

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 201-210

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It had been nearly ten days since we left the Murim Alliance under the guidance of Bing Yerin and her companions.

Although we were still far from reaching the North Sea Ice Palace, we had already passed through Shaanxi Province, officially stepping outside the Central Plains.

Naturally, the climate had begun to shift in ways that diverged from what I was familiar with.

“No matter how deep into winter it is, I didn’t expect it to be this cold even in the daytime under sunlight.”

“Sichuan is one of the warmer regions of the Central Plains. How was Zhejiang Province, Sir Cheon?”

“Zhejiang wasn’t particularly cold. Hebei Province, though, was definitely freezing.”

Back in my previous life, during the period when both orthodox and unorthodox factions fled to Hebei to escape the Demonic Cult’s onslaught, resources became scarce.

There were so many people but not enough supplies. Martial artists with lower cultivation levels couldn’t even get sufficient firewood—let alone civilians.

That winter... so many froze to death.

Even martial artists succumbed to the cold, so how could ordinary civilians possibly survive?

And yet, this winter feels even colder than that.

“To think we still have a long way to go before reaching the North Sea Ice Palace...”

“You and Sowol keep sighing like the world’s ending. With your cultivation levels, this kind of cold shouldn’t even register.”

Seorin was right.

Both she and I had gone through a spiritual rebirth, attaining resistance to both heat and cold, and Tang Sowol, being at the Sub-Perfection level, wouldn't be affected by the cold either.

So when we say we're cold, it's not because we're physically suffering.

It's more because we're curious about the people who do get more energized the colder it gets.

I tilted my chin toward the direction where Seol Lihyang and Bing Yerin were walking.

"Now this feels alive. What do you think, Miss Seol? Isn't this cold, brimming with natural yin, something you can't experience in the Central Plains?"

"Phew... It's definitely nice. Hey, do you have any more of that stuff we ate last time? That cold-something herb?"

"Ah! Do you mean Naengbicho?"

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Hehe. In the North Sea, it grows like weeds. Of course I brought plenty. Would you like another?”

“Wait... Even if it's low-grade, isn't that still an elixir? You brought that much?”

“You’re right. But to the people of the North Sea Ice Palace, it’s like a chicken rib—something that’s not worth using. It does carry yin energy, but its effect is so weak that natural absorption is better. It has no real medicinal value, and the taste and aroma are too unusual to use in food or tea.”

“I kind of liked that subtly sweet and minty flavor...”

“Same here! But a lot of people really hate that feeling. It’s always ‘pick one or the other.’ Honestly, they just don’t know good taste. Isn’t that right, Young Palace Mistress?!”

“I’m not your Young Palace Mistress. But I’ll agree they’ve got no taste.”

Nodding, Seol Lihyang split a leaf with black spots on a light green base and shared it with Bing Yerin.

In the past ten days, the two of them had grown considerably closer.

Considering how Seol Lihyang had instinctively hidden behind Seorin when they first met, this was a massive step forward.

Though, honestly, it felt more like Bing Yerin was bending over backward to match everything Seol Lihyang said or did.

Ever since witnessing Seol Lihyang's martial arts at the Murim Alliance, it was like her eyes had glazed over in devotion.

I'd wager that if Seol Lihyang asked for all her elixirs, Bing Yerin would hand them over without a second thought.

And Seol Lihyang, on her part, seemed to genuinely like Bing Yerin's unconditional praise and friendliness.

Of course, she wasn't a fool. She wouldn't be swayed just because someone was nice to her.

...Right?

I excused myself from Tang Sowol and Seorin and approached where Seol Lihyang was.

She was in the middle of an animated discussion about cooking rice with Naengbicho when she spotted me and flinched.

After a moment of serious contemplation, she tore the leaf she was holding in half and offered me one side with trembling fingers—like someone with the shakes.

“Ugh... If it’s you, Cheon Hwi, I can spare half—”

“I’m not here to mooch. You can eat it all yourself.”

“Really?!”

Beaming, she tossed the remaining half into her mouth.

Well... if she's happy, I'm happy too.

I gave a small laugh and gently wiped the crumbs from the corner of her lips.

“Ah.”

She flinched slightly, as if embarrassed, but maybe the abundant yin in the air had put her in a good mood.

Unlike usual, she subtly tilted her chin upward, as if asking me to do it again.

I tugged at her cheek playfully, prompting a small yelp—“Ow!”—and then turned toward Bing Yerin.

“Now that we're getting closer to the North Sea Ice Palace, I'd like to ask a few things. Is that alright?”

“Of course! As long as you keep being this good to the Young Palace Mistress, ask anything!”

“I said I’m not your Young Palace Mistress. And this is fine from Cheon Hwi.”

“??”

Bing Yerin blinked, clearly not understanding the satisfied expression on Seol Lihyang’s face as she rubbed her own cheek.

But that’s just how Seol Lihyang is.

She likes playful pats, and she likes receiving them too.

To be precise, she just prefers relationships without formalities.

But it’s not something anyone could figure out by just trying to match her—only those who’ve spent enough time with her would know.

I shrugged and began to speak.

“Bing Yerin. From what I’ve heard, the five major families of the North Sea—Eom, Dong, Seol, Baek, and Bing—are like the Five Supreme Clans of the Central Plains, and the Palace Master usually comes from one of them, right?”

“That’s correct. The former Palace Master, the Bingcheon Divine Lord, was my grandfather.”

“I figured someone from the Bing Clan would have had a Palace Master in their lineage, but I didn’t expect it to be that direct.”

“Thanks to that, I was able to be part of the envoy to the Central Plains.”

“Maybe it was your family’s influence... but I think there’s more to it.”

Bing Yerin looked to be about the same age as Tang Sowol—maybe a bit older—but her martial level was somewhere in the middle of the Peak Stage.

It’s not a low level per se.

But considering she’s leading a delegation that represents the North Sea Ice Palace and carrying valuable resources for a mission as critical as recruiting a successor, it was lacking.

Among her entourage, several martial artists seemed stronger than her, one even close to Sub-Perfection.

Yet no one objected to her being in charge. In fact, they followed her with familiarity.

That meant something.

I gave her a long look, silently pressing her to explain. With a small smile, Bing Yerin raised both hands in surrender.

“Usually, people who are gifted aren’t all that perceptive, but you’re both. Impressive, Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

“Living long enough does that to you. Some things only become clear when you take a step back.”

“Eh? Huh?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, not quite following the exchange.

So I put it in simpler terms for her.

“The North Sea Ice Palace is still a martial group at its core, and the outer Murim is still Murim. In the end, martial strength is the highest currency.”

But Bing Yerin’s strength was somewhat lacking compared to the responsibility she held.

Which meant one of two things.

Either recruiting a Young Palace Mistress from the Central Plains wasn’t that important...

Or Bing Yerin had value beyond martial arts.

“We’re not entirely on the same boat yet, but you could say we’ve got one foot in. So if there’s anything you’re still hiding, I’d like you to share. Not forcing you, of course, since we’re not fully committed.”

“Ah.”

Seol Lihyang nodded, seemingly understanding now, and turned to stare silently at Bing Yerin.

Still smiling, Bing Yerin slowly shook her head.

“You didn’t need to look at me like that. I was planning to explain everything anyway. You’d find out once we arrived at the palace.”

With that, Bing Yerin looked up into the air with her icy-clear blue eyes, as if trying to sketch something invisible.

“Have you heard of Ice Essence?”

“Of course. Isn’t it the sacred relic of the North Sea Ice Palace?”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s a special type of ice that releases tremendous cold energy on its own, right?”

“Yes. You’re well informed. Ice Essence was both the sacred relic and the greatest treasure of the Ice Palace, constantly releasing pure cold... But it’s not like that anymore.”

She said this with a heavy voice.

Snowflakes began to drift down over her head—likely because we were nearing the North Sea.

Gazing silently at one melting on her palm, she continued.

“There’s no such thing as permanence in the world. Everything changes and changes again. That’s what a famous Taoist from the Central Plains said when he visited the Ice Palace long ago. And he was right.”

The Ice Essence—a mystical artifact that constantly exhaled yin energy—couldn’t last forever.

As its cold began to weaken with time, the elders of the Ice Palace grew concerned.

Thanks to the Ice Essence, their Palace Masters had always wielded overwhelming power, which in turn protected them from invaders and the harsh environment.

Without it, the palace could splinter apart—or worse, perish.

In the end, one person volunteered to sacrifice themselves.

“They gave up their life and transferred all the cold they had cultivated into the Ice Essence. And it worked. Better than anyone had hoped.”

Even the strongest martial artist is still only one person. But the Ice Essence, having absorbed that one life’s essence, began to emit an even fiercer cold—almost as if it had always craved blood to grow stronger.

“After that, about once every thirty years, someone would volunteer to offer their life to it. Usually women—since they’re more likely to master yin-based techniques. That’s why they were called Shin-nyeo, Divine Maidens.”

“Divine Maidens... huh.”

“Yes. Divine Maidens are chosen only from volunteers. While alive, they’re treated just below the Palace Master in status.”

Now it all made sense.

“You’re the current Divine Maiden of the North Sea Ice Palace.”

“I am.”

“Then the reason you personally came to the Central Plains...”

“The Young Palace Mistress is meant to become the future Palace Master. And the Palace Master is the only one allowed to draw on the power of the Ice Essence. I wanted to know who I’d be dying for. And if possible, I’d like to choose for myself.”

She said it with a serene smile.

But I didn’t like it.

Seol Lihyang’s expression had gone completely cold.

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Now, you could often see Seol Lihyang joking playfully or laughing lightheartedly...

But before my regression, Seol Lihyang was known by the fearsome alias Demonic Sound Witch. She was downright ruthless. Only I and Seorin were exceptions to her cold demeanor.

Even now, I suspect that deep within Seol Lihyang lies that same fierce and merciless temperament from before the regression.

When she fought Jeok Yeonghu—the Bloodflame Fist Demon—there was a moment where, trying to surpass her limits to help me, Seol Lihyang emitted a demonic aura that reminded me of her former self.

It's only natural, really. That side of her didn't appear out of nowhere—it was forged by her past.

Seol Lihyang was once raised to be consumed.

Because she was born with a Pure Yin Physique. Because she was the daughter of a courtesan. Because... she had no power to resist.

She became livestock in human form.

Her fierce pride and the way she always thinks about how to repay a debt before even expressing gratitude—those traits likely stemmed from those times.

In this life, I managed to save her early on, and she's shown a much brighter side since. But the trauma and misery of her past... that doesn't just vanish.

So for someone like Seol Lihyang, the idea of a Divine Maiden—someone who offers up her life to preserve the power of the Ice Essence—would sit poorly.

Likewise, the position of Ice Palace Master, which relies on that same sacrifice, would hardly seem honorable to her.

Whether the sacrifice is “willing” or not, in the end, they're still living just to die.

That's why she said what she did.

“I don't like this.”

Seol Lihyang's expression stiffened as she looked at Bing Yerin, who wore a half-serene, half-resigned smile.

Perhaps she hadn't expected such a harsh reaction. Bing Yerin blinked rapidly, flustered, and spoke.

"W-well, it's alright! I volunteered for it knowing everything... And there's a huge reward for the family of the Divine Maiden! Ah, and of course, I'm treated very well while I'm alive!"

"Yeah. Cows and pigs are pampered too—until the day they're slaughtered."

"C-cows and pigs?! I'm—"

"You said you volunteered. But was it truly your own will?"

"O-of course...!"

"Not just anyone can become the Divine Maiden, right? You'd need to offer enough energy to restore the Ice Essence. That means you'd have to be someone with exceptional talent."

She wasn't wrong.

Bing Yerin had reached mid-Peak Stage in her teens—within a declining sect, no less. With the average martial power of our group being so high, it didn't seem that impressive, but it was an incredible achievement.

It's something usually only direct descendants of the Five Supreme Clans or elite disciples of the Nine Great Sects manage to achieve.

That she reached such a level in the North Sea Ice Palace—despite its decline—was proof of her exceptional talent and serious dedication to martial arts.

But in the end, she became the Divine Maiden. Or rather, she was pushed into becoming one.

All her hard work, joy in cultivation, and sense of achievement—were they just paving the way for a sacrifice?

Seol Lihyang clearly couldn't stomach that idea.

“This is your life, so I won’t lecture you further. But I just can’t bring myself to like the concept of the Divine Maiden. Or the system that not only allows but praises such a role within the North Sea Ice Palace.”

With that, she turned and walked toward Tang Sowol and Seorin.

I was just about to follow her when Bing Yerin, who had only been staring silently at Seol Lihyang’s retreating back, finally opened her mouth.

“Blood Flame Sword Demon.”

“Hmm?”

“Would you help me?”

...Does she think I’ll actually agree?

“You’re especially fond of the Young Palace Mistress, aren’t you?”

“That’s true.”

“Then I believe you’ll want to help. Because this is something that may ultimately benefit her.”

Her voice trembled slightly, but her gaze remained steady.

“I’m sure the Young Palace Mistress saw right through my hesitation. Yes, the Divine Maiden is chosen from volunteers. But…”

“It’s voluntary in name, not in truth. That happens a lot.”

“Yes. With the honor and rewards the family receives, how many truly volunteer out of pure will? I was only twelve at the time.”

“Hm. If you want to escape the North Sea Ice Palace, wait until Seol Lihyang and I return to the Central Plains. That would be your best chance.”

“No, that’s not it.”

She shook her head firmly and continued, slowly but clearly.

“I became the Divine Maiden without even understanding what it meant. There were times I trained hard in martial arts just to break free of that fate...”

“But now?”

“I’m still afraid of dying. But more than that... I genuinely want the North Sea Ice Palace—and the many people who live in it—to survive.”

“That sounds like someone is targeting your sect.”

The North Sea may be harsh and cold, but that very harshness has protected it from outside invasions.

Unless a master at the Flowering Stage appears, its slow decline would be natural—but that shouldn’t be enough to destroy the sect.

At least in my past life, I never heard of the North Sea Ice Palace being annihilated. Not even when the Heavenly Demon swept through the Central Plains.

So why was she talking like disaster was imminent if a proper Palace Master didn't emerge?

I asked her with suspicion, and she nodded subtly.

“Saying we're being targeted... wouldn't be entirely wrong.”

“Go on. What exactly do you want my help with?”

“There is an ancient monster that dwells in the North Sea. The North Sea Ice Palace was originally founded to survive and resist that being.”

And so, Bing Yerin began recounting a tale I had never heard of in my previous life—one not known even in the Central Plains.

A long time ago, the ancestors of the North Sea Ice Palace loved their land, but the extreme cold... that, they couldn't accept.

So they set out to discover the source of this unbearable cold—whether it existed or not.

And at the end of their journey, they found it: a massive pale-blue serpent that exhaled overwhelming cold.

These days, even minor spirit beasts are rare. But in the past, they were more common. Among them were a few with powers akin to Peak Stage masters.

The one the ancestors found was such a being.

Bigger than a house—large enough to be called a moving hill. It stirred blizzards and turned the land into ice.

They believed it was the very source of the cold.

The ancestors battled that pale serpent for a long time. Eventually, the founder of the North Sea Ice Palace, who created Glacial True Qi, succeeded in slaying it.

Its massive corpse became the foundation of the Ice Palace, and its core—still radiating immense yin energy—was named Ice Essence. It became the source of power for each generation's Palace Master.

They celebrated their victory and looked forward to a warm future—

“...But that day never came.”

The cold remained. But what changed was that they no longer feared it.

By fighting the Azure Cold Serpent, they naturally developed arts to manipulate and resist the cold.

By the time the creature was slain, their mastery of yin arts had advanced enough that they no longer needed to worry about the cold.

Even a basic yin-based martial art could help a practitioner endure freezing temperatures.

It didn't take long for the ancestors to decide they were better off remaining in the cold and continuing to develop their arts.

“And even as time passed and we began to interact with the Central Plains, that resolve never wavered.”

That was when the Central Plains started forming impressions about the Ice Palace—that they practiced rare yin arts, were individually powerful, and had icy, aloof personalities.

In the early days, some side effects of their martial arts included: male practitioners becoming more effeminate or losing facial expression entirely.

But through exchange with the Central Plains, those issues were gradually resolved.

And eventually, their ultimate technique—Glacial True Divine Art—was created. It minimized drawbacks and maximized benefits.

It was developed several generations ago and has since been exclusive to the Palace Master.

“Maybe... that’s what started the problem.”

“You mean Glacial True Divine Art?”

“More precisely, the excessive absorption of Ice Essence’s power required to cultivate it.”

Ice Essence was already weakening. The strain of maintaining Glacial True Divine Art rapidly drained its strength. It got to the point where it couldn’t be sustained without regular sacrifices.

And recently, for some reason, the natural yin energy across the North Sea began to decline as well.

The Ice Palace panicked and investigated.

“In the end, my grandfather—the former Palace Master, Ice Palace Divine Lord—discovered the cause.”

“What was it?”

“The descendants of the Azure Cold Serpent we once defeated.”

“...What?”

“Yes, it’s true. They were smaller, but dozens of spirit beasts that resembled the serpent in the records were discovered. They were absorbing all the surrounding yin energy.”

“...What the...”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Just because a creature is born of a spirit beast doesn’t mean it will become one too. And the number of spirit beasts had been dwindling for years.

But considering the special environment of the North Sea and how long it’s been since the original serpent was slain... I suppose it wasn’t impossible.

Unlike martial artists who absorb qi methodically, spirit beasts devour it indiscriminately.

Even in a land rich with cold energy, it couldn’t withstand dozens of spirit beasts absorbing it all.

But still...

“Wasn’t Ice Palace Divine Lord a master at the Peak Stage? Even if there were many of them, he should’ve been able to handle them.”

“Yes. If they were ordinary, that might’ve been true. But their nest... was guarded by a creature so powerful, it reminded everyone of the original Azure Cold Serpent.”

Ice Palace Divine Lord led a raid with the Ice Palace’s best warriors.

They managed to slay a few of the smaller ones, but they couldn’t defeat the leader.

“They retreated. My grandfather told us, before he passed, that the serpent’s descendants were cultivating their strength to avenge their slain ancestor.”

“You mean the same one the Ice Palace founder killed.”

“Yes. And if Ice Essence loses its power completely... and if the energy of a Peak Stage warrior isn’t detected in the palace... they will attack.”

...She doesn't want me to fight those monsters for her, does she? If that's what this is, I'll pass. I'd rather suggest they relocate entirely.

"Fufu. I wouldn't be that shameless. What I wanted to ask..."

She smiled weakly, then continued with resolve.

"If the Young Palace Mistress refuses to take her place... eventually, we'll face destruction regardless."

She let out a short sigh and looked me straight in the eye.

"Before that happens, I'd like to at least struggle. If she refuses the role, I plan to absorb the Ice Essence itself—not just its power."

"And you want me to protect you during the process."

"Yes. To serve as guardian while I absorb it."

"What's the reward?"

“I’ll grant you access to all of North Sea Ice Palace’s martial arts, including secret techniques normally forbidden.”

That alone was quite a tempting offer.

Realistically, the sect probably wouldn’t even allow Bing Yerin to absorb the Ice Essence. So asking me to “guard” her really meant stopping them from interfering.

But it was also true that the Ice Palace’s secret techniques were a valuable reward.

After a moment of thought, I opened my mouth.

“I’ll ask Seol Lihyang and decide.”

“Yes. I’ll wait.”

Leaving behind Bing Yerin, who bowed her head slightly, I finally returned to our group.

I explained everything I'd just heard to Seol Lihyang.

“So basically, the North Sea Ice Palace is on the brink of annihilation because they're fighting a Peak Stage spirit beast and dozens of others...”

“...What kind of bullshit is that?”

She cut me off before I could even finish.

Seol Lihyang tilted her head and glared at me.

...Well. Hearing it all at once, it does sound ridiculous.

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I explained to Seol Lihyang what I had heard from Bing Yerin.

“What kind of bullshit is that?”

She cut me off before I even finished.

Seol Lihyang tilted her head and glared at me with a pout and half-lidded eyes full of confusion and disbelief.

...Yeah. If you suddenly hear all this without context, it's honestly hard to believe.

While I was trying to decide where to start explaining again, Tang Sowol—still bundled up in thick clothing since she hadn't yet reached Cold Immunity—timidly raised her hand.

“Um, Brother Cheon...?”

“What is it?”

“I understand what you’re saying, but... is that even possible?”

“Exactly! Just like Sister Tang said! How could the temperature rise just because some spirit beasts are sucking up a bit of energy?”

Taking her chance, Seol Lihyang jumped in, waving her arms in protest. But before I could respond, Seorin stepped in.

“To give you the conclusion first, it’s not impossible.”

“Eh?”

Seol Lihyang flinched as Seorin continued calmly.

“When I was young, I heard from my grandfather that powerful spirit beasts can even change the weather around them. He once captured such a beast himself in his youth.”

“Hmm... Seorin-unni is this old, and her grandfather was young back then, so that makes it...”

Seol Lihyang started folding her fingers to calculate something, then suddenly widened her eyes.

“Two hundred years ago—!”

“Hey! It wasn’t that long ago! At most a hundred!”

Smack!

Seorin smacked Seol Lihyang on the back and huffed. Honestly, even a hundred years is pretty long ago.

But both Tang Sowol and I were wise enough to read the room and keep quiet.

As I barely resisted the urge to laugh, Seorin gently patted the sulking Seol Lihyang’s back and continued.

“Ahem. Anyway, back when spirit beasts were more common, such phenomena weren’t unheard of. I’ve heard stories about the Flame Sun Fox raising the river temperature and wiping out entire schools of fish, or the Eternal Snow Ginseng making caves so cold that unfamiliar animals gathered nearby.”

“Even so, could it really warm up the whole North Sea?”

“Not the entire North Sea, but if it’s just the Ice Palace and the surrounding region, then yes, it’s entirely possible. Moreover...”

Seorin glanced toward Bing Yerin and the martial artists of the Ice Palace and gave a slight nod.

“I’ve heard that everyone in the Ice Palace learns martial arts, regardless of their level. If both people and spirit beasts have been absorbing natural energy in the same area for so long, then as I said before, it’s not impossible.”

Natural qi tends to flow and maintain balance, but if that balance were truly perfect, why would so many historic sects build their compounds deep in remote valleys?

Some places naturally gather energy, while others disperse it.

Considering how “auspicious sites” are usually in isolated areas, it’s clear that even just people living in one place for long periods can affect the surrounding energy.

Normally, the changes would occur slowly over a long time, but...

In the case of the North Sea Ice Palace, with spirit beasts and a cultural trend of widespread martial training, that shift would have accelerated.

Also, because their arts deal specifically with cold energy, they might be more sensitive to even minor changes.

“That’s why I don’t believe the Divine Maiden from the Ice Palace is lying.”

“Understood. Then if she’s telling the truth and sincerely asking for help... what should we do?”

“That’s for you to decide, Seol Lihyang.”

“Huh??”

“There’s not much we can gain from this visit to the Ice Palace. But for you, it’s different.”

The Ice Palace holds a rare and deep mastery of yin arts, rarely seen in the Central Plains.

It's an environment so saturated with cold that even this 'mild warming' feels unbelievable.

And potentially... the position of Palace Master itself.

If Seol Lihyang desired, she could grasp all of that—or selectively take only what she wanted.

“That’s why your decision matters most. Besides, the help Bing Yerin asked for is based on the assumption that we’re going to leave for the Central Plains soon.”

“So my choice is what matters... Then Cheon Hwi, are you saying that if I choose to stay here in the Ice Palace, you’ll just leave without me?”

She stared at me, eyes wide, voice tinged with disappointment.

I let out a dry laugh and shook my head.

“Not just leave.”

“Then?”

“I’ll ask you to reconsider first.”

“Hmph. That’s not bad. And if I still say no?”

“Well, then I guess I’d have to cling to your leg and beg.”

“Oh... That, I’d actually like to see. And if I still say no?”

Seol Lihyang was now clearly amused, even expectant.

I shrugged and answered casually.

“Then it can’t be helped. I’ll respect your decision.”

“Can’t exactly kidnap someone who doesn’t want to come, right?”

“...Huh?”

“Though, I could do that.”

“Then do it. If I get stubborn, just kidnap me. Got it?”

“...Huh.”

I’d only said it half-jokingly, but I didn’t expect her to respond that way. I nodded and asked,

“Got it. So, what do you think about Bing Yerin’s proposal?”

“Doesn’t seem like we’d lose anything. I say we take the deal.”

“That’s fair. But there’s one thing I forgot to mention.”

“What?”

“Learning not one or two, but multiple secret arts from the Ice Palace, whether you like it or not, is the same as becoming their successor. Even if the sect gets wiped out later, someone will recognize your techniques and start digging into your connection with the Ice Palace.”

“I don’t care.”

Seol Lihyang shook her head firmly and said,

“I don’t care about fame. I just want to become stronger so I can help you—like you once helped me when I had nothing.”

Got it. I’ll let them know.

I smiled and replied, and Seol Lihyang finally nodded in satisfaction.

With the serious conversation finished, we released the qi barrier and returned to small talk.

Things felt slightly awkward, but Seol Lihyang and Bing Yerin resumed chatting, and when someone asked what food the Ice Palace was famous for, the martial artists hesitated before answering: “Liquor.” That earned them a disappointed glare from Seorin.

Aside from that brief awkwardness, we resumed our journey in good spirits.

But I found myself thinking a little differently from the others.

Let’s say I help Bing Yerin absorb the Bingjeong.

If it succeeds, great. She’d likely reach the Sub-Perfection realm and could either oust the current Palace Master or inherit the title of Young Palace Mistress later.

Sure, the next generation Palace Master would be weaker without the Bingjeong, but Bing Yerin seems intent on fighting the Pale Cold Serpent horde anyway. Whether she lives or dies, she’ll fight—so there’s no point worrying about the next generation.

The real problem is if she fails to absorb the Bingjeong.

Frankly, that's more likely. The Bingjeong is an unrefined core steeped in the blood of countless Divine Maidens.

Just as the Demonic Cult's concoctions like the Blood-Refining Pill or Soul-Blood Pill were infamous for causing qi deviation due to their murky, corrupted energy...

The Bingjeong may also be polluted by the blood and resentment of the forcibly sacrificed maidens.

If Bing Yerin fails during absorption, that's what we'll have to deal with.

Stopping her from going into deviation or knocking her unconscious would be simple. Even if the Bingjeong flares up, Seorin and I are both Flowering Stage. It won't be enough to stop us.

The real issue would come afterward—with Bing Yerin having consumed the Bingjeong against the Ice Palace's will, and us helping her do it.

We only stopped here as a fallback plan in case we couldn't defeat the Heavenly Demon.

But if this escalates, we could become enemies of the Ice Palace.

Even if they urgently need a successor, and Seol Lihyang is the perfect candidate... if they've lost the Bingjeong and been betrayed, they won't look kindly on us.

So, we need to do them a favor—to leave them with some form of repayment—so they won't be hostile later.

“...Cores have always been excellent alchemical ingredients.”

The Pale Cold Serpent horde is strong enough that even the previous Palace Master and his elites failed to defeat them.

But we have two Flowering Stage martial artists.

If push comes to shove, we can always retreat.

And more importantly...

“Tang Sowol.”

“Yes? What is it, Brother Cheon?”

“I was just thinking... I’m really glad you’re here.”

“...?”

She tilted her head, clearly puzzled by my sudden words. When I held out my arm, she instinctively linked hers with mine.

The warmth through her thick clothes. Her subtle scent, reaching me a moment late.

Yes. A direct confrontation would be risky... but sneaking in to scatter poison and escape? That might just work.

As my thoughts settled, a massive structure came into view.

The distant outline of the North Sea Ice Palace.

I spoke, almost absently.

“Think you could make a poison effective against serpents?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, not just any snake—one with power between Peak and Sub-Perfection Stage. A spirit beast.”

“Ah...”

Now understanding what I meant, Tang Sowol gave a sweet smile.

“At my current level, I can make poison that could even affect the Pale Cold Serpent leader—if it holds still and takes it, that is. Since they’re full of cold energy, I could use that against them...”

She tapped her chin, muttering calculations under her breath. Then, with a solemn face, she spoke.

“Brother Cheon. Brother Cheon.”

“Hm?”

“Did you know? Snake wine is very good for men.”

“...What?”

“No particular meaning, of course. Just thought you should know.”

She grinned slyly.

Why did it feel like she was the snake now, and I was the prey?

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After arriving at the Northern Sea Ice Palace, the gazes we received were filled with curiosity—and expectation.

In response, Bing Yerin gave an awkward smile and opened her mouth.

“Haha, please don’t pay it too much mind. They probably didn’t expect us to return this early.”

“That’s not something to worry about. It’s perfectly understandable... It’s just a little surprising.”

Suppressing a sigh of admiration that almost slipped out, I looked around.

The architecture was completely different from anything in the Central Plains. With snow piled high on every building, it felt as if we’d stepped into a deep winter forest.

Of course, this was still a place where people lived. Though the buildings were packed somewhat tightly together, it wasn’t an actual forest, and here and there, people could be seen.

Clothing made of unfamiliar materials and in unfamiliar styles. All of it seemed crafted using thick animal fur and leather, and all of it looked exceptionally warm.

And appearances that differed vastly from those of the Central Plains. Skin so pale it was nearly white, with lightly colored eyes and hair.

Though I thought I had grown accustomed to the appearance of Northern Sea Ice Palace residents after seeing Bing Yerin and her group, seeing so many people all at once gave me a different feeling.

No, to be exact, it's probably the realization that this is their land, and I am the unusual outsider—that's what makes it feel strange.

Even in the vast Central Plains, there are foreigners—merchants from the Western Regions, monks from Tianzhu—but the people of the Central Plains always made up the majority.

Now that I find myself in the minority, I understand it clearly.

“We’ve really arrived at the Northern Sea Ice Palace... at the Foreign Martial World.”

“Well, technically, we’ve been in the North Sea for a while already.”

Perhaps understanding the sentiment behind my words, Tang Sowol added her own remark. That’s right. In the end, it’s not the land itself, but the people living on it who define it.

In that sense, it's not the cold weather or the swirling snow, but seeing the people who live here that truly made me realize we'd arrived at the Northern Sea Ice Palace.

Children stared at us from afar with eyes full of curiosity.

Watching them fondly, Tang Sowol spoke up.

“By the way, it really looks like everyone here practices martial arts. There's no distinction between martial artists and commoners anymore, only differences in cultivation.”

“In that case, those cultivation levels would essentially define the line between commoners and martial artists.”

“Well, yes. If everyone practices martial arts, it's only natural.”

As I watched Tang Sowol nodding, something suddenly came to mind.

“Come to think of it, though we’re still in the Foreign Martial World, the people of Yunnan didn’t look that different from those in the Central Plains... But the people here in the North Sea are very different in appearance.”

“Well, it’s probably due to their environment and the martial arts they’ve trained in.”

“That may be true, but isn’t it fascinating how many different reasons can lead to such differences?”

“Pardon?”

“Think about it. Farmers working under the sun tend to have darker skin. Likewise, people living in hot regions tend to have darker complexions.”

“Well, yes. The martial artists I saw from Yunnan during our time in the Thousand Poison Sect did look like that.”

“On the other hand, people in the cold North Sea tend to have pale skin, and their hair colors are all unusual.”

Some martial arts visibly alter the body as a sign of mastery.

Even Tang Sowol's green-tinted hair is a result of her advanced mastery of poison arts.

Perhaps the martial arts of the Northern Sea Ice Palace have similar properties. Those who have trained to a certain level seem to show changes in hair and body color.

But even among those without such high mastery, many appear to be born with unusual traits.

Like how most of the people peeking at us from afar have blonde hair and blue or green eyes.

A land where people have faint coloring. That was my first impression upon arriving at the Northern Sea Ice Palace.

"Wherever you go, I suppose it's similar. The people of the Western Regions evolved to fit their environment, just as the people of the Central Plains did."

"True enough."

“Then doesn’t that make you curious?”

“About what?”

“If your appearance changes based on where you live, and then changes again depending on the martial arts you train... And in some cases, like the Peng Clan of Hebei, those traits are passed down genetically... Then—”

I paused for a moment before continuing.

“What would the most natural form of a person look like—one untouched by environmental or martial influences?”

“Cheon Hwi-da.”

“Hmm?”

“Have you perhaps become a little tense under all these gazes?”

“...Maybe a little?”

More precisely, it wasn't the number of gazes, but the weight of the expectations behind them.

Being the center of attention was something I had experienced many times before my regression. But receiving such hopeful, expectant looks—this was a first.

Though I had grown somewhat used to it while staying with the Tang Clan, it couldn't compare to now.

Every person we passed whispered, asking if I was the new palace lord candidate, wondering if they could finally feel at ease... Honestly, it was overwhelming.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, on the other hand, was clearly enjoying it.

She lifted her chin, puffed up her shoulders, and let out little snorts of pride that made her look utterly pleased.

After all, this was the life she had dreamed of—a righteous martial artist, not feared, but welcomed. Of course she would be elated.

It just felt like I was the one suffering from embarrassment in her place.

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I changed the subject.

“Ahem. The Northern Sea Ice Palace is larger than I expected.”

“Huhu. That’s only natural, since everyone living nearby ends up gathering here. Of course, it’s still nothing compared to the Central Plains...”

Bing Yerin nodded confidently, only to trail off at the end.

As she said, the Northern Sea Ice Palace was an impressive place, hard to believe it was built on this icy, snowy land. But after seeing the Murim Alliance buildings, it was understandable if her confidence faltered a little.

Noticing this, Seol Lihyang smoothly changed the subject.

“Anyway, we’ve walked quite a bit since arriving in a populated area. Shouldn’t we be seeing something soon? I mean, it’s called a palace, right?”

“Ah, we’re almost there. We just have to cross that lake.”

“Lake?”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head, as if she had heard something incomprehensible. Before us stretched nothing but a snow-covered frozen plain—where was the lake?

Seeing our confusion, Bing Yerin chuckled and swept away the snow at her feet.

Beneath the white layer was perfectly clear, impurity-free ice.

“What the...?”

“It’s frozen solid now, but in the summer, it melts into water. It’s as wide as a sea, but it’s a lake, not the actual ocean.”

“Aha, so that’s where the name 'North Sea' comes from? Then the people living there... live on top of the ice??”

“No. Like I said earlier, it melts in summer. That area’s just regular land.”

“Hmm? Then where exactly is the Northern Sea Ice Palace?”

“It’s everywhere. The first settlement of our ancestors was that small patch of land in the middle of the lake. But as the palace’s influence grew, and its name became known, many others gathered from the surrounding regions...”

“So eventually, people began living on the land beyond the lake too, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“I bet the people living in the actual palace receive better treatment.”

“That’s true as well. Those with outstanding martial skill, intellect, or lineage live inside the palace, while everyone else lives outside.”

“Now it makes sense. When you said the palace had opened its martial arts, it meant they started teaching techniques that used to be limited to palace residents to the outer inhabitants too, right?”

“As expected of the future palace lord. You’re sharp. Originally, they could only learn the bare minimum for survival, but now, if they want, they can even learn advanced martial arts... Though the problem is, wanting to doesn’t mean they can.”

As Bing Yerin said this, she looked at Seol Lihyang with burning eyes.

If possible, she’d rather take the Ice Crystal herself and challenge for the palace lord position—but it seemed her best option was still making Seol Lihyang the palace lord.

Avoiding her intense gaze, Seol Lihyang subtly moved closer to me.

“Hey. Cheon Hwi...”

“What is it?”

“I have something I want to ask you.”

“Here you go.”

“...??”

When I extended my arm, Seol Lihyang blinked in confusion. I chuckled and continued.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to ask something?”

“...Eiit!”

Realizing what I meant, she bit down on my arm in mock annoyance. Not enough to hurt, just enough to tickle a little.

After nibbling for a while, she finally let go, wiped the faint bite mark and her drool with her sleeve, then opened her mouth again.

“So, here’s my question.”

“Go ahead.”

“You and Sister Tang... are you two plotting something behind my back?”

“Oh?”

“I don’t know what it is, but I can tell. So just tell me straight—what are you up to?”

“First of all, it’s not just you we’re keeping it from. Seo Mun-Hwarin doesn’t know either, nor does Bing Yerin.”

“Seriously, what is it?!”

“That’s...”

Seol Lihyang swallowed hard, focusing on the shape of my mouth.

Smirking, I spoke.

“Of course it’s a secret.”

“Hey!?”

“If I could tell you, it wouldn’t be a secret in the first place.”

“Then why even say anything and get on my nerves!?”

“Well, obviously...”

I watched her scowl deepen in frustration before answering.

“To tease you, of course.”

“You!”

Slap!

In the end, Seol Lihyang couldn't hold back and started smacking my back.

But after constant external martial arts training—and having undergone a full-body transformation—her palm didn't hurt much without any inner strength behind it.

She knew this too, which is probably why she kept hitting me with just raw strength.

Once she'd vented a little, I gave her a shrug.

“You'll find out soon enough. That's why I didn't say anything.”

“It's not something weird, right?”

“Have I ever done anything harmful to you?”

“Well... when you put it that way, I guess not.”

Letting out a deep sigh, Seol Lihyang shook her head.

“Hoo... Why do I feel so uneasy?”

We crossed the frozen lake and arrived inside the palace.

Unlike before, Seol Lihyang was now surrounded by people who were clearly martial artists—and they were welcoming her.

Watching her and the visibly relieved palace lord, I spoke.

“Palace Lord.”

“What is it?”

“I heard you’ve been troubled by snakes lately.”

“How did you know...?”

The Northern Sea Ice Palace Lord’s eyes widened as she glared at Bing Yerin.

Apparently, she didn't expect me to suddenly bring up something she had told Bing Yerin. The betrayal on her face said it all.

But it's not like I ever promised to keep it a secret, and I only said I'd think about it—I never agreed to help with her plan.

I stepped behind Seol Lihyang, grabbed her by both shoulders, and pulled her toward me.

Then, speaking in an utterly straightforward tone, I said,

“I can't solve the problem completely, but I can buy you time. So hand over all your elixirs and martial arts techniques.”

“Hey! Cheon Hwi! That totally sounds like a threat!”

“Oh.”

Guess I got a little too blunt with that one.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After arriving at the palace, we received a warm and respectful welcome.

The reason was simple. Unlike the outside, the palace was teeming with martial artists of a higher level, and just like the envoy delegation, these people also recognized Seol Lihyang at a glance.

And well, the martial prowess of our group, myself included, probably played a role as well.

The average martial strength of the North Sea Ice Palace was one of the top even in the Central Plains. There were numerous Peak Stage and Sub-Perfection masters here.

However, there were no Flowering Stage martial artists. So when two absolute masters showed up, it was only natural that they would be tense and give their utmost in hospitality.

“It makes me uncomfortable how much they're watching us.”

“Well, if you told them to stop paying attention, it’d make things even more awkward, Seorin.”

“This One is aware of that much,” Seorin said with a shrug of her shoulders.

I slid my hand behind her neck in one smooth motion.

“Hiick?!”

Just as we entered the room, Seorin jumped in surprise at the touch of my still ice-cold hand.

Even if one achieves Cold Immune Body, the sensation of cold doesn’t disappear. A cold wind can still chill the body. It’s just that the cold no longer affects it.

“H-How could you do such a cruel thing to This One...!”

Clutching the back of her neck with both hands, Seorin glared at me in resentment.

No, it wasn’t just a glare. She stretched out her arm toward the back of my neck, as if intent on retaliating in kind. But she couldn’t quite reach—she was too short.

“Hng! Take this!”

She jumped up and down, trying to get to my neck, but all she could manage was to brush it lightly. She couldn't mimic what I'd done and slip her hand under my collar.

Whether it was because of her youthful appearance or not, the scene was quite pleasant to look at, enough to ease some of the tension in the air.

“Where do you think you're running?!”

When her hand couldn't reach, she took a step into the air using Empty Air Steps to match my height.

Then she shoved her cold hand into the back of my neck, finally nodding in satisfaction.

“Fufu. How does it feel to have it returned to you? If you tease This One again... hmm? Why is everyone lowering their heads?”

“Well, you did use Empty Air Steps just to mess around, Seorin. Of course they're avoiding eye contact to avoid getting in trouble.”

“What?! You started it, yet why are they afraid of This One?!”

“I just playfully teased you, but you immediately resorted to high-level techniques, Seorin.”

“This One is so adorable, though...!”

...?

She's not wrong, but saying it herself makes it sound weird.

Anyway, the silliness didn't last long. As we neared the audience chamber, we straightened up and adjusted our clothing.

Even if the Ice Palace Lord wasn't stronger than me, he was still the ruler of this domain. Since the North Sea was beyond the influence of the imperial family, his role was closer to that of a king than just a sect master.

That meant basic courtesy was required.

As we were tidying up, the doors opened as if on cue.

Inside, everything was blanketed in white as though snow had fallen. At the far end stood a raised platform and a luxurious chair.

“Welcome!”

But the Ice Palace Lord wasn't seated. Instead, he stepped down from the platform and walked directly toward us.

“I received word in advance and have been waiting! I am Seol Dancheon, the Palace Lord of North Sea Ice Palace. I also go by the title White Fist of Ice Soul, but feel free to call me whatever is comfortable.”

Like Bing Yerin, his hair was a whitish-blue. He looked older, but had a clean-shaven and well-kept face. Though tall, his muscles weren't prominent, so he seemed slightly lean.

But that didn't mean he looked weak. His impression was gentle, but he was unmistakably a Sub-Perfection master, and his internal energy was incredibly deep—possibly even greater in volume than mine.

Of course, since I use Willpowe in my techniques, that makes comparison meaningless, but still.

Another unusual feature was his green eyes, unlike the blue eyes most North Sea people had.

Perhaps it was because of his gaze—it felt transparent, as if it could see right through you.

It wasn't oppressive in a martial way. Rather, it was a kind of subtle pressure that came from the man himself, not his strength. Not unpleasant—just weighty.

It's too early to be sure, but even with other Sub-Perfection masters around, no one objected to him becoming the Ice Palace Lord. I think I now understand why.

While I paused, examining him, Tang Sowol stepped forward and, in a voice reminiscent of a noble lady, greeted him.

“Thank you for the warm welcome. I am Tang Sowol of the Sichuan Tang Clan.”

“I’ve heard of you. Said to be unrivaled in poison and concealed weapons in the Central Plains.”

“I’m honored you know of us even in such a remote place. This is my fiancé—”

She smoothly introduced the rest of us one by one.

Though the Ice Palace Lord maintained a generally friendly demeanor, I felt a subtle tension when he exchanged greetings with Seorin and me.

It was a bit much to say it was just the natural nervousness in front of someone stronger than oneself...

Most likely, Bing Yerin had mentioned us in her letter, along with the stories she’d heard in the Central Plains.

After all, it's standard for the Tang Clan to do some background checks to avoid any missteps with guests.

The issue, however, is that Seorin and I don’t have very... pleasant reputations.

Seorin may be enjoying life now, but in the past, she lived a notoriously bloody one.

And as for me... didn't I recently annihilate the entire Thousand Poison Gate by myself?

So it's natural for the Ice Palace Lord to be tense. On the other hand, his eyes sparkled with amazement when it was Seol Lihyang's turn.

"My name is Seol Lihyang..."

"Oh! So you're that one!"

"Eh? Uh, I'm not sure what you've heard, but if it's about someone who learned Glacial True Qi, then yes, that's me."

"I received a letter from the Divine Maiden in advance! It said you had trained in the Glacial True Qi that was stolen a few years ago? Don't worry about that. We didn't expect the original to be stolen, but there are several copies in circulation."

"Oh, thank you?"

“I heard you combine sound arts and yin-based techniques in a unique way. If it’s not too much to ask, could you show a little?”

“You’ve invited me here... I suppose a small demonstration is fine.”

With a reluctant nod, Seol Lihyang opened her mouth slightly. A clear voice flowed out—not loud, not flashy, just a pure tone.

The moment it resonated, frigid energy began to swirl around her.

It didn’t end there. Maybe it was the unique environment of the North Sea—local cold energy responded to her qi and voice, resonating and amplifying it.

Just like a snowball growing larger as it rolls, the chill around her intensified.

“Uhugh...!”

The Ice Palace Lord, now shocked beyond simple admiration, stood stunned. Once Seol Lihyang closed her mouth and gathered her qi, he spoke again, voice quickened.

“Incredible. Truly... beyond imagination!”

“Heheh. That’s a little embarrassing.”

Praise always feels good. As Seol Lihyang fought back a smile, the Ice Palace Lord exhaled in relief, face full of satisfaction.

“Amazing! Seol Lihyang, was it? What a coincidence. This One also shares the same surname. Perhaps... in the distant past, one of your ancestors came from the North Sea.”

“I-I doubt it. Our family didn’t know a thing about martial arts. Even my grandfather was a lifelong local.”

“I see? Well, it’s not that important. If you decide to remain here and become the Young Palace Mistress, I’ll adopt you myself. It’s easy enough to make the story fit.”

“Pardon?”

“I’ll give you everything you’ve seen since arriving. Including our martial arts.”

He raised his fist, gathering internal energy. White cold flame-like energy danced on it—not a result of massive power output, but rather an extremely concentrated chill in a normal punch.

Like how a hot object gives off heat distortion, but instead cold... and it was happening here in the North Sea.

Even Seol Lihyang, who would understand better than anyone how unbelievable this was, focused intently on his hand.

“This is Ice Divine Art. It can be used for fists or palms, and though a bit less efficient, even weapons.”

“To have such cold energy...”

As Seol Lihyang stared blankly, the Ice Palace Lord gently coaxed her further.

“Ice Divine Art is the highest-tier martial art of the North Sea Ice Palace. It’s said that no matter what other art you learn, you must eventually master this one to reach the pinnacle.”

“In other words, no matter what you’ve trained in—so long as it’s from the Ice Palace—you can switch to Ice Divine Art without issue. That includes Glacial True Qi.”

“Oh.”

Seol Lihyang flinched, clearly tempted. The Ice Palace Lord smiled in satisfaction.

“Just to be clear, I’m not asking you to decide now. For now, just explore this place and learn all you can. Everything is ready for that.”

“O-Okay.”

“And if you do choose to become the Young Palace Mistress... it’s simple. I’ll let you pick any one of my sons to marry. Then everything in the Ice Palace will be yours.”

...Wait. What did he just say?

Marriage between his son and Seol Lihyang...

Well, I already knew. Bing Yerin mentioned adoption and making her the candidate for Young Palace Mistress.

And Seol Lihyang didn't say she wasn't interested—she was just momentarily distracted by Ice Divine Art.

But I didn't like how he said that while she was captivated.

So I decided to speak up. I had the perfect excuse.

“Palace Lord.”

“Yes?”

“I heard you've been troubled by snakes lately.”

“How did you...?!”

The Ice Palace Lord looked shocked. Bing Yerin, too, looked betrayed.

Ignoring both of them, I firmly pulled Seol Lihyang by the shoulders to my side and spoke confidently.

“I can’t solve it completely, but I can buy you time. In return, hand over all your elixirs and martial arts.”

“Hey! Cheon Hwi! That sounds like extortion!”

“Ah.”

I may have been too blunt in my assertiveness.

But I had no regrets. This needed to be addressed properly.

“Sorry to mislead you, but Seol Lihyang has no intention of becoming your Young Palace Mistress. And I have no intention of letting her go. Isn’t that right?”

“Wha—Well... yeah, that’s true.”

Though surprised by my sudden declaration, Seol Lihyang nodded obediently.

The Ice Palace Lord, however, seemed to have anticipated this and calmly continued.

“As I said, it was merely a suggestion, not coercion. But Blood Flame Sword Demon, you speak like a guest trying to pressure his host.”

“That came off a bit sharp. I apologize for that.”

“Apology accepted. But now, I must ask—how do you plan to buy time against all those Azure Cold Serpents?”

“You’re not going to ask how I found out?”

“No need. It must’ve been the Divine Maiden. I already guessed what she was thinking.”

“...Huh.”

I didn't expect him to know.

When I glanced at Bing Yerin, her face had gone pale. She hadn't realized she was found out.

I shrugged and turned back to the Ice Palace Lord.

“From the way you're talking, it sounds like if it's possible, you'll go along with it?”

“Correct. I'm willing to give you as many elixirs and martial arts as needed—so long as it's possible.”

Despite still being wary of my strength, he held his ground.

So I decided to give him a sincere answer.

“There is indeed a method. Though not with me—”

“...What?”

I gestured toward the person next to me.

Tang Sowol blinked, then cleared her throat.

“Ahem! I haven’t personally encountered the Azure Cold Serpent, so unlike Cheon Hwi, I can’t say for certain. However, among the poisons used by the Thousand Poison Gate to subdue snakes in Yunnan Province...”

It was a complicated explanation, hard to grasp in full, but as she spoke, the logic became clear and convincing.

Yes, leaving it to the expert was the right call.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Ahem! I haven’t personally encountered the Azure Cold Serpent, so unlike Cheon Hwi, I can’t say I’m absolutely certain. However, among the poisons the Thousand Poison Gate once used to subdue snakes in Yunnan Province…”

The moment poison was mentioned, Tang Sowol’s explanation poured out without giving anyone room to breathe.

It was complex—hard to fully grasp—but as you listened, you couldn’t help but nod along.

Not because you fully understood, but because the gist seemed to be: “I don’t really get it, but it sounds like it’ll work.”

Yes, leaving this to the expert was definitely the right choice.

As I nodded in satisfaction, Bing Yerin approached hastily.

“Blood Flame Sword Demon! What on earth is going on here?!”

“What else? Exactly what it looks like. The issue is simple—North Sea Ice Palace is weakening, and there’s an impending threat. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true! And we can’t keep putting things off—there’s no fundamental solution in delay alone!”

To solve it fundamentally, they’ll have to become stronger again.

The leader of the Azure Cold Serpent group still holds back, focused only on raising its offspring. The reason it hasn’t attacked yet is likely because the Ice Palace Lords have always been powerful.

But you can’t just make Flowering Stage masters pop out of thin air. That’s not how it works.

This overlaps with what happened to the Jeomchang Sect and the Hwangbo Clan.

They both declined because no one reached Flowering Stage anymore, though the outcome was very different.

The Jeomchang Sect still has hope: the Heaven-Slaughter Star, who overcame his killing instinct, and Jang Inam, who, despite his age, has talent and strong will.

The Hwangbo Clan, on the other hand, couldn’t accept their fall and ended up destroying themselves with reckless desperation.

What I realized watching both cases is this:

“You never know what’ll happen in life.”

“...Pardon?”

“As you said, Bing Yerin, delaying things won’t always solve them. But some problems can be solved by waiting.”

Of course, I don’t mean doing nothing and sitting on your hands.

North Sea Ice Palace is weakening because there are no Flowering Stage masters now.

And the future looks unstable because the surrounding cold energy is visibly diminishing, making it harder to master techniques that require intense cold.

“In that case, you just need to take time and build your internal energy. If you have enough time, the future of the Ice Palace doesn’t seem so dark... At least from my perspective, it feels too early to make any final decisions.”

“The future of the Ice Palace...? But if Lady Seol doesn’t become the Young Palace Mistress, then who—wait, are you saying...”

Bing Yerin frowned deeply, then suddenly made a strange expression and pointed at herself.

“Are you talking about me?”

“Yes. I’m talking about you.”

I heard that while the Divine Maiden lives, she receives greater support than even the Ice Palace Lord. She’s basically second only to him.

Still, no matter the support, reaching such heights at her age isn’t something anyone can do.

Our group is exceptional, but Bing Yerin’s accomplishments aren’t lacking even compared to the direct heirs of the Nine Great Sects or the Five Supreme Clans.

“B-But I’m the Divine Maiden. Everyone in the palace is hoping for my death—to recover the Ice Crystal.”

“Then just become strong enough to crush everyone who wants your death.”

“W-What kind of nonsense...!”

“It’s not nonsense. If even your plan to bring in a new Young Palace Mistress failed, how many candidates are left in the Ice Palace? How much potential do they have? And what do you lack compared to them?”

Bing Yerin opened her mouth, but no words came. She just silently moved her lips, and I smirked as I raised two fingers.

“Bing Yerin, your plan has two problems.”

“What are they?”

“First—didn’t you promise to let Seol Lihyang learn all the Ice Palace’s martial arts? That’s too big a gift for someone who hasn’t even been confirmed as the successor.”

I looked her straight in the eye as she flinched.

“Were you planning to fool everyone into thinking she’d become the Young Palace Mistress until we left?”

“It might not be a problem for us—since we could just flee back to the Central Plains or Sichuan. But was it really the same for you?”

Bing Yerin said nothing, as if struck right in the heart. I continued in a calm tone.

“Even if you do take the Ice Crystal, if the people of the palace don’t support you, it’s meaningless. No one wants a con artist as their leader.”

“A... con artist?”

“Yes. You should’ve gone head-on instead.”

“Are you suggesting I stand up against over a hundred years of tradition and clan pressure? That’s foolishness.”

“If that’s what it takes, then yes. It might be foolish, as you say... but all martial artists are fools. A martial artist’s life is like a drunkard teetering on the edge of a blade. If you want safety, you should abandon everything and run.”

“...”

“But you can’t do that, can you? Then at least, be honest with yourself.”

“With... myself?”

“Exactly. Especially if you want to reach even greater heights.”

Bing Yerin closed her mouth with a complicated expression, clearly lost in thought.

Watching her, Seol Lihyang—still held by the shoulder—finally spoke.

“Wow. Cheon Hwi is sounding like a righteous sect martial artist for once.”

“I mean, I’m clearly part of a righteous sect, though?”

I was trying to build my status in the righteous sects. That's why I got involved in the Heaven-Slaughter Star case and had all sorts of other plans in motion. So her comment stung a little.

“But didn't you just threaten the Ice Palace Lord for martial arts and elixirs like a bandit?”

Seol Lihyang shot back with a smug smile. Technically correct, annoyingly so.

Still, isn't having power and not using it just inefficient?

...I didn't say that out loud. Didn't want to be called a demonic cultivator again. So I changed the subject.

“And the second problem with your plan—people don't always fall for deception. The Palace Lord already had an idea what you were planning, didn't he?”

“You're trying to switch topics all sly-like, but I'll let it slide this once.”

For some reason, Seol Lihyang said that proudly, then turned to Bing Yerin.

“I agree with Cheon Hwi, but I’m a bit different.”

“Different how?”

“I kind of understand what made you come up with that plan.”

Her teasing expression disappeared, replaced with a serious one.

“I know what it’s like to stand on the edge of a cliff, pushed forward against your will, forced to wait for death with your eyes wide open.”

“Even you, Lady Seol...?”

“Surviving is a fight. Whether it’s fair combat or backhanded trickery, you do what you must. But there are exceptions.”

Seol Lihyang tilted her head back and began poking her head against my chest as if to emphasize her point.

“People who help me. People I want to help. People I can lean on. You don’t lie to those people.”

“Ah.”

“Bing Yerin, you’re not risking your life just for yourself, but for the Ice Palace. So why do you keep trying to carry it all alone?”

“A-All alone...?”

“Yeah. Whether it’s offering your life as the Divine Maiden for the Ice Crystal, or taking the Ice Crystal yourself to fight the Azure Cold Serpents, you’re doing it all alone. Did you really think you could manage that by yourself?”

Still leaning her chin up, Seol Lihyang gave a soft laugh.

“You’re not that strong.”

Bing Yerin blinked in shock, caught off guard by Seol Lihyang’s direct words.

She opened her mouth to reply but kept closing it again and again, unable to speak.

While we were talking to Bing Yerin, the conversation on the other side must've wrapped up well, because the Ice Palace Lord, who'd been nodding all along, spoke up.

"I see. In that case, it's worth trying. If there's anything you need, let me know—I'll provide support."

Seems he decided to gamble on Tang Sowol's poison.

When he asked what she needed, Tang Sowol thought briefly before speaking.

"I heard a former Palace Lord once attempted a subjugation of the Azure Cold Serpent. Is there any preserved corpse from that event?"

"There are no complete corpses left. But we did preserve some hides, bones, and internal cores during dissection."

“Better than nothing. Could you gather and send them all to me? Also, I’ll need a large room with no foot traffic.”

“Understood. I’ll prepare everything. As for the martial arts and elixirs the Blood Flame Sword Demon mentioned earlier...”

He glanced at me, so I answered in his place.

“Half in advance, the rest after the job is done.”

“Then I’ll give you the martial arts and elixirs I originally prepared to entice you into becoming the Young Palace Mistress.”

The Ice Palace Lord shrugged with a playful tone.

What started as a welcoming ceremony ended after some minor chaos and concluded peacefully.

Afterward, the Palace Lord kept his word and promptly fulfilled all the promised support.

Thanks to that, Tang Sowol holed up all day researching poisons that might work against the Azure Cold Serpent—or occasionally clung to me to replenish her energy.

Seol Lihyang was now properly learning the Ice Palace's martial arts and consuming elixirs suitable to her level, with Seorin helping her out.

And Bing Yerin? She was under house arrest by order of the Palace Lord. Which, honestly, was only to be expected.

But there was one thing that felt suspicious—rather than punishing her, it seemed the Palace Lord was actually helping Bing Yerin.

Sure, house arrest restricted her movements...But it also restricted others from approaching her.

Considering she was facing pressure from her family and the fact that the Palace Lord often brushed off demands from retainers insisting she be severely punished...

It's hard to shake the feeling that he's protecting her in his own way.

Not that it's a bad thing.

Anyway, while everyone else was busy with their tasks... what was I doing?

"Hm. I'm a little bored."

Just doing solo training like usual—from sunrise to sunset.

The room, once lively like a guesthouse, was now quiet.

I said I was bored earlier, but truthfully... it felt more like a hint of loneliness.

"Still, I can't disturb the others."

As I gazed up at the night sky with a half-moon hanging there, I sighed and closed the window.

Just as I lay down to end the day...

Creak.

The sound of a door opening—faint but familiar footsteps.

Someone coming quietly at night without a word... could only be Tang Sowol.

She's done it before, so I pretended to sleep, planning to tease her for it.

But something felt different—hesitant movements, shy presence.

Suddenly, I felt lips near my ear, and someone whispered:

“Cheon Hwi. You awake?”

...I wasn't expecting Seol Lihyang.

A cold sweat started forming.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Cheon Hwi, are you asleep?”

“...”

I hadn't expected Seol Lihyang to come.

Her voice was soft, a little hesitant, almost expectant—like she was nervous yet hoping for something.

The moment I heard it, a cold sweat started to form.

Seol Lihyang suddenly showing up in the middle of the night, not directly asking for anything, but speaking as if she wanted me to do something for her... I knew all too well what that usually signaled.

Before my regression, there was a kind of secret code between me and Seol Lihyang: a single pear.

But how could one fruit convey all our intentions?

There were times—especially during seasons when pears were hard to come by, or when it was unbearable to wait until the next day—that she would quietly slip in and ask, “Are you asleep?”

Of course, the current Seol Lihyang is different from the one before regression.

Her personality, her martial arts, our relationship—they’ve all changed.

Surely, she didn’t come for that kind of reason. Right? Right...?

Either way, no need to overreact. I just had to calmly say I wasn’t asleep and ask what brought her here.

With that mindset, I opened my eyes.

“Ah.”

“Eek—!”

We locked eyes at a distance close enough that she might’ve kissed me.

Dark eyes, yet sparkling even in the shadows. That startled, slightly wistful look in them made me freeze.

Seol Lihyang also froze, eyes wide, seemingly caught in the same moment.

A heavy silence fell—so thick it was as if time had stopped. And in that instant, I instinctively knew:

This is dangerous.

I’ve never thought of myself as weak-willed. But there are always exceptions.

Tang Sowol’s the same—if Seol Lihyang really made up her mind and pushed, I might be able to reject her once, maybe twice. But could I resist to the end?

...No. Not likely.

Still, I had to hold firm tonight. Even if Tang Sowol was willing to yield on everything else, she made it clear the order mattered—and I had to honor at least that much.

I forced myself to stay alert, even circulating my internal energy to my head so I wouldn't lose focus.

Then Seol Liyang, in an awkward tone, abruptly sat up.

“A-Ah, so you weren't asleep!”

“I just woke up.”

In truth, I'd been awake the whole time—but there's no way I could admit that.

How could I tell her I'd been lying there tense, worried she might jump me?

And now that I see her, she probably had no such intentions in the first place.

I was too wrapped up in memories of the pre-regression Seol Lihyang. This version... this is more like her now. It is. But...

A faint sigh slipped from my lips, tinged with subtle disappointment.

“Hoo... So? Sneaking into a man’s room in the middle of the night without a sound—what brings you here?”

“...Hey. Cheon Hwi, why are you leaning away from me?”

“Basic defense against an intruder.”

“And covering yourself with the blanket?”

“That’s standard protocol for shameless intruders, isn’t it?”

“Why am I suddenly shameless?!”

She shrieked and scrambled onto the bed to yank the blanket away from me.

It was the usual playful banter—a silent agreement from her to pretend that odd tension a moment ago never happened.

As we tugged back and forth on the blanket in a mock struggle...

Thud.

“Ah—”

Seol Lihyang stumbled and fell forward with a short gasp.

Honestly, at her level, it’s not easy to misstep. Peak Stage martial artists have trained balance and reflexes that are near-infallible.

But lately, Seol Lihyang has been training like mad in the North Sea Ice Palace, practically draining herself as she tried to absorb everything she could.

She probably just lost focus for a second due to accumulated fatigue.

I reflexively reached out and caught her.

Poof.

And so, she naturally fell into my arms.

The blanket that had been tossed aside draped over her shoulders a beat later.

Only after confirming she was safe did I sigh deeply and pat her back gently.

“Did you overdo it again? Just because it’s internal energy cultivation doesn’t mean it won’t strain your body.”

“Fatigue in the muscles or the mind—either way, it dulls movement and focus.”

“Why aren’t you saying anything? Come on, give me a response.”

I shrugged and looked down at her—and immediately understood why she was silent.

Her face was flushed to the tips of her ears, her eyes wide, and she was breathing a bit roughly, whether from surprise or something else.

Currently, Seol Lihyang was immersed in a freezing environment, taking potent yin-based elixirs and undergoing relentless training.

In short, her body was filled with cold energy, or yin qi.

And yin qi has side effects—especially for those with yin-heavy physiques like hers. Women with strong yin are, by nature, drawn to yang energy.

It’s not as bad as having Extreme Yin Pulse, but it’s enough.

“Let’s get some distance.”

“No.”

Seol Lihyang shook her head and wrapped her arms around my waist.

I felt her cheek press against my chest, her body leaning in closer, her chest pressing against my lower abdomen—probably due to her posture, propped up on her arms.

Soft warmth through every point of contact. A slightly chilly body temperature.

Seol Lihyang had been getting bolder since receiving Tang Sowol’s permission, but never quite like this.

I was frozen, unsure of what to do—until her soft voice whispered up.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to break my promise to Sister Tang. I just want to talk. Like this.”

“Talk, like this?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I see Sister Tang clinging to your back, hugging you for a long time. I think I finally get why now.”

“I still don’t.”

“It makes me feel... safe, I guess. Like the fatigue of the day melts away. It reminds me why I’m trying so hard.”

“That’s nice, but you know... you should be doing it for yourself. That lasts longer.”

“And what about you, Cheon Hwi? Are you living for yourself?”

Oof. Got me there.

Honestly, I’m no different. If I just wanted to live well, I could’ve joined the Demonic Cult and had my fill of pleasure.

Then when the cult made their move, I could’ve grabbed what I wanted and left the Central Plains.

But I didn't. Because I couldn't.

Seol Lihyang, still in my arms, leaned her full weight into me as she spoke again.

“Watching Bing Yerin and the others here... I've been having a lot of thoughts these past few days.”

“What kind of thoughts?”

“That they're all so earnest about protecting their place.”

True. The Ice Palace's issues could be solved by simply abandoning the North Sea and their yin-based martial arts.

They'd struggle at first, but their deep foundation would let them shine again eventually.

But they didn't. Even while sacrificing their own elites, even knowing past grudges were waiting to strike, even if it meant placing an outsider on the throne.

They were doing their best to protect their home, their martial arts.

“I understand Bing Yerin’s position, but I didn’t really get why she accepted it all or came up with such a reckless plan. Maybe it’s because I don’t have roots like they do.”

“Roots, huh.”

“Yeah. Roots.”

Neither of us—me nor Seol Lihyang—has any real origin to speak of.

No respectable parents. No hometown ties. No fellow disciples to bond with over shared martial arts. No master to guide us. No juniors to lift up.

We had nothing. Just floating alone in this vast world.

Back in my previous life, when I was known as Blood Wolf, I had decent skills but wandered like a drifting weed.

I didn't know where to put down roots, so I never knew where to stop walking.

It was only by chance that I ended up at the Black Lotus Sect, and there I met Seol Lihyang and Seorin.

As I was drifting into these memories, Seol Lihyang curled up slightly and spoke.

“My mother died when I was too young to remember. My father... sold me because he was addicted to gambling.”

“I know.”

“You once said you helped me because your father got something from mine.”

“I did say that.”

“That... was a lie, wasn't it?”

Honestly, she never fully believed my story. She just accepted it because it seemed I truly wanted to help her.

There was a short silence before she forced a casual tone and continued.

“It’s fine. I gave up expecting my father might’ve been a good man a long time ago. So I don’t really care anymore.”

“Thanks for saying that. And sorry for lying.”

She slowly lifted her head, resting her chin on my chest and looking up. Her gaze was hazy, yet filled with longing.

“I don’t care that my dad was garbage. I already knew. But I’m curious about something.”

“What is it?”

“Most parents love their children. Most children love their parents. Sister Tang and the Tang Clan Head are a perfect example.”

“They really do seem like the ideal warm family.”

“Yeah. I wonder if that’s what the Ice Palace people feel about their roots too. I don’t really get it, but... maybe.”

She said it lightly, but her emptiness was even more obvious because of it.

I had felt the same when I was her age.

I gently stroked her back, and she relaxed into my touch with a satisfied sigh.

After a long moment, she spoke quietly again.

“You know, Cheon Hwi... Maybe it’s because of my father, but I always told myself: I’ll never be like that. If I ever get married, if I ever have a child, I’ll be good to them.”

“That makes sense. I understand.”

“Really?”

“My parents passed away early, but they were good people. So I only half understand.”

“Mhm. I like how honest you are.”

Seol Lihyang giggled softly and sat up—still clinging to me, so it felt like she was crawling up my body.

Her hands explored slightly, then clasped behind my neck. Our chests were now pressed together.

Looking into each other’s eyes at that close distance, she whispered:

“Anyway, what I wanted to say is... I want to be a really good parent. A good wife too.”

“I see. But why bring that up all of a sudden—”

“Cheon Hwi.”

Her breath tickled my nose as she cut me off.

“How far have you gone with Sister Tang?”

“...What?”

“If it’s that far... well, I have permission. So... yeah.”

In that moment, the current Seol Lihyang overlapped with the one before regression.

Most of those memories... were from our time together in bed.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 208. Negotiation (4)

"How far did you go with Sister Tang???"

"What?"

Seol Lihyang's sudden, piercing question caught me completely off guard. I flinched without meaning to, stunned by the unexpected content.

She licked her slightly dry lips briefly with the tip of her tongue and continued.

"If you went that far... then I'm allowed too. Right?"

Her face was right up against mine, arms wrapped around my neck. Her cool body temperature had turned slightly lukewarm at some point.

Whether it was my warmth being transferred to her, or me cooling down from her chill, the only certainty was that our body heat was starting to blend.

Normally, Seol Lihyang kept her feminine energy in check... no, to be exact, she was now showing a more honest version of herself. From her, I could feel an odd kind of sensuality.

Somehow, in this moment, she began to overlap with the version of Seol Lihyang I remembered from before my regression—mostly the version I saw in bed.

“Hey, Cheon Hwi. So just how far did you go with Sister Tang?”

“How far, you ask.”

I quietly looked down at her. I wondered if she even realized how she looked right now. How incredibly attractive she was to me.

A mix of nostalgia, a flicker of impulse, and the subtle sense of guilt underlying it all stirred a singular thought:

She’s beautiful.

It was something I already knew in my head, and something I’d grown dull to after spending so much time around our companions.

But now, Seol Lihyang, nearing the age I remembered from before my regression, was coming into her beauty in full bloom.

Still, I swallowed all those thoughts down and spoke with deliberate calm.

“We kissed.”

“Hmm?”

“I said, we went as far as a kiss. And that was back during the Thousand Poison Gate incident.”

Seol Lihyang froze mid-head-tilt. Then her black eyes widened as her voice shot up.

“That’s it?!”

“That’s it, you say? We’re not even married yet. I’d say that’s already pushing it.”

“No way! That’s barely anything! You two are always stuck to each other, rubbing shoulders all the time, and all you’ve done is kiss?!”

““Rubbing shoulders’... that’s a bit of an exaggeration...”

I must have looked a bit sulky, because she unwrapped her arms from my neck and sat up straight.

As I quietly watched her pull away—somewhat regretful of the loss of contact—she suddenly raised her index finger with a snap and continued.

“Think about it. If two people are supposedly head-over-heels for each other, but only just kissed recently? Isn’t that absurd?”

“You and I might be street-born, so it feels slow to us, but Tang Sowol is from a prestigious clan. Of course she'd be more reserved in that area.”

“Sure, Sister Tang’s a proper lady and all, but that has nothing to do with it. Remember that Peng guy and that Yeon girl you dated before?”

“You mean Peng Woojin and Yeon Ga-hye? At least remember their names.”

“If I’m not interested, I forget quickly. Anyway, they’re both from prestigious clans too, right? But what happened?”

“What happened? They lived tiresomely because of their families' strict rules.”

“And?”

“In that sense, I was lucky. Despite everything, I still became Tang Sowol's fiancé without much opposition.”

“Cheon Hwi, you dummy! What matters is that even while being chased by time and others' eyes, they still did everything they wanted to! Focus on that part!”

“Oh.”

Now that she mentioned it... right. They bought a small house and even lived together briefly, or took boat trips just for the two of us.

“It's been four years since you and Sister Tang got engaged! You two might have had a few minor fights, but you were always so lovey-dovey that I thought my teeth would rot from the sweetness!”

“What do your teeth have to do with it?”

“Because it was so sweet! Painfully sweet!”

Seol Lihyang shouted, clearly frustrated, then panted as she tried to calm herself. I gently patted her back and replied.

“I had my reasons too.”

“Don’t tell me... are you impotent...”

“I figured if her father caught us, we’d have to settle things in a life-or-death duel.”

“Ah.”

Now it was Seol Lihyang’s turn to go silent.

A moment of awkward stillness passed between us. Then she let out a deep sigh and spoke again.

“Huu. Anyway, I get it. So, a kiss is all I need to match that, right? Just a kiss?”

Mid-sentence, she flinched, stiffly lifting her head to look at me.

Her gaze locked on my lips. The way she stared made me realize—despite all her bold talk, she was actually very nervous now that it was her turn.

Seol Lihyang's lips twitched as if she wanted to say something but held back, or as if she were rehearsing something.

Just earlier, she had exuded enough seductive energy to remind me of her former self. But now, she'd returned to her usual demeanor.

Maybe it was pure shyness or hesitation. But more than likely, it was because she couldn't control the sudden surge of yin energy within her.

I chuckled quietly, then gently lifted her chin so she'd face me again.

“Anyway, I get what you're saying. A kiss is enough, right?”

“Y-yeah, but...”

“If it’s just that, then I don’t need to feel guilty. Sowol already told me what to expect.”

I slowly leaned in. Her gaze wavered, darting around uncertainly, but soon she closed her eyes.

And then—

“W-wait!”

Thump.

She blocked my mouth with her palm. Soft and squishy.

“W-mmmp.”

“What’s wrong?”

Even though my voice was muffled, the meaning got through. Seol Lihyang hesitated, then mumbled.

“It just feels... meaningless, doing it so suddenly like this!”

“Mmm?”

“Oh, right. I’ll let go now.”

She pulled her hand back. I stared at her, and she stammered, continuing her explanation.

“I mean... it’s my first time, so I want it to be more... romantic, or justified, you know?”

“I’d say the mood right now is good enough.”

“But still...”

“But?”

“If we do it like this, I’ll just seem like some weird woman who barged in at night for a kiss and ran off.”

“Don’t worry. The moment you barged in at night, you were already a weird woman.”

Seol Lihyang said nothing and tapped my chest lightly with her fist. Normally, she’d use the heel of her hand like a massage. But this was a straight punch form.

She must’ve been learning something lately. The martial arts of the Ice Palace often included techniques to release cold energy through the hands.

I let her hit me a bit, then caught her hand and pinned it in place.

This time, I smirked as I said:

“If you’re going to be a weird woman anyway, does it matter if you kiss or not?”

“What kind of logic is that...”

“And what’s with provoking me like this only to suddenly back off?”

“Ugh.”

She lowered her head, unable to answer, guilt all over her face.

As I leaned in again, her nape trembled from tension and excitement.

Watching that small reaction, I whispered:

“Still, you’re right. Mood matters.”

I leaned in—not to her lips, but to the snow-white nape of her neck—and kissed her there.

“Hnngh.”

She flinched like she was holding back laughter. I sucked firmly, hard enough to leave a mark.

Smooch.

As I slowly pulled away, a deep red mark remained. Seol Lihyang slowly opened her eyes, dazed.

She looked completely confused, as if she had no idea what just happened.

“Uh... um, just now...”

“As you said, we’ll save the lips for next time. This should be enough, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Then stop making that dumb face and, since we brought it up, let’s decide when to actually do it.”

“Geez! You suddenly being all aggressive just surprised me, that’s all! And the next time... I guess when I’ve fully stabilized my qi.”

“You’re not talking about after reaching Sub-Perfection, are you?”

“Of course not. Just when I’ve fully made this new inner energy mine.”

“So you do realize it.”

“That I’m being swayed by my yin energy? I’ve noticed... a bit.”

She gave a small nod, then flopped backward and lay down, casually kicking her feet.

“I originally came here to ask you for acupressure help. But seeing you sleeping like that... I kind of just... yeah, that happened.”

“Hah...”

I shook my head briefly. But Seol Lihyang wasn’t finished.

She tapped my thigh lightly with her toes and went on.

“Also, watching the people from the Ice Palace lately... I’ve been thinking more about my roots.”

“For people like us, that’s something we can’t avoid.”

“Maybe. But it feels like you already figured it out long ago.”

She was right. After Seol Lihyang and Seo Mun-Hwarin’s deaths, I learned that even someone like me could love.

And after meeting Tang Sowol, I considered her my place to put down roots.

Seol Lihyang must’ve been the same. Bringing this up now... she probably wanted to say it was okay to put her roots in me too. That she was ready to try.

Of course I knew. How could I not know her feelings?

Instead of answering, I shrugged, grabbed her fluttering leg, and pinned it gently to the ground.

“It’s a secret. But I’ll give you that acupressure session anytime.”

I lightly straddled her hips, positioned my hands, and channeled qi into my fingertips before pressing firmly on her shoulder blade.

“Aaahk...?”

Seol Lihyang let out a half-melted moan. Oddly enough, this felt more intimate than when I kissed her nape.

Stifling a laugh, I continued the acupressure session.

Eventually, I finished one side. As she adjusted her posture, Seol Lihyang tilted her head and said:

“That’s weird. I’ve been getting this from Sister Seo Mun lately during training. It’s not bad, but...”

“But?”

“Strangely, when you do it, it feels way more effective... and nicer, too.”

She muttered the last part, then covered it up by speaking louder.

“What’s the difference? Do you have some secret trick?”

After a short pause, I focused my qi into my fingers again and placed them on her waist.

“That’s a secret too.”

The next morning.

Seeing the mark on Seol Lihyang's nape, Tang Sowol cautiously leaned in to sniff.

Then she gave a satisfied smile and a thumbs-up.

“Well done, Young Master Cheon!”

“It's kind of scary how you figured it out just from the scent.”

Well, she trained in poison arts. She probably honed her sense of smell to identify poisons.

Seo Mun-Hwarin, having witnessed this bizarre scene, also circled around Seol Lihyang and sniffed.

Then she tilted her head in confusion.

“My dear. There's a bruise on Lihyang's neck... but what does the scent have to do with that?”

“That's enough, Senior Seo Mun.”

I lightly patted her head as if brushing it.

She didn't seem to hate it.

Thus began a new day with a bit of commotion. But those peaceful days didn't last long—

—for Tang Sowol had succeeded in developing a new poison.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 209. A Poison That Poisons Even a Serpent (1)

Tang Sowol had succeeded in developing a new poison.

“Ooh! So this is the one...!”

The Ice Palace Lord peered into the small cup containing a black liquid, marveling at it.

“There’s definitely an unusual energy about it. At the very least, it doesn’t seem like something even a Sub-Perfection master could easily handle. It’s not the kind of poison that would affect someone just from smelling it, right? Hahaha!”

Perhaps it was because the request he had only half-believed in returned with far better results than expected—his mood was clearly elevated.

Tang Sowol smiled brightly at him.

“It’s specifically designed to infect through breathing, so of course it will cause poisoning. As I mentioned, it’s particularly dangerous to those carrying cold energy. A slight misstep, and they might erupt with rampaging cold and turn into blocks of ice.”

The Ice Palace Lord immediately set the cup down and held his breath, his expression serious. Tang Sowol casually shrugged, as if to reassure him.

“Of course, that would only happen if you were a serpent. Even if someone does get poisoned, it’s a toxin that can be expelled easily with proper internal energy control. And to be sure, I’m personally manipulating the poison energy right now, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I-I see...?”

“Yes, like this.”

As she spoke, Tang Sowol flicked her finger. The black poison in the cup floated up in sync with the gesture.

“Object-Grasping Through Empty Air?!”

“Oh, hardly. That’s something only Cheon Hwi or Sister Hwarin could pull off. It’s just that since the poison came from me, I can control it freely like this.”

Speaking in a soft tone, she lightly curled her hand into a fist. The black liquid was drawn toward her hand and absorbed into the back of it.

She had completely made it her own.

Well, considering the traits of her Poison Spirit Constitution, this wasn’t surprising. Instead of mixing poisons using half-baked equipment, it was much more efficient for her to absorb them directly and test their combinations internally.

The Ice Palace Lord, watching the strange but fascinating display, eventually nodded.

“I may be ignorant about poisons, but I know enough to understand that controlling something so naturally—even if it came from one’s own body—is no ordinary feat. I’m certain it’s enough to serve its original purpose. So... when do you plan to carry out the detoxification?”

“Hmm, I don’t intend to wait long. But considering that even the former Palace Lord couldn’t slay the beast, I’ll need to be cautious. Once we find a suitable location to do it discreetly, I’ll begin.”

“Understood. I’ll assign people who know the location of the serpent den. Use them however you see fit. And... truly, thank you.”

“I haven’t actually proven its effectiveness yet. Besides, I was only able to do this thanks to your generous support. And we’re receiving a fitting reward in return, so there’s no need for too much gratitude.”

“Even so, this brings a ray of hope to the Northern Ice Palace. How could I not be grateful?”

Tang Sowol and the Ice Palace Lord exchanged polite smiles and warm words.

...Or at least, that's how it looked.

In truth, this was more of a diplomatic negotiation in disguise.

Something like: Don't even think of paying me in favors. Make sure you deliver the rest of the payment.

Or: Can't I leave just a bit of it as a favor owed?—that kind of conversation.

Having spent some time rolling around in the murim world myself, I could catch the general gist. But pulling it off as smoothly as Tang Sowol? That was a different story.

Seo Mun-Hwarin probably had a similar sense of it.

Seol Lihyang... well, she was still at the stage where she should be focused on her cultivation rather than these political nuances.

Mm.

In any case, it was reassuring to have someone like Tang Sowol on our team who could handle situations like this with such finesse.

I guess I wasn't the only one who thought that—Seo Mun-Hwarin tiptoed over and whispered to me.

“It's times like this that having Sowol is a real blessing.”

“My thoughts exactly. If it were me, I'd probably start with threats out of habit.”

“...That just means your personality's the issue, no?”

I let Seo Mun-Hwarin's jab pass through one ear and out the other.

Before long, Tang Sowol returned to us after wrapping up her conversation with the Ice Palace Lord.

“How'd it go?”

“It went well. We’ll now go scout for a suitable place to detoxify.”

“Sounds good. No need for all of us to go. Just you, me, and the guide should be enough.”

“Um... Cheon Hwi.”

Seol Lihyang cautiously raised her hand and glanced toward Tang Sowol.

“I’m not trying to get in the way of you two, but... could I come along this time?”

“Hmm? Is there a reason? We’re just scouting today. I doubt anything serious will happen.”

“I just want to see the Azure Cold Serpent. Even from a distance.”

“The Azure Cold Serpent?”

“Yeah. I’ve never seen a spirit beast in my life. And they say it uses cold energy like I do, so... I got curious.”

Tang Sowol and I briefly exchanged glances, then nodded.

“Well, I suppose it’s fine. We’re just checking the place out.”

“Yes. And if anything does happen, Young Master Cheon can just scoop us both up and sprint away.”

“Scooping you up takes unnecessary effort and uses both arms. Stick to either the front or the back.”

“My, having both me and Lihyang at your front and back...”

“You’re thinking something weird right now, aren’t you?”

“Oh my? I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean.”

Tang Sowol replied playfully. As we chuckled among ourselves—

Suddenly, a white head poked in between us.

“OO.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin, cheeks puffed out and lips sticking out like a duck, inserted herself between me and Sowol.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin... Don’t tell me—dementia?”

“Don’t say such awful things! I’m perfectly sane!”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“It’s obvious! Even this morning and now—you’re all talking about things I don’t know and leaving me out!”

I blinked at her, unsure of what she meant, but Seo Mun-Hwarin began stomping her feet. The kind of terrifying threat equivalent to a three-month-old bear cub.

Though, her actual threat level was probably higher than most adult bears.

“Ah... is this about the mark on Seol Lihyang’s neck?”

“Exactly! Anyway, I’m coming with you this time too, so don’t bother trying to stop me—”

“That’s fine. Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin can come with us.”

“...Huh?”

She had been acting all firm, but now tilted her head in confusion.

Smiling faintly, I explained.

“This is a rare opportunity to see a Flowering Stage spirit beast—even from afar. At the very least, you can sense its energy. Encounters like this were rare even in your era, weren’t they?”

“It’s quite rude to treat my era like some distant fantasy... but yes, you’re right. Now I’m curious.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded with a serious expression, setting aside her earlier sulking.

It was a time when spirit beasts were becoming increasingly rare. She probably didn’t want to miss this chance, knowing she might never get another.

“At this rate, if spirit beasts disappear, spirit herbs may be next.”

“Hah. I never considered that... but if so, that would cause serious issues in alchemy.”

“And if spirit herbs vanish, perhaps martial artists will be next.”

“That’s going too far. Spirit beasts are rare, but they still exist. And many herbs can now be artificially cultivated. Martial artists won’t disappear.”

“Well, whatever the case, it’s far in the future—long after we’re dead. Nothing to worry about now.”

With a shrug, we wrapped up the conversation and returned to our rooms to prepare.

After gathering the necessary supplies, we followed the guide assigned by the Ice Palace Lord and began walking across the snowfields.

White, white everywhere. The monotony was exhausting. I let out a long sigh.

“In a place like this, I see why you need a guide. How do you even navigate here?”

“We use the terrain. Though it all looks the same up close, distant features have subtle distinctions.”

“Can’t say I notice them.”

“That’s something only experience can teach. If the Blood Flame Sword Demon lived here for thirty years, he’d pick it up naturally too.”

“True. The locals must have their own methods. What else do you use?”

“During the day, we follow the sun’s path. At night, constellations. But honestly, we mostly rely on markers we’ve left.”

He pointed to a strip of red cloth sticking out from the snow.

I didn’t know what it signified, but I could guess it was a signal of some kind.

While answering my questions, the guide kept his eyes fixed ahead. Eventually, he came to a sudden stop.

It had only been a little over an hour since we left the Ice Palace.

“Please look over there.”

“I don’t see anything.”

He pointed into the distance, but all I saw was swirling snow whipped by the wind—no different from the terrain we’d been walking through.

But after a few moments, the wind began to die down, and the snow settled.

Only then did I finally see what he was pointing at.

“...You’ve got to be kidding.”

Imprints of fists and palm strikes were engraved in the snow, big and small. And beside them—something massive and winding, ignoring all sense of scale.

The martial marks were impressive, but the enormous serpentine trace beside them defied description.

It didn’t feel like the mark of a living creature, but more like a natural phenomenon—like gazing upon a deep canyon or a sheer cliff.

It had to be the trace left by the leader of the Azure Cold Serpents, a Flowering Stage spirit beast.

“What is that...?”

Even Tang Sowol, who had been gauging the distance for the detox, muttered blankly with her mouth agape.

The guide replied in a bitter voice.

“That’s the aftermath of the former Palace Lord’s battle with the Azure Cold Serpent horde.”

“But how can it still remain, with all the snowfall here?”

“After that battle, this area began experiencing frequent blizzards. Sometimes, the marks are completely buried... but at other times, like now, the wind blows the snow away and reveals them again.”

“Then where’s the serpent’s den? Is it nearby?”

“Over there.”

He pointed to a massive crack in the ground, far in the distance.

“No way...”

“Yes. Unless they’ve moved dens, they should still be hiding in that crevice.”

“Wow...”

Despite the sound, Tang Sowol’s eyes weren’t smiling as she turned to look at me.

“Young Master Cheon.”

“What’s wrong?”

“How... exactly are we supposed to poison that...?”

Yeah...

I’d kind of like to know that too.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Episode 210. A Poison That Poisons Even a Serpent (2)

"Young Master Cheon."

"What is it?"

"How exactly are we supposed to poison... that?"

Even if you ask me, I wouldn't know.

I've stuck close to Tang Sowol both before and after my regression, so I've picked up some basic knowledge about poison arts. But it's just that—basic. I don't possess anything near her level of expertise.

Well, she probably didn't expect me to actually answer, anyway.

I lightly patted Tang Sowol's shoulder as she let out a deep, frustrated sigh.

"The leader of the Azure Cold Serpents... even I'd say it's closer to a monster than a spirit beast. But we're not fighting it head-on, right? We're just throwing poison and running, so why all the sighing?"

"Phew. Young Master Cheon, how much poison do you think is needed to effectively infect a target like that?"

"Isn't it simple? Dump enough to kill, and it'll die."

"True, using a large amount would definitely cause poisoning. But then we'd have to give up all stealth."

She brushed off the hand I had placed on her shoulder, though she didn't let it go. She idly fiddled with it as she continued speaking.

"There are three primary ways to poison someone: ingestion, inhalation, and direct injection."

"I can guess. And for this case, you're planning to use inhalation, right?"

“Yes. Each method has pros and cons, but stealth is key for this mission. Ideally, poisoning the Azure Cold Serpent’s food would be best...”

“But we don’t know what it hunts or eats, and poisoning it gradually would take too long.”

“Exactly, Young Master Cheon. That’s why, as I told the Ice Palace Lord, I chose inhalation.”

Sprinkling poison into the air so the target breathes it in is the next stealthiest option after poisoning food.

The ideal would be the so-called “Three-None” poisons—colorless, odorless, tasteless. But...

The poison Tang Sowol developed this time doesn’t quite meet those criteria.

Its scent is faint, its taste is intense, and as for color, it’s a deep, thick black.

If we scatter it, it’ll be noticed immediately. Which means we’ve only got one shot at this.

After all, the entire purpose of preparing this poison was to avoid a direct clash with a Flowering Stage spirit beast.

“The problem is that airborne poison doesn’t travel far. It’s fine at close range, but...”

“You mean it won’t reach that fissure.”

“Yes. Maybe if the wind’s favorable, it could just barely make it. But the wind here isn’t exactly on our side.”

The battle between the former Palace Lord and the Azure Cold Serpents seemed to have affected the climate. Strong winds constantly tore through the area ahead.

Sometimes it escalated to full-blown blizzards, so even if she infused the poison with inner energy, it would be difficult to deliver it properly.

And getting closer would likely trip the senses of the Azure Cold Serpent’s leader.

As for finding another good vantage point, the terrain had been flattened by the prior battle, leaving no high ground.

“Even if we somehow manage to reach it with the poison mist... that brings us back to the original issue.”

“How much poison is needed to be effective, right?”

“Yes. It typically depends on the target’s size, constitution, and internal energy.”

“Constitution should actually work in our favor. We studied its corpse to create a poison specifically tailored for it. But the other factors...”

“With that size, and the kind of energy that influences the weather—even if just in a small area—a moderate amount won’t cut it.”

“So what’s the plan, then?”

“Hm...”

Even now, she pressed into my palm, comparing her hand to mine as if measuring something, absentmindedly fidgeting.

Soon, she let out a deep sigh.

“No choice, then. Better to abandon stealth than risk ineffective poisoning.”

“Abandon stealth?”

“Instead of using diluted powder or poison mist, I’ll have to pour the raw, concentrated liquid directly into the fissure. In large quantities, of course.”

“So we’d have to get right up to the edge of that cave?”

“Not quite inside. If we’re close enough, I can control the poison directly. Just getting to the edge of the fissure should be enough.”

“That’s still dangerous.”

This serpent held a grudge so deep it trained in solitude for centuries to avenge its parents. There's no way it would ignore Tang Sowol after she invaded its domain and poisoned it.

If we're unlucky, we might have to fight it at least once.

"As you previously said, Young Master Cheon, we won't need to fight to the death—but we might need to injure it severely to make it retreat."

Her voice sounded guilty.

I smirked, gave her hand a firm squeeze, then let go.

"No worries. We've got two Flowering Stage experts here. Right, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?"

"Kuhem. I've heard everything. The world never goes as planned. This is a risk worth taking. And there's plenty to gain."

The former Ice Palace Lord, Bingcheon Divine Monarch, was one of the strongest among Flowering Stage martial artists.

Even he fought the Azure Cold Serpent horde with his retainers and didn't come out victorious.

The leader of the serpents was likely too much for me to face alone.

But if Seo Mun-Hwarin is with me, and it's poisoned by Tang Sowol's toxin?

It's doable.

And as she said, the reward for this mission—the remaining half of the payment—is enormous: Ice Palace secret arts and more spirit elixirs than one person could use.

They're all related to cold energy, so their use is limited, but...

Considering Seol Lihyang's talent and the ceiling she's hit in Central Plains cultivation, the value is tremendous.

“Well then, let's do it.”

“Fufu. Sowol, just trust in me and Cheon!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin lightly thumped her chest and lifted her chin.

That confident display softened the tension in Tang Sowol’s expression.

“Understood. If I can’t trust the two of you, who else could I trust?”

“Uh... what about me?”

Seol Lihyang carefully chimed in at Tang Sowol’s gentle tone.

“What should I do, Sister Tang?”

“Hmm... Right. Lihyang...”

After a moment’s thought, Tang Sowol nodded.

“Cheer for us.”

“...Okay.”

As a Peak Stage martial artist, she was the weakest of us. The only thing she could contribute right now was moral support.

After laying out our plan, Tang Sowol reported everything to the Ice Palace Lord and began preparing the poison in earnest.

Since her body already remembered the recipe, she didn't need anything special. She simply ate well, rested, and steadily built up the toxin by expending her internal energy.

Meanwhile, Seo Mun-Hwarin and I requested information from the Ice Palace about a potential confrontation with the Azure Cold Serpent.

The former Palace Lord discovered the serpent horde only about a decade ago. Though Bingcheon Divine Monarch died during the subjugation attempt, surely not everyone involved has passed away.

So we asked to meet anyone who had fought the serpents—or see any relevant records.

“...Why are you the one showing up, Bing Yerin?”

“Because I’m the most qualified person here.”

Bing Yerin swept back her bluish hair as she spoke. I stared at her expectantly, waiting for further explanation.

Not just me—Seo Mun-Hwarin and Seol Lihyang also turned to look at her. With a troubled expression, she raised both hands.

“Please don’t give me those looks. I really am the most suitable person. And my confinement period is nearly over, anyway.”

“You’ve probably never even seen the Azure Cold Serpent.”

“True. But I know the most about the leader. Remember—my grandfather was Bingcheon Divine Monarch.”

“Oh.”

Right. Bing Yerin was his granddaughter.

Maybe her parents forced her to become a shrine maiden because they couldn't let go of the glory their family had during his time.

Shrine maidens themselves enjoy great authority during their lives, but families that produce them are also rewarded with status and prestige.

As I nodded inwardly, Bing Yerin spoke again in a calm tone.

“Ordinary Azure Cold Serpents won't pose a threat to the Blood Flame Sword Demon or Lady Seo Mun. What you're really after is information on the leader, right?”

“That's right. But even if you're his granddaughter, you wouldn't know more than those who actually fought it.”

“Not necessarily. My grandfather didn't want pointless deaths, so he had his retainers fight the younger serpents and faced the leader alone.”

“And you... heard about it directly from him?”

“I was something of a favorite grandchild, so yes.”

She shrugged slightly, but her expression quickly turned serious.

“My grandfather called it the Azure Ice Flood Dragon.”

“Flood dragon? Are you saying it’s a true dragon?”

Seo Mun-Hwarin widened her eyes.

Bing Yerin shook her head.

“No. It’s definitely a serpent-type spirit beast. But it was too strong to be called just a snake. So he gave it that new name.”

“Well, just seeing the traces it left was overwhelming. That name fits. But why doesn’t anyone else call it that?”

“My grandfather was one of the strongest Ice Palace Lords in history. And yet, even he couldn’t defeat the Azure Ice Flood Dragon. If word got out that such a beast was threatening the palace, it could’ve crushed morale.”

“So he kept it secret to prevent demoralizing people, especially when the palace was already struggling to maintain strength at the Sub-Perfection level.”

“Exactly. There was also a succession issue at the time.”

“Now that you mention it, the current Ice Palace Lord ascended with widespread approval. I guess the competition used to be more intense?”

“Hmm, it was intense, yes—but more accurately, it wasn’t a battle of succession... it was a romantic feud.”

A romantic feud? Why are we talking about this now?

“Well, you see...”

According to Bing Yerin, at first, the competition was the usual brutal affair. No one stood out in particular—they were all of similar martial level.

But the current Ice Palace Lord thought it was foolish to waste energy on such infighting with the palace's future already uncertain.

So instead of killing or exiling anyone, he sought a more peaceful solution.

“...Which was seducing every single other heir candidate.”

“You're kidding.”

It's common knowledge that women are better at handling yin-based martial arts, so most heir candidates were women. The only male candidate was the current Ice Palace Lord, and he decided to charm all of them.

As absurd as it sounds... it actually worked. He even married them all in political alliances.

With overwhelming support, his rise to the position of Ice Palace Lord was inevitable.

“Even Grandfather was speechless.”

“Anyone would be.”

One moment, they were at each other’s throats over succession. The next, they were all one big family. Of course people were baffled.

“...Anyway, I digress. Grandfather considered the leader of the serpents extremely dangerous. And he was right.”

“You’re not just going to leave it at ‘it’s really strong,’ right? I want details.”

“I’ll tell you everything. Don’t rush. First, there were three things that made Grandfather struggle against the Azure Ice Flood Dragon.”

“Three...?”

That number made me feel... a little uneasy.