and approached right in front of the dazed Namgung Ho's nose.

My violet glint in my eyes stared straight into Namgung Ho's shaking pupils.

"Well, the situation is turning out strangely, isn't it?"

"H-Hyeokryeon Yeom..... why didn't you go to Kunlun and.....!"

"Because I robbed the Qinghai Sect, your food supply, a little. Thanks to that, it seems the meat shields got hungry and bit their masters."

Namgung Ho's complexion turned white.

Gathering the remnants of the Saphaeryeon and feeding them the Blood Demon Pill was a top-secret matter of the Murim Alliance.

However, not only did I see through everything, cut off the supply route, and make the enemies self-destruct, but I also appeared as a 'savior' taking advantage of the moment they lost control.

Now the public opinion of the Murim will completely turn over.

An amazing reversal where the Murim Alliance becomes the hypocrite who abandoned the commoners, and the alliance of the Demonic Cult and the Ice Palace becomes the hero who saved the commoners.

"You..... demon-like bastard....."

Fwoosh-

I conjured a flame.

"A demon, you say."

Smirk-

To me, who knew better than anyone what a truly demon-like bastard was, those words were.

A praise.

Chapter 167

Chapter 167 : The Tenth Divine Object

I smirked and withdrew my hand.

The momentum of the Realm of the Profound that I emitted did not decrease at all and crushed the entirety of Punghyeon-eup.

-Hehehe, brat. Just look at the bloodline of that stupid Namgung Clan. It is quite a sight to see them struggling after falling into the pit they dug themselves.

-Master, those guys are really pitiful too. They came all the way here just listening to the words of that snake-like Zhuge Myeong, but now it looks like they will take all the blame.

The telepathy mixed with mockery from the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen brushed past my mind.

I turned my head and looked at the village people.

The commoners who were trembling in fear were now shedding tears while receiving the food distributed by the Small Snow Squad members and the first aid medicine handed out by Seong Sang-ah.

“Now, Captain Namgung. It is time to make a choice.”

I spoke lowly towards Namgung Ho again.

“Will you fight me in the name of the Murim Alliance like this and die a dog's death in front of the residents of this village? Or will you humbly accept the fact that we eradicated these monsters that you could not control and step aside?”

Namgung Ho's hand trembled minutely.

The strength had already drained from the wrist holding the sword.

Attacking me here was not only a suicidal act, but it would also be like pointing a blade at the commoners who followed him calling him ‘Master’.

“……The Murim Alliance will not forget this matter.”

Eventually, Namgung Ho withdrew his sword.

It was a declaration of defeat.

Namgung Ho led the bloodied Exorcism Sword Squad members and started to retreat into the darkness.

***

After the commotion subsided, I sat in the giant merchant guild carriage prepared by Moyong Geum and drank the tea Seong Sang-ah had served.

Seol Ye-rin was maintaining her ice sword next to me, and Cheon Deung-jin, who was still in a good mood, was grilling meat with her Fire Spirit Qi.

“Young Master, now the public opinion of the Central Plains Murim will completely turn over.”

Seong Sang-ah smiled brightly and checked my pulse.

“The Murim Alliance will arouse suspicion that they colluded with the Blood Cult to create monsters, and you will be revered as the hero who eradicated those monsters. Zhuge Myeong's petty tricks ended up shooting himself in the foot.”

“I have no interest in being a hero. It is enough that the number of people getting in the way on the road to Kunlun has decreased.”

I put down my teacup and looked out the window.

“Moyong Geum.”

“Yes, Big Brother!”

“Prepare the carts and go up the mountain. We have come right under the chin of Kunlun, but haven't we only thrown a wedding invitation to the master of this mountain and not received the congratulatory monetary gift yet.”

At my shameless yet confident declaration, the three women inside the carriage burst into giggles, and Baek Mu-yong and Wi Ji-yeong, who were on the coachman's seat, nodded their heads as if they were used to it.

It was right after the bloody commotion tangled with the defeated soldiers of the Saphaeryeon and the Exorcism Sword Squad of the Murim Alliance had ended, but there was only one thing in my head, the thought of pulling out the foundational pillars of the main mountain of the Kunlun Sect, which was called the pride of the orthodox sects and the Ancestor of Ten Thousand Mountains.

“I receive your command, Big Brother! I will push the carts with the momentum to bring even the Jade Emperor of the Kunlun Sect Taoists!”

Along with Moyong Geum's spirited shout, the giant merchant guild carriage procession rode the mountain slope and started advancing towards the One Pillar Gate of the Kunlun Sect.

***

The main mountain of the Kunlun Sect, the front yard of Taecheongjeon.

Taoist Cheong Pung, the Sect Leader of the Kunlun Sect, and the elders were still looking down below the mountain gate with pale faces.

It was because a moment ago, they had entirely witnessed the thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men who had swept the entrance of Mount Kunlun due to Zhuge Myeong's stratagem, and the overwhelming martial arts of my party who turned them into a pile of ashes in a single breath.

“S-Sect Leader……! The D-Demonic Cult, no, the Ice Palace group is coming up!”

Along with the guard's urgent shout, the tightly closed mountain gate of the Kunlun Sect opened wide.

I, faintly surrounded by the black-gold light(黑金光) waves, confidently walked in while fluttering my pitch-black long robe.

Beside me, the transparent ice flower Seol Ye-rin and the blazing flame Cheon Deung-jin stood side by side, emitting a chilling momentum.

I nonchalantly swept my gaze over the completely frozen Taoists of the Kunlun Sect, then approached right in front of Taoist Cheong Pung and leisurely took a clasped hands greeting.

“Sect Leader. Our greetings were cut short earlier because of the uninvited guests from the Murim Alliance and the unorthodox faction. Did you read the wedding invitation I gave you well?”

At my shameless greeting, Taoist Cheong Pung took out the red letter I had thrown from inside his sleeve and let out a deep sigh.

The fact that the Murim Alliance Strategist Zhuge Myeong tried to use the Kunlun Sect as a shield was now evident.

Rather, the one who prevented the sanctuary of Kunlun from being dirtied by the bloody water of the Blood Cult was the demon head under the heavens standing right in front of his eyes, me.

“……This old man also clearly saw with my own two eyes that the Murim Alliance tried to drive Kunlun into a deathbed under the pretext of a great cause. The grace of protecting the sanctuary of Kunlun, our Kunlun Sect will never be forgotten.”

As Taoist Cheong Pung politely bent his waist, I smirked and waved my hand.

“What grace. I just cleared away the swarm of flies blocking my wedding path. Now, since the Kunlun Sect is also safe, shouldn't you show your sincerity accordingly? It's Kunlun, called the pinnacle of the Central Plains Taoist martial arts, but surely you don't intend to just make do with congratulatory greetings empty-handed, right?”

No sooner had those words fallen than Wi Ji-yeong and Moyong Geum, who were waiting in the back, popped out.

Wi Ji-yeong spread open a large ledger and soaked her brush in ink, and Moyong Geum smacked his lips while lightly flicking his golden abacus.

“Wait, Third Young Master!”

The moment the tip of Wi Ji-yeong's brush was about to touch the drawing paper, Taoist Cheong Pung urgently raised his hand and shouted.

His complexion was still pale, but the stubbornness befitting the head of the Taoists leading Kunlun was imbued within.

“No matter how great a grace Kunlun has received, as the pinnacle of the Central Plains Taoist martial arts in name, we cannot leave a record that we offered a wedding congratulatory monetary gift to the Young Master of the Demonic Cult. That is an act of shoving the thousand years of Kunlun's honor and pride into the gutter!”

At that unyielding remark, even the elders of the Kunlun Sect standing behind him swallowed their dry saliva and studied my mood.

He had expressed a refusal head-on while talking about honor to the monster who had just turned thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men into a handful of ashes a moment ago.

My pupils sank deep.

“Honor, you say. I saved you from becoming a sea of blood with your mountain gate breached by the Blood Poison Demon Men that Zhuge Myeong of the Murim Alliance had laid out as meat shields, but you're going to keep your petty face now?”

The black-gold light wave emitting from my entire body heavily crushed the front yard of Taecheongjeon.

Seol Ye-rin also fiddled with the hilt of her ice sword as if she was displeased, and beneath Cheon Deung-jin's feet, red fire qi squirmed like snakes.

“P-Please do not misunderstand!”

Taoist Cheong Pung let out a fake cough and urgently brought out an alternative.

“It does not mean I will forsake the grace or send you away empty-handed. It means that the justification is important for the face of the orthodox sects! Instead of a congratulatory monetary gift, how about changing the title to a ‘wedding gift of gratitude(報恩)’ for the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace saving Kunlun from its crisis, and a ‘commission fee for the subjugation of the Blood Poison Demon Men’? If we do that, our Kunlun's face will be saved, and won't your carts be full too?”

At that absurd wordplay-like proposal, silence flowed for a moment.

-Hehehe! I thought they were just scholars with blood not even dry on their heads, but the sight of these old Taoist bastards taking care of their faces is quite a spectacle! In the end, it means they will give everything they have to give but just change the name tag!

-Oh my, Master really. The old men squeezed their brains out because they wanted to live.

Inside my qi center, the giggling telepathy of the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen resonated.

As soon as Moyong Geum heard those words, he cheerfully flicked the golden abacus he was holding and burst into a broad laughter.

“Hahahaha! Sect Leader, from my standpoint as a merchant, it is a very excellent and reasonable proposal! Since you are not yielding to the Demonic Cult but paying a fair remuneration to an ally named the North Sea Ice Palace, you can secure the justification of the orthodox sects and also avoid the stares of the Alliance!”

Wi Ji-yeong also wielded her brush with sparkling eyes.

“Then I will write it down in the ledger as ‘Kunlun Sect, Commission Fee for Subjugation of Blood Poison Demon Men and North Sea Ice Palace Friendship Gift’! Anyway, you have to pack it completely full to the volume of ten carts!”

Taoist Cheong Pung nodded his head with a bitter expression and gestured to the elders to open the door to the Treasure Pavilion.

However, I had no intention of ending it there.

“Filling the carts is a given. There should be one more important ‘return gift’ that the Kunlun Sect has to give me.”

Taoist Cheong Pung's expression heavily stiffened.

He too was not unaware of the real purpose of my visit to Kunlun.

“……Are you talking about the path leading to Jade Lake?”

“Correct. Zhuge Myeong tried to permanently seal the formation of the Jade Lake using the Heavenly Secret Stone he attempted to snatch from the Kongtong Sect. But that key has already fallen into my hands.”

I took out the jade stone imbued with the color of the sky, the Heavenly Secret Stone, from my arms and showed it.

As the bright wave of Heavenly Qi was emitted, the eyes of the Kunlun Sect Taoists widened in astonishment.

“I could forcibly break through and go up, but since it is someone else's sanctuary, wouldn't it be proper etiquette for the master to personally open the door?”

Taoist Cheong Pung let out a deep sigh.

The Jade Lake, the highest peak of Kunlun called the Gate of Heaven, was the source of Taoist martial arts and a forbidden area where the entry of outsiders was strictly controlled.

However, they had neither the justification nor the strength to stop me, who possessed the overwhelming martial force that saved Kunlun and even held the Heavenly Secret Stone, the key to the Jade Lake.

“……I understand. The Murim Alliance drove Kunlun into a deathbed making excuses of a great cause, but the Third Young Master protected Kunlun. We will personally open the path heading towards the Jade Lake, the summit of the Ancestor of Ten Thousand Mountains.”

As Taoist Cheong Pung's permission fell, a satisfying smile of a supreme ruler finally spread across my mouth.

“Moyong Geum. You take responsibility for the collection and make sure it is securely loaded onto the merchant guild. I will go up to the top of Kunlun with the Small Snow Squad.”

“I receive your command, Big Brother! I will cleanly rob the Treasure Pavilion of the Kunlun Sect without leaving a single speck of dust, no, I will politely receive it as a wedding gift!”

Leaving behind Wi Ji-yeong's humming and the sound of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild workers moving busily, I looked up at the rugged snow mountain in the northwest soaring through the clouds.

Inside my qi center, the nine divine objects that had finished fusing were pulsating like crazy towards the final tenth piece.

Chapter 168

Chapter 168 : Signpost

The Kunlun Sect's secret passage, the Path to Heaven, was a sheer cliff path that stretched endlessly with the clouds beneath our feet.

As I climbed the mountain guided by Taoist Cheong Pung, Seol Ye-rin, Cheon Deung-jin, Seong Sang-ah, and the elites of the Small Snow Squad followed behind me.

The higher we went, the thinner the air became, and an extreme cold unimaginable in the Central Plains dug into our flesh, but it was not a big problem for my party.

It was because Seol Ye-rin's ice qi absorbed the surrounding cold qi and paved the way, Cheon Deung-jin's Fire Spirit Qi warmed the body temperatures of the squad members, and the spiritual medicine for preventing altitude sickness that Seong Sang-ah had distributed beforehand stabilized their qi and blood.

"My goodness, to have such talented individuals gathered by your side. I truly cannot tell where the will of heaven lies."

Taoist Cheong Pung, who was walking in the lead, muttered while clicking his tongue.

At the end of the path he guided us on, finally breaking completely through the clouds and stepping up, the legendary lake, Jade Lake, revealed its figure there.

The Jade Lake boasted a scenery that seemed out of this world.

The endlessly wide lake was frozen transparently like a crystal, and above the water's surface, the clouds and starlight of the sky were reflected perfectly like a mirror.

A pure spiritual qi that seemed to contain the mystery of antiquity and the principles of all things, piercing deep into the bones, enveloped the entire lake.

"This place is....."

Seol Ye-rin unknowingly let out an exclamation and took a step closer.

It was a perfect and noble coldness that even she, who had lived her entire life in the severe cold of the North Sea, was experiencing for the first time.

Taoist Cheong Pung stopped his steps at the boundary line of the Jade Lake and bowed his waist deeply.

"This is as far as this old man can guide you. The Jade Lake is a strict forbidden area where even the Sect Leader of Kunlun cannot carelessly set foot. Only the one holding the key of heaven will be able to reach the center of that lake."

At Taoist Cheong Pung's words, I lightly nodded my head.

"Thank you for your trouble, Sect Leader. I will not forget Kunlun's debt."

Leaving Taoist Cheong Pung behind, I took a step towards the frozen surface of the Jade Lake.

The moment I was about to let my first foot touch the ground.

Vwoooom—!

The entire Jade Lake vibrated violently as an invisible massive barrier tried to bounce me away.

It was rejecting the uninvited guest who went against the principles of heaven and earth.

But I did not step back.

I smiled and took out the jade stone imbued with a clear sky-blue color that I had obtained in the underground secret room of the Kongtong Sect in Gansu Province, the Heavenly Secret Stone, from my arms.

Hwaaaaang—!

The pure Heavenly Qi emitted from the Heavenly Secret Stone wrapped around my entire body and gently neutralized the Jade Lake's rejection reaction.

At the same time, a massive resonance began deep within my qi center.

Iron, Fighting, Poison, Buddhist, Gold, Dark, Twin, Illusion, Beggar.

The nine divine objects of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens that I had gathered so far reacted to the energy of the Jade Lake, pulsating crazily and flowing through my blood vessels.

-Hehehe, the door is finally opening! What in the world will the tenth divine object be!

-Third Young Master, do not relax your tension. The tenth energy might be more massive than all the previous nine combined.

Inside my qi center, the telepathy of Sword Venerable Baek Un-han and Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong resonated.

And following that was the heavy voice of the Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin, who could not hide his overwhelming emotions more than anyone else.

-Could the tomb of the Ice Emperor, the closest to heaven, be beyond this?

The moment the Spear Saint spat out his questioning remark.

Craaack—!

As I injected the energy of the Heavenly Secret Stone and touched the water's surface, the middle of the crystal-like lake split open, revealing a blue ice staircase leading to the bottom.

"Captain! We will go with you too!"

The Small Snow Squad members, including Baek Mu-yong and Wi Ji-yeong, hurriedly tried to follow behind, but I raised my hand and stopped them.

"You guys wait here. Miss Cheon, Miss Seong, the same goes for you. Down there is a realm of a perfect vacuum that does not allow the energy of others."

"But Young Master……!"

Cheon Deung-jin stepped forward as if worried, but at my firm gaze, she soon had no choice but to bow her head.

I only looked back at one person, Seol Ye-rin.

"Miss Seol. Come with me."

"……Is it okay for me to go?"

"It is a place where the Ice Emperor's legacy might be. You, who will become the true master of the North Sea, must watch it clearly with your own two eyes."

Shining at her transparent pupils, Seol Ye-rin firmly held my outstretched hand.

My Extreme Yang Qi and Seol Ye-rin's Extreme Yin Qi achieved perfect harmony and wrapped around us as a protective shield.

As we went down the ice staircase to the bottom of the lake, a quiet altar appeared where all the sounds of the world seemed to be cut off.

In the center of the altar, without any decorations, a pure white bead floating alone in the air and shining radiantly was pulsating.

-Hehehe, is that truly the legacy of the Heaven Venerable, the pinnacle of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens?

Sword Venerable Baek Un-han's thought-wave trembled minutely. Even for him who was called a Martial God, the energy emitted by the pure white bead was massive and distant enough to overwhelm him.

A crystal condensing the very principles of heaven that covers and encompasses all the energies of the world. It was the Heaven and Earth Core.

"Because it is the purest, it is the heaviest energy."

I squeezed Seol Ye-rin's hand that I was holding tightly and slowly approached the altar.

Vwoooom—!

As I took a step closer, the Heaven and Earth Core began to fluctuate like crazy.

At the same time, the nine divine objects settled in my qi center simultaneously screamed and struggled to pop out.

"Keugh……!"

Iron, Fighting, Poison, Buddhist, Gold, Dark, Twin, Illusion, Beggar.

The energies that had been suppressed and fused under my will until now instinctively tried to submit and scatter upon facing the massive master called 'Heaven', the source of all things.

-Third Young Master! Firm up your qi center! The nine energies are about to be devoured by the overwhelming mass of the Heavenly Qi!

Demon Queen Jang So-ryeong's urgent shout struck my mind.

The tenth divine object wanted a merciless ruler who could perfectly dominate the nine energies and forcibly shove even that massive 'Heaven' into his vessel.

"Since you entered my body, have you forgotten who the master is?"

My two eyes fiercely flashed with purple and black-gold light.

The energy of the Extreme Yang Body surged explosively and ruthlessly crushed the nine energies running wild inside my qi center.

Paat—!

Suppressing the rebelling energies, I reached my hand straight towards Heaven and Earth Core.

It was the moment my fingertips touched the surface of the pure white bead.

Booooooom-!

A massive white flash of light exploded, as if erasing all the sounds of the world.

"Third Young Master!"

The pure energy of heaven poured into my blood vessels through my fingertips like a tidal wave.

Due to its overwhelming density and expansive power, the veins all over my body swelled as if blood would burst out.

No matter how much my physical body had been trained to the limit, it was a moment where it felt like my vessel would shatter from trying to take in the providence of mother nature itself all alone.

"I will not let go."

Seol Ye-rin tightly gripped my hand with her two hands.

A chilling coldness was emitted from her transparent pupils.

Extreme Yin Qi.

Seol Ye-rin poured out everything she had and began to coldly cool down my blood vessels that were boiling from the energy of the Heaven and Earth Core.

My explosive Extreme Yang Qi and Seol Ye-rin's absolute Extreme Yin Qi intertwined, drawing the trajectory of a perfect Taiji using the Heaven and Earth Core as a medium.

"Heuaaaaaah!"

My beast-like roar shook the bottom of the quiet lake.

Amidst the perfect harmony of Yin and Yang, the pure white energy of the Heaven and Earth Core finally pressed down on the nine energies in my qi center and started weaving them into one giant ring.

The hardness of Iron, the spirit of Fighting, the corrosion of Poison, the dharma power of Buddhist, the water energy of Gold, the darkness of Dark, the resonance of Twin, the illusion of Illusion, the life force of Beggar.

And the harmony of Heaven that covered all these heterogeneous energies like a lid and completed them into a perfect microcosm.

Crackle, boom!

The bead floating above the altar completely vaporized and permeated into my chest without hesitation.

The ten divine objects formed a perfect sphere inside my qi center and shone radiantly.

A stage where one threw off the shackles of humans and assimilated with the principles of heaven and earth.

It was a historic moment of reaching the true Wuji of the Realm of the Profound.

The storm of light that was fiercely raging subsided, and quietness visited the altar cut off from the world once again.

I slowly opened my eyes.

A black-gold light in my eyes, as deep as the abyss of the universe and as hot as the sun.

Every time I exhaled a breath, the frozen atmosphere of the Jade Lake was swaying as if in awe.

-……You did it.

-Finally, the legacy of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens has been contained in a single vessel.

Even the thought-waves of the Sword Venerable, Demon Queen, and Ice Soul Spear Saint held their breath, engulfed in awe before that overwhelming achievement.

While catching my rough breath, I smirked towards Seol Ye-rin who was looking up at me worriedly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

I gently pulled Seol Ye-rin's hand that I was holding and wiped the sweat from her cheek.

My whole body's blood vessels felt as light as a feather as if they were assimilated with mother nature, yet inside my fist, an absolute power capable of turning even Mount Tai into dust was reliably beating.

"Young Master, is your body…… is your body okay?"

Seol Ye-rin asked with a trembling voice.

The energy emitted from my entire body was showing a sublime pressure like facing a newly born sun.

"I lived thanks to you. If you weren't here, my vessel would have shattered first."

The moment I answered, the ten divine objects that had formed a perfect microcosm inside my qi center simultaneously began to resonate.

Vwooom-!

As the ten energies were woven into a single circle, like a giant compass operating, a blue signpost was drawn beyond my line of sight.

Chapter 169

Chapter 169 : Mount Heng (North)

Vwoooom-!

The ten divine objects that began revolving, drawing a perfect circle inside my qi center, simultaneously resonated.

It was a massive attractive force emitted as the energy of 'Heaven', the source of all things, pierced the remaining nine powers into one.

A blue signpost appeared overlapping beyond my line of sight.

At the bottom of the Jade Lake, the back wall of the altar, which seemed to allow no trace of any living creature, began to sway like an illusion.

-Hehehe, look! As the harmony of 'Heaven' covering the nine divine objects occurs, the real treasure map finally appears!

-Third Young Master, follow that light. At the end of the path the light heads towards, the Ice Emperor's tomb might be there!

The agitated telepathy of the Sword Venerable and Demon Queen struck my mind.

I adjusted my grip on Seol Ye-rin's hand.

Her hand, which had poured all its strength into the process of accepting the Heaven and Earth Core, was as cold as ice, but a firm will to support me was imbued within it.

A blue signpost appeared overlapping beyond my line of sight.

At the bottom of the Jade Lake, the back wall of the altar, which seemed to allow no trace of any living creature, began to sway like an illusion.

"Let's go, to find the real legacy the Ice Emperor hid."

Led by me, Seol Ye-rin nodded her head.

Following the trajectory of the blue light, the two of us passed through a passage behind the collapsed altar, where space itself seemed distorted, and soared back above the surface of the Jade Lake.

Paat-!

As the two of us broke through the frozen lake and revealed our figures, the party waiting nervously outside the lake burst into cheers simultaneously.

"Young Master!"

"Captain! You are safe!"

Cheon Deung-jin, Seong Sang-ah, and the Small Snow Squad members, including Wi Ji-yeong, hurriedly ran over.

I gently gathered the light in my eyes emitting from my whole body and smiled.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. The final piece is safely contained in my qi center."

I took out the Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong's divine object, the Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection, from my arms.

When I blew the energy of the Ten Venerables stored in my qi center onto the surface of the mirror, the violet mist emitted from the mirror began to draw a massive three-dimensional map of the Central Plains in the air.

The blue signpost started from Mount Kunlun, crossed the heart of the Central Plains, and pointed to the far-off eastern edge.

"This direction is....."

Moyong Geum, who was carefully examining the map, widened his eyes like circles.

"Big Brother, the place the light is pointing to seems to be Mount Tai. It is a long journey of thousands of li from Kunlun!"

"Mount Tai, you say."

A mountain in Shandong. One of the Five Great Mountains of the Central Plains.

It was a place I wanted to visit.

The corners of my mouth curled up diagonally.

If Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u's real tomb was in such a far-off place, the process of moving couldn't be wasted either.

"That's great. To go from Kunlun to Mount Tai, don't we have to pass through Shanxi Province."

At my words, Moyong Geum spread the complete map of the Central Plains wide open from his arms and sparkled his eyes.

"As expected of Big Brother! If we stretch out east from Kunlun, passing through Qinghai and Gansu, we will naturally pass through Shanxi Province and enter Shandong Province. And in Shanxi Province, there is Mount Heng (North), called the Northern Peak among the Five Great Mountains and the Mount Heng Sect of the Nine Sects One Gang!"

"Mount Heng (North), you say."

I stroked my chin and smirked.

"I said I wanted to tour the Five Great Mountains when I came out to the jianghu. The Western Peak Mount Hua and the Central Peak Mount Song have already put out ample congratulatory monetary gifts, so now it's time to check the sincerity of the Northern Peak Mount Heng (North) and the Eastern Peak Mount Tai. I should also check the foundation pillars of the monks on the way."

At that shamelessly unparalleled declaration, familiar cheers burst out from inside and outside the carriage.

Wi Ji-yeong promptly took out a large ledger and ink and hummed.

"Captain! If it's the Mount Heng Sect, isn't it a place where monks with deep Buddhist faith are? They will pack the carts full with a very merciful heart!"

Seol Ye-rin, who was about to get in the carriage, lightly leaned her ice sword on her shoulder and smiled faintly.

"No matter where it is, if they block the Third Young Master's path, I plan to freeze them all."

"Oh my, Miss Seol. Wouldn't it be troublesome if the monks of Mount Heng (North) freeze to death? I will warm them up nicely with my Fire Spirit Qi so they will willingly put out their bundles!"

Cheon Deung-jin also fluttered her red dharma robe and clenched both fists.

I shook my head watching the two women burning with enthusiasm.

-Hehehe! Look at those wicked wenches. To think they are trying to rob even the pockets of old nuns, how come everyone around you are thieves!

-Master really, the more wedding funds the better, right? I will also use this Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection to pick out only the most expensive treasures in the secret storehouse of the Mount Heng Sect, so look forward to it.

At the giggling telepathy of the Sword Venerable and Illusion Venerable inside my qi center, I firmly readjusted the Ice White Divine Spear and grandly commanded.

"Now, there is no time to delay. The next collection spot is the Mount Heng Sect in Shanxi Province!"

"We receive your command!!"

***

Shanxi Province, Northern Peak Mount Heng (North).

At the entrance of the rugged mountain terrain wrapped in bizarre rocks that looked as if they were carved from the clouds, a tension-filled silence lingered instead of the usual quiet sound of Buddhist scriptures.

The Sect Leader of the Mount Heng Sect, Jeong-hye, was sweating cold sweat while lined up in front of the mountain gate with about a hundred elite disciples.

"Sect Leader monk..... Is that demon head really coming to this place?"

When an elder of the Council of Elders asked with a trembling voice, Jeong-hye rolled her prayer beads and let out a deep sigh.

"Namu Amitabha..... The dispatch rider has already arrived. They say that Zhongnan and Mount Hua of Shaanxi, Kongtong of Gansu, and even the Kunlun Sect of Qinghai all had their foundation pillars pulled out under his feet. They say he is committing legal robbery under the pretext of a wedding congratulatory monetary gift....."

It was then.

Along with the sound of horse hooves ringing the earth's axis, a magnificent carriage procession arrived in front of the One Pillar Gate of the Mount Heng Sect, kicking up dirt dust.

At the sight of those arriving leading carts, the Mount Heng Sect disciples were intimidated and couldn't close their mouths.

At the front of that procession, I fluttered my black satin long robe and lightly stepped down to the ground.

As the aura of the Realm of the Profound, which fused the ten divine objects into one, was faintly emitted, the swords held by the Mount Heng Sect disciples began to tremble minutely.

"......Are you the Sect Leader of the Mount Heng Sect."

I approached in front of Jeong-hye and politely took a clasped hands greeting.

At that polite attitude, Jeong-hye rather felt a chill down her spine and pressed her palms together.

"Amitabha. I am called Jeong-hye of Mount Heng (North). Why have you come all the way to this shabby mountain gate."

I smiled and took out a letter coated in red gold foil from my arms.

"On my way passing through for sightseeing, I came to hand out the wedding invitation for the wedding I will soon hold with the Young Palace Head of the North Sea Ice Palace. Since the Mount Heng Sect is also a solid pillar of the orthodox sects, wouldn't you bless the future of our couple with the mercy of Buddha?"

Thud.

The wedding invitation fell at Jeong-hye's feet.

Jeong-hye tightly closed her eyes.

A blatant collection scene disguised as a merciful blessing.

However, looking at the Young Palace Head of the North Sea smiling while holding her ice sword and the Young Palace Head of Tibet blooming red fire qi from behind, she realized the harsh reality.

If they drew their swords here, the Mount Heng Sect was finished today.

***

Jeong-hye swallowed her dry saliva while looking down at the red wedding invitation, resembling blood, dropped at her feet.

The momentum emitted by the man in front of her eyes, Hyeokryeon Yeom, had already far surpassed the common sense of humans.

She instinctively realized how powerless it was to discuss 'mercy' against that monster who had melted the demonic qi of the Hundred Thousand Mountains, the cold qi of the North Sea, and even the Heavenly Qi of Kunlun into one body.

"……Amitabha. I have heard much of the Third Young Master's reputation. Since you personally brought the wedding invitation all the way here, how could our Mount Heng (North) not bless you."

Jeong-hye picked up the wedding invitation with trembling hands.

But her mind began to spin complexly.

If their foundation pillars were destined to be pulled out anyway, it would be a better policy to borrow the power of this calamity-like man to solve the long-standing difficult problem choking the sect's neck.

"However, Third Young Master, before bestowing the mercy of Buddha..... may this old nun shamelessly offer just one request?"

My eyebrows slightly raised as if interested.

"A request. You aren't asking to cut down the congratulatory monetary gift, are you?"

"How would I dare do that. However, even if I wanted to open the Treasure Pavilion of Mount Heng (North) to fill the Third Young Master's carts..... I am saying this because there is an 'uninvited guest' sitting in that Treasure Pavilion right now, locking the door."

Before Jeong-hye's words even finished, Seol Ye-rin's ice sword standing behind me emitted a cold qi.

"An uninvited guest? Who dared enter the sanctuary of Mount Heng (North)?"

Jeong-hye let out a long sigh and continued speaking.

"It is the remnants of the Blood Cult. They attacked the Hyeongongdong, the forbidden area of Mount Heng (North) and where the Treasure Pavilion is located, a few days ago. Those bastards twisted the formation of the Treasure Pavilion to snatch the Mount Heng Sect's secret spiritual medicine, the 'Ten Thousand Buddha Pill', and are holding out inside. With the power of our disciples, we do not have the skill to break through that cave filled with true poison."

It was true.

The bastards of the Blood Cult occupied the deepest cave taking advantage of the time the Mount Heng Sect disciples were cultivating the Dao.

If the Treasure Pavilion was robbed, let alone putting out a congratulatory monetary gift, the very survival of the Mount Heng Sect would be uncertain.

I smirked and stared intently at Jeong-hye.

Jeong-hye felt her entire body tingle at that violet light in my eyes, as if it pierced through her inner thoughts in an instant.

"So, you are saying that if I clear away that trash, you will 'voluntarily' put out the treasures in the Treasure Pavilion as a congratulatory monetary gift."

"……If only the Third Young Master solves this, we will load not only the Ten Thousand Buddha Pill but also all the Cold Iron rough stones from Mount Heng (North) onto your carts."

"Good. I was thinking of warming up my body anyway on the way to Mount Tai, but the welcoming is very definite."

***

My figure left a violet afterimage and soared above the sheer cliff.

From the entrance of the Hyeongongdong, which looked as if it was floating in the air, a blood scent that pierced people's noses and a dark red mist were pouring out like a waterfall.

"Oh my, the smell is too terrible. Young Master, it seems there are quite a lot of rotten rats sitting inside there."

Seong Sang-ah wrinkled her nose and took out a scent pouch from inside her sleeve.

When she lightly waved her hand, a clear herbal scent spread out and diluted the poison mist at the entrance.

Seol Ye-rin had already drawn her ice sword.

Transparent ice staircases were created on every cliff her feet touched, and the Small Snow Squad members following behind rode that path and infiltrated into the cave like lightning.

"Who is it! Who dares interfere with the great task of the Holy Cult!"

Deep inside the cave, in front of the giant iron door of the Treasure Pavilion, the warriors in red masks who were twisting the formation turned around in astonishment.

It was a group of the 'Blood Wolf Squad', a lower sub-group of the Blood Cult.

Instead of answering, I lightly wielded the Holy Blood Spear.

Booooom!

The black-gold light aura emitted from the tip of the spear wrapped around the cave wall like a serpent, and instantly turned the dozen or so Blood Cultists blocking the front into chunks of meat.

To me, who had obtained even the eye of Heavenly Qi along with the nine divine objects, these guys were not even warriors.

"That's enough playing around."

The violet light in my eyes shone brightly in the darkness.

I gathered the fluctuating energy of my qi center to the tip of my finger.

The energy of 'Heaven', fused through the Heavenly Secret Stone, tied the darkness of the Dark Venerable and the spirit of the Fighting Venerable into one and caused a massive whirlpool.

"Ten Thousand Heavens Flower Rain Black Lotus."

When I flicked my hand towards the void, thousands of black-gold light petals completely filled the inside of the cave.

It looked like beautiful falling flowers, but it was a fatal rain of hidden weapons that tore apart everything it touched at a molecular level.

"Keuuaaak!"

"H-Heeek! Save me!"

The screams were short.

The members of the Blood Wolf Squad perished without even knowing what kind of attack hit them.

The evil arts of the Blood Cult blocking the Treasure Pavilion also crumpled like a sheet of paper and disappeared before my overwhelming destructive power.

Chapter 170

Chapter 170 : Ice Emperor

After a while, I leisurely walked out to the entrance of the Hyeongongdong where the thick blood-colored mist had cleared.

Not a single drop of blood splashed on the hem of my clothes, but only a silence where the energy of living creatures had completely perished lingered inside the cave I passed through.

Following behind me, as Baek Mu-yong and the Small Snow Squad members came out carrying heavy wooden boxes, the eyelids of the Mount Heng Sect Leader, Jeong-hye, who was watching this, trembled finely.

"Amitabha..... Third Young Master, you have truly worked hard. With this, our Mount Heng (North)'s sanctuary has escaped from dirty demonic hands."

Jeong-hye pressed her palms together, trying hard to act calm, but she swallowed tears of blood inside while looking at the Mount Heng Sect's crest engraved on each box.

If the Blood Cult aimed for lives, this man aims for the thousand-year sweat and blood of the sect.

It was equally painful either way.

"What is there to call hard work. Thanks to it, our Small Snow Squad members also warmed up their bodies after a long time."

I passed by Jeong-hye and approached Wi Ji-yeong.

As if she had been waiting, Wi Ji-yeong soaked her brush with plenty of ink and spread open the ledger.

"Captain! Ten jars of Ten Thousand Buddha Pill recovered from the Mount Heng Sect's Treasure Pavilion, and twenty boxes of Cold Iron rough stones, a Mount Heng (North) specialty! Shall I write them down right away on the list of congratulatory monetary gifts 'voluntarily' put out by Sect Leader Jeong-hye?"

"Yeah. Record it meticulously so that the merciful hearts of the monks will be widely known even to the North Sea in the future."

At my sly reply, Jeong-hye couldn't bear to continue speaking and only rolled her prayer beads quickly.

The young nun disciples who were about to burst with complaints next to her could only bow their heads, overwhelmed by the ice qi Seol Ye-rin shed and Cheon Deung-jin's blazing Fire Spirit Qi.

"Then I will take my leave now, Sect Leader. Thanks to Mount Heng (North)'s generous Buddhist faith, it seems our couple's future will shine even more. I look forward to seeing you on the dazzling snowy fields of the North Sea in the future."

As I politely took a clasped hands greeting and turned around, the nun Jeong-hye tightly closed her eyes and chanted a deep Buddha's name.

"......Namu Amitabha. I will pray for the Third Young Master's martial fortune."

As we exited the mountain gate, the workers of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild were moving the secret treasures of the Mount Heng Sect onto the carts in perfect order.

Moyong Geum, who was flicking his golden abacus, ran over barefoot as soon as he spotted me.

"Big Brother! From the Ten Thousand Buddha Pill to Cold Iron rough stones! I didn't know the collection from the Mount Heng Sect... no, the receipt of the congratulatory monetary gift would be this successful. Finally, our procession's carts have surpassed one hundred! Now it's a massive capital that won't fall behind even if compared to the safe of any sect in the Central Plains!"

"Good work, Geum. But with this amount of carts, it will be cumbersome to move to the next destination."

At my words, Moyong Geum thumped his chest.

"Do not worry! From the path going down from the Mount Heng Sect, I will attach the guild's most elite escorts in layers and move them safely in the rear. You should advance at full speed towards your intended destination, Big Brother!"

After nodding my head, I lightly jumped onto the roof of the carriage.

Inside my arms, the Illusion Venerable Danmok Ryeong's divine object, the Mirror of Heavenly Flower Reflection, was vibrating on its own and emitting a faint violet radiance.

A map of the Central Plains rose three-dimensionally above the clear surface of the mirror, and the blue signpost clearly pointed to Shandong Province, the eastern edge past Shanxi Province.

"Shandong Province, Mount Tai, you say."

There is really not much time left until we reach the place where the Ice Emperor is.

-Hehehe, you are finally going to the real tomb of that old geezer.

-Oh my, since you have robbed even the souls and pockets of the Mount Heng Sect nuns, you've gathered all the funds to proudly go and greet Elder Ice Emperor as a daughter-in-law.

-Mount Tai's Jade Emperor Peak. The place closest to the sky... if it's the Ice Emperor, he would have been more than capable of freezing his physical body there.

Inside my qi center, the thought-waves of the Sword Venerable, Illusion Venerable, and Spear Saint resonated one after another.

My qi and blood, which had reached the Realm of the Profound of Wuji by perfectly fusing the ten divine objects, was fluctuating like a giant wave as we headed towards Mount Tai.

"Now, the collection ends here. Entire army, advance to the final destination, Mount Tai in Shandong Province!"

Along with my loud command, the massive congratulatory monetary gift procession began an overwhelming sprint towards Shandong Province.

***

A few days later, Tai'an in Shandong Province.

The panoramic view of the Eastern Peak Mount Tai, soaring grandly through the clouds, entered my party's line of sight.

A miraculous famous mountain where the Fengshan ritual, where past emperors offered sacrifices to heaven, was held.

As we reached the entrance of Mount Tai, the ten divine objects of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens inside my arms simultaneously resonated like crazy and caused a massive vibration.

Vwoooom-!

As if welcoming its master, the spiritual qi of mother nature wrapping around the entirety of Mount Tai collided with my black-gold light wave and soared to the sky.

"The energy is too heavy from here on."

I firmly readjusted the Ice White Divine Spear on my back and looked back.

"Moyong Geum, Wi Ji-yeong, and the Small Snow Squad members, guard the carts and wait at the bottom of the mountain. From here on, only me and Miss Seol will go up alone."

"Captain! We will also escort……!"

Wi Ji-yeong urgently stepped forward, but Baek Mu-yong grabbed her shoulder and stopped her.

Baek Mu-yong shook his head feeling the absolute coldness and atmospheric pressure pressing down from the mountain peak.

"It is not a realm we can handle. Let's follow the Captain's order."

Cheon Deung-jin and Seong Sang-ah also made regretful expressions, but knowing that this final journey was a task only for me and Seol Ye-rin, the true successor of the North Sea, they quietly stepped back.

"Young Master, you must return safely."

"Third Young Master, whatever the Ice Emperor's arrangement is... the two of you will be able to do it."

Receiving the two women's send-off, I firmly held Seol Ye-rin's white hand.

"Let's go, Miss Seol. To meet the true master of the North Sea."

"Yes."

The two of us kicked the ground and began to jump up the tens of thousands of stone steps of Mount Tai in a single breath.

As the altitude increased, the dry wind of Shandong Province disappeared without a trace, and a bone-cutting cold qi of Absolute Zero dominated the atmosphere.

It was an overwhelming coldness one might only feel in the deepest heart of the North Sea Ice Palace.

A realm that felt as if it was blocked by a barrier.

Only by breaking through here would we be able to face the Ice Emperor.

I wrapped myself in Extreme Yang Qi and took a step forward.

Craaack—!

Every time I took a step forward, pure white frost bloomed on the stone steps.

An absolute space where the very particles composing the space seemed to freeze and stop.

'It's difficult.'

At that time, Seol Ye-rin took a step forward.

Then. The realm began to crack again.

This coldness that seemed to freeze even the lungs of a master of the Realm of the Profound was only allowing passage to the bloodline of the North Sea and the one who embraced it.

"It's opening."

"Third Young Master, I see something over there."

Seol Ye-rin's hand trembled minutely.

Seol Ye-rin's silver hair resonated with Mount Tai's cold qi and emitted a bright blue light.

The highest peak of Mount Tai, the Jade Emperor Peak.

Above that sacred altar where sacrifices were offered to heaven, a giant ice crystal palace that could not exist according to the common sense of the Central Plains soared like a mirage.

-Hehehe, we have finally arrived. To think that old monster is suppressing the qi vein of the Central Plains and showing off the majesty of the North Sea even after death. What an old geezer with a terrible personality.

Sword Venerable Baek Un-han's telepathy was heard, but I did not answer.

The ten divine objects fused inside my qi center were pulsating like crazy.

As if finding a piece of a lost heart, the fluctuating energy dyed my entire body with black-gold light.

"Let's go."

I led Seol Ye-rin and passed through the main gate of the ice palace.

Inside the palace, thousands of ice blades floated in the air, guarding against intruders.

However, when the Ice White energy emitted from Seol Ye-rin's hand touched them, the blades opened the path and sank to the floor like loyal dogs meeting their master.

The heart of the palace, the deepest Great Hall.

A giant ice throne was placed there, and a man sat on it with his eyes closed.

Even though hundreds of years had passed, his skin was as lively as someone who had just fallen asleep.

An Extreme Limit Qi that seemed to freeze all things rippled like a wave from his entire body.

The legend who drove the Central Plains into fear and awe in the past, the first Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u.

A man who had suppressed the qi vein of the Central Plains for hundreds of years and reigned over the summit of Mount Tai.

The physical body of the first Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u maintained a noble majesty as if mocking the concept of death.

The coldness emitted by the Ice Emperor was a realm of absolute nothingness that stopped all things and even froze the flow of cause and effect.

Seol Ye-rin slumped down on her knees right there.

A massive resonance flowing through her bloodline beat her heart fiercely.

"……Founder."

The moment the trembling voice resonated in the Great Hall, Seol Cheon-u's frozen eyelids trembled minutely and slowly lifted.

Swoooosh—!

The moment the Ice Emperor's pupils were revealed, the air inside the Great Hall expanded instantly and engulfed me and Seol Ye-rin.

However, I did not take a single step back and received that momentum head-on while emitting violet light from my eyes.

Along with the Extreme Yang Qi in my qi center, the ten divine objects were reacting to the Ice Emperor's energy and howling like beasts.

Seol Cheon-u's gaze rested on Seol Ye-rin first.

It was a gaze that was blunt yet imbued with deep affection.

Before long, his head slowly turned and pierced through me.

The ten divine objects that he had scattered in the Central Plains, with Extreme Yang Qi embraced in his body, were lurking inside my body.

-You finally made it here. The child who inherited my blood, and the monster brat who swallowed up all the essence of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens.

The Martial God of the North Sea Ice Palace who was called the first North Sea Martial God in all ages.

The Ice Emperor, Seol Cheon-u, the two of us finally encountered him.