

Chapter 1182

I will carry it. (1)

Baek Cheon's words were nothing short of a lightning bolt.

Everyone stared at him in disbelief. Despite being crystal clear, the words seemed too unbelievable to be true, making them doubt their ears.

Astonishment.

There was no other way to describe it.

Yet, no matter how great the bewilderment others felt, could it compare to the shock felt by the disciples of Hwasan?

Those who lived with the word, «Hwasan,» as their destiny were all wide-eyed, looking at Baek Cheon as if unable to believe what they were seeing.

Even Jo Geol, who had fiercely opposed Baek Cheon just moments ago, stood there with his mouth agape, dumbfounded.

«I...»

In that moment, a voice from Chung Myung sounded almost like a sigh or a groan.

«That crazy bastard...»

Words may vary, but there might not be a more fitting expression than this to convey the feelings of Hwasan's disciples.

As shocked as his disciples, or even more so, Hyun Jong looked at Baek Cheon in disbelief.

«So, you said Sect Leader?»

«Yes, that's correct.»

«...you?»

«Yes.»

Amidst the chaos, Baek Cheon was the only one maintaining composure. He calmly nodded.

«Specifically, I humbly request to be appointed as the Acting Section Leader. Becoming the Sect Leader requires adhering to the procedures and formalities according to the sect's laws. However, the appointment of the Acting Sect Leader, who receives the delegation of authority from the current Sect Leader, can be done anytime with the Sect Leader's approval.»

«W-well, that may be true, but...»

No, what meaning is there in debating this now? Isn't the only difference in title between Sect Leader and Acting Sect Leader?

In essence, Baek Cheon is expressing his intention to directly decide the affairs of Hwasan in place of Hyun Jong.

No matter the circumstances, in the strict rules of Hwasan, it was never appropriate for a disciple to make such a direct request to the Sect Leader.

«Baek Cheon. I understand what you're saying, but this does not make sense. You are the senior disciple of Hwasan, but you are not Sect Leader's disciple. Above you is Un Am. Even if you request, Un Am...»

«That matter has already been discussed with Un Am Sasuk.»

«... With Un Am?»

«Yes.»

Baek Cheon nodded and elaborated.

«I have already conveyed my intention to Un Am Sasuk this morning. He has agreed to it.»

«No, that guy...»

Hyun Jong seemed on the verge of saying something but eventually closed his mouth.

Blaming him for making such a decision without consulting Un Am felt burdensome when Un Am wasn't present in this situation. Isn't Un Am's absence here an indication that he has no influence over the crucial decisions of Cheonumaeng and Hwasan?

'Something felt off when he was persistently declining attendance.'

If Un Am had been here supporting Baek Cheon, the situation might have looked slightly better, but it also would have emphasized that Baek Cheon had multiple figures above him. So, by leaving his position, Un Am probably intended to lend strength to Baek Cheon. Un Am was that kind of person.

Hyun Jong, trying to calm his embarrassment and confusion, opened his mouth.

«It seems this is not the right place to make such a decision hastily.»

Baek Cheon nodded.

«Yes. Sect Leader, this request comes after much contemplation. Please understand it's not a conclusion made in youthful haste or impulsive vigor.»

«...But, Baek Cheon. If you had such intentions, shouldn't you have sought the agreement of the other disciples? Judging by their reactions, this does seem like the first time they're hearing this story here.»

«That would not have been appropriate.»

Baek Cheon shook his head firmly.

«Gathering the opinions of junior disciples with lesser experience to request the position of the Sect Leader is merely a different guise. Ultimately, it's no different from rallying support from below to oust the Sect Leader. It's something that should not happen within Hwasan.»

«...»

«If it's an unreasonable request, then naturally a fitting punishment will be delivered.

However, to determine that, we need to hear it first. Baek Cheon.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«As you mentioned to me, everything requires a reason. What is the reason for requesting the position of the Sect Leader? Is it because I am lacking?»

«No, it's not.»

«Then, is it because you don't approve of my choice?»

«Even more so, that's not the reason.»

«If that's the case, then why?»

«As I mentioned, it's because our perspectives differ.»

Hyun Jong waited for a response without saying anything. It seemed like an invitation to continue speaking.

«You were not wrong, Sect Leader. You are undoubtedly correct. One of the Sect Leader's greatest duties is to uphold the laws of the sect and carry on the will of Hwasan for future generations. How can it be considered wrong to fulfill such a duty?»

«Well?»

«But the position we will inherit is different from that.»

«...»

«While you must continue, for us, who have no future generations to protect, the present is more important than the future. Therefore, what we need to do is not just to preserve.»

Baek Cheon spoke with a calm yet firm tone.

«What we must do is prove to the world that what we inherited from our predecessors was not wrong.»

Hyun Jong's eyes widened.

«From those near to us, the ancestors who sacrificed their lives for the world a hundred years ago, and even further back to the founder who first established Hwasan on a steep mountain peak!»

«...»

«It is to prove with this hand, this sword, and this life that the will passed down and continued from those who first founded the doctrine of Hwasan is still present within the sect. It is to show that the meaning, fueled by the will of countless individuals, has progressed even further than in the past.»

Hyun Jong's tightly clenched fist began to tremble faintly. None of those watching noticed this fact, not even Hyun Jong himself. Everyone was absorbed in every word Baek Cheon spoke.

«While the decision to protect the young disciples cannot be deemed wrong, declaring to fight for the weak without caring for one's life is also something that cannot be deemed wrong.»

«...Indeed.»

If that statement were wrong, everything about Hwasan would lose its meaning. That's why it's an irrefutable statement.

«Therefore, I genuinely understand and respect Sect Leader's choice. However, as disciples of Hwasan, as those who must continue the will of the sect, our decision must also align. There is only one way to satisfy both of those right but different intentions.»

Baek Cheon's words continued, resonating like a declaration.

«For those who have lived their lives with the duty and responsibility of passing on everything to future generations, it is the burden they must prove to bear.»

«...»

«That is why I must become the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

Even the elders no longer expressed anger — they simply stared at Baek Cheon with blank eyes.

«I conveyed these words to Un Am Sasuk. I urged him to take on the role of the Sect Leader, but he firmly refused. He believed in the righteousness of my cause but stated that he, being one to protect rather than prove, couldn't accept it.»

«Un Am...»

«If Sasuk insists on this path, the one who must prove and take on the role is none other than me, Baek Cheon, the most suitable for the position at Hwasan right now.»

Hyun Jong bit his lip, not out of anger, but because tears welled up at the realization that the little boy had grown to say such words.

‘When did he...?’

He knew he was growing. He thought the boy was developing even more excellently than he had anticipated. However, a child's growth always surpassed the expectations of their superiors.

For someone nurturing a disciple, this moment was likely the culmination of their dreams — a flood of emotions that compensated for all the time invested.

However...

«Baek Cheon, I understand your intentions well. But you are still...»

«Insufficient, is that what you'd say?»

Baek Cheon asked, then lowered his head on his own.

«Sect Leader. Will I never be competent enough?»

«...»

«After ten years, won't I be enough? Will I not become perfect after these ten years?»

«Well...»

«In the eyes of the predecessors, the moment when the successors don't seem lacking never truly arrives. It's just a matter of the right time. I believe that time is now.»

«...»

«If you think I'm lacking, guide me. If you think I'm lacking, advise and scold me. But that is something you can very well do even when I take on the role of the Acting Sect Leader.»

Hyun Jong looked at Baek Cheon with a facial expression that was hard to articulate. After a long while of biting his lips in such a manner, Hyun Jong exhaled a sigh as if the ground beneath him would shake and asked,

«Since when?»

Before Baek Cheon could open his mouth, he asked again,

«Since when have you had such thoughts?»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes slightly, organizing his thoughts before responding.

«It all began with Jo Geol's words.»

«Geol?»

«Yes. In response to Jo Geol's words that everything was going wrong, I said, 'Think about what you should do'. And I thought about what I should do.»

«I see.»

«I told my Sajil who couldn't find an answer, 'Those who don't take responsibility for the decision have no right to criticize Sect Leader's choice.'»

«...»

«That applies to me as well. I respect Sect Leader's choice and intend to follow it. However, my position, my thoughts, and my will are different. But being someone who doesn't shy away from responsibility, I cannot dare not to follow. So, I pondered, agonized, and thought. At the end of it all, I reached one conclusion.»

With clenched fists, Baek Cheon stated,

«If that responsibility is not given to those who don't take it, then I will take on that responsibility.»

The disciples who guarded Baek Cheon's back bit their lips in response to his words.

'Sasuk!'

Especially Jo Geol gazed at Baek Cheon with a face that seemed ready to cry at any moment. He thought his words hadn't been listened to, but that wasn't the case. Baek Cheon didn't dismiss or ignore him. In fact, more than anyone else here, it was Baek Cheon who earnestly listened to Jo Geol's words.

«That's why I am determined to continue. To prove that the disciples who received the teachings of the predecessors are on the right path, I will do so with my own hands, with the swords of my Sahyeongs and my Sajils,»

Baek Cheon said, his voice filled with sincerity.

Baek Cheon took a slow breath, as if gathering all his resolve for the next words.

Finally, that deep breath flowed out as a resolution named determination.

«The heavy responsibility, the weight of the burden, the irreplaceable value of the disciples' lives...»

«...»

«I will carry it.»