

Chapter 1240

Who has come? (5)

Grumble.

The glasses were filled with alcohol to the brim.

A drunken voice reached Yu Gong's ears, as he was staring at the overflowing glass.

«Not drinking?»

«...»

Yu Gong raised his head, then swiftly brought the glass to his lips, downing its contents in one gulp, ignoring Chung Myung's amused grin.

«Nice. You drink well. Good.»

The burning sensation in his throat was vivid. But Yu Gong didn't bat an eye as he emptied the glass in one go.

Thud.

Setting down the now-empty glass, he looked straight ahead, expression unchanged.

«Let's have another drink.»

Chung Myung laughed as he poured more alcohol into the glass. Yu Gong simply stared at Chung Myung.

There were so many things he wanted to ask.

There were so many things he wanted to say.

But now, he had long ceased to be someone who spoke what he wanted. He had become someone who spoke what needed to be said. Raising the glass filled with alcohol lightly, Yu Gong glanced around before speaking.

«I was surprised.»

«Huh?»

As Chung Myung tilted his head slightly, Yu Gong gave a faint smile.

«You may or may not know, but traditionally, we people of Haenam harbor less-than-favorable sentiments towards mainlanders.»

«Hmm?»

«Of course, to others, it may sound a bit odd. After all, Haenam is a prominent sect within Gupailbang, both in name and in reality.»

«...»

«However, no matter how high Haenam's reputation may have risen, the years of being treated as inferior islanders have not been erased from our history.»

Chung Myung remained silent, gazing at Yu Gong.

«Moreover... With the incidents surrounding the Gangnam Peace Treaty, those sentiments have only intensified.»

Yu Gong smirked.

«Even if they didn't speak it aloud, deep down, they must have been pondering. If we weren't islanders but mainlanders, if the sect isolated by the Gangnam Treaty was not Haenam but another great sect within Gupailbang, would we have been so thoroughly ignored? But...»

Yu Gong glanced briefly at the sprawled figures around them.

«Just as those who harbor ill feelings towards mainlanders are here today, mixing with the arriving outsiders and drinking until they pass out.»

«...»

«While Hwasan may have a secluded nature, upon closer inspection, it boasts a longer history than that of Wudang. It seems that statement is not far from the truth. Just by observing such Taoist sorcery...»

Yu Gong's gaze scrutinized Chung Myung, as if searching for something.

«Well... Perhaps that's not entirely accurate. If it's not too presumptuous, may I ask a question? Is it that the Taoist sorcery of Hwasan Sect is exceptional? Or are Hwasan Geomhyeop's personnel management skills so remarkable?»

Chung Myung chuckled at the question. Yu Gong attempted to match his smile as best as he could.

Until the next words were spoken.

«Hey.»

«Yes?»

“Stop babbling and drink up quickly. It's three drinks. You've already had one.»

«...»

«Drink.»

Yu Gong cleared his throat and brought the glass to his lips. Then, just like before, he downed the full glass of liquor in one gulp.

«If you overdo it and end up coughing, you'll be paying for the wasted drinks, so figure it out.»

«...»

«Come on, one more.»

Chung Myung laughed as he refilled the empty glass with liquor. Yu Gong's complexion paled slightly as he saw the pouring liquor.

Reluctantly gulping it down to maintain his composure, Yu Gong was aware that Haenam's liquor was typically consumed cautiously in smaller glasses, not in gulps like this. Despite being a warrior, drinking such potent liquor continuously while unable to utilize inner energy was quite burdensome for him.

«Do you want an answer?»

«Yes?»

«Then drink. After three drinks, I'll give you an answer.»

«...»

Upon hearing those words, Yu Gong stiffened his face slightly and glanced at Chung Myung before beginning to raise his third cup.

«Oh, you're drinking well, aren't you?»

Clunk! Clunk!

Suppressing the sensation in his burning throat, Yu Gong forced the liquor down, as if pushing it through, then abruptly tore the cup from his lips. Cough!

A scream-like gasp escaped his lips. With each breath, a strong aroma filled his mouth, and his stomach felt as if he had swallowed lava. It was as if his blood rushed twice as fast throughout his body.

«Excellent.»

Chung Myung chuckled and swiftly poured liquor into his own cup. Then, with a frightening speed as if to challenge the brim, he grabbed the cup and gulped down the liquor.

«Gahhh!»

Clank!

Rather than a cup, the vessel, more akin to a bowl, made a clear sound as it hit the floor.

Chung Myung wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked at Yu Gong, who was struggling to control the sudden rush of intoxication.

«So.»

«Yes?»

«What were you curious about?»

«That... um...»

Yu Gong hesitated for a moment, stumbling over his words. Chung Myung grinned at his reaction.

«I probably don't even remember. Just asking whatever comes to mind without much interest.»

Yu Gong's face flushed, whether from intoxication or unavoidable embarrassment.

«Still, I'll give you an answer. I haven't done anything special.»

Chung Myung turned his head to look at the scattered people.

«I just asked for some liquor, and I drank it. The rest of them just decided to join in and ended up like that.»

«...»

Yu Gong sighed.

«Although the disciples of Haenam may seem simple in some ways and even take pride in it, they're not foolish enough to behave like that in front of guests who just arrived. Obviously, Hwasan Geomhyeop must have done something.»

«But perhaps this gentleman has been deceived all along. He says he hasn't done anything.»

«Yes, that could be.»

Yu Gong nodded quietly.

«But if you think about it, that's even more remarkable. The atmosphere naturally changes even when the person himself hasn't done anything...»

«Hey.»

Chung Myung's voice interrupted him, causing Yu Gong to furrow his brows slightly.

«I've emptied my cup. Want another round?»

«I... I'll pass...»

«Why? Is there something you shouldn't say when you're drunk?»

«...»

«Drink up.»

Chung Myung poured more liquor into Yu Gong's cup.

Yu Gong looked at Chung Myung and the cup alternately with a puzzled expression. Chung Myung shrugged as he filled the cup.

«Ah, well. Don't misunderstand. I hate forcing people who don't want to drink. Why would I force precious liquor on someone who doesn't like it? I don't have enough for myself.»

«Then...»

«Not drinking is your choice. But if you're not going to drink, you should step aside. I'm here to make a spectacle, not to chat.»

«...»

Yu Gong sighed deeply and gripped his glass. Then, this time, he began to drink slowly, without haste. Chung Myung chuckled at the sight.

«But still, we're communicating a bit.»

Clank.

Yu Gong set down his glass, his hand trembling slightly. His face was flushed, as if it could catch fire at any moment.

«Oh well, don't use up your inner energy. It's a waste of liquor.»

Chung Myung clicked his tongue and started gulping down the liquor in his own glass, filling it up again.

Once the alcohol had taken its effect, Chung Myung continued the conversation.

«Am I impressive?»

Chung Myung laughed.

«I don't understand. Are you really saying you've done nothing?»

«...then.»

«It's not that I'm impressive and causing this scene. It's quite the opposite.»

«Oh?»

Chung Myung gestured towards the collapsed figures.

«How does it look?»

«...Pathetic,»

came the honest sentiment. At least, it wasn't a sight befitting a host. Even though he had no right to criticize as he was leaving Haenam soon, could he not at least pass judgment?

«Is that so?»

Chung Myung smiled and refilled his glass. Then, he offered a contrasting opinion to Yu Gong.

«They seem impressive to my eyes.»

«...»

Yu Gong fell silent. Partly because of the rising intoxication, but also because it was difficult to understand Chung Myung's words.

«As you said, no matter how young and simple they may be, they wouldn't be so thoughtless as to get drunk and collapse in front of people visiting Haenam for the first time.»

Yu Gong nodded with newfound clarity.

«But why does it seem that way? Did I skillfully scratch the surface?»

«...»

«No, I really haven't done anything. Everyone just gathered as they naturally would.

They've been holding on, pushing themselves to the limit in a situation where anything could explode at any moment. Under the pressure of not knowing if tomorrow might be their last day alive.»

Chung Myung's gaze darkened as he looked at the fallen figures.

He saw familiar scenes overlapping with the sight of those who had collapsed.

Those who, after battles, sought out alcohol excessively and collapsed into sleep as if knocking themselves unconscious.

These are the images of those who drank alcohol compulsively in an attempt to somehow cut off their consciousness due to the sense of guilt and relief that they came back alive after not being able to die along with those who died today, and the fear of having to go to the battlefield again tomorrow.

Yes, it was truly painful.

But at that time, they were at least fully responsible for themselves. However, the ones here now are still too young compared to those he knew in the past.

So.

«Enduring so far is impressive.»

«...»

«It is not something big that causes those who held on for so long to break down, but a small sense of relief. Not the relief of no longer having to endure, but the petty relief of knowing that at least for tonight, or maybe just for a few more hours, they might be safe.»

«...»

«All I've given them is that.»

Yu Gong seemed like he wanted to say something, but then he just lowered his head. A faint groan-like voice escaped from Yu Gong's lips as he remained silent, bowing his head.

«...It's not enduring.»

«Huh?»

«There was just nowhere else to escape. Nowhere in the world.»

Chung Myung lifted his gaze to the ceiling.

«... Yeah. That's right.»

He knows.

He knows painfully well.

«So just let it be. Sometimes, even knowing it's not the right thing to do, people want to let go. They'll wake up tomorrow with regrets and a throbbing headache, but sometimes, that's what gives them the strength to endure tomorrow.»

Yu Gong's gaze shifted to the face of the collapsed Gwak Hwanso. His face, always rigid as a rock, seemed a bit more relaxed for the first time in a while.

Perhaps Chung Myung's words were right after all.

What they needed might not be a clear answer or a goal, but simply the luxury of being able to sleep tonight without any worries.

But... while they could do that, he...

«Drink.»

Chung Myung abruptly placed a glass of liquor in front of Yu Gong.

«...»

As Yu Gong stared blankly at the glass, Chung Myung spoke with a hint of seriousness.

«Regardless of your position, regardless of your circumstances...»

«...»

«Even if you're uncertain whether we'll become allies or enemies starting tomorrow, you've endured just like them until now.»

«...»

«As someone who also has a position to consider, I might not be able to say everything I want to say tomorrow morning. So, I'll say it now.»

Chung Myung's lips formed a faint smile. Then, in a slightly softer tone, he addressed Yu Gong.

«You've held up well, young one.»

«...»

Yu Gong's shoulders trembled slightly.

It was awfully presumptuous and terribly arrogant words. Yet strangely, Yu Gong didn't feel the slightest bit offended. No, he didn't feel bad at all. In fact, he felt...

«Drink. And pass out. Dealing with the aftermath can wait until tomorrow.»

Yu Gong gazed at Chung Myung with vacant eyes.

«Not drinking?»

«...»

His slightly trembling hand reached for the glass. With both hands, Yu Gong slowly, very slowly, began to drink the liquor in the glass.

«Good.»

Chung Myung poured liquor slowly into his own glass. Then, as if to toast with Yu Gong, he brought the drink to his lips.

The liquor up until now was for everyone, but this particular drink was solely for him.

‘For everyone.’

The image of Hundred Thousand Mountains passed through his mind.

‘Don’t criticize me too much. Someday, I’ll go there too.’

The strong liquor went down his throat.

Memories of the past, creeping slowly, were washed away by the liquor that Chung Myung forcefully swallowed, sinking deep into the recesses of his mind. But...

The scent of the liquor remained, lingering around Chung Myung.

Just like those days which were long gone.