

Chapter 1187

It's the path we'll continue to walk in the future. (2)

The will of Hwasan. The righteousness of Hwasan.

No one grasped immediately what those words meant precisely.

If those present hadn't witnessed the previous circumstances, they might have dismissed the earnest words shouted by the newcomer who had only just assumed the position of an Acting Leader.

But those who had observed the situation from the beginning fully felt the subtle resonance of those words.

Perhaps it was due to the disparity between reality and ideals that those burdened with a certain level of responsibility couldn't help but empathize.

Everyone learns. Everyone vows. They pledge to uphold the righteous path and pursue the greater good.

Wasn't it common for everyone to harbor dreams of prosperity in their hearts when they first raised their swords, or when they first entered the world of martial arts?

Yet once they learned the harshness of Gangho and understood the price of that righteous path, they no longer spoke of it lightly.

That's why Baek Cheon's words carried weight.

Hwasan was no longer just a small sect on a remote mountain in Shaanxi. With its increased prominence came greater responsibilities. Yet here was Baek Cheon, representing Hwasan, speaking of its righteous principles.

How long had it been since anyone witnessed such a sight?

«Will... and...»

Beop Jong's voice trailed off with a strange tone.

«...righteousness.»

A relaxed smile graced Beop Jong's lips.

«Your words almost sound like you're saying there's neither will nor righteousness in Shaolin. Have I misunderstood, Acting Leader?»

Baek Cheon received Beop Jong's words with an even broader smile.

«Of course, that wasn't my intention. I simply wanted to express that the ways in which we pursue righteousness may differ.»

Beop Jong slowly nodded.

«Acting Leader, I cannot deny the courage embedded in your words. Perhaps the reason why the elderly should listen to the words of the young is because the elderly have already lost such courage and enthusiasm.»

At first glance, it seemed like recognition of Baek Cheon, but there was a subtle edge to it. It could be interpreted as meaning that besides courage, there was nothing else in Baek Cheon's words.

«However, unfortunately, courage alone may not suffice as an adequate response to my question.»

Beop Jong spoke with a lowered head.

«The intentions of Hwasan and Shaolin differ. Hence, we cannot walk the same path.»

He raised his head slightly and looked at Baek Cheon with dark eyes. It was a piercing gaze, almost oppressive. There was a palpable chill in the air, enough to make one involuntarily shrink back.

«Simply acknowledging each other and stepping back may not be sufficient given the dire situation Gangho faces. Surely, Acting Leader, you understand that it's not easy to consider the positions of both an individual and a sect.»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes as if affirming those words.

He knew too. Ideals were ideals, and reality was reality.

«If we were to consider every individual's standpoint one by one, it would eventually lead to chaos. If Acting Leader cannot offer a proper rebuttal, then I'll have no choice but to accept that Hwasan prioritizes its own agenda over the welfare of the realm.»

Neither words that stirred emotions, pointed out logical flaws, nor even remarks critiquing Beop Jong's attitude could shake him, who stood firm like a perennial rock.

'That's why they're so frightening.'

Unconsciously, Tang Gunak bit his lip.

Those who used righteousness as their justification were terrifying for this reason. That's why countless heroes risked their lives to win the cause.

Until now, the righteousness of Gangho undoubtedly rested with Cheonumaeng. But in this moment, that righteousness was firmly grasped by Beop Jong.

So, no matter what Baek Cheon said, could it not be countered by arguing that Hwasan would abandon the suffering commoners and only pursue its own will?

Of course, it could be ignored. Acknowledging it would end the argument. But the price for that would be the loss of many things for Hwasan. Especially since Hwasan had yet to fully secure public support.

Tang Gunak looked at Baek Cheon, who closed his eyes as if in contemplation.

'It's okay, Dojang...'

Tang Gunak didn't expect Baek Cheon to perfectly counter those words. It was too harsh a demand on Baek Cheon, who had just become the Acting Leader of Hwasan. After all, the responsibility for bringing the situation to this point lay with others, so wasn't it absurd to demand a resolution from the one who inherited it?

Even if there were losses, even if there were criticisms, as long as he stuck to his point, it would suffice.

The meaning of agreeing to follow Hwasan's decision was not to use Hwasan as a shield. Just as Hwasan willingly shared the benefits gained from its decisions with Cheonumaeng, it also meant that the responsibilities Hwasan had to bear would be shared.

The burden was still too heavy for young Baek Cheon to bear alone. Although compared to Tang Gunak he was significantly younger, but if we look at it now, among the lords of Cheonumaeng, the only one significantly older than Baek Cheon was Maeng So.

So, just as Hyun Jong had been his shield until now, now it was time for Tang Gunak to be Baek Cheon's shield.

With determination, Tang Gunak opened his mouth to intervene in the conversation. But Baek Cheon spoke first.

«You keep saying the same thing to me, Abbot.»

Baek Cheon's expression was extremely composed.

«If you fail to understand one thing, it will only lead to a repetition of the same conversation in the end.»

«...Other than what this monk should understand, what else is there?»

«I, as an individual, may be lacking, but the Sect Leader of Hwasan can never be inadequate. He represents not only the sect but also the will of the sect. From now on, I will demonstrate this to you.»

Baek Cheon narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked at Beop Jong.

«The righteousness you spoke of, Abbot, is 'saving more lives is the right choice,' correct?»

«It's not that simple. It's more about sacrificing to ensure the safety of the realm.»

«While the packaging is excellent, ultimately it means sacrificing those who don't need to be sacrificed, doesn't it?»

Beop Jong furrowed his brow.

«Acting Leader, no one desires sacrifice. There is no one who wouldn't save those who can be saved. But if driven by ambition to commit irreversible actions, the entire realm's population will bear the consequences. How long does Hwasan intend to cling to this unrealistic ideal?»

Baek Cheon lowered his head at those words.

«You're right. But you're also wrong.»

«Why is that?»

«Sacrificing fewer lives to save more ultimately boils down to weighing human lives on a scale.»

«Ha...»

Until now, Beop Jong had maintained the utmost respect for Baek Cheon, but for the first time, a slight smirk escaped his lips.

«Is that the logic of Hwasan?»

He couldn't help but scoff, as if he found the notion absurd.

«Do you think there's anyone who doesn't understand the value of human life? Each life is precious. But that's just idealism. If you had to choose between one death and a thousand deaths, what would you choose, Acting Leader?»

Baek Cheon's expression subtly twisted at the corner of his mouth.

«There's no hierarchy — each life holds equal value, so the lives of many may outweigh the lives of few.»

«Is that so?»

«The meaning behind what you're trying to convey, Abbot, is understandable. However, it simply implies that the importance of human life can be divided. It's a matter of perspective.»

«It's not about that...»

«What about one and ten? What about one and two?»

Beop Jong's face contorted. He felt like he was grasping at straws.

‘Was he just like this all along?’

Beop Jong felt the positive impression he had held for Baek Cheon collapse due to his pitiful logic driven by his stance. He couldn't see the value in continuing this meaningless debate any further.

«It seems futile to continue speaking...»

«Abbot.»

It was at that moment. Baek Cheon's complexion changed suddenly.

«Then, let me ask you in reverse, Abbot.»

«What do you mean?»

«You mentioned that you could make a decision, so let me ask you again. When all lives are considered equal, which is more important: one life or a thousand lives?»

Beop Jong hesitated slightly, sensing that there was something hidden behind the same question. But what could be drawn from a question that stipulates equality?

«As a Buddhist monk, I cannot make that choice, but as the leader of Shaolin, I would undoubtedly choose the thousand. Since their worth cannot be compared, it's simply about choosing more lives. We cannot turn away just because the choice is difficult! That's what responsibility entails, Acting Sect Leader!»

«I respect your perspective, Abbot. Ultimately, you're saying that sacrificing one to save a thousand is the right choice, correct?»

«... Yes.»

Beop Jong, exhausted from further discussion, nodded in agreement. At this point, even if Baek Cheon tried to twist his words, it would only seem forced.

However, Baek Cheon's next question was something Beop Jong had never imagined. Baek Cheon's gaze suddenly became sharp, as if piercing through Beop Jong.

«Then, if you had to choose between saving one life or obtaining enough money to feed a thousand, which would you choose?»

Beop Jong's expression momentarily blanked. It wasn't just because of the absurdity of the question — it was also difficult to understand what Baek Cheon was getting at.

«What do you mean...»

«Let me ask again. If sacrificing one life could save a thousand starving lives by obtaining a large sum of money, what would you do? Would you sacrifice one life to save a thousand?»

Beop Jong's tightly sealed lips slowly parted.

‘What is this...’

The question was only slightly different. Nothing had changed. However, if he were to answer here and now, wouldn't he be choosing money over human life?

Unable to respond immediately, Beop Jong hesitated, prompting Baek Cheon to ask again.

«Is money the issue? Then what about food? If sacrificing one life could provide enough grain to feed ten thousand people, would you choose food over people?»

«Th-this... Acting Leader... What is...»

«Is food also the issue for you? Then why not consider fertilizer to grow rice? If obtaining an enormous amount of rice could be achieved through that fertilizer, it might be more important to the Abbot than saving one person's life.»

«Acting Sect Leader!»

Beop Jong couldn't contain himself any longer and rose from his seat. His eyes flashed with intensity, the aura of Shaolin's leader emanating from him. It was a presence that no one in the world could easily withstand.

But Baek Cheon didn't back down an inch.

«Please, sit down. I have not finished speaking yet.»

«What kind of sophistry is this?!»

«Why call it sophistry? According to what you said, isn't a means to save a thousand lives more important than saving one? So why should it be a problem if that means one life is worth not more than a pile of dung?»

«Listen here, Acting Leader!»

«In the first place!»

Baek Cheon raised his voice sharply.

«Comparing the incomparable! Choosing what cannot be chosen! Ultimately, it divides the value of everything in the world! Things that shouldn't be judged will be judged, and things that shouldn't be devalued will be devalued!»

Beop Jong found himself speechless, his lips bitten in frustration.

«At first, it's the lives of Haenam sect!»

A fire burned in Baek Cheon's eyes.

“Then it's the lives of our allies surrounded by the enemies! Next, it's the life of the wounded soldier who fell on the battlefield! Then it's the life of a fellow warrior from another faction! After that, it's the lives of young disciples who haven't even reached their

full potential! What's the difference between abandoning what's deemed less valuable? It's the same as abandoning everything in this world!»

«Abandoning! Abandoning! Abandoning again and again! By sacrificing everything, even what shouldn't be lost, what exactly are you trying to protect? Where are the 'more people' you speak of, Abbot? Where are the 'people of the whole world' you claim to represent?»

«Well...»

«How can you protect those who trust and follow you when you're willing to discard them like sacrificial pawns? You speak of representing the people, but aren't you the one deeming them the least valuable? If that's Shaolin's righteousness, if that's the Abbot's righteousness...»

Baek Cheon gritted his teeth and drove in a wedge.

«...Hwasan will never align itself with such righteousness.»