

Chapter 1141

However, what else could be done? (6)

Quietly approaching dense bushes, Baek Cheon lowered his stance. The clashing of weapons became clearer and closer.

‘Are there two of them?’

It didn’t sound like a fight involving multiple people...

Suppressing his presence as much as possible, he cautiously advanced. As he reached closer to where the sound emanated, he carefully leaned against the dense, overgrown bushes.

«Huh?»

In that instant, Baek Cheon witnessed an unexpected sight, inadvertently parting his lips in surprise right before a sound was about to escape.

«Hush.»

A voice came right beside him. Startled, Baek Cheon attempted to scream, but a hand swiftly covered his mouth.

«Shh.»

«...»

Ordinarily, someone like Baek Cheon wouldn’t just allow anyone else to cover his face, but this person was an exception. The one who covered his mouth was none other than Yu Iseol.

«Quiet.»

Baek Cheon nodded silently, and Yu Iseol removed her hand from his mouth. Though her sudden appearance raised questions, it wasn’t crucial at that moment. They redirected their attention to the scene unfolding before them.

Clang! Clash!

Swords clashed in front of them.

The young man in pure white robes was thrown backwards, tumbling relentlessly.

«Ugh!»

Despite the young man’s audible groan, there was no room for delay. Instinctively, he twisted his body.

Kwoooong!

A foot landed precisely where the young man’s face had been just moments ago, leaving a clear mark on the ground. It was a situation too obvious to contemplate what might have happened if the young man hadn’t shifted his body.

However, before they could even feel relieved, the one who stepped on the ground launched a swift kick at the young man’s back.

Thud!

The young man flew like a kicked frog, crashing against a massive tree trunk.

Kwoong!

Sliding down, his body fell limply. Nonchalantly observing this scene, Chung Myung, in a calm tone, finally spoke.

«Get up.»

«...»

«Why? Done already?»

Hearing those words, Seol Sobaek's fingertips twitched.

«Cough!»

As he coughed, blood mixed in. Seol Sobaek staggered, struggling to rise. Despite strength seemingly leaving his body, causing him to waver multiple times, he managed to use his sword as a support and stood up.

«Your reactions are slow,»

Chung Myung said, casting an indifferent glance at him.

«Having less power is inevitable. Your internal energy is lacking, hence the lack of strength. It's also inevitable for your speed to be slow. Your physical strength is lacking. But the delayed reaction, that's entirely your problem.»

Seol Sobaek's hand, holding the sword, trembled. It wasn't a shock from Chung Myung's words — it was simply due to being completely drained and exhausted.

His condition was already a mess.

The young man in the white robe, once as white as the Northern Sea's snow, was now covered in dust and tinted with a dusty yellow hue, with dried black blood in various spots. His originally fair face had lost even its faint flush, appearing nearly as pale as a corpse.

“Why?”

Chung Myung asked in an icy tone, observing Seol Sobaek in such a state.

«Should we stop here?»

«N-no, Dojang-nim!»

Seol Sobaek clenched the sword tightly with trembling hands.

«If you want to stop, you may. You have done enough.»

«No!»

Seol Sobaek gritted his teeth.

«As you said, Dojang-nim, whether it's enough or not is for me to decide!»

“...”

«Indeed, I'm not enough! That's why I need to continue!»

Seol Sobaek insisted.

Chung Myung chuckled.

«In that state?»

«...»

«Let's be honest here. There's no need for all this. Nobody will disregard you just because you're weak. At least not as long as I'm alive, no one from the Northern Sea would dare to touch you.»

Seol Sobaek gritted his teeth.

«And objectively speaking, you've put in enough effort. No one could say you've had an easy time. So, before you harm yourself-«

«No!»

Seol Sobaek cut off Chung Myung's words vehemently, it seemed like a scream.

His intense gaze fixed directly on Chung Myung.

«I have done enough! I've tried my best!»

His words cut through, clear and intense.

«What meaning does that have? All it means is that I am weak to the point I can't even participate in the Ice Palace's training!»

Seol Sobaek's voice carried a tone of frustration.

«Isn't that expected? You started learning martial arts late, and you didn't become the Lord of the palace because you were strong in the first place.»

«Why should that be expected!»

Seol Sobaek shouted in frustration.

«Is there anyone who understands that? How can the lord of the Ice Palace, weak as I am, protect the palace's martial artists and the people of the Northern Sea?»

«...»

«Being young doesn't absolve one of responsibility! Saying that becoming stronger later is just consolation! Ultimately, it means that I am weak now and incapable of doing what needs to be done!»

Seol Sobaek fixed his sword, previously stuck in the ground, and drew it out.

«I will become stronger. As the Lord of the Ice Palace, I will qualify to lead like other Lords. Sooner rather than later!»

«This foolish guy...»

«Thanks to someone I learned from.»

At that moment, Chung Myung lunged towards Seol Sobaek, swinging his sword. Seol Sobaek swiftly raised his sword to block, but in that moment, he was forcefully thrown back. Though he reacted in time, he couldn't withstand the force behind Chung Myung's sword.

«Ugh!»

Seol Sobaek, severely injured, eventually coughed up blood. Observing him, Chung Myung approached with a grim expression.

«Unfair, isn't it?»

«...»

«You clearly reacted, yet you're overpowered. This isn't something I can rectify. So how am I supposed to win? Just keep losing like this?»

Seol Sobaek's eyes trembled slightly. Those words precisely mirrored his feelings.

«But you know, Gangho is naturally like that. Unjust and endlessly unfair. Effort? There's no guarantee that putting in effort will bring just rewards. However...»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«But what else can we do? If all we have is to put in effort, then let's do just that. Isn't that right?»

Seol Sobaek forcibly raised his trembling body.

Cough!

Despite coughing heavily, he resolutely adjusted his posture. Chung Myung calmly inquired as he observed Seol Sobaek's determined stance.

«You know, right? There's almost no chance for you to grow enough to fulfill your role as a Lord before this upcoming war. Let alone performing the role of a proper Lord.»

Seol Sobaek nodded his head.

«Even so, will you still do it?»

«Yes!»

«Even if it's pointless?»

«Yes!»

Seol Sobaek's response didn't contain even the slightest hint of hesitation. Seeing his intense determination, a satisfied smile appeared on Chung Myung's lips.

«Seems like you haven't had enough. Shall we continue until you admit you can't go on anymore?»

Chung Myung dashed straight towards Seol Sobaek. In that instant, Seol Sobaek, gritting his teeth, struck the ground, launching towards Chung Myung.

Watching this one-sided beating disguised as a sparring match, Baek Cheon turned his head to look at Yu Iseol.

«Samae.»

«Yes?»

«...How long have they been like this?»

«How long?»

Yu Iseol slightly tilted her head, as if finding it difficult to understand. However, before Baek Cheon could clarify, her response flowed out.

«From the first day... perhaps the day after.»

«The day after?»

«From the day after the Ice Palace arrived.»

Baek Cheon flinched momentarily, looking back at Seol Sobaek again.

‘So today is not the first day?’

So, has Chung Myung been beating them during the day and dragging Seol Sobaek out for training at night all this while?

No, that's not it.

‘When did they arrive?’

Then, did the Lord of the Ice Palace endure these one-on-one beatings every night?

‘This is insane...’

It's not an unusual sight. He always... no, even more so than Seol Sobaek... was beaten by Chung Myung. But weren't they fundamentally different from each other to begin with? Baek Cheon couldn't imagine that young Lord endure such grueling training.

'But he's enduring, isn't he?'

Baek Cheon was confused about how to perceive this sight. At that moment, Yu Iseol whispered.

«He's growing.»

«...Huh?»

«Day by day. Surprisingly fast.»

Yu Iseol wasn't one to easily praise people. For her to say such words meant that Seol Sobaek was truly growing stronger at a remarkable pace.

'Is it talent?'

No, it couldn't just be that. While talent might be a part of it, Yu Iseol's statement indicated something beyond mere talent. And there was no need to ponder what that might be.

«AAARGH!»

Seol Sobaek charged towards Chung Myung. Not only did he fail to reach him properly, but he also seemed on the verge of collapsing before getting there.

Watching this, Baek Cheon involuntarily clenched his fists.

'To this extent...'

He had exerted himself excessively. He had worked tirelessly to an extreme. No one could deny that Baek Cheon had given his all.

But at that moment, he came to a realization.

'I knew that myself.'

He had worked hard enough, done enough, and secretly believed it was difficult to do more than this.

As Seol Sobaek dragged his feet, determined to swing his sword at least once more, it felt as if Baek Cheon had unintentionally become someone who looked down on others from above.

'I am...'

Baek Cheon, lips slightly trembling, turned to glance at Yu Iseol.

«Why are you watching them, Samae?»

«...At first, it was an accident.»

It probably started that way. Yu Iseol had always been reluctant to showcase her personal training to others. It must have felt uncomfortable to train in the same training grounds as Hwasan, let alone other martial arts factions.

'No, does that mean... despite all that training, Samae continued her personal training?'

Even Baek Cheon himself hadn't been doing that recently.

«After that...»

Yu Iseol seemed about to say something more but closed her mouth, indicating it was difficult to articulate the precise reason.

Yet Baek Cheon seemed to understand why Yu Iseol had watched this scene unfold.

Thud!

Chung Myung kicked Seol Sobaek's side, sending him flying. Then he stopped and spoke to Seol Sobaek, who was lying down.

«Leading people isn't an easy task.»

«...»

«It's not difficult to stand in front. But leading someone is an entirely different matter. It requires more effort than just standing there, never falling behind. You must be certain that you're moving in the right direction.»

«... Yes.»

«Certainty comes from contemplation. It arises from the doubt that what I thought might have been wrong. Someday, when you too contemplate and conclude, you'll reach a point where you'll delude yourself into thinking you're right, just because you've done things the same way until now.»

Hearing this, Baek Cheon clenched his fist.

«Remember this.»

Chung Myung spoke coldly.

«When the position where you stand changes, what was right might become wrong, and what was wrong might become right. And no one knows when that time will come. It might be a year from now, it might be tomorrow, or it might even have been yesterday.»

«...»

«So, if you don't want to be wrong, you must constantly contemplate and doubt.»

Seol Sobaek nodded weakly.

«Leading someone is indeed tough. But if you could manage to do that...»

Chung Myung swiftly twirled his sword.

«The Ice Palace might truly obtain a proper Lord.»

«Of course, that will happen.»

«Words are cheap. Come on.»

«Yes!»

Seol Sobaek gritted his teeth and once again rushed toward Chung Myung.

As Chung Myung watched Seol Sobaek while lowering his sword, and Seol Sobaek moved forward with all his might, a bright moon hung overhead.

Baek Cheon involuntarily closed his eyes.

'I wasn't stagnant. I simply froze in place.'

He gripped the sword, which felt like an extension of his own body. Reacquainting himself with each sensation of the sword, once so familiar that it had become comfortable, Baek Cheon delved deep within himself.