

Chapter 1016

What did you just say? (1)

The robe of Abbot Beop Jong fluttered in the strong wind. His gaze was fixed on the boats on the Yangtze River. At first glance, they appeared peaceful and leisurely. But to Beop Jong, they looked like sharp fangs, ready to rush in and tear his throat apart.

«Umm.»

Beop Jong's eyes sank into contemplation.

It had been nearly ten days since the Maehwado incident had ended. However, the Sapaeryeon had not left the river.

Surochae was a group of bandits who typically robbed those who traveled the river. Keeping these boats anchored here, which should have been targeted for robbery, meant a significant loss for the Sapaeryeon. That's why Beop Jong couldn't make a move. There was no way to lower his guard before the enemy put down their swords.

«...Jang Ilso.»

The name filled with hatred flowed from Beop Jong's lips. He would be in the camp across the river, which was clearly visible.

Tap, tap.

Behind him, Beop Gye slowly approached.

«Abbot, we've received replies from the Gupailbang sects.»

While Beop Gye delivered the news, Beop Jong didn't show any reaction.

«...Abbot.»

Beop Gye called out a couple more times before Beop Jong reluctantly turned his gaze.

«What do you say?»

«Overall... Many of them are leaning towards sending support to the Yangtze River first.»

Beop Jong had a faint smile on his face.

«You mean they didn't specify the exact timing and quantity of support?»

«Yes, Abbot.»

A hint of anger slowly crept onto Beop Jong's face. Vague promises without specific details were nothing but empty words that could be changed at any time. Despite the situation, they were still playing political games.

«I see. That's how it is.»

But Beop Jong nodded indifferently, as if he had expected as much.

«What about Cheonumaeng?»

«They mostly replied with deep suspicion regarding Cheonumaeng's actions.»

«Deep suspicion...»

Beop Jong chuckled softly.

Suspicion, what a beautiful word. It meant that if Cheonumaeng had made some secret alliance with the Sapaeryeon, they had been skeptical from the beginning, and if not, they would be relieved that their suspicions ended there.

They were lukewarm. Yes, they had been lukewarm in all matters.

«Abbot.»

«As expected.»

When Beop Jong nodded lightly, Beop Gye let out a deep sigh.

«How can you be so calm?»

«Hmm?»

Beop Gye's voice contained a hint of resentment.

«Of course, I'm not saying we did everything perfectly. We certainly made mistakes, and there were misunderstandings.»

«...»

«But at least we are here, facing the Sapaeryeon on the Yangtze River, aren't we? How should we interpret their indifference toward us, considering that?»

Beop Jeong looked at Beop Gye and smiled.

«Do you find it resentful?»

«I... I...»

«There's no need for resentment. That's just how people are. The thorn stuck in my fingernail is excruciatingly painful, but I can't even feel the pain of someone dying in a faraway land in this foreign place.»

Beop Gye bit his lip.

The method may not have been right, but they, nevertheless, came this far with good intentions. Beop Gye found their response to their good intentions to be excessively cruel.

«So, are you saying we should just endure this?»

Beop Jong didn't respond with a smile but instead posed a question.

«What do you think should be done?»

«...»

Beop Gye looked at Beop Jong with a momentarily speechless expression.

Abbot had been restless when the Maehwa rebellion was in full swing. But now, just a few days later, he had regained some of his former composure.

«It's a problem. It's a problem. How should we deal with those who won't listen?»

Muttering to himself, Beop Jong gazed across the river.

«First, send messengers again to report the situation continuously, and keep requesting support. If possible, demand that they specify what kind of support they will provide.»

These were detailed instructions. However, Beop Gye let out a sigh when he heard them.

«Abbot, even if we say this, will they actually give it to us?»

«They won't give it to us. But it doesn't matter.»

«What?»

Beop Jong began to speak abruptly.

“People watching across the river aren’t in a hurry. Maybe they are just enjoying the spectacle of those who are burning with intense emotions.”

“...”

“Right now, to them, we’re just the ones jumping around on the other side of the river, trying to put out a fire. They have no reason to hurry.”

Beop Jong paused for a moment and stared at Beop Gye.

“Do you know how to make those people feel urgency?”

“I... I’m not sure, Abbot.”

“Let them know that the fire could cross the river.”

Beop Jong muttered under his breath.

“The fire on the other side of the river can’t threaten me. But the fire that’s about to burn at my feet is no longer entertaining. That fire can burn my home, my fields, and ultimately, it can burn my family and even me.”

Beop Gye nodded quietly.

Of course, the reason why the Gupailbang and other factions were not responding properly was due to the weakening of the Shaolin’s authority. But more fundamentally, they didn’t perceive the Sapaeryeon as a substantial threat.

‘Those three years have ruined everything.’

If Jang Ilso had killed everyone there during the Yangtze River tragedy, the Sapaeryeon might not have existed now. The remaining factions would have tried anything to eliminate Sapaeryeon. However, Jang Ilso spent three years quietly building his power in Gangnam. It took time for the mere existence of the Sapaeryeon across the river to be considered natural. So they became accustomed to it, the presence of the flames burning on the other side of the river. What is familiar is no longer perceived as a threat. Therefore, no matter how loudly you shout here, they won’t hear it.

«Shouldn’t we inform them, Abbot, how dangerous the Sapaeryeon’s fire is?»

«Yes, I thought the same.»

«...And?»

Beop Gye raised an eyebrow at Beop Jong’s casual voice. His response had seemed a bit strange just now...

«Until not long ago.»

And Beop Jong’s subsequent words confirmed that it wasn’t a mishearing.

Beop Jong paused. His voice had subtly changed.

«But recently, I’ve started to wonder if I might have been thinking something wrong.»

«What do you mean by that?»

«They might not know how fierce that fire is.»

Beop Gye still couldn’t fully grasp Beop Jong’s words. Who wouldn’t understand how dangerous Sapaeryeon was?

«Contrary to my thoughts, it seems like they've forgotten what fire even is.»

«Abbot?»

A slight smile tugged at the corner of Beop Jong's mouth.

«Yes, it was a world that never had fire to begin with. There was ample time to forget what a flame was. No, in a world where there might be embers but no combustion, that's more appropriate.»

«...»

«That's why they've forgotten what fire is, why they should be afraid.»

Doubt filled Beop Gye's eyes as he looked at Beop Jong. Then Abbot turned to face Beop Gye. His gaze was chillingly dark.

«Beop Gye.»

Beop Gye startled, bowing his head.

«Yes, Abbot.»

Beop Jong's voice was soft, slow, and tender, as if soothing a child.

«...Do you know how to make someone who doesn't know fire understand what it is?»

«Well...»

«You make them feel it.»

For a moment, Beop Gye's spine tingled. Beop Jong spoke calmly.

“It's about making them feel how hot fire is, how painful it is when your hand touches the flame, and what happens when the body starts burning.”

“A-, Abbot.”

“Of course!”

Beop Gye tried to speak, but Beop Jong interrupted firmly.

“It will hurt. It will be painful. But... if they will know what fire is, will they foolishly walk into the flames?”

“...”

Beop Gye fell silent as if he had lost his words. The faint smile on Beop Jong's lips and his gentle voice remained the same. However, within that appearance of Beop Jong, Beop Gye sensed something eerie. It was a chilling energy, as if his soul was freezing.

Beop Jong gazed at Beop Gye and smiled.

“Do my words sound too harsh?”

“Abbot, I just...”

“It might sound harsh, but a Buddhist should not fear losing.”

Beop Jong raised one arm toward Beop Gye, not in the traditional Shaolin salute of clasping both hands together but with a distinctive Shaolin gesture of raising only one arm.

«Why does Shaolin use the half-palm salute [반장 (半掌) — “Banjang” — Meaning: Half palm or half-hand stance.]?»

It was a sudden question, and Beop Gye naturally knew the answer. If you belonged to Shaolin, you couldn't be unaware.

«...To honor the Second Patriarch. [이] 조 (二祖) — “Lee Jo” — Meaning: Second Patriarch (in the context of Buddhism)]»

«That’s right.»

Beop Jeong nodded quietly.

While Shaolin traces its lineage back to the Indian monk Bodhidharma, its spiritual origin lies with the Second Patriarch, Hyega [慧可/혜가], and his non-dualistic completion with the Sixth Patriarch [육조 (六祖) — “Yukjo” — Meaning: Sixth Patriarch (in the context of Buddhism)], Hyeneung [慧能/혜능].

Aren’t all these connected to what Shaolin is today?

«The Second Patriarch cut off his arm to attain enlightenment.»

«Yes, Abbot.»

«In reverse, it means that to attain great enlightenment, one should be willing to sacrifice at least an arm without hesitation.»

«...»

«It’s not just a story that applies to those within the Buddhist community. Sometimes, to gain something significant, one must be willing to make small sacrifices.»

Beop Gye couldn’t say a word. There was an indescribable pressure within the gentle aura that Beop Jong emanated. Even breathing became difficult.

Abbot, who had performed the half-palm salute, closed his eyes as if organizing his thoughts. After a moment, he opened his eyes again and spoke.

«Just make them aware. That should be enough.»

«Yes, Abbot.»

«Send a response.»

«Yes.»

Beop Gye respectfully performed the half-palm salute and stepped back. He felt a strong desire to leave this place as soon as possible.

As he was about to walk away, Beop Jong, who had fixed his gaze on the Yangtze River, asked in a low voice,

«How is Hwasan doing?»

Pausing his steps, Beop Gye cautiously replied,

«They seem to have established a base not far from here and are staying there with Tangga. They don’t seem to be making any significant movements.»

«What about Hwasan Geomhyeop?»

«...That young one seems to be teaching the swordsmen of Namgung lately.»

«Teaching Namgung?»

«Yes.»

Beop Jong’s gaze shifted slightly upward.

“...That young one will eventually capture Namgung as well.”

“...”

“Go.”

With those words, Beop Jong remained motionless, merely gazing at the river, which flowed endlessly.

Beop Gye, who had been observing him from behind for a moment, respectfully performed the half-palm salute and withdrew.

In the back view of Beop Jong, the glimmering Yangtze River was full of meaning.

“...The world is unfair,”

a bitter smile played on his lips.

“Amida Buddha...”

In his closed eyes, nothing else was visible.