

Chapter 1013

They got me today. (3)

The atmosphere in the large chamber was oppressive. Namgung's swordsmen leaned against the walls, looking up at the ceiling in silence. Even with a crowd of people in the room, not a single one of them spoke.

The mood was so heavy that it defied simple description.

In the midst of the somber atmosphere, Namgung Dan sighed without saying a word. He would usually do anything to lighten the mood in such a situation, but the atmosphere was far too grave, even for him.

In normal circumstances, he would have tried his best to lift the solemn mood. Of course, it was Namgung Dowi's role to lead them, but Namgung Dan always played a part in supporting him. However, the current situation left no room for that.

Why wouldn't it? The one who had most contributed to this grim atmosphere was Namgung Dan himself.

He raised his hand and buried his face in it. It was a devastating defeat that words alone couldn't express. The fact that, despite learning the sword for barely five years, the young and inexperienced Tang Soso defeated him without giving him a proper chance for a counterattack had erased any minimal room for excuses.

What could he possibly say in this situation?

Namgung Dan continued to contemplate the situation. The image of Tang Soso's sword striking at him relentlessly still lingered in his mind. What aggravated him even more was the fact that he couldn't find a single aspect of her victory that he could attribute to luck. He was outclassed in the basics — the power behind her strikes, the precision of her swordsmanship, and even her inner strength. He couldn't fathom how, despite dedicating more than twenty years to swordsmanship, he could be outperformed at the most fundamental level by someone like Tang Soso.

«How can something like this happen?»

he mumbled to himself, his voice laden with disbelief.

Then, another voice, filled with despair, broke the silence.

«How... could this happen?»

Namgung Hyuk, with a look of utter disbelief on his face, spoke in a soft tone.

The room fell into an even deeper silence. No one could offer a response to the question he posed.

«Are we... wrong?» he continued.

Namgung Dan finally interrupted, an edge of irritation in his voice.

«Stop it. It's embarrassing.»

Namgung Hyuk's tone conveyed a sense of self-doubt.

«How did we... to Nunim...»

«Enough,»

Namgung Dan cut him off sharply.

«Just stop.»

No one in the room had an answer to Namgung Hyuk's questions. All they could do was stare in silence.

«Are we... wrong?»

«Stop it. It's embarrassing.»

«Hyung-nim...»

«No matter how much we try to explain, the fact won't change. We lost, and it was a crushing defeat.»

The room fell into an even deeper silence, and the weight of the loss continued to hang over them.

«Is there just one more reason? We were weaker than Lady Soso.»

«Doesn't that seem unreasonable to you?»

Namgung Dan couldn't help but chuckle.

'It's unreasonable...'

But what could he do? If something deemed impossible by his knowledge had already happened, there was an inescapable conclusion.

«In that case, it must be our understanding that's wrong.»

«Hyung-nim!»

Namgung Dan gazed at Namgung Hyuk with a resigned expression.

«Why? Are you going to argue it's impossible to accept?»

«Well, it's just...»

«Then are you going to pick up a sword and fight her again yourself?»

Namgung Hyuk finally lowered his head. He knew that, in their current state, they couldn't hope to compete with Soso.

«I really can't understand, Hyung-nim,» Namgung Hyuk murmured.

Namgung Dan sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He also found it difficult to understand.

But...

«There's no need to understand.»

«Yes?»

«Just accept it. The fact that we are weaker than the youngest generation of Hwasan.»

Namgung's swordsmen nodded in agreement.

Namgung Dan continued with a touch of self-reflection in his voice.

«We've already seen them in action in Meahwado, right? Despite that, we never fully acknowledged them. We watched them wipe out the beasts we hadn't even tried to face, and

yet we unreasonably believed there must have been some other reason for their success, not just their skill.»

As he spoke, Namgung Dan's expression was tinged with disappointment.

«We staked our lives to wear down the beasts, and the reason we could shine was that. If the roles were reversed, we might have overwhelmed the enemies too... Well, those kinds of thoughts.»

«Hyung-nim...»

«But...»

Namgung Dan lowered his head slightly.

«Through experience, I understand. Just... that they are stronger than us.»

Namgung Dan's face showed traces of frustration, but he accepted the reality.

I never wanted to admit it, but now I had to accept the truth. Even Tang Soso alone was so strong. In that case, how strong would the disciples who entered Hwasan before Tang Soso be now? And how remarkable is the strength of Hwasan's exceptional Five Swords?

‘Can Young Lord handle them?’

Just a day ago, Namgung Dan would have answered without hesitation, ‘Yes.’ Namgung Dowi is Namgung Dowi, his strength is on a completely different level from other young swordsmen of Namgung.

But now, he couldn't easily have confidence. “But, Hyung-nim,”

Namgung Hyuk spoke as if he was still not convinced.

“Haven't we worked hard too?”

Namgung Dan understood Namgung Hyuk's sense of injustice. Have they been lazy? No, absolutely not. Namgung, who suffered disgrace in the Yangtze Incident, has done his best for the past three years to take revenge on Sapaeryeon. Nevertheless, how can he explain the difference that has become so wide?

“Hyuk-ah.”

“Yes, Hyung-nim.”

“Did you see Soso's hands?”

“...”

Namgung Hyuk fell silent. Namgung Dan scanned everyone here who was watching this.

To persuade someone, you must find reasons that are convincing to yourself as well.

Although he is not completely convinced myself, being in a position to persuade Namgung Hyuk, he saw things he hadn't seen before.

«Let me see your hand.»

«...»

«Extend your hand.»

Namgung Hyuk reluctantly extended his hand. His hand also had several scars. However, the number of these scars was incomparable to the scars on Tang Soso's hand.

Namgung Dan stared at his hand in silence and then slowly spoke.

«I remember lady Soso from the past.»

«What?»

«She was truly beautiful.»

Namgung's swordsmen's eyes momentarily narrowed. Startled by their reaction, Namgung Dan hastily withdrew his hand.

«Oh, no! I didn't mean it that way...!»

Misunderstood, he coughed with a reddened face.

«Her hand used to be pure and clean. Her snow-white hand, seen under magnificent robes, suited the term 'semsem-oksura' [a perfect, white hand] perfectly.»

Some who remembered that Tang Soso nodded in agreement.

«But how is her hand now?»

Many were left with a heavy heart. The Tang Soso they saw now had hands that were just those of a swordsman – rough with calluses and scars.

You could guess just how challenging her training has been by looking at her hand. She has gone through a time so rough, she lost her original hand completely.

Namgung Dan spread his hand wide. He gazed at the scars on it.

«You worked hard, didn't you?»

«...»

«Yes, you did. You must have worked hard. But... it seems that our 'efforts' and their 'efforts' look different. Seeing how clean my hand, which has been training longer, is compared to this, it's clear.»

«...Hyung-nim.»

Namgung Dan felt even more embarrassed.

He thought he had worked hard. He thought he had lived harder than anyone. But his hand didn't show the traces of his efforts.

Even while Hwasan's swordsmen swung their swords relentlessly until both hands were covered in scars, they settled for their ordinary training they had done until then.

«Did we really work hard?»

«...»

«Can we really say proudly in front of them that we worked as hard as they did? We, who complained loudly that our bodies hurt from training that hadn't even lasted a few days, really?»

No one could answer that question.

They knew it too.

The disciples of Heasan were doing the training they had simply criticized as torturing their bodies. Moreover, the intensity was many times higher than what Namgung swordsmen had done for several days.

Namgung Dan let out a deep sigh. Initially, he had started speaking to calm them down, but now his words held true sincerity.

«Discussing talent, environment, and the superiority of swordsmanship has meaning only among those who have made at least the same effort. We do not have the right to discuss swords with them.»

Everyone, their faces flushed, couldn't lift their heads.

«What makes me even more ashamed is...»

Namgung Dan bit his lip.

«Even though we clearly saw the end of those who died for us in Mahwado, we still couldn't let go of our useless pride.»

«That's... «

«Is it really shameful to learn from Hwasan?»

He chuckled as he posed the question.

«At least now, I know there's someone working harder than I am, yet I'm clinging to useless pride. That's far more embarrassing.»

No one responded to his words. They simply lowered their heads.

«I will participate in tomorrow's training.»

«Hyung-nim...»

«I won't force anyone. It's each person's choice. But I... If I can become stronger, if there's a way to reclaim Namgung Clan's name, I won't hesitate. I'm not going to keep babbling like before. I intend to truly test where my limits are.»

Namgung Dan stood up from his seat and turned his gaze to the person sitting in the corner.

Namgung Dowi. He was silently looking at Namgung Dan.

Namgung Dan bit his lip.

'Young Lord probably already knew.'

The unbridgeable gap between Hwasan and Namgung. How frustrating it must have been to watch them cling to their pride.

Namgung Dan bowed deeply to Namgung Dowi and left without any regrets.

A thick silence settled in the place he had left. Namgung's swordsmen, leaning against the wall, were deeply lost in thought.

Sitting in the corner, Namgung Dowi smiled faintly at the sight.

'This is just the starting point.'

After going round and round, they were finally at the starting line. To move forward, you first need to know where you stand.

Tonight will probably be very long for them.

Because no one else can provide the answer to these question. They have to find it for themselves.

However, Namgung Dowi believed in them.

At least if these were people who understood the weight of the name Namgung, they should be respected, no matter what choice they made.

Namgung Dowi was just going to watch their choice...

“Young Lord.”

“Yes?”

At that moment, Namgung Hyuk approached cautiously. Namgung Dowi looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“... What’s the matter?”

He hesitated, as if he was unsure, then carefully spoke.

“Um... Young Lord, if it’s not too much trouble... I’d like to ask something.”