

Chapter 1098

The ‘Hwasanization’ of the entire Central Plains (3)

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

The rhythmic sound of tapping on wooden Moktak [목탁 — buddhist instrument that looks remotely like a fish] and the chanting of scriptures filled the small room.

With each tap of the Moktak, the lamp illuminating the room swayed ever so slightly.

It was a solemn sight. As the old monk tapped the wooden instrument and chanted scriptures, his face exuded solemnity, serenity, and the unique tranquility of Buddhism.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

However, at a certain moment, the regular rhythm of the tapping began to waver.

Consequently, the calmly burning lamp flickered.

The flow of scripture chanting from the monk ceased right at that moment. The monk, who had closed his eyes, quietly looked down at the Moktak in his hand.

‘I’ve tapped this for my whole life.’

He had held this instrument for over seventy years. Even now, he could play it without a single mistake, even if he closed his eyes and blocked his ears.

However, at this moment, the Moktak in his hand failed to produce the right sound.

‘A mirror of the mind...’

Gazing at the wooden block with deep, contemplative eyes, Beop Jong slowly lowered it. No matter how deeply ingrained it was in his body, if the mind wavered, all of it was in vain.

Ultimately, everything depended on the direction of the mind.

Beop Jong knew this truth too well. It was the teaching he had earnestly sought to understand throughout his life in Buddhism.

However...

‘Everything lies within the scriptures.’

The ancestors had already shown him the way. However, the reason why succeeding generations couldn’t easily reach enlightenment was that knowing everything didn’t mean one could act upon it.

«...Amitabha Buddha.»

A faint sigh escaped his lips.

How much more understanding and seeking must one undertake to truly join the ranks of the Buddhas? Could this sinful and greedy body genuinely ascend to that state?

«...That, too, is an obsession.»

It’s ironic.

Obsession is the root of all afflictions. To truly attain enlightenment, one must let go of all attachments. However, when examined closely, isn’t the desire to attain enlightenment also a form of obsession?

The one who desires cannot attain, and only the one who relinquishes can achieve the path of Buddhism. So, how can it be called a path for people to follow?

‘It’s all in vain.’

Beop Jong slowly shook his head.

He knew. He was far from becoming a Buddha.

‘Rather than becoming a Buddha alone, I shall make the entire world Buddhas. Even if it means my own body falling into hell.’

For that to happen, everyone in the world must comprehend the sublimity of enlightenment. They must realize that embracing and seeking Dharma is the only true way to escape this arduous life of suffering.

However, sadly, those struggling to survive each day have no interest in the profound teachings of Buddhism. To lead them to the Pure Land [정토(淨土)], it requires not just teachings but also majesty.

A dazzling majesty so radiant that no one can look away, an imposing presence that involuntarily inspires a desire to walk that path.

Compared to that, the name ‘Shaolin’ seems insignificant. Everything he does ultimately aims to spread the Buddha’s teachings in the world, leading as many as possible to the Pure Land.

The Buddhist teachings are not necessary to exalt the name of Shaolin. Shaolin’s reputation is needed to spread the teachings of Buddha

Isn’t everything merely for the sake of suffering sentient beings?

‘But why is this path so tremendously hard?’

Beop Jong’s eyes were shut tightly.

The world is too chaotic to convey the Buddha’s teachings, and his strength is too feeble to overcome that confusion.

‘No one shows the way. No one...’

With his wrinkled hands, Beop Jong once again grasped the Moktak. For the path of the practitioner is to keep walking, regardless of wavering and trembling.

But then, at that moment,

«Abbot, are you inside?»

Beop Gye’s voice from outside the door echoed.

Beop Jong gently placed the Moktak he held down again and let out a deep sigh. Not even given the luxury of controlling his own mind, this was the life he had chosen.

«Come in.»

«Yes, Abbot.»

The door cautiously opened, and Beop Gye entered.

Unintentionally, Beop Jong furrowed his brow as he looked at Beop Gye’s haggard complexion. He felt like he might understand his own condition by seeing Beop Gye’s current state.

«Abbot.»

Beop Gye sat cautiously in front of Beop Jong. His eyes continuously examined Beop Jong's expression.

«We've received news from Hangzhou.»

Beop Jong remained silent, closing his eyes.

He had been curious about this news as well, but he already sensed the outcome. Beop Gye's expression said it all.

«What has happened?»

«Hangzhou suffered severe damage, practically devastated. However, the malicious forces of the Demonic Cult who invaded Hangzhou have ceased their rampage and left the Central Plains for now.»

Up to this point, Beop Jong had anticipated the news.

«What about... those from Hwasan who headed to Hangzhou with the group from Sapaeryeon?»

«That's...»

Beop Gye cautiously assessed Beop Jong, who had his eyes closed, then spoke tentatively.

«Two days ago, they had already... returned to the place where Hwasan is stationed without any casualties,»

Beop Jong was momentarily engulfed by a storm of emotions so intense it was indescribable. Countless emotions swirled within him.

As the silent pause lingered, Beop Gye sitting before him hardly even dared to breathe deeply. He simply kept his mouth shut, awaiting Beop Jong's response with unrelenting anticipation.

Eventually, Beop Jong slowly opened his eyes and asked,

«Two days ago...?»

«...»

«Did you say two days ago?»

«Y-yes, A-Abbot.»

Seeing the chilling energy in his eyes, Beop Gye involuntarily shrunk his shoulders. The former Beop Jong, even upon hearing deeply distressing news, had never exhibited such a cold demeanor.

But times had changed. Now, even Beop Gye sometimes perceived such chilling feeling from Beop Jong, that he almost trembled in fear.

Yet, Beop Jong's current demeanor was different from anything seen before.

«If they returned two days ago, it's only natural that their activities would be known to the Beggars Sect.»

«...»

«Despite that, how should I interpret the fact that this news has reached you only now?»

«That... that, I also...»

The veins at the corners of Beop Jong's eyes twitched as Beop Gye's speech trailed off as he anxiously glanced around.

«Nothing...nothing at all...»

His hand, which had lightly gripped the Moktak, suddenly clenched the edge of his robe, blue veins bulging on the back of his hand.

«Nothing works properly! Not a single thing!»

«Abbot...»

«Yes.»

Beop Jong, lips tightly pressed, glared at Beop Gye.

«Continue.»

«...»

«I said continue!»

«Yes, yes, Abbot!»

Beop Gye flinched, quickly bowing his head and swiftly resumed speaking.

«According to the news from the Beggars Sect... the ones appearing in Hangzhou were the Bishop of the Demonic Cult and a diocese following him. Hwasan headed south towards Gangnam, joining forces with Maninbang, Black Ghost Fortress, and Nokrim, and they've slaughtered the cultists... and...»

Beop Gye, holding the grim news in his words, instinctively glanced at Beop Jong once again, before continuing.

«Furthermore, Paegun Jang Ilso and Hwasan Geomhyeop Chung Myung struck the Bishop's neck in a joint attack»

«...»

«The remaining demonic cultists fled, and although the Beggars Sect intended to pursue them, the beggars tailing them lost track without a trace,»

Beop Gye relayed the news, swallowing dryly and spoke in a fading voice.

«T-That's all.»

Beop Jong's face grew cold as if struck by a northern wind's cutting edge. Seeing his expression, Beop Gye involuntarily closed his eyes.

‘Why...’

He had spent a lifetime alongside Beop Jong, seen him both as a great leader and, on a smaller scale, as his Sahyeong. He admired and respected Beop Jong's noble character and had lived by his side for years.

Yet recently, why did Beop Jong keep displaying this unknown side that he seemed unaware of? Even though Beop Jong's heart remained true to Shaolin and the people, why?

«Paegun Jang Ilso and... Hwasan Geomhyeop struck the Bishop's neck?»

«That's what the Beggars Sect said...»

«That's right.»

Beop Jong interrupted Beop Gye's words and pressed on with a chilling voice.

«Those who couldn't wait to kill each other before joined hands and fought together to defeat the enemy?»

«...»

«And after defeating the Demonic Cult, they willingly sent Hwasan's swordsmen away, who were isolated in Gangnam?»

Beop Gye could only nod his head, unable to utter a response.

It was yet another unbelievable turn of events, but there was no other choice. At least in Gangnam region, their eyes did not exist. Hence, they had no option but to rely on the information provided by the Beggars Sect.

«Heh...haha,»

Beop Jong let out a disheartened laugh.

«I misjudged Hwasan.»

«Abbot?»

His face had contorted into a grim expression before he even knew it.

«Though our intentions may differ, I believed they, at least, strived to walk the righteous path. That's why deep down, I held some sympathy!»

«...»

«If they're willing to collude with the wicked Sapa for their goals, what makes them any different from Sapa!»

«Abbot... the situation...»

«The situation?»

Beop Jong glared angrily at Beop Gye.

«What situation are you referring to?»

«...»

«Were they the only ones who were heartbroken by the news of the civilians dying there? I was so devastated, I couldn't sleep at night!»

Thud!

Beop Jong's fist slammed down heavily.

«However, is that truly the right thing to do? Is choosing the unjust path to achieve desired results truly the path of righteousness?»

Beop Gye bowed his head deeply. Beop Jong, face flushed, continued speaking.

«I'm not blaming their altruism! But is it because they genuinely don't understand that ultimately, it only strengthens Sapaeryeon's dominance over the Gangnam region?»

«T-That's...»

Beop Jong clenched his fist tightly.

«These foolish ones have made Jang Ilso a hero. Now Jang Ilso, having rescued Gangnam from Demonic Cult's grasp, will solidify his rule over the evil factions even more. And why don't they understand that more people will suffer in long term because of this?»

Beop Gye looked at Beop Jong without a reply, seeming like someone who had lost their voice.

«It's all wrong! It's all wrong! Hangzhou? Of course, it's tragic for those who died in Hangzhou. But did those who rushed to Gangnam achieve anything? Did they save the people in Hangzhou?»

«They couldn't... do that...»

“When that kind of turmoil arises, people have no choice but to flee. Naturally, the damage would have been greatly reduced, and ultimately, those ruthless Sapa would have had to fight the Demonic Cult to prevent their advancement. It was a situation where simply enduring a bit could have brought the Demonic Cult and Sapaeryeon to fight each other, the two evils! Why did they rush into that situation and plunge the commoners of Gangnam into despair?”

«...»

«Foolish! So foolish!»

Beop Jong pounded his point.

«Those who cannot see beyond their noses will praise them and blame us again! Again! Without even knowing what they've done!»

«A-Abbot...»

«This!»

Crash!

Finally, when Beop Jong struck his fist, the table in front of him shattered into pieces.

Startled, Beop Gye stared blankly at Beop Jong.

«Hwasan... couldn't prevent this disaster...»

A bright blue murderous look emanated from Beop Jong's eyes.