

Chapter 1229

I don't know. (4)

«Whoa!»

The group led by Im Sobyong ran like the wind. With no time to spare due to the already delayed journey, they couldn't afford to rest for even a moment. Day and night, they raced through deserted paths.

Amidst their rapid journey, a voice called out,

«Hold on!»

Im Sobyong shouted, raising his hand, prompting everyone to come to a halt.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, Im Sobyong cleared his throat and spoke calmly,

«We need to be a bit more cautious from here on.»

«From here on?»

Yoon Jong looked ahead with a puzzled expression. The path ahead seemed no different from what they had been running on. But Im Sobyong quickly clarified his statement, dispelling any doubts.

«From here on, I also have no information about the road.»

«What?»

Jo Geol's expression crumbled.

“No, after boasting that you have all the mountains under the heavens in your hands!”

“That statement is not necessarily wrong. The issue is... whether we can truly call what lies ahead ‘under the heavens’.”

«What do you mean by that?»

It was Baek Cheon who responded to the question. He turned his head slightly towards Im Sobyong, as if he had a suspicion.

«From here on?»

«Yes.»

«Sasuk. What are you saying?»

«It's Daesan [대산(大山) — Great Mountain].»

«What?»

«Hundred Thousand Mountains [십만대산 — 十萬大山].»

At that moment, a shiver ran down Jo Geol's spine as he realized where they were.

«Here?»

As he grasped the reality of their location, certain details stood out to him. Though the path they had traversed seemed no different, now before them jagged peaks stretched endlessly, instead of the gentle hills they had seen before.

‘The Great Mountain...’

Now aware, the sight before them began to resemble hundreds of swords piercing the sky. «From here on, it's unknown territory. The reason Nokrim occupies mountains is to secure those who pass through them. However... as you know, no one enters the Hundred Thousand Mountains. And for any sect with some sense, it's a place they'd never set foot in.»

Everyone nodded in agreement. It was an obvious conclusion.

Even without much thought, anyone with common sense would avoid this place. This was the home to Demonic Cult, the one that had turned the Central Plains into hell in the past. Even though Demonic Cult had largely faded from memory, the dread and fear associated with its name remained vivid.

As a result, even without any formal declaration, the martial world of the Central Plains treated the Hundred Thousand Mountains as a forbidden zone where one should not set foot.

«Um... Nokrim King.»

«Yes.»

«For orthodox sect's members, there's an understanding that they shouldn't enter the Hundred Thousand Mountains... Is it the same for unorthodox sects?»

«Just because they're Sapa doesn't mean they're not human, right? They also understand what dread means.»

Im Sobyong shrugged before speaking.

«Originally, there isn't some grand reason why the orthodox factions avoid this place, right? It's simply eerie and ominous.»

«That's right...»

«The unorthodox are the same. And they have no reason to come here in the first place. Why would they establish themselves where there are no people? They're not going to cultivate Tao in the mountains.»

«True.»

For the orthodox sects, being distant from people wasn't a big issue. Especially for Taoist and Buddhist sects, their practitioners tended to gather in secluded areas. Once a sect gained fame, people would naturally come to them.

But Sapa is different. They were shunned by people, and their existence depended on extracting money from them. As a result, most unorthodox sects were located near large cities.

Im Sobyong chuckled.

«Originally, the reason why Jang Ilso was able to grow Maninbang so big was partly due to its strategic location between Guizhou and Guangdong. Other major sects didn't operate well below the Hundred Thousand Mountains. That led to chaos with small sects proliferating, and Jang Ilso conquering that land.»

«Well... hearing that, it sounds like Jang Ilso grew Sapaeryeon because of Demonic Cult, doesn't it?»

«It's a bit oversimplified to call it a cause, but in a sense, it's not entirely wrong.»

Baek Cheon's face twisted in frustration.

«Anyway, Demonic Cult's bastards are no help at all.»

He shook his head after this exaggerated joke. But the others remained tense.

«...Do we have to pass through here?»

«We don't have much choice. Despite the lack of information, this is still the area least monitored by Sapaeryeon.»

«But...»

Namgung Dowi glanced at the mountains with a hint of concern in his eyes. In his mind, he recalled the bishop he saw in Hangzhou not long ago. If there were remnants of the Cult there... even if someone like that bishop was there?

He quickly averted his gaze, noticing the same worried expression mirrored in the faces of others.

Seeing their concern, Im Sobyong chuckled and said,

«While I recommend this path, there's nothing wrong with taking a detour. It might take longer, but... it's not that late yet.»

His words were met with nods of agreement and an exchange of glances among the group.

«In that case...»

«Let's take the detour...»

«This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.»

However, their timid voices were completely drowned out by the annoyed voice coming from behind.

«What, a detour?»

«But...»

«Are these guys out of their minds? Hey, you bastards! A hundred years ago, even with those cultists swarming around, we charged straight in without hesitation. But now, the descendants of those guys, on land we've already cleared out, are too scared to go in? Why? Afraid of the cultists?»

«Well, back then, we were like a pack of wolves! But now, there are only ten of us!»

«So what if there's ten of us?»

«Then are you scared of the cultists?»

«Then what?»

Jo Geol shouted, trembling all over.

«T-There might be... g-ghosts! G-Ghosts of the cult... Aaaah!»

He screamed as Chung Myung kicked him away, sending him flying and crashing down.

«Look at this crazy punk! Hey, you crazy bastard! You're a taoist, a taoist! The one who exorcises the ghosts!»

«That's right.»

«It's true that's our role.»

«Even though we've never actually caught one...»

Even those who follow Buddhism tend to rely on a Taoist priests when it comes to matters related to evil spirits or ghosts. While Hwasan itself doesn't delve much into that aspect, shamanism plays a significant role in revenue for Wudang.

«And you guys! Even if they become ghosts, wouldn't it just be those cultists? Those guys from orthodox sects who died there would become ghosts too! The victorious ghost is on our side, so what's the problem!»

«Chung Myung! Show some respect to our ancestors!»

«You shouldn't talk like that to them, you idiot!»

«Tsk...»

Chung Myung clicked his tongue. What's not right? It was Chung Myung who dragged those useless idiots to Hundred Thousand Mountains in the first place.

'What's changed since then?'

With a deep sigh, Chung Myung shook his head and led the way.

«Stop talking nonsense and just follow me.»

«Umm, but...»

«Just follow.»

Watching Chung Myung run ahead, everyone bit their lips with anxious expressions.

«Sh-should we go?»

«W-We have to. We must.»

Eventually, one by one, they reluctantly followed behind him. However, their anxious demeanor couldn't be completely shaken off.

Pa-ah-aah-t!

As they entered the foothills of the mountains, they soon picked up speed again. It was no wonder, as apart from sporadic encounters with wild animals, there was hardly any sign of living creatures around.

Throughout the journey, the uneasy group began to regain their composure.

«It's unusually quiet.»

«Yeah...»

Despite not deliberately choosing a secluded path to avoid being noticed, they encountered no one.

'It's understandable.'

Baek Cheon quickly understood the reason as he looked around.

Even if this wasn't the stronghold of Demonic Cult, it wouldn't be easy to find people here.

In the first place, this wasn't a suitable place for human habitation. The densely packed peaks made it unsuitable for farming, and each peak was too steep to hunt wild animals.

It was a land with no reason for hunters or farmers to establish settlements.

However, one thing was certain.

«It's... it's eerie.»

«Yes, truly unsettling.»

Yoon Jong nodded in agreement with Baek Cheon's words.

He had seen the Great Mountain from a distance before. It was when they collected the remains of their ancestor and returned to Hwasan afterwards.

However, experiencing the Hundred Thousand Mountains firsthand was vastly different from observing it from afar.

The terrain was suffocating, making it abundantly clear why this place was Demonic Cult's stronghold and why such a horrific war had occurred here.

The endless jagged peaks made it impossible to see what lay just a few miles beyond from any vantage point. Unlike other parts of the Central Plains, where distances were easily discernible, here it was challenging. It was almost complete darkness.

Even when trying to secure a line of sight by moving sideways, another peak blocked the view ahead. To confirm what was happening behind, they had no choice but to venture inward.

'I don't know where the cultists might be...'

Cold sweat ran down his back.

Thinking from the perspective of leading a group, it felt daunting. They couldn't enter recklessly without knowing where ambushes might be set up.

If they were in a position to establish a foothold here and resist, it would have been equally perplexing. They would have had to rack their brains to decide which ambush site would be more effective.

'Leading elites into this kind of place and pushing forward?'

Baek Cheon thought to himself.

In the past, he had only vaguely admired the bravery of the warriors who risked their lives like sacrificial pawns to kill the Heavenly Demon.

However, seeing Hundred Thousand Mountains with his own eyes revealed that the situation was not as romantic as he had imagined. If someone had proposed leading all the elite warriors there for an assault, what would his response have been?

He might not have known, but the first thing that would come to mind would be questioning their sanity.

A single mistake. A single misstep could lead to the loss of all their forces in this terrain where even one false move could be catastrophic.

Yet, those who had to lead the elites and come here, what kind of emotions were they experiencing?

A sense of determination. A gamble where failure meant losing everything.

He couldn't explain it otherwise.

'And Hwasan was also there.'

Ahead of everyone else...

Baek Cheon unconsciously turned around. The expressions of those following him were equally stiff. They seemed to feel what he felt.

Among them, especially the disciples of Hwasan had darker expressions.

And then it happened.

“Sasuk! Over there!”

Baek Cheon abruptly turned his head at Jo Geol’s sudden shout.