

## Chapter 1186

It's the path we'll continue to walk in the future. (1)

Crash!

The sound of the shattered beads hitting the floor echoed loudly, resembling thunder. The broken pieces of the beads rolled on the floor, making an indifferent clattering sound as they flowed from the severed thread.

Already with widened eyes, Tang Soso kept her gaze fixed on Baek Cheon. She discreetly reached out and pulled the hem of Yu Iseol's clothes.

«Sago.»

«What?»

«W-well, let's try to do something about it.»

«What?»

«No, I...»

«No need, anyway.»

Without changing her expression, Yu Iseol muttered calmly.

«There's no point in trying to stop him. You might as well just hit him.»

Hearing those words, Tang Soso finally realized.

The most unstoppable figure in Hwasan was not Chung Myung, the madman infamous throughout the entire Central Plains, but Hwasan Jeonggeom Baek Cheon.

The reactions of others who witnessed this situation were not much different from Tang Soso. Jo Geol's mouth was nearly torn apart from shock, and Yoon Jong had his narrow eyes wide-open, clearly astonished.

'Oh my....'

Yoon Jong looked at Baek Cheon with wide eyes. He could assert one thing: although Hwasan had over a hundred disciples, there was only one person who could sternly rebuke in front of the Abbot of Shaolin, and that was Baek Cheon.

All eyes turned to Beop Jong. Or more precisely, they focused on his trembling shoulders. The leader of Shaolin couldn't contain his anger, trembling uncontrollably. Even those who knew what Shaolin was, who its leader was, couldn't help but feel a sense of dread at this sight.

However, the disciples of Hwasan harbored emotions other than dread, despite knowing everything.

Yes, it was possible that Baek Cheon's actions were excessive. His tone might have been too harsh. Even if it was the same message, it could have been expressed more gently.

But no one could deny why Baek Cheon did raise his voice. It was because the words he spoke were the accumulated resentment that anyone who embraced Hwasan had deep in their hearts.

The ancestors of Hwasan saved the world. Yet, even those who remembered this fact deliberately ignored it and sought to despise and exploit Hwasan. How unjust and frustrating was that?

Yet, here and now, Baek Cheon solemnly pointed out this fact. And he did it in front of none other than Beop Jong.

It was something they had wished and hoped for, but never dared to dream would happen in reality.

In the midst of the prevailing silence in the room, Beop Jong looked down at the scattered fragments on the floor. The shattered pieces of the beads, once held in his hands, were now scattered messily.

Who in the world would dare to discuss morality in front of the leader of Shaolin, Beop Jong? Who would dare to teach him a lesson? This was not only disrespect for the leader of Shaolin, but also an insult to a monk who practiced Buddhism all his life.

However, the criticism for this situation did not come from Beop Jong but rather from his side, specifically from Jongli Hyeong, who was sitting next to him.

«What kind of nonsense is this?»

Jongli Hyeong, who raised his voice, glared angrily at Baek Cheon. Until now, he had kept his mouth shut, as this was not the situation for him to step forward. However, this behavior was considered excessive even by his standards.

«You climbed up as the Sect Leader, and there's nothing to show for it? Even if you officially become the Acting Sect Leader, you still won't have the language suitable for your mouth! Where does this arrogance come from?»

But at that moment, Jongli Hyeong's reprimand was met with opposition not from Baek Cheon but from none other than Beop Jong himself.

«Stop it, Sect Leader.»

«Abbot! But this is too much disrespect...»

«I said stop!»

In an instant, Beop Jong's stern rebuke crushed Jongli Hyeong's rising resistance. Taken aback, he turned to look at Beop Jong. After staring at the shattered praying beads on the floor Beop Jong lifted his head and closed his eyes.

«...I apologize for raising my voice, but Sect Leader. Although I appreciate your concern, this is not something for the Sect Leader to be angry about.»

«Abbot...»

«...Amitabha.»

With his eyes tightly closed, Beop Jong uttered the Buddhist invocation. After regaining his composure with great effort, he finally opened his eyes.

Facing him was Baek Cheon, still wearing the same calm expression. To some, it might seem endlessly confident, while to others, it might appear downright arrogant. What did it seem like to Beop Jeong?

«...On that matter...»

After pausing briefly and taking a deep breath, Beop Jeong spoke as if forcing the words out.

«The fault lies with me. I apologize for the undue pressure.»

As these words left Beop Jeong's mouth, a sigh of relief seemed to escape from the disciples of Hwasan.

At first glance, it might seem like Baek Cheon simply pointed out Beop Jeong's mistake, and Beop Jeong acknowledged it. It might not amount to much more than that.

However, those who understood the underlying dynamics knew it was far from simple.

Beop Jeong closed his eyes again and let out another sigh before speaking.

«You... acting as the Sect Leader of Hwasan, and the Sect Leader of Hwasan deserves the appropriate treatment. It was my momentary lapse to forget that. It's all because of my inadequacy.»

The disciples of Hwasan looked at each other.

The Sect Leader of Hwasan deserves the appropriate treatment.

The words spoken by Beop Jeong could carry various meanings depending on the interpretation. However, the acknowledgment of the treatment «The Sect Leader of Hwasan» deserves didn't originate from the current power and influence of Hwasan.

The meaning was clear – for the first time, Beop Jeong publicly acknowledged past contributions of Hwasan.

How could one express the feelings of the disciples of Hwasan upon hearing those words with their own ears?

Baek Cheon spoke again.

«As a swordsman and a disciple of Hwasan, I must apologize for my excessive words.

However, I am currently in the position of Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan, so I find it difficult to offer an apology for the aspects that may have been perceived as excessive.»

«...There's no need for an apology. It's the right course of action.»

Beop Jeong nodded approvingly. His changed demeanor was evident in the eyes of Tang Gunak, who couldn't hide his surprise.

While others might not fully grasp the significance, he noticed a clear difference in Beop Jeong. If it were the old Abbot, the conversation might not have unfolded in this manner.

‘It seems we're not the only ones influenced by Hwasan.’

Or perhaps, Beop Jeong has returned to his original self. He may have reclaimed his identity shaken by the influence of Hwasan.

Ultimately, it might be a positive development, but at the moment, it wasn't something to be celebrated. After all, Baek Cheon needed to engage in a debate, with this transformed Beop Jeong, who remained calm even in a situation like this.

«However, Acting Leader.»

As if on cue, Beop Jeong spoke up again.

«The apology offered by this monk was not in negation of the meaning behind your words, Acting Leader, but rather in regard to the tone and attitude displayed. Now it's time for you to respond to our inquiry.»

Beop Jong fixed a calm gaze on Baek Cheon.

«You've stated, Acting Leader, that this decision wasn't solely driven by impulsive youthful passion. Therefore, there should be a convincing answer prepared to satisfy my Buddhist way [he is talking about his specific path of Buddhism — Hinayana or Soseung in Korean].»

Some individuals' expressions darkened at his words.

Among those present here, were there any who sincerely wanted to join Gupailbang? Deep down, everyone hoped for Cheonumaeng's survival.

Yet not a single person dared to openly oppose, for there was no legitimate justification or logic to challenge the righteous cause presented by Beop Jong.

How could anyone refute the logic that joining forces to save more people was necessary?

«If that cannot be done, then Acting Leader, you risk becoming a malicious adversary who brings crisis upon Gangho solely out of personal sentiment. You understand, don't you?»

It was a subtle rhetoric, delicately implicating the weight of responsibility onto the responder by using the term «malicious adversary» without exaggeration or overt accusation.

However, should one seize upon that small expression, the responder would be left grasping at straws, trapped in a futile debate.

Everyone could only look at Baek Cheon with worried eyes.

«Of course, Abbot.»

Yet Baek Cheon's response was not only daring but refreshingly candid.

Beop Jong narrowed his eyes ever so slightly.

«Do you have an answer?»

«Yes.»

«It's rather difficult to comprehend, Acting Leader.»

Beop Jong scrutinized Baek Cheon with an inquisitive gaze.

«If you intend to offer excuses, I suggest you not. It would not only undermine the authority of the Acting Sect Leader but also tarnish the honor of the one who appointed you.»

Baek Cheon, who had been listening quietly, finally addressed Beop Jong.

«Abbot, do you not realize?»

«What do you mean?»

«How contradictory your words are at this moment.»

As Beop Jong stared in astonishment, Baek Cheon continued.

«When you visited before, I believed you had changed from the past. That's why I was willing and held you in the utmost respect. Do you recall what you said then?»

«Well... I've said a lot.»

«No one was wrong. We simply had different perspectives. Even if someone wasn't wrong, conflicting pursuits can arise from differing positions. That's what you said that day, Abbot.»

Beop Jong nodded slowly. It was undoubtedly his own words. But why bring up that conversation now?

«What you said that day gave me great insight. It made me reflect on my own position and thoughts, and I could discern what needed to be done correctly. It's said that disciples learn from masters through instances like this. But... what about you now, Abbot?»

Beop Jong furrowed his brow at this.

«What do you mean...»

«You're now saying that those who don't share your views are all wrongdoers, sinners, and adversaries who will lead Gangho to ruin.»

Baek Cheon's sharp observation made Beop Jong inhale deeply. His attempt to persuade them seemed to have turned into a double-edged sword.

'Is that so...'

With narrowed eyes, Beop Jong stared piercingly at Baek Cheon.

In reality, pointing out logical flaws from the sidelines might not be that difficult.

But now, Baek Cheon, for the first time, was in the weighty position of Acting Sect Leader, facing none other than Beop Jong. Wasn't it he who was subtly probing the weaknesses of the logic presented by Beop Jong, while allowing his questions to linger unanswered?

«It's truly regrettable and disappointing. At least I empathized with the Abbot's righteousness, but now, the Abbot fails to demonstrate a fitting display of that righteousness.»

«What...»

«As Hwasan's Acting Leader, I only hope that the Abbot's notion of righteousness isn't merely used as a tool to bolster his own logic.»

Beop Jong's expression subtly contorted, unbeknownst even to himself. Yet Baek Cheon, despite noticing his reaction, continued calmly.

«You need not worry. My skepticism toward that attitude does not translate into skepticism toward the Abbot himself. Nor will it lead to undermining the righteous path.»

Everyone looked at Baek Cheon with surprised eyes.

It was the first debate between Baek Cheon as Acting Leader and Beop Jong. Wasn't it difficult to comprehend someone taking advantage of a situation for their gain, only to relinquish the benefits they gained?

It was a difficult situation to comprehend.

However, Baek Cheon's next words made even those who found it hard to understand nod in agreement.

«The reason is simple. I've said that if I am lacking, I can learn, and if I fall short, others can fill the gap. The Abbot bringing up the fact that I am not flawless as a reason for my refusal only amounts to the Abbot contradicting himself.»

Beop Jong's face twitched subtly upon hearing this.

On the surface, it sounded like a virtuous statement, but ultimately, wasn't it implying that while Beop Jong didn't uphold what he said, Baek Cheon did?

Without giving anyone a chance to question whether it was intentional or not, Baek Cheon spoke.

«There's no need for different reasons why Hwasan chooses a different path from Shaolin. If there is a reason, it's solely because the righteousness the Abbot advocates for is completely at odds with the teachings of Hwasan.»

«...At odds, you say?»

«Yes, Abbot.»

Baek Cheon took a slow breath and declared firmly.

«I'll make it clear here. At least as long as I'm the Acting Sect Leader, Hwasan will not turn away anyone who can be saved for the sake of the righteous cause. If sacrifice must be made, it will be Hwasan's responsibility.»

His voice, calm yet resolute, sent a powerful shiver through every Hwasan's disciple present.

«That's the will Hwasan has carried from the past, and the righteousness it must uphold.»

A gentle smile graced his lips.

«So, Abbot, please remember this fact. It's the path Hwasan has walked until now...»

Baek Cheon's gaze shifted towards the disciples of Hwasan who were looking at him.

It was a gaze somewhat warm, yet also stern.

«It's the path we'll continue to walk in the future.»

The eyes of Hwasan's disciples gleamed in response to his voice, as if affirming his words.