

Chapter 1202

So what's the difference? (2)

“Well...”

Namgung Dowi, after a quick glance at Tang Gunak, let out an awkward laugh.

«Isn't it good? In Haenam, they will surely understand our sincerity.»

Namgung Dowi truly believed that. What better way to show their sincerity than for the sect leaders to visit Haenam themselves? But Jo Geol seemed to have a different perspective.

«Wouldn't it be fortunate if they didn't perceive it as a threat?»

«A threat?»

When Namgung Dowi turned to ask what that meant, Jo Geol shrugged his shoulders.

«Think about it. None of the sects forming Cheonumaeng are pushovers, right?»

«...That's true.»

Admitting that they weren't pushovers was an overly humble statement. While Cheonumaeng might not match up to Gupailbang in terms of influence, they were still among the most powerful forces in Gangho.

«From Namgung, the backbone of the Five Great Families, and Tangga, to Nokrim, the biggest sect of Sapa, and even two of the Outer Palaces.»

«Hmm...»

«Among them, is there any sect that Haenam could consider easy to handle?»

«None... I suppose?»

While Haenam might be considered one of Gupailbang now, it had only recently joined them, less than a hundred years ago. Looking at it objectively, Haenam was undoubtedly more burdened when it came to interactions with other sects.

«But... if the leaders of Cheonumaeng flock there as a group, and say they come with good intentions, so why not join forces peacefully?»

At that moment, a vivid image flashed through everyone's minds.

It was the scene where the leaders of the Cheonumaneg, who were undoubtedly unmatched in their temperament even considering Gupailbang, surrounded the Sect Leader of Haenam.

«Uh...»

«This picture is a bit...»

«Plus, there is even a member of Sapa.»

As some strange reactions began to surface, Namgung Dowi wiped his cold sweat and continued.

«W-we're not threatening anyone, are we? We just think it would be good for the future of Haenam to join forces with Cheonumaeng...»

«Isn't that a threat? If you don't join, we'll just leave. But then Shaolin won't help you, and you'll ultimately fall. If you don't want to be ruined, join us.»

«... «

«That's definitely a threat.»

At that, murmurs began to rise among Ogeom.

«Sounds scary.»

«Really terrifying.»

«I'd be scared if I were them.»

By this point, it felt like a relief that Tang Gunak hadn't joined. Imagine if he were standing just a step away with his piercing gaze, while the others surrounded Haenam's Sect Leader.

Wouldn't it feel like one should step forward, even with nothing to offer?

«...At this point, it can't even be called righteous deed, can it, Sahyeong?»

«Tsk tsk. What a fool. Still don't understand?»

«Yes?»

Yoon Jong looked at Jo Geol with pity.

«Righteousness is fundamentally about power.»

Jo Geol widened his eyes in surprise.

«Oh, um, what do you mean?»

«Think about it. Righteousness that doesn't require power isn't called righteousness.»

«Th-then?»

«That's just charity.»

«Huh?»

Jo Geol's eyes widened in astonishment. At first, it seemed like nonsense, but upon hearing it, there was a certain logic to it. Seeing his expression, Yoon Jong nodded.

«We call it righteousness because we're going to use force to settle it. And we're not going there for charity.»

«Is that so?»

«Yes. So obviously, we need to exert our strength.»

«Ah... I, I didn't know that, Sahyeong. Indeed, this is Hwasan's righteousness.»

«No, you idiots!»

Unable to contain himself any longer, Baekcheon burst out in frustration. Jo Geol looked at him with a puzzled expression.

«Sahyeong, Acting Leader says otherwise.»

«Tsk tsk. Geol-ah, you still don't understand. When you're in a position like Acting Leader's, sometimes you have to call wrong right and right wrong.»

«Oh, so there's a difference in interpretation.»

«That's right. After all, isn't Acting Leader the one who originally devised this plan? And when you think about it, isn't he the pioneer of 'Hwasan's righteousness'?»

«Indeed!»

«N-no!»

Watching silently, Tang Gunak looked up at the ceiling with a resigned expression.

‘Shouldn’t I have just joined hands with the Abbot? Then at least this agony would have been his, not mine.’

It occurred to him that perhaps that would have been the best way to torment Beop Jong. Why hadn’t he thought of that earlier?

Taking a deep breath, Tang Gunak composed himself.

«Anyway, this is no trivial matter.»

Everyone looked at Tang Gunak as his tone shifted.

«While it’s commendable that we are heading to Haenam with such determination... it’s also true that more weight has been placed on those who represent Cheonumaeng than initially thought. Objectively speaking, it’s unprecedented.»

«If those headed to Haenam were to face an unexpected disaster, the damage would be immeasurable. Depending on the circumstances, even the existence of Cheonumaeng could become impossible.»

Tang Gunak glanced at the other leaders as he spoke. Despite his words, he knew he wouldn’t break their will.

Who could be blamed? After all, wasn’t Cheonumaeng originally meant for such individuals? It was because of people like them that they were here with Cheonumaeng.

«So, above all, what’s most important is a safe return. Don’t forget what you’re carrying with you.»

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Lastly, Tang Gunak’s gaze fell on Baek Cheon. It was just a brief glance, but Baek Cheon understood its meaning clearly.

Baek Cheon was the one who initiated this. Therefore, if problems arose, it would be his responsibility, even if he didn’t force anyone, considering everyone volunteered to participate.

It was more of a concerned look than a reprimand. Baek Cheon nodded heavily in understanding of Tang Gunak’s meaningful gaze.

Seeing Baek Cheon’s determined gaze, Tang Gunak couldn’t help but smile faintly.

«However...»

Tang Gunak’s voice, full of the authority of the Lord of Tangga, flowed out.

«Looking at it from another angle, there’s no other way to clearly demonstrate Cheonumaeng’s intentions and determination to the world.»

«We’ve declared to take a different path from Gupailbang. If it ends with mere words, our choice will eventually be judged as a selfish decision driven by the inability to overcome personal feelings.»

Everyone nodded in agreement.

«Living teaches you that sometimes there’s no such thing as a right or wrong choice. A choice is just a choice. What matters is proving that whatever choice you make was the right one.»

This was Tang Gunak's honest sentiment.

Despite often going against the norms of the words, Hwasan, Tangga and Cheonumaeng, they had come this far because their choices were proven right through their sword and will. He knew that ignoring the voice of their hearts and discussing only the reality and risks would eventually lead them to become just like Beop Jong.

The path chosen by Cheonumaeng now was to prove their difference from Shaolin. It was a decision made by none other than themselves.

Suppressing his heartfelt worries and concerns, Tang Gunak looked at everyone with a resolute expression.

«So, go forth boldly in the name of Cheonumaeng.»

The response came in unison, filled with fervor.

«Yes!»

With unwavering determination.

The negotiation between Shaolin and Cheonumaeng fell through. Shaolin's leader, Abbot Beop Jong, attempted to alleviate the longstanding animosity between the two factions and proposed uniting under the banner of righteousness to prepare for the impending calamity, but Cheonumaeng flatly rejected the proposal.

This angered the Abbot, who saw this as prioritizing their own interests over the crisis Gangho is facing, and he firmly declared that they would not cooperate with Cheonumaeng.

- The act of solely advocating for one's own interests amidst the crisis when the vile Sapaeryeon is one the move and the long-lost Demonic Cult is resurfacing after the hundred year absence is not the behavior fitting for those who claim to represent righteousness. Gupailbang, which wishes for prosperity of the Central Plains, sternly condemns Cheonumaeng's reckless actions.

This news spread rapidly throughout the Central Plains at an astonishing speed.

The reactions of those who heard the news were diverse.

«Isn't Cheonumaeng going a bit too far?»

Anger flashed on the face of the speaker.

«What? Is this guy... in his right mind? How can anyone criticize Cheonumaeng? When the powerless suffered, who were the first to rush to their aid? Who were the only ones who charged into the massacre led by Demonic Cult? Think about it!»

«No, isn't it reasonable? Hasn't Cheonumaeng always helped the commoners? If they join forces with Gupailbang, they would undoubtedly be of greater assistance, so why refuse that?»

«It's unbelievable, those Gupailbang bastards! How can we trust those treacherous scoundrels? They just stood by watching as their comrades died because they were too afraid to risk their own lives!»

A middle-aged man furrowed his brow as he listened to the enraged voice.

«Even though Gupailbang may not be what it once was, it's still been protecting people for centuries as a righteous sect. Do you really think they would just stand by when Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult invaded Gangbuk? Even if it meant risking their lives?»

«...That's unlikely.»

«So, shouldn't they naturally join forces to fight? I heard Abbot Beop Jong offered a lot to Cheonumaeng, but they still rejected the proposal. Doesn't that mean Cheonumaeng is starting to focus on something else?»

«Something else?»

«Self-interest. Isn't it obvious? Now that their power is at stake, isn't it regrettable? Cheonumaeng can no longer be considered small or insignificant.»

«Oh this bastard has a big mouth! Hey, you. You'll get what's coming to you. Cheonumaeng has done so much for us.»

«Don't talk nonsense. Do you think Gupailbang was always like this? What Cheonumaeng is doing now, Gupailbang did in the past. They risked their lives to defend the Central Plains when Demonic Cult attacked a hundred years ago. Remember who saved the Central Plains when these demons threatened it.»

«Well...»

The hesitant speaker trailed off, their words becoming muddled. Surely, there was a time when Gupailbang symbolized unity and righteousness. But isn't it a universal truth that 'everything in the world changes'?

«No matter what, Cheonumaeng hasn't changed yet.»

«Don't jump to conclusions. If they truly prioritized protecting the commoners, they should have agreed to join forces with Gupailbang even if it meant sacrificing something. But what has actually happened? Didn't they reject the proposal from Gupailbang themselves?»

«...»

«When faced with Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult, it's common knowledge which side suffers less: divided in two or merged into one. I am deeply disappointed in Cheonumaeng this time.»

«That's probably just because your nephew is a disciple of Kongtong sect. Look at yourself first. You've bent your arm so much you can't even use the chopsticks.»

«What? Have you finished talking?»

«What! Did I say something wrong?»

«This bastard!»

Their voices escalated, causing a commotion in the tavern. The bystanders furrowed their brows but made no move to intervene. They, too, had their own complicated thoughts. Observing this scene from a corner of the tavern sat a beggar. His darkened gaze softened as the Innkeeper* approached him with an irritated expression.

Taking the offered bowl of leftover rice with a smile, the beggar quietly slipped out of the tavern.

* 점소이(店小二) — jeomsoi — can be translated as innkeeper if we consider this hanja.
Can also be translated as an informant generally based in inns which sounds nearly the same.
An informant of a low class, working for/as a beggar, in some murim novels it can be an informant of Hao clan.