

## Chapter 1215

Without a doubt. (5)

Everyone looked at Im Sobyong with renewed awe.

Despite occasionally forgetting that fact due to his usual demeanor, he was indeed one of the Sapa Kings, the king of Nokrim who ruled over all the mountains in the Central Plains. With someone like him personally guiding the way, how could the mountain paths be considered dangerous?

«But hasn't Nokrim already withdrawn from Gangnam?»

Tang Pae asked, to which Im Sobyong casually chuckled and waved his fan.

«What's the problem with that?»

«Yes?»

«While people may have withdrawn, the mountains haven't disappeared. And not everyone in the world knows the mountains as well as Nokrim does.»

Im Sobyong clenched his outstretched hand into a fist.

«There won't be many who know the mountains in Gangnam as well as I do. No matter how high Sapaeryeon flies, in the mountains, they're not a match to me.»

«... Indeed.»

When Im Sobyong's strategy and the knowledge of Nokrim King combined, even seemingly impossible feats became plausible. Just as everyone was about to express their admiration, a gruff voice came from a corner.

«So, you mean...»

Chung Myung. His expression seemed to ask, 'Are you trying to impress us with that?'

«The talk may sound grandiose, but in reality, they're just a bunch of bandits. As soon as the government military shows up, they scatter and hide like rats. That's why they know how to sneak around without being noticed.»

«W-well, knowing the terrain and shortcuts of the mountains...»

«So, that's what it means.»

«Nokrim, who rule over all the mountains in the Central Plains...»

«The 'ruling' is somewhat exaggerated.»

Chung Myung snorted.

«It's not about ruling over all the mountains in the Central Plains, but about lurking in unused or neglected mountains. If they truly ruled over all the mountains, why wouldn't they have a presence on mount Song? How happy would Shaolin's monks be to have neighbors in their loneliness?»

«...»

Gradually, the ones who were just expressing admiration moments ago began whispering to each other.

«Come to think of it, it does seem a bit exaggerated.»

«It seems more than a bit, doesn't it? There are no mountain bandits on mountain Wudang or Hwasan. Not even on Jongnam...»

«Come to think of it, indeed, famous mountains don't have mountain bandits.»

«Famous mountains are all occupied by prominent sects, so how could bandits enter there?»

«It's quite amusing, isn't it? Unable to set foot on majestic Sacred Mountains [the most famous mountains of China], they only set up strongholds in mountains where others don't go, yet they claim to rule over all the mountains in the Central Plains...»

When Namgung Dowi met Im Sobyong's eyes, he smirked strangely. Im Sobyong's hand trembled slightly.

«Ahem! W-well, of course, maybe not all mountains, but at least as much as the ones in Gangnam, I have a firm grip on.»

«A firm grip?»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«You, hiding behind others in case your identity is exposed. Have you ever gone there yourself?»

«...»

«These Sapa scoundrels, they can't help but boast whenever they open their mouths. If only they toned down their damn boasting a bit, maybe their average lifespan would extend by ten more years. Tsk, tsk, tsk.»

Baek Cheon tilted his head slightly and asked,

«Isn't that a good thing then?»

«Huh?»

«It means Sapa will die out quickly.»

«Wha...?»

Chung Myung, upon hearing this, looked at Im Sobyong again as if there was some sense in it. Im Sobyong's face contorted abruptly.

«Even you think like that! Calling them useless Sapa!»

«What are you talking about.»

As expected, Chung Myung dismissed it cleanly and glanced at the map spread out by Im Sobyong.

«Anyway, in the end it boils down to this.»

«... Yes.»

«Going through Gangnam is significantly more dangerous compared to other routes, but it allows us to arrive much faster, right?»

«... That's right.»

«A risky and fast route?»

«...»

«Yeah, that's it. Risky and fast.»

Chung Myung, who had been pondering to himself, started grinning ominously. At the same time, a deep sense of unease settled on everyone's faces. Ultimately, it was Baek Cheon who became Hwasan's Vice Sect Leader, the one everyone desperately turned to.

'Please try to do something.'

'He is your disciple, after all!'

'You've become Vice Sect Leader, so you should do something!'

Unable to withstand the pressure, Baek Cheon awkwardly smiled and opened his mouth speaking to Chung Myung.

«Chung Myung, um... I have a rough idea of what you're thinking... um... but... do we really need to choose the dangerous path?»

«Oh, come on, Sasuk. I'm not an idiot.»

«Huh?»

«Do we really need to go that far?»

«Th-that's right?»

Baek Cheon's face lit up a bit. A sigh of relief involuntarily escaped his lips, thinking that this guy had grown to have some sense.

But then, in that moment, he caught a glimpse of Chung Myung's smirking face. It was so bright that it was truly scary.

«Yeah. It's better to turn back.»

«... Is it? I was also thinking...»

«It doesn't matter to me. What can I complain about if I travel comfortably? Of course, we will arrive in Haenam after going through a lot of hardships by going round and round by sea or by land. All you will be able to see may be Haenam ripped out with only column foundations showing, but what's the big deal?»

«...»

«You can take it slow if you want. Anyway, with Jang Ilso's temperament, once things settle down, he'll probably start stripping off the skin of Haenam's disciples right away, especially once he hears we've split from Shaolin. But that's not our concern, is it? After all, protecting the sect is what you are responsible for.»

A cold sweat trickled down Baek Cheon's spine.

«It's okay, it's okay. Haenam can still survive. Even if Hwasan could recover from being burned down, why can't Haenam? Don't worry, don't worry. Haenam isn't dry like Hwasan, it's by the sea, so even if it burns, there will always be roots left.»

Now, cold sweat began to bead on the foreheads of others as well.

«It's nothing. If we became a third-rate sect for a hundred years and then rebuild it, it'll be fine. If there are only ten members left in Haenam sect, the atmosphere will be more like a family, isn't that great?»

«... «

“Oh, of course, Sasuk, who became Vice Sect Leader by threatening Sect Leader, and retired Sect Leader, who stepped down from his position after hearing all that talking about the future, righteous path and whatever. They will be criticized as having done the most pathetic thing in the world.

And in the meantime, we may hear some nonsense about Cheonumaeng being a spineless group of idiots, but there’s no need to take risks just because we don’t want to hear that kind of talk?”

«That’s enough...»

«Oh, come on, it’s okay, Sasuk. It’s not that big of a deal. Huh? Threats? Oh, that’s just something people say in front of others! Everyone does that, right? Don’t we all just talk about risking our lives for righteous cause in front of others? Who really keeps that up when no one’s looking? Just pretending a bit is enough to make people think, ‘Well, those guys still tried to do something!’ Isn’t it...»

«Let’s go by land route!»

«Across the Yangtze River, damn it!»

«Straight to Haenam! Straight!»

«Everyone, shut up! Let’s just take the fastest route!»

Panicked, the others started to rush Baek Cheon.

«Vice Sect Leader! Let’s take the mountain path!»

«Young Lord Namgung... Please calm down...»

«Do I look calm to you right now? If we don’t save Haenam in time, Namgung’s honor will be completely tarnished. Who’s going to bear that burden, huh? Is it going to be Vice Sect Leader?»

«...»

«Well, if you think about it, wasn’t the whole point of bringing us — to bring the most skilled in martial arts? Even if someone dies because we got caught by Sapaeryoen on our way to Gangnam, it’s not Vice Sect Leader’s fault. It’s the fault of those who applied to join this venture without even being able to run away properly. Let’s just take the fastest route!»

«But... why are you being so aggressive...»

«It’s not aggressive, it’s rational!»

Since when? Since when did that become rational?

«Hmm. Your words may be harsh, but in truth, there’s nothing wrong with them.»

Im Sobyong subtly sided with Baek Cheon.

«Logically, taking the safest route is the best option, but if we think about it, heading to Haenam itself isn’t very logical.»

«That’s true.»

«It’s not exactly sane.»

«But it was Vice Sect Leader who suggested it, wasn’t it?»

All eyes turned to Baek Cheon simultaneously. A bit startled, Baek Cheon took a step back.

«But why are you nitpicking at this point?»

«Well, you know those kinds of people. They make grand plans, but when it comes time to execute them, they start backing out.»

Baek Cheon's clenched fists trembled.

Of course, his frustration wasn't just because of the subtle provocations from the other sects' members. It was because of Chung Myung and Jo Geol, who would hide behind them, poking fun and whispering, 'Looks like Baek Cheon is chickening out.'

«Sasuk.»

At that moment, Yoon Jong, who had been silently lost in thought, spoke up.

«I understand your hesitation. But when you think about it, this isn't something to hesitate about. No matter how good our decision may seem, if everything falls apart before we arrive in Haenam, won't it all be in vain?»

«... That's right.»

«We didn't choose to head to Haenam because of Cheonumaneg's strength or the stance of each faction. It was simply because we couldn't abandon Haenam, which is isolated and on the brink of collapse, could we?»

Baek Cheon nodded in agreement.

«In my opinion, Sasuk has probably already reached a conclusion. But I think I understand why you're still hesitating until the end. So, allow me to speak as someone who is a disciple of Hwasan.»

«... «

«Remember what Sasuk said. Righteousness that doesn't entail its own risks isn't righteousness. Simply speaking, those who seek to adhere to a righteous path must consider taking on risks as inevitable.»

«Amitabha.»

Hye Yeon nodded and intervened.

«Yoon Jong Dojang's words are true, Vice Sect Leader.»

«... «

«Make the decision.»

All eyes turned to Baek Cheon.

In reality, Baek Cheon isn't the highest-ranking figure here. Despite being Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan, there are king of Nokrim and future head of Namgung, not to mention the actual lord of the Ice Palace.

In terms of hierarchy, Baek Cheon is inevitably overshadowed by them.

However, there was no hesitation in the way everyone looked at Baek Cheon. Implicitly, they all acknowledged that he was the decision-maker of this group.

Accepting that responsibility without hesitation, Baek Cheon nodded.

«To Haenam.»

«... «

«Via the fastest route.»

At those words, a satisfied smile crept onto everyone's lips. The moment Baek Cheon prepared to return the smile, meeting their gazes.

«Is he really doing that?»

«He doesn't seem to be in his right mind.»

«Having someone like him as the future Sect Leader of Hwasan... It's predictable what the future of the sect looks like.»

Wait, these bastards? Are they all really going that way?

«Well... There's nothing we can do. We have to go along with it, don't we?»

«If anyone dies, it's all Sasuk's responsibility.»

«Ugh. Meeting Sasuk was a mistake. What a hassle.»

Ogeom turned away, clicking their tongues. Baek Cheon was taken aback, his mouth slightly agape. But before he could find the words to respond, Chung Myung spoke up to clarify the situation.

«Anyway, the decision has been made like that. Nokrim King.»

«Yes.»

«Lead the way.»

Chung Myung momentarily sent a cold and stern gaze, as if piercing through Im Sobyong. Im Sobyong wiped away his smile and nodded firmly.

«I will do my best.»

«Good. Let's go then.»

All eyes shifted towards the wide expanse of the Yangtze River and the land beyond it. From now on, that's where they would be heading.

«So, where do we board the boat?»

«Boat? What boat?»

«... We need a boat to cross the river, don't we?»

«What nonsense are you talking about? Why? Are you going to spread rumors that we're taking a boat and heading to Gangnam?»

«... Then?»

Chung Myung gestured dismissively towards the river.

«Submerge.»

«... Quietly, as much as possible. With no sound. So no one notices.»

«... Depart.»

As the group gazed at the murky Yangtze River, their shoulders collectively slumped. Truly, the path of righteousness is long and treacherous.