

Chapter 1243

That's all? (3)

«Ahem, ahem.»

Geum Yangbaek hastily cleared his throat. It's embarrassing for someone of his stature to lose control of his body and cough uncontrollably.

But who wouldn't be flustered hearing such words face-to-face?

What did he just say?

«Right now...»

Geum Yangbaek steadied his breath once again and asked,

«You're asking us to... withdraw from Gupailbang?»

«Yes.»

The response came back immediately, without a single moment of hesitation, which only made it more disconcerting.

Geum Yangbaek found himself speechless again as he stared intently at Baek Cheon. He refrained from speaking, fearing he might make a mistake if he opened his mouth now.

Who is this person, anyway?

What kind of person confidently comes here with the authority of Hwasan and boldly demands the withdrawal from Gupailbang?

'Has anyone ever heard such words in the history of Gangho?'

Undoubtedly, such a thing would never happen. Asking members of Gupailbang to voluntarily withdraw is simply unthinkable, even for someone who has gone mad.

Even the Demonic Cult that invaded the Central Plains, or the great sects of Sapa that once brought bloodshed to the Central Plains but have now disappeared, would not have been able to easily say such words.

Understanding the significance of Gupailbang, especially considering the efforts Haenam made to join it, makes it even more inconceivable.

Therefore...

'No, no way!'

Geum Yangbaek quickly dismissed the fleeting suspicion that crossed his mind. For a moment, he wondered if Baek Cheon's suggestion stemmed from some deep-seated resentment that Haenam had usurped a position rightfully belonging to Hwasan.

'How could such a malicious thought even cross my mind!'

Even entertaining such a notion was shameful.

These were people who had penetrated deep into Gangnam to come this far. Who in the world would engage in such actions fueled by petty resentment?

Moreover, considering the stories he has heard about Cheonumaneg and Hwasan so far, this amounts to nothing more than baseless suspicion.

Feeling deeply ashamed for even allowing such thoughts, Geum Yangbaek spoke with a more cautious tone.

«It's difficult for this humble Sect Leader to grasp the essence of your words, Vice Sect Leader. What intention lies behind such statements...»

«I mean exactly what I said.»

However, Baek Cheon responded as firmly as before, seemingly disregarding Geum Yangbaek's sentiments entirely.

«We're simply suggesting that you discard the now hollow facade of Gupailbang and join us, Cheonumaeng.»

«But...!»

«What in the world...»

The elders from Haenam, who surrounded Geum Yangbaek, began to protest vehemently. They too looked at Baek Cheon with incredulous expressions.

«What are you thinking!»

«How dare you speak so impudently...»

«Silence.»

«One at a time, elders! Show some respect...»

«Quiet, all of you.»

As Geum Yangbaek spoke, the elders reluctantly fell silent, coughing awkwardly. Despite their overwhelming sense of bewilderment, this was not the appropriate time for them to speak out freely.

Clank.

Geum Yangbaek maintained a moment of silence, then picked up the teacup in front of him.

«The tea might have cooled. It's made from fine tea leaves grown in the mountains of Hainan. Would you like to enjoy its aroma?»

«Thank you.»

Baek Cheon lightly smiled and raised the teacup. From the gesture of lifting the cup to the slow sipping of the tea, everything was flawless and graceful.

«Perhaps you have an interest in tea ceremony?»

Baek Cheon, setting down his teacup in response to Geum Yangbaek's question, smiled.

«I haven't had the leisure to study tea ceremony extensively, but I learned a bit by watching over the shoulder of esteemed Hyun Jong, who is the former Sect Leader of Hwasan and a tea enthusiast.»

«Oh, esteemed Hyun Jong... Wait, what? Esteemed Hyun Jong stepped down from the position of the Sect Leader?»

«I failed to mention that the former Sect Leader passed on the position to Un Am, the current Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

«Oh...»

Once again, Geum Yangbaek couldn't hide his bewilderment.

«Per-perhaps esteemed Hyun Jong... No, could it be retired Sect Leader came down with an illness...?»

«No, that's not the case. He is still in good health.»

«I see...»

«It seems he deemed it appropriate to pass on the position to the next generation.»

It was astounding. Not only was the suggestion to withdraw from Gupailbang utterly perplexing, but this revelation was equally astonishing.

‘He stepped down from the position of the Sect Leader voluntarily?’

At a time like this? It was truly incomprehensible.

Gangho was facing a tremendous crisis. Was it really possible for someone leading a martial arts sect to step down and retire at such a critical moment? How much trust must one have in their disciples to make such a decision?

Geum Yangbaek couldn't even begin to imagine.

‘No, that can't be all...’

In truth, the momentum of Hwasan poses a threat even to Shaolin. While it's uncertain if Hwasan's actual power can yet surpass Shaolin, in terms of influence on Gangho, it undoubtedly exceeds Shaolin in certain aspects.

It took immense patience and endurance for Hwasan to reach this point. Enduring excruciating pain as if sinking into a swamp, only to finally see the light, and now the one at the helm is considering stepping down? Is it really possible?

How selfless must one be for such a thing to occur?

«...Remarkable.»

«I agree.»

A sigh escaped Geum Yangbaek's lips.

‘Our positions have completely reversed.’

When they first met, Hyun Jong was not someone who could be compared to him. But now, the tables have turned. He can't even dare to step into Hyun Jong's shadow.

While he has become the incompetent person who brought Haenam into the brink of destruction, Hyun Jong transformed Hwasan from a third-rate sect into a renowned powerhouse in Gangho.

‘Life is full of surprises.’

Geum Yangbaek, suppressing the myriad of emotions flooding within him, spoke in a voice that seemed to maintain composure.

«I think I can understand why you, as Vice Sect Leader, would make such a suggestion. You are someone who has learned from a person who has detached himself from the world like esteemed Hyun Jong, so the names like Gupailbang may just seem like mere facades.»

«...»

«But, Vice Sect Leader, you should also consider what Gupailbang means in the secular world, and how others perceive it. Gupailbang...»

«I understand, Sect Leader.»

Geum Yangbaek looked at Baek Cheon silently.

Interrupting the words of another sect's Leader could be considered the height of rudeness, but Geum Yangbaek didn't want to quibble over such matters. Instead, he was more curious about what Baek Cheon would say next.

«You said you understand?»

«Yes. Perhaps I might know even better than the Sect Leader. While Sect Leader led Haenam as it was a part of Gupailbang, we were merely onlookers, observing Gupailbang from the lowest position.»

Upon hearing Baek Cheon's explanation, Geum Yangbaek found himself nodding involuntarily. In hindsight, Hwasan had not been in its current position for long. Surely, they too had looked upon Gupailbang with both admiration and envy. And at some point, they must have dreamt of returning to Gupailbang.

«Yet, despite all that, you speak to us of such matters?»

«Yes,»

Baekcheon replied, his eyes flickering. Then, with a firmness that required no further explanation, he continued,

«The reason is simple. The current Gupailbang is a place where Haenam has no reason to bend its neck.»

«Vice Sect Leader...»

«The fact that we are here now...»

Baek Cheon paused for a moment and then turned his gaze towards the elders seated behind Geum Yangbaek. Meeting their eyes one by one, he continued,

«...Proves that it's not Gupailbang, but us who validate that fact.»

A sigh escaped Geum Yangbaek's lips. After a long exhale, he spoke in a slightly slower tone,

«Of course, no amount of gratitude will suffice for those who have traveled from afar to be here. As the Sect Leader of Haenam, and as a person of Hainan island as well, I express my deepest gratitude.»

«...»

“However, Sect Leader, that is separate from this. The gratitude and...»

«Originally,»

Baek Cheon interrupted Geum Yangbaek's words once again, causing Geum Yangbaek to furrow his brow in displeasure. But what followed Baek Cheon's interruption only served to further unsettle him.

«Those who should have come here are not us, but Gupailbang,»

“ ... ”

«The reason is simple. Those who bear the name ‘Jeong (正)’ [jeongpa — righteous/orthodox sects] have an obligation to help those in difficult situations, regardless of the circumstances.»

Baek Cheon looked around at everyone present.

«Therefore, we, Cheonumaeng, also wish to apologize to those who are here.»

With a solemn expression, Baek Cheon bowed deeply. Geum Yangbaek, taken aback by this sudden action, shifted uncomfortably.

«W-Why are you doing this all of a sudden, Vice Sect Leader?»

«We should have come earlier. We should have realized sooner that Haenam needed our help, that the situation in Haenam was not good. For not doing so... Or for half-hearted ignorance when we could have... Please forgive us.»

«How could that be considered Cheonumaeng’s fault? Please don’t do this, Vice Sect Leader! Please, raise your head!»

Baek Cheon slowly raised his head.

“Sect Leader.”

«Yes, Vice Sect Leader.»

«It may be presumptuous, but the statement that it cannot be considered Cheonumaeng’s fault is not entirely true. Cheonumaeng is a place that raises its flag under the value of adherence to the principles of righteousness. It is also a place that has gained much because of it. Criticism is expected when Cheonumaeng fails to fulfill its responsibilities properly.»
Geum Yangbaek felt momentarily overwhelmed by the force emanating from Baek Cheon. Straightforwardness. It could sometimes feel stiflingly rigid, but at other times, it could become a force stronger than anything in the world.

With all the power, influence, legitimacy, and regardless of their respective situations, what Baek Cheon was presenting now was straightforwardness. Just that alone was enough to make Geum Yangbaek feel overwhelmed.

«That’s why I want to ask.»

Baek Cheon stared straight at Geum Yangbaek as he spoke.

«Where are those who should have upheld that righteousness before anyone else?»

«Vice Sect Leader...»

«You must understand. No, you must acknowledge it, Sect Leader.»

Baek Cheon delivered his words with icy resolve, without a moment’s hesitation.

«Gupailbang has abandoned Haenam.»

Those words became a dagger that pierced Geum Yangbaek’s heart.