

## Chapter 1153

Well, if it's absolutely necessary. (3)

«Abbot.»

Beop Jong tightly shut his eyes.

'Is it an Inner Demon\*?'

Lately, thoughts of Hwasan Geomhyeop have been causing frequent disturbances within him. Despite being aware that it's not something that should happen.

«Amitabha Buddha.»

He uttered a mantra to calm his mind as much as possible. After regaining composure somehow, he opened his eyes. Facing the worried look of Jonglihyeong.

«I understand what Sect Leader is concerned about.»

«...»

«I understand that leaving your headquarters empty for too long is not advisable. I also sense urgency as it seems like we're wasting time here without any significant achievements.»

«It's not necessarily like that, but...»

Jonglihyeong sighed lightly. Beop Jong spoke.

«But in the current situation, it's difficult for us to withdraw from here first.»

«Abbot. I understand your feelings, but staying like this won't yield any results.»

«...»

«Logically speaking, we've already lost the support of the people along the Yangtze River.»

Sighing, Jonglihyeong continued.

«It's not just an issue of our headquarters. The residents here treat us differently compared to how they treat Cheonumaeng. As a result, the morale of our disciples is visibly declining.»

«Amitabha.»

«At this rate, I'm worried that it won't just be a waste of time — we might end up losing something essential. Lost time and gains can be recovered somehow, but once pride is shattered, it's not easily restored, Abbot. You, too, must be aware of that.»

Jonglihyeong's point was valid. As the current leader of a faction, Beop Jong was not someone who couldn't distinguish right from wrong.

In his view, what Beop Jong was doing now seemed like stubbornness, not something more profound.

«Abbot, victories and defeats are part of the cycle of life and death. Even if we lose this time, the one who wins in the end will be the true winner, right?»

«...That's true.»

«This place is already a battlefield where we've suffered defeat. A wise commander doesn't linger on the bitterness of defeat. Rather, during that time, it's better to create a new battlefield and pour efforts into redeeming the losses.»

A faint smile played on Beop Jong's lips. Jonglihyeong's words, especially the term 'defeat,' didn't sit well with him.

Nothing seems to be to his liking.

Even the word 'defeat' doesn't sit well with him, and the fact that the opponent in this defeat is not even Sapaeryeon but Cheonumaeng bothers him. Moreover, hearing the term 'defeat' and not actually engaging in a fight with anyone adds another layer of dissatisfaction.

However, the most awkward and burning part was that, despite hearing those words, he couldn't summon the courage to argue back.

It's not a defeat, but it's a war that has been lost. That's how Beop Jong views this Great Battle of the Yangtze River.

«Some sects that received Abbots's perspective have already expressed their willingness to support us.»

«That's correct.»

«Those sects also couldn't just stand by in this situation. But Abbot, where would you have them come? To the Yangtze River? Would you have them come here when there's no war happening?»

“...”

“Abbot, do you want to use this place as a reception hall, asking them to come here? If they see you, the Abbot, here, attempting to control Sapaeryeon by burning your body, what would they truly think? Would they genuinely admire you for staying here?»

Beop Jong's lips twitched again. Yet, Jonglihyeong didn't pause despite such a reaction.

«Authority comes from a position. It could refer to both one's title and status, but literally, it also means the place where someone dwells. Does the Emperor sitting on the throne in the royal palace look the same as the Emperor sitting in barracks? Authority is also about where you are seated.»

That, too, wasn't an incorrect statement.

«Abbot, the place where you should meet them is not here. The place where you should be is none other than Shaolin. Am I wrong?»

A rare sigh escaped Beop Jong's lips.

All those words are correct. All of them are right. However, the problem is, Beop Jong is not here blindly sacrificing himself because he doesn't know all of this.

‘A lost a battle...’

Perhaps that statement might be accurate. There is nothing as foolish as clinging to a lost battle. Trying to recover momentum in a battlefield that has already been lost would only increase casualties.

But...

«I'm not ignorant of what Sect Leader is saying. However...»

As Beop Jong hesitated slightly, Jonglihyeong, perceptive as ever, asked first.

«Is it because of Cheonumaeng?»

«...»

«Abbot... I understand that you also worry about what they are doing here. But once the frontline is in a stalemate, what else can they do?»

Jonglihyeong quickly continued, sensing Beop Jong's hesitation.

“I understand that you are concerned about why they are still staying here. But why should we stay with them? If they choose to remain here to be a shield against Sapaeryeon, why is that our loss? If it's a gain, then it's a gain, that's simple. Right now, Abbot, you are...”

Jonglihyeong stopped abruptly as Beop Jong's eyebrows twitched, showing signs of unease.

“‘Simple,’ did you say?”

Beop Jong's voice, like an icy wind, made Jonglihyeong close his mouth tightly.

Beop Jong, realizing that he might have overreacted, closed his eyes and recited the Buddhist chant. Then, in a voice devoid of the stern aura, he spoke slowly.

«Sect Leader, then, let me ask. Since my arrival at the Yangtze River, have I made a decisive mistake according to your thoughts?»

«Well...»

Jonglihyeong couldn't easily answer. The first thought that crossed his mind was ‘Yes.’

Looking back, every action Beop Jong took related to the Yangtze river was a mistake.

However, Jonglihyeong wasn't a person to think so simplistically.

‘Did the Abbot truly made a mistake?’

That would be hindsight. In retrospect, every action Beop Jong took regarding the Yangtze might seem like a mistake. Yet, Jonglihyeong wasn't someone who saw things in a straightforward manner.

Advancing towards Maehwado, where enemy pressed forward with siege warfare – was that truly the right decision? Back then, even Jonglihyeong criticized Beop Jong's coldness, but if they had truly advanced to Maehwado, even a three-year-old would know what might have happened.

Wasn't it Jonglihyeong himself who said not to linger in regrets over a lost battle?

Cheonumaeng had merely overturned a fight that was already over, turning Shaolin and Kongtong into passive spectators.

‘The same goes for Demonic Cult.’

Was it truly sensible and rational to head towards Hangzhou, which was practically the headquarters of Sapaeryeon and Black Ghost Fortress, to block Demonic Cult's invasion?

The statement that a brilliant commander must choose the battlefield where victory is certain is also from Jonglihyeong. In his view, Hangzhou was not the battlefield they could win on.

That judgment was undoubtedly correct.

If Hwasan had not independently infiltrated Gangnam, beheading the Bishop and reducing Shaolin and Kongtong to cowardly bystanders, then what?

«Abbot...»

«No matter how much I think about it, I don't know. Just tell me what mistake I made. Even if I rethink it a ten, a hundred, or a thousand times, the decision I should have made is clear.»  
Jonglihyeong nodded. He couldn't deny that.

«But what is the cost of that right decision? The momentum of Cheonumaeng has soared, and all credit for the events at Yangtze river has been taken by them. Everyone in the world criticizes Shaolin and praises Hwasan!»

Thunk.

Beop Jong tightly grasped the tea table in front of him. His fingertip dug into the wood.  
«Even Sapaeryeon has credit for stopping Demonic Cult. Isn't it being said they are better than Shaolin, who was idle?»

«...»

«It's worthy of admiration.»

Beop Jong laughed.

«According to the way it should have gone, they should have already faced an inevitable defeat. But did that happen? They won on the battlefield where they were supposed to lose and gained advantages where they should have suffered losses. In unimaginable ways.»

«...»

«I'll ask again, Sect Leader. Is it really wrong for someone who has realized the danger to be cautious? Is that truly such a foolish thing to do?»

«Abbot...»

«No. In my opinion, there's nothing as foolish as repeating the same mistake, even after experiencing the consequences. If you can't understand it logically, at least don't repeat the same mistakes.»

«So, why do you continue to stay here? Is it because you can't let your guard down not knowing what Cheonumaeng might do?»

«...»

«Do you think there's a reason why they won't leave Yangtze river?»

Beop Jong let go of the table without answering. His palm was moist with sweat. Looking down at his own palm, Beop Jong eventually let out a bitter laugh.

«I understand that I may seem frustrated.»

Jonglihyeong couldn't bring himself to deny it.

«Amitabha. However, if another incident occurs, it might lead to an irreversible situation. Shouldn't we prevent that, at least?»

Jonglihyeong closed his eyes tightly. He had realized that whatever he said here wouldn't change Beop Jong's mind.

«Since you insist to that extent... I won't try to convince you any longer. However, Abbot, there's one thing you should consider. The words you're saying right now will be incomprehensible to anyone.»

«...»

«Listening to it... Yes. Listening to it, it sounds like... that.»

Jonglihyeong hesitated for a moment, then bit his lip and forcefully spoke out.

«It seems like you're merely afraid of Hwasan Geomhyeop.»

For an instant, Beop Jong's eyes emitted a sharp gaze, like blades ready to pierce through.

Startled, Jonglihyeong immediately lowered his head and mumbled.

«Of course, I don't think that way... but those short-sighted people won't accept anything else.»

«...»

«So, Abbot, please consider one more time. As you well know, being in a leadership position, sometimes the best choice isn't necessarily the best course of action. Pushing forward with thoughts that others won't understand can only distance those who follow, causing division.»

Jonglihyeong left after his final words.

«I won't force you. However, Abbot, think about the best outcome of the situation, not just the best process. Farewell.»

Jonglihyeong exited the room. Beop Jong remained silent, watching his departing figure.

He knows.

Despite Jonglihyeong's attempts to comfort his disciples and passionately advocate for Beop Jong, knowing this fact brought a sense of emptiness before gratitude.

«...Being afraid...»

It's amusing. A story too absurd.

Who is he? Beop Jong, the current Abbot of the thousand-years-old Shaolin. Yet now, he's letting fear creep in from a mere third generation disciple of Hwasan? And not due to sheer power, but because he can't comprehend his thoughts?

How can this not be considered amusing?

«Maybe that's really the case... Hahaha.»

An empty laughter filled Beop Jong's room.

And for a long time afterward, there were no sounds of buddhist sutras or the praying beads in that room.

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\* 심마(心魔) — hanja wasn't provided but I guess it's 'demon of the heart' or 'inner demon'.