

Chapter 1204

So what's the difference? (4)

Cold sweat dripped from the man's entire body. Thick droplets of sweat passed continuously through his sides and lower back.

Yet, the man felt nothing at all. Perhaps now, even if a blade were to pass through his body, he wouldn't be able to focus on the sensation and pain it brought.

The reason was quite simple. Pain was nothing more than a fleeting moment. Would someone who had their head in a tiger's jaws feel pain from a small wound on their palm? Moreover, the figure the man faced now was incomparable to any beast.

«Hmm.»

As a soft sigh escaped, the man's body instinctively shuddered.

«It seems you're not fond of the tea.»

«What? Oh... How could that be? Certainly, absolutely not. Ryeonju.»

«Anyone here?»

As the figure standing before the man called out, attendants waiting outside immediately entered the room.

«Fetch a fresh pot of tea. Make sure it's warm.»

«As you wish, my Lord»

The attendant retrieved the teacup placed in front of the man and left the room being utmost polite. Watching them go, the man unknowingly bit down hard on the inside of his lip. He feared his actions of not drinking the tea might have made the person before him uncomfortable.

«Hmm.»

At that moment, the eyes gazing at the man painted a crescent-shaped, subtle arc. It was a smile that didn't seem malicious in any way, no matter how one looked at it.

However, the person facing that smile didn't feel at ease.

«There's no need to be so tense, Danju [as a Master/Head etc.].»

«I-I'm sorry. I just...»

«No, no. There's no need for blame. I understand completely.»

Truly, it was a soft and affectionate voice.

«But... Danju, you need not fear me too much either.»

«Y-Yes, of course...»

«If I had any intention of causing harm to you, would there be a need for such trivial methods?»

The meaning behind those words was clearly one of goodwill. And the expression wasn't misconstrued either. If there was an issue, it was that the person saying those words, Paegun

Jang Ilso himself, made even innocuous words seem ominous when they came from his mouth.

«... Yes.»

The person addressed as Danju nodded frantically, looking flustered. Observing this, Jang Ilso smiled faintly once again.

«While I understand how people may perceive me, I am not as ruthless as they may think. Especially towards those who are worthy, I am as gentle as one can be.»

Unable to grasp what response to give, the man hesitated, choosing instead to remain silent. Jang Ilso's gaze hardened.

«Is it hard to believe?»

“I-Is there any reason for me not to believe you, Ryeonju? I-I believe you!”

«Hahaha.»

With a hint of amusement, Jang Ilso smiled slyly, slightly tilting his chin as he scrutinized the man.

«The reason I've arranged this meeting is because I may need your assistance in the future, Danju.»

«... What help could I, a mere merchant, possibly offer someone as esteemed as you, Ryeonju?»

The man who spoke glanced subtly at Jang Ilso's reaction. Jang Ilso, however, remained silent, merely staring intently at him. Sensing that he had chosen his words poorly, the man quickly changed the subject.

«B-But if my meager abilities can be of any help to you, Ryeonju, I will not hesitate to offer my utmost loyalty! I-I will devote my life to serving you!»

It was an oath of loyalty more fervent than could be asked for. However, Jang Ilso's expression remained unchanged.

«Such loyalty...»

What emotion was conveyed in that voice? How should it be described?

«The words of a merchant may be smooth and sweet, but...»

Jang Ilso's gaze remained gentle, yet it swept over the man's entire body like a living viper.

«... Equally dangerous and futile.»

In that moment, it felt as if the blood in the man's veins turned cold. Each word that was flowing out Jang Ilso's mouth echoed through his mind like a relentless drumbeat. Knowing that the whims of this unpredictable demon could cause hundreds, even thousands of lives to be forfeited in an instant, he could do nothing but submit.

«To mock a cursed mouth...»

«What a merchant fears most is ultimately this curse.»

«... Yes?»

A bead of sweat formed on the man's forehead, trickling down.

Jang Ilso slowly opened his mouth.

«I am aware that the merchants of Gangnam have suffered greatly due to the situation on the Yangtze river. As the head of Sapaeryeon, I apologize.»

As soon as the word «apologize» left Jang Ilso's lips, the color drained from the man's face.

«H-How could your lordship apologize? Who would dare suggest that it was not a resolute decision to stabilize the situation on the Yangtze river? Who could be unaware of that?»

«A resolute decision...»

At the mention of a resolute decision, Jang Ilso chuckled as if unable to contain himself for a moment.

«Your consideration is much appreciated. Anyway, I'm not here to ask you to abandon profits and sacrifice everything for Sapaeryeon. Rather, I'm suggesting we find a way to help each other.»

«...Help each other?»

«It's simple.»

Jang Ilso lifted the tea cup to his lips, taking a slow sip. His demeanor suggested he paid no attention to whether the person across from him was burning with curiosity or not.

«Danju.»

«Yes, yes, Ryeonju...»

«If what merchants need is profit, then what Sapaeryeon needs now is stability.»

«...Did you say stability?»

«Everything needs a solid foundation. Isn't stability the most important aspect?»

Naturally, it was a valid point. However, the reason for questioning it was because the speaker was Jang Ilso. Considering his past actions, terms like 'radical' or 'unconventional' seemed more fitting than 'stability'.

«While that is true...»

«In reality, the lives of Gangnam's commoners are far from stable.»

As Jang Ilso spoke with a hint of sigh in his voice, the man was surprised and looked at him again.

'Is this person really Paegun Jang Ilso?'

Of course, the man knew it was true. Who else in the entire Central Plains could boast such flamboyant colors and splendid outfit? Even if there were two people as formidable as Jang Ilso, who else but him could effortlessly control the reins of the fearsome Sapa within this very Sapaeryeon?

Unable to hide his surprise, the man watched Jang Ilso, who then flashed a peculiar smile.

«Why? Is it strange for such words to come from my mouth?»

«Well, it's not that, but...»

«Haha. There's nothing strange about it. Danju, it's undeniable that I'm a leader of Sapa, a murderer who has taken countless lives.»

«But...»

«However, just because that's true doesn't mean there's a need to unnecessarily oppress the common folk, does it? All I seek in Gangnam is stability and order.»

The man attempted to speak several times but faltered each time. It was difficult to determine what to say to not offend the unpredictable Jang Ilso.

«So, I'm making a request. Merchants chase after profit, and sometimes they forget. Ultimately, it's because there are people willing to buy their goods.»

Just when the man couldn't decipher Jang Ilso's intentions, Jang Ilso casually continued.

«After Sapaeryeon took control of Gangnam, merchants have been secretly stockpiling grains and goods.»

«R-Ryeonju...»

«Haa.»

Jang Ilso, as if signaling not to interrupt, waved his hands adorned with jewelry.

«Please don't misunderstand. I'm not blaming you for that. Sometimes, crouching down is a necessity when times are rough.»

«I... I understand. Thank you.»

For a moment, it felt like he had stepped into a realm of madness, only to return abruptly. The man was now at the point where he wished Jang Ilso would just slit his throat with a single strike.

Then, Jang Ilso's glowing gaze narrowed slightly.

«But there must be limits even to pursuing heretics. It's excessive not to release the grain when people are starving, don't you think?»

«...»

«I understand that Danju holds considerable influence over Gangnam's commerce. Shim Ikyeong [심이경(沈二更)] of the Nanjing Merchant Guild [남경상단(南京商團)] is considered the foremost merchant in Gangnam, according to the rumors.»

«It's too much praise.»

«So, please convey this message. Release all the stored grain from the warehouses. And bring the other goods stored there to Sapaeryeon. We will use them for the reconstruction of Hangzhou.»

The man, Shim Ikyeong, began to tremble. The words he least wanted to hear had finally come from Jang Ilso's mouth. The world seemed distant. Amidst the desire to scream for his throat to be cut, an unexpected offer reached his ears.

«And please submit the bill. We will pay within a month.»

«...Pardon?»

Shim Ikyeong, feeling utterly dumbfounded, couldn't help but ask in a faltering voice, «I mentioned offering payment. Why would you be so surprised? Did you think I would resort to robbery?»

«That... How could... How could that be? Ryeonju!»

«Hahaha!»

Jang Ilso seemed amused as he chuckled heartily.

«Alright, alright. But... don't set the price too high. I may like ambitious people, but I disdain those who are greedy. Do you understand what I mean?»

«Yes, of course. How could one be greedy when it comes to serving the people!»

«Hmm.»

A grunt escaped Jang Ilso's mouth. Shim Ikyeong cautiously observed him.

«Then, if I convey the message...»

«And one more thing.»

«Yes, yes! Ryeonju!»

«I will open the Yangtze River for you to resume trade with Gangbuk.»

At these words, Shim Ikyeong's eyes widened.

«There is one condition.»

«...And what would that be?»

«Ensure that the grain and goods retrieved from the warehouses reach not only the major cities but also the villages where the poor reside.»

Silence hung heavy in the air as Jang Ilso laid out his plan.

«Let the flow of logistics, like blood through a person's veins, return to Gangnam as a whole. The same goes for the goods traded with Gangbuk.»

«If that can be arranged, then we have no choice but to comply. After all, merchants rely on logistics for their livelihoods, don't they?»

Shim Ikyeong nervously replied, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

«However... conducting logistics in Gangnam is currently impossible. Even if a slightly valuable item were to hit the road...»

«It will be plundered?»

«That's... «

«Accept it.»

«Pardon?»

Surprised, Shim Ikyeong looked up, only to see Jang Ilso smiling faintly.

«It will only happen once or twice in the beginning. After that, no one will dare to plunder. Once those who laid their hands on the goods witness their comrades being torn apart, piece by piece, they will think twice.»

A chill ran down Shim Ikyeong's spine at Jang Ilso's words.

«So, Danju, I implore you to swiftly mobilize Gangbuk to release grain and goods across the lands and send the accumulated goods to Sapaeryeon to secure this deal. In return, ensure that the payment for this transaction reaches every corner of Gangnam. That is the condition set by Sapaeryeon. In exchange, Gangnam will have unrestricted access to trade with Gangbuk.»

«Thank you, Ryeonju!»

«You're welcome.»

Jang Ilso smiled quietly, prompting a momentary flicker of suspicion in Shim Ikyeong's mind.

«However...»

«Hmm?»

Perhaps it was Shim Ikyeong's courage, or rather, his discomfort that led him to speak up. Jang Ilso, the most feared figure in the Central Plains, leading Sapaeryeon, was now fully controlling Gangnam. Yet, his first act was to release funds to feed the hungry of Gangnam. It was unsettling.

So, Shim Ikyeong eventually asked, pushing aside the creeping fear:

«Why such benevolent governance?»

«Is there something wrong with that?»

«Well...»

«Or perhaps, you think there's a reason why it shouldn't be done?»

«N-No, not at all.»

«Then what is it?»

Jang Ilso said with a deep smile.

«Are you suggesting that Jang Ilso is not as bad as people make him out to be?»

«Bad? Heaven forbid! I've never entertained such thoughts for even a moment!»

Jang Ilso, who had been laughing cheerfully, slowly lowered his gaze and grinned.

«It's a good thing. A very good thing. Despite being misunderstood by the entire realm, to have you, Danju, recognize me — I'm truly grateful.»

Shim Ikyeong remained silent.

«You chase after profits, and I chase after stability, so we can have a mutually beneficial relationship. I look forward to working well together in the future.»

«Yes, Ryeonju! I'll do my best.»

A faint glimmer of excitement crossed Shim Ikyeong's pale face. Though it felt like his lifespan had shortened by ten years, now he could sell the hoarded goods and regain control of the blocked supply routes.

There might not be immediate substantial gains, but just the resumption of logistics was advantageous, wasn't it? And seeing how surprisingly reasonable Jang Ilso was in their conversation, perhaps it wouldn't take too long to seize a significant profit.

«Oh, right. One more thing.»

«Yes?»

Shim Ikyeong was startled, raising his head. And in that moment, he saw it — the sinister glint in Jang Ilso's eyes.

«Just in case... Please spread the word. Let them know, Jang Ilso is someone who likes to set examples.»

Silence filled the room.

«People are different from pigs because they understand gratitude, don't they? If someone understands gratitude, they should accept kindness with kindness. But if there's someone who just can't accept my kindness for what it is...»

Jang Ilso lightly licked his red lips.

«Danju, you will come to realize, in a slightly different sense, that I'm not quite the same as the person the world thinks I am.»

Shim Ikyeong felt his strength drain from his body.

«Please have the tea before you leave. It's my consideration. Hahahaha!»

With a loud laugh, Jang Ilso stood up and from behind him, a servant brought in the tea and placed it in front of Shim Ikyeong.

That day, Shim Ikyeong couldn't finish even a sip of that tea, no matter how much he tried.