

Chapter 1018

What did you just say? (3)

“In the heavens, there is paradise — on earth, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou [上有天堂 下有蘇杭].”

With its stunning scenery, Hangzhou is often referred to as «heaven on earth.» However, the true essence of Hangzhou is revealed after the sun, which had shone on the beautiful landscape, sets beyond the western mountains.

It becomes the «City That Never Sleeps [不夜城].»

As the multicolored lanterns lining the streets illuminate the darkness, a vibrant Hangzhou night, where all the pleasures of the world converge, begins.

The bustling voices of those crowding the streets, the laughter of those gathered around street vendors on every corner, and somewhere in the mix, the sound of a qin[琴 — musical instrument] and a beautiful song performed by a courtesan.

That is Hangzhou.

However, the world is never just what meets the eye.

Once you step into the narrow alleys hidden off the grand boulevards, the world that seemed as bright as day quietly vanishes, and in its place, a dark and eerie alley welcomes those who venture in.

It's like stepping into a completely different world just a few steps away from the outside.

Even the tough folks in Hangzhou, even the government soldiers, don't easily muster the courage to enter without a fair amount of preparations.

The first thing you'll see when you turn into that alley is a group of people with menacing looks, whispering and puffing smoke.

The bright lights only create an equally dense darkness.

Naturally, the most glamorous nightlife in Hangzhou conceals a darker side than any other city.

Going further into the alley, small doors become visible, completely inconspicuous from the outside.

Passing those standing guard, once you enter through the door, you'll see a room filled with people, enveloped in thick sickening smoke.

The stifling smell and intense heat that make you squirm, mingled with a subtle discomfort. Anger, despair, and cheers like fireworks filled with all the joys of the world coexist.

This is none other than Hangzhou's gambling den.

In the center of Hangzhou's gambling den, particularly at the exalted Hwanhiwon with the highest stakes [Pleasure Palace — 歡喜院], five men were seated.

Tak!

A man, throwing down his winning pair of tiles, broke into a triumphant smile.

«I've won.»

«Damn it.»

«I'm cleaning you all out.»

The man reached out and swept all the silver coins piled on the table in front of him.

«It looks like luck is on my side today.»

«...Enjoy it to your heart's content, because when you leave, you'll leave empty-handed.»

«It's a blessing if you even leave with your neck, isn't it?»

Threatening words were exchanged, but the man didn't pay the slightest attention. No one could use violence inside the gambling den. That was the principle of Black Ghost's operations of Hwanhiwon.

Notorious gamblers from Sapa, government officials in disguise, and even merchants who adorned themselves from head to toe just for some amusement, all adhered to this rule.

If someone violated the rule, Black Ghost Fortress would chase them to the ends of hell, strip them of their skin, and kill them.

Looking at the heaps of silver coins piled up to the point where there was no room to organize, the man's lips involuntarily curved into a smile.

Those who frequent gambling tables understand the physiology of gambling better than anyone. It means that in the world of gambling, there are no eternal winners. The piles of silver coins stacked high right now could all disappear in just one round.

Knowing this, some still can't forget the pleasure that a single victory brings, and that's why they daringly wager everything they have in this place.

However...

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

A bitter laugh escaped from the man's lips once more.

Even in a gambling den, there are times when an absolute victory is guaranteed. It's when a rich young fellow, who knows nothing about gambling, enters the game with only money.

The man glanced over at the person sitting across from him.

At a glance, it was clear that this scruffy wanderer was a troublemaker. With messy, unruly hair that looked as if it had never seen a comb, lips cracked and dry, half-hidden beneath that tangle of hair.

Despite the somewhat sinister appearance, the man didn't sense any threat from the person in front of him.

'A foolish brat.'

It was evident that this wandering mercenary had gathered some money and had come here to gamble. He seemed a bit more skilled than your average mercenary, judging by his composure, but that wasn't saying much.

Whether it's a skilled mercenary or a renowned master of the martial arts realm, no one dares to cause trouble in this Hwanhiwon managed by the Black Ghost. If they did, they'd become

lifeless corpses rotting somewhere in the back alleys of Hangzhou before they could even protest properly.

No, even if they were to lose Black Ghost's protection, the outcome would be the same. The man had no need for the help of others, for he was none other than the Third Master of Black Ghost's Hangzhou Division, Chae Gyu [蔡揆], known as Heuksim Yeomra [Black-hearted Yama — 黑心閻羅].

«Well, well, if you want to recover your lost money, let's start the next round quickly.»

«Tsk.»

The men in front of him each threw five coins onto the center of the round table. Chae Gyu, the victor, began to collect the tiles and shuffle them.

«Hey, Third Master.»

The man sitting beside him asked hesitantly.

«What are the higher ups planning?»

«What?»

«The Yangtze River, Yangtze.»

Instead of answering, the man took a drag from his tobacco pipe. White smoke continuously billowed from his lips.

«Ryeonju... I mean, Jang Ilso is just standing there, do you think he'll keep watching?»

«Why are you asking me that? What would a lowly gambler like me know?»

«Still, you might know more than I do.»

«Stop talking nonsense. What does some petty leader like me know? Bringing up outside matters in the sacred gambling room.»

«Tsk.»

The man leaned back in his chair with an annoyed expression. The smoke from his tobacco pipe swirled in a hazy cloud.

«Come on, take your tiles.»

Chak!

Chae Gyu, who had dealt the tiles, flipped one of the pairs in the center.

«It's a reversed tile.»

The people around the round table exchanged their tiles. Tensions subtly rose, and a delicate battle of wits began. Chae Gyu picked up a stack of coins placed in front of him and tossed them into the center.

«Ten nyang.»

«Damn... That's a big bet. I'm done for.»

«I'm in.»

At that moment, Chae Gyu's gaze turned towards the mercenary sitting across from him. The mercenary, who had been contemplating over his tiles, subtly nodded and pushed all his coins to the front.

Drurrug.

Chae Gyu's eyes were filled with greed as he looked at the stack of coins in the center. The sum of the bets gathered here could be equivalent to a year's worth of his salary.

«Okay, let's reveal the tiles.»

«I have three.»

The man sitting to his left nervously flipped his tiles. The mercenary across from him also slowly revealed his tiles.

«Four.»

As the wanderer's hand reached towards the stack of coins in the center, Chae Gyu extended his hand and grabbed his wrist.

«...»

«You're quite impatient.»

Chae Gyu used his other hand to casually touch the remaining tiles. The tile that flipped over was a five, and it was a win for Chae Gyu.

«Hahaha. What can I say, I'm sorry, my friend.»

Chae Gyu swept all the coins in front of him.

«At first, it seemed like you had a good chance.»

«That's how gambling is.»

«Still, gambling can change in an instant.»

The people sitting on either side spoke with a sense of resignation. Chae Gyu quickly shuffled the tiles once more and tossed five more nyang into the center.

Chak! Chak!

Coins flew in from the sides, but the mercenary across from him didn't move a muscle.

«What's going on? Have you run out of money, friend?»

«In that case, you should get up. There are many people waiting for an empty seat.»

The mercenary's chin moved slightly. To Chae Gyu, it felt as if he could only see his distorted eyes, hidden beneath his tangled hair.

After a brief silence, the mercenary slowly slid his hand into his sleeve. Chae Gyu's eyes narrowed as he observed this.

'Is this guy...?'

It seemed like this guy might cause some trouble, and Chae Gyu was preparing himself.

Snap!

Suddenly, the wanderer dropped a crumpled piece of paper onto the center of the table.

«What's this?»

«It looks like a slip or something.»

«A slip? What's it doing here? It looks like it's been around for decades...»

«How much is that worth, anyway?»

Chae Gyu, with a puzzled look, picked up the crumpled paper.

«Can I use it as a stake?»

“... Wait.”

Chae Gyu took a moment to read, then raised his voice.

“Hey, you, Little Rat [鼠崽子]!»

Before his words even landed, the mouse-eared guy who was managing the gambling tables here and there rushed over to Chae Gyu.

«What’s going on, sir?»

«Look at this. Can this slip be exchanged?»

«A slip? Let me see... It’s a slip from the Continent Gold Bank. But the issue date... It’s been over a hundred years.»

«Is it valid or not?»

«It is, but we can’t exchange it for the full amount. We need to sell the paper, so I can offer... about one ohto.»

Chae Gyu signaled to the mercenary with his chin.

«Is that okay?»

He, appearing nonchalant, nodded ever so slightly.

Chae Gyu couldn’t quite figure out his emotions, but he chose to ignore it.

«Then, we will exchange it for coins. This slip seems to be worth a lot.»

«No.»

For the first time, a negative response came from the mercenary’s lips.

«Excuse me? Is there any issue...?»

«Let’s make it in silver yuanbao [銀元寶].»

«Ugh, are you talking about Eunwonbo?»

The mercenary nodded slowly, then raised his head to look at Chae Gyu.

«You want to raise the stakes?»

«... With a silver Eunwonbo?»

«That’s right.»

A silver Eunwonbo was worth fifty silver coins. This guy had instantly increased the stakes by fifty times. Under normal circumstances, Chae Gyu wouldn’t have gotten involved in a game like this.

But right now, his eyes couldn’t hide his greed.

‘This bastard seems to be up to something. He’s behaving like he’s a sucker.’

This place was where the biggest gamblers in Hangzhou gathered. Even though gambling was risky, this particular game left no room for luck.

«Your temperament seems quite fiery. Alright! I’ll change everything to silver Eunwonbo.»

«... But the stakes are getting too high. I don’t have enough money.»

«I’ll lend it to you. Just don’t think about running away.»

«Damn it... If I’m not careful, I could lose everything, even my life.»

Chae Gyu's companions seated on both sides began to provide discreet support as they pretended to make a fuss. With the opportunity to win such a large sum of money, who would pass it up?

Driven by greed, they leaned in eagerly, and as the stakes changed to silver yuanbao, their eyes quickly turned ominous. The gamblers began to shuffle the tiles.

In this bleak and despairing gambling den, the man in a red robe was the only one who watched with the same indifferent eyes as before.

Despair and joy, fear and excitement, all these emotions swirled and raged at the end of this relentless pursuit of wealth.