

Chapter 1185

I will carry it. (4)

Well-packaged on the outside, no one among those present truly believed that Baek Cheon's «positive» words carried a genuinely positive meaning.

‘Unbelievable...’

‘And the Abbot...’

The Lords of Cheonumaeng stared at Baek Cheon with eyes that seemed ready to pop out at any moment.

It wasn't the first time Tang Gunak had seen Beop Jong being disregarded so openly. Given that the person openly doing that was here, it wasn't surprising. However...

‘The approach is different, but this feels even more...’

Namgung Dowi subtly observed Beop Jong's expression. Sure enough, the corners of Beop Jong's mouth were faintly twitching. That slight tremor hinted at Beop Jong's current state of mind.

Even Jo Geol, who usually only considered how to kick Beop Jong out whenever he saw him, looked around and whispered to Yoon Jong.

«S-Sahyeong.»

«Why?»

«Is, is that allowed?»

«Allowed?»

Yoon Jong replied with a deep growl. However, Jo Geol couldn't take it so lightly.

«But, why does Sasuk behave like that in front of the Abbot?»

«Why? Wasn't that guy always like that?»

Jo Geol, struck speechless, closed his mouth like a clam.

«That's true...»

To an outsider, Jo Geol might appear as a least sane human from Hwasan right after Chung Myung, but that would be a misconception. If one were to ask the disciples of Hwasan, they would unequivocally affirm that among them, Baek Cheon was by far the least sane.

No, even so. His opponent was the Abbot...

In that moment, the previously silent Beop Jong spoke.

«Acting Leader.»

It was a brief statement, yet everyone present could recognize it. The Abbot's voice was notably lower than before.

«Yes, Abbot.»

«...Is that the will of Hwasan?»

«That's correct.»

However, Baek Cheon, facing Beop Jong, remained undisturbed.

«...Does the Alliance Leader also agree with these words?»

As Beop Jong glared with sharp eyes, Hyun Jong, after a glimpse at Baek Cheon's back, raised his head.

«If you ask it like that, Abbot, it's inappropriate.»

«What does that mean?»

«I have already delegated all authority regarding this matter to the Acting Sect Leader. So, there is no need to consult my opinion. Even if it were me, I cannot overturn his intentions at this point.»

Beop Jong's eyes visibly trembled.

Even those harboring ill feelings towards the Abbot momentarily felt a sense of unease at the sight. However, the fact that the satisfaction outweighed the unease was undeniable.

«So, Hwasan will not align itself with Shaolin and its intentions.»

«Yes. However, this is merely the will of Hwasan. The intentions of Cheonumaeng might differ.»

Beop Jong, who had been glaring at Baek Cheon with a fierce gaze, turned his attention to Hyun Jong.

«What is Cheonumaeng's will?»

«The circumstances have changed, so we may need to inquire about these intentions again.»

«Then inquire about it right here, right now.»

«No, Abbot, that's...»

«Is there a reason it would be difficult?»

A chill ran through Beop Jong's face.

«Didn't you say that formalities and etiquette can be disregarded in urgent situations? You wouldn't suggest that we need a separate time for such a pressing matter, would you?»

Even the task of determining the Sect Leader was done in front of him, indicating that even seeking opinions should be done in his presence. Though it was a demanding request, there was no flaw in the statement itself.

In the very moment when Beop Jong was about to lash out to press Hyun Jong further.

«You don't need to ask us.»

Namgung Dowi, seating straight, spoke.

«We have already given our answer. Nothing has changed since the beginning.»

Only now did the tension in Beop Jong's expression loosen.

«Wise choice, Young Lord. Suppressed emotions...»

«Abbot, please do not misunderstand.»

Beop Jong was taken aback by Namgung Dowi's interruption. What misunderstanding was being referred to? According to his current words, Namgung had already expressed the intention to rejoin the Five Great Families.

As if sensing Beop Jong's puzzled gaze, Namgung Dowi spoke.

«Namgung has clearly stated here that we will follow the decision of the Sect Leader of Hwasan.»

«That...?»

«These are the words of Hwasan's Sect Leader.»

Only then did Beop Jong grasp what Namgung Dowi was saying, and unknowingly, he gritted his teeth.

«Nothing has changed. If Hwasan's Acting Sect Leader has made a decision, Namgung will stand with that decision. Namgung Clan also will not return to Five Great Families.»

«Young Lord!»

As Beop Jong raised his voice, a subtle laughter emerged from Tang Gunak's lips.

«It seems challenging to find a reason for Sichuan Tang Clan to return without Namgung in the Five Great Families. Abbot, the Tang clan will follow Hwasan's decision.»

Silence fell.

Beop Jong glared at Tang Gunak while chewing his lips. Baek Cheon and Namgung Dowi, being relatively young, could still be swayed by passion. However, Tang Gunak, having experienced the world enough, shouldn't make such statements.

But Tang Gunak remained nonchalant.

«In this world, there are things that cannot be calculated just by bouncing off an abacus. Moreover... If I were to announce my intention to join Five Great Families here, there's a chance the leadership in Tangga might have changed. What can I do if I have to step back now? I don't think it's time yet.»

Everyone turned their eyes to Tang Pae. Tang Pae, with a feigned smile, cleared his throat.

«Well... I didn't think it through that much. Just felt like I should say something serious separately.»

«... You did have some thoughts.»

«Well, considering what I've seen right in front of me.»

«It could be a bit regrettable, this situation.»

«Ahem, I feel framed.»

The atmosphere began to loosen with Tang Pae's joke. Though no one openly laughed, faint chuckles could be heard here and there. In this transformed mood, Beop Jong's expression stiffened even more.

«T-The Ice Palace too!»

At that moment, Seol Sobaek shouted excitedly, his face flushed.

«The Northern Sea Ice Palace will align itself with Hwasan and its intentions. If Hwasan guards Cheonumaeng, the Ice Palace will also stand by Cheonumaeng to the end!»

Baek Cheon responded to Seol Sobaek with a smile, nodding.

«Thank you, Palace Lord.»

«Oh, don't mention it! It's only natural, isn't it?»

Meng So, who calmed the shaking Seol Sobaek by lightly pulling the hem of his clothes, gave a meaningful smile and looked at Beop Jong.

«With the situation as it is, even if the Beast Palace decides to enter Gupailbang separately, I don't think the Abbot would be pleased.»

“...”

«If the owner isn't welcome, guests can't request a seat, so Nanman Beast Palace will also remain with Cheonumaeng. Abbot, you shouldn't feel too disappointed about it, fortunately.» It was a spot on remark. However, despite feeling the harsh undertones, Beop Jong couldn't find words to refute.

Then, naturally, people's gaze turned to the one remaining figure. In response to those looks, the person blurted out something.

«What are you looking at?»

Im Sobyong openly displayed his displeasure, gesturing as if shooing away a stray dog.

«All these esteemed members of the orthodox factions haven't entered yet, and these bandits are shamelessly poking spoons into rice bowl of Gupailbang like they own the place. I'm not an idiot.»

«...»

«You should give them a choice and let them decide. At least ask in the beginning.»

Still, as the gaze persisted, Im Sobyong grumbled and clapped his hands.

«Oh, we stay. I said I'll stay. Do I have to say it out loud?»

That was the end of it. Ever since Hyun Jong mentioned the dissolution of Cheonumaeng, before a fraction of time passed, every faction in Cheonumaeng had agreed to its continuation.

Im Sobyong chuckled and said,

«But isn't this a bit hasty? We might go there, and for us, there could be something to gain. Isn't Young Lord Namgung feeling regretful? Isn't he secretly banging the ground in frustration?»

At his words, Namgung Dowi gave him an irritated look and sighed.

«As I said... Namgung will align with the will of Hwasan, that's all.»

«Well, that's...»

«Gratitude must be repaid. That's only natural. However, that's not everything.»

Namgung Dowi spoke firmly,

«Even when it was just gratitude, Namgung intended to follow Hwasan. But now, between Hwasan and Namgung, there is more than just gratitude. In a short time, we trained together, sometimes hitting and getting hit, cursing, and rolling on the ground together.»

Namgung Dowi's gaze turned towards Baek Cheon. If Hyun Jong might be someone to be thankful for, Baek Cheon held a slightly different significance for Namgung Dowi.

«Do you know what we call such people?»

«Yes?»

«Friends.»

Namgung Dowi looked at Baek Cheon and smiled faintly.

«Of course, it's not a deep bond, more like an unfortunate bond filled more with mutual bad feelings than comradeship. But even so, aren't friends still friends? If repaying the debt to Hwasan is Namgung's duty, then the desire to go with their friend is Namgung's will.»

Namgung Dowi's gaze shifted to Beop Jong this time.

«And... Anyway, Acting Sect Leader has shown faith in me and considered me an excellent person. In the Abbot's eyes, I might still appear as an inexperienced brat, but that's how it is.»

Beop Jong furrowed his brows. Namgung Dowi shrugged.

«If one isn't a fool, it's better to choose a place that values one's worth a bit more. Especially when there are friends there. Why would Namgung clan hesitate to go back to Five Great Families? There is simply no reason to return.»

At those words, Im Sobyong chuckled,

«I thought you were born into a noble family with high status, but turns out you just think highly of yourself. Would a person born without anything choose to live in sorrow?»

Laughter followed Im Sobyong's remark, a bit louder this time. However, Beop Jong couldn't bring himself to join the laughter. Instead of finding it amusing, he glared at Baek Cheon with icy eyes.

'This is why... This is why I should have prevented this situation.'

It was something he already knew. Gain Hwasan — gain everything; lose Hwasan — lose everything. That's why he led them down a path where they couldn't escape, toward Hyun Jong and Chung Myung, the center of Hwasan.

But now, someone unexpected, neither Hyun Jong nor Chung Myung, suddenly emerged and disrupted all his plans.

'No, it's not over yet.'

Beop Jong suppressed the rising frustration and anger. Previously, he might have erupted with anger in a situation like this, but it was not the same as before. There was still a way for him.

Beop Jong stared at Baek Cheon, drawing upon his patience. If everything came to this point because of Baek Cheon, then bending Baek Cheon's will could set everything right again.

«Acting Sect Leader.»

«Yes, Abbot.»

«Do you, Acting Leader, currently see Hwasan's choice as the right one?»

At that question, Baek Cheon gazed silently at Beop Jong, offering no response.

Baek Cheon faced the weighty gaze of this era's giant, the intense stare of the Abbot.

«You made a fervent choice and raised your voices, but the Acting Sect Leader failed to prove that his choice is valid. If you make a wrong choice based solely on passion, how do you intend to bear the weight of numerous lives that will be lost as a result?»

Baek Cheon's lips pressed firmly together. Beop Jong intensified his momentum.

«Are you truly determined to become a heinous sinner of the past, Acting Leader? Do you really not know how much chaos your choice could bring to the entire world?»

It was a thunderous admonition. Beop Jong's hands, resting on his knees, trembled uncontrollably, unable to suppress his emotions.

Baek Cheon stared silently at Beop Jong, as if declaring his readiness to accept all decisions. After a while, he slowly opened his mouth.

«You mentioned passion?»

«Yes.»

«There seems to be a misunderstanding, Abbot.»

Beop Jong's gaze became stern.

«What misunderstanding could there possibly be!»

«Certainly, I am just a young man with an overflow of passion. Naturally, I may make mistakes and lack experience.»

«If you know...»

«One thing.»

In that moment, Baek Cheon's resounding voice cut through Beop Jong's words, penetrating sharply into his ears.

«I might be uncertain about myself, but Hwasan's Acting Sect Leader doesn't choose the direction of the sect based on mere passion. That's because it is the position of Hwasan's Sect Leader.»

«What...»

«Understand this clearly. The one you face now is not the great disciple Baek Cheon, but the Acting Sect Leader Baek Cheon.»

«Acting Sect Leader!»

«And!»

In that moment, Baek Cheon glared at Beop Jong with a furious expression.

«If the Abbot knows what Hwasan represents, if the Abbot knows what the ancestors of Hwasan did for the world! Before criticizing and raising your voice...»

Baek Cheon paused for a moment, and his icy gaze pierced through Beop Jong.

«Ensure you possess the decency that should be exhibited towards the representative of Hwasan. That is the principle one should uphold as a human being. Do you understand?»

Crack!

The praying beads in Beop Jong's hand eventually shattered into countless pieces.