

Chapter 1227

I don't know. (2)

«Um... I...»

He thought he should say something. But when he tried to speak, he found himself unable to utter a single word.

He felt like taking all of them with him to Gangbuk right now. But no matter how much he thought about it, it just wasn't possible.

'This isn't a mission I can do as I please.'

He was leading the members of Cheonumaeng to rescue Haenam. But if he abandoned the mission and went back to Gangbuk, it would only cause delays.

'Everything will fall apart.'

Hadn't he chosen the most dangerous route to Haenam precisely to minimize the time it took to get there? It wasn't a situation where he could afford to waste time just because of a momentary impulse.

But...

Looking at Hyeong Wook's despairing face, Baek Cheon found himself biting his lip unconsciously.

Could he just leave them like this? If he did, wouldn't it prove what Hyeong Wook said, that they only say they value the common people, while in reality prioritizing something bigger? Wasn't that choice no different from the way of the Abbot?

«I...»

Baek Cheon hesitated, torn between duty and compassion.

It was when Baek Cheon's face contorted with anguish. Seeing his expression change, Hyeong Wook hastily prostrated himself flat on the ground.

«I-I'm sorry!»

A bewildered voice trembled as it flowed out.

«I-I spoke without knowing what I was talking about...»

«...»

«I apologize. I shouldn't have uttered a word to a warrior, who saved my life... I just rambled out of frustration. Please forgive me...»

«Don't do this...»

Suppressing the word 'please', Baek Cheon closed his eyes tightly.

As he grabbed Hyeong Wook by his shoulders and lifted him up, Hyeong Wook looked at him with frightened eyes.

Baek Cheon sighed and spoke.

«I'm not angry, nor do I have any intention to harm you. We're not those kinds of people. I just... I just wondered how to handle what you said. So, you don't have to worry about it.»

«I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have dared to say anything to those who bestowed us with salvation... For people like you, it would have been easier if we, people like us, just closed our eyes and passed by no matter what happened...»

Tears welled up in Hyeong Wook's eyes.

«If you don't know gratitude, you're not human, but an animal... Looks like I'm that animal after all.»

«...»

«Just a foolish guy venting his frustrations, so don't pay it any mind. How could I ever think to hinder the footsteps of noble masters heading out to do great deeds? I'm just grateful for you erasing their traces.»

What truly troubled Baek Cheon was that Hyeong Wook's words didn't seem insincere at all. Rather than timidly belittling his feelings, Hyeong Wook genuinely seemed to believe that people like Baek Cheon didn't need to pay them any attention.

Feeling lost, Baek Cheon involuntarily turned his head toward the window. His companions were in sight, but they appeared just as bleak, lacking any answers.

They seemed to send hopeful glances, as if expecting Baek Cheon to provide some sort of solution even in this situation.

Baek Cheon's shoulders felt heavy.

Feeling as if he would collapse if he didn't say something, he faced Hyeong Wook's dejected expression and the expectant gazes of Cheonumaeng's members.

It was precisely at that moment, when Baek Cheon was about to utter some meaningless words, that he spoke up.

«What's with the atmosphere? Someone upset?»

Entering with a face full of irritation, Chung Myung carelessly dropped two wild boars burdening his shoulders with a loud thud.

«Ugh, damn it! It's hard to even find a piglet in these mountains! Sahyeong, feed these to the people!»

«It's meat! Let's grill it!»

«Boil it! If those weak people who haven't even seen meat get sick from eating it, what are we going to do!»

«Oh, got it!»

«Anyway, don't just stand there doing nothing!»

The moment Chung Myung appeared, the stifling atmosphere seemed to dissipate instantly. Baek Cheon unconsciously let out a sigh of relief. The tension that had been building up in his shoulders eased off.

«But seriously, what's going on? That old man seems to be alive and kicking, so why is everyone so gloomy again?»

«Uh... well...»

Baek Cheon looked back and forth between Hyeong Wook and Chung Myung. Even though he couldn't provide an answer, he felt that Chung Myung might be able to find one. No, even if there was no answer, Chung Myung wouldn't hesitate to act decisively.

«Well, the thing is...»

Baek Cheon began to explain the situation as it was once again.

«...»

After a moment, Chung Myung, having heard the whole story, glanced between Hyeong Wook and Baek Cheon. Hyeong Wook wore an apologetic expression, as if he wanted to bite his tongue, while Baek Cheon subtly turned his face away from Chung Myung's gaze.

«No...»

«...»

In the midst of the difficult situation where giving an answer was not easy, Chung Myung's difficult response unexpectedly dropped between them.

«Sasuk, are you stupid?»

«Chung Myung! Watch your mouth!»

«Sasuk might be, but calling him stupid, that's going too far, he is a Vice Sect Leader!»

«Geol-ah, Sasuk shouldn't be called stupid.»

«Oh, right.»

Baek Cheon's face twisted. While he was earnestly contemplating, these... these people...

With a troubled expression, he asked Chung Myung,

«Do you... do you have an answer?»

«No... In the old days, even if luck wasn't on our side, we still had some wits, but how come as humans continue to exist, their condition worsens? Are you seriously worrying about this? Seriously?»

«...»

«And you all were just sitting here twiddling your thumbs? Is that what's going on?»

Chung Myung narrowed his eyes and glanced at the others. Everyone flinched and discreetly averted their gaze elsewhere.

«Oh, my dear. What was I thinking, bringing these things here...»

Chung Myung let out a deep sigh, as if the ground was giving way beneath him.

«Is there a solution?»

«The solution is to freeze to death!»

Chung Myung snapped his eyes opened as he yelled at Hyeong Wook.

«Hey, uncle!»

«Yes? Yes, yes! Sir!»

«People don't act like that. If someone helps you, you should be grateful. Even if it's frustrating, if you start asking for everything from innocent people, what's left for others?»

«...I'm sorry.»

«People like you, once they experience it, helping others becomes terrifying. Because of one thing you said, the next time someone needs help urgently, they might miss the opportunity. Do you understand what I'm saying?»

«Yes...»

«Seriously, who would dare to extend a helping hand if they have to take responsibility for that person's entire life? Who wouldn't be scared stiff even to offer a helping hand?»

«...»

«Living off handouts and being content with it is what keeps beggars from coveting more than they deserve. But if they start demanding more than what's given out of goodwill, who would want to help them? It's the same with those bastards — they'd all end up starving! Do you understand what I'm saying?»

Hyeong Wook couldn't even muster an excuse, he just bowed his head deeply. It was a blunt truth that came out under pressure, but even he found it shameless to think about.

«And!»

Chung Myung's gaze sharply turned towards Baek Cheon.

«If you're going to help, then help! If you're going to refuse, then refuse decisively! What's with the hesitation? Does the Vice Sect Leader not have the resolve to make a decision? Will he hesitate to fight or make peace if the enemy attacks? Then everyone will die, you fool!»

Baek Cheon clenched his teeth and lowered his head. Chung Myung asked him,

«Do you know what the bigger problem is?»

«...I don't know.»

Chung Myung looked at Baek Cheon with pitiful eyes.

«Sasuk doesn't even understand the significance of Hwasan's Vice Sect Leader's position.»

Baek Cheon looked at Chung Myung as if asking what that meant. But instead of answering, Chung Myung slammed the ground with his foot, and leaped forward.

«You're the worst, you piece of trash!»

«Ahh!»

Chung Myung's kick landed squarely on Im Sobyong's chin, sending him screaming and crashing into the wall.

«Having fun? Huh? Finding it amusing? I treated you like a human because I thought you were struggling to climb the cliff! You couldn't stand it when I was away for a moment, so you're playing with people now? You bastard! You're going to pay for it today, you piece of trash!»

«No! No! It's not that, Hwasan Geomhyeop!»

«Die! Die, you Sapa bastard!»

As Chung Myung kept kicking Im Sobyong mercilessly, Hyeong Wook's face turned white.

«...I know this may be hard to understand, but the one getting hit is from the unorthodox sect, and the one hitting is from the orthodox sect.»

«...Yes?»

«That's right.»

«...I see.»

Of course, on the surface, it looked like the one hitting was from unorthodox sect, and the one getting hit was from orthodox sect. Im Sobyong appeared to be a refined scholar from a noble family...

«Huuk! Huuk!»

Breathing heavily, Chung Myung dragged bloody Im Sobyong in front of Baek Cheon and threw him down.

«Ugh...»

«Can't you keep quiet?»

«...»

«Sit down!»

«Yes!»

Im Sobyong rose smoothly like the wind. Chung Myung, with an annoyed look, spoke.

«Do the Nokchae [the elite bandits of Nokrim] know the way here?»

«Um... Yes, they do.»

«Using a different route than the cliff to bring about thirty people across the Yangtze river is no big deal, right?»

«That... That's correct.»

«Just thinking about it makes me mad again. But this bastard!»

As Chung Myung raised his hand, Im Sobyong hastily wrapped his head with his hands and flattened himself on the ground.

«Ah! Please don't hit me! I'm sick!»

«If you were that sick, you should have been dead by now! But you're still alive, you trash!»

«...»

«Ugh.»

Glancing back and forth between Im Sobyong and Baek Cheon, Chung Myung suddenly reached into his robes.

«Squeeeeak!»

Baek Ah, held tightly as if he was dead, screamed as if he sensed her fate.

«Ah, can't you be quiet?»

“...”

Chung Myung, with a sullen expression, dropped Baek Ah in front of Im Sobyong.

«Send a letter.»

«What do you mean?»

«Nokchae will move separately. The goal is to evacuate everyone here to Gangbuk. If you take them to Jangwon, Sect Leader will help them settle down.»

«It's a difficult task.»

«Can't you do it?»

«It could be dangerous, and... Even though it's a request from Hwasan Geomhyeop...»

As Im Sobyong began to withdraw, Chung Myung turned his gaze sharply to Baek Cheon, as if scolding him for not doing anything.

Understanding the meaning behind Chung Myung's words, which implied that Baek Cheon didn't know what the position of Hwasan's Vice Sect Leader entailed, Baek Cheon nodded and spoke up.

«If it's a request made under the authority of Hwasan's Vice Sect Leader, rather than Hwasan Geomhyeop, how about that?»

Upon hearing those words, Im Sobyong immediately straightened up. His playful expression from before disappeared, replaced by a dignified air befitting the leader of Nokrim.

«Is this a formal request?»

To the serious inquiry from Im Sobyong, Baek Cheon nodded heavily. Im Sobyong responded promptly.

«If it's a request from Hwasan, of course we must comply. It won't be easy, but with the elite of Nokrim mobilized, it shouldn't be too difficult. Crossing the Yangtze River may pose some challenge, but since Surochae are not as vigilant as they used to be, it's possible to find a gap.»

«Then...»

«However!»

Im Sobyong stared directly at Baek Cheon as he spoke.

«The elites of Nokrim are not typically mobilized for such tasks, and you must consider the impact on my reputation when issuing such orders.»

«...»

«Therefore...»

A smirk formed on his lips.

«I trust that compensation for this request will be provided in due time.»

Baek Cheon nodded firmly with a determined expression.

«Of course, it will be done.»

Im Sobyong's face bore a satisfied smile. Then, a grim voice brushed past his ear.

«Of course, debts must be repaid...»

«...»

«Unless someone returns to Gangbuk alive. There's no way to repay a debt to the dead, right?»

«...»

«Let's be honest, who would bother worrying about a Sapa bastard dying down in Gangnam?»

«We will do it without compensation!»

In that moment, everyone present felt a chilling realization.

Enthusiastic agreements couldn't outmatch strategy, and well-crafted strategies were meaningless in the face of madness.