

Chapter 1226

I don't know. (1)

Baek Cheon bit his lip, lost in thought.

Was it an oversight? It couldn't be.

He had certainly thought about it — the residents of Gangnam under the rule of Sapaeryeon would suffer hardships. And those hardships would likely be even more severe than imagined. But thinking about it didn't mean he understood, and understanding didn't carry the weight of experiencing it firsthand.

Before seeing with his own eyes how they lived and feeling it on his skin, all these words floated vaguely and emptily in his mind.

But now he understood. What was once merely the word «hardship» tossed around casually to him or someone else was a real threat touching the skin of those experiencing it. It was the fear that they had to suppress their own emotions and bow their heads meekly — a fear that was tangible.

Im Sobyong glanced at Baek Cheon's expression and shrugged.

«Well, it's not necessarily Vice Sect Leader's fault, but...»

«No.»

Baek Cheon shook his head with a bitter expression.

«It's not because I'm Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan. It's because I claimed to wield a sword for the commoners yet failed to understand the actual lives they lived. That's undoubtedly my fault.»

«Why does it always come back to that conclusion?»

Im Sobyong scratched his head awkwardly, seeming unsure.

He had only wanted to inform Baek Cheon about the realities faced by the people of Gangnam, but it ended up turning into an embarrassing discussion about righteousness.

«Um... I know I shouldn't have said those things. So, please don't think I was being too presumptuous...»

Baek Cheon smiled as if he understood his feelings.

«Don't worry. Didn't Confucius diligently learn from a child as his student? It's not that Confucius was inferior to the child he learned from.»

«Oh. Have you read *The Three Character Classic**?»

Im Sobyong momentarily flinched. It was fascinating and delightful to hear Confucius's teachings from these ignorant Hwasan's folks.

Baek Cheon nodded with a smile.

«If even Confucius learned from a child, what could I possibly not learn from a bandit?»

«Well, you...»

The momentarily irked Nokrim King was about to curse, but Baek Cheon turned his head to look at Hyeong Wook.

«Sorry.»

As he suddenly bowed his head, Hyeong Wook was startled and started protesting.

«S-Sir! Why are you suddenly like this? What did you do wrong, sir?»

Baek Cheon didn't go into detail about his mistakes. It was pointless. Instead, he conveyed only one resolution.

«It won't be long.»

«...»

«There are fundamental limits to the dominance of Sapaeryeon. No matter how long the night, dawn always comes.»

It was also a promise he made to himself.

«I will strive to bring that dawn a little sooner.»

To this, Hyeong Wook replied brightly,

«Thank you! Thank you so much, sir!»

«Yes. We will work harder. So, please don't lose hope.»

Baek Cheon tried his best to convey his determination to Hyeong Wook. But then it happened.

«Tsk.»

Im Sobyong was visibly discontented, clicking his tongue, which interrupted Baek Cheon's words.

Turning his head with a puzzled expression, Baek Cheon found that Im Sobyong's gaze was no longer on him. Im Sobyong, who had been staring intently at Hyeong Wook, opened his mouth angrily.

«I think you've misunderstood.»

«Um... yes?»

«I'm not saying I'm that kind of person, but this distinguished individual in front of us isn't someone you can deceive or hide the truth from just because you're feeling upset or your calculations are off. Can't you tell just by looking at his face?»

«...»

«So, instead of trying to please him, speak honestly. That would be much more helpful. This man is far more remarkable than you think.»

Hyeong Wook stumbled over his words with a slightly flustered expression.

«I, I don't know what you mean. I'm just...»

«Perhaps? If you open up honestly, maybe this situation will improve even a day sooner.»

Hyeong Wook glanced briefly at Baek Cheon. After hesitating, he glanced outside. His eyes, which had been gazing at the people busily distributing food, momentarily showed a complex mix of emotions.

Sensing something, Baek Cheon spoke with a stern expression.

«Please do me a favor.»

«Yes?»

«I'm not just trying to feel good about helping someone. To walk the right path, it's important for me to know the facts as they are. So... please. Speak candidly.»

«Oh, no. My true feelings...»

«I'm asking you, please.»

Baek Cheon bowed deeply. Startled, Hyeong Wook hastily grabbed his shoulders and straightened him up.

Jo Geol, Yoon Jong, Namgung Dowi, and even Tang Pae, who had arrived unnoticed, stood outside the house, unable to enter and only watching cautiously.

«... Well, let's say it's my true feelings...»

Muttering to himself, Hyeong Wook let out a deep sigh.

«Sir.»

«Yes?»

«... Please don't take it too badly. You seem like a truly good person, so even someone as lowly as me dares to...»

«I won't take offense at all.»

«Then...»

After a moment of hesitation, Hyeong Wook, with a face still not completely free of conflict, closed his eyes tightly and spoke.

«How can we trust you?»

«Um... yes?»

«How are we supposed to believe what you're saying, sir?»

His words hit Baek Cheon with great impact. It was a shock different from anything he had felt before.

For a moment, Baek Cheon stared blankly at Hyeong Wook before speaking.

«I know you don't trust me, but...»

«No, that's not it, sir. It's not that we don't trust you.»

Hyeong Wook lowered his head. Then, he let out another deep sigh.

«Sir... Do you know how many times we've heard these words?»

Baek Cheon couldn't bring himself to respond.

«Everyone says the same thing. They say they're here to help us, that they genuinely care about us.»

A bitter smile appeared on Hyeong Wook's lips.

«Even those who hold high positions, even those who come from the government, they all say the same thing. It's truly touching and appreciated, but... why do we always end up like this?»

«...»

«Where are those who claim to think of us? Why... why do they only seem to be around when things are somewhat bearable, but disappear when life becomes truly difficult?»

Hyeong Wook asked with a despondent voice.

«You told us not to lose hope, didn't you?»

«...yes.»

«Sir... That thing called hope truly torments people. Every time we hear good words, we always harbor hope. But... whenever that hope turns into disappointment, we always feel it. It would have been better if we hadn't even harbored hope. If we had just accepted that this is how things are and lived with it, it would have been less painful.»

«...»

«Did we expect anything from you from the beginning? We believed. Naively, innocently believed. But... suddenly, the world turned out like this, and those who told us to believe just watch from across the river.»

Baek Cheon clenched his fists. What hurt him the most was Hyeong Wook's expression, which seemed to show that he has already let go of everything.

«They tell us to endure and wait. But... as a weak human, I don't understand. Why should we wait? Why do those prominent and great individuals... why do they just watch those villains? Why don't those who claimed to care about us fight against them?»

«...»

«We shared what little we had to support others, to be of some help. But when things go wrong, everyone just turns a blind eye and withdraws...»

«That's...»

Baek Cheon opened his mouth to speak, but Hyeong Wook spoke instead, articulating what he wanted to say.

«Yes, I understand. Recklessly trying to save a few may lead to a bigger disaster. How can ignorant folks like us dare to guess the deep thoughts of those above?»

«But... But sir.»

Hyeong Wook's gaze fell on his unconscious father.

«It's strange, isn't it? Esteemed warriors like you always say to us, 'People like you are the most important. We wield our swords for people like you.' Isn't that right?»

«Yes...»

«But... why is it that whenever trouble arises, we are always the last ones to be considered? Why do we always end up being the ones who can be rescued last?»

Hyeong Wook's voice grew louder.

«Why are we the ones who can die, who can suffer? Why are we the ones who can endure humiliation like beggars and still live as long as we cling to our lives at the end?»

«...»

«Why do we... why! Why do we have to shed tears and express gratitude for small favors thrown at us as if they were charity, and why do we have to worry about the consequences afterwards? Why?»

As the voice grew louder, Baek Cheon tightly bit his lip.

«You told us to have hope?»

Hyeong Wook quietly lowered his head.

«I'm not blaming you, sir. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't even be alive. I'm truly grateful. We're not ungrateful bastards who, after being saved from drowning, covet even the rescuer's bag. It's not right to blame you for this situation.»

Hyeong Wook silently shook his head.

«But... but sir. Because of this gratitude, it's too much for us to harbor hope again. We've seen too much, experienced too much. That's... yes, that's too harsh of a thing to say. It's too heavy to even entertain hope...»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes.

How careless were his words to someone who had to even curse his own old father in order to survive, to save others at any cost? He thought he understood, but he didn't, and he thought he knew, but he didn't know.

Baek Cheon struggled to speak. He didn't necessarily have anything to say, but he felt he had to say something.

«Uh... I just wanted to offer some comfort, but... my thoughts were short-sighted. I'm sorry.»

«Oh, no. That's not what I meant.»

«But not everyone is so irresponsible. Not everyone thinks that way. I hope you understand that.»

Hyeong Wook's expression stiffened slightly at those words. Finally, unable to hold back any longer, he spoke up.

«Sir.»

«Yes.»

«Are you on your way somewhere urgently to save someone right now?»

«... Yes.»

«And that's really important, isn't it? Right?»

Baek Cheon's face tensed.

«So, you'll be leaving soon. You've done everything you need to do here.»

He knew what Hyeong Wook was going to say.

«I don't know. Even though you might think we're just ones to be rescued later, or just those to be helped enough and then left behind, you believe there are others more important...

Everyone seems to think that way... We're treated as if we're just disposable, somewhere in between.»

«...»

«What should we believe in and hope for... I... I don't know.»

It felt like an endless plummet into the abyss.

* 三字經 — commonly known as San Zi Jing, is one of the Chinese classic texts.