

## Chapter 1142

Did you bring it? (1)

«Is this the place?»

Hwang Jong-ui asked, gazing at the vast manor before him.

«Yes, Master. As far as I know, Hwasan is here,»

the Chief Administrator replied.

Hwang Jong-ui let out a deep sigh at the his words.

«We've finally arrived. It was quite a distance.»

«Even if Master hadn't come personally...»

«Don't speak nonsense,»

Hwang Jong-ui firmly shook his head.

«Hwasan might be a friend of Eunha merchant guild, but they are also our biggest clients. If we neglect our dealings or treat them lightly just because we're familiar, even close relationships can drift apart.»

«Ah...»

«And tell me, is there only Hwasan here? Isn't this where the biggest trading partners of Eunha resides currently: the Northern Ice Palace and the Nanman Beast Palace? With the biggest clients of the Eunha merchant guild gathered in one place, how could I not come myself, even if it hadn't been the Yangtze River but Gangnam!»

«Your words are correct,»

Chief Administrator nodded repeatedly with an admiring expression.

After Hwang Mun-yak's death, Hwang Jong-ui had struggled for a while in that vacant position. However, lately, he had been leading Eunha merchant guild so perfectly that it was almost beyond what Hwang Mun-yak had achieved in his lifetime.

If everything continued this way, openly saying that Eunha under Hwang Jong-ui might leap to become the best in the world was not just a dream.

“My father always used to say, ‘Trust and people are crucial for a merchant.’ I’m just following the words of my ancestors,”

Hwang Jong-ui said, his stern face breaking into a slight smile as he gazed at the manor.

“And... personally, I've been wanting to see Hwasan's people. Whenever I'm exhausted and worn out, just seeing them gives me strength. Frankly, there aren't many people as vibrant as they are, are there?”

“Hahaha, they're too lively, that's the problem. When Hwasan leaves the mountain, it feels like not just Hwaem but also Shaanxi strangely quiet down.”

“That's exactly it,”

Hwang Jong-ui smiled.

Some may know the empty seat, but only I know the occupied one.

‘That just shows how crucial Hwasan has become in Shaanxi. In just a few years.’

It’s a saying that hits home.

Before the revival of Hwasan, the leading sect in the area was the Southern Edge, and when such a significant sect suddenly entered Bongmun, many were concerned.

However, Hwasan not only filled the void left by Southern Edge but also performed beyond expectations. Now, they weren’t just staying within Shaanxi but exerting influence across the Central Plains and even further, reaching the Outer Palaces.

Hence, merely by Hwasan’s momentarily absence, the entire area lost its vitality.

“I also feel uplifted just by meeting Hwasan’s folks.”

“Are you the only one feeling that way?”

Hwang Jong-ui smirked and gestured towards the gate of the manor.

“Let’s go in.”

“Yes, Master.”

Hwang Jong-ui proceeded towards the gates.

“It seems there’s no one guarding the gate?”

“Is it really necessary? With Hwasan, Tangga, as well as guests from the Five Outer Palaces residing here, anyone with a bit of sense wouldn’t dare cause trouble.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Come in. There’s no need to make a fuss about opening the door — they aren’t so tightly closed.”

“Yes.”

At Hwang Jong-ui’s words, Chief Administrator stepped forward and pushed open the door. As Hwang Jong-ui stepped inside, he smiled slightly.

‘It feels strangely like entering Hwasan.’

The unique tranquility of the Tao mixed with the distinctive liveliness of Chung Myung, had been felt even in this place. Wherever Hwasan was, it seemed to carry that ambiance.

“Who’s that person?”

Hwang Jong-ui said, glancing at the figure walking ahead. Encountering someone familiar immediately boosted his mood.

“Is that Jo Geol Dojang? Jo Geol Dojang!”

Hwasan’s disciples were all dressed in same attire, making it difficult to distinguish one from another by their backs alone. However, Jo Geol’s distinct curly hair made him recognizable even from behind.

Hwang Jong-ui, taken aback, approached Jo Geol with a smile.

“Long time no see. Jo Geol, or... Aaah!”

When Jo Geol turned his head to look at Hwang Jong-ui, Hwang Jong-ui, startled, stepped back.

“Jo- Jo Geol Dojang?”

“Oh...”

Recognizing Hwang Jong-ui, Jo Geol bowed deeply.

“Young Mas... No, Master, you’ve arrived.”

“What, what illness have you caught?”

“Um... Sorry?”

“Why does your face look like that? Your face?”

Jo Geol weakly wiped his face with a sleeve.

“It’s a bit damaged.”

A bit damaged?

Hwang Jong-ui was speechless, looking at Jo Geol.

‘This isn’t the look expected even after digging a grave and retrieving a corpse.’

Was this to be described as deathly pale, or as coal-black? His complexion, devoid of color, was so rough that tree bark might have felt smoother. The dark shadows under his eyes were as vivid as if drawn with ink.

Even with deliberate makeup, it seemed impossible to replicate this.

«What on earth happened?»

«What happened is... that’s...»

It was at that moment.

«Isn’t that Master of Eunha?»

Hearing the voice from the side, Hwang Jong-ui swiftly turned his head.

«Wh-who?»

«Yes? Master, it’s me, Yoon Jong.»

«Yoon Jong Dojang?»

Hwang Jong-ui blinked repeatedly.

Yoon Jong’s appearance was hardly different from Jo Geol’s. No, in some ways, it seemed even worse.

«Did Sapaeryeon attack?!»

Yoon Jong, upon hearing that, chuckled in a very strange way.

«Sapaeryeon... If the opponent is Sapa, there’s nothing difficult about it. Just... beat them to death»

«...»

«The problem is that there’s someone worse in Hwasan.»

«It must be... Chung Myung Dojang?»

Who else but Chung Myung could transform someone into such a state?

However, upon hearing Hwang Jong-ui’s words, both Yoon Jong and Jo Geol shook their heads simultaneously.

«Chung Myung is better.»

«At least he was still human.»

«Um... what?»

Both of them shook their heads without giving any answer. Hwang Jong-ui, completely unable to comprehend the situation, was about to ask them again when suddenly...

“These rascals! I told them to come to the training grounds, why are they wasting time here!”

As the angry voice echoed, Yoon Jong and Jo Geol flinched and pulled their necks.

Simultaneously, their faces contorted horribly.

Hwang Jong-ui reflexively turned to look at the one shouting.

“Baek Cheon Dojang?”

“Oh. Isn’t it Master?”

Baek Cheon, upon seeing Hwang Jong-ui, politely greeted him,

“Long time no see, Master”

“Yes... Baek Cheon Dojang’.”

“Have you just arrived?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“It must have been a long journey. You’ve been through a lot. Sect Leader will also be delighted to see you.”

Strangely, while others were deteriorating, Baek Cheon seemed unchanged from the Baek Cheon he knew. No, if anything...

‘He seems oddly unaffected.’

Could it be that only Baek Cheon hadn’t been training? But that would be unusual given his personality, wouldn’t it?

“Let’s go. I’ll escort you to the Sect Leader.”

“Oh... Yes.”

“Just a moment.”

Baek Cheon, who had displayed an infinitely gentle expression towards Hwang Jong-ui, turned his head slightly towards Yoon Jong and Jo Geol. Simultaneously, his expression changed completely from when he looked at Hwang Jong-ui.

“The training time has nearly ended! What are you doing here?”

“We were just about to leave.”

“That... we were greeting Master.”

Yoon Jong and Jo Geol cowered like mice caught before a cat. Baek Cheon, clearly displeased, furrowed his brows at them.

“Go quickly. I’ll escort Master and join you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes!”

The two of them bowed their heads to Baek Cheon and Hwang Jong-ui, then briskly walked towards the training grounds.

“Why are they acting like this? Just a while ago, they were cursing together!”

“They understand...”

“It would have been better if Chung Myung had appeared instead. Ah! When even a high-ranking people aren’t interfering, what can we do?”

“Shh. They might hear us.”

“Everyone will perish. Why should we have additional training? It’s already so difficult, we might as well die.”

“Stop complaining and let’s go. Quickly.”

“Ugh.”

Hwang Jong-ui felt a cold sweat trickle down his back as he watched the two of them dash towards the training grounds. When he turned his head with a sense of unease, Baek Cheon still wore a friendly smile.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

This young man was scarier than he thought.

As Hwang Jong-ui walked as guided by Baek Cheon, he cautiously spoke up.

“Are all the members of the other factions also present here?”

“Yes. Right now, they’ve either finished their afternoon training and are resting, or they’ve gone to have their meals.”

“Ah.”

Hwang Jong-ui nodded.

“Indeed, Hwasan seems to have its unique aspects. It might not be easy for other factions to train as much when everyone’s together in one place.”

“Oh, it’s not like that.”

“Yes? Earlier, it seemed like the other factions were resting while only Hwasan was training...”

“Ah, that...”

Baek Cheon scratched his head.

“There they are. You’ll recognize them once you see.”

“Yes?”

At Baek Cheon’s words, Hwang Jong-ui raised his head to look at the scene unfolding in front of him.

“...”

In the space amidst the large courtyard, bodies covered in dirt were literally sprawled out.

‘A beggars den?’

No, it wasn’t so much a beggars den as it was... What could it be? A group of defeated soldiers?

They resembled soldiers who had barely survived after being beaten up and returned just alive.

Observing those people lying on the ground with their heads buried in the dirt, some foaming at the mouth, Hwang Jong-ui rubbed his temples.

“Th-these, these are Nokrim members, it seems.”

“No, they’re not.”

“Yes? But they wear green...”

Hwang Jong-ui fell silent. He thought they were from Nokrim due to their green attire. Without being Nokrim, it was unthinkable for them to be so disheveled and sprawled on the ground.

However, as he looked closely, he noticed the character “Tang (當)” engraved on the chests of the people sprawled out.

“They are from Tangga.”

“...”

“Tangga? These people?”

Hwang Jong-ui blinked, gazing at those who lay sprawled on the ground, disheveled and scattered.

‘No matter how I look at it, they look like beggars.’

Not just beggars, but those who had starved for at least two weeks.

When did Tangga change affiliation to the Beggars Sect?

“Water... some water...”

“Are you... okay?”

“Di...e... dy...ing...”

“Dying? You want to die?”

“I want to... die...”

“...”

Seeing Hwang Jong-ui’s dismayed expression, Baek Cheon glanced at him briefly, seeming indifferent.

“Don’t worry. It happens every day.”

No, you crazy guy! This shouldn’t be happening every day! Where on earth is this happening?

“Th-those wearing white... or rather yellow attire?”

“They are Namgung. Well, today the Namgung clan seems to be in a relatively good condition.”

“...”

Ah, those people?

“Azure Sky Namgung Clan? The most respectable family in the world, Namgung?”

Hwang Jong-ui, who had been shivering at the sight of almost a village full of victims of what seemed like a plague, gave up any further thoughts as he noticed Im Sobyong hanging on the wall like a dried squid.

‘Let’s not think strangely about this.’

Things always happen in places where Chung Myung is, right? It would be foolish to rationalize the situation. So, remain calm...

“This is it... Hm?”

Baek Cheon, arriving at Sect Leader’s residence, frowned.

“Hey, get up.”

He leaves Hwang Jong-ui and approaches the person sprawled against the wall in front of Sect Leader’s residence and taps their shoulder.

‘That person... hmm? Where have I seen them before?’

“Lord Tang. You should not sleep here. Please, get up...”

“Why is the Lord of the Tang clan here!”

Eventually, a loud exclamation burst out from Hwang Jong-ui’s mouth.

Why is the head of Tangga lying in front of someone else’s residence like a beggar! Why!

“Um, um. Are you Baek Cheon?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“...”

“It seems like you took a brief rest while going to see Sect Leader.”

“...”

“Instead, why don’t you rest a little in your residence?”

“Oh no. Hm? The Master of Eunha merchant guild?”

“Have you been well, Lord?”

“Do I look well?”

Upon hearing the peculiarly cold tone, Hwang Jong-ui bowed his head deeply.

“Let’s go inside.”

“Yes.”

As Tang Gunak took the lead and entered the residence, Hwang Jong-ui let out a deep sigh.

‘I shouldn’t have come...’

It was a feeling that really hit Hwang Jong-ui to the core, the realization that he had truly arrived at a place where Hwasan was located.