

Chapter 118

I've already prepared for that! (3)

«Yahhhh!»

Baek Cheon swiftly parried the flying dagger. The dagger which was heavily coated in poison, potent enough to induce a coma with a mere graze, failed to overcome the strength embedded in his sword, launching it high into the sky.

«...I see roughly what you mean.»

«That's right.»

Gripping his sword tightly, Baek Cheon glanced at those standing before him.

«So, this training isn't just about adaptation, is it?»

He learned this while fighting Tangga, Namgung and Nokrim. Despite engaging in these intense battles, their practical combat experience was still lacking.

To be precise, Hwasan might have extensive experience in individual combat but severely lacked in group battles. Especially when diverse groups with different tendencies clashed, they couldn't fully exhibit their skills.

Perhaps this was visible to that cunning bastard Chung Myung. Hence, he imposed this kind of training.

And once again, Chung Myung's scheme yielded clear results. The more they fought, the faster they comprehended how to handle this chaotic warfare. It's said that the body moves and thinks before the mind, especially in cases like this, it seems.

Alright then. Fine. Everything's fine. The issue is...

'It's not just us who are going through this.'

Those people were absorbing not only experience in group battles but also practical combat skills entirely through this training. They grew stronger by the day, sharper with each passing moment.

Baek Cheon, who was facing them constantly, was astonished.

'I wonder if this is how people have felt about us all this time?'

Observing these individuals grow visibly right before his eyes was an entirely novel experience. Particularly, feeling that growth firsthand while clashing swords brought forth a surge of emotions.

Watching someone grow was both fulfilling and evoked a sense of impending crisis. A determination to not be overtaken ignited within him.

Undoubtedly, this was a good thing... as long as it was simply their 'skills' that were growing.

«But... this is a bit...»

Baek Cheon looked pensively at those gradually approaching him.

Tang Pae, with daggers in both hands, paraded a smug smile. It was understandable — after all, for him, this training had begun as a means to overcome Hwasan.

However...

«Hmm.»

As Namgung Dowi, with a somewhat awkward expression, stealthily inched closer...

«Hehehehe...»

Wasn't Im Sobyong, openly approaching with a face that said, 'I've got you now,' a slightly different case?

«Excuse me...»

Baek Cheon subtly raised his hand and discreetly addressed those who were approaching.

«Something... seems like the meaning of our training is fading, isn't it?»

«Huh?»

«...Wasn't this supposed to be a melee?»

«Hahaha.»

The one responding was none other than Im Sobyong.

«Oh my, it seems our Baek Cheon Dojang is somewhat mistaken.»

«Huh?»

«...Does this still look like training to you? Hmm?»

Baek Cheon shivered as he confronted Im Sobyong, who was blatantly growling.

«Well, I mean... when you think about it, it is training, right?»

However, Tang Pae seemed to have a completely different opinion from that lowly Sapa bastard. Young lord of the prestigious Sichuan Tang Clan...

«Training is training. Training that only Hwasan finds amusing.»

«...»

No, wait. Tang Pae was a bit colder. Well, considering it, resentment might have built up more in the Tang clan.

«We'd like to enjoy that 'amusement' together... But it seems your mind is too narrow, Baek Cheon Dojang.»

«...So, did you put poison in the rice we ate yesterday?»

«Hahaha. Didn't Hwasan teach us not to discriminate in means and methods when facing enemies?»

«But even so, that's...»

Namgung Dowi, who had been silently listening, finally spoke up.

«Please don't misunderstand, Baek Cheon Dojang. There's absolutely no resentment.»

«...»

«This is simply a strategic decision. If we just fight recklessly and haphazardly, wouldn't it only benefit Hwasan? There's no point in repeating the pattern where we only lose. Isn't that right?»

Indeed, Namgung's young lord. Of course, that's true.

However, for that statement to sound convincing, it might be better if he didn't shift his restless sword slightly to the side before speaking... The way the sword kept twitching, it seemed more like an expression of the desire to pierce Baek Cheon's throat rather than holding back... Or is it just a misconception?

«It must have been fun until now.»

«Winning must have been quite refreshing.»

«It wouldn't hurt to gradually taste the bitter flavor of defeat either. We've tasted it enough to grow stronger. This is all about thinking like Hwasan.»

«That's just a figure of speech...»

«Hahaha. Just kidding.»

Namgung Dowi interrupted Baek Cheon, shaking his head.

«As long as it's Hwasan, facing all three of us simultaneously shouldn't pose any problem.»

«Is there a problem?»

«Well, yeah. There might be. Because it's none other than Hwasan.»

«... There might be a problem? Excuse me?»

Baek Cheon, sweating profusely, took a hesitant step back. As he did, the other disciples surrounding him, firmly gripping their swords, subtly retreated as well.

However, surrounded on all sides and a wall blocking the rear, where could one possibly escape? Wasn't this place a battlefield where strategic retreats didn't exist in the first place?

«I finally understand the profound teachings of Chung Myung Dojang.»

«To win, you need to strike from the head, isn't that what you're saying?»

«And here, the head is Hwasan?»

The eyes of the three leaders of their respective martial arts clans gleamed with madness. While maintaining a semblance of decorum in their speech, their eyes held no mercy. They were ablaze with a readiness to strike down Hwasan at a moment's notice.

Baek Cheon let out a bitter laugh.

‘... These bastards.’

It was good that their skills were improving. Even Hwasan could ignite its enthusiasm by observing them. However...

«This dirty and perilous encirclement has crossed the line!»

«Crush them!»

«Smash them to bits!»

«You're caught today! You, Hwasan's scum!»

Instantly, the alliance formed by Tangga, Namgung, and Nokrim overwhelmed Hwasan. The faces of Hwasan's disciples turned pale as they saw this surging wave approaching.

«They're coming!»

«Damn them!»

«Hey! Block them, block them!»

«Ahh! Don't spread the poison!»

Though Hwasan resisted fiercely, the three united clans, determined to utterly defeat them this time, charged forward without looking back.

«Crush them!»

«This is the revenge for our comrades killed by your swords!»

«We didn't kill anyone, you idiot!»

«You think you know everything!»

Amidst the chaos, a sense of sorrow struck Baek Cheon's heart.

Chung Myung... You said it was Hwasanization of the entire Central Plains, but isn't this the 'Chung Myung'ization of the entire Central Plains? I'm not sure if this is really okay. Huh?

Chung Myung...

Meanwhile, at a corner of the training ground, Chung Myung, observing the harsh reality of a savage battle in the training area, casually popped a bean into his mouth.

«You guys are having fun, huh?»

Kids grow up fighting.

«Is it okay?»

«What do you mean?»

«It looks like Hwasan is taking a beating?»

At Tang Gunak's words, Chung Myung smirked.

«Those guys have been catching their breath lately. It's not a bad idea to let some air out now.»

«Haha.»

Tang Gunak laughed heartily and glanced at Chung Myung.

«Haha, that's an amusing joke...»

But he couldn't finish his sentence. It was because Chung Myung wasn't smiling at all.

«... Was it not a joke?»

«...»

«Ahem.»

Tang Gunak cleared his throat slightly. Although it was only for a moment, he looked down on Chung Myung a little.

«These youngsters think they're strong these days.»

Chung Myung said harshly.

«Think they're strong...»

Tang Gunak pondered the implications.

Hwasan was currently facing Tangga, Namgung, and Nokrim simultaneously. Admittedly, they were being overwhelmed, and these three forces weren't the full strength of their respective clans, but the fact that they were contending was what mattered.

If even they were considered youngsters, then where were those in the Central Plains who weren't?

«Your standards for evaluation seem excessively high.»

«The standards of the Central Plains might be excessively low.»

«That might be true.»

As if finishing his statement, Tang Gunak glanced back at the training grounds but subtly opened his mouth without shifting his gaze.

«Is it going to be alright?»

It was the same question, but the meaning behind it was different this time. Chung Myung nodded, as if understanding what it meant.

«It is not something to hold on to.»

«But the resources shouldn't be wasted recklessly. If Jasodan is used by Hwasan, it might have a greater effect.»

«If consuming pills could make everyone stronger, then the Emperor would be the strongest in the world. Or maybe it would be the merchants.»

«That's true, but...»

Harmony is what's important.

There's a limit to the benefits gained from consuming elixirs. Generally, if one hadn't consumed any elixirs, they would typically have a higher level of martial arts expertise than internal energy. So, consuming an elixir results in a rapid increase in martial arts proficiency. However, after a certain level of internal energy is achieved, elixir becomes rather useless. If it weren't so, each martial arts clan would have administered the elixirs not to the later stage practitioners but to the top experts within their own clan.

«Hwasan's disciples have already consumed so much that now it's practically meaningless.»

«Of course, that's true. Yes, that's correct. But...»

Tang Gunak turned to face Chung Myung directly.

«But these are not the ones who will become the last disciples of Hwasan?»

Upon hearing that, even Chung Myung stayed silent. Tang Gunak sighed as he continued like he has made up his mind.

«You must be aware, but both ice crystals and purple perilla [purple plant from Yuunan] aren't inexhaustible resources. Already, in the Northern Sea, the production of ice crystals has dramatically declined. And considering how rigorously it has been exploited, in the future, we might only obtain minimal quantities. Otherwise, we'll have to use lower-quality ice crystals.»

«Hmm...»

«The situation is similar for purple perilla. In the past, it wasn't such a scarce item. But now, isn't it true that it only grows in specific areas in Yuunan? Moreover, the places where it naturally occurs are decreasing by the day, to the extent that it's almost impossible to cultivate.»

«Hmm.»

Chung Myung scratched his head thoughtfully. This statement was also undeniably accurate. Considering the situation in the Northern Sea and Yuunan, it's evident that Jasodan will soon be out of reach.

«Perhaps this Jasodan you're making this time might be the last. But are you planning to give away such a precious elixir to them? Not to the future generations of Hwasan?»

«...»

«Sect Leader surely can't be unaware of this fact. And soon, the disciples will know too. This isn't an issue that can be easily decided.»

Tang Gunak spoke with a firm expression.

«If you use Jasodan wisely, Hwasan might secure its position not only in the next generation but perhaps even in the subsequent ones as the best swordsmen in the world. But if you use this elixir here, there might not be any miraculous pills remaining to fulfill the potential of Hwasan for generations to come. Are you truly confident you won't regret this decision?»

Throughout the conversation, Chung Myung remained silent.

He merely wore an expression that was impossible to decipher, giving away no hint of his inner thoughts.