

## Chapter 1180

I have something to tell you. (5)

Entering this room, no one had anticipated Hyun Jong saying those words. Yet, as the expected statement emerged from his lips, everyone felt suffocated, as if their breath had been taken away.

Wasn't this peculiar?

Cheonumaeng undoubtedly carried significant meaning. To them, Cheonumaeng had been the eaves providing shelter from the rain and the wall blocking the cold wind.

Objectively, however, there was no reason why those roles couldn't be fulfilled by Gupailbang and Five Great Families, which had served in those roles even longer than Cheonumaeng.

So, while the difference might not be substantial, the crucial point lay in the intentions each faction harbored.

Despite comprehending these facts, Hyun Jong's words resonated profoundly, making it inexplicably bitter.

Beop Jong's face remained strange, making it difficult to guess what was on his mind. It seemed to show a blend between a heavy heart with a subtle sense of relief.

«Alliance Leader...»

«However.»

Before Beop Jong could speak, Hyun Jong quickly took the initiative, as if signaling that he wouldn't let Beop Jong conclude the situation entirely.

«Before that... there is something we need to confirm.»

Facing Hyun Jong's intense gaze, Beop Jong nodded slowly.

«That is correct.»

Hyun Jong, adjusting his slightly accelerated breath, calmly spoke.

«Abbot, you emphasized that all of this is not just about the desires of the Leader of Shaolin, but for the sake of justice.»

«Yes, that's right.»

«And yours, Abbot, sense of justice means doing everything possible to save as many people as possible. Does that sentiment remain unchanged in your heart?»

Beop Jong nodded without hesitation.

«Of course, Alliance Leader.»

«Then, can you promise that your intentions will not change in leading Gupailbang, Five Great Families, and even beyond, guiding all the martial factions of Gangho?»

«I promise.»

Was the response too quick? Hyun Jong's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at Beop Jong.

«Abbot...»

«It's not an insignificant answer, Alliance Leader.»

Beop Jong shook his head, as if already aware of Hyun Jong's thoughts.

«This is not an answer given without thought. There was simply no need for further contemplation. If I hadn't already made that decision, how could I have come here?»

«...»

«Alliance Leader, if Cheonumaeng points fingers at me, I can laugh it off. However, when those within the Gupailbang start pointing fingers, it's a painful and bitter experience.»

As if understanding that sentiment, a sigh escaped from Hyun Jong's lips.

«So... how could I utter fabricated lies? How could there be any hesitation?»

«I understand what you mean.»

Hyun Jong took a long breath before speaking again.

«And what you mentioned, that the factions once part of Cheonumaeng should receive equal treatment, must also be strictly adhered to.»

«Amitabha.»

Beop Jong cut in as if there was no need for further consideration.

«Unity is a good thing. Remaining divided into two is not. But worse than that is when those who were once united split again.»

«...That's true.»

«It is my role to prevent that situation. After finally becoming one, we cannot afford to receive criticism worse than in the past. I will think and ponder again and again on how to ensure Gupailbang remains united and doesn't split once more.»

Hyun Jong narrowed his eyes. It was a response that wasn't excessive nor lacking. Therefore, it was an answer that couldn't be faulted. Yes, flawless.

A small bitter smile escaped from Hyun Jong's lips.

'I guess I was at fault.'

Though he had already reached a conclusion within his heart, it seemed he was still seeking an excuse for hesitation until this moment.

'It's ambition and greed.'

Unconsciously, Hyun Jong shifted his gaze to others. All eyes were on him. Just by looking at those eyes, an indescribable emotion swelled in a corner of his heart.

It might not have been a long time. Compared to the dark and burdensome past, the time spent with these people was relatively short. Yet, even if the time was short, the weight contained in each of those gazes was not light.

What is right? What is wrong? Even at this moment, his mind was in turmoil, wavering.

Hyun Jong is someone who acknowledges that he is not particularly outstanding.

However, he cannot defer this choice to the others. Whichever side he chooses, there will be a price to pay.

'I don't know what is right, but...'

If this choice demands a price, if someone has to bear the burden of this misstep, then it must be Hyun Jong. In that case, even if this choice is wrong, others can move forward, leaving him behind.

It's the burden that Hyun Jong, who has enjoyed a prominent position as the leader of Cheonumaeng, must bear. It is the best he can show to those who have believed in him until now.

«Alliance Leader.»

As if sensing his inner thoughts, Beop Jong opened his mouth in a soft voice.

«I understand the feelings of considering me untrustworthy.»

«No, Abbot. It's not about this, it's...»

«I, too, would have pondered and hesitated like you, Alliance Leader, if I were in the same situation. It's not an easy answer to give.»

«...»

«But, Alliance Leader.»

Beop Jong's gaze was heavier and darker than ever.

«Isn't it the duty of a Sect Leader to bear all of that weight?»

Hyun Jong closed his eyes and nodded. Despite their different perspectives, there was an inevitable empathy in these words.

Leaders are the ones who bear this weight, regardless of the size or importance of the sect. A moment later, as Hyun Jong opened his eyes again, his expression was noticeably more relaxed than before.

'It's just a matter of me shouldering the burden.'

What he should be most wary of is not Cheonumaeng losing its power. It's not them losing their legitimacy and identity.

Losing possibilities. Thus, losing the future. The young martial artists leading Cheonumaeng must be vigilant about losing the potential to blossom, hindered by those small things.

'Wasn't I originally someone who endured the winter?'

Thinking it was spring, it seems spring hasn't arrived yet. In that case, one must wait. For the day when those flowers bloom. Whether it's Cheonumaeng or Gupailbang, it doesn't matter. Just being a stepping stone for them and waiting for that time is enough.

Hyun Jong's gaze turned towards Chung Myung.

His face, devoid of any expression, seemed as clean as if it's been washed away.

Not showing any emotions to avoid burdening Hyun Jong.

Hyun Jong knows. Within that emotionless exterior, there are countless emotions swirling.

'Chung Myung.'

Sometimes, Hyun Jong felt provoked by that expression.

The determination sealed within the tightly closed lips is unmatched. Respect for Sect Leader and a determination for the future of Hwasan. Chung Myung is taking it to extreme — thinking only about Hwasan.

Therefore, Hyun Jong would occasionally want to ask.

‘So, what exactly do you have in your hands?’

All Hyun Jong can do is help to ease the heavy burden on those shoulders, even if it’s just a little.

«Abbot.»

«Yes, Alliance Leader.»

«...I trust the Abbot’s intentions.»

Emotion briefly flooded Beop Jong’s face. The fingertips on the hem of his yellow robe trembled ever so slightly.

«I still don’t know what is right and what is wrong. However... I believe this is the best I can do right now.»

«Alliance Leader!»

Beop Jong nodded vigorously.

«That’s right. No, I will make it so. I will prove that us uniting the orthodox factions is a right choice, so that the world can praise the esteemed Hyun Jong for making a splendid decision for the sake of all under the heavens.»

«Just please keep your promise. The promise about all this being to protect more people, that’s the only thing that matters.»

«I will definitely do so.»

Hyun Jong nodded with a heavy heart. Prolonging such moments only leaves wounds between each other. It’s better for him to make a decisive decision alone and face possible resentment.

Having firmly decided, Hyun Jong finally parted his sealed lips.

«As the leader of Cheonumaeng... here... I declare...»

«Just a moment!»

At that moment, Jo Geol’s voice, which had been silent all along, erupted like a scream.

«Now, Sect Leader! No, please! At least consider others’...»

«Shut your mouth.»

«Sasuk!»

Jo Geol turned to Baek Cheon with eyes suddenly ablaze.

«I told you to shut your mouth.»

«This...!»

In an instant, anger flared in Jo Geol’s eyes. Clear, unmistakable emotions that shouldn’t be shown to his sworn brothers surged in his gaze.

But Baek Cheon stared back at Jo Geol with cold eyes, quelling him.

Jo Geol’s fiery gaze clashed fiercely with Baek Cheon’s icy glare.

After a moment of silence, Jo Geol, who had been overwhelmed, finally bit his lip until it bled. His head dropped weakly.

The atmosphere in the room became even heavier.

Everyone turned their gazes away, unable to watch. It seemed as if this situation vividly depicted the current state of Cheonumaeng.

Though the heart shouted against it, reason suppressed such emotions.

It was understandable. Even Jo Geol, unable to endure, and Baek Cheon, suppressing such emotions, were part of this spectacle. This sight was bitter for everyone, and even Chung Myung leaned against the wall, gazing only at the ceiling. Everyone averted their eyes.

In the silent intense atmosphere, that not even Hyun Jong and the elders could escape, the only one remaining composed was Baek Cheon. He silently observed Jo Geol's trembling shoulders and then turned his gaze towards Beop Jong, bowing his head slightly.

«I apologize, Abbot.»

«No need, no need. Don't feel disheartened. It's something that can naturally happen.»

Beop Jong gently nodded with a compassionate expression. His words weren't mere formalities — he fully understood Jo Geol's reaction. If Beop Jong were a disciple of Hwasan, he might have rebelled even more fiercely than Jo Geol did.

What surprised him wasn't Jo Geol's reaction — it was Baek Cheon's chilling composure maintained even in such a situation.

‘Hwasan is indeed Hwasan.’

These individuals were growing in the field cultivated by Hyun Jong and Chung Myung. Someday, far in the future, if someone like this becomes a Sect Leader, the sect might become even more fearsome than it is now.

Baek Cheon, who had lowered his head before, lifted it and looked directly at Beop Jong.

«However...»

«Hmm?»

«I know this isn't the appropriate time, but I feel compelled to be a little impolite. Please understand.»

«...Did you say impolite?»

Beop Jong asked with a puzzled expression. For a moment, he couldn't grasp Baek Cheon's words. The discrepancy between Baek Cheon's expression and his words was so striking that it was understandable.

Without further explanation, Baek Cheon turned his gaze towards Hyun Jong.

«Sect Leader.»

At the calm call, a sigh, almost like a lament, escaped from Hyun Jong's lips.

«Baek Cheon, now is not the time for this...»

«I have something to tell you.»

For an instant, Hyun Jong's expression hardened. He sensed an unwavering determination in Baek Cheon's voice.

Baek Cheon, the Great Disciple of Hwasan, looked at him without a hint of hesitation.

It was a look never seen before, accompanied by a voice that carried unprecedented conviction.