

Chapter 1131

Let's get to know each other better! (1)

Confucius once said: 'If my friends are proper — I will also become proper myself. If I follow around and play with immoral people — I will also become immoral myself.'* In other words, one's character is not solely inherent but also influenced by the friends around them.

And if those words hold true... it was unmistakable that people gathered under Cheonumaeng were nothing but a group of strangers one should never consider as friends.

«Um...»

«Today, someone will definitely die.»

Ogeom walked towards the training ground with faces distorted by malice. Their eyes were filled with venom.

«I thought you were so cold that your mouth froze shut.»

«No. Did we set fire to the warehouse! It was Nokrim! Then those bandits should be kicked out, why are we caught up here?»

«That's right! If they want to sleep outside, they should do it!»

Baek Cheon tilted his head from side to side.

«Enough.»

A flame ignited in his eyes.

«Others might not know, but Nokrim's bastards will truly disappear today. These lunatics even set fire to the warehouse?»

«Whether they did it or not, it's what the Nokrim King ordered.»

«Nokrim King will freeze to death. Just call him a bandit!»

Hwasan had already suffered mental scars from the fire, especially the blaze that had struck the main hall. Wasn't it Chung Myung who said that Hwasan narrowly avoided being completely annihilated by flames in the past?

“You knew that and still set the fire? Are you really that crazy?”

Baek Cheon's eyes were bloodshot.

Haunted by nightmares all night due to Im Sobyong's mocking laughter as he watched the main hall burn, his expression seemed to scream, 'It's not about winning a fight, but making those from Hwasan furious.'

“Im Sobyong...”

Though Baek Cheon ground his teeth, Jo Geol seemed to have a different perspective.

“No, are we just talking about Nokrim King now? Aren't these bastards from Tangga more of an issue?”

Jo Geol protested, rolling his eyes.

“No, those lunatics should’ve at least tried to put out the fire alongside the bandits who mindlessly set the main hall ablaze. They even threw poison smoke bombs!”

“...”

“If it wasn’t for that poison smoke, we could have saved the main hall from burning, right? Don’t you remember Tang Jan’s face full of admiration, marveling at the pink smoke that bloomed over the fire?”

“It was astonishing indeed.”

“Somewhat resembling a plum blossom field.”

“Yeah, it was beautiful.”

“What are you agreeing with them for, you lunatics!”

“...Geol-ah, calm down. It’s still a disaster, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Disaster? Why aren’t they punished today?”

“...It’s quite hard to comprehend, but I was just thinking the same thing as you.”

Yoon Jong shook his head in distress as he spoke,

“And even though it’s poison smoke, if the beasts of the Beast Palace hadn’t been rampant, we would have extinguished the fire before the main hall completely went up in flames. Even so-called spiritual beasts caught fire at the tail and ran wild. How do we deal with that? We’re not Baek Ah.”

“Come to think of it, what happened to Baek Ah? Haven’t seen him around?”

“When desperately trying to control the beasts at that time, he collapsed due to exhaustion...”

“So, he is lying sick? How pitiful...”

“No. He has recovered from the exhaustion, but was captured by Chung Myung, angered by the news of the beasts running wild.”

“...What does that have to do with Baek Ah?”

“If a beast misbehaves, it’s always his responsibility, right?”

Everyone squinted. From Baek Ah’s perspective, it would be unfair. Despite being quite remarkable, he is ultimately just a weasel, and when house sized animals are set fire and go berserk, what could he possibly do?

It’s not about capability but an inherent size issue, yet the problem was that such excuses wouldn’t go well with Chung Myung.

“Amitabha Buddha. May you reach paradise...”

“He is not dead yet!”

However, Hye Yeon calmly shook his head.

“It’s just empty attachment. How can one return alive when drawn by a demon? Next time you see him, he might be a nice scarf.”

“...How did someone like this come out of the Buddhists?”

“When we first met, he was undoubtedly shy and kind.”

“Then it’s our fault.”

“Actually, that’s a difficult point to deny.”

Everyone fell silent in the face of Hwasan’s sins. In truth, just by observing Hye Yeon alone, one could understand the malicious feelings harbored by Shaolin and the actions committed because of them.

Ever since the moment when they transformed the genius martial artist leading the next generation of Shaolin into a thieving drunkard, the relationship between Hwasan and Shaolin became irreparable.

“It was hell, anyway.”

Baek Cheon shook his head as if he was in despair.

Bandits setting fire to the main hall, disciples of Hwasan screaming and scattering in all directions like wild boars upon seeing the fire.

And then there were those Tangga scoundrels who giggled, throwing poison smoke bombs when Hwasan panicked and attempted to extinguish the fire, along with the beast warriors sweating profusely while trying to control the spirit beasts running wild.

All the chaos and malice in the world seemed to converge that night. Anyone witnessing it would surely have bowed their heads and murmured, ‘Master, the progression is too fast.’

“...Come to think of it, where were the Ice Palace’s people then? With their ice techniques, they might have been helpful in extinguishing the fire.”

“They said it was too hot even near the fire and fled without looking back.”

Baek Cheon’s tightly sealed lips trembled slightly.

“Are there no sane people among them?”

It’s unknown. Either all the gathered people were inherently not in their right minds, or perhaps when normal factions enter Cheonumaeng, they lose their sanity.

“Anyway, we’ll truly exterminate them all.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“...For this time, I agree.”

“Me too.”

“I don’t care if he is my older brother, I’ll stab the needle right in the middle of his forehead!”

Hwasan’s disciples, ablaze with determination, headed toward the training grounds.

Unexpectedly, other factions were already there.

“Oh dear.”

As Ogeom appeared, Im Sobyong casually waved his fan. For the past few days, with his emaciated, corpse-like face, he looked like he was about to die.

“I wonder if our Taoist monks slept soundly last night.”

Thud!

The sound of the disciples grinding their teeth echoed like music. Witnessing this, Im Sobyong chuckled.

Seeing the culprit who set fire to their lodging, the fire of hell also blazed within the disciples' hearts. Without capturing and burning that scoundrel to death, that fire within wouldn't be extinguished.

"Ha, a big mouth!"

"Hahaha. Being unsettled in your sleep... cough cough cough... Now, have some sleep... cough cough cough!"

Im Sobyong coughed as if he was about to vomit his lungs. Each cough sprayed red blood in all directions, causing nearby bandits to discreetly step back with a dark look on their faces.

"Cough... Sleep... cough... Need... cough."

"...Wouldn't that person just die on his own if we leave him alone?"

"Just leave him? It feels pointless."

"This is not acceptable. Even if he dies, he should die by our hands. He should be struck down before dying a natural death."

"As expected of Sasuk. Second in Hwasan's toughness ranking."

"What? I'm second? What about Jo Geol?"

Even Baek Cheon couldn't claim to be below third place.

At that moment, several people approached, giggling. It seemed not only Nokrim and Im Sobyong but others wanted to ridicule Hwasan for yesterday's ordeal.

"Oh my, coming out wearing burnt and torn clothes. How undignified."

"It seems Hwasan is short on funds."

"All the remaining clothes burned down yesterday. What could they do? Tsk tsk tsk. Exactly, they should have been cautious around fire at all times."

Baek Cheon glared at the people who were giggling shamelessly.

"You... you seem very pleased?"

"There's no particular reason to be gloomy, right?"

"Exactly. You watched the fire well."

"And watched the people well too."

"Oh, is that so?"

Baek Cheon bent his neck at a weird angle and gripped the sword at his waist.

"But how do we handle it? Those eyes that enjoyed watching the fire might not be able to see soon."

"Oh. Nowadays, even monks make threats? If you can, give it a shot."

"You think I can't?"

Words were no longer necessary.

Wasn't their relationship already thick with suppressed resentment through warm fists and gentle blades? Hadn't they become a close duo who, without words, would spit insults at each other at a mere eye contact, bypassing conversation and opting for direct physical confrontation to prove their bond?

“Kill them all!”

“That Tang Jan bastard, today’s your end...”

Kwaaaaah!

“Aaaah!”

At that moment, someone soared into the blue sky at lightning speed.

“What, what’s happening?”

“Oh my, Geol-ah!”

“Jo-Jo Geol Sahyeong!”

Instinctively, Hwasan’s disciples flinched as they witnessed Jo Geol soaring through the air, leaving a red trail in the sky. Even disciples from other factions, originally attempting to strike Jo Geol down, paused momentarily, baffled.

‘What?’

No one had approached Hwasan yet. Bewildered, they blinked and gazed at the spot where Jo Geol should have been. Instead, standing in that vacant spot was someone familiar to their eyes.

“Chu... Chung Myung-ah?”

“Hwasan Geomhyeop?”

“No, why...”

Thud-thud-thud.

Blood sprayed into the air, falling like a drizzle. Within it, Chung Myung smiled brightly. Baek Cheon’s heart sank instantly.

‘T-This is dangerous...’

Although smiling, his eyes were unnaturally stiff. His eyebrows twitched slightly. It was a signal of extreme danger among all danger signals.

“Chu... Chung Myung! I’m not sure what’s going on, but let’s just calm down for now...”

“Calm down?”

Chung Myung’s smile grew brighter. Baek Cheon’s face began to turn pale. Simultaneously, Yu Iseol, who was quick to assess the situation, silently stepped back.

Chung Myung spoke up.

“No, no. Sasuk, seems like there’s a misunderstanding. I didn’t come here with ill intentions.”

“I-is that so?”

If anyone with common sense were to ask why Jo Geol was blown away, no one dared to voice that fact right now. Well, whether Jo Geol lived or died didn’t concern anyone at the moment...

“Just wanted to ask something.”

“Huh? W-what?”

“No... There have been rumors lately that Sasuks and Sahyongs aren’t sparring but engaging in actual fights. So, I wanted to confirm. Is this a spar going on right now?”

Baek Cheon's face turned pale. Whether the culprit behind all this was Chung Myung or not had no significance at this moment.

"T-that can't be."

"No way!"

"Hey! That's unbelievable, Dojang!"

"W-who said that! We're such good friends!"

"It's a spar, a spar! Just a spar!"

Those familiar with Chung Myung quickly reconciled their words. Tangga and Hwasan, previously at each other's throats, now stood shoulder to shoulder like long-lost friends, laughing. Meanwhile, Nokrim's bandits and Namgung's swordsmen shook hands while breaking into a cold sweat.

It was a historic moment where factions that seemed forever divided, like Gulailbang and Sapaeryeon, Evil and Righteous, came together. However, the truth behind it was unimaginably cruel.

"Oh, is that so? Did I misunderstand?"

"T-That's right!"

"It's just everyone getting along."

"You're saying there's no hidden agenda? Hahaha!"

"That's right, Siju!"

Even Yoon Jong and Hye Yeon found themselves sweating profusely while trying to explain the situation.

However, within a large group, there are always those who are completely oblivious.

"Why are they suddenly acting friendly? Darn it!"

"Who said we were acting friendly with you? You barbarians!"

"Who's this guy?"

Members from the factions of the Central Plains turned their heads sharply. The Beast Palace and the Ice Palace, entirely unaware of the situation, exposed their agitation, sparking another conflict between them.

'Shut up!'

'Please, pay attention!'

'I'll definitely kill these guys later!'

At that moment, just when everyone hesitated to speak up...

"Oh, so you weren't fighting. Then you're actually friends?"

"T-That's right!"

"Of course!"

"Well, now we can't even live without each other."

Chung Myung nodded as if he was satisfied.

"Yeah. It's about fighting and all during the process of becoming friends. Fighting tightly bonds us, right?"

“That’s right!”

“Hahaha. There can’t be anything closer than this.”

Tang Pae and Namgung Dowi desperately thought of some words to say. It was then that Chung Myung spoke again.

“So, I find it a bit regrettable.”

“... Yes?”

He chuckled and licked his lips.

“I realized, despite being in the same status, everyone’s getting close except for me. Isn’t that so?”

“T-That can’t be!”

“Dojang, we are the closest!”

“That’s absolutely not true, really!”

“Oh. Instead of just saying polite words, how about this? So, from now on, I’ll try to get closer and hang out with you all.”

“S-Siju. Wait a moment...”

Chung Myung vigorously cracked his neck, bending it side to side.

“That’s right.”

Everyone present witnessed it.

Hwasan Geomhyeop. The arch-nemesis of Sapaeryeon, the one who defeated the Bishop of Demonic Cult. They saw the terrifying aura emanating from the eyes of this person bearing that great name, an aura that even the fiercest demons couldn’t match.

Kwoong!

As Chung Myung stomped on the ground, a spider-web-like cracks emerged along with a scraping sound.

“Let’s get closer together, you punks!”

With his eyes rolling back, he dashed forward.

“Heeeeeeeek!”

Everyone was thrown into confusion. As the frenzied predator charged, the pitiful lambs’ desperate screams began to fill the entire training grounds.

* 友其正人我亦自. 正從遊邪人我亦自邪. — this was a direct citation of Confucius.