

Chapter 1032

We won't be by his side. (2)

When Chung Myung noticed Hyun Jong approaching, he attempted to stand up, but Hyun Jong gestured lightly for him to remain seated.

He then sat down next to him.

Seeing this, Chung Myung stared at Hyun Jong, who smiled faintly.

«Why? Is it too unrefined for a head of a sect?»

«It's not that, but...»

«I wasn't the head of a sect from the beginning.»

Hyun Jong looked at the flowing river with a bitter expression.

«When I joined Hwasan, I was actually more free than I am now.»

«Yes?»

«Yeah, it might sound a bit strange. Rather than saying I was more free, it's more like...

Yeah, just that there wasn't a system in place.»

Chung Myung nodded silently.

It made sense.

At the upper levels, people disappeared overnight, and even fellow trainees who had been practicing together suddenly left Hwasan. Maintaining the sect's structure had become tougher over time.

Hyun Jong, Hyun Sang, and Hyun Young.

Among the Elders, these three are the only ones currently protecting Hwasan.

Were they the only ones who initially joined Hwasan as disciples? Probably not. Many had left, leaving only this small group behind.

«I didn't know I would become a head of a sect either. When I first joined, my rank wasn't that high. There were quite a few Sahyeongs.»

«...»

«Of course, I thought that the Head Disciple would be the Sect Leader.»

«That scrawny guy from back then?»

Chung Myung asked bluntly.

Hyun Jong chuckled at the mention of the Head Disciple.

Hyun Jong glanced at Chung Myung's face and slowly nodded.

«Remember one thing.»

«.....»

«The Head Disciple you saw back then was extremely unsightly.»

«I won't deny that.»

If the person they saw had become the Sect Leader of Hwasan, Chung Myung might have left Hwasan, or at the very least, he would have tried to replace the Sect Leader somehow.

In hindsight, it was a fortunate thing that someone trustworthy was serving as the Sect Leader.

«But, Chung Myung. The Head Disciple wasn't always like that from the beginning.»

«.....»

«The Head Disciple I saw when I was young was truly an impressive person. At least, in my eyes at that time, he seemed like someone capable of raising and reestablishing a declining sect.»

Hyun Jong nodded slowly.

«But that's how time works. It can turn a young dreamer into a greedy old man and make a timid young man with messy hair into someone responsible for a whole faction.»

Hyun Jong, who had paused for a moment, muttered quietly.

«I have always been grateful to you.»

Chung Myung wanted to say something, but Hyun Jong spoke first, as if he had to finish what he wanted to say first.

«It's not because you led Hwasan. It's not because you did what I should have done. The reason I have always felt grateful to you is simply that you wholeheartedly believed in me.»

«.....Everyone at Hwasan believes in the Sect Leader.»

«Yeah, they might. But... it's a bit different, isn't it?»

Chung Myung couldn't answer right away.

Certainly, everyone at Hwasan would trust Hyun Jong. However, they didn't trust him as completely from the beginning.

Even the elders probably didn't believe that Hyun Jong, as the Sect Leader, could revive Hwasan. They just followed him because he was their Sahyeong.

The only person who had wholeheartedly believed in Hyun Jong was Chung Myung. Hyun Jong's authority did not come from elsewhere. Chung Myung, who bit anyone else like a mad dog, did not disobey Sect Leader's words, so those who watched naturally came to respect and believe in Hyun Jong.

Hyun Jong was acutely aware of this fact.

«As much as I was grateful to you, I have put in tremendous effort to become a person who is not lacking as the Sect Leader of Hwasan. But... it's still not easy.»

«.....Sect Leader.»

«You've always told me that. That the Sect Leader is someone who has the qualification. But I still don't know if I have what it takes.»

Hyun Jong smiled faintly.

«Temperament is something you can't change.»

The sky was darkening, and the stars seemed ready to pour down. Hyun Jong kept his gaze on this sight and continued.

«Shaolin has no intention of going to Gangnam.»

«.....»

«You already knew, right?»

Chung Myung nodded and added slowly,

«Sect Leader must have had a suspicion too.»

«Yes, I suspected it. But I didn't want to give up all hope. No, maybe I just wanted to buy some time, I don't know. While going to hear the obvious answer, I could tell myself that I wasn't just sitting idle and was doing something not ignoring the other side of the river.»

Hyun Jong let out a hollow laugh.

«Did you call it the price for a day of idleness?»

«.....»

«Yes, I understood what that is. I understood. But, Chung Myung...»

Hyun Jong's voice carried a hint of bitterness.

«Even if I understand the cost... Even if I don't, I'm still too afraid to face that reality head-on.»

«Sect Leader...»

Hyun Jong looked into the distance. Chung Myung couldn't discern where his lonely gaze was directed.

«You said it.»

«.....»

«There aren't many things in the world that are clearly right or wrong. No matter what you choose, it's just a different path, not necessarily the wrong one.»

Chung Myung nodded. It was undoubtedly something he had said to Hyun Jong.

«But, Chung Myung...»

Hyun Jong let out a deep sigh.

«Saying that not being wrong means it's right is not quite true.»

«.....»

«To me, it sounds like saying there's no definitive answer in the world. When you have to choose something that you can't choose, and there's no right answer, and there's no better path, which side should I choose?»

Chung Myung looked.

He saw the slightly trembling fingers of Hyun Jong, visible under his sleeves.

«...I don't have the courage to turn away from those who are dying across the river.»

«.....»

«Yet, I don't have the courage to cross the river either. I can talk about being willing to sacrifice my life for the sake of righteousness, but I don't have the confidence to watch you lose your lives across that river.»

Hyun Jong slowly rubbed his face. He looked somewhat tired.

«It's not a matter I can decide. I'm too small of a person to handle that choice.»

He readily admitted that he was a small and inadequate person, just as he always did. Chung Myung could vaguely sense the countless regrets and self-blame that had tormented Hyun Jong over the years.

Still, with his gaze fixed on the sky, Hyun Jong continued speaking.

«I was consumed with anger when I heard Abbot's words.»

«.....»

«It was so cowardly and... so wicked. It was clear that he only wanted to pursue his own interests. It was truly a despicable sight.»

Thinking back to the conversation with Beop Jong, Hyun Jong's voice grew even heavier.

«But... on my way back, I suddenly had this thought.»

Hyun Jong slowly closed his eyes and muttered.

«Perhaps... I am not even courageous enough to be a coward.»

«.....»

«The Abbot's choice might be cowardly, but it's for a reason. He doesn't want to see his disciples die across that river. Even if he's blamed, ridiculed, or criticized for losing his morals, he firmly stood by his disciples and showed his determination to protect them.»

«Sect Leader...»

«If we go by what you say, it's not necessarily wrong, is it? Is it truly a mistake?»

«.....»

«Perhaps... yes, perhaps even that could be another form of courage. Just like Heodojin [Wudang's sect leader] chose in the past, maybe Beop Jong also knows what he should do. Someone who doesn't know what they should do might be... me.»

Chung Myung looked closely at Hyun Jong's face. The reddening around his eyes was visible even in the darkness. For a moment, Chung Myung couldn't hold back a sigh.

«I don't know. I don't know what the difference is between them and me. Maybe it's because there was no role model for me to learn from. Or maybe...»

«It's not like that.»

Chung Myung emphatically nodded.

«What Hwasan needs to convey has already been conveyed to the Sect Leader. If everything is done according to the will of a predecessor, there would be no reason for future generations to exist.»

«.....»

«One who doesn't self-reflect cannot be called alive, even if they are breathing.»

«Right. That's true...»

Hyun Jong nodded slowly and then turned his gaze. His reddened eyes stared at Chung Myung.

«So, Chung Myung...»

«Yes, Sect Leader?»

«Just a little...»

Hyun Jong paused for a moment. It seemed almost impossible to say. However, after a while, he managed to push out those heavy words.

«...Is it wrong to be a little cowardly?»

«.....»

His voice was trembling. It seemed incredibly painful for him to say such words in front of his disciples. Ogeom, who had been listening to their conversation from behind, could not have missed the tremor in his voice. Everyone, unable to look directly at Hyun Jong, hung their heads in silence.

«I understand... that this is an unacceptable act. That it's a choice as despicable as Shaolin's. But I don't know. I really don't know why it should be us.»

«.....»

«Shaolin, Wudang, they all close their eyes and turn away from their cowardice. Why should Hwasan be the only one that must confront them head-on? Why... for what reason?»

Chung Myung closed his eyes tightly.

This question was once posed by him to Chung Mun, why should it be Hwasan, why should it be this way? He, too, shouted that question with anger and hatred. Now, Hyun Jong was asking him the same question.

Hyun Jong sighed deeply.

«There might be something to gain by not avoiding it. Yes, there will surely be something.»

«.....»

«But is what you gain that way... greater than what you have to lose?»

Hyun Jong didn't wait for Chung Myung's response and shook his head.

«I can't do that. I don't have the confidence to...?»

«... . Sect Leader.»

«I... I don't have the confidence to say 'You did well' for Baek Cheon who died for what is right. I don't even have the courage to smile at Yoon Jong's grave, or honor Jo Geol's wishes in front of his coffin! I don't even have the courage to wail while holding Yu Iseol's corpse.»

«.....»

“Even...”

Hyun Jong's chin trembled.

«... Even leaving your cold lifeless body behind, am I supposed to instruct the surviving disciples to follow that righteous path? Me? Me?»

Hyun Jong's voice began to carry intense emotions.

«Is our pride in the righteous path we should follow right now more important than the days those kids have to live ahead? Should they give up everything they'll enjoy in the future for the sake of that value? For what exactly?»

«.....»

«Rather than this...?»

Hyun Jong, who had been shouting in an angry tone, suddenly laughed as if everything was futile.

«It would have been better to remain as a small sect in Shaanxi...»

Unable to bear that expression any longer, Chung Myung closed his eyes.

«If I had known in advance that regaining the old Hwasan would require such... such a cruel price to be paid... I would never have made that choice.»

«.....»

«I would never...»

Hyun Jong's head dropped as if he would collapse.

Chung Myung couldn't bring himself to look in that direction and cast a desolate gaze at the flowing river.

'Sahyeong.'

A low sigh escaped his lips.

'It's difficult, Sahyeong.'

Chung Myung didn't receive an answer.