

Chapter 1103

If it's such a reward... Well, it's worth accepting. (3)

The horizon holds a dazzlingly bright half-set sun. As one gazes at it, the endlessly warm feeling emanating from the radiant white sun trembles...

«Are you not properly centered?»

Kiiiiii...

No, it's not the sun. It's the white weasel that was hunched over, swiftly straightening its back at the sharp voice.

Of course, it's not strange for a weasel to straighten its back. When sensing a threat or stretching, animals naturally lower their upper bodies and vigorously lift their backs as high as possible.

But what touched the ground weren't cute little front paws, but a small and adorable head... No, calling it a head was definitely odd.

And beyond strange was the fact that atop a body the size of a human forearm was a huge sack that seemed ten times the size of the weasel itself.

Kiiii...

When the weighty sack, filled to the brim with stones the size of fists, made the little weasel shiver as it whimpered and lowered its back again.

«But what's this thing?»

Startled by the ghostly voice, the little weasel jerked its back up. However, despite its efforts, in an instant, Chung Myung swooped in and kicked the little weasel away.

Kiiiiiiii!

Beak Ah, soaring high in the sky, flapped his paws wildly. Swiftly rotating his body mid-air and landing with a robust thud, he hastily gathered the sprawling sack and slung it over his back. Then, swiftly, he hit his head again.

«Someone said that even animals understand the favor of feeding and raising them! Who could say such a thing? Who!»

«...»

«No!»

Chung Myung's eyes glimmered intensively.

«Fine, don't care about the kindness. But if you've had a meal, you should pay for it! After feeding and raising you, giving you an errand to do in return, and now you can't wait and laze around?»

Kii...!

Without waiting for an answer, Chung Myung sent Baek Ah flying again.

Squaaaaawk!

Baek Ah, who had soared up into the sky, repeated the action he had just performed moments ago.

Thwack!

Landing abruptly with a vigorous thud, the weasel tried his best to clasp his short front legs behind his back. It was as if he understood that if he agitated Chung Myung any further, he might end up as the rarest scarf in the Central Plains.

«Whether human or animal...»

Chung Myung clicked his tongue and disapprovingly glared at Baek Ah. In response to that gaze, transparent tears welled up in the weasel's eyes.

Of course, the tears weren't from pain or sadness. The meaning behind those tears was purely a sense of injustice.

If Baek Ah could speak, wouldn't he have shouted, 'When have you ever fed me, conscientiously? You worthless creature!'

Honestly, when it comes down to it, all Chung Myung did was occasionally put Baek Ah to some tasks. Baek Ah took care of his own meals, hunting, scavenging, stealing in the kitchen... Well, except for that. Anyway.

But having been fed and raised, and now making a fuss about it, from Baek Ah's perspective, it was an insane exasperation.

But what could one do? Even if one could speak human words, would they get through to that guy?

In times like these, there's nothing to do but silently lie flat and think, 'I might as well be dead.'

"You have signed up to Hwasan too! Huh? Whether dead or alive, we should stick together! While Sahyeongs are training, you're slacking off alone? Why can't you stand up straight?"
Tsk...

Baek Ah swiftly raised his waist up high.

Yoon Jong and Jo Geol, watching from the side, exchanged glances.

"When did we become Sahyeongs and weasels?"

"I... It's my first time hearing about it too."

"Setting that aside... Isn't this approaching animal cruelty?"

Baek Cheon shook his head as if to say that statement was wrong.

"It's spiritual beast abuse."

"But still, abuse is abuse, isn't it?"

"I don't agree with that. As far as I know, Chung Myung is someone who loves animals more than anyone in this world."

"What?"

Jo Geol turned to Baek Cheon with an expression that said, 'What kind of nonsense is this?'
Baek Cheon calmly spoke.

“It was just because it’s an animal. If it were us, we would have been thrown into the river by now, asking fish for news and discussing their matters.”

“Oh, I see.”

Jo Geol instantly understood. He could grasp in one go that Baek Ah was receiving extraordinarily special treatment. If they had slacked off during training, just being smacked on the head and kicked away would be a blessing. They would have been beaten to the point of death, left hanging upside down without food or water for days.

“...Chung Myung surprisingly has a tender side.”

“Really?”

“And when you think about it, it’s quite reasonable, isn’t it? If we slack off, even as animals, we’d get punished without a word.”

“Thinking about it that way, the jerk might not see much difference between us and animals.”

“...That’s Chung Myung for you.”

Listening to their conversation, Yoon Jong involuntarily distanced himself from them.

‘These humans aren’t normal either. Completely insane.’

However, unlike Hwasan’s disciples who found an unexpectedly tender aspect in Chung Myung, Nokrim’s bandits and the members of Tangga could only stand there with their mouths agape in disbelief.

«...What’s with the weasel...»

«Yeah...»

Their pupils shook.

However, while they were surprised, it wasn’t easy to precisely explain what exactly they were surprised about. Were they astonished because the weasel was receiving punishment like a person? Or was it because even the weasel was being harassed and oppressed by that human?

«Hehehe.»

«We’re... but really...»

«But first, we should think about which of those two is the beast...»

At that moment, Chung Myung, who had been delivering a long speech to Baek Ah, turned his head abruptly.

‘Eek!’

‘Don’t make eye contact.’

‘Hold your breath, hold it!’

Quickly, the gazes of Nokrim’s and Tangga’s members darted downward. Just making eye contact with that human had made life more difficult, as witnessed over the past few days.

«Smiling?»

«...»

«You are laughing now?»

Chung Myung's eyes sparkled.

'Wow, look at those eyes.'

'I'd rather deal with a venomous snake pretending to be human.'

'Serving under Jang Ilso would be more comfortable at this rate, damn it.'

The taste of Hwasan. It was a moment when the unique taste of the plum blossoms, felt only on the highest peaks of remote mountains in Shaanxi, was recognized in the famous mountain ranges of the Central Plains and even in Sichuan.

«Anyway, whether human or animal!»

«...»

«Animals, being fed and sheltered, yet still slacking off! And those humans, carrying swords around, barely rolling up their sleeves to train properly, but panting and groaning on the ground.»

«...»

«Oh my. My fortune, what have I done in my past life... No, that's right. I have sinned. I have sinned indeed!»

Yoon Jong turned to Baek Cheon and asked,

«What's that guy saying now?»

Baek Cheon smiled contentedly.

«Just spouting nonsense as usual.»

«Oh.»

«Let it be as it is.»

«Yes.»

Meanwhile, Chung Myung, with a thoroughly displeased expression, looked around at the fallen bandits of Nokrim and the members of Tangga.

'Worse than I thought.'

After putting them through several tests, it became clear what the past generations of Hwasan had missed.

Fundamentally, their martial arts skills were never low. The elite of the Five Great families Sichuan Tang Clan. And it would have been even more strange if the elites of Nokrim, the rulers of the central mountain range, and especially the selected members, were weak.

The problem is that strength is never composed of a single element. In terms of 'Wuwei [무위] — its a whole article of explanation, google if interested],' one could say it falls a bit short, but the issue lies in their physical stamina.

'A warrior being weak and feeble... What nonsense is this, akin to a drowning fish.'

Though internal energy and physical strength are similar, they're not perfect synonyms. No matter how abundant one's internal energy may be, after relentlessly pushing themselves day and night for three days, their physical stamina tends to wane first.

And the moment a person loses their physical strength, their mental prowess starts to diminish. Such martial artists may initially exert their full power when a fight commences, but as the battle prolongs, they eventually fail to demonstrate even half of their true ability. Huh? Doesn't that mean it's about training?

Of course, it is. By engaging in repeated battles, even in situations where they can't exert half of their strength, both physical stamina and mental fortitude will inadvertently undergo rigorous training.

'Survival of the fittest.'

The real issue is that most perish before that happens.

What makes the Demonic Cult fearsome is the fact they are fanatics. And the reason why fanatics are fearsome isn't simply because they don't fear death.

Haven't we witnessed it already?

The cultists never tire. While their bodies might tire and strain, their minds are enclosed in an impenetrable armor, something ordinary people couldn't even dare to imagine.

War never ends abruptly. Depending on circumstances, it can persist day and night, resembling a hellish scenario where people kill and die for weeks on end.

No, even if the battles cease, the anxiety of not knowing when the enemy might strike keeps one enduring day after day. Those who believed in their exceptional skills often found themselves unable to withstand the horrors of war, left practically hanging by a thread.

«Tsk.»

Chung Myung irritably scratched his cheek.

«Even after criticizing those so-called prestigious sects... turns out, I too am from an orthodox faction.»

«Huh? What are you talking about?»

«Oh, nothing.»

Chung Myung let out a deep sigh.

'I'm not without fault myself.'

Suddenly, a conversation from the past with Chung Mun surfaced in his mind.

- Chung Myung, what do you think is the reason behind Wudang's lack of skill?
- Lack of talent.
- ...What about Southern Edge?
- Incomplete humans.
- ...And Namgung?
- No backbone.
- ...Is there no way to fix or improve them?
- Ah, Sahyeong. Can a stone become gold just by carving it? Even if you carve it, it's just a pretty stone. How can you change those born that way? Let them be.
- ...

There really seems to be no answer when he thinks about it now.

Chung Myung covered his face with both hands.

‘No, how was I supposed to know what to do back then?’

If someone learns the same martial art but fails to improve, it’s simply due to a lack of talent. There’s no need for any other reason. Chung Myung didn’t know that back then. He didn’t want to know.

However, it was only after nudging, kicking, pulling by the collar, and struggling to make these uncouth brats act like human beings did he come to understand.

After all, a stone can turn into gold if carved skillfully.

But Chung Myung of the past, Maehwa Geomjon, didn’t know and didn’t need to know. He found it more convenient to go and defeat them all rather than waste mental energy thinking about it.

‘But that way doesn’t work anymore.’

Chung Myung lifted his head and stared at the people from the Tang clan.

«A potted plant in a greenhouse.»

«...Pardon?»

Chung Myung’s brow furrowed deeply.

He had often compared Southern Edge or Wudang’s young disciples to potted plants in a greenhouse. He thought of them as half-baked humans who couldn’t display their true abilities even when facing bastards from the evil factions, let alone the Demonic Cult.

The mistake in Chung Myung’s thinking was precisely that point.

‘It wasn’t just about those kids.’

What becomes of a potted plant in a greenhouse if it grows well?

Well, it becomes a well-grown potted plant in a greenhouse. It may seem healthy and flourishing on the outside, but a few cold wind blows can easily wither it. Ultimately, it becomes nothing more than a useless decoration if not in a warm indoor environment.

Believing that these grown men, as they age and their skills develop, would eventually fulfill their roles was a mistake made without a plan. If even the Tang clan and Nokrim are in such a state, what hope is there for the others?

«No wonder the rear collapsed no matter how hard we fought in the front...»

A sigh escaped Chung Myung’s lips as he recalled unpleasant memories he’d rather forget. It seemed that fighting to the death here resulted in collapse there, and fighting to the death there led to a collapse here.

Looking back, the time wasted by Chung Myung, who hastily received orders from Chung Mun and roamed around the entire Central Plains, was almost as much as the actual fighting time. Whether it’s the Sapa, Demonic Cult, or Gupailbang, it’s all the same.

If he truly wanted to launch a proper attack, those in the rear had to hold out at least. If that didn’t happen, Chung Myung’s frenzied efforts would only repeat the hell of the past.

So, what’s the solution?

«... Is there even a separate solution?»

Chung Myung's eyes blazed like hellfire.

«Physical stamina comes from exertion, mental strength from being struck by fists and words.»

As he muttered, everyone who sensed an ominous feeling widened their eyes. Chung Myung clapped his hands.

«Alright, everyone. Let's start again.»

«Um, Chung Myung Dojang.»

«Yes?»

Tang Pae awkwardly pointed to the sky.

«Um... the sun is already setting?»

«So?»

«Uh... Chung Myung Dojang, you might not be aware, but we also have tasks assigned by our respective factions. At night, we need to handle paperwork and other duties to keep our factions running...»

«And?»

«T-This is something we really need to do...»

«And?»

Tang Pae, at a loss for words, looked at Chung Myung with a dazed expression.

Chung Myung shrugged as if he couldn't grasp their point at all.

«So, you're saying there isn't enough time to do other tasks?»

«Y-Yes! You understand!»

Tang Pae's face flushed. However, Chung Myung, continued speaking, smiling.

«That's quite a strange statement.»

«... Pardon?»

«If there's not enough time, then simply don't sleep.»

«...»

«War, after all, means not sleeping and enduring for ten days straight. Well, this works out perfectly. Let's experience it in advance this time. I was only planning to stay until midnight today, but now, let's extend it by an hour.»

The disciples immediately realized something had gone terribly wrong. All people, Nokrim or Tangga, glared at him as if they were ready to pounce. For now, all he could do was bow deeply, avoiding those murderous gazes.

«Let's start! You guys survive, and I thrive! So, come at me with everything you've got!»

The Hwasanization of the Central Plains was steadily progressing.