

## Chapter 1022

What did you just say? (7)

The man looked at the scene before him with an emotionless face. Horrific corpses were scattered around. If all the corpses were gathered in one place, it would form a literal mountain, but there was no particular reason to do that.

The man's gaze slowly descended. Two mutilated corpses and the weapons they had been holding lay abandoned on the ground. The earth was soaked in blood.

Despite all of this, the man's eyes showed no hint of emotion. He slowly raised and examined his hand, untouched by a drop of blood, before shifting his gaze to the distant sky.

«Bishop.»

At that moment, a demonic cultist approached and bowed.

«All living beings in this area have been eliminated.»

But no words came from the Bishop's mouth. The cultist waited with bated breath for the Bishop's response, kneeling on the cold ground.

Finally, the Bishop spoke.

«...Isn't this strange?»

«What do you mean...»

Once known as Danjagang [단자강(段自強)], the man had now lost that name. He stared with dark eyes.

«Why is it so easy?»

“...”

«To the Cult, the Central Plains was always a place that must be eradicated from the world.»

«That's correct.»

«But they are so weak.»

The Bishop slowly nodded.

«Are they weak, or are we the strong ones?»

«I do not know the answer.»

«Well, either way, it doesn't make much difference.»

The Bishop took a slow step forward, trudging through the ground covered only in blood and corpses, creating a squelching sound.

«If it was so easy... Why did the Church endure all those long years of hunger and despair?»

«That is because it is the Church's mission.»

«...Yes, a mission. Given to us.»

Given by the One Above.

The Bishop's eyes sank into a deep gloom.

'I don't know.'

Was it because he was not faithful enough, or was the Churches teachings flawed? As he confronted the reality of the Central Plains he had despised so much, a profound question gripped the Bishop.

“Why did the Church lose?”

«...The Church has not lost.»

«In that case, let me rephrase the question. Why did the Church, facing such weak people, fail to trample over the Central Plains and instead had to hide in a desolate place?»

«...That is...»

The demonic cultist couldn't bring himself to answer. He was terrified that any slight deviation in his response might cast doubt on his faith.

The Bishop smiled faintly as he watched the cultist.

«No need to answer.»

«...»

The reason may be quite simple. Perhaps, the Central Plains has been engulfed in peace for the past hundred years, and had entirely lost its former strength, or maybe...

The Bishop nodded as though to erase an unimaginable and profane thought that had surfaced in his mind. Shaking his head alone was an old habit of his, like a gesture to wipe away unwelcome thoughts.

As he lifted his head, the words that he had heard so many times seemed to echo in his ears. — Our mission is to await the return of the One Above. Do not think. Do not doubt. What is allowed to the faithful ones is nothing but faith.

‘These elders...’

A century had passed. During this time, the world had changed tenfold, and they had done nothing but wait. They had been living with the belief in the uncertain ‘return.’

Could that be called life?

Can it truly be called life to follow blindly without thinking, without questioning? He didn't have such a mindset from the beginning. To him, faith in the Heavenly Demon was something so natural. He had worshipped the Heavenly Demon since he could remember. He had learned to take joy in waiting for them and had been taught to dedicate his life to them with joy.

The first time doubt came to him, who did not doubt or think, was a very small incident. Someone's death triggered it.

Just like him, that person had never seen the presence of the Heavenly Demon. Born after the war, they had only learned and lived by their teachings. It was the first time he had witnessed someone who had fallen ill and died.

Those who wait will be rewarded with the brightness of his Second Coming.

Yes, let's assume that's correct.

Then what about those who died without seeing the resurrection?

What is given to those who died without ever confirming the existence of the Heavenly Demon, enduring hellish training, bearing a meaningless existence, just for that one moment?

If nothing is given, why should the disciples endure such a painful life? Why?

The Bishop's eyes were endlessly gloomy.

No matter how much he expressed doubt, there was no answers coming back, just words to believe and wait.

The ones who control the upper echelons of the religion are those who have experienced the previous war in some way. These old zealots, who never die, are steeped in a fierce devotion to the Heavenly Demon and allow no room for doubt.

What conversation can one have with those who consider it an honor to strip their own skin and wear it as a shroud for the Heavenly Demon?

So, Danjagang waited. He silently waited for all those long years, trying to cast away doubt and fill himself with pure faith.

However, once doubt takes root, it never truly disappears. Doubt had eaten away at him like a corrosive acid.

If the Heavenly Demon never resurrects like this forever, or rather, only resurrects after he's dead, then what can Danjagang say his life existed for?

No matter how splendid a sword may be, it has no meaning if it never leaves its scabbard.

Who would wish to be born as a sword yet never wielded, only to rust away and be reduced to scrap metal?

«Bishop, please...»

The subdued voice of the demonic cultist carried a subtle unease.

«You can still turn back, Bishop. Even now...»

«Enough.»

Danjagang once again raised his head firmly.

«Bishop...»

The demonic cultist bit his lip.

“My life is not worth a single thought. I fully understand that what you, Bishop, intend to do is another way to prove your faith in him.”

“But?”

“But they won't think that way. They don't tolerate doubt. If you go further here...”

“Why? Should I be worried about being torn to shreds by those old men?”

“Bishop...”

“It's unnecessary worry.”

Danjagang's gaze drifted to a distant place.

“We wait for the resurrection without setting foot in the central plains.”

“Yes, that is our mission.”

“Those who defy the Heavenly Demon's will will be ruled only by death.”

“That, too...”

The demonic cultist fell silent. He understood Danjagang’s intention. These two matters are absolute propositions that any disciple must uphold. However...

“The moment they set foot in the central region to capture me, the old ones will also violate their mission. They won’t be able to set foot there.”

Danjagang smiled bitterly.

‘It’s full of contradictions.’

The teachings of the Heavenly Demon do not align with each other. He only realized this after becoming the Bishop. What they had believed to be the teachings of the Heavenly Demon were nothing more than fragmented words that he had uttered, strung together haphazardly.

«No need to doubt.»

Danjagang spoke with a heavy voice.

«If He truly watches over and guides us, He will surely respond to our fervor. I am just trying to be the messenger of the disciples to convey our devotion to Him.»

“...”

When there was no response, he glanced down at the demonic cultist.

«Speak.»

«...I dare...»

«Speak.»

Unable to resist the pressure, the demonic cultist bit his lip and then spoke.

«I dare to ask... If, by some very slim chance, He does not hear our cry... If He does not return, what will you do?»

Danjagang responded indifferently.

«That won’t happen.»

«Bishop...»

«He will definitely respond.»

He turned away from the demonic cultist.

However, beneath his apparent indifference, there was something small stirring deep in his heart.

‘What if He doesn’t answer?’

That question had been asked countless times before. But no matter how many times he asked it to himself, there was no answer.

‘You’ll find out when the time comes.’

Suppressing the gloom that welled up in his heart, Danjagang’s eyes momentarily darkened.

«Guests have arrived.»

Upon hearing these words, the demonic cultist swiftly rose from his position, and with a gaze as sharp as a blade, he focused on the front.

«They seem a little different.»

A faint smile appeared on Danjagang's lips.

Perhaps they would make him experience the true power of the central plains, something he had yet to fully realize.

«I will handle them.»

«No. Leave them be for now. Let's hear them out first.»

Danjagang slowly stepped forward. The other party, whether they recognized Danjagang or not, ran straight towards him.

The warriors on the other side had formed a line in a way that made his skin tingle from the anticipation. Their numbers exceeded one hundred.

«Hmm.»

Before Danjagang could even begin to speak, one person walked forward from among them. Wearing a stern expression and dressed in cheonsam [청삼 — traditional robe], a middle-aged man, Mangeum Daebu, finally faced Danjagang.

«Are you the person in charge?»

Danjagang didn't reply. But Mangeum Daebu, as if he had already sensed it, didn't wait any longer and gave a signal.

Then, those behind him came forward, carrying a large box and placed it in front of Mangeum Daebu.

Thud!

Over a dozen boxes, each about the size of a person's torso, tipped forward at the same time. The lids opened, and all sorts of precious gems and gold bars poured out in a rush. The sight was reminiscent of grain sacks bursting open.

Danjagang casually inspected the countless treasures without much emotion.

«What's this?»

«A gift.»

«A gift?»

Mangeum Daebu nodded slowly.

«When welcoming the world's famous Magyo, you can't come empty-handed. Consider this a token of Black Ghost Fortress's goodwill.»

Danjagang's lips formed a slight smile.

«What do you desire?»

«Conversation. And cooperation.»

«Conversation, you say...»

When Danjagang didn't continue speaking, Mangeum Daebu opened his mouth first.

«I want to know what it is that you desire.»

«Why?»

«If it's something we can provide, we might be willing to cooperate.»

Mangeum Daebu's eyes were so dark that it was hard to guess his intentions. Danjagang mumbled slowly.

«What we desire...»

Thomp, thomp.

He calmly walked forward. Then, he picked up the offerings on the ground.

«How abundant.»

Crackle, crackle.

The offerings in his hand crumbled and shattered in an instant. Gold tore and melted, and gems turned to dust and scattered.

«...It's such a wasteful land. These useless inedible things have value.»

«If you desire...»

However, Mangeum Daebu wasn't the least bit flustered.

«The price can be a mountain of grain, or perhaps, it could become the land where you live, if not.»

«...»

«I can't guarantee that we can provide everything the world has to offer. But for the most part, we can provide.»

“...Hmm”

«Tell me. What is it that you desire? It won't be a losing deal. What we can offer will be far too small in comparison to what we can gain.»

Danjagang raised his stern lips.

«Grain, land, wealth... we don't need them.»

«Then what?»

Mangeum Daebu remained unfazed. They clearly want something, so there was no reason to waver.

«But... in my opinion, you seem to have what I desire.»

Danjagang stared directly at Mangeum Daebu.

«Tell me, unbeliever.»

«...»

«Is your reputation so high that it shakes the Central Plains?»

Mangeum Daebu nodded with an expressionless face.

«My reputation is not that low.»

«Alright. That settles it.»

Danjagang smiled faintly.

«Your death will surely become known throughout the world. To the extent that everyone will know we are here.»

The corners of Mangeum Daebu's eyes, who had been calm the whole time, twitched for a moment.

“What you want...”

«Now, shut that filthy mouth, you dirty unbeliever. Even the act of speaking seems like it might rot your ears.»

Blood began to flow from Danjagang's eyes.

«All I need is your death scream. Shout. Shout until your throat bursts! Let the world hear your pitiful cries!»

‘A madman...’

Mangeum Daeboo's expression changed dramatically.

Danjagang's madness seemed to momentarily strangle the air.

«Leader!»

«The negotiations have broken down. Strike the enemy from the head!»

Yet, fortunately, the enemy's leader was right in front of them. If they could eliminate the leader, the remaining followers would scatter!

«Kill him!»

As Mangeum Daebu gave the command, Black Ghost's elites rushed towards Danjagang with blade-like intensity.

But in that moment...

Kwaaaaaaaaah!

A storm of demonic energy raged around Danjagang, sweeping through the air. Dark demonic energy surged into the sky like an endless black dragon.

In the face of this astonishing spectacle, the Black Ghost's elites charging forward involuntarily stopped in their advance.

“What... uh...”

Was this truly a sight created by human?

Thick red bloodlust poured forth from the darkness so intense it felt ominous, within the swirling black maelstrom.

“Only death will make you valuable!”

Danjagang's demonic energy spewed out in all directions.