

Chapter 1184

I will carry it. (3)

A brief yet profound silence filled the air. It wasn't just a mere silence — it was more like a profound stillness, almost static in nature.

The lingering resonance of the last words from Baek Cheon permeated through everyone in the room.

Perhaps it was not such a remarkable event, merely a change in one of the many sects within Gangho. However, those who witnessed the scene felt a surge of emotion in their hearts.

Various indescribable and overwhelming emotions held them captive, preventing an easy escape from this lingering aftermath.

It would be challenging to discern who among those present was most deeply moved by this spectacle. On the contrary, it was all too easy to gauge whose minds were entangled in the complexities of the moment.

Beop Jong's eyes trembled incessantly. His gaze, which moments ago displayed profound intensity, now seemed almost unrecognizably uncertain.

‘What in the world...’

He alternated glances between Hyun Jong and Baek Cheon, wearing a perplexed expression. It was simply beyond comprehension.

Choosing the head of a sect was never a decision to be taken lightly. The position of the sect leader was a weighty responsibility, determining the future of the entire sect.

Yet, handling such a crucial matter in this manner left him utterly bewildered.

Even if Hwasan was a sect that had long discarded formalities, this was not something rational to accept. One might prefer to believe that all of this was a deliberately orchestrated play by Hwasan's disciples.

Yet, even such vague expectations from Beop Jong were shattered into pieces by one person.

«What... What is this...»

Turning toward a voice coming from somewhere, he witnessed a completely bewildered Chung Myung.

The state he was in seemed beyond description — saying that he lost his mind fell short to capture his current condition.

«This... No... No, what is this... This...»

«...»

«Even if the sect were to turn upside down... there should be limits. Oh my... Oh my Hwasan...»

With eyes like a dead fish, he gazed beyond the ceiling into the distance, muttering incomprehensible words incessantly.

«I, seeing this... seeing me like this... I... Oh my, Sahyeong... Hwasan is ruined... the Hwasan sect...»

Certainly, Beop Jong understood well that Chung Myung possessed both the appearance of an assassin and that of a trickster. However, even for someone like Beop Jong, it was challenging to dismiss that reaction as mere acting.

Could it be that everything was truly decided right here and now?

‘Is he in his right mind?’

Beop Jong stared at Hyun Jong with a bewildered, if not dumbfounded, expression. Hyun Jong he knew was cautious to the point of being timid. Yet, here was Hyun Jong handling such an important matter in such a nonchalant manner. It was an absurdity.

‘No, no way.’

Beop Jong, who had been in a daze, suddenly snapped back to reality. Now was not the time to blame Hyun Jong, nor was it the time to assess the current situation. The deed was done, and what mattered was the possibility of this place being swept away in an unforeseen direction if one made a wrong move.

Feeling a sense of urgency, Beop Jong briefly murmured a prayer under his breath.

«Amitabha.»

At the clear voice that resonated in the room, those who had been momentarily mesmerized turned their attention to him.

Beop Jong, maintaining a composed facade, spoke up,

«Alliance Leader. I dare not interfere in the affairs of another sect, but this seems excessively drastic.»

As Beop Jong spoke, an unintended expression of realization crossed his face. In the haste to speak without proper contemplation, he might have said the words that would offend Hyun Jong. Instantly recognizing his potential mistake, Beop Jong was surprised to find Hyun Jong nodding unexpectedly.

«In the eyes of the Abbot, it may appear so.»

«...»

«But this matter is a decision made by the Sect Leader of Hwasan, which is me. The authority to determine and appoint the head of a sect lies solely with the current head, me.»

Beop Jong’s lips pressed tightly together. Hyun Jong was correct. Choosing the next Sect Leader was entirely at the discretion of the current Sect Leader. Elders supporting the head or even the potential next head could offer their opinions, but they couldn’t change the head’s decision.

In this context, what significance did the words of a leader from another sect hold?

However, Beop Jong couldn’t retreat from this situation. It was imperative for him, considering his position, not to simply step aside.

«Still... appointing the head of a sect is undoubtedly the most significant event in a sect that should be conducted with formality.»

«That is true.»

Hyun Jong nodded once again, displaying unexpected agreement.

«Therefore, at this moment, it will be the appointment of an Acting Sect Leader, not the Sect Leader. The acting head is a temporary role that represents the authority of the head in matters decided by the head, so formality is not necessary.»

«...That...»

Even Beop Jong found it difficult to argue against these words. Initially, it was a reluctant objection, but now even that reluctance had no place to manifest.

And at that moment.

«Acting Sect Leader, step forward.»

«Yes!»

Hyun Jong untied the sword at his waist and held it out towards Baek Cheon.

«In the name of Hwasan sect, I grant Baek Cheon, Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan, full authority to negotiate with Shaolin.»

«I humbly accept the duty.»

Baek Cheon received the sword with a dignified posture, bowing his head. Without delay, he unfastened the plum blossom sword at his waist and replaced it with the Purple Mist Divine Sword [자하신검(紫霞神劍) — jahasingeom] Hyun Jong had given him.

What could Beop Jong say about the feeling in his heart upon seeing that sword?

That sword was none other than the one Beop Jong had returned to Hwasan. But now, wasn't it putting Beop Jong in a difficult position?

It was beyond infuriating now.

Baek Cheon, with the Purple Mist Divine Sword at his waist, rose from his seat, turned around, and sat facing Beop Jong. The image of Hyun Jong sitting on the elevated seat behind Baek Cheon overlapped with the scene.

At that moment, Beop Jong had to exert tremendous mental strength to calm his facial muscles that were trying to twitch uncontrollably.

«Amitabha.»

Instinctively, Beop Jong, who had been murmuring a chant under his breath, closed his eyes. 'Let's calm down.'

Upon reflection, there was no need to be flustered. It was just that the situation was so bizarre that it ignited a sense of urgency as if a fire had been lit under them. But if you really think about it, isn't it simply a change of conversation partner?

The display shown by Baek Cheon was indeed remarkable, enough for even Beop Jong to take notice, but it was just an evaluation of Baek Cheon as a disciple. If the criteria for evaluation were not as a disciple but as a sect leader, then there was no reason to give him undue credit.

In the end, wouldn't it be more practical to deal with the freshly-appointed Baek Cheon, who had just put on his sword, than with Hyun Jong, who had repented to the point of exhaustion?

Beop Jong steadied his breath. He was about to offer congratulations to Baek Cheon. However, Baek Cheon spoke before Beop Jong could.

«First, I apologize for the rudeness I showed to the Abbot.»

«...»

«I understand it was inappropriate, but the urgency of the matter unintentionally made you wait. I apologize.»

Baek Cheon lightly bowed his head.

Beop Jong nodded reluctantly. Complaining now wouldn't change anything. So, it was better to show some generosity instead.

«Thank you for your understanding. I, Baek Cheon, was delegated with authority from the Sect Leader of Hwasan, aim to clarify the position of Hwasan sect.»

«Hmm, Baek Cheon Dojang. No... Acting Sect Leader.»

«Yes.»

«The words don't seem quite right. Wasn't it you who requested that we address esteemed Hyun Jong not as the head of Hwasan but as the Alliance Leader of Cheonumaeng?»

Beop Jong glanced subtly at the others before speaking.

«We came here to negotiate with the Alliance Leader of Cheonumaeng. How can the acting head of Hwasan negotiate with Gupailbang on behalf of the Sect Leader of Hwasan? It doesn't make sense.»

It was a sharp observation. However, Baek Cheon smiled as if he already knew Beop Jong would say that.

«It seems there might be a misunderstanding.»

«...Misunderstanding, you say?»

«Yes, Abbot. I am not representing this negotiation. I am here to convey Hwasan's response to the proposal you made specifically to Hwasan.»

«This gathering is...»

«Of course, it's a discussion about the future of Cheonumaeng and Gupailbang. However, wouldn't it be appropriate for Hwasan to clarify their stance here? Since you, Abbot, have made different proposals to each sect, we also need to respond to those proposals, don't we?»

«...I see.»

To summarize, Hyun Jong delegated the position of the Sect Leader to Baek Cheon, but he did not delegate the position of the Alliance Leader of Cheonumaeng. Therefore, Baek Cheon's intention was to respond to the proposal Beop Jong made to Hwasan as an Acting Sect Leader of Hwasan, not as an Acting Alliance Leader of Cheonumaeng.

«We deeply appreciate the proposal you made, Abbot, and all the members of Hwasan are thankful for it.»

«That's fortunate. So...»

«However, Abbot.»

Baek Cheon smiled quietly. Strangely, his smile, which should have looked infinitely gentle, seemed much more resolute than even a stern expression.

«Hwasan will reject your proposal. We will not return to Gupailbang.»

Beop Jong's eyes widened involuntarily. He had tried to guide the conversation in a positive direction through careful dialogue. However, this young kid abruptly concluded the matter right from the start, and not in the direction he had hoped for.

«Wait a moment! Acting Leader!»

«And!»

Baek Cheon continued with a firm voice.

«The rights over Cheonumaeng should be shared by all sects belonging to Cheonumaeng. Even if the current sects within Cheonumaeng align with the goals of Gupailbang.»

Baek Cheon glanced at everyone seated in the room. All eyes were focused on him.

Baek Cheon understood the expectations conveyed in those glances and the burden implied by their attitudes. Without avoiding any of it, he embraced it all, channeling all his inner strength into his words.

«Hwasan will remain with Cheonumaeng.»

His voice spread out like lines drawn with a firm brush on clean white paper.

«I declare this in the name of the Sect Leader of Hwasan. There will be no dissolution of Cheonumaeng. Even if all sects leave Cheonumaeng, leaving only Hwasan, we will uphold the name of Cheonumaeng.»

Beop Jong's mouth involuntarily fell open. What on earth was this kid blabbering about? However, unlike Beop Jong, who was shocked, Baek Cheon, facing such astonishment, remained calm and composed.

«Oh, please don't misunderstand.»

«...Misunderstand?»

Misunderstand what? What other misunderstanding is there?

Baek Cheon, who had sternly asserted himself like a mountain moments ago, spoke with a gentle tone as if a mountain breeze.

«Of course, I'm sure the Abbot wouldn't think such a thing, but just to make it clear, Hwasan has no intention of opposing Shaolin or Gupailbang. We are simply heading towards the same destination, taking a slightly different path.»

A warm smile spread across his composed face.

In different circumstances, that smile might not have been a good sign. But now was not such a time. Those who witnessed that smile, even the disciples of Hwasan, felt a twist in their hearts.

«Even if we don't join Gupailbang, surely the great Shaolin, ruler of all, would embrace a single Hwasan sect?»

«...»

«To resolve the crisis Gangho is facing, cooperation from the entire Central Plains is necessary. And, as you know, I've only recently become the Acting Leader, still inexperienced and ignorant of the world.»

As Beop Jong's mouth hung open in bewilderment, Baek Cheon bowed with utmost courtesy.

«I ask for your guidance in the future, Abbot.»

«Uh...»

Beop Jong couldn't continue his words, wearing a face of confusion.

Watching Baek Cheon blatantly outmaneuver Beop Jong, Tang Gunak briefly closed his eyes, feeling a momentary dizziness.

'Why...'

Why are the people of Hwasan... each and every one of them like this? Why...

The thought that Hwasan they knew had returned brought both joy and anguish to everyone.