

Chapter 1004

Once again. (4)

Beyond the broad Yangtze River, the sun that was gradually setting cast a crimson glow upon the world.

Under that crimson light, Namgung Clan's disciples were scattered across the courtyard of the manor. It was undeniably... an odd sight, to see the Namgung Clan and 'scattered' used in the same sequence. But can one really deny what has already taken place?

Namgung Dowi glanced around with a blank expression on his face. Without exception, his disciples had faces devoid of spirit.

'It's only natural.'

The shock of defeat was not all that profound. There was no significant blow to one's pride. Hwasan had now become an undeniable force. No matter how renowned they were as Namgung Clan, there was no need for them to feel shame for losing to Hwasan.

Yet, the reason why none of them here could regain their composure lay not in the outcome but in the process.

Not a single one had emerged victorious.

It would have been easier if they had all been unknown martial artists who didn't understand the concept of honor. Then, they could have raised their voices and said that it wasn't such a great feat to lose in a simple martial arts competition. Unfortunately, they were disciples of Namgung, who knew the meaning of shame.

'It must be quite shocking.'

No matter how high their status, some of them were seriously injured and had to withdraw from training. However, even so, the shock did not diminish. Those from Hwasan, who ruthlessly defeated them without breaking a sweat, are they not even younger than them? And above all...

«Pft!»

«...»

«Pfwup...»

A vein throbbed on Namgung Dowi's forehead. Clearly, this situation was what he had hoped for, but when he saw Chung Myung's round eyes, mouth covered with both hands, a deep-seated frustration welled up inside him, something he couldn't express in words.

«Hehehehe!»

In the end, the ever-so-polite Baek Cheon scolded him gently.

«Chung Myung.»

«Hmm?»

«It's not the way of a martial artist to mock the defeated. Stop it.»

«Oh, look at our Dong Ryong being merciful because he won.»

«...That's not it...»

«No, really. We can see your lips twitching, you know? Why don't you just be honest and say, 'Namgung Clan is nothing special. It seems the Southern Edge guys might be better?' and laugh about it?»

«...»

Namgung Dowi stared blankly at Baek Cheon.

Dojang? Why don't you refute it? Is there a reason you shouldn't show your expression to us?»

Refute it, Dojang?

Chung Myung chuckled and looked around at everyone.

«Well, it was a bit bland.»

«...»

«Now that we've won, you shouldn't have any complaints, right?»

Naturally, there shouldn't be any complaints. After all, it was a fair and square match, and it was Namgung who had accepted the challenge.

But human emotions don't always flow in a rational manner.

«Oh?»

Chung Myung gave his attention to the one person who was looking at him with dissatisfied eyes.

«Do you have something to say?»

«...»

Namgung Dan stared at Chung Myung with uneasy expressions and then spoke.

«It's not so much about complaints...»

«Hmm?»

«...I just can't understand why this result took place.»

«Huh?»

Chung Myung narrowed his eyes. Namgung Dan looked embarrassed as he continued to speak.

“We've trained our hardest all this time. We've pushed ourselves, suppressing the desire to rest and letting go of complacency. Otherwise, we couldn't have become Namgung Clan's disciples.”

“So?”

“But... we can't understand why there's such a difference.”

Namgung Dan bit his lip in frustration. It might have been acceptable if this had happened before experiencing Maehwado, but after going through Maehwado, he found this situation even more incomprehensible.

“We've experienced firsthand how someone without strength can become utterly miserable. We can confidently say that our determination to win is second to none in any faction.”

“...”

That's why they had given their all in this match. It wasn't just for the sake of pride. They knew that to raise Namgung Clan back to its former glory, they had to work harder than anyone else.

Yet, facing such a devastating defeat, it was inevitable that Namgung Dan felt twisted inside.

“What did we do wrong?”

Namgung Dan asked with boiling frustration, his voice naturally rising. It was a reaction anyone would have if they were in his shoes.

But strangely, Chung Myung's response to his words was beyond perplexing.

“What did you say?”

He tilted his head, picked his ear and blew on his finger.

Namgung Dan, clearly disheartened by Chung Myung's overtly disapproving response, slumped his shoulders. Ogeom looked at him with faces that could only be described as pitiable. While they might have been able to enjoy the perspective of the victor, having gone through these countless experiences themselves, they were emotionally invested in the outcome.

At that moment, Chung Myung snapped his fingers.

«Hey.»

«Yes?»

«Come here.»

Namgung Dan approached Chung Myung, walking with a hesitant gait.

«Come closer.»

«...»

Namgung Dan, standing right in front of Chung Myung, looked at him with a puzzled expression.

Chung Myung raised his hand slightly.

«From now on, I'm going to hit you on the head.»

«Yes?»

«Try to stop me.»

«...»

«I've told you, and you have the will, so naturally, you should be able to stop it, right? Isn't that so?»

In an instant, flames seemed to flicker in Namgung Dan's eyes.

‘There's a limit to disregarding someone!’

No matter how strong Chung Myung was, even capable of defeating the Black Dragon King, it was strange if he wouldn't be able to prevent it when Chung Myung clearly told him where he was going to hit and how he was going to attack. It wasn't as if he was going to use his inner energy to strike forcefully!

«Alright...»

Kuooooong!

A thud.

«Dan-a!»

«Oh my! Namgung Dan!»

The Namgung Clan's martial artists who were standing behind them rushed forward in a panic. They quickly helped Namgung Dan, who had collapsed, to his feet.

«Are you okay?»

«He looks like he's dead!»

«I heard bells ringing from his head!»

Chung Myung watched the scene unfold and clicked his tongue.

«Tsk, tsk, tsk.»

There was a look of disdain in his eyes as he looked at everyone. He let out a cutting remark.

«Willpower?»

«...»

«Are these crazy people trying to spout such nonsense? Hey, you lunatics! You're fighting for your lives, and you expect the opponent to just back down if you put in half-hearted effort?»

«...»

«There's willpower in the Sapas too! Is there anyone in the world without willpower? Why? Do you think your enemies will just surrender if you prepare yourselves and work hard?»

The stunned martial artists lowered their heads in silence.

«Willpower is meaningful during training. Squeezing your eyeballs out doesn't make your sword stronger. You should be doing that on a regular basis.»

«...»

«And you've been wasting your time.»

At that moment, Namgung Dowi raised his hand. Chung Myung turned his head.

«Why... No, why?» /he changes to formal speech/

«Just speak casually.»

«Huh. How can I...»

«Well, if you put it that way...»

Chung Myung shrugged his shoulders and asked again.

«So, why?»

«Because I don't understand, Dojang. It might sound ironic for us to talk with this outcome, but Namgung's training is never easy. We really worked hard.»

«Well, I guess so.»

Chung Myung nodded as if acknowledging it.

«But why do you say that we've been wasting our time, Dojang?»

«Because it's true.»

«...Really?»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«Can you say someone is diligent just because they practice punching all day when they're supposed to use a sword?»

«...No.»

«What you guys did is just like that.»

In truth, this couldn't be entirely blamed on Namgung Clan.

Why was Hwasan strong? It was exceedingly simple. It was because Chung Myung stood by each and every one of his disciples and relentlessly pushed them to their limits. But did that mean only Chung Myung could do it?

'No.'

Even if someone hadn't reached his level of mastery, if they had risen to the top of a martial faction, they could certainly turn such amateurs into proper martial artists.

«Your predecessors couldn't show you the right path.»

Namgung Dowi's face stiffened.

«It's difficult for us to accept your words. Our ancestors were the ones who cared for us more than anyone else.»

«I know.»

«But why...»

«It seems you don't understand. Caring for someone and pushing them are completely different things.»

Namgung Dowi looked at Chung Myung with a face that clearly showed he couldn't quite grasp it.

«Namgung Hwang... No, your ancestors probably thought that the best way to care for you was for them to become stronger themselves.»

«Ah...»

Only then did a flicker of understanding appear on Namgung Dowi's face.

Why couldn't Namgung Hwang, their previous ancestor, raise them properly? It was simple. To nurture those who hadn't reached a certain level, it was much more beneficial for the ancestor to become stronger themselves, rather than pouring time into raising them.

This wasn't a story limited to just Namgung Clan. All martial factions in the world followed a path not much different from Namgung's.

It was a testament to the immense power that a true master could bring to a faction.

Take Hwasan, for example. No matter how strong Baek Cheon became, or how strong Yu Iseol became, even if Hwasan's disciples became stronger than they are now, without Chung Myung, they would never have the same status as they do now.

«But...»

Namgung Dowi still couldn't fully accept it. Then how could a prestigious clan continue?

Chung Myung gave a clear answer, seemingly understanding the situation.

«It seems you don't understand. You don't need to put in the effort to teach them.»

«...Yes?»

«Just gather them all up and roughly teach them. They'll figure it out themselves.»

«...»

“Although they say Namgung has three generations of disciples, most of them are branch disciples. How many of those who entered the main clan and then returned to their branch family are there?”

«Well...»

Chung Myung shrugged his shoulders.

«That's right. Among those who entered the main clan but couldn't win in competition and returned, you don't call them 'internal family'. The ones who failed become 'external family' and expand their influence in the world, while those who win in competition rise higher and become 'internal family'. That's the basic way of prestigious clans.»

«...»

Then how do the lower-generation disciples grow?

'They don't really need to grow.'

Prestigious clans attract newcomers like clouds. Among them, there are often those with exceptional talent. Leave those naturally talented individuals alone, and they will climb up, further and further, on their own.

This was not much different from Hwasan's past. After all, wasn't Chung Myung also someone who came out through such a system?

«So... is Hwasan different?»

At the mention of this question, Chung Myung seemed surprised for a moment. Then he blinked his eyes slightly.

«Is it different?»

«...»

Namgung Dowi was greatly perplexed.

Oh... could those be tears?

«Did you ask if it's different? Is it? Is Hwasan different? Hwasan?»

«Oh, oh. He's acting up again.»

«Sasuk, try to calm him down.»

«...»

Chung Myung wiped his eyes and muttered.

«That's right... it might not be clear to someone who's in a position where disciples are pouring in without stopping. Do they even understand the feelings of a faction, where even ordinary people like Jo Geol have to be utilized?»

«No, why am I tripping over again!»

«Jo Geol, be quiet.»

«To be honest, I agree with that statement.»

“Argh!»

Chung Myung took a deep breath. After managing his swirling emotions, he looked at Namgung Dowi, Namgung Dan, and the Namgung Clan's disciples behind them.

«You don't need to understand.»

«...»

«You'll understand once you experience it. You're in a position where not a single one of you can afford to fall behind now, right?»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«So just leave it to me. I'll take care of it. Very well.»

«...»

It was the moment when the gates of hell opened in Namgung Clan.