

Chapter 1096

The 'Hwasanization' of the entire Central Plains (1)

Sometimes, people can be astonishing.

When you see someone having thoughts that ordinary folks wouldn't comprehend, or when you encounter someone thinking in an entirely different direction from the common people. But the greater surprise comes when you meet someone who sees further than the ordinary person.

«We feared the Demonic Cult and worried about the unification within Sapaeryeon and the rift between Gupailbang. That's why we were flustered and rushed. At that moment, what we contemplated was how we should deal with them from now on.»

At Tang Gunak's words, Hyun Jong nodded. «You're exactly right.»

«But Hwasan Geomhyeop was looking at something different. Not how to handle the Demonic Cult, but how we should transform ourselves. Similar, yet an entirely different narrative, wouldn't you say?»

As Tang Gunak spoke, he sighed.

«How peculiar it is...»

«Uh-hmm.»

Seemingly abrupt, yet Hyun Jong seemed to understand the meaning as he nodded in agreement.

«At times, observing Hwasan Geomhyeop makes one wonder how a person could entertain such thoughts. How can someone who has walked such a perfect path lack faith in themselves?»

«...Patriarch.»

Tang Gunak's gaze shifted slightly upward. It felt like he was looking somewhere beyond the ceiling.

«From the perspective of Cheonumaeng, it's a blessing. Even from the viewpoint of Hwasan, it's truly something to welcome. Such a person's existence guides everyone, but...»

Tang Gunak's eyes clouded briefly, growing darker.

«Hwasan Geomhyeop... whether he is something to welcome, even from the standpoint of someone like Chung Myung...»

His voice carried a distinct sense of sorrow.

«I don't quite understand, Alliance Leader. Perhaps that's... a sorrowful thing, maybe.»

Hyun Jong slowly closed his eyes.

It seemed as if Tang Gunak's words pierced to the core of Chung Myung's being.

Outwardly, Chung Myung appeared as an epitome of self-confidence. Without a hint of hesitation, always presenting the right answers and boldly moving ahead, leading not only himself but others as an extraordinary figure.

Yet, within that outward facade, in the depths of his being, what lay hidden?

It was a doubt bordering on disdain for himself, a deep-seated anxiety, and... fear.

Hyun Jong still couldn't forget the shock he felt when glimpsing Chung Myung's inner self for the first time. No matter how much one might excuse it due to his exceptional prowess, realizing that Chung Myung regarded himself as less than an insect was astonishing. Anyone other than Hyun Jong would have been surprised.

Among the various reasons why Hyun Jong refrained from delving into Chung Myung's past, this was the foremost reason.

Whatever Chung Myung saw or experienced, even if he carried an irredeemable sin...

doesn't he regret it so profoundly? How could one pry into the wounds of someone who has struggled with such anguish, not merely as a leader but as a human being?

A meaningful silence continued. Both wore pensive expressions.

Tang Gunak slowly spoke again.

«Shaolin prioritized its own gains, fracturing even the alliances that had been already formed.»

«...And Maninbang is coercing even allied factions under its control. It might seem right at this moment, but... seen from another perspective, they are treading the path of any once-great Sapa faction that boasted its power but eventually vanished into history.»

Hyun Jong nodded heavily.

«On the other hand, the path chosen by Hwasan Geomhyeop is entirely different. He doesn't build walls between factions, everyone shares what they have, and no one stands in a superior position... Yes, that's friendship.»

Tang Gunak smiled. Until then, Chung Myung always seemed to favor other factions while inwardly ensuring that Hwasan held the foremost position. The evidence lay in how Hwasan relentlessly trained its disciples without concerning itself much with strengthening other factions.

Isn't it evident from his actions, particularly when entering Bongmun threatened by Sapaeryeon's rise, that he strengthened Hwasan while leaving other factions to fend for themselves?

However, Chung Myung has begun to extend his hand not just to Hwasan but also to other factions within Cheonumaeng. To some, it might appear as overreach or undue interference. Yet, upon reflection, it's a considerable sacrifice from Chung Myung's perspective. He evaluates his abilities more objectively than anyone else.

At that moment, Hyun Jong smiled faintly and spoke,

«Come to think of it, Namgung's influence... Chung Myung might have nudged that person's thoughts a bit.»

«I don't think the influence is negligible.»

It might have been a first for Chung Myung as well – the experience of a faction, such as Namgung clan, humbly approaching to seek guidance from a lesser-established faction.

Hence, while respecting the independence of each faction thus far, Chung Myung might have slightly expanded his scope of action.

«As for you, Lord...»

Hyun Jong seemed to hesitate before choosing his words. Then, he asked,

«What do you think will be the outcome of what that child is trying to do?»

«Well...»

Tang Gunak smiled subtly.

«To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. This is something no faction in Gangho has attempted before.»

«Uh-hmm.»

He soon looked at Hyun Jong with a clear gaze and spoke.

«However, the situation we find ourselves in has been unprecedented. The Demonic Cult could invade Central Plains at any time, and Gupailbang, which should be at the forefront of dealing with it, is divided and struggling to exert its strength. Moreover, even Sapaeryeon, which is difficult to seek cooperation from, is becoming increasingly stronger.»

«... Yes.»

Tang Gunak smiled.

«In such a situation, the likelihood of Cheonumaeng overcoming everything without sacrifices is slim. Frankly speaking, even if sacrifices are made, resolving this situation itself will be a remarkable feat.»

«... Indeed.»

Hyun Jong also smiled in response.

«In that case, even if it might only be like catching a floating straw, shouldn't we try everything we can? Even if it's something that has never been attempted before.»

«Of course, we must. All I can do is silently support what that child intends to do.»

«Don't say that. At least for Hwasan Geomhyeop, there may be nothing more powerful than that silent support.»

A hint of embarrassment flickered across Hyun Jong's face.

«There's indeed a lot to do.»

«Yes. First, it seems we should inform the Nanman Beast Palace and the Northern Sea Ice Palace about this situation and request their attendance. Actually... it's a fact that we've unintentionally neglected them to some extent, isn't it?»

A sigh escaped from Tang Gunak's lips.

It was never intentional to neglect them. It's just that the Nanman Beast Palace and the Northern Sea Ice Palace are located quite far from the Central Plains, making it challenging to seek immediate help.

But considering the viewpoints of both Palaces, it's plausible that what appeared as consideration, yet lacked sincerity, could have influenced the majority of Cheonumaeng's actions, outwardly resembled being guided by Hwasan and the Tang Clan.

Now that the call has been made to encompass everyone, it's crucial not to make them feel excluded.

«Nanman Beast Palace might find it a bit bothersome, perhaps...»

Tang Gunak chuckled at Hyun Jong's words.

«That might indeed be the case. But it's something that needs to be accepted.

Responsibilities accompany authority. The Lord of the Palace is someone who understands that much.»

Hyun Jong nodded, exhaling softly.

Every time Cheonumaeng faces a significant challenge, upheaval occurs, whether minor within Hwasan or major within Cheonumaeng.

But blaming it on that shouldn't happen. Chung Myung has consistently overturned not just Hwasan but also Cheonumaeng, shaping it anew each time.

Hyun Jong's task isn't to admonish that fact, but rather to ensure that Chung Myung can unfold his intentions without feeling burdened.

«However...»

Tang Gunak opened his mouth with a slightly different expression than before.

«I have some concerns. Internal issues aside, the biggest worry is undoubtedly external.»

«...Are you referring to the Gupailbang and Sapaeryeon?»

«Yes.»

Rang Gunak's eyes narrowed slightly.

«The full story of the Hangzhou incident will soon spread throughout the world. In that case, the stature of Hwasan and Sapaeryeon, which participated in this event, will rise to unprecedented levels. And those who might feel most uncomfortable about this fact would be...»

«The Gupailbang, I presume.»

«Yes. And that discomfort might exceed what even the Alliance Leader could imagine.»

As Hyun Jong looked at Tang Gunak with a questioning gaze, Tang Gunak suppressed a bitter smile.

«What Shaolin didn't want to miss at any cost was the concept of 'Shaolin safeguarding Gangho.' But this incident has allowed Hwasan to claim that concept.»

«Ah...»

Hyun Jong nodded slightly with a complicated expression. At that moment, as if about to say something, Tang Gunak covered his mouth with his wide sleeve. His shoulders began to twitch faintly. When Hyun Jong opened his eyes wide and asked,

“Why?”

«Oh, I'm sorry. I know it's not appropriate, but just thinking that the Abbot might be burning with anger from head to toe makes me chuckle involuntarily.»

It was an unexpectedly frivolous remark coming from Tang Gunak's lips. However, Hyun Jong completely understood Tang Gunak's mood. Controlling oneself becomes quite challenging when thinking about the Abbot's furious demeanor trotting back and forth.

He said, suppressing his expression,

«A rigid person.»

«That's right. Not inherently foolish, just... too aware of their own excellence and possessing a strong sense of pride.»

In this aspect, Beop Jong stands on the opposite side to Chung Myung.

Beop Jong is also incredibly talented. Just by reaching the pinnacle position of the Abbot among the distinguished martial masters of the Thousand-Year Shaolin, it's evident that he is undeniably capable.

«That's the reason.»

The Abbot never considers the possibility of being wrong. He never lets go of his certainty of being right. Isn't this starkly different from Chung Myung, who lives with the notion that he could be wrong at any time, carrying it around like a dagger?

«So, one must be cautious. An injured pride of the Abbot might lead to unpredictable outcomes.»

Hyun Jong nodded with a heavy heart.

Though it's a stifling situation, the Gupailbang present at the moment posed a more immediate and substantial threat than the Demonic Cult attempting to destroy the Central Plains or Sapaeryeon eyeing Gangbuk. At least for the time being.

With a newfound conviction in his voice, different from before, Hyun Jong said,

«Whatever their thoughts may be...»

With an abrupt shift in demeanor, even Tang Gunak's gaze across the table became sharper.

«There won't be a single finger laid on those kids. That's what I must do as the leader of Hwasan and the lord of Cheonumaeng.»

It was a statement that clearly showed his determination. Tang Gunak smiled and said,

«I will do my best to assist, my Lord.»

Perhaps even these actions of Cheonumaeng might seem like small changes. No, considering the rapidly changing dynamics in Gangho, it might indeed be a minor change.

However, Tang Gunak was convinced that at the end of this change there would be significant results.