

## Chapter 1189

It's the path we'll continue to walk in the future. (4)

Beop Jong's vacant gaze remained fixed on Hye Yeon for a long while.

Hye Yeon didn't bother to meet his gaze, not out of fear or embarrassment, but simply because he knew that facing Beop Jong at this moment would be too harsh for him.

«Hmm...»

After a moment, a hollow laugh escaped from Beop Jong's lips.

«Hah... Haha...»

«...»

«Hahahaha!»

Finally, Beop Jong turned his gaze away to look at the others. Each of them held a firm resolve in their eyes. Beop Jong shook his head incredulously and spoke as if he couldn't believe it himself.

«It seems... this was a meaningless endeavor from the start. I was just clinging on to those who had no intention of joining me.»

«Abbot.»

«Acting Sect Leader.»

Beop Jong spoke calmly, devoid of any more enmity or anger in his voice.

«You have won.»

Baek Cheon couldn't decipher what exactly was contained within Beop Jong's composed gaze.

«I have no confidence in dismantling your logic. How can I hope to prevail against someone who articulates their arguments with such clarity?»

His gaze shifted beyond Baek Cheon to Hyun Jong, who wore a complex and enigmatic expression.

«If one knows how terrifying the world truly is, how can the elderly, who are being pushed aside, bear the weight of the bold words uttered by the young ones?»

«Abbot, we...»

«Acting Sect Leader.»

Beop Jong's gaze returned to Baek Cheon, tinged with a bitter undertone.

«Acting Leader, you must understand that those lofty ideals, that lofty righteousness, and that unwavering orthodoxy may one day tighten around your neck and lead Hwasan sect to ruin.»

«...»

«Those who proclaim justice kneel before power, those who preach mercy are trampled by malice, and those who discuss righteousness find themselves beheaded by charlatans.»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes tightly.

«Life is suffering, and the world is hell. Those lofty ideals may provide the strength to endure that hell, but they cannot change it.»

Beop Jong let out a deep sigh. His face seemed unusually tired.

«This is neither a curse nor idle gossip. It is simply the truth, nothing more, nothing less — the harsh reality of life.»

Baek Cheon felt as if a heavy weight had settled on his chest. How could he not know? Hwasan had already experienced enough sacrifices.

Beop Jong asked again,

«Is that really okay? Despite the grandiose words, aren't you essentially saying that Hwasan will continue to sacrifice itself at the forefront, shedding blood as it has done so far?»

«...»

«You questioned how someone who doesn't value those around them could consider the welfare of all under the heavens. Then, conversely, how can someone who cherishes those around them be willing to sacrifice their precious life for those who are insignificant? Can you walk the thorny path, the hellish road, guided only by the beacon of righteousness? Can you be proud of those who died following your orders?»

It wasn't spoken out of malice.

Has there ever been a time when Beop Jong didn't dream of the glory? Has there ever been a moment when his heart didn't burn with fervor? Even as the body ages, the heart still yearns for passion.

This was advice given by someone who had already traversed the path, to someone who had yet to tread it, and it was a concern expressed to someone who was willingly heading back down the thorny path he had once trodden.

But Baek Cheon simply smiled and said nothing.

«Did you say those who are following my orders will perish?»

«Yes, that's correct.»

This time, Baek Cheon looked around at those nearby.

«Don't you see it, Abbot?»

«...»

«Do you see those who are willing to risk their lives to follow orders they don't believe to be right, Abbot?»

Beop Jong turned his head. There, facing him with determined faces, were the disciples of Hwasan.

«As a leader, my duty is simply to jump into the fire pit at the forefront.»

«You, personally?»

«Yes.»

Baek Cheon nodded. Beop Jong asked, puzzled,

«Are you saying you'll be the one to throw yourself into the most dangerous place, as the Acting Sect Leader?»

«What reason would there be not to?»

«Acting Leader...»

«Abbot. Do you believe that no one can replace you in your position as an Abbot?»

At this question, Beop Jong fell silent.

«Other martial arts sect may not have someone to replace their Sect Leader, and even among the disciples of Shaolin, it's doubtful if anyone can fill the position of the Abbot. That's because the Abbot is so exceptionally talented. However...»

Baek Cheon shook his head slightly.

«It's not me. I believe anyone from Hwasan could stand in my place. It's just my turn to step forward now. Someday, someone better than me will naturally take my place.»

The corners of Beop Jong's lips trembled. Baek Cheon smiled at him.

«That's why martial arts sects exist. To do what one person alone cannot, and to pass on the determination discovered over a lifetime to future generations. That's why truly exceptional leaders...»

Baek Cheon turned his head, glanced briefly at Hyun Jong, and continued.

«...Are those who believe in the future generations. And those who guide them toward better paths.»

At his words, Chung Myung's shoulders trembled slightly.

‘Sect Leader Sahyeong...’

The image of Chung Mun smiling seemed to appear before him. His dedication to sacrifice everything for the sake of future generations seemed to be paying off.

«So, I will jump in without hesitation. I will endure the bloodshed that follows. Because I believe without a doubt that this blood, this determination, this sacrifice will make Hwasan even more like Hwasan.»

«...»

«And the actions of the disciples and myself will prove that Hwasan has never strayed from the right path.»

«Acting Leader.»

Beop Jong sighed.

«I'm not sure if I dare to say this, but I must ask one more thing, regardless of my shame.»

«Please ask, Abbot.»

«I understand your intention well. I even understand why. But still, there's one thing that simply doesn't make sense.»

«What is it?»

Beop Jong looked at Baek Cheon, Hyun Jong, and the disciples of Hwasan.

«Is Hwasan really okay with that?»

«...»

«Doesn't Hwasan know best what consequences such lofty determination and relentless pursuit might bring?»

Beop Jong asked sincerely.

«We may face the same result this time as well. And because of that lofty pursuit, we may even face the collapse of Gangho. Is it really okay for the Hwasan?»

Baek Cheon smiled softly.

«Abbot, it seems that the answer to this question should come from Baek Cheon, the senior disciple of Hwasan, rather than the acting head.»

«...As a mere senior disciple?»

«Yes.»

Baek Cheon took a deep breath and spoke.

«The part you mentioned, Abbot, has troubled me the most. Whether it's right to continue acting as we have in the past and face the same results.»

«...Amitabha.»

«There were times when I, too, thought our predecessors were foolish and felt anger at their meaningless sacrifices. It was more of a sense of pity than resentment. But, Abbot, after experiencing trials of Gangho, I was able to come to a conclusion.»

Baek Cheon looked at the disciples of Hwasan. His words seemed directed not just to Beop Jong but to all of them.

Then, he turned his head back to face Beop Jong directly, speaking with utmost seriousness.

«Do you think they were wrong?»

«...»

«I'll ask again. Do you think those who sacrificed their lives for righteous cause were mistaken?»

«That's...»

«No. No, they weren't. They were not mistaken.»

Baek Cheon shook his head.

«The reason people do good deeds is because those deeds bring them good. It's good in itself.»

«...»

«Whether it's in Taoism, where mindfulness is emphasized, or in Buddhism, where compassion for all beings is stressed, it's not because mindfulness and compassion yield good results. Even if the results aren't favorable, it's because we're human, and it's right for humans to do good deeds.»

Baek Cheon's eyes seemed firm with unwavering determination.

«You are a Buddhist, Abbot, and I am a Taoist. So why should we judge our predecessors and discuss the results they achieved? Even if the whole world condemns their choices as wrong, shouldn't at least you and I refrain from doing so?»

«...»

«If we criticize good deeds just because the outcomes weren't favorable, then there will be no one left in the world to do good deeds. People will only do things that bring good results

to themselves, rather than doing good for the sake of goodness. Then, as you said, Abbot, the world will become no different from hell. Abbot, are we the ones creating such a hellish world, as you described, or is it our predecessors?»

Beop Jong's eyes, silently fixed on Baek Cheon, trembled slightly.

«The ones who should pay the price for wrongdoing are not the predecessors who lived righteous lives. It's the later generations who failed to uphold the ideals of those predecessors, the ones who buried those noble intentions. If their descendants had continued the legacy and practiced righteousness, things wouldn't be as they are now.»

«...»

«Do you think I'll regret the same outcome?»

Baek Cheon smiled warmly.

«The legacy left by Hwasan will persist as long as Hwasan exists, whether it's for a hundred years or a thousand. Perhaps as long as the word 'Hwasan' remain in the world, it will continue eternally.»

«Acting Sect Leader...»

«If I have one wish, it's only this: to follow in their footsteps and become a worthy successor to our predecessors. So that someday, like them, I too can pass on my determination to the next generation with pride.»

«...»

«You mentioned that the world could collapse because of my choice, Abbot. We've already defeated Demonic Cult. We've already prevented the unstoppable force of Sapa. Yet here we are again, facing the same situation. Why is that?»

Baek Cheon's eyes radiated determination.

«It's because those who truly fail to practice mindfulness and uphold the righteous intentions of our predecessors keep repeating foolish actions. If we keep compromising and hesitating in the face of reality, we'll inevitably find ourselves facing another Demonic Cult, another Sapaeryeon, and eventually, we'll be defeated by them.»

«...Acting Leader.»

«I have only one conclusion.»

Baek Cheon straightened his shoulders. The will inherited from Hwasan was with him.

«To avoid repeating this deep foolishness, I am determined to learn and improve myself. That's my intention as a senior disciple of Hwasan, as an Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan, and also...»

Baek Cheon held the final words of this conversation on his lips.

«...The will of Hwasan.»

As everyone looked at Baek Cheon with awe, only one person lowered their head.

Chung Myung. His shoulders trembling faintly.