

## Chapter 1017

What did you just say? (2)

Glug, glug, glug.

The clear and transparent liquor flowed out like a stream of pure silk, filling the cup. Jang Ilso, who had been silently gazing at the flowing liquor, smiled mysteriously.

«...They can't provide support?»

«That's correct.»

«Hmm.»

Jang Ilso's smile deepened slightly. However, Ho Gamyong sensed a hidden unease within his smile.

«The reasons are...»

«Never mind.»

Jang Ilso waved his hand as if he didn't want to hear any more.

«Of course, they must have been speaking nonsense. Isn't that right?»

«That's right.»

«Hmm.»

He lightly chuckled, then slowly sipped the liquor. The strong and aromatic drink left a lingering fragrance in his mouth and gradually spread throughout his body. As Jang Ilso savored this feeling, he suddenly turned his head to look at the Yangtze River.

«Indeed. How do you think things are going?»

«The side that appears to be actively confronting us seems to be Hao clan's head.»

«Hmm.»

Jang Ilso nodded slowly.

«Mangeum Daebu [the head of the Black Ghost Fortress] should be keeping his mouth shut.»

«He's not showing any active willingness to cooperate, but that doesn't mean he's displaying a hostile attitude either. To put it precisely, 'watching and waiting' would be the most appropriate term.»

«Watching and waiting, huh...»

Jang Ilso chuckled softly.

Well, can we really call it 'watching'?

Certainly, in terms of not intervening and just observing, 'watching' is an appropriate word to describe Mangeum Daebu's current stance. But if you look into his true intentions, the story changes a bit.

By now, Mangeum Daebu would be meticulously calculating what's in his best interest, even though he's not actively participating.

«He must be busy diverting the verdict.»

In the darkness that had descended over the Yangtze River, it flowed deep and black, steadily as ever. Jang Ilso remained deep in thought and finally inquired about the Surochae.

«What about Surochae?»

«Most of it has been cleaned up. It was smooth since there weren't many resisting forces.»

The Black Dragon King would be furious if he heard, perhaps even vomit blood, but Ho Ganyeong was simply reporting the facts.

«I'm not entirely pleased with this, but there aren't anyone to oppose or unite the dissidents on behalf of the Black Dragon King.»

«That's true.»

Jang Ilso chuckled without shifting his gaze from the river.

«People like Black Dragon King would never tolerate a character like this.»

The mantra of the evil factions was that the victor takes all. It didn't matter where you came from or what your status was. The world where the strong seize everything. That was the world in which Sapa thrived.

However, this extreme structure was also harsh for those who held everything. Anyone who had taken everything knew that they, too, might lose everything one day, instilling the fear of the unknown.

That's why the henchmen of the Sapa didn't tolerate anyone who could potentially threaten their position. What they wanted was complete dominion.

«It's a dirty business.»

Jang Ilso's gaze slowly sank.

Namgung Clan lost a lot of significant figures on Maehwado, including the prominent patriarch Namgung Hwang and pillars of the family, the elders, not to mention their main forces.

But Namgung Clan remained unshaken. They were now doing everything in their power to rebuild the clan, centering it around the young Namgung Dowi, who could only be called a child.

On the other hand, Surochae had preserved most of its strength, yet the Black Dragon King had lost his power, leading to their state of disarray. Thanks to this, they had neither resisted properly nor defied Jang Ilso and had ultimately surrendered.

«What a farce.»

This is probably the most significant difference between the orthodox and unorthodox sects. Occasionally, the Sapa is led by monsters that threaten the entire world. These leaders of the evil factions trample over the orthodox ones and stain the world with blood.

But that's all. The stronger the leader's power, the greater the void left behind. When the absolute ruler's influence disappears, the Sapa once again engages in internal struggles and rivalries.

Hence, while Shaolin, with a history spanning a thousand years, still exists, the evil faction, with a history of only a hundred years, is difficult to find.

‘It’s not bad from my perspective.’

Jang Ilso smiled softly.

With the Black Dragon King, who had lost his power, Surochae had completely fallen into his grasp. Now, only Hao clan and Heuk-Gwibo [Back Ghost] remained.

Of course, the Mara Blood Palace still existed, but from his perspective, controlling them was like inheriting a curse. The costs of trying to dominate those outside his power would outweigh the benefits.

«I don’t know about Black Ghost Fortress, but it’s important to take control of Hao clan quickly. We need their information to have an edge in the battle across the Yangtze River.»

Jang Ilso nodded slowly. He, too, had contemplated the necessity of this.

It’s not just a problem of north of the Yangtze River. Efficiently governing the expanded Sapaeryeon requires Hao clan’s intelligence network.

Ho Gamyong examined Jang Ilso’s expression briefly and let out a small sigh.

«How could it be that the Cheon Myeon Susa [천면수사(千面手士) — The Thousand Faced Man] would be so proactive in opposing us? I thought he was someone who knew how to read the currents, but...»

«Because he knows that.»

«...Pardon?»

Jang Ilso smiled wryly.

«He’s not doing it because he doesn’t know, but because he knows. He knows the people in the country quite well.»

«...»

«Once he calculates that he can’t win, he’ll never raise his head again. He knows that if he tries to rebel now, while he still has some strength left, he won’t be able to do it.»

«I understand that part, but... considering the situation, wouldn’t it make sense for him to unite under Ryeonju’s command and confront those hypocrites of the orthodox sects when the time comes?»

«Indeed, but it might be meaningless.»

Jang Ilso chuckled bitterly.

«Someone will fight the barbarians and sacrifice their lives to protect the nation, while someone else will dig through the corpses of the dead to loot their property. For Cheon Myeon Susa, the victory of the evil factions might not mean much.»

Ho Gamyong was slightly irritated.

Of course, he had no intention of denying that. The Sapa’s nature is fundamentally about doing whatever it takes for personal gain, isn’t it?

«But there’s a timing for everything in this world. If it’s not the right time for them to fight each other now...»

«What will you do, then?»

«Hmm.»

Jang Ilso interlocked his white hands, resting them on his knees. The long fingers adorned with rings brushed against each other, creating a clinking sound.

«For a while, let's just leave them alone, Gamyyeong.»

Jang Ilso spoke with a voice slightly tinged with dissatisfaction.

«In my heart, I wish I could go there and make them understand, but...»

For an instant, a deep sorrow appeared in Jang Ilso's eyes. He was staring at the Yangtze River with eerie expression. He soon relaxed his body and shook his head.

«It's not possible. Those fellows down there need me too much, don't they?»

His faint laugh echoed along the silent Yangtze River.

Watching him for a moment, Ho Gamyyeong finally opened his mouth.

«May I ask you something, Lord Ryeonju?»

«What?»

He adjusted his posture, leaning closer to listen.

«I don't know what you're thinking. Your mere presence here will lead them to drift apart and engage in internal strife.»

In other words, Jang Ilso is reaping significant benefits just by guarding this place at this moment.

«But, My Lord, no matter how much they may be divided, we won't be able to take advantage of it if the Sapaeryeon doesn't stand properly. It's hard to understand why you're leaving them alone.»

«Tsk, tsk.»

Jang Ilso clicked his tongue and filled his cup.

«Gamyyeong-ah, Gamyyeong-ah.»

«Yes, My Lord.»

«You underestimate that guy too easily.»

«... Yes?»

A twisted smile appeared on Jang Ilso's lips.

«It's true that he's being pushed around here and there, but in truth he's not that easy. If that was the case, he would have been devoured by Hwasan Geomhyeop by now. Nevertheless, he's a man worthy of the name of the leader of Shaolin.»

«...»

«If we start withdrawing and cleaning up behind us now, that guy will also step back and start preparing for our advance. Right now, tying down that guy's movements is our top priority.»

«But even without leaving this place, couldn't the Abbot take advantage of the current situation to rally the Gupailbang?»

«It's possible.»

«So, should we not prevent it?»

Jang Ilso smiled mysteriously and looked at Ho Gamyyeong.

«Do you really think we can prevent them from uniting?»

«... Yes?»

«Gamyong, you underestimate the venom of those who possess power. The reason they're not uniting now is that they think we're insignificant. If they were genuinely threatened, they would put aside all their deep-seated grudges and unite. They've always been like that.»

Ho Gamyong could only nod in agreement. It was true. The Gupailbang, those guys, would engage in power struggles among themselves when the world was peaceful, but when disaster struck, they united as if to say, 'When has it ever been like this?' and opposed the enemy.

Is there any guarantee that it won't be the same because the opponent is Sapaeryeon?

«There's nothing to gain by cornering them like this. There's something else we really need to gain.»

«... May I ask what that is?»

Jang Ilso twisted his lips.

«Fear.»

«... Fear?»

«Yes, fear. That's right, fear. But it's...»

A sly smile played on Jang Ilso's lips. However, his gaze was ominously deep.

«It's not fear of us. It's something much smaller and more trivial.»

However, Ho Gamyong didn't quite understand Jang Ilso's words, but he couldn't muster the courage to ask again. Even though there was no overt emotion in his voice, an unidentifiable sense of pressure weighed on him.

“Do you know what a person consumed by fear does first?”

“...”

“They seek a way to save themselves.”

Jang Ilso's face showed a cunning expression.

“All those pretenses of harmony and justice get thrown away, and they seek a way to save themselves. Isn't that the true nature of humanity?”

“Lord...”

“Let's see. How much can those mighty monks truly overcome their true nature?”

Jang Ilso slowly licked his lips wet with alcohol.

‘It's almost done. Almost done.’

It was visible in his eyes.

It wasn't just a visible crack between the usual power struggles. It was a very small rift caused by the wedge driven into the heart of the Gupailbang. Slowly but meticulously opened, that rift would finally yield significant results. The time was ripe.

‘Just a little more now...’

It was at that moment.

«Lord... My Lord!»

Someone rushed to his feet and prostrated themselves.

«Hmm?»

Jang Ilso looked at him with a puzzled expression.

«What's the matter? It can't be that Hao clan has attacked, can it?»

«W-well...»

The messenger, with a pale face, quickly began to speak.

«What did you just say?»

An unusually strong reaction from Ho Gamyong followed the report.

«Are you absolutely sure about this fact?»

«Y-yes!»

Ho Gamyong remained silent for a moment with a pale face. His face quickly turned to despair.

“Why, why... at a moment like this...”

Even he, who had proven his abilities as a military advisor in the Maninbang countless times, could only be perplexed and lose his wits at this moment. He urgently checked Jang Ilso's expression.

Kkara lalalalalak!

Rings densely lined on both of his hands emitted an uncomfortable metallic sound. Despite the threatening gestures, there was a steady smile on the corners of Jang Ilso's lips.

“This is why...”

He slowly rose from his seat.

“...Life is quite interesting, you see. Unexpected variables can emerge, that's the thing.”

Madness flickered in his eyes. Jang Ilso's pearly white teeth were exposed. It was a laugh filled with intense anger and vile pleasure.