

## Chapter 1006

Once again. (6)

With a burst of azure energy, the wooden sword slashed through the air mightily.

«Sword!»

Swish!

«Don't swing it like that!»

Swish!

«Are you trying to poke someone's eyes out?»

Swish!

«Idiot! You're empty-headed!»

Thunk.

Namgung's disciples collapsed limply, and white steam rose from the heads of the swordsmen.

«Tsk.»

Chung Myung grimaced as he observed the trembling individuals.

«These brats are all show! They put on airs with their fancy moves, but where did they learn to twist their wrists and fall like that? They're about to get themselves killed!»

Watching this spectacle with admiration, Jo Geol whispered softly to Baek Cheon,

«What does that mean, Sasuk?»

Baek Cheon shrugged and provided a detailed explanation,

«It means that those who haven't properly mastered the fundamentals of martial arts are attempting fancy techniques. He is telling them to go back to basics and learn everything again.»

Impressed by the excellent interpreter's ability, Jo Geol nodded repeatedly.

«In my time, huh? You bastards! Before swinging a sword, huh? You guys! Huh? Anyway, these days!»

Jo Geol asked again,

«What does that mean?»

Baek Cheon smiled and replied,

«In my time, I focused on substantial basics rather than flashy techniques, but it seems like the current trend among the strong swordsmen emphasizes appearances too much. I'm worried about that...»

Chung Myung furiously threw the wooden sword he had been holding to the ground.

«Starting tomorrow, you guys will train twice as hard. I don't know what's happened to you, but it seems the more I feed you, the worse you get! The seniors seem somewhat decent, but the juniors are utterly hopeless! Come on, I'll train you from head to toe!»

“What's that about?»

«Well, this is a bit longer.»

Baek Cheon cleared his throat and continued,

«I originally respected the teachings of Namgung Clan's ancestors and revered their swordsmanship. However, it's unfortunate that the young swordsmen of Namgung don't seem to carry on their teachings properly. Even though we're not directly related by blood, as fellow travelers on the path of the sword, I'll help them establish the fundamentals...»

«Baek Cheon.»

«Yes?»

Jo Geol interrupted with a somewhat troubled expression on his face.

«...Isn't this getting closer to 'what I want to think it is' interpretation rather than what it is?»

«It's because he really means that...»

Jo Geol, who alternated his gaze suspiciously between Chung Myung and Baek Cheon, shrugged his shoulders.

«Whenever I listen to Sasuk, it feels like excellent education is taking place, but why does it just look like they're being bullied to me?»

«Well...»

«Yes?»

«Because that's exactly what's happening.»

Both Baek Cheon and Jo Geol sighed simultaneously, looking ahead.

Standing alone amidst the disheveled disciples of Namgung Clan, Chung Myung was continuously shouting something that didn't sit right with him.

«...Watching that scene is giving me indigestion.»

«I had a nightmare last night.»

«I thought I'd feel good watching someone else suffering.»

«...I'm trembling.»

Certainly, this sight was not good for their mental health. Each time Namgung's disciples were reduced to dirt by that fearsome wooden sword, it felt like their heads were throbbing in unison.

«Hey, Sasuk.»

«Yeah?»

Yoon Jong seemed to have something on his mind as he scratched his cheek.

«I'm a bit concerned... Can the disciples of Namgung family accept this situation?»

«What do you mean?»

«Well... We didn't have much to begin with, and we knew that this was the only way to get stronger, so we followed along without complaints. But those folks must have their pride.»

«Pride?»

Baek Cheon's face twisted slightly, and noticing his realization, Yoon Jong quickly shut his mouth. Jo Geol didn't miss the chance to tease.

«Hey, Yoon Jong, are you insulting Sasuk right now?»

«Shh, be quiet!»

«Pride...»

Baek Cheon stared off into the distant mountains.

«Yeah... There was a time when I had that too.»

Yoon Jong gently patted Baek Cheon's shoulder.

«Don't cry.»

«...I won't cry.»

Baek Cheon wiped away a tear that had welled up under his eye, composed himself, and continued speaking.

«At first, they'll resist. When the belief that they was exceptional shatters, the despair that follows is equally immense.»

«Is this from personal experience?»

«Personal experience.»

«Heh, it's vivid.»

«...Just shut up.»

As veins popped on Baek Cheon's forehead, the Ogeom collectively turned their heads and whistled. He had been glaring at them as if ready to kill, but soon, he let out a deep sigh.

«However... they'll eventually accept it.»

«...So, they'll realize it's the right thing to do?»

«No.»

«Yes? Then...»

«If they don't accept it, they'll just get hit more.»

Everyone stared at Baek Cheon with blank expressions, but he shrugged as if stating the obvious.

«They either accept it or get beaten up. What other choice is there?»

Yoon Jong thought with a satisfied smile,

'This guy is the oddest of them all.'

And the others probably had similar thoughts.

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Namgung's disciples, who had returned to their lodgings, collapsed on the floor.

«Ugh...»

As soon as their heads touched the ground, they thought they would fall asleep, but the moment their bodies made contact with the floor, excruciating pain surged through them.

«My arm... Agh... My arm...»

«Ugh... My back... Feels like it's going to break...»

«Uuuweh...»

«Don't puke here!»

There was no respite. Namgung Dan was stuck to the ground like a starfish, and he struggled to lift his head.

«Ugh...»

It felt like his body was falling apart.

«This is insane...»

«How... How are we supposed to endure this?»

«Our bodies will break before we get stronger.»

Complaints filled the air from various corners. It wasn't that their voices didn't get louder because their emotions weren't intensifying; it was because they had no energy left to shout in anger.

«What kind of training is this? It's just torture!»

«That's right.»

«Why do we have to go through this?»

But even as people approached the brink of exhaustion, anger started to rise, and the voices of the disciples grew louder.

«Will anything change by doing this? Namgung Clan has its own ways, no?»

«If the head of the family had seen this, would he have condoned it?»

«They treat us almost like slaves. There's no way other sects treat their disciples like this!»

At that moment, a quiet voice was heard.

«Everyone, calm down.»

All eyes turned towards the person who spoke. It was Namgung Dowi, struggling to stand near the entrance. Those who saw his efforts forced themselves to rise, their lips trembling.

«Young Lord.»

«We know it's tough. But we have to overcome this.»

Faces contorted with anger.

«...Honestly, I'm not sure how this kind of training is supposed to help.»

«Right, training can be helpful, but the attitude is just too arrogant and disrespectful.»

«Everyone...»

«Young Lord.»

Namgung Dan glared at Namgung Dowi with dissatisfied eyes.

«Wouldn't it be better if Young Lord spoke on our behalf?»

«...Me?»

Namgung Dowi's gaze hardened as he looked at his fellow disciples.

«Yes, we can endure the difficulty of the training. What's truly unbearable is the humiliation.»

Namgung Dowi stared at the speaker without replying.

«You said we're not here to be pampered as disciples. We're here to learn of our shortcomings through Hwasan. But, Young Lord...»

Namgung Dan didn't back down, continuing to speak firmly to Namgung Dowi.

«No teacher treats their students like this.»

Gradually, Namgung Dowi's expression hardened even more. However, the impassioned Namgung Dan didn't seem to notice his growing rigidity.

«This isn't just our problem. If rumors spread that Namgung Clan is being mistreated by Hwasan, it will damage Namgung's reputation. In times like this, it's Young Lord who needs to step forward.»

«Exactly!»

«Hwasan shouldn't underestimate Namgung this way.»

«If the family head was here, he wouldn't allow us being treated like that.»

«Enough! Stop it!»

At that moment, a short but thunderous roar erupted from Namgung Dowi's mouth.

«No, Young Lord!»

«... Y-young Lord?»

The flustered Namgung disciples stared blankly at Namgung Dowi. Those who were about to pour out more complaints were silenced as they saw his icy expression.

After a while of wordless, tense silence, Namgung Dowi finally spoke.

«Reputation?»

Silence.

«Humiliation?»

Namgung Dowi chuckled as if he couldn't believe it.

«So that's it. I was the only one who didn't know.»

His tone dripped with sarcasm.

«So, Namgung still has enough pride to feel humiliated and cares about reputation, and I'm the only one who didn't realize it. Everyone knew except me.»

Silent glances were exchanged among Namgung's disciples, and they felt the weight of their Lord's words.

«Young Lord.»

Namgung Dowi continued, looking at each of them in turn.

«I thought all of you had left such feelings behind at Maehwado.»

Silence.

The disciples of Namgung lowered their heads in acknowledgment, whether his words were right or wrong. In this situation, who could dare to meet Namgung Dowi's gaze?

«But... Ai...no, that's not true. I was the only one who left. Even though those who died there couldn't regret it, I was the only one who swore to somehow resurrect Namgung, even if I had to chew on mud.»

«Young Lord, that's...»

«I hope you all keep it.»

Before the Namgung Dan could respond, Namgung Dowi spoke in a cold, decisive voice.

«Your pride and reputation. If what those who died at Maehwado protected with their lives was truly that, then shouldn't we do everything we can to protect it?»

Namgung Dowi turned and left without waiting for any response, leaving the disciples behind in stunned silence.

«... Why did he have to say such things...»

«Are you saying it's my fault then?»

Harsh words were exchanged briefly, but that too passed. Everyone fell into a deep silence.

Meanwhile, outside, Namgung Dowi gazed at the distant sky.

In the darkened heavens, stars seemed ready to pour down like rain. Normally, he might have marveled at such a sight, but sadly, at this moment, he couldn't appreciate any beauty.

'It's difficult.'

It was not easy. The road was long, and there was much to do, but it seemed that not everyone shared his feelings.

Did he think they would accept it if he poured out his sincerity? Was it all just wishful thinking?

'Father...'

Just as he thought deeply, Namgung Dowi suddenly felt something flying towards him from behind. He quickly turned and reached out, catching something that was flying toward his face.

«... A liquor bottle?»

What he had caught in his hand was a white bottle of alcohol. Namgung Dowi looked at what he held in his hand with a bewildered expression.

Above the entrance of the pavilion, someone was standing there, now a familiar figure.

«Is that you, Dojang?»

«Yeah, it's me.»

«What are you doing up there?»

Chung Myung shrugged his shoulders.

«Well, never mind that. How about it?»

Looking at the perplexed Namgung Dowi, Chung Myung casually shook the bottle in his hand.

«A drink?»

Namgung Dowi slowly nodded his head in response.