

Chapter 1095

I might have gone a bit too far with my words. (5)

«Uwaaaaah!»

A piercing scream echoed from outside the door. Startled, Tang Gunak glanced outside. The voice mixed in with the scream seemed somewhat familiar.

However, his head soon returned to its original position.

«...Are you alright?»

Hyun Jong asked cautiously. Tang Gunak smiled bitterly in response.

«I'm fine.»

«It won't be easy.»

«It was expected.»

Reaching out, Tang Gunak picked up the teacup placed in front of him. Confirming that the tea had cooled slightly, he gently raised his internal energy. The cooled tea began to emit wisps of steam.

Savoring the aroma, Tang Gunak smiled faintly.

«I always feel this way, but plum blossom tea has a truly delightful fragrance.»

«Thank you.»

Taking a sip of the tea, Tang Gunak placed the cup back on the table and continued,

«Actually, it's something I've been contemplating for a while now. There might come a day when we can't follow Hwasan in the same manner as now.»

«It's very humble of you to say so. Who would dare compare the Sichuan Tang Clan, revered throughout the world, to Hwasan?»

Tang Gunak smiled bitterly.

Certainly, the world might still regard Tangga slightly higher than Hwasan. Weren't most people thinking that even when the Cheonumaeng was formed, except for a few who understood the hidden circumstances, most believed that the Tang clan would present Hwasan upfront and seize control?

But once what they did in Gangnam start spreading, even that misconception will change.

‘Above all else...’

What's crucial isn't the outside perception. It's how Tang Gunak views this current situation, isn't it?

While Hwasan grows stronger by the day, the Tang clan remains in the same position. Until now, Sichuan Tang clan was waiting for the day when Hwasan would stand next to them. But this incident has flipped that position.

«Alliance Leader. No... Sect Leader.»

Hyun Jong looked at Tang Gunak with a deep gaze at the changed title.

«If things continue this way, the gap between Hwasan and Tangga will widen.»

«Lord...»

«Not acknowledging that is neither pride nor anything else. It's merely the arrogance of those who turn away from reality.»

Hyun Jong quietly faced Tang Gunak.

Though Tang Gunak speaks easily, entrusting the training to others is not an easy task. No, it's doubtful if even Hyun Jong himself can handle it at this moment.

Watching Tang Gunak speak so calmly about it made admiration well up within him.

«Wouldn't it have been possible if the Lord of the Tang Family had put his mind to it?»

Tang Gunak held back a bitter smile.

«While I'm grateful for your high estimation... If that was possible, I would have had no reason not to strengthen family's power until now.»

«I have been impolite.»

«No, you haven't.»

Tang Gunak calmly nodded.

«I, too, learned from observing Hwasan Geomhyeop. Being excellent in martial arts and being skilled in teaching are entirely separate matters.»

This was Tang Gunak's genuine sentiment, without anything added or taken away.

Of course, from the moment he first saw Chung Myung, he suspected that he was a talent capable of causing upheaval in Hwasan. Chung Myung at that time displayed a maturity beyond his age... No, he exhibited martial prowess that disregarded age, coupled with a chilling determination. But...

'Even that was underestimating Hwasan Geomhyeop.'

Tang Gunak never imagined that Hwasan would become this powerful. Watching Chung Myung develop Hwasan, even Tang Gunak, filled with only goodwill towards Chung Myung, occasionally felt inferiority and self-reproach.

Ordinary individuals might express that inferiority as hostility towards Hwasan Geomhyeop, but Tang Gunak wasn't such a fool. He was someone who knew what the best course of action was for him and for the Tang clan.

«If it was something within my capacity, I would have done it. But... if I was to step in now and try to manage the disciples, it would only seem like the Lord, feeling threatened by Hwasan's growth, is pushing everyone in the clan to their limits. Both internally and externally.»

«Hmm.»

Hyun Jong sighed. Upon reflection, it made sense.

«So, I believe this is the right approach.»

«But, Lord...»

«Externally, I mean.»

Tang Gunak held his ground.

«Internally, I feel a bit different. Even if I was to personally step in and manage the disciples, if there were no proper results, wouldn't it be just my own disgrace?»

«...»

«Pride is useless, but sometimes it's necessary to maintain appearances. Outwardly, it appears as if I'm nurturing Hwasan Geomhyeop and other disciples. For me, there's nothing better than this.»

Observing Tang Gunak's playful smile, Hyunjong sighed.

«...That child is making things difficult for many people.»

«It's quite meaningful hearing that from the Alliance Leader.»

Hyun Jong smiled at Tang Gunak's words.

That statement implied that among the ones having a hard time, Hyun Jong might have it the worst.

«It's hard to deny.»

Chung Myung's presence was akin to a blessing for Hyun Jong. Yet at the same time, it felt like a dagger aimed at his throat.

It's always the case with exceptionally talented subordinates. Those exceptionally outstanding, like Chung Myung, always pierce the ones standing above them. Therefore, even when standing in a higher position, one must always introspect and doubt if they're making decisions correctly.

Coping with that burden was undoubtedly no ordinary task.

«Thank you, Lord.»

Hyun Jong, who had been lost in thought, bowed his head.

«Oh, no. Why suddenly this formal tone?»

Tang Gunak, surprised, gestured with his hand. In response, Hyun Jong looked at him with a deeply reflective gaze.

«Even though it must have been an audacious request, for you to accept it without reproach... As the Sect Leader of Hwasan, I have no choice but to express my gratitude.»

«I think there might be a misunderstanding, Alliance Leader.»

«...A misunderstanding?»

«Yes.»

Tang Gunak smiled faintly.

«Hwasan Geomhyeop didn't request to train the people of Tangga. I asked if I could entrust the training to Hwasan Geomhyeop.»

«I see.»

However, Hyun Jong's expression remained unchanged.

«Still, my gratitude remains unchanged. In other words, it means that Lord Tang understood the hidden meaning behind Chung Myung's words and decided to step in first so that the child wouldn't have to say things he didn't feel comfortable to say, right?»

«...It seems like you're flattering me, Alliance Leader.»

Tang Gunak laughed bitterly.

«You don't have to, Alliance Leader.»

Then, he glanced toward the door.

«Truthfully, I lack the courage. I'm not as brave as Nokrim King to blindly follow Hwasan Geomhyeop's commands. So here I am, sitting here having tea with you, Alliance Leader.»

«That's... a bit of a different situation...»

«It's not that different. The truly remarkable one is Nokrim King. If he asserts his authority, Hwasan cannot deny it. Moreover, didn't he perform remarkably well in the recent events?»

«That's true.»

Hyun Jong nodded.

Even if they set aside the details of Im Sobyong's personal behavior, merely holding the position of Nokrim King was enough for him to be treated with respect.

By faithfully receiving the legacy passed down by the previous generations, he had already proved his worth as Nokrim King. Naturally, Im Sobyong was respected anywhere as the leader of a martial faction that had its say in Gangho.

Yet, here was someone of that stature rolling in the dirt.

«There's probably no need for him to go that far...»

«That's to prevent any backlash.»

Tang Gunak, smiled faintly. He had been involved with Im Sobyong on the Yangtze for the past three years. Consequently, he now had a fair understanding of who Im Sobyong was.

«It's said that within the Sapa, everything is influenced by 'weak following the strong' logic, but that's generally confined to internal Sapa matters.»

«Hmm.»

«Despite Hwasan Geomhyeop's strength, he's ultimately just a disciple, not the main figure of Hwasan. There's no reason to feel obliged following someone like him. Even if he's not an ordinary disciple of Hwasan.»

Hyun Jong nodded, finding it all too obvious from the perspective of Nokrim's members.

«But if Nokrim King Im Sobyong trains quietly at the forefront without making any fuss, it eliminates room for dissatisfaction. Perhaps Nokrim King aims for that.»

«...He's a thoughtful person.»

«It's different from what appears on the surface.»

Tang Gunak's gaze sank deep.

«Of course, deep down, Nokrim King intends to strengthen his control by increasing the power of his sect, even if it means incurring a debt to Hwasan Geomhyeop's gesture.»

Tang Gunak, who had been speaking calmly, chuckled dryly and let out a light sigh.

«However, it's undoubtedly not an easy task even if there's a target in sight.»

«Yes. I think he's an exceptional individual.»

Hyun Jong's expression was somewhat complex and subtle.

The more you know him, the more you observe him, the more you realize how different Im Sobyong appears. Isn't it evident how much his evaluation has changed since he first entered Hwasan?

«Exceptional...»

That's when it happened.

«I'm sick, you darned snotty brat!»

«Sick? Sick? Are you kidding me, you Sapa punk! Let me show you what being truly sick means! Come here, you punk!»

«Hiyiiieek!»

As if it was agreed upon by Tang Gunak and Hyun Jong, they both turned towards the door with bewildered faces. Tang Gunak, who had been silently listening to the screaming for a while, quietly concluded his earlier statement.

«...He's an exceptional individual.»

«Yes...»

Strangely, his voice lacked strength.

«Ahem. Anyway.»

Tang Gunak, cleared his throat and spoke up again.

«As Noklim King is dealing with such a situation, I can't just sit and watch. I intend to do my best to assist in supporting the intentions of Hwasan Geomhyeop.»

«Thank you, Lord.»

Tang Gunak smiled strangely.

«This time, it's something I've come to realize anew, but it seems that people have different capacities. Merely being able to conceive such ideas, setting aside what's realistic or challenging, makes Hwasan Geomhyeop not an ordinary person.»

«Hmm... in various senses.»

«Yes. In various senses.»

A subtle expression crossed both their faces.

It would be truly wonderful if it wasn't ordinary in a positive way...

«It's an insightful perspective.»

«...Yes?»

«On the surface, it might imply sharing responsibility for Hwasan's burdens with other factions. However, isn't the underlying meaning entirely different?»

Hyun Jong nodded with a solemn expression.

«Indeed.»

«It's not just anyone but Hwasan Geomhyeop...»

Tang Gunak, whose words briefly trailed off, quickly continued.

«Didn't he also declare that other factions belonging to Cheonumaeng will also shoulder responsibility, hasn't he?»

Hyun Jong also closed his eyes and nodded.

«When Hwasan Geomhyeop initially presented the logic to me when creating Cheonumaeng, it was ‘those who benefit each other can become friends.’ However... this time, the word ‘benefit’ was omitted.»

«You were aware of that.»

«That’s why it’s remarkable.»

Tang Gunak smiled as if unable to withstand the irony.

«Who in this world could dare to articulate beyond profit and logic, embracing everyone?

Only... yes, only Hwasan Geomhyeop could say that.»

«...»

«Therefore, how could one not admire him?»

Outside the door, the voice of a young man could be heard consistently. Within the seemingly sharp voice lay calmness that was hard to discern without paying close attention.

«I always thought he didn’t quite fit in with the Taoist teachings, but it seems my perception was wrong. A great Tao appears ordinary to the eyes of the ordinary, and when you speak of it as the Tao, it ceases to be the Tao...»

With a gentle smile, Tang Gunak concluded his words.

«Now, I truly understand.»

Upon hearing this, Hyun Jong quietly closed his eyes.

«I think so too.»