

Chapter 1173

A man who can't even answer. (3)

Everyone's expressions were different.

Jo Geol's face was distorted, Hye Yeon was silently disapproving with a pale face.

Tang Soso wore an expression that seemed on the verge of tears, and standing beside her, Yu Iseol remained expressionless, but her gaze was darker than usual.

And Yoon Jong, whose inner thoughts were the hardest to decipher, let out a sigh.

'As always, this is holding me back.'

At times like this, one realizes that the world doesn't always operate as learned.

They learned to revere righteousness. Everyone within the orthodox sect would learn that sacrificing their lives to uphold this righteousness was the path that the one wielding a sword should naturally take.

And they learn again. That they should cherish their comrades more than their own lives.

Those words were undeniably true.

However... If the righteous path they so fervently protect leads even their beloved comrades down a path of death, then what is the purpose of upholding it?

«...That's too extreme of a statement.»

As Jo Geol bluntly expressed his thoughts, Baek Cheon lifted his head.

«You felt it too, didn't you?»

«...»

«Honestly, there's probably no one here who hasn't entertained such thoughts. Isn't that right?»

Baek Cheon lifted his head. In this moment, no one could meet his gaze. Although they didn't commit any sins, they subtly avoided eye contact like someone with an uncomfortable secret.

«I've had those thoughts at times too. Perhaps the reason we've been able to discuss the righteous path without hesitation is because we haven't experienced significant losses.»

«No... Sasuk. Where is a place that has lost as much as Hwasan?»

«Have you lost something?»

«Yes?»

«Are the things Hwasan lost the same things you possessed?»

Jo Geol closed his mouth at those words. Baek Cheon, who was observing him closely, let out a sigh.

«We are Hwasan's disciples. That's why we consider these experiences as our own. But... if we look at it objectively, it was Hwasan of the past that suffered these losses, not us. Think about it rationally. Did we lose anything when we entered Hwasan?»

Jo Geol lowered his head deeply. Lost something? There was no such thing. From the beginning, when they joined, Hwasan was already in such a ruinous state that it couldn't get worse, and since Chung Myung came in, it had progressed with an absurd momentum. Ironically, by entering the sect that had lost the most, they became the ones who gained the most.

«Those who haven't been struck do not know the pain of being struck. Those who haven't been cut by a sword do not understand how fearsome that light blade can be. So... we, who haven't experienced loss, cannot completely understand the suffering of those who have lost.»

Baek Cheon chuckled.

«Isn't it absurd? If someone who has never been cut by a sword says that a sword isn't frightening and can be cut ten or a hundred times, what would you think?»

Jo Geol bit his lip slightly. What could he say? Someone who has never experienced the pain of being cut by a sword would probably mockingly dismiss such boasting.

«Such thoughts occur, huh? Perhaps what we've confidently shouted so far might be nothing more than the boasting of those who haven't experienced being cut by a sword. Because we haven't lost, we could proclaim that we would endure losses.»

Baek Cheon lowered his eyes quietly. They always risked their lives. They fought for what they believed in. But...

«In retrospect, it seems I was quite a cowardly person.»

«Sasuk... What are you suddenly talking about?»

«When heading to Hangzhou, there was not a hint of hesitation in my heart. It was full of conviction. I thought it was something that, as a disciple of Hwasan, I naturally had to do.»

«Isn't that a natural thing to do? How does that make you a coward?»

«But that is what I think. If Chung Myung wasn't there with us at that time...»

«...»

«If we had to head to Hangzhou without him, could I really have walked without hesitation? Could any of you have done the same?»

Yoon Jong nodded.

«Sasuk, that's a meaningless assumption. Being righteous is not challenging the impossible and throwing ourselves into a death trap.»

«Is it?»

Baek Cheon's smirk twisted slightly.

«When you can win, fighting without considering gains or losses is called the righteous path. But when you can't win, not engaging in reckless battles becomes the righteous path.»

«...»

«Let me ask again. Could you really have gone to Hangzhou without him? If you believe that's right, could you have practiced that righteousness without caring for my life and the lives of your Sahyeongs beside you?»

No one could answer. A somewhat lengthy silence lingered painfully. Baek Cheon, silently waiting for an answer, finally spoke in a heavy tone.

«If not, then what we've been shouting about being righteous is ultimately the arrogance of those who haven't lost anything... No, it's nothing more than the cowardice of those who have nothing to lose. It's no different from a three-year-old boy with his father in front of him boldly refusing to endure the injustice of his ten-year-old brother.

“Amitabha...»

With a brief disapproval, Hye Yeon looked at Baek Cheon with a piercing gaze.

«Baek Cheon Siju, what are you trying to say?»

«I'm suggesting we acknowledge it. And I want us to reflect on it.»

«...»

«In retrospect, we've never once stepped out of Chung Myung's shadow. We haven't even fought where he wasn't present.»

Hye Yeon's expression hardened.

Upon hearing those words, it became apparent how unnatural their battles had been all this time.

«Over the past few years, Hwasan has faced numerous battles, rising from a small faction in Shaanxi to the leader of Cheonumaeng.»

«...»

«However, despite experiencing so much, Hwasan has never once split its forces. It has never even deployed a small special force, let alone split its forces in one battlefield. Do you understand the significance of this?»

Yu Iseol bit her lip. Seeing her expression, Baek Cheon nodded.

«That's right. He has never allowed us to fight outside of his sight. In any battlefield, he aimed to keep all members of Hwasan within the area he could protect.»

«...»

«But now, it won't be possible. No, it shouldn't be.»

Everyone nodded in agreement. Baek Cheon let out a long sigh.

«Despite boasting, I don't have any sharp answers just because I'm speaking. This is a problem we all need to think about. And the starting point for everything is understanding where we stand.»

«Yes, Sasuk.»

«Is it right to uphold this righteous path? Is it right to abandon Haenam and save more people? Is it right to sacrifice those I love and cherish for the sake of rescuing people I don't even know? Am I truly not afraid of losing my life to uphold this righteousness?»

Baek Cheon listed his thoughts swirling in his mind without organizing them.

There was no need to organize them because this was not a problem that could be resolved by summarizing into one answer.

«Everyone will consider different things important and prioritize differently. But... yes, it seems there's only one way to find this answer.»

Baek Cheon's voice became infinitely quiet.

«Someday, when we stand in the middle of the battlefield, someone will inevitably face the fate of going to their death. Inevitably.»

«...»

«At that time, what's important is not whether you can die yourself. It's whether you can let your comrade beside you go to their death knowingly and still not stop them. That's when the righteousness you've upheld all along will truly be tested.»

Yoon Jong's shoulders trembled. That was an exceedingly harsh statement.

«If Hwasan truly follows the value of righteousness, I should be willing to sacrifice not only my life but also the lives of Hwasan's disciples for the sake of it. I'll go. The statement that 'if I go first, it's just an escape to avoid making choices.'»

«Sasuk...»

«Can you really do that?»

Once again, there was no immediate response.

«Let's think about it. What were we really trying to do? Is this truly the only path? Or should we choose a different path now?»

Jo Geol bit his lips even tighter. It was to the extent that blood was slightly drawn. Even Yu Iseol, who always remained composed, had a faint trembling in her fingertips.

Everyone seemed to be shaken.

«If that's impossible, perhaps it's better to follow the Abbot's words. Then at least Hwasan won't shed more blood than others and can face the same consequences as others. We won't have to accept harsher results in the name of the righteous path. I'll make sure of that.»

Baek Cheon stood up.

His face remained composed, but those who knew Baek Cheon could sense something beneath that composed expression: a sternness that had never been seen in him until now.

«Think about it. I'll convey the conclusion you reach to the elders.»

As Baek Cheon turned to leave, Yoon Jong called out to stop him.

«Sasuk.»

Baek Cheon abruptly halted his steps.

«Have you decided on an answer?»

«Does that even matter?»

«...»

«Right and wrong are determined by oneself. Don't ask others. There's no need for mutual consultation. At least ask yourself how you will use your own life.»

Yoon Jong's head dropped.

Without a word, Baek Cheon turned away from Yoon Jong and distanced himself from them. Left behind in that spot, the others briefly exchanged glances before silently turning towards their respective places.

A particularly heavy moonlight hung on their shoulders.

Baek Cheon's slow footsteps echoed through the darkness.

'It's tough.'

Even if he tried not to, sighs escaped him repeatedly.

«It's difficult...»

A few years ago, he wouldn't have entertained such dilemmas. Back then, the goal was simple: just become stronger and focus on reviving Hwasan. Dealing with his immature Sajil and the troublemaker Samae, putting in some effort while shouting around, that was all that mattered.

However... now the world forces choices upon them. It shouts at them to bear the weight befitting their strength. Although they haven't shouldered too much yet, their shoulders already feel too burdened, as if they might be crushed and disappear.

'So, this is what it's like.'

Fighting formidable enemies. Until now, they hadn't fully grasped the profound meaning behind that simple phrase. It encapsulated everything they had upheld until now – life, relationships, values, and more.

'What kind of fight was it?'

What did the ancestors from a hundred years ago, who engaged in even more brutal battles than the current generation, see and feel? If they were by Baek Cheon's side now, what would they convey to him?

Baek Cheon turned his gaze towards the moon. Time had passed, and the world had changed just as much. The voices resembling those from a hundred years ago were nowhere to be heard. However, the moon remained there, just as it had a hundred years ago.

Baek Cheon's face, gazing at the moon, suddenly went blank. No, in fact, his gaze was directed not at the moon but at the roof partly embracing it.

On the eaves the silhouette of a person was visible.

Shoulders that seemed somewhat sad, overlapping with the moon.