

Chapter 1100

The 'Hwasanization' of the entire Central Plains (5)

Just because heat is applied doesn't mean water will boil instantly. But with continuous heating, the water will eventually boil over.

That's exactly how the current situation was.

Despite the news of Demonic Cult emerging in Gangnam, people in Gangbuk didn't show much reaction. To them, Gangnam was too distant to care about.

For those whose daily lives revolved around plowing fields just to survive, the turmoil that unfolded in Gangnam, a place they'd never visit in their lifetime, didn't register on their radar.

But what made this unimaginable event hit home was one piece of information that floated down the river.

- The Demonic Cult that invaded Hangzhou mercilessly slaughtered every resident without leaving a single soul alive.
- Hangzhou, once the most vibrant city in the Central Plains, turned into a city of death within a few days.

Upon hearing this news, everyone couldn't help but doubt their ears and be horrified.

What kind of place was Hangzhou? It might not have been the largest city in the Central Plains, but it was undoubtedly the most bustling. Even those who hadn't been there knew about it.

The fact that such a place was annihilated overnight, how could one not be shocked?

Such incidents weren't entirely unheard of. Occasionally, when invaders from the north struck, an entire city would be destroyed, and refugees would flee in lines.

But this incident occurred not in the distant north but in the southern regions, which rarely faced invasions. The magnitude of this shock was unparalleled.

"I-Is this really true?"

"Don't you keep hearing the same thing? It must be true!"

"But... no matter how those Demonic Cultists behaved in the past, does it make sense for them to suddenly appear in Gangnam? They didn't fall from the sky. And... how big of a city is Hangzhou for it to have fallen? I really can't believe it."

"Hey! Didn't they say all merchant caravans heading to Gangnam have been stopped?"

"M-Merchants?"

There's a saying that even if war breaks out, nothing can stop the merchants, who can make money. They say these are the words of traders who will trade even in a battlefield, risking their lives to continue trading in dangerous situations, such as when the lower Yangtze River

was completely controlled by pirates, and merchants from the Central Plains continued their trade regardless.

The fact that these traders weren't heading towards Gangnam was a clear sign that something really serious had happened across the river.

"S-So, what happens now?"

"What happens? It'll probably be the same as it was a hundred years ago."

"Wh-What?!"

People were suddenly engulfed in fear. And everyone started recalling.

Stories that had been forgotten until now, tales of the Demonic Cult from a hundred years ago that were passed down from above to below, from mouth to mouth.

More precisely, they spoke of how ruthless these cultists from that time were.

During that dreadful war, they said blood ran like rivers, and bodies piled up like mountains.

The assumption that this war might happen again was enough to send shivers down even the spines of those who had no interest in Gangnam's affairs.

"Shouldn't we stop it?"

"How? What can we do?"

"Well, didn't Shaolin and Gupailbang step up before to stop the Demonic Cult? Shouldn't they do something this time too?"

"Shaolin? They say Shaolin is just watching across the Yangtze River right now."

"Why? How come?"

"Wasn't Gangnam taken over by Sapaeryeon? Shaolin wouldn't risk jumping into a fire-pit like a Sapa's territory."

"What nonsense! Since when did Demonic Cult care about righteous and evil? During the previous war, they fought desperately against the Demonic Cult without distinguishing between orthodox and unorthodox, didn't they? And during that war, Shaolin was the most active!"

"Maybe that was the case back then. But it seems Shaolin isn't up for that now. Or maybe they just don't want to join forces with Sapaeryeon, even if it means risking their lives."

"This foolishness..."

People acknowledged the existence of the evil factions but didn't particularly fear them. They were already very familiar with them. While they might suffer greatly or even lose their lives if they unfortunately got involved, ordinary people who lived their lives wouldn't have any dealings with the evil factions throughout their lives.

To them, rather than the huge factions like Sapaeryeon and whatnot, the petty street thugs swaggering in the back alleys were far more menacing. Therefore, Shaolin's standing in ignoring Gangnam while asserting their pride seemed far from appealing.

"So, when will Shaolin act?"

"I don't know. They'll probably fight if the Demonic Cult head towards Gangbuk."

“What about Gangnam? Are there no people there? Are those living in the territory controlled by Sapaeryeon not worth saving? Do they just leave it to the evil factions?”

“Have you ever seen those noble monks bother about such matters? They were the ones hiding in the mountains while the pirates were rampaging near the Yangtze River. During that time, wasn't it Sichuan Tangga that saved the people, not Shaolin?”

“Those... those hypocrites! Always talking about righteousness and peace in the Central Plains, but when things happen, they just step back and watch. If those kinds of attitudes are scrutinized, how are they any different from those Sapas?”

Once the water started boiling, it was not easy to cool it down.

The fear of the Demonic Cult, concerns about when they might surge towards Gangbuk, and the questionable behaviors displayed by Gupailbang, who was led by Shaolin, all started boiling together.

Those known as the orthodox factions of the Central Plains received special treatment.

They roamed with swords openly in broad daylight without any restrictions, fought without interference from the officials. Instead, numerous people purposely used their businesses more and even directly supported them, to the extent of providing direct sponsorship.

All of this was allowed because there was a belief that when commoners faced injustice, these factions would step in to help.

Officials are strict and generally unconcerned about the lives of commoners. Instead, they intimidate and impose fines on people who fail to pay taxes properly.

In contrast, the orthodox factions were places that always lent a helping hand without taking anything in return. Hence, commoners used to place more trust in these so-called righteous factions than in the officials.

However, at this moment, the commoners who had been enduring silently began to doubt the sincerity of these factions. How many of those living in Hangzhou were there? With so many people dying, how could they trust those who stood still and did nothing?

“So, what should we do? Should we seek refuge somewhere...?”

“Hey, my friend. Is evacuating an easy task? How will you survive if you leave here?”

“Better than dying. Would you rather be trapped in a spider's web on the mountain?”

“What's the difference between that and dying? Are you planning to beg for scraps?”

“Well...”

Days passed with simmering discontent, unable to reach a resolution.

Just before this simmering feelings were about to explode, a piece of news spread like a wildfire from the lands of Gangnam.

- The Demonic Cult that had invaded was annihilated.
- Elite forces from Cheonumaeng, led by Hwasan, rushed into Gangnam and beheaded the Bishop of the Demonic Cult.
- Cheonumaeng temporarily allied with Sapaeryeon and overcame the Demonic Cult.

Upon receiving these explosive news simultaneously, the commoners cheered at once.

“Hwasan! Once again, it’s Hwasan!”

“I thought if it was Hwasan, they would step up! Isn’t Hwasan the place that solves problems whenever they arise?”

“Hey! How can you only talk about Hwasan? Wasn’t it said that Cheonumaeng also acted together?”

“Isn’t that the same thing? Hwasan is the leader of Cheonumaeng. Cheonumaeng is Hwasan, and Hwasan is Cheonumaeng!”

“Exactly, that’s it!”

To those who were anxious, these news felt like a sip of nectar.

“They say they slit the throats of the Demonic Cultists? Does that mean the cultists are completely wiped out?”

“We don’t know. Isn’t it necessary to determine if this recent appearance of the Demonic Cult is the main force?”

“Still, it seems like all those who appeared this time have been taken care of?”

“It looks that way. As expected, there’s no one to trust but Hwasan!”

Most of those raising their voices hadn’t even known about the existence of the sect called Hwasan just a few years ago. But now, even those people didn’t hesitate to praise them.

Ultimately, evaluations are driven by achievements and actions. What wasn’t highly praised at the time, when persistently repeated, eventually becomes influential.

The actions of Hwasan, which had been the first to rush in and rescue commoners from the time when there were disturbances in the lower Yangtze River, or even earlier, had remained vividly in everyone’s memory.

“While those foolish Shaolin and Gupailbang just watched, Hwasan risked danger and rushed into Gangnam.”

“Well, is that really surprising? Wasn’t Hwasan never part of those factions?”

“Hwasan does all the hard work, and those swindlers just pretend to be supportive! They’re nothing better than those gangs.”

“Gupailbang and whatever are completely rotten. Ugh! I regret giving rice to those beggars I used to help!”

The people’s reactions were more intense than expected. While many had previously looked favorably upon Hwasan’s actions, there had never been anyone who thought Hwasan’s power and abilities were superior to Shaolin.

However, the news of Hwasan going to Gangnam and defeating the Demonic Cult was practically evidence that their power was now comparable to, if not greater than Shaolin’s. Even if it was still lacking, the situation remained the same. No matter how sharp a sword is, if it isn’t drawn from the scabbard, it’s no different from a stick. People started paying attention to the dagger right in front of them rather than waiting for an elusive sword.

“I feel a bit uneasy.”

“Hmm? What do you mean by that?”

“Even so, joining hands with those from the evil factions, it’s a bit...”

“What is this foolish bastard blabbering about now? Did Sapaeryeon massacre the people in Hangzhou?”

“Well, that’s not the case...”

“To sit back and watch people dying just to avoid joining hands with unorthodox factions, isn’t that just being selfish? Are these so-called righteous factions meant to overthrow the Sapa or to protect the commoners? What takes precedence, huh?”

“...Indeed.”

“Tsk tsk tsk. Did you think there wouldn’t be people like you, even among those supporting Hwasan? Frankly, it would have been fine for them if they had just stayed behind like those Shaolin bastards did. Despite that, despite the ridicule and risk, Hwasan went to Gangnam to rescue people. But instead of praising that effort!... I really misjudged you!”

“I... I was short-sighted. Oh, please, enough with the anger.”

“Never utter such words again! Just blabbering like that will only result in people like us dying if, at the next occurrence, even Hwasan doesn’t act! Understand?”

“Oh, I get it.”

Water doesn’t boil in an instant.

And so was the public opinion regarding Hwasan. Over the years, the actions of Hwasan and Cheonumaeng had gradually heated up the world. And the moment it crossed the tipping point in Hangzhou, it finally began to boil explosively.

It reached an unexpected level, the level even Chung Myung and Beop Jong could not have expected.