

Chapter 1124

If a friend calls, of course, you should come. (4)

«I asked if there was a problem.»

People from the Beast Palace flinched at Seol Sobaek's cold voice.

They were not foolish enough to misunderstand the situation. It was impossible for these people to not know that this young man was the Lord of the Ice Palace, one of the Five Great Palaces along with the Beast Palace.

However... despite acknowledging the man as the Lord of the Northern Ice Palace, their expressions remained dark as they gazed hesitantly at the cart piled high with layers of animal hides. Even if their opponent was the Lord of the Northern Sea Ice Palace, wasn't there something that needed to be said?

«Well...»

The voice, initially subdued, gradually regained its strength.

«Is there a need to needlessly kill innocent animals like this?»

«I don't understand what you mean.»

Seol Sobaek cut in as though there was no worth in engaging in conversation.

«Discussing whether an animal is guilty or innocent is pointless. Even if there was a point in doing so, do I have to be judged by you for these actions?»

«Oh...»

Chung Myung looked at Seol Sobaek with bewildered expression, and Ogeom, who also remembered Seol Sobaek, widened their eyes in surprise.

'Is that Sobaek?'

'Sasuk, I don't know. Doesn't seem like it, right?'

'Is that the Sobaek I know?'

'Goodness, he used to be so small and cute back then.'

Chung Myung looked at Seol Sobaek with new eyes.

Although in appearance he had grown to the point of being unrecognizable, within Chung Myung's mind, Seol Sobaek remained a child. A child who, despite being the heir of the Northern Sea Ice Palace, had never received proper treatment as the rightful heir.

However, the Seol Sobaek before them now was distinctly different from the innocent child they remembered living in a cabin. He exuded the commanding presence befitting the Lord as he coldly eyed the followers of the Beast Palace.

'How intriguing.'

Four years might be enough time for a young child to become a young man. However, it was an unimaginably short time for an innocent child, who was once so naive, to display such a commanding presence.

Does one's position shape a person? Or perhaps, was the bloodline of the northern sea more influential than Chung Myung had initially thought?

"Then, is it right to kill innocent beasts?"

Yet, despite Seol Sobaek's intimidating aura, the members of the beast palace did not yield easily.

There exists an aspect within each individual that they will never betray. They treated beasts like friends, and they couldn't tolerate the Ice Palace's act of stripping the skins of the animals, passing it off as gifts.

"Aren't you wearing animal skins?"

"We didn't obtain this by killing. It was taken from the animals that died naturally. We don't take the lives of healthy beasts just for their skins."

"Haha."

At that moment, Seol Sobaek laughed as if finding the situation preposterous.

"Are those learning the art of killing people advising not to recklessly kill beasts? What an absurd notion."

"People commit sins, but animals do not.»

Seol Sobaek's eyes turned dark at that moment.

"Seems like the place where you all live is quite abundant."

"... Yes?"

"From the things you talk about, it seems quite prosperous. But what can you do? The Northern Sea, covered in snow and ice, is a place where one must do anything to survive. There's no room to consider the circumstances of mere animals."

Seol Sobaek's voice was bitterly cold.

Indeed, while the Ice Palace enjoyed a rather affluent life in the Northern Sea, Seol Sobaek was not an ordinary resident in the Ice Palace. Moreover, he lived a life unrelated to the Palace until he reached certain age, experiencing firsthand how the people of the Northern Sea lived.

Therefore, he knew. He knew how difficult it was to survive on that frostbitten land where not even a single crop could grow properly.

How hollow would the words of those from Yunnan, stating not to kill innocent beasts, sound to someone like Seol Sobaek?

"Are you suggesting we're wrong?"

"Well, not exactly. But..."

Seol Sobaek turned his head slightly. Through a gap in the warehouse door, the silhouettes of large animals could be seen.

"Did you bring them?"

"Yes, but..."

"How amusing."

Seol Sobaek sneered.

«The resources needed to raise such large animals must be considerable. As far as I know, even Yunnan wasn't doing well until recently.»

«What do you mean?»

«If there's enough food to feed those animals, it should be shared with those starving. Yet, amidst all that difficulty, you seem to take great care of the beasts. Are animals more important to you than people?»

«If you've said all you wanted...»

«What will happen once it's all said?»

The atmosphere grew icy. Seol Sobaek spoke in a chilling tone.

«Though it's said that the Beast Palace is a place of freedom, this seems less like freedom and more like self indulgence. Even if there were issues here, is it proper for mere disciples like you to directly question me, the Lord of the Ice Palace?»

«T-That's...»

«The term 'presumptuous' seems fitting here. Thanks to it, I've come to understand what kind of place the Beast Palace truly is.»

«T-That's an exaggeration!»

«An exaggeration?»

Seol Sobaek bared his teeth, emitting a cold aura.

«So it's fine that you disregarded the Northern Sea Ice Palace, but for me to speak recklessly about the Nanman Beast Palace — is that excessive? I didn't realize how magnificent the Beast Palace is. I'm curious. Just how much more can you disregard the Ice Palace?»

«...»

“At this point, it seems I must prove that the Ice Palace isn't a place to be disregarded, right?”

Intense tension filled the air. Just as Seol Sobaek, with eyes as cold as the ice walls of the Northern Sea, stepped forward, someone spoke from behind.

«Hey, why do we have to fight as soon as we see each other? Let's get along well.»

«...Fight? No way!»

The moment Chung Myung's voice echoed from behind, the chill emitted by Seol Sobaek dissipated as if washed away. Seol Sobaek swiftly changed the atmosphere, turning towards Chung Myung with a humble smile.

“Oh, we were just having a brief conversation. How could I do such a thing with Dojang-nim here!”

“...”

“Oh, come on, surely not. Hehe.”

The members of the Ice Palace, who had been admiring the suddenly grown young lord, lost their vigor. Their shoulders slumped powerlessly, their eyes moistened.

‘He's having another bout of temper.’

‘Why does it always have to be related to Hwasan?’

‘Why does this keep happening!’

Who could truly understand their feelings?

Even to their eyes, Seol Sobaek had truly grown remarkably. There were undoubtedly some who initially disapproved of a child ascending to the position of the Lord merely due to the blood of the former Lord without any real experience in the Ice Palace.

However, now, no one in the Ice Palace doubts that Seol Sobaek will become an outstanding lord. The excellence he has displayed so far has eliminated any lingering doubts.

Unlike the former lords who grew up in the comfort of the Ice Palace and failed to understand the lives of those living in the actual Northern Sea, Seol Sobaek understood the hardships of the Northern Sea inhabitants better than anyone. That’s why he is becoming someone who takes care of the people more than any previous lords.

He is growing into someone who protects them from what they need to be protected.

While it may not be perfect right now, Seol Sobaek was being evaluated as perhaps someone who, someday, could become more perfect than anyone else of his time as the current lord of the Ice Palace.

Except for one thing.

‘Except for Hwasan.’

It was incomprehensible why such a rational, logical, and warm-hearted person would lose his composure just because of the word “Hwasan.” It was the same with those animal skins.

-M-My Lord. People of Hwasan are from the warm Central Plains, but do we really need these... leather goods?

-Hmm, and?

-Well, it’s just that they’re hard to obtain, and everyone is exhausted... They’re so rare...

-And so?

-It’s not that I don’t want to do it, but is this really necessary?

-So?

-...Well, I’ll do it.

Those are not items easily dismissed as just precious.

How many nights did the Ice Palace warriors endure to procure those hides? Creatures with such hides are mostly nocturnal, hardly seen during the day!

In the already frigid Northern Sea, imagine the lunacy of hunting these beasts during blizzards in the dead of night?

Usually, isn’t it an effort to ensure the Ice Palace’s comfort, their sustenance, yet the mention of Hwasan turns the Lord into a madman, urging the palace warriors to hunt on bitterly cold nights amid blizzards?

«And, well... Even so, your words might seem too extreme.»

«Oh, is that so?»

Seol Sobaek, upon hearing the subtly discouraging yet clear words from Chung Myung, couldn't help but laugh happily. At his inexplicable reaction, Chung Myung tilted his head in confusion.

«Why are you laughing?»

«It seems like I've done well.»

«Huh?»

«I made an effort. Normally, we should remain warm-hearted, but to foes or enemies, isn't it right not to offer even a hint of warmth?»

«Um...?»

Well... That might be true, but... the Beast Palace isn't exactly an enemy, is it? Nevertheless, whether Seol Sobaek understood Chung Myung's sentiments or not, he flashed an even brighter smile.

«It was truly challenging, but after consistent effort, to receive such words from Dojang-nim. Truly, your words about hard work never betraying were right, Dojang-nim.»

«W-what effort?»

«Of course, your effort.»

«...Huh? What kind of...»

«I tried to emulate the way you presented yourself. When you fought, you were just like this! At that time the bastards from Demonic Cult were treated just like that!»

«...»

«I'm still lacking, but if I keep trying, someday I might become like you, Dojang-nim.»

Chung Myung looked blankly at Seol Sobaek, who was smiling brightly.

Shifting his gaze slightly, Chung Myung noticed the Ice Palace warriors who seemed ready to bury their heads into the ground, unable to bear witnessing such a sight. The stark contrast between their flushed faces and pristine white attire was evident.

«Me?»

«Yes!»

«...And I was like this?»

Chung Myung turned to look behind him at Ogeom, but they, as if finding it difficult to explain, evaded his gaze and seemed lost in their own thoughts.

«Well, it's not entirely the same.»

«A bit... um, slightly similar.»

«I understand what he was trying to imitate... yes, I get it.»

«Of all things...»

Chung Myung stared bewilderedly at Ogeom, then shifted his gaze back to Seol Sobaek. Seeing him blinking with large eyes and smiling, an image of a large puppy vigorously wagging its tail involuntarily popped into Chung Myung's mind.

A voice devoid of soul escaped Chung Myung's lips.

«...Really?»

— Now, it's all the way to the Northern Sea...

'...No, you bastard. I've never been like that, have I?'

Woah...

Woah... This is crazy, really...