

## Chapter 1172

A man who can't even answer. (2)

Not far from the picturesque riverbank, familiar faces gathered: those including Baek Cheon, Ogeom and Hye Yeon. Perhaps they are the ones closest to Chung Myung at this moment. They sit at a slight distance, staring at the flowing river with blank expressions. The atmosphere was tranquil. The sounds of cicadas and the waves of the Yangtze River gently reaching the riverbank, spreaded gently.

The place where they gathered was always bustling, so this current silence might feel even more unfamiliar and awkward.

Yoon Jong, who absentmindedly observed the splashing waves, turned his head to scan the expressions of the others.

‘It’s heavy.’

No, to be precise, rather than being heavily burdened, they all seemed a bit dazed.

«Sahyeong.»

«...Huh?»

As if sensing his gaze, Jo Geol raised his eyes to Yoon Jong, breaking the silence.

«What are your thoughts on this, Sahyeong?»

«Are you referring to the Abbot’s words?»

«Yes.»

A soft sigh escaped Yoon Jong’s lips.

What do you think? Normally, it wouldn’t be a difficult question, but at this moment, answering feels uncomfortably awkward. However, it’s not a question to be evaded with a vague response either.

«Well, I don’t know.»

Yoon Jong replied, lifting his head as if letting out a sigh.

«In reality, there was no other way, right?»

«No, are you calling that an answer?»

Reacting to Yoon Jong’s words, Jo Geol suddenly raised her voice.

«No... Why bother asking if you’re going to think whatever you want. Just think as you please.»

«Why ask such a nonsensical question then? Saying there was no other way!»

«...So, do you think the Abbot was wrong?»

«Sahyeong is still a long way off!»

Jo Geol spoke with a raised voice.

«If we evaluate based on whether there is logic in words or not, where would those esteemed scholars be wrong? They’ve studied enough, even took trials to get into their positions — so they should all speak logically!»

«... What does that have to do with this?»

«Yet, among themselves, they argue, each insisting that their words are right. It's not just about having logic: it's about what is more correct. Besides, a word coming from someone inherently untrustworthy, whether it's right or wrong, does it matter?»

«...»

«What's more important than the logic of words is trust and credibility in people. At least, that's what I've learned. Is the Abbot someone you can trust?»

Yoon Jong looked at Jo Geol with a troubled expression. Normally, Yoon Jong wouldn't be easily outdone by Jo Geol's logic, but in this case, he had no immediate counterargument. Just like Jo Geol, he couldn't trust Beop Jong. However...

«Geol-ah, what you're saying isn't entirely wrong, but... it's not that simple, is it?»

«Then what's the problem?»

«I, too, was thinking along the same lines.»

Jo Geol seemed momentarily at a loss for words, biting his lip.

«Aren't you the same?»

«I...»

He seemed about to say something but instead lowered his head without speaking.

Baek Cheon, who had been silently observing the two, turned his gaze to Hye Yeon.

«Monk.»

«Speak, Baek Cheon Siju.»

«I have one question. I only want to confirm, so please don't misunderstand.»

Hye Yeon nodded silently and spoke, as if already knowing what Baek Cheon was going to ask.

«Since we can't peer into a person's heart, merely observing from the side doesn't reveal everything. But at least in my feelings, it seemed there was no falsehood in what the Abbot said.»

«... I see.»

Baek Cheon nodded with a hint of bitterness. In truth, there was no need to confirm such a thing. The Abbot had no reason to lie. If it were revealed that what he said after merging with Cheonumaeng was a lie, he would face an enormous backlash incomparable to the present one.

At that time, he would lose all justification, practicality, and everything else. Perhaps he might even have to surrender the leadership in Gupailbang he currently held to Cheonumaeng. Would someone of the caliber of Shaolin's leader engage in actions that would undermine his own survival?

«Uh, Sasuk.»

«... Yes.»

Tang Soso glanced at Baek Cheon hesitantly. Seeing her expression, Baek Cheon felt uncomfortable in his stomach. It was rare and unfamiliar for Tang Soso to make such a face.

«I don't know how Sasuk thinks, but... I don't think the Abbot's proposal looks that bad.»

«Soso!»

When Jo Geol raised his voice, Yoon Jong sternly restrained him.

«This...»

Jo Geol bit his lip. Tang Soso, after exchanging glances with him and Yoon Jong, let out a sigh and continued speaking.

«In truth... I understand Jo Geol's statement that we can't trust the Abbot and Gupailbang, and I also understand that it's difficult for others to let go of Cheonumaeng, which they have build so far. But...»

«No need to be cautious. Speak freely.»

«Yes, Sasuk.»

Tang Soso nodded and continued.

«Even if that's the case, fighting alongside Gupailbang might actually be more beneficial, right?»

«What nonsense are you talking about!»

Jo Geol expressed his frustration again.

«What are we trusting over there? Handing over command to them! Is there any guarantee that that damn bastard won't shove us into the most dangerous place? And he's the one we're supposed to trust!»

«Geol!»

Baek Cheon sternly scolded him.

«Be careful with your words.»

«...I apologize.»

Seeing Hye Yeon's lowered gaze, Jo Geol realized his mistake and apologetically expressed it with a somewhat humble expression. Even if they were saying the same thing, he had to consider Hye Yeon's feelings a bit more.

«While I made a slight mistake in my words, I honestly think that fighting alongside them might make things even more dangerous.»

«More dangerous?»

Tang Soso looked directly at Jo Geol.

«How could it be more dangerous? Tell me, Sahyeong. How can it possibly be more dangerous? Ten of us entering Gangnam, where there are only enemies, to fight with Demonic Cult. What could be more perilous?»

«Well, that's...»

«I've been saying this for a long time. He might end up dead. Chung Myung Sahyeong thinks of his body as if it were a ragdoll. No matter how injured he is, he thinks he'll be fine after a good night's sleep. But a human body doesn't work that way!»

Jo Geol couldn't meet Tang Soso's gaze.

«This time... yes, this time the battle ended with just one round. But you know, wars aren't supposed to be like that. But Sahyeong, you know how it is. This time he might truly die. He will overwork his body to the point of death and return to the battlefield without being able to rest or heal properly. However...»

Tang Soso looked around at the others.

«Who can stop that?

“...”

“No one. We didn't stop it this time either. No, we didn't. I even offered to go with him, blowing wind at his side.»

«Soso...»

«I might have not been in my right mind. Then someone dies, and I spend the rest of my life regretting it. What a nerve.»

Baek Cheon saw how Tang Soso's fingertips were trembling as she desperately tried to maintain her composure.

‘That's right,’

Tang Soso is a medic, after all. Someone who, if anyone dies, would feel greater responsibility than others. Even though no one demanded such a thing from her.

«...What would change if we fought alongside Gupailbang?»

«If you are the Abbot, at least you won't send Sahyeong to die. Sahyeong needs to stay alive until the end of the war. And we can at least catch Sahyeong, who wants to go back to the battlefield, in a miserable state.»

«Why would the Abbot do that?»

«Because it's beneficial for him!»

Tang Soso glared at Jo Geol with furious eyes. Jo Geol bit his lip tightly.

«We're not expecting any favors from that side. If you're not a fool, you know. It's beneficial to keep Chung Myung Sahyeong alive until the end.»

«What if we do it...»

«Can you stop him? Really, do you think that we can stop Chung Myung Sahyeong? We're lucky if blood doesn't rush to our heads and we don't run away first.»

Tang Soso spoke as her body trembled.

«I'm terrified, Sahyeong. Afraid I might witness his death for real...»

As Jo Geol, who was nervously chewing his lips, was about to say something, Yu Iseol, who had maintained silence all along, spoke up.

«This isn't a story to be told only about Chung Myung.»

«...Yes?»

«Being in danger is something we all share.»

Yu Iseol's indifferent gaze swept over everyone there as if assessing the situation.

«It's more unusual that none of us has died so far.»

«That's...»

Baek Cheon, who had half-opened his mouth, closed it again. Since everyone already knew the answer.

«Yes, Sahyeong. It's Chung Myung.»

«... Yeah. He was keeping us alive even while fighting himself.»

«He put himself in even greater danger.»

«Yeah, that's right.»

Baek Cheon sighed briefly, as if lamenting. It was a fact known to everyone, but it had never been felt so palpably until now. The Abbot's words brought to light the reality they had been ignoring all this time.

«Then, should I just throw a punch to stop it from happening in the future?»

Jo Geol remained unyielding, seemingly not convinced.

«Enough of such weak words. Who helped us get Hwasan this far? And now, you want to rely on others? If those who genuinely wanted to help us were here, they would have done so long ago!»

«Geol-ah.»

«No, Sasuk! I might be ignorant, but I'm not stupid. What I want to say is...»

«It's not just Chung Myung's problem, as Samae says.»

«... Yes?»

Baek Cheon looked at everyone and spoke.

«Are you really okay with dying?»

«What nonsense!»

«Think about it and answer.»

«...»

The weight in Baek Cheon's voice momentarily silenced Jo Geol.

Baek Cheon, who had been observing Jo Geol biting his lips with a somewhat pitiful look, spoke again.

«We have always staked our lives. We've said we're not afraid to die for the righteous cause. Haven't we?»

«... Yes.»

Yoon Jong nodded in agreement.

«But... honestly, I have my doubts too. Was that truly my resolve, even if it meant risking my life to adhere to a righteous path, or was it just boasting uttered in the complacency of thinking I won't die?»

«Sasuk!»

«I'm not saying you guys are like that.»

«...»

«I mean, I am. I...»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes for a moment, as if trying to organize the swirling thoughts within.

«What happens to Cheonumaeng? And what should we do about Chung Myung?»

He slowly opened his eyes, lowering his head.

«That's something for later. If we ourselves are not firm in what we want to do, do we have the qualification to discuss other matters?»

Everyone looked at Baek Cheon as if being drawn in.

«Before discussing the Abbot's words and Cheonumaeng's future, let's ask ourselves first.»

Baek Cheon's words were calm yet resolute, heavy yet sharp.

«Whether we can truly fulfill everything we've said until now with our lives alone. And...»

His gaze painfully swept over everyone.

«Whether I can even sacrifice those standing by my side for the principles I wanted to protect, even if it means sending them to death.»

At those words, the faces of everyone turned pale.

Baek Cheon pressed on without giving them a chance to catch their breath.

«Someday, on that battlefield, when a sword pierces my chest and my body becomes cold.»

«...»

«Seeing my comrades lying lifeless beside me, I wonder if I'll truly have no regrets.»

His words, sharp as a blade, stabbed into their hearts, chilling them like cold water.