

## Chapter 1104

If it's such a reward... Well, it's worth accepting. (4)

Thud.

Tang Pae collapsed right there, sprawled out.

«Ugh...»

Exhaustion made it difficult to even breathe properly. Dust swirled in through the nostrils, but there was no strength left to even turn the head to the side.

«Tsk.»

Soon enough, Chung Myung's dissatisfied tongue-clicking brushed past his ears.

«Weakness leads to downfall...»

His voice felt like needles piercing through both ears and body.

«What? Handling poison and throwing daggers delicately?»

«...»

«You babble nonsensical things. You think poison flies on its own, and daggers dance by themselves when left alone, huh? In the end, whether it's poison or dagger, it's people who use them. How will those with trembling hands and pathetic stamina use these techniques?»

«Ugh...»

«It's not that delicate martial arts don't require stamina — on the contrary, delicate martial arts demand good stamina. The martial arts of your family can break apart from the slightest tremor. I, watching from the outside, know that, so why don't you, the practitioners of this martial art, understand that?»

Chung Myung scanned the fallen people and then turned away.

«We'll start again when the sun rises tomorrow. Anyone arriving late will be kicked out.»

Finally glancing briefly at Chung Myung's retreating figure, Tang Pae once more pressed his face into the ground. A concerned voice was heard nearby.

«.....Hyeong-nim.»

«.....»

«Hyeong-nim... Are you alright?»

«Do I look alright?»

«.....»

«Ugh...»

Struggling, Tang Pae made his way back to the lodging, barely moving his legs.

He wanted nothing more than to wash his face and sleep, just to collapse in that spot covered in dirt. What barely held back that impulse was the sense of responsibility as the Young Lord of Sichuan Tang Clan.

No matter how tough things got, could a member of the Tang Clan just lie down and sleep on the training ground?

«I'm dying, I'm dying.»

«So am I.»

«Good grief!»

Tang Pae shouted in surprise. Soon, he saw Tang Jan lying on the bed. Tang Pae clenched his trembling chest and said angrily.

«What are you doing? Without a notice in someone else's place!»

«Mmm.»

Struggling, Tang Jan rose from the bed. His arm gripping the bed trembled, pointing to his extreme exhaustion.

«It's nothing.»

Tang Jan, taking a breath, furrowed his brow impatiently.

“The dissatisfaction among the younger siblings and our seniors is reaching a boiling point.»

«.....»

«It seems everyone finds it hard to speak directly in front of the Young Lord, but lately, complaints are pouring out behind your back whenever there's a spare moment.»

«Well...»

Tang Pae let out a deep sigh.

«What kind of complaints?»

«Well... We all understand that this training is necessary, but... it seems the situation is just too harsh, isn't it?»

At Tang Jan's words, Tang Pae furrowed his brow in silence. Truthfully, he understood what Tang Jan meant. There's always a certain form to be adhered to, even in necessary training. Following instructions of the third generation disciple of Hwasan doesn't exactly have a pleasing appearance.

«It seems the passing observers' whispers are greatly affecting their pride. Especially our seniors.»

«Hmm.»

«So, the thing is...»

Tang Jan glanced at Tang Pae discreetly. His occasional glances suggested that perhaps he hadn't come here entirely by his own choice but might have been pushed by the seniors.

«Could you possibly talk to the Patriarch about this?»

«The Patriarch?»

«Yes.»

Tang Jan nodded his head.

«Most of the training currently conducted by Chung Myung Dojang is something even the Patriarch could do. Of course, we understand that he has a busy schedule with official duties, but still...»

«It's impossible.»

Before Tang Jan could finish his sentence, Tang Pae abruptly cut him off.

«It's not worth mentioning. Don't ever bring up such matters in front of me again.»

«Hyeong-nim.»

«Even if you say it.»

«But...»

Tang Pae firmly shook his head.

In truth, as the Young Lord, it wasn't his place to forbid discussion on specific matters. It was part of his role to listen to what the Lord of the family couldn't address and relay those issues to him.

However, on this particular matter, he wasn't willing to compromise.

«Are you doubting our father's abilities right now?»

«Th-that's not what I meant! I was just...»

«So, do you believe our father is unaware of the dissatisfaction among the disciples right now and is simply observing?»

«Well...»

Tang Pae narrowed his eyes.

«In every matter, there is someone appropriate. If our father deems Hwasan Geomhyeop as suitable for this matter, members of the clan should simply follow his word.»

Tang Jan nodded silently for the time being. To counter this statement means challenging the authority of the family head. It might be different elsewhere, but in the Sichuan Tang Clan, it was unimaginable.

After encountering Chung Myung Dojang, or rather Hwasan Geomhyeop, much had changed, but initially, the Poison King, Tang Gunak, was an absolute symbol of authority within the clan. Especially after dismantling the Council of Elders and completely controlling the clan, no one dared to challenge that authority.

However, despite nodding, there was still a clear lack of conviction in Tang Jan's expression. Observing this, Tang Pae firmly set his point.

«Jan, you don't understand.»

«It's not that, but... Hyeong-nim.»

«Is that petty pride really that important?»

«... Hyeong-nim?»

Tang Pae looked at Tang Jan with cold eyes.

«Being criticized in front of people for rolling on the ground — affects the dignity of the family? Straining yourself, following the instructions of Hwasan's third generation disciple, does that make you feel uncomfortable?»

«I... I...»

«You've got a chip on your shoulder.»\*

Tang Jan fell silent. Tang Pae's icy gaze made it impossible for him to say anything.

«Pride isn't preserved just by wearing fine clothes and strutting around arrogantly. Feeling ashamed when your clothes gets dirty or you look a bit foolish — why then don't you feel shame when the once-disregarded Hwasan is surpassing and moving ahead of us?»

Tang Jan couldn't offer any response.

«Our family is supposed to be the foremost ally of Hwasan.»

«Yes, Hyeong-nim. I understand. So...»

«But during this recent expedition to Gangnam, the Sichuan Tang Clan wasn't there. It was Namgung and Nokrim who stood by Hwasan. Do you understand the significance of that?»

«...»

«Of course, the Lord could have intervened directly. But... do you really think it was right for our Lord to assist Hwasan Geomhyeop on this mission to Gangnam? Really?»

«T-that's not...»

«Exactly. That should have never happened. So, I'll ask you. Why didn't our clan participate in this crucial task of blocking the Demonic Cult and safeguarding the Central Plains?»

«Well, um...»

Once again, Tang Jan couldn't respond. He knew the answer but lacked the courage to voice it. Yet, Tang Pae stated firmly, like rubbing salt in a fresh wound.

«Because we are weak, you and I.»

«...»

«Isn't that so?»

«Yes, you're right.»

Tang Jan bowed his head deeply.

Of course, the elders of the clan could have stepped up. But what Hwasan Geomhyeop desired wasn't just someone strong — it was someone who could align hands and feet with them. If Tang Pae and Tang Jan were as strong as Baek Cheon, would Chung Myung have really set off for Gangnam leaving them behind? No, he wouldn't have.

Both Tang Pae and Tang Jan were already sensing it. They couldn't join the mission because they couldn't be trusted.

«After facing that disgrace... are you feeling proud now? Is that something the direct lineage of the Sichuan Tang Clan dares to bring up?»

Anger simmered in his voice. Tang Jan couldn't muster the courage to lift his bowed head. Despite the hint anger in his voice, there was no room for any rebuttal against Tang Pae's words.

«Namgung's Young Lord, Namgung Dowi, even after recently losing his father, carried the Namgung name and headed for Gangnam. He already represents Namgung's name. But...»

A bitter laugh escaped from Tang Pae's lips.

«Here, my own younger brother of the same age is blabbering about feeling embarrassed and losing face while rolling on the ground in front of people. Where does this difference even come from?»

«Hyeong-nim...»

«Today, Namgung received the same training as us. But they finished their training much earlier and returned in decent condition. You saw that too, right?»

«... Yes.»

«Even after seeing that, such words still spill from your lips.»

Tang Pae's cold voice now felt like it was piercing Tang Jan's heart. It was rare for Tang Pae to display such intense anger.

«Does your pride feel wounded?»

«...»

«My pride is hurt too. But the reason of my wounded pride isn't mere dignity. It's because I witnessed with my own eyes the situation of the Sichuan Tang Clan! And the warriors of our clan were lagging behind in comparison to other factions.»

Tang Pae gritted his teeth.

«Is there anything more humiliating for a warrior than being considered weak?»

«H-Hyeong-nim. But we differ from them in the martial arts we practice... We...»

«Shut your mouth.»

Tang Pae's voice was chilling.

«There's not a single mistake in what Hwasan Geomhyeop says. We've always found ways to cover up like that. If our skills are lacking, we create more potent poisons, develop deadlier hidden techniques. So, tell me, has our clan ever once stood at the top?»

Tang Jan was speechless.

«If you can't learn anything from the one in front of you, it's over. You don't need to come for training starting tomorrow. No, not just you, tell everyone involved in training to stop. I'll take responsibility.»

«H-Hyeong-nim.»

Tang Pae sternly continued,

«But I will continue this training until the end. Rolling on the ground means nothing. Even if I have to swallow mud, it doesn't matter. I will become stronger. Even if I were to die, once I become the head of this clan, I won't ever entertain the notion of being weaker than Namgung's Young Lord or inferior to Baek Cheon of Hwasan.»

«...»

«Spread the word. However!»

With his dark brows furrowing, Tang Pae glared at Tang Jan. His face seemed to reflect the demeanor of the Poison King Tang Gunak.

«If there's anyone looking down on Hwasan Geomhyeop, who voluntarily endured hardships for things he didn't need to do, tell them, without needing the Lord to intervene, I, as the Young Lord, will personally take action. If those who bear the surname 'Tang' act like ungrateful beasts, naturally they will be treated like beasts.»

«...»

«Do you understand?»

«I will keep it in mind.»

«Go.»

«...»

«Go!»

Still bowing his head, Tang Jan left. Watching him leave, Tang Pae sighed heavily.

It might have been excessive, but it was unavoidable. Now was the time for others, including Tang Jan, to except the reality.

«It's not easy.»

He let out another long sigh.

«Hmm.»

Chung Myung clicked his tongue while lying on the eaves.

«Tsk.»

He raised the liquor bottle with an expression that clearly conveyed his annoyance.

Unfortunately, despite shaking it for quite a while, not a single drop of alcohol came out.

«Tsk.»

He was about to try again, when suddenly a voice interrupted his thoughts.

«Here you are.»

«Huh?»

Turning at the unexpected voice, Chung Myung saw Tang Gunak who had appeared next to him, smiling and offering the liquor bottle.

«... What's all this about?»

«Mind if I join you?»

«Sure.»

He sat beside Chung Myung.

«Let's drink together. I feel like having a bit today too.»

«It would be nice to drink with the Lord.»

«Is that so?»

Tang Gunak smiled and took a sip from the bottle. Then, gazing at the night sky, he spoke.

«You must be having a tough time too.»

Chung Myung looked at him, taken aback by the abrupt comment.

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\*In Korean he says “배때기에 기름이 쫘구나” — “There is oil in your stomach”. I guess it's something about being angry and frustrated. So chip on one's shoulder (according to Cambridge Dictionary) fits this narrative.