

Chapter 1181

I have something to tell you. (6)

In that moment, a memory from a distant past flashed in Hyun Jong's mind.

- I want to join Hwasan.

It was the time when he first encountered a boy who, despite his young age, climbed a rugged mountain alone. The sect was visibly declining at that time, and Hyun Jong struggled each day just to endure. However, when he saw that boy for the first time, Hyun Jong recalled the long-forgotten word: hope.

Yes, it was undoubtedly like that.

To Hyun Jong, who was contemplating whether he should stop accepting disciples to avoid repeating their sorrow, Baek Cheon's existence represented hope that could continue the future of Hwasan.

That hope was now looking at him.

«Step back!»

Hyun Sang sternly shouted.

«This is a place where the leaders of Gupailbang and Cheonumaeng discuss their futures. Even if you were allowed to attend, it doesn't mean you're permitted to speak. Stop being impolite and get out!»

However, Baek Cheon shook his head.

«I won't do that.»

«Baek Cheon!»

«Cheonumaeng was originally a place that didn't restrict speech. Therefore, I believe it's not inappropriate for a disciple to inquire about important matters before us, especially when facing significant changes.»

«This guy!»

«Furthermore.»

Baek Cheon looked at Hyun Jong and continued,

«While I understand the intentions behind your actions, Sect Leader, I think it's better for both of us to understand those intentions clearly through questions and answers, rather than speculating and covering up. If your disciple's thoughts were hasty, please deliver a suitable punishment after this gathering.»

«Stop it!»

As Hyun Sang was about to rise from his seat, Hyun Jong raised his hand to stop him.

«Enough.»

«Sect Leader!»

«It's done.»

Hyun Jong nodded, but even Hyun Sang, who always followed Sect Leader's words without question, couldn't hide his displeasure this time.

What made him step back was Hyun Jong's calm persuasion.

«It'll be fine.»

Hyun Sang, sighing without a reply, reluctantly sat back down.

Hyun Jong could understand why Hyun Sang reacted so strongly. But it wasn't about asserting authority or disrespecting him — it was something else.

Hyun Sang was concerned that Baek Cheon, now part of Gupailbang, might unintentionally provoke Beop Jong, causing his wrath.

«Your words are not wrong,»

Hyun Jong nodded and sought understanding from Beop Jong.

«I apologize, Abbot. I understand it's not proper to discuss such matters in front of a guest, but...»

«Why call me a guest? Now that Hwasan and Shaolin are practically one family, please don't be concerned about that.»

«Thank you.»

Hyun Jong finally faced Baek Cheon.

«You said you have something to say?»

«I wanted to ask, precisely.»

«Alright, go ahead.»

With a somewhat eased expression, Hyun Jong looked at Baek Cheon.

Maybe this was for the better. If he could answer Baek Cheon well and make them understand, it would be good. On the other hand, if the answer was evasive and incurred their anger, it might not be a bad thing either. It would clarify who would take responsibility.

«So, as the representative of Cheonumaeng, the head disciple of Hwasan, I wish to inquire on behalf of other Cheonumaeng's members.»

«Hmm.»

As Hyun Jong nodded, Baek Cheon slowly began to speak.

«Do you think it's right for Hwasan to join Gupailbang?»

«That is true.»

«In that case, as a disciple, I dare to seek the reason. Once Sect Leader makes a decision, the disciples must follow. So, before that, don't I have the right to know why such a choice was made?»

«It's a difficult question.»

Hyun Jong looked at Baek Cheon and everyone behind him. Those people observed him with complex eyes.

«The words of the Abbot are not wrong.»

«Not being wrong is a good reason. However, it may not be a complete reason.»

«True. That's right.»

Hyun Jong organized his thoughts for a moment. Then he spoke again.

«Saving more people, even if just one, is also in line with the saying of righteousness.»

«Cheonumaeng can also save more people.»

«That will happen. But, to achieve that, won't there be too much bloodshed?»

Hyun Jong, who had been silent for a moment, spoke again.

«To embody Cheonumaeng's aspirations, we must always take the lead and constantly rush into the most dangerous places. Achieving that won't be without value. Instead, it will be exceedingly important and precious. However... Can we say that the price of blood to be shed is small because of that?»

«I cannot say so.»

«Right. I thought the same. That's why I sought ways to shed as little blood as possible.»

«If we could choose for ourselves, we would determine the cost of that blood. But if we follow someone else's orders, we won't be able to decide that cost ourselves.»

«That's why I confirmed the sincerity of the Abbot. And just because we join Gupailbang doesn't mean we have to blindly follow the Abbot's orders, right?»

Hyun Jong added, tilting his head slightly.

«I will protect and conserve. That is my duty, and I will fulfill it throughout the rest of my life.»

Baek Cheon nodded.

«So, Sect Leader, do you consider that right?»

Baek Cheon posed the question that Hyun Jong had been endlessly conflicted with.

«...I don't know.»

Hyun Jong shook his head with a somber expression.

«Deciding right from wrong is an incredibly arduous task. So, I'm just doing my best, even if it may seem frustrating and insufficient to you.»

Baek Cheon nodded silently.

«So, what do you think about things we might not be able to protect by holding onto what we have?»

«...»

«The blood we don't shed will come back as someone else's blood. If we, who have learned about justice and righteousness and learned to balance it, turn away from that blood and turn a blind eye to it, what value is there in what we've preserved?»

Hyun Jong closed his eyes.

This was the least wanted statement.

Turning away from those dying to save more lives. How contradictory was that? Following the Abbot ultimately meant following that contradiction.

Opening his eyes and meeting Baek Cheon's gaze, a sigh escaped Hyun Jong's lips.

He might find a way if he set his mind to it. But he was the Sect Leader of Hwasan. Faced with his disciple's eyes, he didn't want to spin a web of lies.

«Baek Cheon.»

«Yes.»

«As much as those we must protect, you all are just as precious to me too.»

«...»

«You, and the other kids, Hwasan. And everyone who joined Cheonumaeng...»

Hyun Jong's voice carried deep remorse.

«Yes. I said that. I taught that. You should be willing to risk your life for that righteous path. But... I'm sorry. I'm such a small person that I can't even uphold the words I uttered.»

«Sect Leader...»

«I lack the courage to commend you for sacrificing yourselves for that righteousness through death. I just hope that at least one more person survives to do more in the future.»

«...»

«So, blame me. Resent me. This is entirely a consequence of my incompetence.»

Baek Cheon's face hardened. Hyun Jong shook his head with a slightly tired expression.

«If you have your answer, it's time to step back. It's not polite to keep the Abbot waiting for too long.»

«Then I'll ask one last thing.»

«...What is it?»

«If, Sect Leader, you were not the Sect Leader of Hwasan but just an ordinary disciple, would you still turn away from those dying?»

Hyun Jong remained silent. Despite parting his lips several times to answer, he ultimately couldn't say anything.

Baek Cheon spoke as if he had already heard the answer there.

«I understand.»

«No, wait. Baek Cheon, I...»

«That's not it, Sect Leader.»

A momentary look of confusion flickered in Hyun Jong's eyes. Not it?

«Sect Leader, you are not wrong.»

«...»

«The position of a Sect Leader should never be like that of an ordinary disciple. The decision you made for Hwasan and Cheonumaeng is not wrong. No one can deny that.»

«Baek Cheon...»

«I just understand. It means that even when no one is wrong, the decision can be different. It's because everyone has a different perspective.»

Those who understood nodded with solemn faces.

Regardless of Baek Cheon's intentions leading this conversation, anyone who heard it would find it hard to blame Hyun Jong.

Hyun Jong gazed into the distance with regretful eyes. Baek Cheon spoke calmly.

«I consider it truly fortunate that you, Sect Leader, are the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

«...Thank you.»

As Hyun Jong, with a bittersweet smile, was about to end this conversation, Baek Cheon posed another question.

«Sect Leader, was the decision you made done as the Sect Leader of Hwasan or as the Alliance Leader of Cheonumaeng?»

«...Both. I didn't neglect either one.»

«I understand. All the answers have been given.»

Baek Cheon bowed his head slightly towards Hyun Jong.

In that moment, Hyun Jong saw it. A sense of 'resignation' brushing across the faces of those who couldn't express their dissatisfaction and those whose emotions were simmering beneath the surface.

While they might not accept this decision joyfully, ultimately, they acknowledged it. It was none other than Baek Cheon who facilitated this acceptance.

'...Baek Cheon.'

When did he grow so much? A momentary ray of light seemed to enter Hyun Jong's heart, which had been immersed in heavy darkness.

'Yes, it's settled.'

As long as he could protect these kids, there was nothing he couldn't do. So, with confidence, he moved forward.

However, it was at that very moment.

Baek Cheon straightened his back, facing Hyun Jong directly.

«So...»

«Hmm?»

In that moment, Baek Cheon's figure seemed larger than usual to Hyun Jong's eyes.

«While it may not be the appropriate occasion to discuss the great and small matters of Cheonumaeng, I, a senior disciple Baek Cheon, would like to make a humble request to the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

«...A request? What is it?»

«Sect Leader.»

For an instant, the room fell silent.

Even those who were merely observing the situation sensed something unusual unfolding and held their breath. All eyes were fixed solely on Baek Cheon's broad back, who was sitting facing Hyun Jong.

«As the senior disciple of Hwasan, I dare to implore you.»

Even amidst everyone's attention, Baek Cheon spoke confidently with clear eyes and an unwavering voice.

«Please appoint your disciple as the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

His words, breaking the fragile silence, echoed like thunder.