

Chapter 1216

Who will help? (1)

Hainan Island. A huge island in the southernmost part of the Central Plains

Located far south from what Central Plains' people refer to as 'Central Plains', it was once a place used for exile or punishment due to its remote location.

The hot climate and humid environment made it difficult for people to live there, unlike the northern regions.

However, those who were born and raised in Hainan managed to lead their daily lives in relative peace amidst these challenges.

Yet, the atmosphere dominating Hainan at the moment was heavier than ever before.

In fact, Hainan was a remote place, and its size was only about half of a typical province. It has a vague impression to the outsiders. However, its name was frequently mentioned because of one sect located half-way up the Wuzhi Mountain in Hainan.

Haenam Sect. A place that filled the void left by Hwasan, and became a part of Gupailbang. Although, in terms of history and lineage, it might lack compared to traditional Gupailbang's powerhouses, still, it was a Great Sect. Just occupying that position alone was enough to explain the status of Haenam Sect.

At the center of Haenam, at the residence of the Sect Leader, a place that should have been the most reverent. But now, a gloomy voice was emanating from there.

"...Perhaps."

The voice, cut off for a moment, continued with some difficulty.

"Has the messenger arrived?"

Haenam's Sect Leader, Geum Yangbaek, looked at the elders and asked. Strangely, despite clearly asking, his voice lacked any hint of a question.

It was a question not expecting an answer. People call it a rhetorical question.

«Not yet...»

The answer was not even complete. It ended as if it was embarrassing to speak, but this incomplete response perfectly encapsulated the current situation in Haenam.

«That's right.»

Geum Yangbaek let out a brief chuckle. In that laugh, a cold cynicism lingered, making the elders feel even more uncomfortable.

«Sect Leader... It's not time to give up hope yet. Considering the circumstances, it's possible that the messenger hasn't arrived...»

«What's the difference?»

A hint of sarcasm flashed across Geum Yangbaek's lips.

«It's the difference between having the intention but being unable to help due to lack of communication, and not having the intention to communicate in the first place. But the result is the same.»

«Sect Leader.»

The elder who had spoken earlier bowed his head and fell silent.

He knew well that the words he had brought up were nothing more than meaningless consolation.

Geum Yangbaek let out a long sigh. Although he lashed out in frustration, it wasn't their fault to begin with.

What could the elders do in such a situation?

«The movements of Sapaeryeon, how is it?»

«So far, there haven't been any significant movements.»

«...Is there something we haven't grasped?»

Once again, there was no immediate answer.

To speak frankly, how could they possibly know the movements of Sapaeryeon? They couldn't even send a single disciple to the lands beyond the sea.

The information network they had carefully established was completely destroyed, and the Beggars Sect that used to share information with them had long withdrawn from Gangnam. Isolation.

At present, they could only know the situation on this island.

Neither people, nor information, nor even a bird flying in the sky could reach this island. It would take quite some time for news that would cause a stir in the world to eventually reach Haenam.

«Sect Leader... Although we haven't received any news, if the feared situation were to arise, there will surely be sects willing to help us. Even if Shaolin overlooks all these circumstances...»

«Is that so?»

Interrupting the conversation, Geum Yangbaek chuckled.

«Right, that's it. It seems I, as foolish as I am, have been throwing a tantrum because I couldn't understand the intentions of the Abbot who, after deeply considering it, had left us alone for so long.»

«...»

“When things happen, they will naturally lend us a hand. I worry too much, don't I? Is that it?”

Eventually, the elders simply closed their eyes.

Geum Yangbaek was not originally someone who sneered and mocked others like this. If anything, he was enough to be called a gentle person. However, over the past few years, as the isolated Haenam continued to suffer under the pressure of Sapaeryeon, his words became rougher, and his personality inevitably sharpened.

Sensing the discomfort of the elders, Guem Yangbaek sighed deeply once again.

“... I’m sorry. It’s not fair to blame the elders.”

“No, Sect Leader. How much trouble you must be going through, we can’t even imagine.”

The elders’ faces also turned grim. Their hearts were not different. How could there be no resentment towards Gupailbang?

Gupailbang was not just a simple symbol of authority. Despite often squabbling amongst themselves, fighting for power, they had always united against external threats like foreign invaders or any kind of sabotage. It was this unity that had earned Gupailbang its current reputation.

But since the Gangnam Peace Treaty, Haenam had received no support from any sect within Gupailbang. Therefore, they were left alone to face the sharp fangs of Sapaeryeon, like a wolf banging at their door.

«Hasn’t anyone been sent from the Beggars yet?»

«...No, Sect Leader.»

«When was the last time someone from the Beggars Sect visited?»

«About a year ago... Yes, it’s been a year.»

Guem Yangbaek stared at the ceiling with a devastated expression.

«Has it really been that long?»

After muttering to himself, he fell into silence for a while before slowly speaking again.

«No matter how sharp Sapaeryeon’s sword is, and how great the influence of Jang Ilso is...

Is it really possible for the Beggars to not send a single person?»

«Sect Leader...»

Guem Yangbaek chuckled softly. His hollow laughter echoed sadly in the quiet room.

«It’s ironic. Like a dog abandoned by its master, unaware of its abandonment, only waiting for its master’s return. That’s exactly how we are now. Even in such a situation, we’re just waiting for news from Gupailbang.»

It was a truly pitiful and sorrowful reflection.

No matter how dire the situation, he was the leader of a sect. He was considered the leader of one of the major sects within Gupailbang. For him to compare the sect to a dog was truly out of character.

But no one blamed him. Guem Yangbaek was more devoted to Haenam than anyone else here.

«What do you think?»

«... «

«Do you really believe that when Sapaeryeon extends its claws, Gupailbang will send support?»

«That... That’s what should happen. It’s only natural. Isn’t that just and righteous?»

One of the elders spoke up again.

«If a sect as influential as Shaolin doesn't send support, it would be impossible due to the scrutiny of others.»

Guem Yangbaek nodded slightly at the remark. But there was no strength in his gesture. He lacked conviction.

«Then I'll ask again. Do you think the support sent by Shaolin will arrive on time?»

«That's... «

No one could give a definite answer to this question.

No, it's not that they lacked confidence. Rather, they were quite confident. Shaolin would undoubtedly send support.

But that support would never arrive on time. Whether it was sent sincerely or merely for show.

«What Shaolin wants is justifiable grounds and suitable leverage.»

Guem Yangbaek laughed bitterly.

It's blatantly obvious.

«They'll issue stern warnings and might even retaliate with force. But... will those sent for retaliation really penetrate deep into Gangnam?»

«... «

«They'll probably just protest at the banks of the Yangtze River.»

«Well, Sect Leader... Surely Shaolin wouldn't go that far...»

«Is our Haenam sect worth saving to them, even if it means jeopardizing their main force?»

Guem Yangbaek gritted his teeth.

«If Hwasan hadn't collapsed in such a quick and devastating way, and if we didn't have to hastily fill its void, could we really have been a part of Gupailbang now? Could our Haenam sect, subtly looked down upon as outsiders by them, really have been accepted?»

His words silenced everyone.

If Hwasan hadn't collapsed, perhaps Haenam would have never breached the sturdy walls of Gupailbang. Everyone here knew that fact.

«In the end, even if we are called a part of Gupailbang now, we just matched the position at the time it was vacant.»

«Sect Leader...»

«Was I wrong?»

Unmistakable anger crept onto Guem Yangbaek's face.

«Are you saying that Shaolin truly lacks the capability to send a single person to Haenam for over a year?»

«...»

«That's a rather bleak statement. It implies that the power of Sapaeryeon surpasses our expectations to the extent that even Shaolin is rendered powerless!»

«Sect Leader! Please restrain yourself. Shaolin wouldn't want to see the collapse of the Gupailbang's system. They...»

«That's an amusing statement. I dare say if Hwasan heard that, they'd burst out laughing.»

No one could refute his words.

Even if one sect crumbled without leaving a trace, the sturdy system of Gupailbang remained intact. Another prestigious sect would simply fill the void.

Wasn't Haenam once the beneficiary of this system? Even if their stance has now reversed after a hundred years, what's so strange about that?

«Gupailbang will undoubtedly face criticism. They will be pointed fingers at and ridiculed. But will that last forever?»

«... «

«In the end, if they will manage to stop Sapaeryeon, it would be judged that sacrifices were inevitable. The choice of the Abbot not to waste resources on Haenam but to cut losses will be praised as a decisive move, won't it?»

«Sect Leader... «

«That's just the way of Gangho.»

Guem Yangbaek chuckled.

«In the end, Haenam will be forgotten. Just like how people forgot about Hwasan. No, perhaps even faster.»

Guem Yangbaek closed his eyes.

He had already seen it. How meticulously those who committed sins could erase their guilt. What Hwasan experienced in the past would now befall Haenam.

Amidst this, what pained him the most was that Haenam, once one of the most active participants in the past, now had no right to condemn or even criticize this situation.

As everyone fell into a solemn silence, a voice, like a whisper, reached Guem Yangbaek's ears.

«In such a case... it might have been better to... join Cheonumaeng.»

Instantly, all eyes turned to the speaker.

The elder who had spoken hesitantly at first, with a slightly troubled expression, soon spoke with resentment.

«If it's Cheonumaeng, an alliance bold enough to venture into Gangnam, dominated by Sapaeryeon, because Demonic Cult had supposedly reappeared... Wouldn't it be unforgivable to let a sect of the same affiliation perish under the excuse of being too far away?»

With that voice, the atmosphere within the room abruptly sank into profound silence.