

## Chapter 1114

I wonder if I can do well? (4)

“...Mmm. My body isn't as strong as it used to be.”

Tang Jan massaged his stiff jaw. The blow that damned bastard landed still caused him discomfort.

“That damnd jerk...”

Even the glare in Jo Geol's eyes while beating him up still felt vivid. It was undoubtedly a punch infused with genuine emotions.

Tang Jan grasped his jaw, crying out in pain. Him gritting his teeth out of anger only seemed to worsen the ache.

“Next time, I'll definitely kill that bastard!”

Tang Jan, baring his raw negative feelings, shook his fist. Now it seemed absurd, having good feelings towards them while being from the same alliance.

“Hyeong-nim, these Hwasan's bastards are just... aren't they going too far... Hyeong-nim?”

Absentmindedly speaking to Tang Pae, Tang Jan tilted his head. Tang Pae was sitting on the bed, contemplating something with a serious expression on his face.

“Hyeong-nim, are you okay?”

“Mm.”

A muted voice came from Tang Pae, who was lost in thought.

“Are you in a lot of pain?”

“...”

“That person is quite harsh.”

At those words, Tang Pae involuntarily rubbed his temples. The eye that had been bruised by Yu Iseol's punch was now darkened and swollen.

“Soso kept insisting on following her, and I wondered why she was doing that... Turns out she's definitely not an ordinary person. So please don't make such expressions. Sometimes you might get hit in life.”

“That's not it.”

“... Yes?”

Tang Pae's face contorted slightly.

Tang Jan seemed to think that he was upset about being hit by a woman. Of course, in Sichuan Tang clan, they generally didn't teach martial arts to women of the family, so there was rarely a situation where men were hit by women. Therefore, it might be shocking to contemplate.

However, the reason for Tang Pae's seriousness now was not that.

“Jan-ah.”

“Yes, Hyeong-nim.”

“...Are you okay?”

“Me? I’m fine. My tooth feels a bit loose, but it’s nothing...”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

Tang Pae lowered his head.

“Did you lose again?”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

Tang Jan scratched his head.

“Well... I mean, I did lose, but if you think about it, technically, it wasn’t a clear loss, right? If I had used poison and hidden weapons in real combat, I would have surely won.”

“Do you really think so?”

Thinking he would naturally answer that way, Tang Jan momentarily closed his mouth after seeing his brother’s expression. Tang Pae was more serious than he had anticipated.

“Of course, as you said, if we had used extreme poison and techniques without considering the opponent’s damage, the situation might have been slightly better. But isn’t it the same for Hwasan’s disciples?”

“What do you mean?”

“In sparring, your jaw hurts, and my eye is bruised. But in a real fight, your neck might have been severed, and my eye might have been gouged out.”

Only then did Tang Jan’s face turn serious as well. Tang Pae sighed deeply and continued,

“They are swordsmen. Especially, Hwasan’s swordsmanship is considered more vicious than Sapa’s. Do you think they would have needed to strike one of us twice in a real fight?”

“...”

“I saw their swords at the Mehwado. They were simpler and more ruthless than any other sect’s swords I’ve seen. If their swords had come at us... there would have been no need for them to prolong the time by trying to bring us down. The moment we entered the range of their sword’s attack, our lives would have ended.”

Tang Jan couldn’t counter this argument. If today’s sparring had been a real fight, he would have witnessed not Jo Geol’s face and frenzied eyes while hitting his jaw but Jo Geol’s cold back passing by after slashing his neck.

The thought sent a chill down his spine.

“Of course, if it was a real fight, they would have suffered too. However... no matter how I think about it, the outcome wouldn’t have changed.”

“Hyeong-nim...”

“There’s nothing more foolish than trying to deny an undeniable fact. The important thing isn’t denying the existence of the problem, but rather, how to address it. What do you think the issue with the current situation at the Tangga is?”

Tang Jan pondered over his brother’s question. There were plenty of things that came to mind when trying to identify the problem.

“There are too many things I can think of... but one crucial thing stands out.”

“What is it?”

“Real combat experience.”

Tang Pae nodded.

“I agree with that. My thoughts exactly.”

The reason both of them were thinking about the same issue was that after this recent sparring, they realized that the Sichuan Tang clan had never properly fought against any specific faction.

“... We didn't have this problem at Mehwado...”

“You're mistaken.”

Tang Pae responded with a bitter tone.

“Back then, we were glad that we could show the majesty of the Tang clan to the world, but looking back, it wasn't the Tang clan who was outstanding but it was Hwasan who was great. Didn't they block all attacks directed at Tangga and carved a path through for us?”

“They even dealt with the pirates targeting us underwater.”

“Yes. But we thought that was the Tang clan's prowess. While comrades risked their lives protecting us like shields, we were like archers comfortably shooting arrows and boasting about their achievements.”

Tang Jan slightly bit his lip at that harsh assessment.

It's rather sharp, yet undeniably accurate assessment that he couldn't bring himself to refute. The one who felt the sting of those words wasn't anyone else but Tang Pae himself.

“Without experiencing a proper real combat, it's impossible to identify the issues. Only after this sparring, I've started noticing the problems within the Tang clan.”

Tang Jan nodded in agreement. He could resonate with what he was hearing.

While the Tang clan can be considered the top faction in Gangho when fighting from a distance, the moment things get up close, they fail to fully display their true strength. The problem is, the battles they are about to face are likely to be chaotic melees with enemies coming from all directions. If they are exposed to the enemy without proper protection in such a situation, can one imagine the dire consequences?

Tang Jan, lost in his thoughts with a stern expression, suddenly looked up and turned to Tang Pae.

“However, Hyeong-nim.”

“Yes?”

“Then... did Hwasan Geomhyeop foresee all of this and create this situation intentionally?”

“Probably.”

Tang Pae wore a bitter smile.

“It was probably meant to encourage experiencing and feeling it firsthand. In terms of practical combat, Hwasan Geomhyeop is unrivaled. Perhaps he wanted to make the problems within the Tang clan more evident?”

“Wouldn’t the Lord not have known... No, perhaps the Lord knew, but even so, Hwasan Geomhyeop pointed out these aspects first?”

“Don’t misunderstand.”

At that moment, Tang Pae’s voice subsided slightly.

«The Lord might be a more skilled master than Hwasan Geomhyeop, but that’s a separate matter from practical combat experience.»

«During fights where other factions put their lives on the line, the Tang clan has always held back. Even during the Yangtze Disaster when the Gupailbang had to risk their lives, the Tang clan didn’t participate, right?»

«That’s true, but...»

«In nearly a decade, our only real combat experience was at Maehwado. However, Hwasan Geomhyeop has been fighting constantly against enemies threatening his life for several years now. They were attacked by Maninbang, fought in the Northern Sea against Demonic Cult, battled with Jang Ilso in the middle of the Black Dragon’s Fortress, and now this. What about us?»

Tang Jan felt his mind go blank for a moment, unable to utter a word.

«Though we have considered Hwasan as an amicable faction, perhaps our familiarity made us underestimate both the sect and Hwasan Geomhyeop. They are far more formidable than we have thought.»

Tang Jan sighed deeply.

«It could have been explained in words.»

«Would you understand then?»

«...»

«You may have pretended to understand, but you probably didn’t engrain it deep in your bones. People tend to roughly accept things they haven’t experienced firsthand.»

Tang Pae massaged the area around his bruised eyes in frustration.

«Getting a lesson for such a price... these wounds are just a small cost to bear.»

Tang Jan momentarily stared blankly at his injuries. Tang Pae asked with a puzzled expression,

«Why are you like this?»

«No, it’s nothing.»

Tang Jan shook his head.

At moments like this, it became evident to him. Why Tang Pae was the young lord of Sichuan Tang clan, while he was just the son of Tang Gunak? It was hard to attribute it merely to age. Their dispositions were different, their perspectives varied.

Once he had dreamt that Tang Pae might falter and he could become the next Lord himself, but now it seemed merely amusing.

«Hyeong-nim, what should we do now?»

«We must experience it.»

determination flashed across Tang Pae's face.

«Didn't Hwasan Geomhyeop carefully pave the way for us? Didn't he generously provide the most precious disciples of Hwasan, urging us to supplement our insufficient practical experience? Isn't it our duty to gratefully make use of it?»

«I understand what you mean.»

«However.»

«Yes?»

Tang Pae had a strange smile.

«Even so, we can't keep breaking recklessly like this. Gather everyone.»

«What do you intend to do...»

«It's unlikely that what the Lord or Hwasan Geomhyeop wants from us is just to clash and break. It's about desperate contemplation, enhancement, finding ways to stand on equal footing with Hwasan,»

Tang Pae continued.

«That's not a problem to be concluded between just you and me. It's a matter that requires the input of more people, more thoughts,»

he explained further.

«But Hyeong-nim... if we do that, your authority...»

Tang Jan began hesitantly.

«You're talking nonsense. Within Hwasan, the authority of Hwasan Geomhyeop is stronger than anyone else's. Does that mean he goes around, plugging his ears and demanding only his orders to be followed?»

Tang Pae asked.

«Well, it seems like that?»

Tang Jan replied uncertainly.

The momentarily speechless Tang Pae had a bewildered expression.

«Th-that... n-no. I mean... well, yes, that's... cough!»

He quickly coughed to change the atmosphere.

«Anyway, in my opinion, what we should be doing isn't flaunting authority. Perhaps Hwasan's strength lies in distributing power from top to bottom, communicating without barriers. Persisting in the old ways without keeping an open mind is just foolish,»

Tang Pae smiled softly.

«Let's open up a bit more. Perhaps the reason Hwasan Geomhyeop is pushing us like this is to bring us closer, to open our hearts a bit more. Even those who are as knowledgeable as they are had to open themselves up. Are we just going to cling to what we have and keep it locked away?»

Tang Jan nodded in response to his words.

«To be honest, I don't quite understand your words, Hyeong-nim. Hwasan might just be a rising sect, and our clan has proven its strength as Sichuan's leader for hundreds of years. Naturally, there will be resistance from everyone,»

«Well, that could be the case.»

«However...»

Tang Jan looked at his brother with resolute eyes.

«I will follow your words. But I want you to recognize that it's not because I find Hwasan remarkable, but because it's you who issued the command.»

Tang Pae, momentarily speechless, lowered his head and softly uttered,

«Thank you.»

«Then I'll be off.»

«Sure.»

As Tang Jan hurriedly left the room, Tang Pae let out a deep sigh.

'I've been too naive.'

He thought that if everyone united in purpose, everything would smoothly resolve. But as different people gathered in one place, all he could see were their differences and their respective shortcomings.

«Even if that's the case, we can't just turn away from it.»

Tang Pae clenched his fist lightly. Even if Hwasan led Cheonumaeng, there was no intention to simply linger as their followers. The Tang clan would never become mere assistants to Hwasan. Sometimes guiding Hwasan and always being a faction to which Hwasan could lean on was what they aimed for.

That was the pride of the clan and the pride of Tang Pae, the young lord of the clan.

«Before that, however... we need to teach those devils what it means to be defeated. Let them fully experience what we've felt,»

Tang Pae gritted his teeth.

Unfortunately, he was unaware that his expression had gradually taken on the likeness of Hwasan's demons.