

Chapter 1099

The ‘Hwasanization’ of the entire Central Plains (4)

«Abbot...»

Beop Gye swallowed hard and cautiously spoke up.

«I am not unaware of what Abbot is referring to... but...»

Beop Jong’s piercing gaze cut through Beop Gye like a blade. Sensing an impulse to shut his mouth instantly, Beop Gye bit his lip tightly, but soon regained his composure. Fear shouldn’t postpone speaking up — otherwise, everything could truly go wrong.

«Abbot... if you were truly concerned about that situation, wouldn’t it have been prudent to have a serious discussion when Hwasan’s Sect Leader arrived? Blaming them after everything is finished...»

«Discussion?»

Beop Jong’s chilling voice interrupted Beop Gye’s words.

«Who do you propose to discuss this with?»

«With Hwasan’s Hyun Jong and...»

«That scarecrow?»

Beop Gye shut his eyes tightly.

Regardless of any circumstances, calling a Sect Leader of another sect a scarecrow was unacceptable. It would be a grave insult even to a small or minor faction, let alone to Hwasan, which became formidable sect.

Beop Jong was well aware of this fact. He, as the respected leader of Shaolin, had been extremely cautious in his conduct to maintain that position. However, recently, incidents related to Hwasan had been causing Beop Jong to lose his rationality more frequently.

‘No...’

A strange glint flickered in Beop Gye’s eyes.

Would the Abbot he knew ever use such an expression for someone just due to simple hostility? Could it be true?

‘What am I thinking!’

Beop Gye quickly erased the suspicion that had surfaced in his mind. It was utterly unimaginable. Could the esteemed Beop Jong, the Abbot of Shaolin, possibly harbor competitive feelings toward Hyun Jong, a mere leader of Hwasan?

At that moment, Beop Jong asserted himself.

«What’s the point of discussing anything with Sect Leader Hyun Jong? Is it because we don’t know who really holds a say in decisions within Hwasan?»

«...»

«Hyun Jong may not know. If he's merely a good person, he might not understand what it means for Hwasan to go to Gangnam, or how that cunning Paegun Jang Ilso would manipulate them. However!»

Beop Jong pounded his point.

«Do you think that Hwasan Geomhyeop truly didn't foresee all these circumstances before heading to Gangnam?»

Beop Gye remained speechless. Beop Jong outright chuckled.

«That's unlikely. Someone like him, who seems to carry ten snakes in his belly, wouldn't have been unaware of this situation! He went knowingly!»

Beop Gye couldn't muster a counterargument.

Considering the abilities of Hwasan Geomhyeop Beop Gye had witnessed thus far, it seemed more absurd that he couldn't foresee all of this.

«They, who incessantly spoke of righteousness and the common people, couldn't restrain their petty ambitions, ultimately plunging all of Gangnam's civilians into hell! This was the perfect opportunity to overthrow Sapaeryeon and liberate Gangnam! A chance just thrown away!»

Beop Jong's face flushed crimson. The image of the an old monk seeking enlightenment that had been present just moments ago was now entirely absent.

«Unforgivable! Unforgivable! Their intentions are crystal clear to me! By enduring a bit of shame, by enduring a bit of criticism and waiting, they could have brought peace to Gangho! Is this how they ruin it all? Is this the way of Hwasan?!»

It was a raging fury akin to a thunderbolt.

«And furthermore!»

Beop Jong's hand clenched the edge of the robe, trembling.

«Of all things, colluding with those Sapa scoundrels to perpetrate this!»

«...»

«Had Hwasan not joined hands with Jang Ilso and resolved all this independently, I might have been furious but wouldn't have doubted their sincerity! Yet! How am I supposed to accept that those advocating righteousness fought alongside Sapa's leaders? When the souls of those who died at Black Dragon Fortress and Maehwado are still wandering the heavens! Joining hands with Sapa?»

Beop Jong spoke as if spewing fire. His intense rage caused Beop Gye's body to tremble involuntarily.

However, what followed wasn't a vehement outburst but a resigned laughter.

«Heh... hahaha...»

Beop Jong suddenly laughed dryly and lowered his head.

«How harsh... it's just so harsh.»

«Abbot...»

«Those who know nothing will now praise Hwasan. They'll praise Jang Ilso as well. They'll say he defended the Central Plains against that dreadful Demonic Cult. And they'll blame us. Where were we?»

Beop Gye fell silent.

Looking at the stated facts, it wasn't entirely wrong. Wasn't it a fact that Shaolin hadn't done a thing during the upheaval in Hangzhou?

Or, to be rational, in the recent series of events that shook Gangho, Beop Gye was perplexed about Shaolin's actual role. Weren't they repeatedly stepping back, waiting for the situation to escalate, only to lose ground to Sapaeryeon or Hwasan?

Beop Gye cautiously spoke up.

«Abbot, in my opinion... considering the weight carried by the name 'Demonic Cult,' perhaps waiting this long wasn't the best course of action.»

Beop Jong stared at Beop Gye in silence.

From Beop Jong's mouth, which had been pressuring Beop Gye with heavy silence, a voice tinged with regret finally emerged.

«Do you also believe that?»

«It's not that...»

Beop Jong's voice lowered, cutting off Beop Gye's words.

«That's precisely why we should have waited even more.»

«... Yes? But...»

«Don't you understand?»

Beop Jong stared intensely at Beop Gye and spoke,

«If Hwasan truly feared Demonic Cult, if they were weary of them, they wouldn't have rushed to Gangnam impulsively. Instead, they should've naturally sought an alliance with us. No, to put it more bluntly, they should've bowed their heads to us!»

«A-Abbot... Cheonumaeng is no longer just a small alliance.»

«What significance does that hold?»

Beop Jong gritted his teeth.

«Who are these figures in this so-called Cheonumaeng that you mentioned?»

«Well...»

«The Sichuan Tang clan, once rejected even by the orthodox factions. Namgung clan, who lost power and has nowhere else to turn! Outside factions, not even considered the part of the Central Plains, and Hwasan, kicked out of the Gupailbang!»

«...»

«Is there really any faction within them that wields significant influence over Gangho?»

«Well, not really.»

«They're all merely a facade! All of them!»

Thud!

Beop Jong slammed the ground as if to express his frustration.

«Just because Hwasan defeated South Edge, did Southern Edge bow to Hwasan?»

«...»

«Just because Hwasan defeated Wudang, did Wudang surrender their position to Hwasan?»

«No, Abbot.»

«That's the limitation of Hwasan and Cheonumaeng. No matter how much they achieve or expand their influence, would those proud and esteemed factions from Gupailbang ever consider aligning themselves under Hwasan?»

Beop Gye couldn't find words to respond.

Could anyone imagine Shaolin bowing down to Hwasan or joining the Cheonumaeng?

Absolutely not.

Perhaps other Gupailbang factions harbored similar thoughts. Unless it was a faction like the Beggars Sect, who wouldn't care about prestige or pride.

«It's not about me being Shaolin's leader and thus centering everything around Shaolin. Do you understand why, whenever there's a turmoil in Gangho, Shaolin becomes the center?»

«Well...»

«They only step back when dealing with Shaolin! Need I say more? If Namgung Hwang was alive, would he have given up his position as the leader of the Five Great Families and joined Cheonumaeng?»

«...»

«Cheonumaeng cannot unite the factions into one with force. Hence, they gather only those they can easily control to expand their influence. Despite knowing well that such actions are causing a clear division within the Central Plains!»

Beop Jong's shoulders trembled with anger.

«Do you understand what I'm saying?»

«... Yes, Abbot.»

Even Beop Gye unintentionally nodded in agreement.

In truth, there was nothing wrong in Beop Jong's words.

No matter how much one thought about it, the sight of Cheonumaeng, a newcomer who challenged the established power of the Gupailbang in Central Plains, could not be imagined. Ultimately, as Cheonumaeng grew stronger, Gangbuk would merely divide into two factions: Cheonumaeng and Gupailbang.

Moreover, aren't these two factions already harboring intense animosity towards each other? Even without mentioning Shaolin's example, from the beginning, Hwasan and Gupailbang were in no position to harbor good feelings towards each other. By leaving matters unresolved for so long, the wounds have festered and are now decaying beyond repair.

«Do you think they are unaware of that fact?»

«...»

«Will there truly be a place for Gupailbang in the image they envision for Cheonumaeng?»

«Well, that's...»

«But until when should I show them mercy? Until when should I think of them as ones we should embrace? Even Buddha did not show mercy to Mara. Yet, how much longer should I endure before I stray from that profound path?»

Anger began to flicker in Beop Jong's eyes.

Initially, it was Beop Jong who confirmed the dormant potential of Hwasan and supported them. And Hwasan surpassed his expectations more than anticipated. Wasn't it why he sent Hye Yeon, who was naturally timid and weak minded, to them, to learn from their determination?

Even though at times they exhibited behavior that didn't sit well with him, it was a principle that the capable should be allowed a certain degree of freedom. Hence, he attempted to deal with them through patience rather than condemnation.

But...

«Now, I can no longer overlook their self-indulgence.»

If the Buddhists sought to resolve everything through compassion, there would be no need for disciplinary measures like the Gyeodo [계도(戒刀) — disciplinary sword] to punish those who transgressed the rules.

Rotten shoots must be cut.

Otherwise, even the healthy ones would start to decay. The entity known as Hwasan has already caused numerous issues. If this division accelerates further, let alone the Demonic Cult, they might soon be unable to handle even immediate problems like the rise of Sapaeryeon.

«...Unaware of the seriousness of the situation.»

Beop Jong bit his lips tightly. Eventually, blood began to seep from his bitten lips.

«I should have listened to that warning back then.»

«Abbot?»

«No.»

Beop Jong shook his head.

«If we continue to let it go like this, it will become uncontrollable. Summon the Beggars Sect. We must investigate the alliance between Cheonumaeng and Sapaeryeon.»

«At a time like this?»

Surprised, Beo Gye was met with a silent, chilling stare from Beop Jong. Eventually, Beop Gye rose from his seat and respectfully bowed his head.

«I will do so.»

«Hurry.»

«Yes!»

Beop Gye hurriedly left the room.

Alone, Beop Jong slowly turned his head, gazing at the flickering lamp. Though there was no wind inside the room, the lamp kept swaying, as if reflecting the turmoil within him.

«Hwasan... Hwasan Geomhyeop, Chung Myung.»

Snap.

Beop Jong, clenching his fist as if ready to burst, exhaled deeply. Then, as if trying to calm himself, he reached out and lightly picked up the fallen Moktak from the floor.

Crack.

At that moment, the wooden instrument in his hand cracked.

Beop Jong stared blankly at the split Moktak. After a while, a sound of a hollow laughter escaped his lips, while he was unable to peel his eyes away.

«Ha...haha.»

The lamp swayed more vigorously.

«Hahaha! Hahaha!»

In a room which no one approached, only the helpless laughter of an old monk echoed endlessly.