

## Chapter 1134

Let's get to know each other better! (4)

“Ha...”

Chung Myung stretched with an endlessly refreshed expression, even his face seemed to shine.

«Now it feels like I might survive.»

«...»

«So, you went a bit too far there, Sasuk.»

At Chung Myung's fleeting glance and mocking words, tears formed in Baek Cheon's eyes.

‘You asked for it, you little devil.’

There's a time to hold back, and there is time to fight, and now this... It's all too much. What music should we dance to anyway?

Of course, well... Baek Cheon wasn't entirely innocent either. It might have been a bit excessive. Or... actually, it was too excessive.

«Anyway, those who wield swords don't understand moderation. If you let them loose, they'll just crawl as far as you allow.»

Thud. Thud.

Chung Myung glanced around at the sprawled figures, feeling a strange sense of accomplishment as he witnessed the messy aftermath.

If all these people had been in normal condition, even if Chung Myung had shook hands with other leaders or elders, it wouldn't have been possible to clean up this mess so swiftly.

But these lunatics had been going at each other relentlessly for nearly ten days, without sleep, so much so that a slight push from the side could have toppled them. So, facing those who conserved their strength while leisurely watching wasn't an option.

«Especially you! You, punk!»

Chung Myung kicked the person who collapsed at his feet. Im Sobyong, half out of consciousness, rolled lifelessly as Chung Myung kicked him.

«You should control yourself! Setting fire while people are sleeping?»

«It... was a strategy used since ancient times...»

«You still have some spirit left. Quite persistent. Just die, will you?»

Chung Myung kicked Im Sobyong once more and turned away with a satisfied expression on his face. Tang Gunak approached him with a peculiar expression.

«You've worked hard.»

«Mm.»

Tang Gunak scratched his cheek with uncharacteristically suspicious expression on his face.

«I did as I was asked, but... I'm not sure if it was a wise decision.»

«For that, you seem rather pleased.»

Tang Gunak blushed slightly and cleared his throat. Of course, now he thought this way, but moments ago, it felt satisfying to hurl wooden coins at Tang clan's youngsters.

«Kids usually grow up getting a few hits.»

«Kids, huh...»

Tang Gunak looked at the scattered bodies with a subtle expression. If they were common people they would have already formed families and had children by their age. Could these sorts be called 'kids'...?

“We didn't rely on emotions — it's a form of training, nothing more.”

“...That's true.”

Tang Gunak nodded at Maeng So's words. Though, of course... the statement that they didn't rely on emotions stung a little.

“Listen carefully, everyone.”

It was questionable whether the unconscious ones could hear, but Chung Myung didn't mind and shouted,

“We'll continue training the same way tomorrow. Don't exaggerate and all come out.”

“...”

“As it seems you've pushed yourselves to the limit and still have pent up energy, I'll properly help you release it. That's all!”

“...”

“Let's go.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Oh, feels refreshing. Hehehe.”

Chung Myung gathered the leaders of all the factions and walked away from the training grounds.

Looking at Jo Geol, who was lying on the ground covered in dust, a murmur slipped out, “...you jerk.”

Everyone inwardly resonated fiercely with that sentiment.

“Is it really okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone seems to have reached their limits now. Repeating the same training in such a situation...”

Tang Gunak's worry was about something other than what he said.

Chung Myung referring to the same training wasn't about engaging in sparring amongst themselves. It meant that starting tomorrow, Chung Myung, along with other sect leaders and elders, would subject them to intense training.

«Is there a problem?»

«...Shouldn't we give them a break?»

«Oh, Lord, your confidence is excessive.»

«Hmm?»

«Do you think we could win against them if they weren't in that state?»

Tang Gunak fell silent, his expression tightening in contemplation.

«It won't be easy.»

«We have to toughen them up to be even more formidable in the future.»

«...Seems like your intentions are a bit impure.»

Chung Myung replied sharply.

«That's the essence of it.»

Tang Gunak tilted his head.

«What does that even mean?»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«Now, everyone has a good sense of the others' skills. After testing each other's skills, they've seen them all the way until they hit the bottom.»

«That's true.»

Admittedly, it might have been excessive, but it was the point.

«That's as far as I thought it through. It turned out a bit more extreme than anticipated... well, quite a bit, actually.»

«Very much so.»

«To be honest, I didn't expect them to be that crazy. Even if it's Hwasan, but why are they so?»

«Have you heard the saying 'near the inkstone everything turns black'?»

«Well, Lord Tang is somewhat shrewd.»

As Tang Gunak, lost for words, turned with a troubled expression, Chung Myung shrugged.

«Well, it had to go that far. Within mere superficial courtesy, people fail to truly understand one another.»

«But hasn't it left nothing but ill feelings?»

«That's why continued training is necessary.»

«Huh?»

Chung Myung smirked.

«Do you know when a person truly needs a companion?»

«Well...»

«When you don't have the strength to lift a finger and an overwhelming enemy stands before you, something you can't handle alone.»

Chung Myung stated calmly.

«That's when anyone becomes earnestly needed. Regardless of whether it's someone you trained with yesterday or someone you've regarded as an enemy, that gratitude and warmth can't be replaced.»

Tang Gunak silently nodded. Although he hadn't experienced it personally, he could understand it. Isn't it evident just by contemplating how Namgung clan, trapped in

Maehwado, reacted to Hwasan? Since then, Namgung regarded Hwasan as an unparalleled benefactor.

«In that case, people naturally band together.»

«...So, that means...»

Understanding Chung Myung's words, Tang Gunak narrowed his eyes slightly.

«It seems people need a common enemy to unite.»

«Yes, a formidable enemy that they wouldn't dare to face...»

Chung Myung looked up at the distant sky.

When Demonic Cult first appeared, the Central Plains were in complete disarray. Or more accurately, chaos reigned supreme during the early stages of the war against Demonic Cult. There's no need to seek reasons. To the dominant forces of Gangho, it was more uncomfortable to deal with the neighbors they'd been growling at than the suddenly emerged lunatics.

Perhaps that's why Hwasan didn't find its place alongside the ongoing battlefields.

However, as the war persisted and the magnitude of power possessed by Demonic Cult became apparent, and most importantly, as they understood what kind of being the Heavenly Demon was, relationships between factions began to reconcile to some extent.

In places other than the battlefield, perhaps it's different, but at least those at the forefront of the battlefield unquestioningly entrusted their backs to the disciples of rivalry sects, without any questions asked.

Such camaraderie is born in dire circumstances.

'Well... those guys who caused all that trouble were utterly crushed on the summit of Hundred Thousand Mountains.'

This surely contributed to the chaos that followed, Hwasan's destruction and devastation of all the other sects. If there were any survivors from the initial disaster, they might have become heroes of Gangho and possibly led future generations.

The real cause of the whole situation might have been that only cowards and incompetent fools, who didn't join the frontlines, survived and ended up leading the factions.

Anyway, the conclusion is that the existence of the Heavenly Demon was what externally united the divided factions in Gangho, even if it was only on the surface.

«Likely, it will end up that way again this time. There's the looming threat of Sapaeryeon and Jang Ilso, and who knows if the Heavenly Demon will return.»

«Hmm.»

«But if we try to unite at that time, it'll be too late. It won't be just taking some beating like now — it will cost lives.»

How many sacrifices and how much bloodshed did it take for the factions to unite?

«One has to experience it in advance. Witnessing the lowest point of one's allies, fighting against a formidable enemy, even situations where just having someone who fought alongside you becomes a source of strength...»

«...»

«While it may not compare to firsthand experience, isn't it better than doing nothing?»

Chung Myung turned to look at Tang Gunak and Maeng So. Before Chung Myung could speak, Maeng So intervened.

«If you're going to do it, do it properly. Don't regret losing your fighters later.»

«Yes.»

Chung Myung grinned.

«Whatever... Though it might be hard to be a target of resentment, but isn't it better than watching the kids die?»

Whether it was intended or not, these words became a sharp dagger that pierced through Tang Gunak's and Maeng So's hearts.

As Chung Myung had pointed out, the foremost duty of a martial arts sect leader is to protect the disciples. It's not about fear of hearing complaints or withdrawing when authority falters. Even if one witnesses insults and disciples rising in rebellion, they must guide them towards the path of survival.

Yes, that was the rightful course of action.

However, Tang Gunak and Maeng So hadn't done so until now. They merely withdrew, claiming it was an impossible task, something only Hwasan could accomplish.

«So, it was this side.»

«What do you mean?»

Seeing Chung Myung feigning ignorance, Tang Gunak stifled a bitter smile.

«I thought you were angry with those kids.»

Indeed, it seemed Chung Myung's anger was directed toward the leaders of each martial arts sect. Punishing those kids today was a form of retribution for their unruliness, but ultimately, it served as a warning to the sect leaders who had facilitated the situation to this extent.

«I understand what you mean now.»

Tang Gunak let out a deep sigh.

He knew the clan needed to change as well. Considering what they would face in the future, it would be difficult to survive as they were. However, it seemed that somewhere along the line of envisioning that change, he had inadvertently excluded himself.

He believed that if Chung Myung could lead the disciples of the Tang clan, the clan itself would undergo a change.

'That's unlikely.'

When the upstream water is murky, how could the downstream ever turn clear? It was such an obvious thought upon reflection.

«Embarrassing, isn't it?»

«You speak in riddles.»

Tang Gunak chuckled at Chung Myung shrugging and pretending not to know anything.

Maeng So nodded seriously in agreement, seemingly sharing Tang Gunak's thoughts.

‘We didn’t deserve the same treatment as Nokrim King and Young Lord of Namgung clan.’ There was no need to chastise them separately. They were already making efforts to blend in and change.

Realizing how pitiful he had been, laughing at their attempts once he understood their intentions, made him feel fiery with embarrassment.

How pathetic it was to laugh at those receiving the same treatment for trying to change while remaining stuck in one’s own swap, unable to join them.

Though the kids received the punishment today, it was truly Tang Gunak and Maeng So who faced the consequences.

“Ahem.”

Tang Gunak cleared his throat loudly, resolved as he looked at Chung Myung.

«...As you say, perhaps we should become formidable enemies. Even if a bit of animosity builds up.»

«It’s better than fighting among themselves.»

Chung Myung chuckled as Tang Gunak and Maeng So seemed to grasp the idea.

«If you’re going to do it, I’ll entrust it to you.»

«Understood.»

«Leave it to me.»

Nodding, Tang Gunak felt something new once again.

‘In the end, all this training wasn’t about everyone coming together in unison.’

Clashes, fights, and petty disagreements. Then, facing a formidable enemy and joining forces with those they had been fighting against until yesterday.

This was something they would inevitably experience against Demonic Cult. Chung Myung had orchestrated the pains they would eventually face, much more gently, similar to what Cheonumaeng would endure in the future on this very battlefield.

The reasons behind the irksome, burdensome, and agonizing process were all too clear.

There was a single principle guiding all of Chung Myung’s actions: saving even just one more disciple of Hwasan. Now, the subjects to be saved were not just the disciples of Hwasan.

It wasn’t merely lip service — it was heartfelt.

«...I misunderstood you a bit.»

«You did?»

«It’s embarrassing, but I genuinely thought you were furious and punishing the kids without considering anything else.»

«...»

«Now that I think about it, even the punishment of the kids today was according to your plan...»

Tang Gunak paused mid-sentence, noticing Chung Myung rolling his eyes and avoiding eye contact.

«... You?»

«Ha... Haha! Of course! It was planned! I had it in mind all along!»

«...»

«Oh my, I've been caught. Embarrassing.»

As Chung Myung turned away and started to leave, Tang Gunak, staring blankly at his retreating back, soon burst into laughter.

«I can't stop you.»

He straightened his posture, raising his head high.

He understood Chung Myung's intentions. So now, what he had to do was clear.

«Well then, for a while, shall I try being the devil's advocate?»

Tang Gunak clenched his fist with determination.

The sound of his knuckles cracking seemed to foretell the future of the disciples of Cheonumaeng, unaware of what lay ahead.