

Chapter 1191

Why did it have to be like that? (1)

«Abbot.»

«.....»

«Abbot!»

After being called out repeatedly, Beob Jong finally turned to face Jongli Hyeong. His face was flushed red. Beob Jong asked calmly,

«Why do you behave like this, Sect Leader?»

«Are you really going to leave like this?»

«And if I am?»

Jongli Hyeong raised his voice in frustration.

«Is this how we're going to end it, so lukewarm? Even after witnessing their arrogance, is this the reaction you're going to give?»

«Abbot, it was your own suggestion. No, wait, wasn't it? Wasn't it the suggestion made directly by Gupailbang?»

Jongli Hyeong spoke with a fervent tone, his eyes glaring with indignation.

«Speaking frankly, Abbot, how good a suggestion did you make? Enduring even the bitter words that didn't need to be heard, extending a hand that didn't need to be offered, how could you just dismiss it like this?»

But Beob Jong only smiled in response.

«Isn't it nice?»

«Yes?»

«As one grows older, there's nothing as enjoyable as seeing overly confident youths. Moreover, in Shaolin, perhaps due to being a Buddhist temple, it's even harder to come across such determined individuals.»

«Th-this is just...»

«Let it be.»

Beob Jong nodded silently.

«While it's unfortunate that things didn't go smoothly, from our perspective, it's not entirely a bad thing.»

Jongli Hyeong shook his head in apparent disbelief.

«How is this not a bad thing? We failed to absorb them, and you, Abbot, was openly embarrassed... well, not openly, but...»

«I was embarrassed.»

«N-no, that's not what I meant...»

Jongli Hyeong trailed off, avoiding Beob Jong's gaze.

No matter how one tries to sugarcoat it, whatever the words were exchanged, in the end, from an outsider's perspective, it would appear that Beob Jong, the Abbot of Shaolin, has now been admonished and sent away by Baek Cheon, the newly appointed Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan.

To think that the esteemed Abbot of Shaolin has been embarrassed by the newly appointed Sect Leader of Hwasan — how delightful the gossips would be! Even if they don't know now, it won't be long before it becomes a well-known rumor throughout the entire Gangho. «Thinking about it like that does make me a bit embarrassed.»

«Abbot?»

Jongli Hyeong stared at Beob Jong as if he couldn't quite comprehend. Despite claiming to feel embarrassed, Beob Jong's face didn't show any signs of discomfort.

Whether it was a misunderstanding or not, he even seemed somewhat relieved.

«Is this not entirely a bad thing?»

Jongli Hyeong asked again impatiently.

«After all, isn't everything heading towards disaster? Cheonumaeng has declared to take a different path from Gupailbang, hasn't this resulted in a clearer division within Gangho?»

«While Sapaeryeon and Demonic Cult are eyeing the central region greedily, it's our own internal division. Where in the world does such absurd behavior exist?»

«Amitabha.»

Beob Jong calmly rejected the criticism, but Jongli Hyeong raised his voice in frustration.

«That's not true. Just because it's Gupailbang, just because it's Five Great Families, does it always mean they got along well? Wasn't Gupailbang sometimes even more bitterly opposed than enemies? Yet whenever a crisis befell Gangho, they somehow came together to fight again. Isn't that why Gupailbang could be what it is?»

«Yes, that's right.»

Beob Jong nodded calmly as if confirming that the statement was indeed correct.

«But how could they say something so outrageous? Even if they're still young, such behavior is unacceptable!»

Beob Jong smiled.

«Sect Leader.»

«Yes?»

«The mistakes committed by the young are not their fault, but the fault of the elders who failed to guide them properly.»

«W-well...»

«In the end, it's just spitting on my face. Who should be blamed when we haven't properly educated and convinced them?»

Jongli Hyeong coughed uncomfortably. Beob Jong smiled again.

«And... what the Acting Sect Leader said isn't just reckless or ignorant. It's not something said out of ignorance or lack of learning, but rather, it's a well-informed and well-spoken statement.»

«What do you mean...?»

Beob Jong nodded without further explanation.

«So let's just observe.»

«Abbot. But right now, it's urgent...»

«The more urgent, the more reason to step back, isn't it?»

Jongli Hyeong started chewing his lip anxiously. Frankly, Beob Jong's calmness and confidence were beyond comprehension, and what he believed in was unclear.

«Abbot, do you really not understand?»

«What do you mean?»

«I'm talking about how much damage you've suffered due to the collapse of this agreement. Especially...»

Jongli Hyeong stopped mid-sentence, but Beob Jong seemed to know what he was trying to say and finished his thought for him.

«Suggesting an unnecessary agreement when our options were already limited only resulted in embarrassment. It's likely that more people will now look down on me.»

«It's okay.»

Jongli Hyeong didn't respond, but Beob Jong continued as if he had already received an answer.

«That's not so important. What's important is that, regardless of the outcome, Gupailbang finds itself in a precarious situation.»

«Isn't that what I...»

Trying to agree in frustration, Jongli Hyeong was interrupted by a perplexing statement.

«What better outcome could there be in this situation?»

Jongli Hyeong blinked, his face blank.

«Oh, no, Abbot. Didn't you misspeak? How could this be a better outcome? It's actually quite difficult to imagine a worse one.»

Beob Jong simply nodded lightly in response.

«The perception of events varies depending on one's perspective. Consider this, Sect Leader. Now, Gupailbang finds itself in a situation where its influence within its own sects has diminished, making it unable to pursue its goals freely. Isn't that so?»

«Yes! That's what I meant!»

«So, it's actually a very favorable situation.»

Jongli Hyeong couldn't hide his bewilderment as he stared at Beob Jong. In his mind, he couldn't help but think, 'Has this gentleman lost his mind after facing humiliation?'

But Beob Jong simply chuckled at Jongli Hyeong's perplexed expression.

«It seems the words of this monk are difficult to comprehend, Sect Leader.»

«To be honest, yes.»

«Sect Leader, do you know why people have cheered and supported Cheonumaeng's actions rather than Gupailbang?»

«Well...»

Jongli Hyeong couldn't answer. Not because he didn't know, but because there were reasons he didn't want to articulate.

«Because of the righteousness?»

«...»

«Yes, of course, that's part of it. But that's not all. The reason people have been backing Cheonumaeng is because Gupailbang is perceived as strong and powerful.»

«Ah...»

Finally understanding what Beob Jong was trying to convey, Jongli Hyeong vigorously nodded his head. While others might scoff at such words, Jongli Hyeong knew that Beob Jong's words were not far from the truth.

In the eyes of the world, Gupailbang was not only an absolute power but also an absolute authority. Because of the perception that it defended Gangho, people wouldn't openly show hostility, but why wouldn't there be those who were upset by their actions?

«So, what you're saying is...»

«Yes, Sect Leader. As a result of this incident, Gupailbang will no longer be the dominant force.»

Beop Jong continued quietly.

«Gangnam is controlled by Sapaeryeon, and the western part of Gangbuk by Cheonumaeng. As a result, Gupailbang's influence has been reduced by less than half of what it used to be.»

«...»

«So, people will no longer see Gupailbang as the strong force that can do whatever it wants. And that goes for those within Gupailbang as well.»

A subtle smile played on Beob Jong's face.

«When an external enemy arises, internal cohesion is inevitable. Do you know why Gupailbang hasn't been able to unite until now?»

Jongli Hyeong hesitated slightly, as if pondering, before offering his response.

«It's because the external enemy... wasn't a proper enemy.»

«Yes, that's right. They may have faced a tough situation once, but Sapaeryeon wasn't strong enough to bring down Gupailbang. But now, what about the present? The moment Cheonumaeng separated from Gupailbang, Sapaeryeon ceased to be a mere threat. Moreover, Gupailbang now finds itself in a situation where it must contend with Cheonumaeng to be the center of orthodox factions.»

«No one wants to lose what they hold in their hands. The moment I announce today's outcome, the sects within Gupailbang that have been holding back will have no choice but to reconsider.»

«... Is it really going to be like that?»

To a voice still filled with skepticism, Beob Jong closed his eyes and exhaled.

«Just look at the sects in Sichuan. Quincheng and Emei are struggling against the threat from Sapaeryeon in the south and the dominance of Cheonumaeng in the north. Can they withstand it without the roof of Gupailbang?»

«... Diancang will be even worse. Diancang is located in Yunnan, after all.»

«Yes, that's right.»

In fact, one of the major reasons the factions in Sichuan had rebelled against Beob Jong was also due to the covert power struggles within Gupailbang. Historically, the sects surrounding Henan, centered around Shaolin, Wudang, Hwasan, Kongtong, Jongnam, and Gaebang [beggars], had vastly different degrees of power compared to the peripheral sects located in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Qinghai.

The sects that rallied behind Beob Jong as his influence waned were all peripheral sects. But now, they too would no longer be able to continue this confrontation.

With nothing to gain by bringing a little more power from Shaolin only to have everything taken away by Cheonumaeng, what choice did they have?

«It seems like the immediate problem will be resolved.»

«Not only that.»

Beob Jong lowered his head slightly as he spoke.

«The reason why Gupailbang had to consider so much with each decision in the past was also because Gupailbang was the strong one. Everyone was ready to criticize those choices. But now that Gupailbang can no longer be considered an absolute power, there's hardly any room for criticism even if it moves to find its own survival.»

«Ah...»

«In the meantime, Cheonumaeng has elevated the value of righteousness so much that whenever there's a need for that, they will turn to Cheonumaeng instead of Gupailbang. It might seem a bit opportunistic, but it gives us a reason to step back.»

Beob Jong chuckled.

«But a bit of opportunism is something we can handle, right? So, Sect Leader, don't rush to hide today's events. Instead, actively publicize them. Say that the Abbot of Shaolin was embarrassingly rejected by the young Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan and chased away.»

«... Can we really do that?»

«It's not about whether it's okay — it's about what needs to be done.»

«Ah, understood, Abbot.»

«Amitabha.»

Beob Jong exhaled softly with a hint of resignation.

They wouldn't know what they had done. They would soon realize as they observed the changing situation.

«Listen, Sect Leader. Every action comes with responsibility. And now, that responsibility should fall on Cheonumaeng, not Gupailbang.»

Beob Jong was simply pushing the situation forward a bit faster. For now, that was enough.

«But, Abbot...»

«Yes, go ahead.»

Jongli Hyeong, after gauging Beob Jong's reaction, spoke again.

«But in the end... no matter what happens, the fact that Cheonumaeng has completely separated from Gupailbang, just when we have to fight against Sapaeryeon...»

Beob Jong nodded slightly.

«It's just a temporary setback. Ultimately, things will flow according to the natural order.»

«Becoming an old man full of fear despite having been a young man brimming with courage isn't just because of lacking courage or diminishing ambition. It's simply because the world isn't as easy as we'd like it to be.»

«Indeed.»

«If we understand why the predecessors eventually had to compromise, we can accept Cheonumaeng who has grasped the essence of the world rather than the young Cheonumaeng, who is like a fickle compass pointing in all directions. In the end, instead of going a bit backwards, we can take a better path forward.»

«I understand.»

Jongli Hyeong nodded as if he finally understood everything. Hadn't he himself underestimated Baek Cheon's ambitions just moments ago?

It would be more advantageous to absorb those who had softened after being bent, rather than absorbing the stubborn and stiff Cheonumaeng.

However...

«But, Abbot.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«I'm just asking out of curiosity, but if... by some chance, Cheonumaeng truly persists in their intentions until the very end, what then...?»

What would happen?

The question trailed off into apprehension. Beob Jong slowly closed his eyes.

«At that time...»

After a long silence, Beob Jong, who had been facing the sky with his eyes closed, finally looked up. The endlessly expansive sky was a piercing shade of blue, which could make his eyes bleed.

«It would be one of two things. Either everyone will equally perish, or...»

«As life blossoms again in the ashes, a different world will unfold from what we've known so far.»

Jongli Hyeong suddenly shivered. The lingering echo of Beob Jong's voice left a lasting impression.