

Chapter 1165

What should we do? (5)

Beneath the white sleeves, a pale hand delicately held a crimson wine glass.

Jang Ilso slowly tilted his head back, looking at the moon hanging in the sky.

After gazing at the moon in silence for a long time, he shifted his gaze to the glass of wine in his hand.

The glass seemed ready to overflow at any moment, filled to the brim. In it, the reflected moon shimmered and rippled as if it was swaying.

«When I sing, the moon strolls...»

A voice like a whisper slowly flowed from his lips.

«When I dance, the shadows whirl.»

Jang Ilso, lifting the glass towards his lips, continued,

«Awake, we enjoy it together. Drunk, no traces of it remain...»

The emptied glass held neither wine nor moon anymore. Yet, Jang Ilso continued to silently gaze at the empty vessel.

«Li Bai [李白],»

Ho Gamyong spoke softly as he approached.

«I didn't know you favored that poet so much, Ryeonju.»

«...Li Bai,»

Jang Ilso murmured.

«I don't really favor him. No... I would say I'm more inclined to dislike him.»

«Li Bai?»

Jang Ilso's gaze shifted to the river. Above the flowing waters, the moon was clearly visible.

«Li Bai... tried to catch the moon reflected in the river and ended up drowning, so they say.»

«...»

«Foolish, isn't it?»

Jang Ilso, gripping the wine glass, tossed it into the river in one swift motion. The glass created ripples, distorting the reflection of the moon on the water.

However, the moon, after swaying for a moment, soon regained its tranquil form.

«That's just an illusion. No matter how you try to catch it, you can never hold it. Yet, even so...»

A faint smile appeared on Jang Ilso's lips.

«It doesn't disappear. That's why you have to watch. As if enchanted.»

«But there's a real moon in the sky, isn't there?»

«You can't reach it.»

Jang Ilso tilted his head back as if surrendering.

«Even if you stretch your hand toward the moon in the sky, you can never touch it. But the moon above the river seems like you could catch it. Just reach out your hand...»

«...»

«So, Li Bai must have drowned. He must have wanted to somehow obtain that moon.»

Jang Ilso, with half-closed eyes, gazed at the moon on the water for a while before turning his attention to Ho Gamyong.

«How about it, Gamyong? Does it look like I'm trying to catch the moon reflected in the water?»

In response, Ho Gamyong chuckled softly.

«Well, I'm not sure about that, but I do know a way to hold the unreachable moon.»

«...How?»

He silently approached and placed a new glass in front of Jang Ilso, pouring the drink. The moon reappeared as the glass was filled.

«It's right here.»

«...»

«Drink it, and it disappears. But if you fill it again, you can have it back, right? Don't lament the moon that vanished — just fill the glass again.»

Jang Ilso laughed.

«There's a truly clever one among us.»

Reaching out, Jang Ilso slowly drank the liquor poured by Ho Gamyong.

Observing in silence, Ho Gamyong spoke with a slightly heavier tone.

«I failed to persuade Talmyeong Dokho.»

Jang Ilso continued to gaze at the river, giving no response.

«He said even if it means death, he won't follow Ryeonju.»

Still not providing a response, Jang Ilso listened as Ho Gamyong continued.

«... With no other choice, I executed him.»

«I see.»

Jang Ilso spoke slowly,

«Did he have a family?»

«I believe he had a wife and a son on the side of Fujian. It's been at least ten years since he left his home, though...»

«A heartless person.»

«Isn't that typical of such men?»

«Send enough money to the remaining family members to last for their lifetime.»

Ho Gamyong stared at Jang Ilso without responding.

«Why would you do that?»

«It might be a bit off-topic, but... he was a man who opposed Ryeonju. A foolish one who served the wrong master and persistently made wrong choices. To such a person's dependents...»

«He made a wrong choice...»

Jang Ilso turned his head again to gaze at the river.

«Yes... he was foolish enough to join Mangeum Daebo, and foolish enough to remain loyal until the end. People aren't dogs, but he lived like one.»

«That's true.»

«But... well. Is that truly a mistake?»

«Ryeonju?»

Jang Ilso chuckled softly.

«The ways of the world, if you could clearly distinguish right from wrong, what difficulty would there be? It's merely a matter of pointing out who is right.»

«...»

«But, Gamyeong-ah... People each have their own 'right,' don't they?»

Ho Gamyeong nodded slowly.

«That's what makes it difficult. Although no one is wrong, there's only one path to choose.»

«If that's the case, what should we do?»

«Some will try to persuade, some will press with logic. Some will wait, some will supplicate, and others will be swayed. But I, I'll just...»

Crack!

Jang Ilso's grip on the cup shattered it into pieces.

«...Step on it and take it. It's the fastest way.»

Jang Ilso raised a half-filled bottle of liquor and slowly tilted it. The streaming liquor flowed gently into the river.

«I'm not sorry for those I've trampled on, but I can offer a drink at least, can't I?»

Ho Gamyeong silently nodded.

«As you wish.»

«Good. Let's do that then.»

«Yes, then.»

As Ho Gamyeong respectfully stepped back, Jang Ilso's gaze returned to the moon on the river.

'Who is right...?'

It felt painfully futile.

Beop Jong's mouth silently closed.

Chung Myung's transparent gaze bore down on him coldly, as if a sharply frozen, keen-edged blade was piercing deep into his core.

Darkness gradually descended, and within the room illuminated by lantern light, only those eyes seemed to vividly shine. It wasn't Beop Jong's first time seeing that gaze — he had encountered it several times before.

And every time, Beop Jong had to make an effort to conceal his true emotions. It was to avoid the indescribable discomfort sensed in the eyes of a child who hadn't even lived half of his life.

Yes, discomfort...

Now, at this moment, it must be said that this feeling of discomfort might be another side of fear. It was a fear he couldn't afford to show, a fear felt because of someone who should never be able to evoke fear in him. Beop Jong himself couldn't understand it.

Abbot closed his eyes quietly. Once he acknowledged his true feelings, his heart settled calmly. When he came here, Beop Jong had already anticipated such a moment.

'Hwasan Geomhyeop.'

An existence beyond understanding. Always moving in a direction opposite to where one would expect, achieving unimaginable feats.

His very existence posed a threat to Beop Jong and to Shaolin.

Therefore, Beop Jong has tirelessly tried to control Hwasan Geomhyeop until now. However, at the end of deep contemplation, he came to realize why he feared Chung Myung to such extent.

'It was only because it wasn't mine, and I couldn't confine it within myself.'

If someone like Chung Myung had emerged in Shaolin, would Beop Jong have truly feared him? Would he have been cautious and sought to suppress a perceived threat to himself?

No, absolutely not. On the contrary, he might have welcomed Chung Myung's existence more than anyone else. He could have seen it as a presence that would fill the void currently present in Shaolin.

What does this mean?

'If you can't understand it, just keep it by your side.'

The moment the opponent ceases to be an enemy, fear also disappears. Hence, Beop Jong's conclusion was clear – somehow containing Hwasan within Shaolin and Gupailbang. He prepared an offer they could never refuse.

Beop Jong slowly opened his eyes.

«Siju.»

Chung Myung faced Beop Jong without a word, with eyes unchanged.

«To be honest... I anticipated this moment even before coming here.»

«...What does that mean?»

Beop Jong chuckled.

«I didn't know what question you'd ask or how you'd react. But I was certain Siju would bring forth something I hadn't anticipated.»

Beop Jong smiled.

«It has always been that way.»

Chung Myung's lips twitched slightly. He sensed the difference in Beop Jong.

«So, I established one principle before coming here.»

«What's that?»

«No matter what question I receive.»

Beop Jong stared at Chung Myung with unwavering eyes, not avoiding his gaze.

«I will never, ever speak lies.»

Chung Myung furrowed his brows.

«It's expected of a Buddhist, but it's absurd to think a Buddhist would speak lies as easily as eating. It implies you've been feasting on lies until now.»

«That might be true.»

«Shaolin seems finished. The Abbot casually says such things.»

When Chung Myung showed a hint of irritation, Beop Jong shook his head slightly.

«I've never attempted to speak falsehoods to myself. However, there are times when even the truth can become a lie.»

Chung Myung clicked his tongue briefly, understanding the meaning behind Beop Jong's words.

«Promises like 'I will try my best' or 'I will make an effort' — it sounds like avoiding the cliched statements of taking responsibility, doesn't it?»

«Amitabha Buddha.»

Beop Jong muttered disapprovingly.

«That's right. In this position, sometimes you have to tell lies that are not actually lies. I didn't even think of it as a lie. I tried to uphold what I said. But... not saying everything is just another form of falsehood.»

Beop Jong looked at Chung Myung, pondering.

'How ironic.'

How did it come to this?

Even in his eyes, Chung Myung is a hero of Gangho. Now, no one can deny that fact. If he genuinely aimed to protect and establish justice as the Abbot of Shaolin, he should have welcomed and been pleased with someone like Chung Myung appearing.

However, until not long ago, Chung Myung's existence was nothing more than a delusion that filled his heart, neither more nor less.

«So, I'll be honest.»

He knows.

Here, what he should say could be a well-packaged lie. It would make his position a bit more favorable. It's not so difficult to say he'll do his best to save Haenam. So, expressing hope for Cheonumaeng's assistance wouldn't be too challenging.

But Beop Jong knew. It's just a different form of lie, as he mentioned a little while ago.

Hasn't he already made up his mind? He won't utter even a small lie in this place.

«You asked. Is it true that I'll do my best to save even one more person?»

«... Yes.»

Beop Jong nodded.

«Well then, I'll be honest.»

The darkened gazes of Beop Jong and Chung Myung collided in the air.

«Shaolin... I have no intention of saving Haenam.»

His voice was remarkably calm. Consequently, it pierced even deeper into the hearts of those sitting there, as the atmosphere darkened.