

Chapter 1010

That's what it means to become an adult. (4)

The Namgung's disciples silently watched as Tang Soso approached. Namgung Dan found himself in a bewildered state.

'What's happening right now?'

So... is Tang Soso going to face him? With the sword she's holding?

Namgung Dan turned around with a perplexed expression. The reactions of the other members of the Namgung clan didn't seem significantly different from his own.

'Yeah, maybe I'm not the only one thinking something is strange,'

he thought, as the absurdity of the situation pushed him to consider if he might be misinterpreting something.

Namgung Dan addressed Chung Myung.

«Um, Dojang.»

«Hmm?»

Hearing the nonchalant response, he felt a rush of emotions but managed to suppress them.

«Are you telling me to spar with Tang Soso right now?»

«What, do you think I'm going to make a big deal out of sparring? It's just practice.»

Chung Myung chuckled. Namgung Dan bit his lip. The reason for his reaction was quite simple – his opponent was none other than Tang Soso.

'Is he disrespecting me?'

Tang Soso is a member of the Sichuan Tang family, and Namgung Clan and the Sichuan Tang family have had a long-standing relationship, competing to be a leader of the Five Great Families. In other words, they've known each other since childhood.

Naturally, Namgung Dan was quite aware of how Tang Soso had lived her life.

The Sichuan Tang family did not pass secret techniques to women, so until she joined Hwasan, Tang Soso had not received proper martial training. While she might have learned some basic internal energy training and simple martial arts, from the perspective of the Namgung faction, who had endured the rigorous training of Namgung Clan from a young age, calling her a martial artist felt awkward.

'But... with someone like that...'

Even if Tang Soso entered Hwasan and started to seriously train in swordsmanship, how many years could she have trained? The Namgung faction wouldn't even provide a true sword (Jingum) to someone who had only just begun to train with a sword. In terms of training with a sword, she would still be considered a beginner. So, how could they pit her against Namgung Dan? This simply didn't make sense.

«Dojang, please reconsider this. It's...»

«Oh, you talk too much.»

Chung Myung waved his hand dismissively.

«Don't make a big deal out of this. If you have something to say, win first and then say it. Isn't that right?»

Namgung Dan's expression hardened. He glared at Chung Myung with a mixture of emotions, then spoke in a cold tone.

«Don't regret this.»

«Sure, sure.»

Chung Myung replied dryly, and Namgung Dan turned his gaze to Tang Soso.

She was smiling brightly and he wondered why did she seem so happy.

«Hmm.»

Namgung Dan heaved a sigh as he watched Tang Soso's nonchalant expression. But just as he was about to take a step forward, voices from behind held him back.

«Brother!»

The voices tried to persuade him.

«Brother, this is...»

«I would rather go out. It's not your place to step forward, brother.»

«Even so, brother...»

«That's enough.»

Namgung Dan firmly cut them off.

«Sometimes, actions speak louder than a hundred words. I'll handle this on my own. Just watch.»

«But...»

«I said that's enough.»

The swordsmen of Namgung Clan nodded in agreement, but their faces couldn't completely hide the traces of discontent. They were well aware of who Tang Soso was. So, from the beginning, making Namgung Dan fight Tang Soso felt like a situation where they were being disregarded.

Namgung Dan's chest felt tight.

And why wouldn't he be angry? But if he let his frustration show, Namgung Dowi's position would become even more difficult. So, for now, he had no choice but to prove himself with his sword.

Stepping forward to face Tang Soso, Namgung Dan straightened his posture. Their eyes met, and he greeted her.

«It's been a while, Nunim.»

«Yeah, it's been a while, Dan.»

While they had crossed paths a few times since he arrived, they never had an opportunity for such a formal greeting. Namgung Dan heaved a sigh.

«You must have been through a lot, Nunim.»

«Through a lot? Once I start talking, I won't stop for about ten days.»

«That's true.»

Practical attire and a face without make up suited her. Even her hairstyle was simple. He couldn't help but notice the sword hanging from her waist, which added to the sense that this Tang Soso was quite different from the one he remembered.

«Nunim.»

«What?»

«Could you please tell me something?»

«Hmm?»

Namgung Dan nodded.

«Please don't misunderstand, Nunim. This is by no means meant to belittle you.»

Namgung Dan wasn't a fool. They were already outmatched by Tang Soso in terms of physical strength. Just seeing that, he couldn't help but acknowledge how challenging her training must have been since joining Hwasan.

Far from belittling her, he had a deep admiration and respect for her.

‘Moreover...’

Namgung Dan's gaze briefly shifted to Tang Soso's hand. The countless tiny scars on her hand were not the result of dagger training in Tangga but undoubtedly the outcome of swordsmanship. Had she really trained her hand to this extent?

«Everyone knows how hard you've worked, Nunim. But... isn't swordsmanship something that is built up over time?»

«...»

«At a later time, maybe, but not now. This unreasonable spar is not for the sake of your reputation, Nunim.»

«Reputation?»

«Yes.»

Namgung Dan didn't harbor negative feelings toward Tang Soso. There was no reason to in the first place. That's why he didn't want to engage in a duel that would make her fall in front of everyone.

In the first place, this duel would have a predetermined outcome. Could he, as a proud Namgung Clan's swordsman, truly enjoy winning such a one-sided contest?

«Many people are watching.»

«Hmm.»

Tang Soso nodded, as if acknowledging the point.

«Of course...»

Namgung Dan glanced toward the back before he could finish his sentence.

«Convincing him might not be easy, but if you talk to him...»

«It's you.»

At that moment, Tang Soso's voice interrupted him, and Namgung Dan looked back. She narrowed her eyes while looking at him.

«In the past, it seemed like that brat was still somewhat clever, but...»

«yes...?»

“Your condition hasn’t improved.”

“... What...”

He asked with a puzzled expression.

«Is it still your place to talk about honor or whatever?»

«Um, Nunim.»

Namgung Dan couldn’t bring himself to respond with a mortified expression. What he mentioned as reputation wasn’t about Namgung’s reputation, but Tang Soso’s. But to have it put this way...

«From a perspective of an older sister, let me share something.»

«Yes?»

«The reputation of a swordsman isn’t about what comes out of your mouth...»

Thud.

Tang Soso lightly tapped the sword at her waist.

«It’s about what you establish with a sword.»

Namgung Dan’s expression stiffened. She grinned, looking at him.

«Don’t you think that way?»

«...»

Swoosh.

Namgung Dan silently drew his sword.

«If you insist on saying that, then I’ll accept the challenge.»

«Well, wait a moment.»

«Yes?»

Tang Soso lightly waved her hand.

«Let’s use a wooden sword instead of a real one.»

«...»

«I originally intended to use a real sword, but it seems we should use a wooden one.»

Namgung Dan was truly puzzled. If she was afraid of sparring with a real sword, why did she engage in such grandiose words?

«How about it?»

«I think I’ll be fine,»

Namgung Dan replied.

«Okay. Sahyeong! Bring two wooden swords over here!»

However, the situation became even more bizarre from that point.

Upon catching Tang Soso’s gaze, Yoon Jong, with a troubled expression, tried to dissuade her.

«Soso... Do we really need to use wooden swords?»

«Why?»

«Well, it's just that I thought we could do without wooden swords and simply use real ones...»

«Alright, give them to me quickly.»

Yoon Jong hesitated as he looked back and forth between Tang Soso and Namgung Dan, finding it difficult to make a decision. Finally, he turned to Baek Cheon, who nodded.

«Give them to her.»

“Sa-.. Sasuk.”

“It's okay, give them to her.”

“...”

With Baek Cheon's firm backing, Yoon Jong sighed deeply and reluctantly picked up the two wooden swords that were placed nearby. He then handed them over to Tang Soso.

«Be gentle, Soso.»

«Sure.»

She received the wooden swords with both hands and tossed one to Namgung Dan. Thunk.

Namgung Dan, holding the wooden sword, looked at Tang Soso with a bewildered expression. What on earth was this gesture?

«Shall we begin now?»

Namgung Dan tightly gripped the wooden sword in his hand and took a fighting stance.

«I'll learn from you.»

There was usually a procedure to declare one's identity and affiliation, but he didn't go through that process. He didn't want to legitimize this trivial duel as a proper martial contest.

«Let's finish this quickly.»

Tang Soso's options were rather obvious. She would likely employ the unique skills of the Tangga from a distance, launching swift and precise attacks. After all, the martial arts of the Tangga were somewhat similar to Hwasan's swordsmanship.

Although her flashy techniques might be tempting, Namgung Dan saw no real danger in this duel. However, Tang Soso might drag the fight into a long battle with her flashy swordplay and superior endurance, using her excellent physical condition to press him.

‘But that's only a story if she can withstand my sword!’

Namgung Dan had no ill will toward Tang Soso, but he was shouldering the pride of Namgung Clan at the moment. To change the atmosphere where Namgung Clan was being disregarded, he needed an overwhelming victory.

With a strong grip on his sword, Namgung Dan tensed up and exerted all his strength from his toes.

‘I'm coming!’

He hit the ground with all his strength.

«Ugh... Agh!»

However, his powerful advance was suddenly interrupted his excitement stuck in his throat. At the moment he launched himself from his position, Tang Soso had appeared right in front of him.

‘What the...?’

Her sword came crashing down towards his head. Startled, Namgung Dan quickly raised his sword.

Clang!

Two wooden swords clashed powerfully right above his head.

‘That was close...’

Namgung Dan clenched his teeth. Even though he knew the opponent’s martial skills were excellent, he came close to being defeated.

‘But this is the end.’

Namgung Dan thought to himself. Unless she could catch him off guard, it all came down to skills. And she had made a mistake by closing the distance. With this proximity, she wouldn’t have room for her flashy swordplay.

‘I’ll end it in one strike.’

Namgung Dan pressed his sword down and thrust it forward. Or at least, he tried to. Just at that moment, his gaze was instinctively drawn upwards.

Tang Soso’s sword, which should have been deflected, was still pressing down on his sword.

‘What...?’

He gathered all his internal strength and tried to push back her sword again. However, his wrist twisted and Tang Soso’s sword pressed him down further.

«Urgh...»

His arm began to tremble uncontrollably.

‘What’s... happening?’

Cold sweat ran down Namgung Dan’s spine. It felt like an immovable force was pressing him down. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake it off.

Namgung Dan looked at Tang Soso with widened eyes. Tang Soso, who was still smiling brightly, laughed heartily upon seeing him.

«For now.»

«.....»

«Let’s exchange a blow.»

«Huh...?»

At that moment, an immense force pressed down on Namgung Dan’s sword. It felt as if time had slowed down, and everything was crystal clear in his eyes: the sight of his wrist bending, and the sword he was holding fiercely dropping towards his forehead.

‘Uh-oh, this isn’t good...’

Huh?

Kuuuuuuung!

A deafening roar, a result of the collision between a human's head and a sturdy wooden sword, resounded throughout the entire training ground painfully.