

Chapter 1183

I will carry it. (2)

It wasn't just Hwasan that looked at Baek Cheon with eyes filled with awe or admiration. Everyone present couldn't take their eyes off him.

Even Beop Jong and Jongli Hyeong seemed quite surprised.

They were all looking again, at the man named Baek Cheon. At his true face, hidden behind Hyun Jong and Chung Myung.

«The form of my concern took shape at that moment. But the real concerns had already begun before that.»

«...Before that?»

«Yes. It started with Young Lord Namgung.»

«What? Are you serious?»

Namgung Dowi, who had been looking at Baek Cheon with intense and fiery eyes, inadvertently blurted it out in surprise and covered his mouth.

However, Baek Cheon paid no attention to the reactions around him and continued his words calmly.

«To be honest, Young Lord Namgung was someone I didn't consider particularly remarkable.»

«...»

A momentary flash of disbelief passed over Namgung Dowi's face, who had just received an unexpected blow. Baek Cheon's speech seemed to touch him emotionally, and then he received such treatment.

«But now, Young Lord is an exceptional person, beyond what I dared to follow.»

«B-Baek Cheon Dojang.»

«He is leading the restoration of partially destroyed Namgung clan. At times, he speaks so admirably that no one can deny it.»

Hyun Jong nodded in response to these words.

«... Yes. That's true.»

Who here wouldn't know how hard Namgung Dowi was struggling?

«At times, I admired his efforts, and at times, I felt jealous. The person I thought I could now catch up to and surpass suddenly widened the gap, distancing himself again.»

Hyun Jong nodded again, understanding the sentiment.

To them, Namgung Dowi's struggle might have seemed praiseworthy, but for someone like Baek Cheon, being of the same generation, it couldn't have been seen with merely warm admiration. Naturally, there would be a sense of rivalry.

«So, I thought, how did this gap happen?»

Baek Cheon shifted his gaze from Namgung Dowi to others.

«I realized then. Those surpassing me weren't only Young Lord Namgung.»

Baek Cheon's gaze now stopped at Seol Sobaek.

«Lord Seol Sobaek, despite being even younger than Young Lord Namgung, has gained recognition in the Ice Palace. Everyone believes he will become an outstanding leader, and he is striving to meet those expectations. He is even sacrificing his sleep.»

At those words, Seol Sobek scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

«And.»

Baek Cheon's gaze now reached Im Sobyong, who was partially hiding in the corner.

«Nokrim King is also leading Nokrim excellently, despite not much difference in age between us. He has held the weighty position of one of the leaders of Sapa, guiding Nokrim while concealing his status and age, confronting Maninbang being even younger than Jang Ilso.»

Im Sobyong awkwardly cleared his throat, then gently tapped his face with a closed fan.

Turning his gaze to Hyun Jong after observing them all, Baek Cheon asked,

«Sect Leader.»

«...»

«What is different between them and me? Why can't I become like them? Even those who are not different from me, even those younger than me, are leading their sects excellently. So why do I still have to rely on the Sect Leader for protection and delay facing the consequences?»

«...That's...»

Even Hyun Jong couldn't provide an answer to these words.

But Baek Cheon seemed not to seek an answer, lowering his head as if acknowledging the lack of response.

«It's not Sect Leader's fault. But the difference is undoubtedly there. That's why I pondered where that difference came from.»

Baek Cheon looked at Namgung Dowi.

«My conclusion was simple. I apologize if this sounds disrespectful, Young Lord, but if Lord Namgung Hwang was still alive, you wouldn't be the same person you are now.»

It could be perceived as impolite, but Namgung Dowi nodded his head without the slightest offense. Then, as if offering support to Baek Cheon, he spoke,

«There's nothing to apologize for. That's natural.»

Baek Cheon lightly nodded before continuing,

«The biggest difference was one thing. What burdens have you shouldered?»

His gaze turned towards Tang Gunak, as if seeking agreement, perhaps implying that when Tang Gunak ascended to the position of the head, the situation might have been similar. Tang Gunak, in response to that gaze, unconsciously nodded as well.

«A position shapes a person. It's not just about being excellent because you were meant to be the head — it's also about becoming excellent because you became the head. A position demands responsibilities suitable for that position. But in other words...»

Baek Cheon shifted his gaze to the disciples of Hwasan, as if they too needed to hear this.

«Taking on responsibilities and carrying the weight oneself also means the potential for growth. Standing in the same position as those who took on the burden without taking on the responsibility is nothing more than a child's whim. If you truly want to stand in the same position, you must know how to shoulder the responsibility yourself.»

His voice became clearer and more distinct.

«Now that I know this truth, I intend not to avoid the burden I must bear. No, I intend to shoulder that burden myself. To grow more through the responsibilities on my shoulders, to become more dignified.»

«Baek Cheon...»

«So, please, Sect Leader.»

Baek Cheon slowly bowed his head. It was incredibly polite, yet never humble.

«Grant me permission.»

A sigh escaped from Hyun Jong's lips. How could someone be so confident and impressive? Emotions he couldn't express swept over him.

Then, a faint sound, like a wind, brushed past his ears.

«Amitabha.»

Beop Jong, who had been observing the situation, seemed dissatisfied and tried to interrupt the atmosphere.

«Baek Cheon Siju seems too hasty. Responsibility is...»

«Baek Cheon.»

«...»

But those words were abruptly cut off by Hyun Jong's voice.

«I understand your intentions, but it's an incredibly difficult task. Do you think you can handle it?»

It was a heavy question, but there was no hesitation in Baek Cheon's response.

«It's difficult to do it alone.»

«...Alone?»

«Yes. However, Sect Leader. You haven't shouldered everything alone either. By your side were the Elders. Elder Hyun Sang led Hwasan's martial arts, and Elder Hyun Yeong managed Hwasan's finances.»

Emotions welled up on the faces of the two Elders.

«It's not just about duties. When the cold winds blew and the waves crashed, how could a single person endure those hardships? You, too, Sect Leader, must have persevered because they were there. And the disciples from Un generation, including Un Am Sasuk and Un Geom Sasuk, did their best to protect you.»

«Yes, I didn't act alone. Absolutely not.»

«Yes, Sect Leader. That's right. I'm the same. I can't do it alone. But I have people who support me. Silent but sturdy and trustworthy Sajils, and when I'm on the wrong path, there is Samae who will tell me the right way without caring about whose feelings might be hurt.»

There was tension in Yu Iseol's lips, and Yoon Jong closed his eyes in silence.

«Sometimes people need someone who follows warm emotions rather than cold reason, and even if their rank is lower, there's someone who can objectively mediate the situation.»

Jo Geol turned his gaze upward, as if suppressing his tears, and Tang Soso lowered her head deeply.

«And... just having someone who watches and scolds me from behind is enough. I will endure that gaze for my whole life.»

All of Hwasan looked at Baek Cheon.

One radiating light like a white crane in flight, like the white robes he was wearing.

«You ask me if I can do it. Sect Leader, your disciple will handle it better than anyone else.

Everyone will shape me in that way. And...»

Baek Cheon's gaze finally turned to Chung Myung.

«I bear no grudges about the past, and I have no debts to future generations. That's why I must become the Sect Leader now. In the imminent era of war, only I can wield the sword called Hwasan properly.»

Chung Myung's eyes, looking at him, were deep and dark like the heavy sea. However, Baek Cheon accepted that gaze without avoiding it.

After looking at Chung Myung for a while, Baek Cheon slowly turned his gaze to Hyun Jong.

«So, Sect Leader, please make a decision. Don't trust the disciple. Trust Hwasan. Please believe that the will the ancestors intended has also been passed on to me. Hwasan will lead this disciple in the right path.»

Hyun Jong closed his eyes. What came to his mind was something that happened even earlier than when he met Baek Cheon.

'Master.'

When no one wanted to take the position of the Sect Leader, his master handed over the unfinished duties to Hyun Jong. And even in the moment of his death, he was worried about Hyun Jong.

Hyun Jong endured those harsh years. It was like enduring a freezing winter. If Hyun Sang and Hyun Yeong hadn't been by his side, he would never have endured that cold.

That's why he wanted to give them more time. Time where the responsibilities of the Sect Leader didn't crush him, and he could look at his life with clarity.

But now, Baek Cheon is speaking to him. He says that the time was not in vain. That the time, the position, and the weight have shaped the present Hyun Jong.

As Hyun Jong's silence prolonged, Yoon Jong subtly observed the reactions of those around him.

Beop Jong, looking uncomfortable no matter what, and Jongli Hyeong, who seemed ready to shout out any moment asking what was this situation.

Even the heads of each faction of Cheonumaeng, who were usually friendly towards Hwasan, were struggling to handle the current atmosphere.

Yoon Jong, sensing that things might get out of hand, cautiously spoke up, «Perhaps... for today, let's adjourn the meeting and discuss this later.»

Right at that moment, Hyun Jong spoke, «Listen, disciples.»

The disciples of Hwasan immediately adjusted their postures.

«Yes, Sect Leader!»

Hyun Jong, with a stern gaze like autumn frost, addressed Baek Cheon. Baek Cheon, standing confidently, met his gaze.

«Diminishing the honor of Hwasan with inappropriate remarks is a grave offense. Moreover, the request for abdication, the act of asking the Sect Leader to step down, is deceiving your master and dishonoring your ancestors* [기사멸조(欺師滅祖) — gisamyeljo]!»

«S-Sect Leader!»

«No, wait...»

At the mention of Gisamyeljo*, the disciples of Hwasan were startled, looking at Hyun Jong in shock. However, his icy gaze left them speechless, suppressing any potential resistance.

As everyone averted their eyes, only Baek Cheon remained steadfast, gazing at Hyun Jong without hesitation, seemingly willing to accept whatever decision would come.

«Thus, I, Hyun Jong, as the Sect Leader of Hwasan, pronounce a penalty upon the disciple Baek Cheon who has transgressed the authority of the Sect Leader. He shall be forbidden from practicing martial arts and confined for six months.»

The eyes of Hwasan's disciples, which had been tightly shut, opened wide in surprise.

However, Baek Cheon, in contrast, kept his eyes closed. He had done everything he intended to do and had no regrets. Just...

«In a martial arts sect, there are laws that must be upheld at all times. Those laws must be maintained regardless of the situation. The punishment for violating the principles of time, circumstance, and etiquette is inevitable.»

Hyun Jong, who had always been accommodating, spoke with an authoritative tone that left no room for objections. Nobody dared to challenge it, merely bowing their heads in acceptance.

A chilling coldness settled in everyone's hearts.

«Elder Hyun Sang.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«As the elder of Hwasan, execute the punishment for the disciple's wrongdoings.»

«I will carry out your command.»

The sound of footsteps resonates, as if heralding an inevitable fate. When the bitter end pierces through everyone's hearts, Hyun Jong's voice, sharp as a blade, echoes like thunder.

«Halt!»

Staring directly at Baek Cheon's closed eyes, Hyun Jong, with all his authority, made a declaration that seemed to carve through the air.

«By the authority of the Sect Leader of Hwasan, I hereby appoint Baek Cheon as the Acting Sect Leader. The execution of all these punishments will be postponed until Baek Cheon steps down from the position of the Acting Section Leader of Hwasan! This is the decree of the Sect Leader and shall face no dissent.»

Baek Cheon opened his eyes in astonishment. The once slightly blurred world became clear, and in his field of vision stood Hyun Jong, radiating all his dignity.

A gentle smile adorned Hyun Jong's lips, a warmth reminiscent of the plum blossoms on a spring day when Baek Cheon first ascended Hwasan.

«Baek Cheon.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«Now, you are the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

«...»

«Please, lead Hwasan in the right direction.»

Baek Cheon lowered his head. His shoulders were not as sturdy as moments ago. They trembled, almost pitifully. Yet, no one here pointed fingers or mocked him.

«I will... I...»

Baek Cheon's shaky voice came out.

“I will accept this duty.»

It was the moment when a new Sect Leader of Hwasan was born.