

Chapter 1164

What should we do? (4)

‘So this was it.’

Jongli Hyeong observed the bowing figure of Beop Jong, his lips slightly twitched.

‘No way...’

Initially, he thought Beop Jong had lost his mind.

Would other martial arts sects in Gupailbang readily accept the proposition of reinstalling Hwasan and willingly give up all they could offer?

This was nothing short of an unconditional surrender to Cheonumaeng. However, in the moment Beop Jong spoke his final words, Jongli Hyeong could grasp the true intention behind Beop Jong’s statement.

‘There is nothing to lose.’

Recognizing Nokrim as a legitimate sect would hardly bring any harm to Gupailbang. And would those from the Outer Palaces suddenly abandon their land and rush to settle in the Central Plains just because they were recognized as the sects of the Central Plains?

Tangga and Namgung would simply return to their original places. Essentially, what Shaolin was conceding was merely acknowledging Hwasan.

Of course, establishing a counterbalance like Hwasan in the power structure of Gupailbang, which Shaolin had led single-handedly until now, would not be pleasing to Shaolin.

However...

‘It’s nothing compared to having Cheonumaeng to deal with externally.’

No. Upon reflection, setting Hwasan as a counterbalance might not be a bad thing for Shaolin. Unless Shaolin held an unwavering position, wasn’t the current Shaolin in a state of instability?

Amidst such uncertainty, if a sect opposing Shaolin were to emerge from the outside...

Those sects unwilling to have their power taken away from by Hwasan will inevitably gather under Shaolin’s banner. Shaolin is currently under attack partly due to Beop Jong’s missteps, but also because Shaolin holds a position above all other sects.

People always want to pull down those who stand the highest.

‘However, people inherently dislike others surpassing them from the start.’

No one would want someone standing on their head. If that were to happen, Shaolin would have the chance to regain stability rather than teetering on uncertain grounds.

‘The more I think about it, the more perfect it seems.’

If Hwasan accepts this proposal, Beop Jong would instantly become a hero, who united the opposing sects to stand against Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult. A hero who sacrificed all for the world by relinquishing what he possessed! What’s more ironic is that all of this was

originally something Beop Jong should have done. It would have naturally unfolded this way, but it came to fruition dramatically after going through many hardships.

Isn't it true that people are usually more interested in a dramatic conclusion like this rather than in a natural victory? The phrase «triumph through adversity» must exist for moments like this.

‘What will you do, Hyun Jong?’

Jongli Hyeong's gaze fixed on the hardened expression of Hyun Jong.

Certainly, if Cheonumaeng rejects this proposal, it would be a futile attempt, but such a scenario is unlikely. The moment the proposal is declined, all the justifications and values Cheonumaeng has upheld will be trampled upon.

What remains is an assessment that solely revolves around the pursuit of power, neglecting the sacrifices of the common people. However, how could one possibly reject this proposal?

Jongli Hyeong has seen it in Hyun Jong's eyes — the dagger firmly lodged in his side. A dagger that pierced flesh, cut through bones, and even tore the lungs apart in an instant.

«Hmm...»

It was the moment when Hyun Jong, as if groaning in pain, swallowed the empty air.

«Why... why must it be us? If that's the case, wouldn't it be better for Shaolin to join Cheonumaeng? Whether it's Gupailbang or Five Great Families, the result would be the same if they join Cheonumaeng, wouldn't it?»

Feeling that the situation had become strange, even if he couldn't comprehend it fully, Jo Geol shouted urgently. Speaking with an excessively impolite tone given his status as one of the Hwasan's third generation disciples.

But Beop Jong didn't blame Jo Geol. Instead, he smiled approvingly.

«Of course, it might be possible. However, it's not the right path.»

«Why...?»

«Because the common people are also those who fight alongside us. Which name would they be more familiar with?»

«That's...».

Beop Jong let out a sigh.

«And, it's embarrassing to admit, but the other sects in Gupailbang will likely refuse to dismantle and join Cheonumaeng. That would only lead to another division.»

«Why... why us only...»

«So, I'm asking you like this. In my opinion, there isn't a better way beyond this.»

Beop Jong looked at the remaining people in the room.

«There's only one principle: gathering strength towards a better direction and saving more people. If you know a better way than my suggestion, teach me. If it's valid, I'll follow it.»

Silence followed.

There couldn't be a better way. Even those present here had all come to accept it. The method Beop Jong just mentioned was indeed the most effective against Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult.

'Fight alongside Gupailbang?'

The earlier attempt to strengthen the Alliance even a bit now seemed foolish. Of course, all those efforts might not be in vain, but nonetheless, the name of Gupailbang felt immense.

Tang Gunak bit his lip slightly and spoke.

«A little while ago, you promised an equal position to Hwasan. But in the end, isn't that just words? Is it realistically possible?»

«Why do you think it's not possible?»

«Even if Shaolin acknowledges it, other sects won't.»

Beop Jong laughed.

«Why worry about that? Can't the people here help with that?»

Silence followed.

«Even if you change affiliation, the bonds you've built won't disappear. Isn't that more reliable support than those meager promises and positions?»

«Gupailbang is in a bit of a... situation.»

«Lord Tang, nothing in the world is perfect.»

Beop Jong shook his head and said,

«If you try to keep everything without giving up anything, harmony and compromise become mere dreams.»

Beop Jong turned his gaze slowly toward Hyun Jong.

«Isn't that right, Sect Leader?»

Hyun Jong couldn't help but laugh. Just a little while ago, Beop Jong consistently addressed him as the Alliance Leader, and now he already referred to him as the Sect Leader as if he was a member of Gupailbang.

A truly artful choice of words.

«I have one question, Abbot.»

«Please go ahead.»

«Why are you going to such lengths?»

Beop Jong looked at Hyun Jong with unwavering eyes.

«Sect Leader.»

“...”

«Honestly, you must be doubting my sincerity right now.»

«...Frankly, yes.»

«Then let me be honest with you. I am currently very personal, explicit, and filled with desire.»

«What?»

«Someday in the future, I absolutely don't want to hear stories about the madman called Beop Jong, who didn't know what to do and rampaged, turning the world into the lair of evil factions.»

Hyun Jong flinched.

«If my words sound like a threat, it's because I am that desperate. I may not become a hero who saved the world, but I don't want to become a villain who plunges the world into chaos. If that happens, there will be no face left for me to show to the ancestors of Shaolin, even in death. It might be better to fall into the eternal torment of the underworld.»

Hyun Jong's fingertips trembled slightly.

Beop Jong was simply expressing his inner thoughts calmly, but to Hyun Jong, it sounded like a warning.

If he rejects this proposal, it means Hyun Jong will become the villain, unintentional as it may be.

«Well then, I intend to do what I should have done originally. Regret may come too late, and what's done cannot be undone, but still, isn't it better than having no regrets at all?»

«... You speak the truth.»

Hyun Jong was no longer sure.

The person sitting in front of him was like a venomous snake harboring a relentless poison, yet at the same time, resembled an enlightened monk who had renounced all worldly attachments.

No, perhaps both aspects coexisted within him.

'I don't know.'

It's uncertain. Certainly, Beop Jong's actions and purpose seem to embody that of a virtuous person, yet the outcome of his deeds is pushing Hwasan into a corner. The virtuous one is ironically pressing him like a harsh evil.

'Maybe... the Abbot has been like this from the beginning.'

If something is deemed right, he endeavors to fulfill that rightness to the best of his ability. In the process, he doesn't shy away from sacrifices, even tolerating damage to his reputation, and steadfastly enduring momentary humiliation.

Yes, this is merely the image Beop Jong has shown them from the opposite side until now.

The only difference is that Beop Jong's purpose has now shifted to being with them. Can you say it's wrong to criticize that?

'What should we do?'

Everyone is looking at Hyun Jong.

Those who were passionately discussing the future of Cheonumaeng just a while ago now looked at Beop Jong with faces filled with uncertainty, their attention focused solely on his words.

Everyone in this room, remarkable as they were, had been completely swayed by Beop Jong. Or had they all?

Hyun Jong's gaze naturally shifted towards one person. The one who always opened a path for him whenever he found himself cornered.

«Hwasan in Gupailbang...»

Before Hyun Jong's gaze could reach him, Chung Myung's slow voice flowed through the room like water. The voice naturally captivated everyone's attention.

«Well, it's not a bad idea. If the Abbot keeps his word, that is.»

«If there's no trust, then I will make an oath. I'm willing to offer my life if needed.»

«Well, if you put it that way...»

Chung Myung shrugged his shoulders.

«Does that mean Gupailbang is now becoming Shibpailbang? The name seems a bit odd.»

Beop Jong chuckled heartily.

«What does the name matter so much? While Gupailbang originally signifies ten sects, it has long become a symbol in itself. So even if eleven sects join, the world will understand.»

«Well, that might be true.»

Chung Myung, crossed his arms while shaking his head.

«Abbot.»

«Why are you doing that?»

«You're more impressive than I thought. Honestly, I never imagined we'd be cornered like this.»

Beop Jong chuckled at his words.

«Seeing the renowned Hwasan Geomhyeop speaking like this, it seems my proposal was quite right.»

«It's so good that I feel like dancing. When did you start thinking about it?»

«It just came to me when I let it go.»

«...Should I even believe in Buddhism?»

Chung Myung shook his head as if he couldn't stand losing. Observing him closely, Beop Jong spoke again.

«So, what will you do? What's your answer?»

«...I can't think of a way to refuse. Honestly, if we don't accept this, Hwasan will end up swallowing insults from all over the world until its insides bursts and it dies.»

«Because that's the right thing to do, isn't it?»

«...The justification and the cause are like the swords I used to wield, but now, it's you who picked them up, Abbot.»

Chung Myung sighed loudly and raised both hands up, as if surrendering.

«Then can we assume you're accepting it?»

«Well, we have to, right? We may not know how it'll turn out later, but for now, responding positively seems like the first step.»

«Alright. I'm not expecting an immediate answer here either. Take your time to think.»

Beop Jong's smile revealed his confidence. Chung Myung spoke up.

«But before that, I have one question.»

«What is it?»

«You mentioned that you let it go to save even one more person, right? Did you do it for that purpose?»

«That's right.»

«Are you sincere about it?»

«Naturally, I am.»

«Oh, really?»

Chung Myung grinned. In that moment, their laughter-filled gazes met.

«Well then, what about Haenam sect?»

«...Haenam?»

«Yes, Haenam. The one at the southern tip of Gangnam, surrounded by Sapaeryeon.»

«...»

«We will decide after hearing that. Tell us how you'll handle this situation.»

Those who were holding their breath on the spot saw it clearly for a moment. It was as if Chung Myung's ice-cold gaze was piercing through Beop Jong.