Chapter 171

Chapter 171: Martial God Struggle

Hundreds of years.

For an eternity impossible to measure by human time, This Emperor had kept himself frozen atop Jade Emperor Peak, the summit of Mount Tai.

This Emperor had sealed his flesh within ten-thousand-year cold ice and sunk his consciousness into an endless abyss.

He had pressed down upon Mount Tai, the heart of the Central Plains and the center of its qi veins, while leaving behind an arrangement so that the power of the North Sea would not vanish completely from the world.

The ten fragments This Emperor had scattered throughout the world.

This Emperor knew that when those powers, which the foolish martial artists of later generations revered and called the Ten Venerables under the Heavens, gathered as one, his long slumber would finally come to an end.

But when this Emperor opened his eyes and faced those who stood before him, for the first time in hundreds of years, he had no choice but to swallow a deep sigh.

'……What a truly cruel fate.'

This Emperor's gaze first fell upon the silver-haired girl kneeling beneath the jade throne.

At a glance, she was clearly of The Emperor's bloodline.

Even among the bloodlines of the North Sea, hers was a cursed constitution that might appear once in several hundred years, the Extreme Yin Body.

Had things gone as they should have, she would have died before reaching adulthood, with every blood vessel in her body frozen solid.

Yet the Extreme Yin Qi wrapped around the girl's body was not rampaging. Instead, it was controlled perfectly, like a deep and silent abyss.

Finding the reason was not difficult at all.

It was because of the boy standing beside the girl—no, because of the boy standing proudly without taking even a single step back before the majesty of this arrogant, colossal ice palace.

“So you have finally come this far. A child of my bloodline, and a monster who has devoured every last essence of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens.”

This Emperor’s lips opened for the first time in hundreds of years, and his cracked voice rang through the great hall.

This Emperor’s gleaming eyes pierced through the boy.

‘Strange. Truly strange, and a terribly dangerous vessel.’

Throughout his whole body, the powers of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens that This Emperor had scattered had fused into a flawless circular orbit, and supporting their center was the power of an Extreme Yang Body, as though it would burn all creation.

Yet beneath that coiled a sticky and savage pitch-black energy.

‘The bloodline of the Heavenly Demon.’

It was unmistakably the bloodline of that wretched old man with whom This Emperor had once fought a life-or-death battle in the deepest forbidden area of the Hundred Thousand Mountains several hundred years ago.

A man who had inherited the blood of the Demonic Cult possessed the Extreme Yang Body, had chewed up and swallowed every divine object This Emperor had left behind, and had climbed to the peak of Mount Tai while holding hands with the young palace head of the North Sea, This Emperor’s own descendant?

Whether this damned turn of events should be called heaven’s will or an ill-fated bond, This Emperor could not say.

The boy lightly stamped the Ice White Divine Spear against the floor and opened his mouth.

“It is an honor to meet the first ancestor. I am Hyeokryeon Yeom, the live-in son-in-law of the North Sea Ice Palace.”

Impudent.

A bloodline of the Demonic Cult dared to call himself the Ice Palace’s live-in son-in-law before This Emperor.

This Emperor was about to burst into a derisive laugh.

“Hehehe! Old geezer, so you still hadn’t died and were sitting here with your eyes wide open!”

“Oh my, you truly look like the First Founder! Still as stiff as ice. You were quite handsome, weren’t you?”

“……Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin greets the founder ancestor.”

A strange wave rose from the boy’s qi center and breast, and three translucent spirit bodies sprang into the air of the great hall.

This Emperor furrowed his brow sharply.

“Descendants of later generations, are you? Tsk, tsk. How is it that you still have not departed this world?”

Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin flinched and lowered his head.

But Sword Venerable Baek Un-han and Illusion Venerable Jang So-ryeong merely shrugged.

“Heh-heh, old geezer. You think we became ghosts because we wanted to? While stopping the rampage of that damned Ice Crystal you left behind, our true qi was sucked dry, and only our souls barely remained!”

“That’s right! And if it weren’t for the Third Young Master, we might have scattered to pieces and become evil spirits.”

This Emperor clicked his tongue.

“Silence. You fools could not even properly pass your arts down to your successors and let your lineages be severed, yet your mouths alone remain alive and well.”

This Emperor’s gaze turned back toward Hyeokryeon Yeom.

Even amid the ghosts’ chattering, the boy never lowered his guard.

Within his violet eyes lay the dense fighting spirit and abyss unique to one who had crossed the threshold of death countless times.

“Brat of the Demonic Cult. No one who calls himself my descendant’s companion.”

“Yes, Elder Ice Emperor.”

“I have a rough grasp of how you controlled Ye-rin’s cold qi despite her Extreme Yin Body, and how you fused the divine objects of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens. But within

your body..... even the Heart of the Heavenly Demon is pulsing. Did you open the forbidden area of the Hundred Thousand Mountains?”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s gaze trembled faintly.

“I did. My father opened the path for me.”

“Foolish boy. So that forbidden gate was opened after all.”

This Emperor slowly rose from the ice jade throne.

His joints, stiff after hundreds of years, moved with crackling sounds, and the power of the ten-thousand-year cold ice covering all of Mount Tai began to surge like a storm.

Seol Ye-rin instinctively tried to block Hyeokryeon Yeom’s front while releasing extreme cold qi, but Hyeokryeon Yeom grasped her shoulder and gently stopped her.

“Elder, the reason we came here is.....”

“Shut your mouth.”

When This Emperor lightly waved his hand, the space inside the great hall itself was severed, and a transparent Absolute Ice Wall split Hyeokryeon Yeom and Seol Ye-rin apart.

“Third Young Master!”

Seol Ye-rin screamed as she struck down with her ice sword, but the ice This Emperor had created was an eternal crystal that even a master of the Realm of the Profound could not break in one blow.

“Do not worry, child. I do not intend to kill your husband immediately.”

This Emperor slowly descended the steps toward Hyeokryeon Yeom.

“Do you know why this Emperor scattered the powers of the Ten Venerables throughout Murim and sealed himself on Mount Tai several hundred years ago? I am asking whether you know the true despair that the First Heavenly Demon of the Demonic Cult and I faced in the forbidden area of the Hundred Thousand Mountains.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom silently endured this Emperor’s pressure with the Blue and Red Twin Swords crossed before him.

Violet demonic fire surged from his qi center and fiercely resisted This Emperor’s cold qi.

“It must be related to the God-Demon realm that madman Hyeokryeon Geuk is trying to reach.”

“……You are quick-witted.”

This Emperor muttered bitterly.

“In the past, the First Heavenly Demon and I fought over supremacy beneath the heavens. Yet at the place we reached at the end of our decisive battle, we realized that the end of martial arts was not connected to godhood, but to a destructive demonic origin. The Heavenly Demon sealed that evil heart in the Hundred Thousand Mountains by using his own bloodline, and I split the heavenly principles capable of controlling that demonic qi into ten pieces and hid them throughout the Central Plains. And in preparation for the slightest chance that the seal would be undone and a true monster would be born, I left my flesh and essence as an arrangement here at the peak of Mount Tai.”

This Emperor’s eyes flashed terrifyingly.

“The fact that you have gathered all those split powers means that this man called Hyeokryeon Geuk has already reached his limit and is trying to swallow murim and the North Sea.”

“That is correct. He has already aimed for the Ice Palace’s Ice Crystal and dyed the Five Demon Clans in blood. To protect me and my people, and to defend the North Sea, I need your final legacy, Elder.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s answer did not waver in the slightest.

Within the fierceness of Extreme Yang, there coexisted the tranquility of one who held the Heavenly Qi of great nature.

“How arrogant.”

This Emperor reached into the air.

Thousands of ice blades floating within the great hall all turned toward Hyeokryeon Yeom at once.

“Do not delude yourself into thinking you can grasp all beneath the heavens just because you picked up and ate ten divine objects. My remaining essence is Absolute Zero itself, the authority that brings every principle in the world to a halt. Whether that dirty demonic qi of yours and your hodgepodge vessel can contain my true ice qi…… prove it with your own body!”

Along with This Emperor’s command, the cold qi of hundreds of years that had pressed down upon Mount Tai poured toward Hyeokryeon Yeom like a waterfall.

“Proof, is it?”

A beastlike smile spread across Hyeokryeon Yeom’s lips.

From Hyeokryeon Yeom’s entire body, a black-gold wave erupted explosively, like the roar of nine dragons.

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The cold qi emitted by the First Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u was unlike any chill Hyeokryeon Yeom had ever experienced.

An absolute martial force that froze time to a halt, erased the meaning of existence, and even locked the threads of cause and effect solid in ice.

Sensation began vanishing from the tips of his feet.

Even amid this overwhelming pressure, capable of freezing a Realm of the Profound master to death in an instant, Hyeokryeon Yeom’s qi center instead throbbed madly.

“Hehehe, brat! Keep your mind straight! That old geezer is serious!”

“Third Young Master! Bind the powers of the nine divine objects into one! If they scatter, you’ll be shattered to pieces!”

The urgent telepathy of the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen rang inside his head, but Hyeokryeon Yeom instead closed his eyes.

The “Eye of Heavenly Qi” obtained through the Heavenly Secret Stone opened.

‘Did you call it a hodgepodge?’

Hyeokryeon Yeom adjusted his grip on the Ice White Divine Spear. Violet demonic fire flickered from the spear tip.

The pitch-black demonic qi released through his Extreme Yang Qi, and the flame of Wuji created by fusing the essences of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens.

“I don’t care if it’s a hodgepodge. Try putting out even this flame with that vaunted zero degree of yours!”

Hyeokryeon Yeom kicked off the ground and shot upward.

BOOM—!

The place where Hyeokryeon Yeom had stood instantly turned into a vast field of ice thorns.

Thousands of ice blades cutting through the air chased after Hyeokryeon Yeom like beasts.

Hyeokryeon Yeom twisted his form in midair and swung his spear.

The heaviness of the Iron Venerable, the spirit of the Fighting Venerable, and the darkness of the Dark Venerable tangled together at the spear blade's edge and exploded.

"Wuji Lotus Flower!"

The violet lotus blooming from the spear tip scattered in all directions, melting the rushing ice blades one by one.

The instant the vaporized steam filled the great hall, Hyeokryeon Yeom pierced through the mist and closed in right before the Ice Emperor.

"I shall learn one move from you!"

The tip of the Ice White Divine Spear shot toward the Ice Emperor's chest.

Chapter 172

Chapter 172: To the North Sea

However, the Ice Emperor did not so much as blink and lightly flicked his finger.

CLANG—!

The spear tip was stopped by a transparent wall of air.

The air itself had frozen solid and turned into the hardest shield in the world.

"You are soft, brat. My cold qi does not only freeze flesh."

The moment the Ice Emperor's voice reached me, a chilling cold qi flowed backward along my spear.

From the palm gripping the spear shaft to my elbow, white frost settled in an instant.

The terror of my qi and blood stopping, and the flow of my qi being cut off.

-You fool! To freeze while holding the Spear Saint's spear—aren't you ashamed?!

Seol Yeong-jin’s Lion’s Roar snapped my mind awake.

‘Who says I’m freezing?’

I forcibly reversed the core inside my qi center.

The blood channels into which the Poison Venerable’s Ten Thousand Year Heavenly Poison Liquor had melted began to boil and froth.

Poison gnawed away at life, but it was also the most powerful catalyst for forcibly breaking through a stagnant flow.

WHOOSH!

The frost covering my arm evaporated and vanished.

Instead of pulling back my blocked spear, I stretched out my left hand and grabbed the Ice Emperor’s ice shield head-on.

“If I’m blocked, I just need to break through!”

The Buddhist Venerable’s golden monastic robe and the Illusion Venerable’s phantasm overlapped over my left hand.

I saw the shield's gap.’

It was the faintest wavering point of cause and effect within the Ice Emperor’s authority, pierced through by the Eye of Heavenly Qi.

CRACK—!

My fingers dug into the ice wall that had seemed absolutely unbreakable.

For the first time, shock colored the Ice Emperor’s eyes.

“You brat…….”

I exploded my qi just as I was.

A black-gold wave surged along the ice wall and rushed toward the Ice Emperor’s entire body.

The whole great hall trembled as if it would collapse, and a massive avalanche erupted from the summit of Mount Tai.

From beyond the Absolute Ice Wall, Ye-rin’s cry rang out, laced with a scream.

“Third Young Master—!”

Amid the thick ice powder and mist, I met the Ice Emperor’s gaze head-on.

Joy.

The Ice Emperor’s face was filled with joy.

“……Not bad. To mix the heart of the Hundred Thousand Mountains with the essence of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens and forge such a monster. The Heavenly Demon, that old man, left behind quite a fine seed.”

The Ice Emperor slowly spread both hands.

The ceiling of the great hall was blown away, revealing the night sky of Mount Tai.

“The test is over now. I shall pour the remaining eons of my time into your vessel. Endure it. If you cannot endure it, there will only be death.”

The Ice Emperor’s body began to crumble into blue-white particles of light.

And the Ice Emperor’s vast essence, the final tenth power that contained Mount Tai’s earth vein, poured into Hyeokryeon Yeom like a tidal wave.

The moment blue-white light swallowed Hyeokryeon Yeom’s entire body, the pain that seemed ready to tear his flesh apart vanished as if it had been a lie, and his consciousness was pulled into a distant eternity of time.

The life of one human—no, of an absolute being who had sought to transcend human limits and touch the realm of gods—flashed through Hyeokryeon Yeom’s mind.

What unfolded before his eyes was the endless eternal snow of the North Sea.

At the center of that blizzard stood the Ice Emperor of his youth, Seol Cheon-u.

A noble and arrogant cold qi, as though it would freeze the entire world.

He tempered and tempered himself without end, desiring only to see the end of martial arts.

After finally completing his ultimate ice qi and reaching the threshold of becoming World’s Best, the place he headed for was none other than the deepest darkness of the Hundred Thousand Mountains.

The scenery distorted, turning into a hellish battlefield where the sky burned red and the earth split apart.

There, the Ice Emperor was fighting a life-or-death battle against a man wrapped in pitch-black demonic qi.

It was the founder and ruler of the Demonic Cult, the First Heavenly Demon.

Black flames and ice snow collided, surging as though they would destroy the world.

The martial might of the two absolute beings cutting through the air was itself a wonder.

Even though it was only an illusion, Hyeokryeon Yeom could not take his eyes off the trajectory of Wuji they emitted.

But at the end of that fierce battle, the truth the two absolute beings faced was cruel.

Beyond the door opened by reaching the peak of martial arts, there was no place of enlightenment.

There was only a horrifying demonic origin that sought to devour and destroy all things.

The dense despair and emptiness those two heroes felt before that vast abyss constricted Hyeokryeon Yeom's chest exactly as it had been.

Within the illusion, the First Heavenly Demon sealed that evil abyss inside his own heart to stop it from flowing out into the world, then buried himself in the forbidden area of the Hundred Thousand Mountains.

And the back of the Ice Emperor, left alone, was infinitely lonely and heavy.

To make sure the sacrifice of the Heavenly Demon, who had been both his friend and his sworn enemy, would not be in vain—and to prepare for the day the seal might one day be undone and a true monster might be born—the Ice Emperor made a decision that cut to the bone.

Hyeokryeon Yeom saw him split the heavenly principles and absolute authority he had spent his entire life attaining into ten pieces and scatter them across the Central Plains.

Those were the powers of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens that Hyeokryeon Yeom had bled so bitterly to gather until now.

The final illusion was here, at Jade Emperor Peak on Mount Tai.

After scattering all his power and holding only his remaining essence, the Ice Emperor sealed his flesh inside ten-thousand-year cold ice.

In that lonely, cold sleep of hundreds of years, he waited for someone to one day gather the fragmented powers into one and punish the demonic being that might become a true monster.

As he slowly closed his eyes, faint regret lingered on the Ice Emperor's face.

As the cluster of light slowly subsided, the illusions that had filled Hyeokryeon Yeom's mind also began to scatter.

"……So this was the weight you bore."

Hyeokryeon Yeom murmured quietly and slowly opened his eyes.

The body of the Ice Emperor Seol Cheon-u had already completely melted into the winds of Mount Tai, without even a handful of blue-white powder left behind.

Inside Hyeokryeon Yeom's qi center, the tenth power containing the Ice Emperor's final eons meshed perfectly with the existing nine divine objects and the demonic qi emitted by the Heart of the Heavenly Demon.

Extreme Yang and Extreme Yin, orthodox and demonic energies, fused into one without the slightest conflict, forming a perfect universe of great nature inside Hyeokryeon Yeom's body.

Hyeokryeon Yeom quietly offered a clasped hands greeting toward the empty ice altar.

The burden of the legend that had waited for hundreds of years had now been passed wholly to Hyeokryeon Yeom.

"Rest in peace, Elder. The monster you and the First Heavenly Demon feared—I will tear him apart with my own hands."

In Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes, the radiance of the Realm of the Profound, where violet and blue-white mingled together, blazed brilliantly toward the night sky of Mount Tai.

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BOOOOM—!

When Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly waved his hand through the air, the Ice Emperor's Absolute Ice Wall that had separated him from Seol Ye-rin crumbled gently like melting spring snow.

The eternal cold qi that had clutched Mount Tai's summit for hundreds of years scattered, assimilating into the flow of great nature with a single breath from Hyeokryeon Yeom.

“Third Young Master!”

As soon as the ice wall disappeared, Seol Ye-rin, who had been holding her breath and waiting, ran over and threw herself into Hyeokryeon Yeom’s arms.

Seol Ye-rin’s shoulders were trembling faintly.

It was because she had worried herself sick, afraid that Hyeokryeon Yeom’s vessel might break beneath the Ice Emperor’s overwhelming will and the energy waves that had seemed ready to shatter Mount Tai.

“Sorry for making you wait, Miss Seol.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom gently patted Seol Ye-rin’s back.

Feeling the energy transmitted through Hyeokryeon Yeom’s touch, Seol Ye-rin flinched in surprise and lifted her head.

The active-volcano-like rough heat of Extreme Yang she had once felt whenever she held Hyeokryeon Yeom, and the explosive instability unique to demonic qi, had completely disappeared.

Instead, in their place was something as deep as the abyss of the North Sea, as endlessly vast as the sky, and as warm as the sun.

“Young Master..... your energy.....”

“It’s all over. I finally threaded the scattered fragments together into one perfect whole.”

The mysterious black-gold gleam in Hyeokryeon Yeom’s eyes, where violet and blue-white subtly mingled, curved softly.

-Hehehe! Amazing, truly amazing! To throw the powers of two absolute beings into a furnace and use the nine divine objects as the lid! In all my life, I’ve never seen a monster like this!

-Oh my, Master, really. Monster? What do you mean, monster? Our Third Young Master is now someone who will truly ascend to the realm of a Martial God.

-.....You have inherited the Elder Ice Emperor’s will. Brat—no, Hyeokryeon Yeom. There will be no hesitation in your spear and sword now.

The overflowing thoughts of the Sword Venerable, the Demon Queen, and the Spear Saint poured from inside his qi center and rang cheerfully through Hyeokryeon Yeom’s mind.

They, too, had shared the Ice Emperor's memories together with Hyeokryeon Yeom and witnessed with their own eyes the true form of the vast despair that had entwined them several hundred years ago.

"Let's go. Everyone down the mountain is probably waiting until their necks fall off."

Hyeokryeon Yeom took Seol Ye-rin's hand and began descending the stone steps of Mount Tai, leaving the empty altar behind.

The treacherous pressure of Mount Tai and the Absolute Zero cold qi that had gnawed down to the bone when they climbed up were nowhere to be found. Only the clear, refreshing mountain breeze of Shandong Province pleasantly brushed against the hems of their clothes.

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At the foot of Mount Tai.

Below tens of thousands of stone steps, Moyong Geum and the Small Snow Squad members, who had been waiting in camp, were anxiously stamping their feet after the tremendous tremors and storm of light from the mountain summit finally subsided.

"Ahhh! Why isn't the Captain coming down already?! I said we should go up there!"

Wi Ji-yeong could not endure it any longer and whined while fiddling with her flying dagger.

"Calm down, Ji-yeong. Have you forgotten that overwhelming energy wave pressing down from the mountain summit earlier? That was not a place for us to interfere."

Baek Mu-yong admonished her in a heavy voice, but he, too, was so tense that sweat had soaked the hand gripping his sword hilt.

Cheon Deung-jin and Seong Sang-ah were also staring fixedly up the mountain, their hands clasped as if in prayer.

It was then.

"Huh? They're coming down! Captain! Young Palace Head!"

Tae Un-seo was the first to spot the two figures coming down from Jade Emperor Peak and shouted.

Hyeokryeon Yeom and Seol Ye-rin were walking leisurely through the misty clouds.

The moment they saw that sight, the party waiting below the mountain all held their breath at once.

In their eyes, Hyeokryeon Yeom had become completely different from before.

An overwhelming awe surrounded him, making them want to kneel just from looking at him, as though every single step and every breath he took contained the principles of great nature.

“B-Big Brother..... are you truly human?”

Moyong Geum asked, stammering as he nearly dropped the golden abacus in his hands.

Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled and stood before the party.

“Then what, am I a ghost? If you don’t want to lose your livelihood, stop saying useless things and get the cart ready.”

Only then did Wi Ji-yeong burst into tears at Hyeokryeon Yeom’s familiar shameless tone and rush toward him.

“Captain! I thought you really became a Martial God and ascended to heaven, leaving us behind!”

“Young Master, you aren’t hurt anywhere, are you?”

“Your physical condition has changed from before. You are so perfect now that even my acupuncture would be useless.”

Cheon Deung-jin and Seong Sang-ah also approached and sighed in relief.

Amid the flood of questions and warm greetings, Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly raised his hand and calmed the party.

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s gaze stretched toward the distant north, toward the barren yet beautiful snowfield that touched the sky.

“All preparations are complete.”

At Hyeokryeon Yeom’s low, weighty voice, the group’s noisy commotion subsided in an instant.

“We have secured every legacy of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens and the arrangements left behind by the Ice Emperor and the First Heavenly Demon. There is nothing more in the martial world of the jianghu for us to avoid or prove.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom readjusted the Ice White Divine Spear on his back and stood shoulder to shoulder with Seol Ye-rin beside him.

“We return to our home, the North Sea.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s firm declaration echoed through the foot of Mount Tai.

Chapter 173

Chapter 173: Black Kill Squad

A massive procession of hundreds of carts began racing north, cutting across Shandong’s yellow earth.

The scale of the procession had already gone beyond the movement of a single sect and was more reminiscent of a great nation relocating its capital.

Hyeokryeon Yeom was not on the roof of the large carriage at the very front. Instead, he was sitting inside the carriage beside Seol Ye-rin.

In the past, he would have refined his energy while taking the wind on the roof, but the current Hyeokryeon Yeom had reached a realm where the essence of nature circulated through him on its own just by breathing quietly.

“Third Young Master, you look tired.”

Seol Ye-rin covered the back of Hyeokryeon Yeom’s hand with a gentle touch.

Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled faintly and shook his head.

“I’m not tired. I just have a lot to think about. It feels as though the inside of my qi center has become a clear lake.”

-Hehehe, brat. That is precisely the state of Wuji spoken of by the Daoists. Usually, it seems empty, but the moment you clench your fist, that lake will become a vast tidal wave and swallow your enemies whole.

-Master, your expression is too murderous! Our Third Young Master is now like an immortal who doesn’t even need to get angry!

Listening to the noisy telepathy of the Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen, Hyeokryeon Yeom looked out the window.

Cheon Deung-jin, who had been riding alongside the carriage, poked her head in through the window.

“Young Master! Isn’t it stuffy inside? The wind outside is very refreshing. How about riding a horse and running with me?”

Cheon Deung-jin smiled brightly and held out her hand toward Hyeokryeon Yeom.

Around Cheon Deung-jin, the warm energy unique to the Fire Spirit Body lingered, pleasantly warming the cold wind of Shandong.

But before Hyeokryeon Yeom could answer, Seol Ye-rin blocked the gap in the window with a cold hand.

“Jin, dust is getting in. The Young Master is currently regulating the energy in his qi center, so don’t disturb him. Go ahead and clear the road properly.”

“Hmph, really, Miss Seol. You must be very happy, monopolizing the seat beside the Young Master all by yourself.”

Cheon Deung-jin pouted and grumbled, but Seol Ye-rin paid her no mind and smiled as she half-closed the carriage window.

In the corner of the carriage, Seong Sang-ah, the granddaughter of the Holy Hand Divine Physician, watched the scene as she put away her silver needles and smiled languidly.

“Please do not get so heated, both of you. Right now, the Young Master’s body is in a state where the nine divine objects and the Heart of the Heavenly Demon are in perfect harmony, so mere dust from outside would be repelled by natural energy before it could even touch his skin. Rather, wouldn’t those heated gazes of yours be what makes the Young Master even more tired?”

“Miss Seong, you really……!”

“Miss Seong, that was a bit much.”

The invisible battle of nerves among the three women made the air inside the carriage freeze and burn again and again.

Hyeokryeon Yeom pressed his throbbing temple and let out a small sigh.

He had reached the Wuji of the Realm of the Profound and understood the principles beneath the heavens, yet he simply could not grow used to the principles of this trouble with women.

-Hehehe! Isn’t this something you brought upon yourself? To head for the North Sea with the Ice Flower of the North Sea, the flame of the Western Regions, and even a famed physician of the Central Plains hanging all around you! Even the Heavenly Demons of past generations would click their tongues before your luck with women!

-Oh my, Master. Are you jealous? With our Third Young Master's vessel, he should be able to handle a flower garden of this level easily.

Listening to the cheerful cackling of the Martial Gods inside his qi center, Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled faintly.

It was tiring, but it was not a commotion he disliked.

It was a warm peace filled with the scent of people, something he had never once felt in those harsh past lives.

It was then.

With the loud clatter of horse hooves outside the carriage, a rider carrying the flag of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild pulled close beside the wheels.

It was Moyong Geum.

"Big Brother! An urgent report has come from the Rogues' Guild and the merchant guild's reconnaissance team up ahead!"

Instead of his usual composure, Moyong Geum's voice was filled with deep tension.

Hyeokryeon Yeom opened his closed eyes and turned his head toward the window.

"What is it?"

"They say the path through the Yan Mountains, the gateway from Hebei into the North Sea, has been completely blocked. Several thousand martial artists in black are camped there, and their presence is not at the level of an ordinary sect. Judging by the demonic qi they are emitting……."

"They must be Hyeokryeon Geuk's hunting dogs."

Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes instantly sank into a black-gold gleam.

Moyong Geum wiped away cold sweat and nodded.

"Yes, Big Brother. It seems the Young Cult Leader's side is determined to completely seal off your route north to the North Sea. Since we have so many carts, there is no proper detour either…… What shall we do? Should I place the merchant guild's escort warriors at the front?"

Instead of answering, Hyeokryeon Yeom opened the carriage door and stepped outside.

When he lightly leaped onto the carriage roof, beyond his fluttering ink-colored long robe, he saw the endless procession of hundreds of treasure carts stretching out behind him.

It was the marriage fund and congratulatory monetary gifts they had collected while sweeping through the heartland of the orthodox sects and the Outer Regions, an unprecedented amount in the history of the North Sea.

“Captain! Just give the order!”

Wi Ji-yeong, Baek Mu-yong, Tae Un-seo, Eun Bin, Yu So-dong, and the other members of the Small Snow Squad, who were escorting the carriage at the very front, all drew their weapons and looked up at Hyeokryeon Yeom at once.

In their eyes, instead of fear, there was absolute confidence built up while pacifying the Hundred Thousand Mountains and Dongting Lake.

Hyeokryeon Yeom slowly drew the Ice White Divine Spear from his back.

The blue starlight embedded in the transparent ice spearhead resonated with Hyeokryeon Yeom’s Extreme Yang Qi and emitted a dazzling radiance.

“There will be no detour.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s heavy voice rang out clearly across the entire massive procession.

“We are not defeated soldiers fleeing right now. We are the procession of a prospective groom returning to the North Sea to hold the greatest wedding beneath the heavens. Is there any need for us to go around and greet rude, uninvited guests who are blocking the road to the bride’s house?”

At that brazen yet spirited declaration, a deep smile spread across Seol Ye-rin’s lips inside the carriage.

Cheon Deung-jin also erupted with Fire Spirit Qi and cheered, while the Small Snow Squad members let out beastlike roars.

“Waaaaaaah!”

“We’ll sweep away every bastard blocking the road!”

Hyeokryeon Yeom extended the Ice White Divine Spear forward.

“Moyong Geum! Do not slow the carts. We will pierce straight through the middle of the enemy camp and head directly to the North Sea. Small Snow Squad, and Miss Cheon!”

“Yes, Captain!”

“Just say the word, Young Master!”

“I will clear away the trash blocking my path, so all of you are to guard the congratulatory gifts like an iron fortress and make sure not a single cart gets scratched. If even one coin of ten jeon is taken, do not expect mercy!”

“We obey your command!!”

Along with Wi Ji-yeong’s sharp reply, the massive congratulatory gift procession did not slow down at all. Instead, it began racing forward with even more terrifying momentum.

Standing on the carriage roof, Hyeokryeon Yeom stared at the dense demonic qi slowly rising from the direction of the Yan Mountains.

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The only major road running between the rugged valleys of the Yan Mountains.

The martial artists in black blocking that road were like a vast dark cloud.

At their center stood a man wearing a red eyepatch. He was Yuk Cheol, one of Hyeokryeon Geuk’s closest aides and the Vice Captain of the Black Kill Squad, the Demonic Cult’s execution unit.

“Vice Captain, they are coming.”

At the messenger’s report, Yuk Cheol looked toward the horizon with cold eyes.

What approached while raising a cloud of dust was a procession of hundreds of carriages. It was exactly as the information had said. The enormous treasures said to have been prepared by the Demonic Cult’s Third Young Master, Hyeokryeon Yeom, by squeezing the lifeblood from the orthodox murim, had appeared before his eyes.

“Hehehe. I heard the gifts he collected after sending out wedding invitations were enormous.”

The huge chain sickle in Yuk Cheol’s hand swayed with a metallic sound.

The Black Kill Squad was different from ordinary Demonic Cult martial artists.

They were killing weapons who knew no pain, having undergone the process of “True Blood Brainwashing” that Young Cult Leader Hyeokryeon Geuk had received after joining hands with the Blood Cult.

“All of you, remember this. Our liege wants the divine objects and Seol Ye-rin alive. Everything else..... may be destroyed. In particular, I will grind that arrogant Third Young Master’s limbs into powder and offer them before the Young Cult Leader!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

Several thousand Black Kill Squad members raised their weapons while emitting sinister demonic qi.

The entire valley was swallowed in dark red demonic qi, creating a terrifying atmosphere.

Had it been an ordinary merchant guild, they would have abandoned their goods and fled at the mere sight of that pressure.

But the approaching procession did not stop.

No, it was actually picking up speed.

“Mad bastards. They’re desperate to die.”

Yuk Cheol let out a sneer and was just about to swing his chain sickle.

Wooooong—!

Suddenly, the air began to give off a strange resonance.

The demonic qi emitted by the Black Kill Squad members collapsed powerlessly, like morning mist standing before a vast sun.

“W-what is this energy.....!”

Yuk Cheol instinctively stepped backward.

At the head of the carriage procession, from the entire body of the man standing atop the roof, black-gold radiance close to pure white was surging upward.

It was neither demonic nor orthodox. It was a transcendent pressure, as though the principles of great nature had been placed upon the palm of one hand.

“All forces spread out! His energy is not ordinary! Fire Bow Squad, shoot!”

At Yuk Cheol’s urgent command, the archers lying in ambush above the valley all loosed arrows filled with demonic qi at once.

Thousands of black arrows poured down like rain, covering Hyeokryeon Yeom and the carriage procession.

But Hyeokryeon Yeom did not even swing his spear.

He merely stamped his foot lightly.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM—!

Transparent ripples spread through the air, and the thousands of falling arrows all stopped in midair at once, as though they had struck an invisible wall.

And the next moment, according to Hyeokryeon Yeom's will, the arrows whipped around and shot backward toward the Black Kill Squad members lying in ambush.

"Aaaaaagh!"

"W-what kind of martial art is this?!"

Watching his subordinates scream as they were pierced by their own arrows, Yuk Cheol's mouth fell open.

He had seen masters of the Realm of the Profound release qi to knock away arrows, but he had never heard of someone twisting the providence of nature itself and taking full ownership of an enemy's attack.

Piercing through that mist of shock, Hyeokryeon Yeom's voice cruelly burrowed into the Black Kill Squad's eardrums.

"Will you still stand in my way?"

Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes flashed, violet and blue-white mingled together.

Yuk Cheol realized it.

Things like Jaegal Myeong's schemes and Hyeokryeon Geuk's orders were nothing more than a child's prank before this overwhelming existence.

Chapter 174

Chapter 174: Ice Palace and Demonic Cult

The narrow canyon of the Yan Mountains was swallowed by silence for a fleeting instant.

The sight of their comrades screaming after being pierced by the arrows they themselves had fired, and the transcendent martial might that overturned all common sense, made the eyes of the Black Kill Squad members tremble.

They were killing weapons who prided themselves on having erased fear through brainwashing, yet even they flinched.

Yuk Cheol gripped his chain sickle even tighter as savage killing intent poured from beyond his red eyepatch.

“Do not be afraid! It is nothing more than mere sorcery! That bastard is alone, and we number in the thousands! Reform ranks and charge! Whoever takes the Third Young Master’s head will sit in the seat of an Elder of the Demonic Cult as of today!”

Yuk Cheol’s crazed shout echoed through the canyon, and the Black Kill Squad members who had faltered once more surged forward with beastlike roars.

Thousands of footsteps shook the earth, and the dark red demonic qi they emitted covered the sky.

-Hehehe, that brat with the red eyepatch is not in his right mind. Does he think thousands of ants rushing in can catch a dragon?

-Master, they are pitiful dolls who have sold even their souls. Third Young Master, I don’t think there is any value in showing them mercy anymore.

The Sword Venerable and the Demon Queen’s cynical telepathy brushed through his mind.

Hyeokryeon Yeom slowly looked down at the Ice White Divine Spear from atop the carriage roof.

The blue starlight wavering at the spear blade’s tip.

“Mercy.....”

A smile settled on Hyeokryeon Yeom’s lips.

And the next instant, his form vanished soundlessly from atop the carriage.

PAAAAAT—!

Behind Hyeokryeon Yeom as he rushed forward as a black-gold streak, the delayed sound of the air tearing apart followed him.

The heavily armored martial artists of the Black Kill Squad charging at the very front with their shields raised had not even managed to react.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!

The moment Hyeokryeon Yeom set foot on the ground, the wave of Heavenly Qi formed from the fused powers of the Ten Venerables exploded in all directions.

The ground crumpled like a sheet of paper, and dozens of martial artists were launched into the air. The instant their bodies touched Hyeokryeon Yeom's energy, they disintegrated like dust and vanished.

A single landing.

With that alone, the vanguard of the Black Kill Squad was erased without a trace.

"You monstrous bastard!"

Yuk Cheol swung his chain sickle and charged, aiming for Hyeokryeon Yeom's neck.

The sickle hanging from the end of the chain drew a black arc as it cut through the air.

That sickle contained the savage Blood Poison infused into it by Hyeokryeon Geuk, making it a lethal weapon that would melt the blood vessels throughout the entire body with even a graze.

But Hyeokryeon Yeom did not swing his spear.

He merely stretched out his left hand and caught the sickle blade with his bare hand.

CLANG—!

Rather than the sound of metal striking metal, a heavy boom like two enormous slabs of bedrock colliding echoed through the canyon.

"W-what……? My Blood Poison does not work?!"

Yuk Cheol pulled the chain in shock, but Hyeokryeon Yeom's hand remained immovable as a rock.

"Poison? The Poison Venerable inside my body has already eaten such shallow energy as a snack."

Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes shone fiercely violet.

"And your chain sickle is far too light. Shall I put a little of the Iron Venerable's power into it?"

A pitch-black iron-colored energy flowed backward along the chain through Hyeokryeon Yeom's hand.

Crack! CRUNCH!

In an instant, the entire chain sickle twisted and turned into a weight of tens of thousands of geun, crushing Yuk Cheol's arm.

Yuk Cheol screamed at the pain of his arm bones being shattered, and the sickle slammed into the ground, creating a deep pit.

"Aaaaaagh! My arm, my arm!"

Ignoring the screaming Yuk Cheol, Hyeokryeon Yeom swung the Ice White Divine Spear horizontally toward the thousands of Black Kill Squad members still charging at him.

"Wuji, Glacier, Heaven-Rending!"

Transparent cold qi spewed from the spear tip and spread out in the shape of a fan.

It was the martial art of the Ice Emperor, freezing space itself.

HISSSSSS—!

The thousands of Black Kill Squad members filling the canyon froze into statues and came to a halt in a single instant.

As they stood frozen with their weapons raised and their shouting expressions unchanged, fine cracks began spreading over their entire bodies.

CRASH—!

As though exquisite glasswork had shattered, thousands of martial artists turned to powder and scattered on the wind.

The dark red demonic qi that had filled the entrance to the Yan Mountains was nowhere to be seen. Only clear cold qi lay like mist beneath Hyeokryeon Yeom's feet.

Hyeokryeon Yeom withdrew his spear and looked back.

The carriage procession of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild remained intact without a single scratch.

"Waaaaaaah!"

The first to break the silence was Wi Ji-yeong, who was bouncing up and down on top of a carriage.

“Captain! No, Young Master! What was that just now?! Thousands of them turned into ice sculptures and shattered all at once!”

“……Well, this leaves no room for us to step in at all.”

Baek Mu-yong and Tae Un-seo also stared blankly down at the weapons in their hands and laughed hollowly.

Moyong Geum was trembling with his golden abacus in hand, yet his eyes sparkled with awe toward Hyeokryeon Yeom.

‘To think such a person is backing our merchant guild! It is only a matter of time before the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild becomes the greatest merchant guild beneath the heavens, beyond even the Central Plains!’

Leaving the group’s cheers behind, Hyeokryeon Yeom approached Yuk Cheol, who was lying face down on the ground and shedding tears of blood.

In the eyes of the killing weapon who had lost his emotions through True Blood Brainwashing, there was now only vivid ‘fear.’

“H-hiiik……! D-do not come near me! You monster!”

Yuk Cheol retreated with his remaining arm.

Hyeokryeon Yeom looked down at him with indifferent eyes and spoke.

“You are not even worth killing, but there is a reason to leave you alive.”

“W-what…….”

“Go tell your master.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s violet gaze drove deep into Yuk Cheol’s pupils.

“That I will come for him later.”

Crushed by Hyeokryeon Yeom’s pressure, Yuk Cheol could not even scream before he foamed at the mouth and fainted.

Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly kicked the fallen Yuk Cheol aside to clear the road, then leaped gently and landed atop the roof of the large carriage.

Beyond the carriage window, Seol Ye-rin looked up at him with a gentle smile.

“Thank you for your hard work. You handle the North Sea’s ice arts even more refreshingly than I do.”

“For a skill I learned from you, Miss Seol, wasn’t that rather decent?”

When Hyeokryeon Yeom answered shamelessly, Cheon Deung-jin beside them pouted.

“Hmph. If I had burned them all away with my Fire Spirit Qi, there wouldn’t even have been bone ash left. Please let me join in next time!”

“Fine. Next time, you take the lead, Miss Cheon.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled pleasantly and pointed ahead.

“Moyong Geum! The road is open, so raise the speed! We enter the North Sea in one breath!”

“I obey, Big Brother! All forces advance toward the North Sea at full speed!!”

Along with the thunderous command, the procession of more than a hundred carriages once again kicked off the earth and began racing forward.

As they passed through the rugged canyon of the Yan Mountains, the density of the air gradually began to change.

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The dust of Shandong and the murky air of Hebei gradually disappeared, and pure wind that stung the tip of the nose began to fill the atmosphere.

The vast snowfield they faced after crossing the Yan Mountains at the northern edge of Hebei announced that the territory of the North Sea would soon begin.

At that time, in the Ice Crystal Hall, the highest place in the North Sea Ice Palace, where ten-thousand-year snow swirled violently.

The mistress of the North Sea and Seol Ye-rin’s mother, Ice Queen Hong Ye-hwa, was silently gazing at the white horizon spreading beyond the window.

Around her, ice qi rose like a haze, displaying a majesty that seemed capable of freezing even the indoor temperature to Absolute Zero.

“……They are coming.”

Hong Ye-hwa’s low voice reflected off the ice walls and rang coldly.

Hong Ye-hwa could feel a vast wave of energy pushing in from the distant south.

It was the energy of Wuji, transcending orthodox and demonic, binding all the mystical powers of the Central Plains into one.

“Madam, can you sense Ye-rin’s energy?”

From the darkness of the great hall, a giant of a man revealed himself.

It was the master of the North Sea Ice Palace, Ice King Seol Baek-ho.

Even he, who was usually full of dignity, carried the nervousness of a father waiting for his daughter at this moment.

Hong Ye-hwa looked back at her husband and smiled.

“It is not only Ye-rin. The energy of the ‘live-in son-in-law’ that child is bringing with her is shaking the entire earth vein of the North Sea. Kunlun’s Heavenly Qi and even the legacy of the Ice Emperor of Mount Tai..... He is a vessel I simply cannot believe.”

“Haha, that boy has grown tremendously.”

Seol Baek-ho laughed heartily, but Hong Ye-hwa’s expression soon settled again.

Hong Ye-hwa slowly set down the jade-colored teacup in her hand and continued speaking.

“This is not the time to rejoice. You know what kind of storm the ‘wedding invitations’ that child scattered all across the Central Plains have brought, do you not? Our son-in-law and daughter are not the only ones heading for the North Sea right now.”

When Hong Ye-hwa lightly flicked her finger, the illusion of a young Ice Eye appeared in the air and reflected a map of the Central Plains.

Countless dots were heading from south to north.

“From the sect leaders of the Nine Sects One Gang to the Clan Heads of the Five Great Clans, and even the strange masters beneath the heavens who have gathered after hearing the rumors. All the renowned masters of the Central Plains are flooding into this barren North Sea. What they bring will not only be ‘congratulatory gifts.’”

Seol Baek-ho’s eyebrows twitched.

The North Sea Ice Palace was a sacred ground of the Outer Regions that had been isolated from the world for hundreds of years.

It was unprecedented since the founding of the Ice Palace for this many people from the Central Plains to cross the border at the same time.

“Haha. Our son-in-law has truly made the stage enormous. Is he planning to make all the heroes beneath the heavens, orthodox and unorthodox alike, stand as attendants?”

“That may be so, but I hope only those with good intentions come.”

Worry seeped into Hong Ye-hwa’s voice.

The North Sea Ice Palace had been attacked multiple times already.

She could not allow the same things to repeat again.

“It will be all right.”

Ice King Seol Baek-ho looked at Ice Queen Hong Ye-hwa and spoke.

“It is the wedding ceremony of the Demonic Cult’s Third Young Master and the precious jewel of the North Sea Ice Palace. If they do something again this time, would that not mean declaring the Demonic Cult and the Ice Palace their enemies?”

At the sight of her husband saying something correct for once, Hong Ye-hwa nodded.

Hong Ye-hwa, too, only earnestly hoped that the wedding would be held safely without incident.

Chapter 175

Not long after, at the main fortress of the North Sea Ice Palace.

“Oh my, my, my! Our lucky charm son-in-law has finally arrived!”

No sooner had the Ice Palace’s enormous One Pillar Gate opened than Ice Queen Hong Ye-hwa, dressed in a dazzlingly splendid palace robe, came running out in her stockinged feet.

Behind Hong Ye-hwa stood Ice King Seol Baek-ho, clearing his throat while putting on a solemn expression, General Manager Seol Su-hyeok frozen with his mouth hanging open, and the Elders of the Ice Council lined up in rows.

“Father-in-law, Mother-in-law. I have returned safely.”

When Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly jumped down from the carriage roof and respectfully offered a clasped hands greeting, Hong Ye-hwa slapped Hyeokryeon Yeom's shoulder and laughed heartily.

"Yes, yes! You worked hard! Still, I did tell you to bring back plenty of congratulatory money so I could decorate the wedding venue, but....."

Hong Ye-hwa's gaze turned toward the massive carriage procession stretching endlessly behind Hyeokryeon Yeom.

The carts fluttered with the golden flags of the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild.

Inside them, mountain-like piles of astronomical wealth from across the Central Plains and the Outer Regions were stacked high, including spiritual medicines from the Mount Hua Sect, armaments from the Zhongnan Sect, Cold Iron from the Sichuan Tang Clan, treasures from the Kongtong Sect of Gansu, and even gold from the Potala Palace of the Western Regions.

"Yes! As ordered, we very cleanly uprooted the pillars of the orthodox sects of the jianghu murim!"

Wi Ji-yeong proudly shouted while fluttering a thickened ledger, and Moyong Geum joined in while flicking his golden abacus.

"Ice Queen! With just the congratulatory gifts contained in these carts, the North Sea Ice Palace will be able to enjoy the greatest wealth beneath the heavens for the next hundred years!"

At that overwhelming show of sheer quantity, even the Elders of the Ice Palace, who were known to be strict and difficult to please, looked shocked enough for their jaws to drop. Seol Baek-ho placed a hand on his forehead and let out a hollow laugh.

"Haha..... To raid the heartland of the orthodox sects to prepare wedding goods. My son-in-law has accomplished something no Demon Head in history has ever done."

At that moment, a Guardian Squad martial artist in charge of the Ice Palace's intelligence network hurriedly approached General Manager Seol Su-hyeok and whispered into his ear.

After receiving the report, Seol Su-hyeok's face flushed red with excitement and bewilderment.

"Palace Head! Ice Queen! The situation at the border heading into the North Sea is anything but ordinary!"

"What is it? Are the Murim Alliance bastards invading?"

When Seol Baek-ho asked with a frown, Seol Su-hyeok shook his head firmly.

“No! They are not invading..... They are guests! Martial artists from the Central Plains are flooding toward the North Sea in such numbers that it is like a sea of people!”

“Guests?”

“Yes! It is because of the ‘wedding invitations’ Young Master Hyeokryeon scattered throughout the Central Plains! The Mount Hua Sect, Diancang Sect, and Southern Barbarian Beast Palace, which have sworn alliances with us, prepared large delegations early and sent congratulatory processions. Even the high monks of the Beggar’s Gang and Shaolin are said to be making their way here, overlapping with the connections of the Holy Hand Divine Physician!”

Seol Su-hyeok drew in a deep breath and continued.

“And that is not all. Even the other sects of the Nine Sects One Gang and the Five Great Clans, fearing Young Master Hyeokryeon’s retaliation, are watching the situation closely while carrying enormous wedding gifts across the North Sea border. Even..... the main force of the Heavenly Demon Divine Cult has begun marching north under the escort of the Cult Leader himself!”

The whole world was quite literally gathering in the North Sea.

In the past, the North Sea Ice Palace had been a barren, exclusionary forbidden area of the Outer Regions, a place people of the Central Plains hesitated even to step foot in.

But now, regardless of orthodox sects, unorthodox sects, Demonic Cult, or Outer Regions, the renowned heroes and leadership figures of the jianghu were competing to step through the snow and ice in order to witness the wedding of the Demonic Cult’s Third Young Master and the Young Palace Head of the Ice Palace.

-Hehehe! Amazing, truly amazing! To think the heads of the orthodox sects and the Demon Heads of the Demonic Cult are all about to gather in one place and eat noodles together! Even if all the Ten Venerables under the Heavens gathered, they couldn’t create such a rare sight!

-Master, this is how great our Third Young Master is. Before even becoming World’s Best, he has already turned the entire world into guests at his wedding.

At the telepathy of the Sword Venerable and Demon Queen cackling inside his qi center, Hyeokryeon Yeom let out a small laugh.

“This banquet has grown far larger than I expected. Will we have enough ingredients?”

At Hyeokryeon Yeom's joke, Small Snow Squad chef Tae Un-seo raised his kitchen knife high and shouted.

"Do not worry, Captain! Even if tens of thousands gather, I will serve a flawless banquet meal, even if I must empty the seas before the North Sea and butcher every horse bandit's cattle!"

Amid the bustling atmosphere, Seol Ye-rin quietly approached Hyeokryeon Yeom's side and took his hand.

Behind the anticipation for the coming festival in Seol Ye-rin's transparent eyes, there was also a heavy resolve.

"Young Master. Now that the stage has grown this large, those hiding in the darkness will not stay still either."

Hyeokryeon Yeom gripped Seol Ye-rin's hand tightly and nodded.

Jaegal Myeong of the Murim Alliance, who was inciting the remnants of Saphaeryeon, and the remnants of the Blood Cult, who sought to dye murim in blood amid the chaos.

And above all, the false God-Demon Hyeokryeon Geuk, who sought to absorb the stolen Ice Crystal and awaken as a true Demon God.

"Of course. The larger a banquet grows, the easier it becomes for rats who want to scatter ashes over someone else's house to sneak in."

Within Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes, violet demonic fire and blue-white Heavenly Qi swirled mysteriously.

Since there would certainly be those who wished to ruin the wedding ceremony, their defenses had to be properly prepared as well.

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Somewhere in the Central Plains, deep underground in a place where not even light could seep in, there was a vast Blood Pond.

In the center of the swirling pond of sticky blood drawn from thousands of corpses, the Demonic Cult's Young Cult Leader Hyeokryeon Geuk floated in the air while sitting cross-legged.

"……My foolish little brother is determined to decorate his own grave more splendidly than anything beneath the heavens."

Hyeokryeon Geuk slowly opened his eyes.

From within the darkness, Sa Gong-hwi, a survivor of the Sa Ma Clan, approached while folding his fan, knelt, and spoke.

“Young Cult Leader. The Heavenly Demon has led the main force of the Hundred Thousand Mountains and begun marching north toward the North Sea. Not only that, the leadership of the Nine Sects One Gang and the Five Great Clans, having slipped beyond the Murim Alliance’s control, are also said to be carrying congratulatory gifts and flooding toward the Ice Palace. The qi veins beneath the heavens are quite literally being drawn toward the North Sea.”

At Sa Gong-hwi’s report, a cruel sneer settled on Hyeokryeon Geuk’s lips.

The momentum of Hyeokryeon Yeom, who had collapsed Black Lotus Cave in Liaoning and even seized the legacy of the Dark Venerable, was certainly threatening.

The nine divine objects Hyeokryeon Yeom had gathered, and that fleshly body which had reached the true Realm of the Profound, were perfect offerings that Hyeokryeon Geuk had to absorb in order to ascend to the realm of Demon God, which even the First Heavenly Demon had failed to reach.

“When the heroes beneath the heavens gather in one place of their own accord, where could there be a more perfect altar? I shall connect the essences of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens that Hyeokryeon Yeom has gathered, and the blood of all the masters beneath the heavens, to this Blood Pond and devour them all at once.”

When Hyeokryeon Geuk’s finger cut through the air, blood-colored demonic qi writhed like a snake and pressed down on Sa Gong-hwi’s shoulders.

“Go. Sow the seeds of Our Cult at every route leading toward the North Sea. The moment they raise their celebratory cups upon the ten-thousand-year snow of the North Sea Ice Palace, that dazzling snowfield will turn into a vast Demonic Sea boiling with the black blood of beasts.”

At the same time, in the great hall of the Murim Alliance, the heartland of the orthodox sects.

Murim Alliance strategist Jaegal Myeong was crumpling the letters placed on the table with bloodshot eyes.

“You foolish, weak things……! To think the leaders of the orthodox sects would carry gifts and bow their heads before the wedding of a Demonic Cult bloodline and a barbarian! This is a disgrace to a thousand years of murim!”

Jaegal Myeong’s plan should have been perfect.

It had been a perfect scheme: steal the Heavenly Secret Stone of the Kongtong Sect, seal off Kunlun's vital point, and drive Hyeokryeon Yeom to his death by spreading Blood Poison Demon Men in Punghyeon-eup as meat shields.

However, as if mocking all those schemes, Hyeokryeon Yeom had seized the Heavenly Secret Stone first and even uprooted the pillars of Kunlun and Mount Heng under the pretext of congratulatory gifts.

Now public opinion in the jianghu was completely praising Hyeokryeon Yeom and the North Sea Ice Palace as saviors, while condemning the Murim Alliance for losing its great cause.

"Strategist, with even the Exorcism Sword Squad having retreated from Kunlun, our alliance's forces alone lack both the justification and the strength to break through that coalition gathered in the North Sea and strike the wedding ceremony."

At the trembling report of his subordinate strategist, Jaegal Myeong nervously snapped open his fan and ground his teeth.

"Justification is no longer necessary. I cannot watch that monster Hyeokryeon Yeom command all beneath the heavens while I still live. We still have the 'card' we could not use in Punghyeon-eup, do we not?"

At the venomous light in Jaegal Myeong's eyes, the strategists drew in sharp breaths.

The card he spoke of meant the remnants of Saphaeryeon who had been fed True Blood Demon Pills and lost their reason.

In other words, the uncontrollable Blood Poison Demon Men.

"I do not care even if we bear the dishonor of having colluded with the dregs of the Blood Cult. Move every last one of the thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men right under the Ice Palace's nose. When the main force of the Demonic Cult and the hypocrites of the orthodox sects mingle and raise their wine cups, release those slaughter-maddened monsters right in the middle of the festival."

Jaegal Myeong glared toward the northern sky while emitting chilling killing intent.

"Your wedding table will be filled with red blood and chunks of flesh, Hyeokryeon Yeom."

God-Demon Hyeokryeon Geuk, who was preparing a vast slaughterhouse for the awakening of the Demon God.

And Jaegal Myeong of the Murim Alliance, who intended to release reasonless monsters to preserve his ugly pride.

The century's wedding ceremony, which should have received the greatest blessings, was paradoxically transforming into the final battlefield where vast masses of evil, seeking to swallow all beneath the heavens, bared their teeth at the ten-thousand-year snow of the North Sea all at once.

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Looking at the endless spectacle of tents stretching beyond the Ice Palace's outer fortress, Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled.

'What would I do if it were me?'

If Hyeokryeon Yeom were Jaegal Myeong or Hyeokryeon Geuk, he would not miss an opportunity like this.

A banquet day with such an enormous crowd was the best possible chance.

Taking advantage of the moment when orthodox and demonic mingled and vigilance loosened to spread poison, or throwing uncontrollable monsters into the middle of it to turn everything into an Asura field.

They were obvious tricks that would come from minds on the level of Jaegal Myeong or Hyeokryeon Geuk.

"Wi Ji-yeong, Moyong Geum."

At Hyeokryeon Yeom's call, the two came running at once.

"Yes, Captain!"

"Just say the word, Big Brother!"

"Set up checkpoints in three stages from the North Sea border to the Ice Palace main fortress."

Wi Ji-yeong tilted her head and asked.

"Checkpoints? Are they defensive lines to stop intruders?"

"No. The pretext is defense, but the purpose is a complete inspection. We have to stop rats from mixing into the banquet, do we not? Use Seong Sang-ah's detoxification needles to identify those with the energy of Blood Poison and filter out those carrying demonic qi. And."

Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly flicked Moyong Geum's golden abacus and added.

“If anyone says they feel offended by being inspected, tell me.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s eyes grew ominous.

If there were bastards trying to ruin his wedding ceremony with Seol Ye-rin, he intended to punish them somehow, even if he had to step forward himself.

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Chapter 176

After ordering the checkpoints installed, Hyeokryeon Yeom descended with Seol Ye-rin into the deepest part of the Ice Palace.

The threads of cause and effect he had seen while inheriting the Ice Emperor’s legacy on Mount Tai were resonating strongly with the earth vein of the North Sea here.

“Young Master, are you planning to adjust this place’s energy yourself?”

When Seol Ye-rin asked, Hyeokryeon Yeom made the ten divine objects inside his qi center pulse at once.

“Yes. I’m planning to turn the North Sea’s earth vein itself into a giant trap so the monsters sent by Jaegal Myeong or Hyeokryeon Geuk’s bloodwater won’t seep inside the fortress. If it were me, I would have aimed for the wedding ceremony, when the enemy would be most off guard.”

When Hyeokryeon Yeom reached out and placed his hand against the ice wall, black-gold waves spread along the earth vein like a spiderweb.

Kunlun’s Heavenly Qi read the terrain, the Ice Emperor’s cold qi fixed the earth vein in place, and the Dark Venerable’s darkness wove an invisible net.

Now, if anyone carrying evil energy or the scent of Blood Poison came near the fortress walls, the energy in the air would become sharp ice blades and twist their qi and blood.

-Hehehe, brat. You really are vicious. To hold the lives of guests in your hand and shake them on the day of a festival!

-Oh my, Master. This is called “efficient guest management.”

-Now that he has even obtained the Ice Emperor’s legacy, he is truly the pillar of the Ice Palace in both name and reality.

Listening to the praise(?) of the Martial Gods inside his qi center, Hyeokryeon Yeom rose from his seat.

It was about time to prepare to welcome the guests.

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The main gate of the North Sea Ice Palace, the first checkpoint.

“What kind of rude behavior is this?! How can I, an Elder of Shaolin no less, be subjected to such trifling needle pricks?!”

Master Beop Un from Shaolin shouted angrily.

Before him, Seong Sang-ah was idly fiddling with a silver needle while wearing a languid smile.

“Oh my, Sir. This isn’t rudeness, but mercy. If the disgusting poison qi of the Blood Cult were to mix in among the guests, even the Buddha would grieve. Wouldn’t it be only proper for me to examine you in advance?”

At that moment, Hyeokryeon Yeom leisurely walked out from behind her, wrapped in black-gold radiance.

The instant Hyeokryeon Yeom’s shadow touched him, Master Beop Un’s momentum vanished as if washed away.

“Sir, this is the clan of the woman who will become my wife. If the North Sea’s laws are not to your liking, you may leave that heavy bundle behind and return comfortably with only your body.”

When Hyeokryeon Yeom’s violet gaze pierced through Beop Un, the old monk unconsciously broke into cold sweat down his spine and closed his mouth.

Facing the monstrous energy of Mount Tai in person, he could not even dare to argue.

“……Amitabha. I failed to understand the Third Young Master’s deep intention. Please conduct the examination.”

When Master Beop Un quietly extended his arm, the masters from the other sects who had been watching the mood around them all began lining up at once.

Hyeokryeon Yeom looked at that sight and nodded in satisfaction.

“Ji-yeong, Geum. The collection of congratulatory gifts and the guest registry are proceeding without issue, right?”

At Hyeokryeon Yeom's call, Wi Ji-yeong, who had been wielding a brush over a large ledger on one side, and Moyong Geum, who had been flicking his golden abacus, approached with bright smiles.

"Of course, Captain! We are not only moving Shaolin's Buddhist scriptures and spiritual medicines into the storehouses, but also packing in the very pillars of the sects from Hebei and Shaanxi!"

"Since everyone thinks of it as the fee to pass the checkpoint, they have been offering things very voluntarily and generously, Big Brother!"

It was then.

In one corner of the smoothly operating first checkpoint, the silver needle of Seong Sang-ah, who had been observing the guests, trembled faintly and turned dark red.

"Oh my, Young Master. It seems uninvited rats have mixed in here."

At Seong Sang-ah's cold voice, the eyes of three men disguised as ordinary martial artists from small and medium sects rolled back.

"Grrrrr!"

They were the Blood Poison Demon Men that Murim Alliance strategist Jaegal Myeong had created by feeding True Blood Demon Pills to the remnants of Saphaeryeon and making them lose their reason.

Once their identities were exposed, the mindless monsters emitted savage demonic qi and surged forward to bite the guests around them.

"H-hiiik! D-demonic practitioners!"

Master Beop Un and the martial artists, who had been complaining about the checkpoint until moments ago, retreated in shock.

However, Hyeokryeon Yeom folded his arms without even thinking of drawing the Ice White Divine Spear on his back.

Wooooong—!

The moment the Blood Poison Demon Men tried to cross the fortress wall's boundary, Kunlun's Heavenly Qi and the Ice Emperor's cold qi, which had been fused into the North Sea's earth vein, read the impure energy of the uninvited guests and reacted on their own.

Crack, crack, crack—!

Sharp ice blades surged up from the ground and pierced the limbs of the charging Blood Poison Demon Men in an instant.

At the same time, the Dark Venerable's invisible darkness bound their qi and blood like a spiderweb, perfectly suppressing even the self-destruction unique to the Blood Cult.

"Aaaaaagh……!"

The Blood Poison Demon Men who had tried to run wild could not spill even a single drop of blood. They turned into pure white ice sculptures on the spot and crumbled.

-Hehehe, these bastards truly have a fine talent for digging their own graves!

-Oh my, Master, really. That was thanks to the Third Young Master and Miss Ye-rin perfectly controlling the earth vein.

At the overwhelming power of the trap, the first checkpoint was engulfed in a deep silence so complete that not even breathing could be heard.

On the faces of the martial artists who had been dissatisfied, there was now only pure awe and fear toward Hyeokryeon Yeom.

Hyeokryeon Yeom smiled gently at the stiffened guests.

"As you can see, the North Sea's snowflakes are very spicy today toward uninvited rats. Please consider the checkpoint inspection and congratulatory gifts you just paid as a seat fee that saved your lives."

At his shameless words, the masters, including Master Beop Un, could only swallow dryly and nod at once.

Now that they had witnessed the Blood Poison Demon Men, the ugly hidden side of the Murim Alliance, right before their eyes, the Ice Palace's inspection was truly a merciful salvation.

"Keep up the good work."

"Yes, Captain!"

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At that time, in the Ice Moon Pavilion, located deep within the main hall of the North Sea Ice Palace.

This was the space prepared for Seol Ye-rin, the bride who would bloom today as the most dazzling flower.

Unlike the strict security outside, the inside of the Ice Moon Pavilion was filled with heat and lively noise.

“Ye-rin! Raise your head just a little more. Is this rouge color right? No, mix in a little more of that golden powder brought from the Western Regions!”

Ice Queen Hong Ye-hwa was personally overseeing her daughter’s adornment and moving about so busily that she had no time to breathe.

At the Ice Queen’s orders, dozens of Ice Palace maids carried in the finest silk and jewels without pause.

“Mother, isn’t this too splendid? The wedding robe is so heavy that it’s hard to walk.”

Seol Ye-rin smiled shyly as she looked at herself reflected in the jade mirror.

The wedding robe Seol Ye-rin wore was lavishly decorated with enormous snowflake and phoenix patterns embroidered in gold and silver thread over the North Sea’s ice-blue silk.

It was the only garment of its kind in the world, made by the combined efforts of the most renowned artisans of the Central Plains and the Outer Regions.

“What nonsense! The Heavenly Demon Cult Leader himself is coming, and the sect leaders of the orthodox sects are all gathering. My daughter must be the most graceful and beautiful woman in the world!”

Hong Ye-hwa patted Seol Ye-rin’s shoulder in satisfaction.

At that moment, the door opened and Cheon Deung-jin, Seong Sang-ah, and Han Seol-bi entered.

“Waaah..... Unnie, you really look like a goddess!”

Han Seol-bi clasped her hands together and let out an exclamation of admiration.

Even Cheon Deung-jin, who normally would have subtly envied the relationship between Seol Ye-rin and Hyeokryeon Yeom, stared at Seol Ye-rin’s beauty in a daze today.

“Miss Seol..... you’re truly beautiful. If the Young Master sees you, he’ll probably lose his mind.”

“Oh my, it’ll be a relief if our Third Young Master doesn’t freeze solid. Not because of Extreme Yin Qi, but because of this beauty.”

At Seong Sang-ah’s joke, the room instantly became a sea of cheerful laughter.

Seol Ye-rin hid her reddened cheeks and once more gazed at herself in the jade mirror.

In the past, there had been a time when she had received a death sentence because of her cursed Extreme Yin Body and had waited alone for death in the Young Palace Head's Hall.

She had locked herself inside ice crystals so no one could approach.

But there had been one man who melted that cold ice and came to her.

Hyeokryeon Yeom.

The Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, whom she had thought was nothing but a scoundrel, had saved her life, brought warm wind into the dried-up Ice Palace, and finally became a Martial God who had conquered all beneath the heavens and stood by her side.

'Gaga…….'

A soft smile spread across Seol Ye-rin's lips.

Today, she would no longer stand before the world as a cursed ice flower, but as one man's true companion.

"Now, everyone, move aside! I have to put on the veil last!"

At Hong Ye-hwa's shout, the maids cleared a path.

The transparent, dazzling veil shaped like a snowflake gently settled over Seol Ye-rin's head.

"Ye-rin."

Hong Ye-hwa tightly clasped her daughter's two hands, her eyes reddening.

"This mother of yours only hoped you would live…… But now you've met such a fine match and become the most beautiful bride in the world. Thank you. Truly."

"Mother…… It is all thanks to Young Master Hyeokryeon, no, thanks to my Husband. And thanks to you and Father, who never gave up on me."

"Yes, your father suffered a great deal too."

"Where is Father?"

"The General Manager is probably keeping him company. Around this time, fathers always make a fuss because they don't want to send their daughters away."

While mother and daughter shared a warm moment, a great trumpet sounded outside the Ice Moon Pavilion.

Bwooooo—!

“Ice Queen, Young Palace Head! The auspicious hour has come! The Cult Leader and the Palace Head are waiting in the great hall!”

General Manager Seol Su-hyeok’s urgent yet moved voice came from beyond the door.

At last, the moment had come for the unprecedented grand wedding ceremony, upon which the eyes of the entire murim world were fixed, to raise its mighty curtain.

Seol Ye-rin slowly rose from her seat.

As the wife of Hyeokryeon Yeom, son of the Heavenly Demon.

It was time to go hold the ceremony with Hyeokryeon Yeom, the live-in son-in-law of the North Sea Ice Palace, who would embrace all beneath the heavens.

With unwavering eyes, Seol Ye-rin took a proud and beautiful first step toward the door.

RelatedRelatedRelated

Chapter 177

Bwooooo—!

The great trumpet that shook the snowy fields of the North Sea rang once more through the sky above the Ice Palace.

The great hall of the Ice Palace’s main hall, a place where normally only a frost-edged cold qi would have lingered, was now filled with the heat emitted by thousands of guests gathered from the Central Plains and the Outer Regions.

The sight of renowned masters of the orthodox sects, great figures of the unorthodox sects, and Elders of the Demonic Cult wrapped in pitch-black demonic qi mingling in one place and raising wine cups was unprecedented in the history of murim.

“Heavenly Demon Rebirth! Ten Thousand Demons Submit!”

The main force of the Heavenly Demon Divine Cult, which had ridden black horses from the Hundred Thousand Mountains and pierced through dark mist, finally passed through the main gate of the North Sea Ice Palace.

From a massive palanquin, Heavenly Demon Hyeokryeon Hwi descended with an oppressive stride.

The moment his foot crunched into the ten-thousand-year snow of the North Sea.

It was an unprecedented moment in the hundreds of years of murim history, when the Cult Leader of the Demonic Cult walked into the Ice Palace's main stronghold with his own two feet.

"Hahaha! As my daughter-in-law said, I have personally come to step upon the North Sea's ten-thousand-year snow and share old feelings with my in-laws!"

When the Heavenly Demon's hearty Lion's Roar shook the banquet hall, Ice Queen Hong Ye-hwa, dressed in a dazzlingly splendid palace robe, went out to greet him in her stockinged feet.

"Oh my! Hwi! I said it would only be fun to see your face after so long, but you really came! If not for our lucky charm son-in-law, how would I ever have seen this stubborn old man in the North Sea?"

Unlike the Elders of the Ice Palace, who had been frightened by the news that the main force of the Demonic Cult was coming, Hong Ye-hwa had scraped the Ice Palace's treasury down to its bottom and decorated the road with red silk, golden candlesticks, and the finest ice flowers of the North Sea, welcoming the Heavenly Demon into the most magnificent banquet hall.

General Manager Seol Su-hyeok, who had at first gone pale and asked whether they should switch to wartime footing, and Ice King Seol Baek-ho, who had pressed a hand to his forehead at the Demonic Cult Leader's visit, also cleared their throats at Hong Ye-hwa's dignified attitude and solemnly greeted their in-law.

"In-law, you must have suffered coming all this way. The North Sea's liquor is quite strong too, so let us drink properly today."

At the bold greetings exchanged by two absolute beings who had broken down the borders between orthodox and unorthodox, the Central Plains and the Outer Regions, the taut tension slowly melted away.

After them, processions of hundreds of carriages carrying renowned orthodox masters belonging to the Central Plains Murim Alliance, including the Kunlun Sect, Zhongnan Sect, and Mount Hua Sect, endlessly crossed the Ice Palace's border.

It was the result of the 'wedding invitations' Hyeokryeon Yeom had scattered while sweeping through the Central Plains.

Not only had the Mount Hua Sect, Diancang Sect, and Southern Barbarian Beast Palace, which had formed prior alliances with him, prepared large delegations and sent congratulatory processions, but even the sects of the Nine Sects One Gang and Five Great Clans, who had been watching the situation in fear of Hyeokryeon Yeom's retaliation, flooded into the North Sea with enormous gifts in their arms, bowing and scraping.

Even the high monks of the Beggar's Gang and Shaolin, who had turned their backs on the secular world, arrived through the connections of the Holy Hand Divine Physician.

The banquet hall had truly become a festival ground where all the qi veins beneath the heavens gathered.

"Captain! The Mount Hua Sect's spiritual medicines, the Zhongnan Sect's armaments, the Sichuan Tang Clan's Cold Iron, and even the Kongtong Sect's treasures! We have very cleanly uprooted the pillars of the orthodox sects of the jianghu murim!"

Wi Ji-yeong proudly shouted while fluttering a thickened ledger, and Moyong Geum, who was flicking his golden abacus beside her, also cheered with sparkling eyes.

"Ice Queen! With just the congratulatory gifts contained in these carts, the North Sea Ice Palace will be able to enjoy the greatest wealth beneath the heavens for the next hundred years!"

In the past, the North Sea Ice Palace had been called the barren, exclusionary forbidden land of the Outer Regions, a place people of the Central Plains even hesitated to set foot in.

Yet today, even the leaders of the Murim Alliance could not help but admire the delicacies from land and sea that the Ice Queen had personally overseen, and they were drinking Jade Flower Spring while mingling with the Elders of the Demonic Cult.

"Haha..... To raid the heartland of the orthodox sects to prepare wedding goods. My son-in-law has accomplished something no Demon Head in history has ever done."

Seol Baek-ho let out a hollow laugh as though dumbfounded, but at the end of his gaze stood Hyeokryeon Yeom, who was quietly gathering the black-gold waves around him at the highest place in the great hall.

And beside him stood his daughter, Seol Ye-rin, dressed in a dazzling ice-blue wedding robe, leisurely looking down over this scene of grand unification.

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My father-in-law's hollow, laughing mutter reached Hyeokryeon Yeom's ears clearly even amid the noise of the great hall.

With a faint smile on his lips, Hyeokryeon Yeom held Seol Ye-rin's white hand beside him a little more firmly.

Rin Mae, dressed in her ice-blue wedding robe today, looked nobler and more dazzling than the ten-thousand-year snow of the North Sea.

The girl who had once been trapped in the curse of her Extreme Yin Body and dying had now become the true mistress and companion of the North Sea, standing tall and proud in perfect form.

As he looked down over the heat filling the great hall, Hyeokryeon Yeom was overcome with deep emotion.

I, the scoundrel Third Young Master of the Demonic Cult, who had once entered the North Sea as an abandoned hostage, had now gathered every force beneath the heavens as guests at my wedding table.

His father was laughing heartily while drinking with his mother-in-law, and even the masters of the orthodox and unorthodox sects, who had once been bitter enemies, were drunk on the finest Jade Pot Spring released by the Moyong Clan Merchant Guild and tearing down the boundaries of hundreds of years.

As expected, the Martial Gods' noisy telepathy rang from inside his qi center.

-Hehehe, to think the old men of the orthodox sects and the Demon Heads of the Demonic Cult would mingle together and hold a drinking party! This is a bizarre yet delightful sight I never saw even three hundred years ago!

-Oh my, Master, really. This is the size of our Third Young Master's vessel. In any case, Miss Seol looks no different from a heavenly fairy today.

-A reconciliation between the Demonic Cult and the Ice Palace. I truly cannot believe it.

At the fussing of the Sword Venerable, the Demon Queen, and the Spear Saint, Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly shook his head and gently gathered the black-gold radiance of the Realm of the Profound in his eyes.

"Husband."

Seol Ye-rin called Hyeokryeon Yeom in a low voice.

"All of this truly feels like a dream. If not for you, Husband, the Ice Palace, I, and this peace would not exist."

"It isn't a dream. And this peace is only just beginning."

Hyeokryeon Yeom sent warm Extreme Yang Qi through their clasped hands.

However, behind that perfect peace, the nine divine objects and the Heart of the Heavenly Demon inside Hyeokryeon Yeom's qi center began to pulse faintly.

Through the Heavenly Secret Stone he had obtained at Mount Tai, Hyeokryeon Yeom's opened "Eye of Heavenly Qi" had caught the foreign, impure energy writhing beyond the earth vein of the North Sea.

'They're coming.'

He could clearly feel uninvited guests crossing the North Sea's border, seeking to stain Hyeokryeon Yeom's wedding ceremony, which should have been the most blessed occasion, with blood.

But Hyeokryeon Yeom did not lose his ease as he gripped the Ice White Divine Spear behind his back.

After all, together with Ye-rin, he had already laid a giant ice trap by weaving the North Sea's earth vein together with Kunlun's Heavenly Qi and the Dark Venerable's darkness.

He had not the slightest intention of letting rats scatter ashes carelessly over the banquet table.

Hyeokryeon Yeom stared outside the great hall, toward the edge of the North Sea where a dark red blizzard had begun to rage, and crookedly raised the corner of his mouth.

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Meanwhile.

On the outskirts of the Ice Palace, unlike the main fortress heated by the festival, the Silent Snowfield at the North Sea's border was shrouded in stillness.

The blizzard, which should normally have been a transparent silver, had at some point begun to stain itself dark red like blood.

Filling the air were the stinging scent of blood and a damp demonic qi that seemed capable of corroding all things.

"……Are the preparations complete?"

In the middle of the blizzard, a man floating in the air while sitting cross-legged opened his mouth.

It was the Demonic Cult's Young Cult Leader, Hyeokryeon Geuk, who called himself God-Demon.

His skin had already lost its human color and turned a pale ash gray, and sticky bloodwater rose from his entire body like a haze.

"Yes, Young Cult Leader. The three thousand Blood Poison Demon Men sent by Murim Alliance strategist Jaegal Myeong have already finished their ambush in the Ice Palace's underground waterways and outer snowfields."

From within the darkness, Sa Gong-hwi, a remnant of the Sa Ma Clan, appeared like a shadow and reported.

Behind him, monsters with their eyes rolled back stood in endless rows, breathing roughly like beasts.

A cruel sneer settled on Hyeokryeon Geuk's lips.

"My foolish little brother. Since he has gathered all beneath the heavens as guests, their blood and souls will become the noblest offerings for my rebirth as a Demon God.

Hyeokryeon Yeom, I shall use even all the essences of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens you have gathered as fertilizer for my qi center."

When Hyeokryeon Geuk slowly raised his hand, a dark red wave shot down from his palm toward the ground.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM—!

The earth vein of the North Sea screamed and twisted.

The "Blood Heaven Great Formation" that Hyeokryeon Geuk had prepared with the Blood Cult's secret arts had begun to operate.

"Go! Dye the snowflowers of the North Sea in fresh blood!"

At Hyeokryeon Geuk's command, thousands of Blood Poison Demon Men lurking beneath the snowy field all kicked off the ground and surged upward at once.

Monsters who felt no pain and hungered only for slaughter became a massive tidal wave and rushed toward the Ice Palace's outer wall.

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At the same time, at the first checkpoint by the banquet hall entrance.

“Oh my, they really are coming in a swarm?”

Seong Sang-ah fiddled with her silver needle and smiled languidly.

At her feet, several spies already lay frozen, pierced through by ice thorns that had surged up after detecting the energy of Blood Poison.

Moyong Geum, standing beside her, threw aside his golden abacus and drew out a massive iron bow.

“With this many bastards trying to freeload without paying congratulatory gifts, isn’t that against merchant ethics?!”

Watching all of this from the roof of a carriage, Eun Bin raised a red flag high.

“All members of the Small Snow Squad, take battle positions! Do not leave a single person without a name in the ledger alive!”

At Eun Bin’s command, thousands of ice spears appeared atop the Ice Palace’s walls.

It was finally time for the earth vein trap Hyeokryeon Yeom had prepared in advance to awaken.

SHWAAAAK—!

The moment the Blood Poison Demon Men racing across the snowy field stepped within ten li of the fortress wall, the entire earth was engulfed in dazzling blue-white radiance.

“Aaaaaagh!”

“W-what is this……?!”

Kunlun’s Heavenly Qi forcibly twisted the flow of the enemies’ qi and blood, the Dark Venerable’s darkness cut off their vision, and the Ice Emperor’s cold qi froze even their souls.

It was an “Absolute Forbidden Area.”

Hundreds of monsters at the front of the charge turned into enormous ice statues and crumbled in the span of a single cry.

But Hyeokryeon Geuk’s main force did not stop.

Masters of the Blood Cult wrapped in red mist flew through the sky, and at their center, Hyeokryeon Geuk finally appeared in the air above the Ice Palace, drawing a massive sword of blood.

Chapter 178

RUMBLE!

The red mist covering the sky swirled and pressed down upon the Ice Palace's great hall.

The clear, refreshing air of the North Sea was instantly corrupted into the smell of fresh blood, and the guests gathered in the great hall dropped their wine cups as they looked up into the air with shocked eyes.

"Hyeokryeon Yeom! You should come out and pay your respects to your elder brother!"

Hyeokryeon Geuk's voice, descending as it tore through the clouds, was no longer human.

The sound waves, where pitch-black demonic qi and the Blood Cult's sorcery were mixed together, made the ice pillars of the great hall tremble faintly.

Hyeokryeon Yeom slowly let go of Seol Ye-rin's hand.

Then he lightly stripped off the splendid ceremonial outer robe draped over his shoulders.

Beneath it, he wore a light black-gold martial arts uniform that allowed him to leap into battle at any moment.

"Miss Seol, wait for me for a moment. Too many fly bastards have gathered around the banquet table."

"……Yes, Husband. Be careful not to get blood on your clothes."

Seol Ye-rin's answer was firm.

She began deploying an ice wall barrier to protect the guests gathered in the great hall.

Hyeokryeon Yeom slowly walked outside the great hall and into the wide plaza.

Every time he took a step, the waves of "Heavenly Qi" planted in the North Sea's earth vein resonated and emitted dazzling blue-white radiance.

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In the sky, Hyeokryeon Geuk and the Blood Cult masters rode the red mist. On the ground, hundreds of Blood Poison Demon Men that had forcibly crawled through the barrier surrounded Hyeokryeon Yeom.

“Hahaha! Little brother, look! These countless heroes you gathered will soon become offerings for me! What a grand funeral this is!”

When Hyeokryeon Geuk swung his sword of blood, thousands of blood droplets in the air became arrows and poured down.

It was the Blood Cult’s forbidden martial art, “Blood Heaven Ten Thousand Rains.”

But Hyeokryeon Yeom did not even draw the Ice White Divine Spear on his back.

When Hyeokryeon Yeom lightly flicked his finger, the moisture in the air condensed in an instant, forming an enormous lotus-shaped ice shield above his head.

Clang! Crash!

The blood-drop arrows bounced away helplessly the moment they touched the ice lotus.

“Hyeokryeon Geuk, your head is still bad. It’s not as though you don’t know where this is, is it? To dare try staining the North Sea with the filthy energy of the Blood Cult.”

Hyeokryeon Yeom’s eyes flashed, swirling with violet and blue-white.

“Ji-yeong! Geum! What are you doing? I told you to strip uninvited guests down to their souls under the name of a ‘special congratulatory gift’!”

At Hyeokryeon Yeom’s command, the Small Snow Squad members waiting atop the fortress wall leaped down at once with roars.

“We obey, Captain!”

Baek Mu-yong’s heavy sword split the ground and crushed the Blood Poison Demon Men’s formation, while Wi Ji-yeong’s flying daggers accurately pierced the acupoints of the Blood Cult martial artists in midair.

Seong Sang-ah scattered detoxifying powder with a languid smile, neutralizing the poison mist emitted by the enemies.

At the center of that Asura field, Hyeokryeon Yeom looked at only one person, Hyeokryeon Geuk, and slowly floated into the air.

-Hehehe, brat! That fake God-Demon bastard has ripened quite deliciously. Chew him up and swallow him in one bite!

-Master, really, you’re too cruel for our Young Master’s wedding day. Still, Third Young Master, that elder brother of yours does seem to need some cleaning up.

Leaving the Sword Venerable and Demon Queen's telepathy behind, Hyeokryeon Yeom finally drew the Ice White Divine Spear from his back.

The harmonious energy of Extreme Yin and Extreme Yang emitted by the spear blade split the red sky in two.

"Hyeokryeon Geuk. If the God-Demon you dream of is only this much....."

Black-gold waves exploded from Hyeokryeon Yeom's entire body.

"I am no longer afraid of you."

The black-gold waves exploding from Hyeokryeon Yeom's whole body violently pushed back Hyeokryeon Geuk's red mist, where the demonic qi of the Hundred Thousand Mountains and the Blood Cult's sorcery were mixed.

Hyeokryeon Geuk's eyes twisted.

"You arrogant bastard! Do you think that just because you picked up the scraps of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens, you can surpass me, who has united the Ice Crystal's absolute Extreme Yin and the Heavenly Demon Divine Art's Extreme Yang?!"

When Hyeokryeon Geuk raised the Blood Demon Blade, blue cold qi emitted from the Ice Crystal in his chest mixed with dark red bloodwater and created enormous ice spears.

A contradictory attack that froze and burned space poured toward Hyeokryeon Yeom like a tidal wave.

But a deep sneer hung on Hyeokryeon Yeom's lips.

"A fake can never defeat the real thing."

The Ice White Divine Spear in Hyeokryeon Yeom's hand was the legacy of Ice Soul Spear Saint Seol Yeong-jin, liberated after a hundred years, and an absolute divine object that could freeze or melt the world according to Hyeokryeon Yeom's will.

Inside his qi center, the powers of ten divine objects—Iron, Fighting, Poison, Buddhist, Jade, Dark, Twin, Illusion, Beggar, and even Heaven, the final principle of the sky—formed a perfect sphere and rotated like a vast microcosm.

On top of that, the energy of Wuji he had gained by purifying the Heart of the Heavenly Demon fiercely gathered at the spear tip.

"Heaven Breaking Ice Flame Spear!"

The instant Hyeokryeon Yeom thrust his spear, a ray of light where violet flame, pitch-black darkness, and extreme cold qi had fused together shattered Hyeokryeon Geuk's dark red ice spears as if slicing tofu.

BOOOOOOM—!

The red formation of the Blood Cult that had covered the sky shattered like glass the moment it touched Hyeokryeon Yeom's overwhelming strike.

"Keuk. Why?! How did you become this strong?!"

Hyeokryeon Geuk was pushed back dozens of zhang and vomited dark red blood.

The cold qi of the Ice Crystal that Hyeokryeon Geuk had been forcibly squeezing out was already being handled by Hyeokryeon Yeom.

As he saw Hyeokryeon Yeom, who possessed Extreme Yang, achieve the harmony of Yin and Yang and begin freezing Hyeokryeon Geuk's qi and blood in reverse, Hyeokryeon Geuk was shocked.

-Hehehe! There's no way a hodgepodge vessel that forced energies together could defeat someone who obtained the divine objects of the Ten Venerables under the Heavens and fully embraced the principles of great nature!

Sword Venerable Baek Un-han's hearty Lion's Roar rang refreshingly through Hyeokryeon Yeom's mind.

Hyeokryeon Yeom gripped the Ice White Divine Spear and stepped through the air in one breath, closing the distance until he was right before Hyeokryeon Geuk's nose.

"This is the price for killing Brother Mu, deceiving Father, and defiling the ten-thousand-year snow of the North Sea."

Hyeokryeon Yeom's black-gold eyes, where violet and sky-blue mysteriously mingled, froze Hyeokryeon Geuk's pupils.

Hyeokryeon Yeom raised the spear tip and coldly passed judgment.

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'Why..... Why is his energy overwhelming mine?'

A dark red lump of blood surged from Hyeokryeon Geuk's mouth.

His qi center was churning madly.

The reason Hyeokryeon Geuk had brought the main force of the Hundred Thousand Mountains.

The absolute power that should have led him to the realm of the true God-Demon.

That power was based on Extreme Yin Qi.

His vision shook red.

The gaze of the third son, Hyeokryeon Yeom, who had come right before Hyeokryeon Geuk's nose, was that of the absolute being Hyeokryeon Geuk had devoted his entire life to reaching.

Black-gold, with violet and sky-blue mysteriously mingled together.

In those eyes, there was no fear toward Hyeokryeon Geuk.

Not even anger.

There was only contempt, as though he were looking down at an insect.

'Am I..... weaker than him?'

He had to deny it.

'No. That cannot be. That bastard was nothing more than a hostage Father threw away, nothing but a scoundrel!'

His heart pulsed as if it would burst.

His vessel was insufficient.

With the qi center he had forcibly expanded through the Blood Cult's secret arts, he could not defeat that "perfect harmony" Hyeokryeon Yeom had achieved.

'I need greater Yin Qi. Pure essence of the North Sea that can suppress that bastard's firepower and complete my God-Demon body.....!'

Hyeokryeon Geuk's gaze fixed on Seol Ye-rin, who was behind Hyeokryeon Yeom, maintaining the barrier and protecting the guests.

That woman, who had inherited the Ice Emperor's legacy and was emitting frost-edged cold qi.

That child was the final piece Hyeokryeon Geuk had been searching for.

“……Yes. I wonder what face you will make if that woman you cherish becomes the offering for my eternal life!”

Hyeokryeon Geuk burst into a mad laugh and exploded the demonic qi throughout his body.

His skin ruptured all over and black blood surged out from the reckless circulation of qi, which bordered on self-destruction, but Hyeokryeon Geuk paid it no mind.

“Heavenly Demon Evasion Form!”

Hyeokryeon Geuk’s form turned into blood-colored mist and vanished from Hyeokryeon Yeom’s spear range in an instant.

Hyeokryeon Yeom tried to chase the trajectory with the Eye of Heavenly Qi, but Hyeokryeon Geuk burned even his own life force and shot toward Seol Ye-rin at tremendous speed.

‘I see her! I only need to grab that woman by the nape!’

Seol Ye-rin’s eyes widened in shock.

Hyeokryeon Geuk’s nails lengthened and rushed toward Seol Ye-rin’s heart.

It was a trick to unfold the Blood Cult’s forbidden sorcery, “Star-Absorbing Blood Essence,” absorb the Ice Emperor’s essence flowing through Seol Ye-rin’s blood vessels all at once, and turn her into something like the Ice Crystal.

“Come to me, Princess of the Ice Palace! Your frozen bloodline will make me a true god!”

In Hyeokryeon Geuk’s bloodshot eyes, Seol Ye-rin’s white nape drew close enough to touch.

In that fleeting instant, Hyeokryeon Geuk was certain of victory.

The moment he absorbed this woman, he had no doubt that he would be able to crush Hyeokryeon Yeom’s laughable harmony with one hand.

But,

“Hyeokryeon Geuk.”

The voice that struck his ear came not from right beside him, but from within Hyeokryeon Geuk’s shadow.

CRUNCH—!

Before he could touch Seol Ye-rin's body, Hyeokryeon Geuk's outstretched arm stopped dead in the air.

No, to be precise, it had not stopped. It was being seized and twisted by an enormous invisible force.

"……Mother-in-law told me not to get blood on my clothes."

With speed so great that no one could tell when he had moved, Hyeokryeon Yeom stood blocking Seol Ye-rin's front and lightly held Hyeokryeon Geuk's wrist.

From the spot touched by Hyeokryeon Yeom's hand, Hyeokryeon Geuk's demonic qi began turning white, purifying and burning away.

"Did you think I'd let those filthy hands of yours touch my wife?"

Hyeokryeon Yeom's black-gold gaze struck Hyeokryeon Geuk's pupils head-on.

The Hyeokryeon Yeom that Hyeokryeon Geuk had known no longer existed.

Looking into Hyeokryeon Yeom's eyes, Hyeokryeon Geuk realized they were the eyes of a beast of prey after it had decided on its prey.

"Don't make me laugh."

It had not yet been decided who the predator was.

Tssssss—

Ink-colored demonic qi began to surge once more from Hyeokryeon Geuk's entire body.