

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

chapter 211-220

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“There were three things that made Grandfather struggle when facing the Azure Cold Serpent.”

“Three??”

In battle, even a single variable can overturn victory or defeat. But three?

If there's one thing I can say with certainty now that I've reached the Flowering Stage, it's that a martial artist at this stage has more things they can do than things they cannot.

And the Heavenly Ice Divine Lord is among the most exceptional of this era's top masters.

If he said it was troublesome, then it really was troublesome. That must mean the Azure Cold Serpent isn't just some big snake.

As I suppressed the unease rising within me, Bing Yerin continued her explanation.

"The first is its size. It's so enormous that even if you land a proper hit, it's difficult for the wound to become fatal."

"But wouldn't it work if you stabbed a vital point?"

"Do you know where a snake's vital points are?"

"...Oh."

Martial artists, by nature, fight people. Martial techniques are designed to combat people.

I know the pressure points that make a person cough up blood with just a light touch—but a snake's blood channels? No clue.

Let alone vital points. At best, I know that cutting off its head might kill it. But even then, it probably wouldn't die right away.

I once caught and ate a snake when I was starving.

I remember that even after cutting off its head with a sickle, its mouth and body continued to move separately for quite a while. It was grotesque.

“Looks like you understood. According to my grandfather’s words, it felt as hopeless as trying to kill a massive mansion with a single needle.”

“Yeah. Just imagining it, I can’t think of any good method besides cutting off its head or slicing through the inside of its skull. If it’s that big, who knows how many times I’d have to swing my sword... Senior Seorin, would my Inner Weight Technique work?”

“Hmm. If anything, I’d rather smash it with brute force. I don’t do well with soft techniques like the Inner Weight Technique.”

The person who looked the most soft among us began fidgeting her fingers with a serious expression. As if measuring something.

“If I concentrate all my strength into one point, no matter what stands in my way, I can break it. But in that case, it’ll probably only penetrate as deep as my arm. Like you said, who knows how many swings it’ll take to crack that skull.”

“You’d probably need to swing far more than you two are imagining. Because of another factor my grandfather mentioned.”

“What’s the second one?”

Bing Yerin responded calmly to Seorin’s question. I was already starting to feel overwhelmed.

The first problem alone was something that even an absolute master like the Heavenly Ice Divine Lord found troublesome. And now there's another issue of equal weight?

Bing Yerin gently extended her arm, palm facing the sky. Then, a flow of internal energy followed.

Woong—

A bluish aura enveloped her hand and slowly began to rotate around it.

Too delicate and refined to call it ordinary fist energy.

Though I hadn't trained it myself, I'd studied the North Sea Ice Palace's martial arts alongside Seol Lihyang, so I understood.

That slow rotation of internal energy could, when needed, spiral into a vortex that infiltrates the opponent's body and shreds their blood channels.

And if those shattered channels freeze afterward, most opponents would be finished.

It was a more sophisticated form of Seol Lihyang's technique, which injects cold energy into an opponent's body.

But I didn't understand why she was suddenly showing us this. Surely it wasn't just to show off in front of me or Seorin?

My confusion lasted only a moment. Soon after, Bing Yerin casually clenched her fist, dispersing the gathered energy as she spoke.

"The Azure-White Cold Serpent, like most spirit beasts, instinctively knows how to wield its own energy. At most, it can choose whether to release it or not."

“You mean the Azure Cold Serpent is different?”

“Yes. It may not be as refined as human martial arts, but it's so skilled with cold energy that it's hard to believe it's just a beast.”

According to her continued explanation, the Azure Cold Serpent could not only release cold energy in all directions, it could concentrate it in specific directions with varying intensities.

Fitting for a beast of the Flowering Stage level. Naturally, the scale of the energy it could wield would be tremendous.

In short, it could unleash a blizzard of cold energy in its vicinity at will.

Now I see why it was named a flood dragon. It's far too powerful to be dismissed as mere snake trickery.

“Still, if it's just a snowstorm, that wouldn't be a serious issue for someone like me or you.”

Seorin wasn't wrong. The ability to create such a storm is certainly impressive, but martial artists at the Flowering Stage can do similar feats.

Bringing down a massive cliff in one strike, countering a waterfall and sending it soaring back into the sky...

Or like Seorin did before, smashing through a landslide large enough to obliterate an entire village.

Granted, all those examples involve destruction, but the point remains—we can create events bordering on natural disasters if we go all-out.

But what Bing Yerin said next once again surpassed our expectations.

“You’re right. Especially since my grandfather trained in the Bingbaek Divine Art, the pinnacle of yin-based techniques. The cold storm wasn’t much of a problem for him... until the Azure Cold Serpent started using it differently.”

“Differently how?”

“Instead of using it to attack, it used the cold to protect itself, forcibly concentrating it around its body. As a result, a thick layer of ice formed on top of its already tough scales.”

“An armor of energy?”

“More like something far more solid. The real problem is that its already massive body became even tougher.”

At this point, I couldn't help but let out a dry laugh. No wonder the Heavenly Ice Divine Lord couldn't defeat it even after going all out in the North Sea.

It's tough, massive, and has the life force of a snake.

It's likely that a martial artist's internal energy would run out faster than they could deal a fatal blow.

“I get it now. That thing's not a normal opponent. Still, I didn't expect it to be this much. Anyway, tell me the final troublesome trait?”

“The last one's simple. The Azure Cold Serpent is very intelligent.”

“Well, it's a spirit beast, so that's expected. But does that really count as troublesome?”

“My grandfather said that most tricks don’t work on it. In fact, he almost got deceived by it a few times. He said it’s less like a clever beast and more like a cunning human.”

At Bing Yerin’s words, Seorin let out a deep sigh.

“Haaah. The reason humans can hunt beasts stronger than themselves is because their minds surpass those of animals. If this thing kept its beastly strengths but overcame its weaknesses, it truly is troublesome.”

“Still, it’s not all bad. I’ve sliced off the heads of some clever ones before. I know how to deal with them.”

“...You really say scary things so casually sometimes.”

“Oh, and those weren’t people who tried to make up for their shortcomings with tricks. They were clearly ahead of me. They got cocky, and that arrogance led to their deaths.”

“That’s not what I meant to say... Never mind. Whether it’s me or you, we’re both human butchers.”

“...???”

I don't know why that suddenly came up, but honestly, all martial artists are butchers of men in some sense.

What matters is why they kill—whether it's for justice or for selfish desires.

If it's to uphold what's right and protect others, it's the righteous path.

If it's for greed and twisted desires, then it's the demonic path.

What's important is that in both cases, the sword is wielded against people. And swords are tools for killing.

I wanted to voice these thoughts right away...

But I stopped myself when I saw Seol Lihyang shaking her head like she expected it, and Bing Yerin trembling with a pale face.

Everyone's overreacting.

Grumbling silently to myself, I quickly regained focus. I can't just sit around lamenting. I'm not planning to rot away in the North Sea Ice Palace forever.

"Well. Anyway, thanks for telling me, Bing Yerin. I'll need to approach this from a very different angle than I would when fighting people."

"If... if it was helpful, then I'm glad. This matter affects the future of the Ice Palace. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Then there's one thing I'd like to ask already."

"Already??"

Bing Yerin blinked wide-eyed, not expecting me to ask so soon. I shrugged and continued.

"Can you gather people who've trained in energy techniques, or something similar? I need to get a feel through sparring."

"Ah, um, the thing is..."

“Don’t worry. I say sparring, but I only plan to defend.”

The second troublesome aspect Bing Yerin mentioned—freely emitting massive cold energy, and at times using it like armor.

That would be difficult for most martial artists to deal with, but luckily, I have a clear countermeasure.

A martial artist of the Flowering Stage can project their Heartscape into their martial techniques. It’s a point of arrival.

That allows them to wield one ability unique to themselves, separate from the martial arts they’ve learned.

For example, Seorin’s punches are overwhelmingly strong—strong enough to break through anything in front of her.

Before my regression, Tang Sowol’s poison had become something that couldn’t be expelled by internal energy or medicine—only by sheer willpower.

The twin spears of the Black Lotus Sect Master traced incomprehensible paths to pierce any target she set her eyes on.

As for me, I can cut what shouldn't be cut, and strike places my sword shouldn't be able to reach.

That's the manifestation of a willpower formed from the regret of failing to protect anything, and the resolve to never lose anything again.

Thanks to that, I can cut slightly beyond my sword's physical range, and even slice through intangible things like killing intent or internal energy.

So even if the Azure Cold Serpent skillfully wraps its body in cold energy as new scales, I should be able to cut it like always.

Of course, I'll need practice.

That's why I was trying to ask Bing Yerin to find someone to help... but her reaction wasn't encouraging.

"Is there some problem?"

“...Yes. Actually, there’s no one who meets the conditions you mentioned.”

“I know the North Sea Ice Palace prefers martial arts that coat the hands with energy and strike directly... but no one?”

“There are a few martial arts like that. But no one has actually learned them.”

“...???”

I blinked, confused—until Bing Yerin’s next words made everything click.

“To properly handle energy-based techniques, you need to be at least at the Sub-Perfection level.”

“Ah...”

There aren’t many martial artists of that level left in the declining Ice Palace.

And none of them have learned such techniques.

No wonder the Glacial True Qi ended up as a technique no one could master.

As the mood grew solemn, Seol Lihyang poked her head in.

“Cheon Hwi.”

“Mn?”

“I’m good at that kind of thing.”

“...Ah...”

Now that I think of it, there’s Seol Lihyang. It’s not pure energy techniques—she uses a unique blend with sound—but it should be good enough for practice.

“Will you help?”

“I couldn’t do anything but cheer anyway, so I’d be glad to help.”

...There was a bit of sting in her tone.

Guess she was feeling a little left out.

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After hearing the details about the Azure Cold Serpent from Bing Yerin, Seorin and I focused on training suitable for facing it.

Seorin studied how to land effective punches on such a massive serpent, while I, with Seol Lihyang’s help, practiced cutting through cold energy itself.

About ten days passed like that. Then, just around the time when we’d gotten used to only seeing her at meals or before bed, Tang Sowol appeared—carrying a wooden barrel as large as her body.

Though she must've been eating and sleeping well, her face had become noticeably haggard. I approached, worried, but Tang Sowol simply stood tall with a proud smile, completely unaware of my concern.

“Please, praise me now, Brother Cheon!”

“You gathered all the poison? You've worked hard. Then today... No, take two full days to rest. You don't look well.”

“Fufu. I didn't just gather it. Since we only have one shot, I condensed it as much as possible to make sure it'll inflict a proper poisoning.”

Before she could finish her confident statement, Tang Sowol collapsed on the spot.

“Oops.”

I quickly stepped in to catch her before she hit the ground.

Her eyes were gently closed, her breathing was steady, and she instinctively nestled into my chest.

“So she's just asleep.”

This was practically unconsciousness, but still—after a good sleep, she'd be fine.

I let out a sigh of relief... but it didn't last long. A sudden, unpleasant sensation made my eyes widen.

“This is...!”

The poison pouch in Tang Sowol's body felt significantly weaker than usual.

Thankfully, it turned out she was merely exhausted. After sleeping through the entire day, Tang Sowol woke up feeling much better.

As soon as she came to her senses, she grabbed the barrel full of poison and went straight to the Ice Palace Lord.

Having heard that she'd collapsed for a day, the Ice Palace Lord wore a concerned expression as he greeted her—though he also glanced at me, subtly checking my reaction.

“Is your body alright now?”

“Yes. It’s my first time extracting this much poison, so I may have overdone it a little. But I’m fine now.”

“That’s good to hear. I did hear, however, that the poison is a bit different than before...”

“Hm. The poison itself hasn’t changed. I just concentrated it.”

“You mean this much is the concentrated amount?”

The Ice Palace Lord looked at the large wooden barrel beside us with a somewhat daunted expression.

Tang Sowol nodded with a soft sigh.

“It was far larger and held far more energy than I had anticipated. So I prepared a proportionate amount of poison... but it ended up being too much.”

“How much did you extract at first?”

“Enough to fill two and a half of these barrels. I may be confident in my poison arts, but I can’t freely handle that much poison all at once.”

So, she had repeatedly condensed the poison until it was an amount she could manage.

“I didn’t expect you to go that far. I sincerely thank you.”

“Fufu. If I weren’t going to do it, I wouldn’t have started in the first place. But since I did, I had to do it right. And more than anything, this is about poison. Even if I’m in the North Sea and not the Central Plains, I can’t be careless as a member of the Tang Clan.”

Her lips curled into a confident smile, her face full of pride.

She may have overexerted herself, but since she seemed satisfied, I figured it was fine.

Judging by the steadier energy I felt from her, she had made some personal progress as well.

Even repetitive effort can become a new experience when pushed to the limit.

As I nodded silently to myself, the Ice Palace Lord asked with a tone of admiration.

“The Tang Clan’s reputation is clearly no exaggeration. A poison of this caliber must have a name. Would you be willing to share it?”

“Hm. I was so focused on creating it, I never got around to naming it.”

Tang Sowol tapped her chin thoughtfully, then looked at me with a slightly troubled expression.

“Brother Cheon, do you have any good name ideas?”

“Well, when in doubt, go with something that reflects its purpose. This poison wasn’t made to kill people, but a snake...”

After organizing my thoughts, I spoke.

“How about Python Poison?”

“You chose python instead of snake? Makes sense. That thing is big enough to be called a python, after all.”

Tang Sowol nodded, satisfied. The Ice Palace Lord, on the other hand, gave a wry smile, clearly realizing from my response that I had heard about the Azure Cold Serpent from Bing Yerin.

It wasn't as if they'd tried to keep it from me—more likely, it was simply something they couldn't mention in front of other North Sea Ice Palace warriors. This was enough.

They had even shown me the location of the Azure Cold Serpent and didn't stop Bing Yerin from explaining things, either.

Once the poison was named, Seorin, who had been quiet the entire time, suddenly spoke with an unusually serious expression.

“That means all preparations are complete. Then, when do we carry out the plan?”

“I just have to release the poison and retreat, so I’m ready any time. What about you, Brother Cheon and Sister Seorin?”

“I was the one who brought this up, so I’m ready as well.”

“Same here.”

Thanks to Seol Lihyang’s help, I’d trained to cut through cold energy and had a decent feel for it now.

Spending a few more days practicing wouldn’t make much of a difference. What I need now is focused effort, not more time.

“In that case, how about going tomorrow instead of dragging this out?”

Just as Seorin and I were about to agree with Tang Sowol, the Ice Palace Lord cut in a step faster.

“We’d be relieved to act sooner, of course. But how about waiting one more day and going the day after tomorrow?”

“Is there a reason to wait?”

“As you saw for yourself, the area around the Azure-White Cold Serpent’s nest is prone to sudden snowstorms, regardless of the weather. Based on our observations, it should continue snowing until tomorrow, but it’ll likely clear up the day after.”

“Hmm. If that’s the case, waiting a day seems wise.”

No matter how good one’s senses are, eyesight is still useful. It shouldn't be overly relied on, but it can’t be ignored either.

Especially for us, who are still unfamiliar with the terrain and climate of the North Sea, clear weather is far better than storms.

“Then it’s settled. Two days from now.”

Tang Sowol and Seorin nodded silently at my words. The date was set.

After this mission, I’m locking myself away for a while. Thanks to completing Heat-and-Cold Resistance Art, the cold no longer affects me—but still, I’m starting to miss Sichuan’s warm weather.

Two days later.

We returned to the scene of the massive battle we had visited before.

The only differences this time: Tang Sowol carried a large barrel on her back, and Seol Lihyang had stayed behind at the Ice Palace.

“Just as the Ice Palace Lord said, the weather’s clear.”

“It is. Are you ready?”

“Of course. Now I just need Brother Cheon to carry me.”

Tang Sowol spread her arms playfully with a grin—but the slight stiffness around her eyes betrayed her tension.

I shrugged, trying to sound lighthearted.

“If we follow the plan, nothing will go wrong. Seorin, I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me.”

She patted her flat chest with pride—a strangely reassuring gesture.

After a small nod, I crouched down, and Tang Sowol climbed onto my back. The barrel of poison was also strapped on, making it quite heavy.

With her on my back, I began moving using footwork—this time not focused on speed but on concealing our presence.

Beasts, by nature, have keener senses than humans and are especially sensitive to intrusions into their territory.

Whether the same holds for spirit beasts or not, being cautious can’t hurt.

Even from afar, the site of the battle had seemed massive. Up close, it was overwhelming.

With some exaggeration, the width of the cracks rivaled the size of an average manor hall.

I arrived with a mix of awe and dread. Peering down, I saw the ground split open like a deep canyon. At the center, oddly enough, was a pit shaped like the mouth of a pouch.

I couldn't tell whether the terrain had formed like that by coincidence or whether the Azure Cold Serpent had dug it itself.

One thing was certain: beyond that deep darkness, I occasionally glimpsed massive movements slithering within.

The Azure Cold Serpent and its offspring—the Azure-White Cold Serpents—must be gathered inside.

Some snake species are known to live entangled in groups... Could spirit beasts be the same?

I pushed down the curiosity and whispered to Tang Sowol.

“Let’s begin.”

“Yes. Please wait just a moment.”

Tang Sowol fidgeted as she untied the barrel on her back and hurled it over the edge of the chasm. Then—

“Huup!”

Her eyes sharpened as she stretched her hand toward the falling barrel. It suddenly stopped midair.

Thanks to the Poison Spirit Constitution, Tang Sowol could freely control poison she had extracted from her own body. She used this ability to hold the Python Poison in place.

Controlling this much poison from such a distance wasn’t easy. A bead of sweat ran down her forehead.

Naturally, her focus wavered, and her energy spread outward in all directions.

Maybe it was the poison-infused energy mixed in. Or maybe the beast's instincts sensed danger.

The faint movement we had seen earlier grew violent—energy from the Azure Cold Serpent surged rapidly.

Just moments ago, it had been one with the surrounding nature, completely undetectable. But not anymore.

A bone-chilling sensation. Unfamiliar, but the threat it exuded struck me on a primal level—equal to or beyond my own. So this is what a Flowering Stage spirit beast feels like.

In the darkness of the crevice, a pair of bright yellow eyes suddenly glinted. But before the beast could fully rise, Tang Sowol was faster.

Puuk!

The poison burst out, shattering the barrel as it spread in every direction.

But it didn't scatter randomly—it spread with precise range, shape, and control.

Drip, drip.

Like rainfall, poison dripped from Tang Sowol's fingertips.

A rainstorm that fell only into the pit below.

The Azure Cold Serpent, just about to lift its head to emerge, was struck by the poison rain.

—Shhhiiiiik!

With a sharp, whistling shriek like wind escaping through cracks, it began thrashing in pain.

Boom! Kkwaaang!

Just its twisting body shook the earth. Part of the crevice collapsed, spilling out boulders.

It was truly a spectacle—but unfortunately, we didn't have time to enjoy it.

“Hold tight!”

“I already am!”

Tang Sowol, having pushed herself to the limit to control the poison, had entered a brief state of exhaustion. This was exactly why I carried her in advance.

I felt her weakened arms wrap around my neck—and only then did I release the restrained flow of my internal energy all at once.

I stomped the ground toward the direction we came from. The full-force deployment of Thunderclap Steps created a thunderous boom as it accelerated explosively.

Kuuung!

—Shaaahhh!

From beyond the crevice, the massive jaws of the serpent burst forth.

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Kuuung!

—Shaaaah!

From beyond the crevice, the gaping maw of a massive serpent emerged.

Scales patterned in a mix of white and blue—a blend reminiscent of the frozen lakes of the North Sea. However, one thing disrupted that harmony: the Python Poison darkening the top of its head.

—Shhhiiiiik!

Boom! Kkwaang! Boom!

The Azure Cold Serpent, even after raising its head above the crevice, couldn't regain its senses.

Though a violent storm of cold energy began swirling around it, the flow was erratic—attempting to concentrate in one place, then scattering again.

Just as Bing Yerin had said, it knew how to use cold energy, but it seemed unable to control it properly.

The Python Poison had clearly taken effect.

“Damn, it's huge.”

“Eek! Don't look back, just run! Hurry!”

I had only glanced over my shoulder, yet Tang Sowol began slapping my back in panic. Of course, even as she yelled, she herself was also looking back.

I understood. Being helpless on someone's back, watching a creature that size thrash about—it would make anyone panic. Still...

“My feet haven't stopped, so don't rush me.”

I was already unleashing my footwork at full force, pushing my internal energy to the limit of what my meridians could endure. I was even incorporating my Willpower—though I wasn't yet fully accustomed to using it in footwork.

As a result, the ground shattered under every step I took with a booming roar. But all of it was drowned out by the monstrous thrashing of the Azure Cold Serpent behind us.

Then suddenly—the cacophony ceased. And Tang Sowol cried out, voice tense.

“Brother Cheon! It's locked onto us!”

“I know.”

The chaotic aura of the Azure Cold Serpent had begun to settle. More importantly, I could now feel its killing intent, focused directly at us.

As I roused my aura to shield Tang Sowol from behind—

—Shaaaaah!

The Azure Cold Serpent opened its jaws wide and surged toward us in a straight line.

Its vertically slit pupils gleamed as it slithered forward with frightening speed. Its massive body gave it such momentum that each lurch closed the gap we had opened.

I was carrying Tang Sowol, and although Thunderclap Steps allowed for explosive acceleration, its top speed was average at best.

But even considering that—it was too fast.

Puzzled, I looked more closely—and immediately understood.

A creature of that size and weight should be grinding the earth beneath it as it moved. But the Flood Dragon's scales glided over the ground as if it were sliding on ice.

That was one of the characteristics of the North Sea Ice Palace's footwork—I had seen it several times while training with Seol Lihyang.

They had developed it because they often fought on slippery ice.

“So when they said it was clever, they weren’t kidding.”

It must have picked it up while fighting the previous Ice Palace Lord.

Of course, it wasn’t true footwork. A snake has no feet, after all.

But it had learned how to move its body smoothly over ice-covered terrain—just from observation, not training. That alone was remarkable.

Given its size and the terrain, it made sense that it could move even faster than I could.

“Is now really the time to be impressed, Brother Cheon?! It’s already close enough to strike!”

“Don’t worry. Snakes don’t have hands.”

“Is that really what you want to say right now?! We’re not even at the target location yet—!”

Trailing off, Tang Sowol swung her arm with a resolute look. The Python Poison, split into several streams like hidden weapons, lashed toward the Azure Cold Serpent.

But—

—**Shhhhiik!**

It faltered slightly, but having already been doused in the poison once, perhaps its resistance had kicked in. It only roared in fury and bared its fangs.

Its mouth was large enough to swallow a building whole, and its fangs glinted like massive pillars rather than teeth.

Even if it wasn’t venomous, being bitten or swallowed by that thing meant certain death.

But I had expected this.

“Huup!”

Kuuung!

Without pausing, I planted my foot and redirected all the forward momentum into a rebound.

The recoil was enough to break bones if mistimed. But I redirected the force with a technique akin to Harmonized Redirection.

My body halted unnaturally, like it had been nailed to the spot. The momentum surged upward through my legs, waist, back, and finally my arm—each joint tracing a tight circle.

The instant all the power gathered in my arm, I twisted my torso and swung my sword with all my might—driven by a single thought: to protect the person on my back.

Wooooong!

A vivid form took shape atop the sword as my internal energy and willpower merged.

A pale sword aura surged upward, cleaving beneath the Azure Cold Serpent's jaw.

Puuuck!

The beast had just begun to slam its jaws downward when the strike landed. Its gaping mouth slammed shut as if it had been punched, its head snapping upward.

The wound left under its jaw was far too large to be a typical sword cut.

Because I had cleaved not just its flesh—but the very space beyond my blade's reach.

Roughly three times the length of my sword had been cut through. But still, it wasn't a fatal blow.

At the moment of impact, the creature instinctively channeled energy to its jaw.

Whether due to the Python Poison, or simply poor focus, it hadn't encased its entire body in icy scales like Bing Yerin described. But it could still quickly form a thin protective layer over where my sword would strike.

That wasn't enough to block my blade—especially not one meant to sever energy itself—but it could dull its sharpness slightly.

“Damn thing’s huge and tough.”

Even with a sword aura, the resistance from its scales and hide was intense. When I hit bone, I couldn't fully cut through—it turned into more of a blunt strike than a clean slice.

I had intended to split its jaw entirely. Instead, the impact sent its head flying upward, like it had been uppercut.

To the beast, the wound was probably just a deep scratch.

But with that one strike, I finally understood why even the Ice Heavenly Divine Lord had failed to kill it. Even after being poisoned, it was still this resilient.

But unlike him, I wasn't alone.

The Flood Dragon shook its raised head, and a moment of alertness flickered in its eyes.

Just then—a small silhouette sprinted at incredible speed and launched herself through the air.

Seorin, who had been lying in wait while I lured the beast, stepped onto the air itself and shot forward.

She clenched her fist, crimson-black energy surging around it.

Suspended midair, she struck a straight punch toward the side of the Flood Dragon's head.

KWAANG!

A thunderous crash echoed as the beast's head twisted sharply, slamming into the ground.

THUD!

The ground trembled beneath its collapsed body.

As I set Tang Sowol down, I spoke quickly.

“You should be able to move now. Go ahead.”

“Understood. Please be careful, Brother Cheon.”

“With Senior Seorin here, there’s nothing to worry about.”

With that, I leapt into action, extending my sword aura as far as possible.

The Azure Cold Serpent, dazed by the unexpected blow, couldn’t recover.

Seorin’s destructive power was among the highest of all Flowering Stage martial artists.

She hadn't concentrated her power into a single point—she had spread it wide to deliver a concussive strike.

The result? A huge dent, like something massive had struck the beast's skull.

The thick scales hadn't broken—yet. But it was only a matter of time.

Before it could rise, I swung my sword again.

“Haah!”

What mattered was the will to cut.

My sword aura shone brightly, flashing toward its eye.

—Shhhhiik!

The serpent twisted its head just in time with a sharp hiss. But my strike, longer than the eye could follow, still grazed its scales.

Ssskkuk!

Without giving it time to gather energy, I managed to carve far deeper than before.

I didn't hit its eye, but the long slash beneath it began to bleed profusely.

Strangely, the moment the blood hit the ground, it froze solid.

The sight of its own blood enraged the Flood Dragon. Unstable, yet immense cold energy began to surge once more.

Tuk.

Seorin landed beside the fresh wound with a few air steps. Then—

“Huup!”

Tuung!

Her crimson-black aura-coated fist launched toward the creature's eye—point-blank.

Puuuck!

Her fist slammed into the giant eye, larger than Seorin herself. This time, the concentrated force ripped through its defenses.

Without time to resist, the eye burst—gushing blood like a waterfall.

—SHAAAAAH!

The Azure Cold Serpent thrashed madly, its body contorting in agony.

At the same time, it spewed cold energy recklessly, forming a fog-like haze all around.

Even Seorin couldn't remain within it. She leapt back and landed beside me.

I swung my sword toward the creeping mass of cold energy.

Shrrrkk!

The energy scattered under my blade. Outside of our immediate area, the mist continued to thicken.

Facing blood-splattered Seorin, I said,

“Wipe the blood off, quickly. That stuff’s dangerous.”

“Don’t worry. I saw your strike freezing the blood and prepared accordingly.”

Though her body was coated in blood, it had already half-frozen. With a single shake, it shattered and fell away.

A faint yet solid layer of defensive aura covered her body. She must’ve blocked the splash with her inner defense.

I was quietly impressed as I swung my sword again.

Woosh!

A wide slash this time—not just cutting incoming energy but dispersing the surrounding fog.

My field of vision cleared. The Azure Cold Serpent came into view.

Its mouth drooped with drool from the poison's effect. Deep sword wounds marred its jaw and side, and blood poured endlessly from its burst eye.

We stared each other down, locked in a moment of tense silence.

If we continued, we could probably kill it. But we wouldn't come out unscathed.

Even though the surprise attack succeeded and we destroyed one eye, my wound hadn't been fatal.

If I were struck by its massive body, not even a defensive aura would save me from serious injury.

Perhaps knowing this, the Azure Cold Serpent glared at us with its remaining eye... then abruptly turned and fled.

We watched its retreating figure disappear into the crevice before I finally spoke.

“This much should be enough, right?”

“Mm! With wounds like that, it’ll take quite some time to recover.”

“Never thought I’d have this kind of experience in my life...”

“Same. This was my first time facing a spirit beast of this size.”

“Let’s hope it’s the last.”

I let out a dry laugh and sheathed my sword.

Deep within the crevice, the Azure Cold Serpent writhed in agony, barely suppressing its fury.

When the black liquid had poured over it, the energy in its body went berserk, tearing through its organs in a storm of pain.

It had charged out to kill the source of the pain—but ended up with more wounds and lost an eye.

But at least it was alive. That was enough.

Clearly, those attackers had come from a faraway land. Just bad luck. It would hide, recover, and regain its strength.

But what awaited it in the nest... were the corpses of its offspring, twisted in agony.

The Python Poison. The Flood Dragon didn't know the name, but it immediately realized—the black liquid was what had killed its young.

—Shhhhiik...

A snake cannot cry loudly. Only a long hiss echoed through the serpent's den.

After mourning for a while, the Azure Cold Serpent began swallowing its children's corpses one by one.

To absorb their pain, the remaining poison, their deaths... and their inner cores.

There was nowhere left to run. The dragon knew. The land it could survive in was shrinking day by day.

It had wanted to reclaim its home—but that no longer mattered.

A dull flame began to burn in its remaining eye.

A poison that brings death to serpents.

That poison's name...was Despair.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

After we successfully drove away the Azure Cold Serpent, we returned to the North Sea Ice Palace. Of course, Seorin's endless self-praise came as part of the package.

“Ahem. Your sword was sharp, I admit—but in the end, it was this one who burst that snake's eye and forced it to flee.”

“Yes.”

“Fufu. No need to be upset. It's because this one is exceptional, not because you were lacking.”

“Yes.”

“Still, your use of energy was quite skilled. When your sudden sword slash cut its jaw, I was truly impressed. Of course, this one’s fist was far more effective, but still.”

“...”

“...Are you answering with only ‘yes’ on purpose?”

“Eeit!”

With her cheeks puffed out, Seorin flailed her arms and pounded on my shoulder. For someone who had just knocked down the massive Azure Cold Serpent with a single punch, her attacks were surprisingly dainty.

I let her flail for a bit, then grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her toward me. She stumbled slightly, but quickly regained balance with practiced footwork.

She kept staring at me with a sulky expression, so I let out a deep sigh and spoke.

“I know you did well. Now, show me your wrist.”

“Wh-Why are you so interested in a lady’s wrist all of a sudden?”

“Calling yourself a lady is a bit...”

I ignored her nonsense and examined her arm with a slightly forceful grip.

Just as I thought. Her right hand had turned faintly bluish.

“Sigh. I knew it.”

“What do you mean? Hasn’t this one’s hand always been this fair and lovely?”

“Let’s treat that ‘lovely’ hand before it gets frostbitten.”

While half-listening to Seorin’s boasting, I’d been reviewing the battle with the Azure Cold Serpent in my mind. I remembered clearly how she had smashed its eye.

Seorin had struck from the outside, but the fragments hadn’t exploded inward—they’d burst outward from the inside.

If it had been a normal punch, that wouldn't have happened. She must've realized mid-punch that the eyeball was too large to destroy with mere impact.

"You forced your fist into the Azure Cold Serpent's eye and detonated your energy from within, didn't you?"

"Hik!"

Seorin flinched and hiccuped like someone whose secret had just been exposed.

That creature had so much cold energy in its body that its blood froze instantly upon spilling. She had needed to use her protective energy just to block the backlash from the blood.

But releasing a burst of internal energy inside the creature's body—even with precautions, it was bound to leave an opening.

The frostbite on her hand must've come from that.

She was probably using her own energy to force out the cold, but the Azure Cold Serpent's aura was particularly potent—it wasn't easily expelled.

I held her hand in both of mine and began infusing my energy into hers. She didn't resist as my energy carefully spread inside.

“Ugh.”

Seorin winced and bit her lip. I paused and asked,

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It's just... a little ticklish.”

“Please bear with it.”

I shook my head and focused again. I couldn't purge the cold completely, but I could at least reinforce her internal flow.

Wooong...

My energy burrowed beneath her skin, where the cold energy of the Azure Cold Serpent raged wildly, and Seorin's internal energy tried to suppress it.

I slipped my energy between them and joined the struggle. At that moment, Seorin's energy spread out and enveloped both, working in tandem with mine.

It was only possible because I understood Seorin's martial arts, and she trusted me enough to allow it.

We exchanged a slightly awkward glance. Then Seorin pulled her hand free from my grip.

Her skin was still bluish, but her icy hand had regained some warmth.

Staring at her hand, Seorin smirked and held out her other hand.

“What now?”

“Take it.”

“This one looks fine though.”

“Eii! Just take it already!”

She grabbed my hand somewhat forcefully. With a short sigh, I clasped it, and only then did she show a satisfied expression.

“Let’s walk back to the Ice Palace just like this.”

“Holding hands? Even though that hand is fine?”

“Quiet, just do it.”

“Sure. But once we get there, you should let Seol Lihyang take a look.”

Even if Seorin couldn’t fully resolve it herself, Seol Lihyang might be able to help—as I had.

She nodded, and I took the chance to ask something that had been bothering me.

“There’s one thing I’m curious about.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Fighting a spirit beast is very different from fighting a person. I don’t know if I’ll ever face such a creature again, but just in case, I’d like your advice...”

Seorin looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

“So, your only thought after holding this one’s hand was that?”

“...Was there supposed to be something else?”

“Sigh. Typical you. Fine, speak. What’s been bothering you?”

“When fighting something so much larger than a person, footwork and feints feel meaningless. In the end, all that matters is powerful, sweeping attacks... So what if I tailor my sword techniques to that—broad and forceful? My Heartscape happens to suit that idea.”

“I don’t quite understand from just hearing it. But such attacks will naturally have many openings. And a true master won’t overlook those gaps.”

“What if it’s not a solo fight? What if others buy time while I prepare my strike?”

“Hmm. That’s rare, but... if it works, it wouldn’t be bad. If you land the hit properly, not even a Flowering Stage martial artist could easily withstand it.”

One thing I realized while fighting the Azure Cold Serpent—strangely, the sensation reminded me slightly of fighting the Heavenly Demon.

Of course, the Heavenly Demon didn’t use cold energy, nor was he massive or absurdly tough.

But the pressure of wielding an inhuman power—it was similar.

Especially Heavenly Demon Divine Art. That monstrous energy technique warped the very space around it.

It gave off the same oppressive force as the Azure Cold Serpent's enormous form coiling and writhing.

If there's a common thread between the two... then maybe a strike that worked on the Azure Cold Serpent could work, even partially, against the Heavenly Demon.

That was my serious line of thought—and perhaps sensing that sincerity, Seorin stopped sighing and began pondering with me.

“A technique focused solely on a single, overwhelming strike... Forget practicality—this one finds that idea intriguing.”

“A thrust or a vertical slash would probably work best. Both are optimal for concentrating power into a single point.”

“Yes, you're right. Then what about this—this one once nearly fell to something similar...”

She began recounting a story where she almost died, offering advice based on it.

As we shared ideas and walked, we eventually returned to the North Sea Ice Palace.

Seeing Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang waiting with worried expressions—and holding hands—I couldn't help but chuckle.

But in the end, the mission concluded without issue.

As for the rest...

Just as expected.

To celebrate the successful repelling of the Azure Cold Serpent—and to see us off—the North Sea Ice Palace held a grand banquet.

They say even a ruined noble lives well for three years.

The North Sea Ice Palace hadn't fallen yet, but the banquet felt lavish enough to evoke that saying.

As promised, we received martial arts manuals and elixirs.

I collected every elixir that would benefit Seol Lihyang's level. She could take them gradually with enough time between each dose.

We also took all the martial techniques she deemed necessary after reviewing the Ice Palace's style.

And Bing Yerin... surprisingly, was released from her probation.

She had been prepared to give up her position entirely, but since she had acted for the Ice Palace's sake—and she was the one who brought us—it seemed they chose leniency.

That's what they said, at least. But honestly, it looked more like the Palace Lord just decided to forgive her.

They seemed oddly lenient toward Bing Yerin... but then again, she was the granddaughter of the Ice Heavenly Divine Lord.

That, combined with her titles—North Sea Shrine Maiden and top talent of the post-generation—must have helped.

“Well, we’re leaving tomorrow. Not our problem anymore.”

“You’re so cold. What if Lady Seol changes her mind...?”

“She won’t.”

“That’s a shame. Still, she’s taken every secret of the Ice Palace with her. Wherever she may be, she’s part of us now. If she ever wants to return, she’ll always be welcome.”

“No thanks! You can be the Palace Lord, Bing Yerin!”

“Yes. I just might. After all, someone did give me a little push.”

“...Huh?”

Seol Lihyang blinked, staring between me and Bing Yerin, then flailed her arms in mock protest like she was guarding me.

The sight made us all burst into laughter.

But the joy of the banquet didn't last.

Kuuung!

A massive rumble interrupted the celebration. The ground vibrated beneath us. The sky, once clear if not warm, had turned dark with storm clouds.

Kuuung!

Another tremor. I wasn't the only one who felt it. People looked up from their food, glancing around to find the source.

Kuuung!

The third impact came with the sound of something breaking. Snowflakes began to drift down from the blackened sky.

But this snow carried a familiar energy.

“No way...”

Alarmed, I shot to my feet and leapt out the window.

Far beyond the warmth of the banquet, a wall of the Ice Palace had crumbled. Beyond it, a raging snowstorm approached.

No—within the blizzard, a dark silhouette loomed.

As I stepped deeper into the palace interior, the snowstorm wrapped around my body, then weakened—revealing its source.

A creature as massive as a grand hall. Scales of icy blue and white, like frozen glaciers. One eye burst, scars around its mouth.

I knew immediately.

The Azure Cold Serpent had returned. The very same one we thought had fled to recover.

But this time, it was cloaked in a far more ferocious aura.

Still—its body was clearly not in normal condition.

“What... the hell is this...”

One eye, now bloodshot. Black spots growing across its blue-white scales. A swollen belly, filled with something unknown. And an aura so massive it wounded even itself.

It was textbook Deviation—a sign that something had gone horribly wrong.

“This is insane.”

I burned away the last traces of drunkenness with internal energy—and reached for my sword.

Srrng.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

The Azure Cold Serpent, which was thought to have retreated, left its nest and directly invaded the North Sea Ice Palace.

“This is insane.”

Though he hadn’t drunk much, the faint intoxication he had felt quickly evaporated as he dispelled it with his internal energy. First, he drew his sword.

Sreung—

The sound of a sword being drawn snapped the onlookers out of their daze. They had been staring blankly at the massive figure of the Azure Cold Serpent, which had smashed through the fortress wall. And then—

“Kyaaahhh!”

“What is that monster?! Everyone prepare to fight... No, run! We can’t win against that thing!”

Those unfamiliar with the Azure Cold Serpent screamed in confusion and fear. Some were frozen in place, others fled immediately, and a few ran to protect their families. But—

Very few actually grasped the situation. And those few ran directly toward the area where my group was.

Just like the Ice Palace Lord and Bing Yerin who were now in front of me.

“Didn’t you say the Azure Cold Serpent had been defeated?! What is going on... No, looking closer, its condition definitely doesn’t look normal.”

“Do you have any idea what could have happened?”

At their urgent questioning, Seo Mun-Hwarin, standing beside us, drew up her internal energy with her still-unhealed fist and replied.

“I’m not sure. I definitely inflicted serious wounds on it, yet... it seems even stronger than before, though unstable.”

“Does the reason even matter right now, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin? What matters is that thing has lost half its sanity and is rampaging. And unlike last time, we don’t just need to drive it off, we need to kill it completely.”

“Indeed. In the end, there’s only one thing we can do.”

Seo Mun-Hwarin nodded and looked toward the Ice Palace Lord.

“I and Hwi-da will completely cut off its breath. In the meantime, evacuate the others. Since everyone here has learned martial arts, even if the buildings are destroyed, we can minimize casualties.”

“Understood. Is there anything else you need?”

“No. If anything, just be ready to leave this land if it comes to that.”

“ ... ”

The Ice Palace Lord spoke as if she had no intention of ever abandoning this land.

Of course. After all, the root cause of this entire disaster was that the martial artists of the North Sea Ice Palace chose to protect their homeland rather than abandon it.

Conversely, the Azure Cold Serpent also sought to reclaim this place—once its home and the site of its parents' death.

Some may leave the North Sea after witnessing the Azure Cold Serpent in person... but not everyone would. Some would stay behind.

I nodded inwardly, then pushed Seol Lihyang and Tang Sowol toward Bing Yerin.

“You two should get out of here as well. If it gets too dangerous, head to Sichuan ahead of us.”

“Don't spout nonsense. Just come back alive.”

“Exactly! Without you, Cheon Hwi, we're not going anywhere. So just remember that!”

“Heh...”

I didn't expect to be scolded so firmly for saying nonsense. With a short sigh, I nodded.

“Then there's no helping it. Let's do what we must. Let's go, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin.”

“Mn, understood.”

Leaving behind the worried gazes of Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang, we rushed toward the rampaging Azure Cold Serpent.

We arrived quickly using light footwork. Most of the surrounding buildings were already destroyed, and many had died in the resulting chaos.

No, perhaps that's not quite right. They weren't just caught in the chaos. The Azure Cold Serpent had deliberately killed them.

Puuhk!

The Azure Cold Serpent smashed its head into a nearby building. The shattered wood and stone fragments rained down on those hiding nearby.

They were members of the Ice Palace, so they had learned martial arts, but only to a second-class level. Dodging or deflecting such fast projectiles was impossible.

They would've died on the spot—if not for Seo Mun-Hwarin, who arrived just in time.

“Haaat!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin threw herself in front of the survivors, raising her fist. A dark crimson energy surged over her knuckles and shot forward in a straight trajectory.

Kkwaang!

The fragments exploded like bombs and flew back toward the Azure Cold Serpent.

But it had little effect. Perhaps the fragments were too small now, having broken further.

The Azure Cold Serpent's energy was running rampant, the wild chill swirling around it twisting the trajectories of all incoming debris into a snowstorm.

"Tch. Seems it's already broken free of the poison."

"No, I don't think that's the case."

I motioned for the stunned survivors to flee, then stood beside her and looked up at the Azure Cold Serpent.

"Because my transformed body has a deep connection to Tang Sowol's poison, I can tell. That thing is still poisoned by the Python Venom. The black blotches rising beneath its scales are proof."

"Then what is this blizzard-level cold it's radiating...?"

"It's just expelling all its energy."

I had done something similar before while facing the Thousand Poison Gate. It's merely qi deviation—a temporary surge of energy that pushes back the poison.

For reasons unknown, the Azure Cold Serpent had given up on living. A behavior contrary to most beasts, which prioritize survival.

As my finely honed senses reached it, our eyes met—its last remaining eye.

The moment it registered Seo Mun-Hwarin and me, a crazed killing intent erupted from it.

Unlike before, when it retained some sinister subtlety like a snake, now it felt like facing a rampaging beast. It didn't care if it died—it just wanted to kill us.

“It's come fully prepared. I'll open the path, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin. I leave the rest to you.”

“Very well.”

I rushed past Seo Mun-Hwarin straight toward the Azure Cold Serpent.

Shaaaat!

The Azure Cold Serpent amplified its chilling aura and unleashed a fierce snowstorm. The debris it touched froze instantly, and the corpses rolling on the ground turned to ice.

Even if one had reached resistance to cold and could shield themselves with energy, taking that head-on was suicidal.

So I raised my sword high.

Feet planted shoulder-width apart, back straight, gaze fixed forward. The internal energy circulating my body began to converge around my willpower.

Wuuuung.

Pale white sword energy surged over my dark sword.

With the sole intent to cut, I swung.

A slash through the air. The strike cleaved the storm of icy wind in half.

Ssskuk.

The whirling storm unnaturally split, momentarily revealing the Azure Cold Serpent's body.

Seo Mun-Hwarin wasted no time. She charged and slammed her fist down.

A crimson-black meteor seemed to rise from the earth and crash into the beast's head.

Kwajjik!

The sound of something breaking. The Azure Cold Serpent's head snapped downward violently from the hit. But that was all.

There was no collapse, no scream of pain like before.

It simply rolled its remaining eye to glare at Seo Mun-Hwarin, who hovered in the air.

Instead of scales, the top of its head released nearly invisible shards of transparent ice.

Using the blow to its head, the Azure Cold Serpent tucked its head close to its body, compressed its massive frame and coiled muscles, then sprung upward with explosive force.

Like a spring uncoiled, it launched a lightning-quick counterattack.

Seo Mun-Hwarin initially tried to escape with aerial steps but saw the gaping maw and braced herself instead.

Aerial stepping only allows one to stand on empty air—not to use footwork or movement techniques.

She couldn't dodge. She'd have to block.

They didn't seem to consider my presence at all. I felt a twinge of irritation.

I gathered all my internal energy and detonated it through my Dragon Fountain Point.

Kkraang!

A thunderous roar. With the explosive recoil of my qi, I shot forward like something had shoved me.

But that wasn't the end. My next step detonated more qi following the principles of Thunderous Steps.

With each step, thunder resounded, and vivid footprints marked my path as I shot toward the Azure Cold Serpent.

Last time, I hadn't noticed the secondary layer of scales—transparent ice that acted like defensive energy.

I stomped on it mercilessly with the full speed gained from consecutive Thunder Steps.

My foot shattered part of the ice, digging into the serpent's body.

Using that as a springboard, I leapt upward, channeling the remaining momentum into my sword arm using the principle of Fusion Reversal.

My body shot up vertically as if inertia didn't exist. The Azure Cold Serpent, about to devour Seo Mun-Hwarin, turned its eye toward me.

Realizing something was off, its head twisted rapidly—but too late.

“Huu.”

Exhaling lightly, I spun my wrist and gripped my sword in a reverse hold. Then I twisted my entire body and swung wide.

A sword strike not meant for humans, but for something much bigger and tougher.

It didn't aim precisely, nor was it flashy—but it was fast, forceful, and wide.

A technique I had conceptualized with Seo Mun-Hwarin. It wasn't perfect yet, but the power was enough.

The blade surged toward the inside of its mouth. If it connected, it could pierce the palate and scramble its brain from below.

But things are never that simple.

Half a beat late, the Azure Cold Serpent reacted and twisted its head. A massive fang, like a pillar, blocked my sword.

Zzzeok!

I sliced through 80% of the thick fang. The rest snapped under the force.

But the Azure Cold Serpent had still blocked my sword.

“Tch.”

I clicked my tongue reflexively. Seo Mun-Hwarin then kicked the broken fang toward the serpent's intact eye.

But then the raging cold surged again, and the unnatural blizzard distorted the fang's trajectory.

It grazed the serpent's temple and flew off somewhere.

Twisting its body with that momentum, the Azure Cold Serpent spun its entire form toward us.

Then—its massive tail flew at us like a missile.

“What the...?!”

A snake shouldn't move like that. But then again, no snake grows to this size or commands such energy.

I hurriedly raised my defensive energy. So did Seo Mun-Hwarin, who struck at the tail with her fist, brimming with crimson-black energy.

Though she shattered the ice and scales, she couldn't stop the tail's force. Only dampen it slightly.

And then—

Thud!

“Kuhugh!”

Even wrapped in protective energy, the impact rattled us to the bone. Seo Mun-Hwarin and I were slammed into the ground.

Nothing was broken, and we had no internal injuries—but a huge chunk of qi was drained. All from withstanding a single strike.

Climbing out of the rubble, we saw the enormous figure of the Azure Cold Serpent.

I let out a hollow laugh and gripped my sword again.

“If we get hit like that again, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin might get even shorter.”

“Then you’ll just have to carry me around.”

Unfazed, Seo Mun-Hwarin clenched her fist.

In the safest inner chamber of the Ice Palace, where the Ice Essence was kept, Tang Sowol and Seol Lihyang were watching everything unfold.

Because there was nothing else they could do.

Seol Lihyang bitterly resented her own weakness.

As always.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Each time the massive serpent moved, the earth overturned, and a freezing snowstorm raged outward, icing over everything in sight.

Perhaps a spirit beast that absorbs immense natural energy eventually becomes a part of nature itself.

As the Azure Cold Serpent—a living natural disaster—unleashed its fury, everyone in the room held their breath.

No, even without seeing it directly, one could sense it. Surely those watching from other parts of the palace were thinking the same.

When humans encounter something overwhelmingly beyond their reach, they inevitably feel fear... and awe.

Most of the martial artists who had resolved to remain at the North Sea Ice Palace no longer clung to their determination as they once had.

But now, in this very moment, there were two more beings commanding awe.

Cheon Hwi and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

Each time a streak of white sword energy from Cheon Hwi cut through the air, everything in its path—and even beyond it—was sliced cleanly.

Buildings, debris, raging snowstorms, the massive serpent's thick scales, and the thick ice shielding them—

Cheon Hwi's sword—or more accurately, the force of his will—cut through it all.

A surreal scene, as if a beautifully painted masterpiece was being torn apart with reckless abandon.

Seo Mun-Hwarin was no different.

Perhaps due to her rejuvenated body, her small fists still appeared delicate even when wreathed in forceful energy—but the power they carried was anything but small.

Heaven-shaking, earth-shattering might burst from her fists, as if to prove the meaning of true strength.

Every time her crimson-black energy exploded outward, the resulting roar hurt the ears, and even her glancing blows left gaping craters in the ground.

In this battlefield filled with incomprehensible phenomena, Seo Mun-Hwarin was the one person producing unmistakably visible destruction.

That's what a true master of the Flowering Stage was. A being clad in human skin, but no longer bound by human limits.

And yet, even with the combined power of these two masters, they couldn't easily bring down the Azure Cold Serpent.

Cheon Hwi's blade could cut through virtually anything it touched—but the creature's scales and the layers of ice covering them were too thick.

Even sword strikes sharp enough to chill the spine at a glance couldn't fully cleave its massive body.

Worse still, unless they kept cutting it down regularly, the swirling snowstorm would regenerate and freeze everything it touched, constantly disrupting their assault.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's punches were undeniably powerful. She could shatter the serpent's thick scales and even the ice atop them in a single blow.

A direct hit could stagger the enormous serpent's entire body.

But that alone wasn't enough to end it.

Unlike humans, snakes were notoriously tenacious creatures—and this one was no ordinary snake, but a spirit beast.

Even with broken bones and shattered scales, the Azure Cold Serpent wouldn't die so easily.

Given its sheer size, even serious wounds were little more than scratches.

And the creature didn't simply take hits—it retaliated with brutish force, its counterattacks a serious threat even to Cheon Hwi and Seo Mun-Hwarin, despite their protective inner energy.

It was a battle where both sides were a threat to each other, yet neither could land a decisive blow.

An endless stalemate—a quagmire where victory could not be discerned.

Watching it all unfold, Seol Lihyang bit her lip. There was nothing else she could do.

She still remembered the first day she met Cheon Hwi. How he overturned an entire Hao Clan branch to protect her, then helped her escape in the middle of the night.

“That day, I swore I’d one day become someone who could repay Cheon Hwi’s kindness. That next time, I’d be the one to help him.”

Fueled by that determination, she threw herself into her training. Even with her natural talent, she’d started martial arts relatively late—and reaching her current level was only possible thanks to her resolve and fierce grit.

She had trained tirelessly and recently received full support at the North Sea Ice Palace, the homeland of yin-based techniques.

Yet despite all of this, the gap between her and Cheon Hwi hadn't closed. It had only widened.

“Not just today... I've always only been protected.”

Seol Lihyang bitterly resented her own weakness.

She always had.

Her cold, sunken gaze stared out the window toward the battle.

It was all happening so fast she could barely follow it with her eyes.

But even so, she was one of the few who had watched Cheon Hwi fight from the closest distance for the longest time.

She could instinctively tell—he might be fine for now, but as time dragged on, Cheon Hwi would be in danger.

This wasn't a conclusion based on reason, but intuition. And it was correct.

Though Cheon Hwi had reached the Flowering Stage and had become fairly adept at wielding sword energy...

Seo Mun-Hwarin was someone who had reached the Flowering Stage long ago and fully mastered her strength.

The Azure Cold Serpent had fought the previous Ice Palace Lord—meaning it had possessed this strength for at least over a decade.

But Cheon Hwi was different. He might wield sword energy with ease, but it hadn't even been a full year since he reached the Flowering Stage.

He might be managing for now, but as time wore on, his situation would become different from the others.

From the start, the sword technique he was using now had been devised solely to counter this unnatural monster.

It might work temporarily, but in the long run, it was not sustainable.

And when the delicate balance broke, the one in greatest danger would be the one pressing the fiercest—Cheon Hwi.

Lost in thought, Seol Lihyang stared silently out the window. Perhaps sensing something unusual in her demeanor—

Bing Yerin lightly patted her shoulder in reassurance.

“Don’t worry too much, Miss Seol. I don’t know how the Azure Cold Serpent became this strong, but it doesn’t seem to be in a stable state. If we drag this out, they’ll win.”

“No... Before that happens, Cheon Hwi will be in danger. Sister Tang... what do you think?”

“I think the same. If only I could spread more poison...”

“What’s the main problem?”

“That snowstorm, obviously. Even though Cheon Hwi is cutting it down regularly, at its core, it’s just a berserk force of icy qi barely held together.”

Tang Sowol's poison arts specialized in refining internal energy into toxins.

But thanks to Cheon Hwi's earlier interruption, her poison didn't spread far. And breaking through a rampaging, unrefined force like that snowstorm was no easy task.

Seol Lihyang nodded quietly.

"So, if we could just do something about that cold energy...?"

"For now, yes. The wind remains a problem, but I've spent the past few days preparing a stronger Deathlonging Venom just for this."

"Do you think there's a way?"

"I'm about to find out."

Her eyes still shone sharply, and with a light shrug, Seol Lihyang cleared her throat.

Then she opened her mouth—facing the distant Azure Cold Serpent battling Cheon Hwi and Seo Mun-Hwarin.

“Ah—”

A song rang out.

Uniquely, her cold energy began to resonate with the surrounding chill.

Then her internal energy rapidly swelled.

Her sonic arts rode her voice outward. Combined with the Glacial True Qi she had refined, and the still-frigid North Sea environment...

And for the first time, she fully utilized the martial arts of the North Sea Ice Palace.

Everything Seol Lihyang had cultivated until now came together in a single, unnamed melody that echoed across the world.

Her cold qi, carried by sound, wasn't enough on its own—so it began drawing in the natural energy around her, expanding its form.

She began to consciously invoke a resonance phenomenon, one that had surprised not only Bing Yerin but all the North Sea martial artists who had ever experienced it firsthand.

As her own internal energy fused with nature's, the resulting force grew exponentially.

Qi exists to enhance one's essence.

Just as focused internal energy makes a punch harder or a step lighter...

Her voice, now infused with the greatest energy she could muster, became clearer—reaching far farther than usual.

And then, the moment her sonic attack reached the snowstorm surrounding the Azure Cold Serpent—

Puuhk!

“Kyaaahhh!”

Perhaps because that storm was a forcibly amassed and berserk energy enhanced by inner deviation, the moment her voice touched it, it was instantly torn apart.

All that remained was the pain of having her technique violently shattered.

Seol Lihyang coughed up a mouthful of dark blood.

“Ptuh!”

“Hyang-ah?!”

Startled, Tang Sowol rushed to lift her up, but—

“I’m fine, Sister Tang.”

“Eh...?”

Pushing her away, Seol Lihyang stood up by her own strength.

A fierce smile tugged at her lips.

It was a smile eerily reminiscent of Cheon Hwi. The kind of expression he made when he found a path in the middle of danger.

“It’s not too bad. And I figured something out—so I’d say this was a fair price.”

“What exactly are you planning, Hyang-ah?”

“It’s simple. I infuse my voice with internal energy, gather the surrounding cold, and add it to my technique, right?”

“Don’t tell me...?”

“Yes. The Azure Cold Serpent’s energy is still cold. I might not be able to completely wrest control away—but I can definitely disrupt it.”

“Just like how Cheon Hwi keeps cutting away the blizzard?”

“Exactly. Only for a moment, but I can create a definite opening. In theory.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s simple. I confirmed that my technique can interfere with the Azure Cold Serpent’s internal energy. But naturally... I’ll need a lot of energy.”

“Ah.”

Even if a single drop of dye can blacken a pond, you need far more to color an ocean.

The Azure Cold Serpent’s energy was massive—and disrupting it required a similarly massive amount of energy.

But Seol Lihyang didn't have that much on her own.

That is—if she were alone.

Then Bing Yerin, who had been listening quietly, spoke up.

“You're planning to use the Ice Essence.”

“If the North Sea Ice Palace permits it.”

“Can you truly absorb its power in such a short time?”

“Of course not. I'm not going to absorb it. I'll just circulate it according to the Glacial True Qi formula—use it without fusing it.”

“That's... possible, but dangerous. Your meridians might not withstand it.”

“And what about Cheon Hwi and Sister Seo Mun? Are they not in danger?”

They were holding their own for now—but that wouldn't last forever.

Realizing Seol Lihyang's resolve, Bing Yerin nodded heavily.

“I'll ask the Palace Lord—”

“There's no need for that.”

The Ice Palace Lord, who had been tending to her wives, stepped forward and cut her off.

Though she had always presented herself with the dignity befitting the Ice Palace Lord, this moment was different.

With a desperate expression, she opened the special box containing the Ice Essence.

Just opening the box unleashed a bone-chilling cold. Even Tang Sowol, who had reached Sub-Perfection and had long since grown resistant to cold, felt a shiver.

“I’ve never liked the Ice Essence. No matter how sacred it is, I’ve always hated that it’s sustained by sacrificing people—and that the Ice Palace Lord depends on it.”

“So use it if you must. Just—”

“I won’t blame you, Palace Lord, even if things go wrong.”

If you only do what you can, then you’ll never do more than what’s possible. But when you want—or need—more...

You must be willing to throw yourself into the impossible.

Maybe it was because she’d learned from watching Cheon Hwi for so long.

But Seol Lihyang’s mindset now was remarkably similar to his.

She exhaled briefly, then picked up the Ice Essence without hesitation.

A shard of ice the size of two fingers—enough to freeze anyone else down to their bones just from touching it.

But Seol Lihyang, born with a Pure Sound-Frostflower constitution, was the exception.

Instead, she felt vigor fill her body and swallowed it whole.

Zzzeok.

The sound of her blood vessels freezing—heard only by her.

It was a sensation she hadn't felt in a long time.

And one that she missed.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Zzzeok...

A sound only audible to Seol Lihyang—her blood pathways freezing over.

It was proof that the immense cold energy contained within the Ice Essence was beginning to mix with her blood vessels.

Afraid she might let the energy leak out, or waste it in vain due to a lack of control, Seol Lihyang clamped her lips shut. A single bead of sweat trickled down her forehead.

“It’s alright. Just store it for now and move slowly.”

Originally, the Ice Essence was a sacred relic that only the Palace Lords of the North Sea Ice Palace could harness. And aside from the current generation, all previous palace lords had reached the Flowering Stage.

As much as it was a precious sacred relic, it was also an object that was difficult to utilize fully unless one had reached the Flowering Stage.

In the current era, the power of the Ice Essence had weakened significantly. Without a proper offering, it could even vanish completely.

Even so, the Ice Essence was still the Ice Essence. The pure cold energy it contained was more than enough to freeze a human body and shatter it entirely.

An ordinary person would have had their fingers frozen the moment they touched it. Even if they managed to swallow it, it would only become a massive shard of ice and break apart.

But Seol Lihyang was different.

She had mastered the North Sea Ice Palace's Yin-based energy arts, which were in no way inferior to the Ice Essence itself. Among them, the Glacial True Qi—a technique that prioritized control of cold energy above all else.

In addition, she possessed the Pure Yin Physique. A body constitution that made one innately capable of containing the purest yin energy. That alone was enough to endure the cold of the Ice Essence.

Just as cold energy was a branch of yin energy, the Ice Essence could freeze Seol Lihyang's blood vessels, but it could not destroy them.

And her oldest memory—was of a distant, bone-chilling cold that made her feel as though she had become ice itself.

Not due to the weather, but a phenomenon caused by her inability to withstand her own yin energy. It had happened more often than she liked to admit.

Back then, Seol Lihyang believed she had been born with a congenital illness... but now, she understood.

It was merely that her entire bloodstream had frozen from the intensely refined yin energy of her Pure Yin Physique. Yet, because of that very physique, she had not died and had been able to survive.

And now was no different.

The immense cold energy of the Ice Essence far exceeded the internal energy she had built up until now.

Any ordinary martial artist would have died the moment their blood vessels froze. But Seol Lihyang could endure it thanks to her unique body.

The process didn't need to be clean or perfect. As long as she could endure it and contain the energy of the Ice Essence, then all that remained was—

—To move this immense cold energy, just once, according to her will.

Seol Lihyang slowly opened her eyes.

Move.

She focused her entire concentration toward the cold energy locked tightly in her blood vessels.

You have to move!

In the past, when Cheon Hwi-da had personally taught Seol Lihyang martial arts, he once said:

It is willpower that makes the impossible possible—not merely physical movement or internal energy manipulation.

And willpower is made of intention and thought. What people commonly call “the heart.”

Moreover, since everyone has a heart, everyone is capable of using willpower. It's just that most people can't consciously control it, and their methods are far too immature to be meaningful.

Thus, the harmony of soul, qi, and body—not just how well one fights—is what determines the height of one's martial prowess.

To most, it was a theoretical tale detached from reality. But not to Seol Lihyang.

For her, dismissing Cheon Hwi-da's words had never been an option.

He was the one who shattered her dark and confined world, the one who held her hand and pulled her into the light. How could she ever doubt his words?

I can do it. I'm certain.

So she let go of everything unnecessary.

She discarded the thick pride she had built to protect herself.

She cast aside the self-doubt that clung to her ever since Cheon Hwi-da became distant.

And finally, even the faint jealousy and obsession she had harbored in her heart—she let those go as well.

Once all her layered shells had peeled away, only pure intention remained.

A fierce, azure demonic aura began to ripple across Seol Lihyang's eyes.

The people nearby, watching her from close by, all flinched at her terrifying gaze. But if Cheon Hwi-da had seen her now, he would have been awed instead.

Seol Lihyang exuded the kind of chilling otherness unique to those who could throw away everything about themselves for a single purpose.

And now, the demonic aura blazing in her eyes surpassed even her pre-return self, who had never fully shed her armor.

Wooong—

The cold energy that had sealed her blood vessels responded to her transcendent will and began to stir—slowly but surely.

Simultaneously, from within the pure, nearly natural cold energy of the Ice Essence, a murky, blood-hued evil energy began to rise.

A corrupt energy born from the blood of countless Divine Maidens sacrificed to restore the Ice Essence's power over the years.

How many of them had truly offered their lives willingly?

The resentment of those who hadn't must have gradually tainted the Ice Essence.

No—perhaps it had been corrupted from the start.

After all, wasn't the Ice Essence taken from the belly of the mother of the Azure Cold Serpent, slain by the North Sea Ice Palace's founder?

But to Seol Lihyang, none of that mattered.

Neither the desperation of a spirit beast that died protecting its young and nest, nor the grudges of Divine Maidens forced to die.

Even when all of that was added up, Seol Lihyang's intent did not fall behind.

Above all else, those were the lingering wills of the dead—each one merely a type of yin energy.

Seol Lihyang's Pure Yin Physique wasn't suited for handling just cold energy. It was meant to control all forms of yin.

Ududck...

The sound of ice cracking echoed all around.

The once-rigid cold energy of the Ice Essence began to circulate slowly yet distinctly through Seol Lihyang's blood vessels.

A sensation like ice sliding along her meridians.

Coincidentally, the path followed by the frigid energy mirrored the chant formula for Glacial True Qi, as if to prove the legitimacy of that martial art.

And the moment she succeeded in making one full rotation with the Ice Essence's energy—

—Seol Lihyang opened her mouth softly.

“Huu...?”

An overwhelming sense of omnipotence from controlling such unimaginable power. Exhaustion built from surpassing her limits. The achievement of enduring it all. And even the sudden impulse to run straight to Cheon Hwi-da—

A whirlwind of emotions filled her breath and scattered into the air.

Seol Lihyang's gaze drifted out the window, away from her inner self.

Cheon Hwi-da and Seo Mun-Hwarin were still fighting the Azure Cold Serpent.

A deep sword wound had formed on its nape, and its tail had been crushed, but—

—It had come at a price. Both of them were not in good condition.

Seo Mun-Hwarin's protective energy shield was visibly faint, and Cheon Hwi-da seemed to be wielding his sword one-handed, his left arm limp as if struck wrong.

Seeing this, a faint smile formed on Seol Lihyang's lips.

“Looks like I'm not too late.”

But she knew this wasn't the time for composure.

She took a deep breath—and released it, carrying all her swirling emotions.

A clear voice. No lyrics, only tones and melody. And yet, even in this dire situation, her song wrapped the hearts of those who heard it in warmth.

Though not sung loudly, her voice carried far and wide.

A song filled with nothing but pure affection and worry. Instead of spreading warmth, it absorbed the surrounding cold and swelled in power.

Not just the natural energy of the North Sea—but even the internal energy of the North Sea Ice Palace’s warriors.

“H-Huh?!”

“Wh-What is this...??”

Shock filled the eyes of the Ice Palace Lord and Bing Yerin.

Who wouldn’t be alarmed, watching their internal energy get drawn out against their will?

Of course, the pulling force of Seol Lihyang’s yin-based voice technique wasn’t that strong.

It wasn’t coercion—more like a gentle invitation. If they wanted to resist, they could. But—

“Warriors of the North Sea Ice Palace! Do not resist the feeling you sense now! Offer up your internal energy!”

The Ice Palace Lord knew well that Seol Lihyang’s martial arts, though rooted in the same origin as the North Sea Ice Palace, had developed in a completely different direction.

She was aware that by using a yin-based voice technique to spread Glacial True Qi, Seol Lihyang could temporarily amplify its power through resonance with nearby cold energy.

But as for how it resonated with the North Sea Ice Palace’s internal energy—that remained a mystery.

Perhaps, in learning the palace’s martial arts, Seol Lihyang had unconsciously expanded her influence.

Or perhaps this ability had always been hidden deep within the Glacial True Qi that none had practiced for so long.

What was certain was that with each portion of internal energy consumed, the power contained in her song grew stronger.

Each fragment of energy might have seemed insignificant, but together they became a force not inferior to the cold energy enveloping the Azure Cold Serpent.

Of course, Seol Lihyang wasn't controlling it directly. Just channeling the Ice Essence's energy into her voice was already pushing her limits.

She lacked the strength to command it all.

Instead, she simply offered direction for the cold energy to move. That alone was enough.

Watching all this unfold beside her, Bing Yerin's eyes widened.

Glacial True Qi.

Though recognized for its legitimacy due to its origin with the palace's founder, it had been deemed impractical and left unlearned.

Eventually, it became a secret art that no one could master—even with the manual.

It was believed to offer no ability beyond manipulating large amounts of cold energy. But now—

Now she understood why the North Sea Ice Palace's founder had treasured and preserved the Glacial True Qi.

In its early days, the North Sea Ice Palace had not been as strong as it was now. Even after finding a new sanctuary, they had still struggled daily in the frigid environment.

They had taught martial arts to as many as possible, hoping that one day, they might gather the surrounding cold and create a habitable land. That was likely why they passed down the Glacial True Qi.

At some point, drunk on power, the palace neglected the technique meant for the future—and instead chased only the Ice White Divine Art, which could freeze enemies before them.

The weakening of the present-day palace may have been inevitable.

If so, then the current Seol Lihyang...

As Bing Yerin's thoughts reached that point, the song—now containing the energy of the Ice Essence and the internal energy of the Ice Palace warriors—reached the Azure Cold Serpent.

Originally, Seol Lihyang's plan was merely to disrupt the flood dragon's energy control and create an opening.

But now, the energy her voice drew had far exceeded her expectations.

Zzzeok.

The blizzard summoned by the Azure Cold Serpent dissipated as though it had never existed.

The additional layer of scales that covered its body cracked and shattered of its own accord.

The beast, stunned by its own suddenly hardened, immobile energy, became nothing more than a massive snake with no means to fight back.

Toward the gaping weakness, crimson and white aura crashed down from above and rose from below.

Kwaaang!

Seo Mun-Hwarin's fist smashed down on the flood dragon's crown.

Scales shattered. Part of the skull caved in. The head slammed violently into the ground—

—and upward came Cheon Hwi-da's reverse-gripped sword.

Ssskuk.

The Azure Cold Serpent's head was severed, its own neck thrown into the blade's path.

Kuuung!

Due to its sheer size, its body hit the ground with a resounding crash.

Like the tenacious creature it was, the headless body thrashed briefly, but—

—A body without a head could never move for long.

Cheers erupted from all directions the moment the dragon's death was confirmed.

But to Seol Lihyang, they rang only as noisy tinnitus. She had overdrawn her spiritual energy, and clearly surpassed the limits of what her body could handle.

Even with a Pure Yin Physique, enduring this level of strain would leave her far from unscathed.

“Ah...”

Perhaps sensing as much, Cheon Hwi-da ran toward her in a panic. A bright smile bloomed on Seol Lihyang's bloodied lips.

“So troublesome. I'm going to get scolded by Cheon Hwi again, huh.”

Her tone betrayed no real distress or regret—of course it didn't.

Some saw a demonic aura in her that no human should possess. Others saw the past and future of the North Sea Ice Palace.

But from the beginning, Seol Lihyang had eyes only for one person.

Cheon Hwi-da.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

Seven days and nights had passed since the fall of the Azure Cold Serpent.

It had rampaged so wildly that a portion of the North Sea Ice Palace had been completely destroyed. Yet despite the scale of the destruction, there were surprisingly few casualties.

Likely because everyone in the North Sea Ice Palace was a trained martial artist and managed to escape more easily. Well, that and the fact that Seo Mun-Hwarin and I had stopped it relatively quickly.

During the past seven days, there'd been funerals, the dismemberment of the Azure Cold Serpent's corpse, and for some reason, even Bing Yerin had prostrated herself and asked me to persuade Seol Lihyang to become the next Palace Lord.

A lot had happened. And at the center of it all was Seol Lihyang.

“Water.”

“Here.”

“Not like that—feed it to me by hand.”

“I've injured my arm too, you know.”

“Oh! Well, in that case, I suppose it can't be helped.”

Lying in bed, she was bossing me around freely. Honestly, she might be the most extravagant patient I've ever had to care for.

Still, at least in this case, Seol Lihyang deserved it.

“Puhaha. Thanks. I was pretty thirsty. But why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing.”

Watching her sip water from a floating cup—raised through Object-Grasping Through Empty Air—made me feel...complicated in ways I couldn’t quite explain.

Maybe it was her carefree attitude that bothered me. Seol Lihyang pouted, displeased.

“Haah. I pushed myself to the point I can’t even move a finger for someone, and this is how I get treated. Ahh, it’s all meaningless, meaningless.”

“Didn’t I do everything you asked? What more do you want?”

“Just thinking about eating that terrible dinner again makes me angry.”

“Endure it. Thanks to that food, you’ve recovered this much.”

The “terrible dinner” she referred to was the soup made from the Azure Cold Serpent’s meat.

Naturally, to suppress its energy, Seol Lihyang had pushed herself far beyond her limits—and collapsed. Not just collapsed, but with internal injuries so severe that even her Pure Yin Physique had been damaged.

Her life wasn’t in danger due to her unique constitution, but the aftereffects were so serious that she should’ve been bedridden for years.

If luck hadn’t been on our side, she might’ve even lost her martial arts.

Fortunately, it happened to be a time when the North Sea Ice Palace was overflowing with... nourishing ingredients (?). The meat soup, boiled with some medicinal herbs under Tang Sowol’s guidance, was practically a tonic.

Eating it at every meal had remarkable effects. It didn’t boost internal energy much, but for healing and recovery, I’d never seen anything better.

That’s how Seol Lihyang, though unable to move her body well, recovered her consciousness quickly, and how I, whose left shoulder had been shattered, got back to walking around again.

Well, our injuries were from the Azure Cold Serpent to begin with.

Chuckling quietly, I sat down on the chair I'd placed beside her bed in advance.

Seol Lihyang stared quietly. She had just been pouting a moment ago, but now, with a mischievous grin, she began wiggling playfully.

“Cheon Hwi, I'm cold.”

“I'll bring in another brazier.”

“No, there's a faster and easier way.”

With slow, labored movement, she lifted half of her blanket.

“Get in here!”

She looked up at me with a playful and expectant gaze. But when I just stood there staring, she let out a long, disappointed sigh.

“Haa, you’re no fun.”

“I’ll say this now—your condition is still serious. There’s no need to create unnecessary problems when you’ll recover just fine as is.”

“What?! Were you planning to do something problematic to me?!”

“...”

“Pfft. I was joking. So stop looking so grim.”

“What grim look?”

“A very troubled one?”

“...Can’t deny that.”

Of course I'm troubled. Seol Lihyang had overexerted herself trying to save me, and now Tang Sowol had practically shoved me into her room because of it.

Not without reminding me, of course, that I should keep my promise.

The image of Tang Sowol taking care of various aftermath tasks with Seo Mun-Hwarin—who was at least relatively unscathed—while pushing me into this room flashed in my mind, and I scratched my head.

The blanket Seol Lihyang had lifted sagged back down as she flopped over, facing away.

“By the way, Cheon Hwi, any interesting news? Or even just an update on what's going on? I've been stuck in bed and totally out of the loop.”

“Hmm. It's only been seven days, but quite a bit's happened. Most of it's North Sea Ice Palace business... Ah, but there is one story I think you'll find interesting.”

“What is it, what is it?”

Suppressing the urge to tease her, I continued.

“You remember how we dismantled the Azure Cold Serpent’s corpse after we took it down?”

“Of course. A spiritual beast that size is nothing but treasure from head to tail.”

“Right. Since we were the ones who defeated it, they decided to give all of it to us.”

When the Palace Lord first told us that, both Seo Mun-Hwarin and I nodded like it was obvious. But Tang Sowol said she’d rather use it to treat the wounded, as a gesture of goodwill.

Naturally, that led to discussions about division of resources and future collaboration with the Tang Clan.

It reminded me again that, despite having spent quite some time at the Tang Clan and adapting to the mindset of an orthodox sect, I hadn’t really changed much from my old ways as a rogue martial artist.

“You only now realized that? I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, but you’re just so straightforward. Remember how you told them to hand over everything they had if we dealt with the Azure Cold Serpent?”

“Is that a problem?”

“How’s that any different from bandits demanding tolls on mountain roads?”

“At least I don’t take lives unnecessarily. Usually.”

“...That last part is a bit worrying, but never mind—it was fun.”

“I haven’t even gotten to the main part yet.”

Seol Lihyang giggled, clearly satisfied with something. Shaking my head, I went on.

“Anyway, when we started dismembering the beast to get its core, I had to slice open its belly myself because the scales were too tough. Inside the stomach were countless corpses of Azure Cold Serpents.”

“Aren’t those its offspring? You’re saying it ate its own children because it lacked power? Ugh, beast or human, there’s no difference...”

Given her own past—sold off to a courtesan house by her gambling-addicted father—it was no surprise Seol Lihyang had a skewed view. But this time, it was different.

“Not quite. According to Tang Sowol, who came to help since I couldn’t use one arm properly, the Azure Cold Serpent had swallowed them after they were already dead.”

“Already dead?”

“Yeah. Remember, the Python Poison was originally created to poison the Azure Cold Serpents. But it was concentrated several times to use against the Serpent.”

“Oh! So it was so potent that it killed the serpents instantly?”

“Exactly. Tang Sowol suspects the reason the Serpent went berserk after escaping wasn’t because of any wound, but because all its children had died.”

“Mm... that does make me feel a bit conflicted.”

“No need to overthink it. We were enemies who had to fight anyway—it just happened sooner than expected due to unforeseen circumstances.”

“Yeah. It’s not like we were going to live peacefully as neighbors or anything.”

Seol Lihyang nodded with effort. I remembered how she once said she wanted to become a better parent than her father had been.

Maybe that’s why she felt conflicted now. Even if we had to fight, in the end, we had annihilated its offspring first.

Still, with her bedridden as it is, giving her more emotional weight to carry would only make recovery harder.

So I shrugged and changed the mood with a lighter tone.

“Now, here’s the good part. You remember how the Azure Cold Serpent looked like it went mad near the end?”

“Yeah. How could I forget the sight of a beast that huge conjuring blizzards?”

“Well, turns out it wasn’t just ‘like’ it had gone mad—it actually had. According to our findings, it had entered a state similar to energy deviation. And because of that... its core fused with those of the Cold Serpents it ate.”

“...Wait. We did say all the spoils belong to us, right?”

“Congratulations. You now have access to a training environment overflowing with cold energy—even in the Central Plains.”

“If I eat that thing, my body’s going to explode!!”

Seol Lihyang dove under the covers in panic. I gently tapped the round lump she had become.

“No one’s saying you need to eat it. Even the Ice Essence had to be absorbed gradually by the Palace Lords—no one ever swallowed it whole.”

“Oh.”

With a short exclamation, her head peeked out from under the covers.

“If enough time passes and the energy weakens, then maybe—but for now, we should use it by placing it in a training chamber to create a cold-rich environment.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. I always felt like I gained twice as much internal energy training here than in the Central Plains.”

“If we design the chamber well enough to prevent the cold from leaking out, it’ll be even better.”

Though Seol Lihyang’s martial art uses sound as its medium, it operates like any other internal energy technique. What matters most is how much internal energy one holds and how much one can circulate at once.

She may have overexerted herself this time, but if she fully recovers, her blood pathways will be wider and stronger than ever.

Add in her newfound experience in manipulating massive amounts of cold energy, and—

Her cultivation level might not leap instantly, but the foundation for reaching the next level would be firmly set.

If nothing goes wrong, she should reach the Sub-Perfection master level soon enough.

She's now clearly surpassed the Seol Lihyang from before her regression. Which makes me a little curious—

—just how far she can grow if she doesn't waste her talent this time.

If, like Tang Sowol, she could reach the Flowering Stage...

That hopeful thought didn't last long. Seol Lihyang, uncharacteristically hesitant, finally spoke.

“So, um... Cheon Hwi. Do you remember what I said the other day?”

“The other day? About what?”

“You know... about doing things properly if the timing and reason are right.”

I finally understood what she meant. She was referring to what she said that night when she barged into my room.

I gave a dry laugh and stood up. As I moved to sit at the edge of her bed—

“W-Wait!”

“Don’t tell me... again, like last time—”

“Ugh! No! I mean, before that, just open that cloth over there.”

“...Cloth?”

I turned to where she gestured. There, neatly wrapped, was a cloth bundle.

I untied it as she instructed, revealing something I hadn’t expected at all.

“Seolli?”

“Oh? You already knew? It was pretty hard to find around here.”

“Yeah. I know it.”

A white pear-like fruit. Expensive, with snow-colored flesh. But to me, it held a very different, personal meaning.

A sudden torrent of emotion welled up—tenderness, guilt, gratitude, longing... so many things at once that I couldn't even name what I felt.

Swallowing it all down, I looked at Seol Lihyang. She seemed slightly flustered, as if she hadn't expected me to recognize it.

I gently placed the Seolli in my robes and strode toward her bed.

“Eh? W-Wait...”

Was it the flood of emotions showing on my face? Or was she simply surprised by my silent approach?

Either way, it didn't matter. Because from this moment on, there was only one thing to do.

“Don't worry. I intend to keep my promise.”

“Uuugh! This wasn't how it was supposed to go!”

Half resigned, half expectant, her voice trembled.

As I gently brushed her cheek, she flinched, then slowly closed her eyes.

Then came the kiss.

A slightly cool body temperature. A soft texture. A body trembling minutely with tension.

Breathing in her scent that lingered near my nose, I slowly pulled away.

A long, silver thread of saliva stretched between us and broke. Seol Lihyang, staring blankly at it—

Clang!

“Hiieeee!”

A crashing sound of broken dishes—and a familiar scream—snapped us both back to reality.

We both turned our creaking heads.

“Th-The lady has seen nothing! So don’t mind her! Carry on!”

There stood Seo Mun-Hwarin, hands covering her face.

Though her fingers were spread wide open, so it really didn’t help at all.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“Phew. Now I finally feel alive again.”

My arm no longer ached when I moved it. I tried rotating my shoulder in circles as a test, then gripped my sword hand to perform a few basic forms.

There were no issues with ordinary movement. As long as I didn't overdo it, I could swing my sword just fine.

“So it's already been a month, huh.”

It had been about twenty days since I received that familiar gift from Seol Lihyang—the same one she had given me before her regression. In other words, nearly a full month had passed since we defeated the Azure Cold Serpent.

Naturally, all the messy business had long been settled. Although Seol Lihyang had suffered serious internal injuries, thanks to being stuffed full of all kinds of tonics in the North Sea Ice Palace, she actually recovered faster than I did.

Most of the tonics weren't for boosting internal energy but for recovering from internal wounds and strengthening the body. Still...

I wouldn't be surprised if an ordinary person who'd never trained in martial arts could live without a single illness for a hundred years after taking that much.

"Pretty sure I'll never witness anything like that again."

"Eh? What are you referring to all of a sudden?"

Tang Sowol, who had diligently tended to my broken bones like a personal physician while my arm was injured, tilted her head in confusion as she exhaled a sigh of relief upon seeing me fully healed.

"It's nothing. Just remembered what happened two days ago."

"Ah... that really was surprising."

Around the time Seol Lihyang had recovered enough to leave her bed for short walks, a swarm of clan heads—known for their prestigious names—had come rushing in to request meetings with her.

Each carried packs of expensive medicinal tonics they claimed were good for her health.

They spoke obliquely about wanting her to stay in the North Sea Ice Palace, saying she'd be a reliable right arm, and so on...

“But Hyang turned them all down flat. Told them to buzz off because they were annoying.”

“Yeah. Though she accepted all the tonics.”

No matter how mid-grade they were, medicine was still medicine. With that many offerings, you'd think she'd at least listen to their pitch.

But Seol Lihyang didn't care. They had interrupted her time spent hanging out with me, and with her, that was reason enough.

“Still, you must've felt relieved, right?”

“A little.”

The reason the North Sea Ice Palace suddenly started throwing themselves at Seol Lihyang wasn't simply because we defeated the Azure Cold Serpent.

It was because of what she showed them in the final moment—the true essence of Glacial True Qi.

Yes, several conditions had coincidentally aligned to make it possible. And yes, she had consumed the Ice Essence, which the palace treated as a sacred treasure.

But as I later heard, Seol Lihyang had used her own cold energy as a core to gather the surrounding cold, and even drew upon the internal energy of the Ice Palace warriors.

With that snowballing mass of energy, she had struck down the flood dragon.

What mattered wasn't how amazing that feat was. The key point was: she united the internal energy of the Ice Palace warriors with nothing but a single verse of song.

Most large sects have methods to combine multiple forces into one. Formation techniques like the Coordinated Attack Formation are a prime example.

But even for those, you need shared training, deeply aligned thoughts, and a strong bond, even if you're using similar martial arts.

Yet Seol Lihyang managed it all alone. Perhaps because of the nature of Glacial True Qi—and perhaps only with the warriors of the North Sea Ice Palace—but still.

It's no wonder everyone, even those who had disliked her as an outsider, became obsessed with the idea of making her the next palace lord.

Of course, she refused so intensely that they had no choice but to back off in tears.

Just as I nodded with a small sense of pride—

I saw a small figure hopping toward us from the entrance of the training field.

“Sowol! There you are. Come see what I've brought—Hiick!”

As soon as she noticed me, Seo Mun-Hwarin yelped, jumped in place, and ducked behind the door.

“You do know that won't hide you, right, Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin?”

“T-The Lady is not here...!”

Amazingly, it had been over twenty days since Seo Mun-Hwarin witnessed Seol Lihyang and me kiss—and she was still like this.

She’d hide every time our eyes met, but she didn’t completely avoid me. At meals and during official business, she’d act like her usual self. It was... odd.

I’d let it slide until now, but it had gone on long enough. With our departure from the Tang Clan drawing near, it was time to address it.

“Senior Seo Mun-Hwarin, you seem awfully happy. What did you bring?”

“Fufu. This is a Heart-Guarding Armor made from the hide of the Azure Cold Serpent! They used its hardest scales!”

“Wait... did only you receive one, Senior?”

“Of course not. There are ones for you, Sowol, and Hyang as well. They said they were going to hand them over later, but since I was with Hyang, they gave them to us early!”

“She’s been really cooperative lately. Senior, would you be so kind as to come out and talk properly instead of hiding over there?”

“The Lady is not here...!”

“That’s enough now.”

After a moment of silence, Seo Mun-Hwarin’s shadow hesitantly peeked out.

She looked the same as ever—short and slight. In her hand was the very armor she’d just mentioned.

Clean, icy white-blue, reminiscent of frost. It had been covered in black patches due to Serpent Poison, but once Tang Sowol purified the toxins, it returned to its original form.

Tung tung.

I flicked it lightly with my fingers. The solid, reliable sound was reassuring.

“This really is good quality. It might not block energy strikes, but it’ll hold up against most attacks. Though for us, Protective Energy is still more efficient.”

“Mmm. But in moments of absolute danger, when even Protective Energy fails, this will come in handy. Unlike Protective Energy, we can also lend it to someone else if needed.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

The reason I injured my arm during the fight with the Azure Cold Serpent was simple.

The battle was so intense and prolonged that I ran out of the internal energy and willpower needed to activate Protective Energy.

While I’m proficient in controlling sword energy, I still haven’t fully mastered Protective Energy. It broke in the middle of combat.

“In the end, the armor is meant as a last-resort safeguard. It’ll be more than enough. But Senior... is there a reason you’re covering your face now?”

“Ugh!”

Though she’d come out, Seo Mun-Hwarin now hid behind the armor as soon as the topic shifted to it.

She sighed deeply and spoke in a slightly aggrieved tone.

“Haa... but it couldn’t be helped!”

“What couldn’t?”

“You and Hyang are much closer now. If I stayed around, I’d only get in the way...”

A strangely downcast response. Well, if everyone but her was in a romantic relationship, she probably did feel awkward. Though she might be overthinking it.

“To be so old and still mixing with kids... it just felt a bit wrong. That’s all.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Yes. Like Cheon Hwi said, if that’s your concern, then it’s really no big deal.”

“???”

Seo Mun-Hwarin blinked at our instant responses.

Tang Sowol smiled warmly and said,

“Sister Hwarin, you’ve never really seemed like a grown-up to begin with.”

“Huurk!”

“And if you suddenly started acting distant from Hyang—who sees you like a sister because of your similar mental age—don’t you think she’d be hurt?”

“Gyaaah!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin clutched her ears and twisted her body as if she were witnessing a truth she desperately wanted to deny.

But covering her ears wouldn't change reality. Like how no one questioned her when she once tried to hide her age.

Rejuvenation was a technique that defied the natural order of time. In that sense, this side effect was relatively minor.

Trying to think positively, I added,

“Well, please don't worry about it. We enjoy spending time with you, Senior. If things got awkward now, that would be more disappointing.”

“Thank you for saying that... but did you just say ‘spending time with’?”

“That's what we say when we're humoring elders.”

“E-Elders?!”

Seo Mun-Hwarin’s expression was devastatingly sullen.

Now we were in trouble—she pouted when we called her young, and now again when we called her old.

Usually in these situations, it’s best to calm someone with something sweet... but this was the North Sea. Sweets were rare, and snacks hadn’t developed like in the Central Plains.

So I pulled out some dried fruit I had saved for the trip to Sichuan.

Sha-shak.

“Hooh!”

With the reflexes of a Flowering Stage master, Seo Mun-Hwarin snatched the dried fruit instantly.

She munched it down in seconds, and finally, her expression softened. Relieved, I asked,

“Since the bandages are off, we were about to go see Seol Lihyang. Would you like to come?”

“Mmm? Let’s go. I was just with Hyang a little while ago, so I know where she is.”

With a confident nod, Seo Mun-Hwarin stepped between me and Tang Sowol, took our hands, and led the way.

Like a child returning home hand-in-hand with her parents in the evening market.

“This is...”

“Shh. Just don’t say anything, Cheon Hwi.”

...I was suddenly a little terrified of Rejuvenation.

She was so reliable when fighting the Azure Cold Serpent, and now...

I barely swallowed a sigh that was about to escape.

Still, Seo Mun-Hwarin looked happy. That was enough. Probably.

Surprisingly, Seol Lihyang wasn't in her room or the training ground—she was meeting with the Palace Lord in the reception hall.

Though, things were going... oddly.

“Just once. Please, just reconsider one more time. If you're willing, we could pass on the title of Palace Lord immediately with a little preparation.”

“Ah—why are you saying that too?! I told you, I'm not doing it!”

“If not Lady Seol, then who else is worthy of becoming Palace Lord?!”

“Bing Yerin's right there! I've already taught her Glacial True Qi, and she seems to be getting the hang of it lately, so train her up!”

This wasn't figurative—they were literally half-collapsed on the floor, with the Palace Lord pleading, while Seol Lihyang panicked and waved her arms in refusal.

And off to the side, calmly sipping tea, was Bing Yerin.

I stood frozen in confusion, unable to grasp what was going on, until Seol Lihyang noticed me and beamed.

“Perfect timing, Cheon Hwi! Bing Yerin packed everything into the carriage already, so let's leave now!”

“Wait, shouldn't we at least say proper farewells instead of running away like fugitives?”

I handed her over to Tang Sowol, who took her flailing form, and I sat where she'd been a moment ago.

“I didn't quite catch what was being said. Would you mind repeating it for me?”

“...I was just saying, may your journey be safe and all your future endeavors go well.”

The Palace Lord—who had become notably more polite after witnessing me fight the Azure Cold Serpent—stood up as if nothing had happened.

I Kidnapped the Youngest Daughter of the Sichuan Tang Clan

“I simply said I hoped your journey would be smooth and that everything ahead goes well.”

As if she'd never once thrown herself flat on the ground and begged Seol Lihyang to become the Little Palace Mistress, the Ice Palace Mistress stood up nonchalantly and offered her blessings.

A shift in attitude so fast it left me speechless. While I let out a dry laugh, the Ice Palace Mistress sitting across from me opened her mouth with a forced smile.

“I heard you're leaving now.”

“That's right. I've stayed longer than planned, so it's about time I return.”

Originally, I'd left home saying I wanted to see the Sword of Jeomchang Sect.

And once I recovered, they likely assumed I was simply heading out to prove the rumors that I'd reached the Flowering Stage.

There was some truth to that, of course.

But once I sent off my daughter and son-in-law, not long after, they must've heard that we resolved the issue with the Heaven-Slaughter Star of Jeomchang Sect.

With no idea what was going on, they waited only for me to return home. Instead, they received a short letter saying I was headed to the North Sea Ice Palace.

Though they were shocked and sent a reply, nearly two months have passed with no answer in return.

For reference, I still don't know what Tang Jincheon's letter said. That's because Tang Sowol hasn't even opened it, just stored it away.

“Huuu.”

“If there's a reason you need to stay longer, you're welcome to, truly.”

Perhaps misunderstanding my sigh, the Ice Palace Mistress casually offered again.

But that wasn't an option. I needed to return as soon as possible. If I didn't...

Tang Jincheon might come all the way here himself. He's the type who absolutely would.

"It's fine. I've already made up my mind to return. I appreciate it, but please don't press further."

"Understood. Then, allow me to bring up a slightly different matter."

Clearing her throat a couple of times, the Ice Palace Mistress continued.

"Ahem. As promised, I've organized and prepared everything related to the Azure Cold Serpent, so you may take it as is."

"I understand about the core, but bones and hide—surely the quantity is overwhelming. How are you planning to transport it?"

“For now, we have no choice but to load it onto carts and have people pull them manually. It’s too heavy for animals, and they still get scared of the lingering aura of the Azure Cold Serpent.”

“I discussed that part with others, and I don’t think we need to take everything at once. After all, the Tang Clan and Ice Palace will be in regular contact from now on.”

“Ah! Then shall we hand them over gradually? For now, would you like to take the most valuable parts first?”

“That sounds good. What would you say are the most valuable parts?”

“First, of course, the inner core. Even the exhausted Ice Essence from before was incredible, but the core from the Azure Cold Serpent, fused with that of the Azure Cold Serpent Mother, surpasses that.”

Right. It was the spirit beast that the Ice Palace’s founder had captured. I don’t know how powerful the mother was, but the Azure Cold Serpent itself was nothing to scoff at.

Although it wasn't as renowned as those in the Central Plains, it was still a rare treasure in the North Sea Ice Palace. Even though it was stored in a box made of Ice Iron, a chill still seeped out.

Eventually, they had to put that box inside a larger Ice Iron container to suppress it.

As I listened, Seol Lihyang peeked her head out from Tang Sowol's arms and spoke.

"Um. I don't intend to swallow the inner core directly. I plan to use the energy it emits for training."

"A wise choice. Then we should send a specialist with you who knows how to handle it."

"Oh! Thank you. Actually, since it'll be stored for a while, I was thinking of giving it a name... How about calling it 'Eternal Ice Essence'?"

"'Ice Essence' has become a symbol of the North Sea Ice Palace, but given the origin of this core and the exchange between the Ice Palace and the Tang Clan, I'd say the request is on our side. Call it whatever you like."

Seol Lihyang bowed politely to the Ice Palace Mistress for her generous permission, then quickly hid again behind Tang Sowol like a shield.

She's not usually like this... She must've really had a rough time.

The Ice Palace Mistress scratched the back of her head with an awkward look.

“Ahem. Anyway, the second most valuable item is something you've likely already received.”

“Do you mean this heart-guard vest?”

“Yes. Whether due to poison or the berserk chill, a few of the scales were especially infused with energy. I used them to craft that, hoping it might someday aid my benefactors.”

“Well... Ideally, it'll never need to.”

“Haha! That's true.”

The Ice Palace Mistress laughed but soon paused with a hesitant expression.

“The last one... might feel a bit ominous.”

“What is it?”

“One of its eyes.”

“An eye?”

“Didn’t its energy run amok like a deviation and turn its eyes red?”

Indeed. No matter how extraordinary a spirit beast it was, it shouldn’t have been uncatchable by two warriors at the Flowering Stage—especially while it was poisoned by Death-Despair Toxin.

It had devoured countless Azure Cold Serpent, cores and all, which is what triggered that energy outburst.

Its originally transparent blue eyes turned red as a side effect.

“Normally, once the flow of qi stops, such temporary changes revert.”

“Right. No matter how perfected one’s external cultivation may be, once life ends, even a diamond-like body won’t remain hard.”

“But its eye was different. I don’t know why, but the Azure Cold Serpent’s energy lingers in that eye, still violently churning and glowing red.”

“Lingering energy is understandable, but it’s still moving? Then wouldn’t the energy dissipate quickly?”

“It should, but it hasn’t. That’s what’s strange. We don’t know how it’s possible or what to even do with such a massive eye, but that’s why it’s one of the most valuable.”

“I see. That makes sense. What about the other eye? I recall it was still attached but damaged.”

“Nothing special. As a part of a spirit beast, it contained significant qi, but no more than any other flesh.”

Perhaps because only one eye remained, all the energy concentrated there.

After that, the Ice Palace Mistress gave a brief rundown of the other items obtained from the Azure Cold Serpent's corpse.

Aside from the three most valuable items, they packed top-grade leather, scales, bones, blood, and other parts into two full carts.

The Eternal Ice Essence and heart-guard vest could be carried, but the eye required its own wagon. So in total, we'd need three carts to get back to Sichuan.

Of course, we wouldn't be pulling them ourselves—personnel from the Ice Palace would be accompanying us, so there was no need to worry.

A guide, porters, a representative to continue negotiations with the Tang Clan, a craftsman to build a training room for Seol Lihyang...

It was practically a diplomatic envoy. Surely a massive hassle, but our capable chief steward would handle it all.

Just in case, I brought some Azure Cold Serpent meat to give him. Having tasted it, I can vouch for its health benefits.

As the conversation was winding down, I finally broached a topic I'd been putting off.

“This is just out of curiosity...”

“Yes?”

“What do you plan to do with the North Sea Ice Palace moving forward?”

“Haha! I thought you were about to ask something earth-shattering, and it's just that?”

“It feels a little wrong, taking Seol Lihyang away after receiving so much. Like dangling her as bait and reaping the rewards. And it feels like I'm prying into another sect's internal matters.”

“If it's about the Little Palace Mistress seat, even now, I still earnestly hope Lady Seol would take it. But you can't force someone who refuses. And since you didn't just shift the problem elsewhere but solved it entirely, this much is nothing.”

The Ice Palace Mistress shrugged and continued.

“We no longer have Ice Essence, but the threat is gone. So we’ll focus on rebuilding our foundation. With the Azure Cold Serpent and its brood gone, the surrounding chill shouldn’t weaken as it did before.”

“But over time, the qi might still weaken—not because of spirit beasts, but due to the martial arts of Ice Palace members.”

“That’s why Lady Seol taught our Divine Maiden the Glacial True Qi technique.”

At the mention of herself, Seol Lihyang, who had been leaning lazily against Tang Sowol, spoke without adjusting her posture.

“Yep. Glacial True Qi doesn’t just rely on one’s own inner energy. It manipulates the surrounding cold qi too. And the land here is vast—just not very livable.”

“Ah, so you’re drawing qi from harsh lands rich in natural energy. Not an easy task.”

At that, Bing Yerin, who had been silently sipping tea beside the Ice Palace Mistress, responded.

“It won’t be easy. But it’s not impossible. And watching Lady Seol gave me some insights as well.”

“Insights? From watching me?”

Seol Lihyang blinked, then nodded as if something clicked.

“No wonder. I thought maybe I had a knack for teaching martial arts since she picked it up so fast. So that’s why.”

“Your guidance was invaluable. I haven’t trained in sound-based techniques, so I couldn’t fully absorb it, but learning it alongside the original form of Glacial True Qi helped a lot.”

“Hm. Well, you can train on your own now, so you’ll be fine. Do your best.”

Maybe because it was her first time teaching someone rather than learning, Seol Lihyang spoke with a strange mix of pride and genuine encouragement.

Bing Yerin smiled and nodded at the encouragement from someone much younger.

“Yes, I will, Master.”

“Master...”

Though joking, Seol Lihyang seemed genuinely moved as she repeated the word softly.

The original purpose of our trip to the North Sea Ice Palace was twofold.

One: to support Seol Lihyang’s martial arts training.

Two: to establish a potential escape route to the North Sea in case we ever needed to flee the Central Plains.

The first was a complete success. And judging by Bing Yerin and Seol Lihyang’s dynamic, the second goal had been achieved beyond expectations too.

Feeling much lighter, I rose from my seat.

“Well, I’ll be going now.”

“Let’s meet again under better circumstances next time.”

With a simple farewell to the Ice Palace Mistress, we finally began our journey back to Sichuan.

Even from a distance that a Flowering Stage martial artist could barely make out, he was already standing at the gate.

Arms crossed, eyes wide—Tang Jincheon was waiting, looking like a wrathful guardian statue from Shaolin Temple.

My previously light heart suddenly grew heavy.

“What... should I even say to my father-in-law...”

“I’ve been scolded a lot as a kid, so I know. In times like this, the best move is to just apologize. Add a little charm too.”

“I think just apologizing will do.”

“Tsk. What a shame.”

As Tang Sowol sincerely wiped her mouth in disappointment, I flinched slightly.

Every now and then, I’m reminded...

Tang Sowol is no ordinary person either.