

Chapter 1223

Is this okay? (3)

«Father! Please, open your eyes, father!»

Baek Cheon stared blankly at the sobbing man's back.

‘Father?’

The village head, he was the man's father?

The same man who had just dismissed the significance of that old man's life?

«Doctor! Doctor! Please, save our father! Please! Please, I beg of you!»

«C-Calm down. If you continue doing this you will be disturbing me!»

Even Tang Soso seemed startled and flustered.

«The wound isn't too deep, so if he holds on, he can survive. So please, just try to calm down for now.»

«Thank you. Thank you so much.»

The man knelt on the ground, his head bowed in despair.

«Is... Is this...»

After hesitating as if afraid to ask, Baek Cheon finally forced out the next words.

«...Is this man your father?»

The man flinched, then nodded. His face was now streaked with tears. It was hard to believe that this was the same face that had been smiling just moments ago, dismissing the ‘old man’.

«Yes... Yes, he's my father.»

«But... But how...»

How could he speak like that?

How could he degrade his father and humbly plead in front of those villains who had cut him down with a sword?

It felt instinctively wrong to ask such a question. But Baek Cheon couldn't help but ask.

In response to that question, the man sobbed and replied,

«Then... Then what should I do... What should I do...»

The man looked down at his father, who had lost consciousness. The sense of devastating guilt in his eyes pierced Baek Cheon's heart.

«In my mind, I want to tear them apart into thousand pieces, no, ten thousand! I want to demand they save my father this instant! I'm human too, how could I not feel this way!»

“...”

«But... But what would that change? Everyone else would just die right away, all of them!»

The man held his father's hand tightly.

«We... We have to save the ones who are still alive. If I had the strength, I wouldn't beg like this. But what can I do? I'm powerless. If the powerless want to survive, want to save even

one more person, they have to grovel at the enemy's feet, don't they? What else can they do! What else!»

A desperate voice burst out. It was filled with frustration and resentment.

«Us weak people.. We have to... We have to live like that. Enduring whatever comes, swallowing our grievances... Just pretending we don't know anything. Because if we don't... Because if we don't...»

The man couldn't continue, breaking down into tears.

Baek Cheon clenched his lips tightly.

He felt the urge to tear out his own tongue, the same tongue that had just criticized this man so harshly.

What did he really know to dare judge someone, without understanding the emotions driving them to bow their head to their enemy?

«Ugh...»

After sobbing for a while, the man wiped his face with his sleeve and bowed deeply towards Baek Cheon again.

«Thank you.»

«P-please, don't do this.»

«No, I must. Knowing they were from Sapaeryeon and still stepping up for us villagers, how can I not be grateful? Thanks to... thanks to you, I have a little longer to live. I'm truly... truly grateful. On behalf of the village, thank you.»

Baek Cheon's eyes trembled with emotion.

He wanted to deny it. Just a moment ago he wanted to scream at them for devaluing a person's life.

He wanted to scream, that he was weighing the dozens of lives here and the impending dangers, deciding which was more crucial.

But Baek Cheon couldn't bring himself to utter those words aloud.

Behind him, the grim people, who have casually discarded Sapaeryeon's bastards, approached slowly. They too had sensed the tense atmosphere and their expressions grew grave and dark.

«Dare I... May I inquire about your identity, esteemed saviors?»

«We...»

Baek Cheon, about to say something, lowered his head.

«Do not ask.»

«...»

«If by any chance something happens, that way it would be more favorable.»

Whether the man understood the meaning behind it or not, he nodded without further inquiry.

«Thank you... Truly... Thank you so much.»

The man bowed down, pressing his head against the ground. Baek Cheon turned his head away, finding it difficult to witness such a sight any longer.

Then, Chung Myung's slightly grumpy voice echoed from behind.

«How is the old man?»

«...He's a bit unwell. The injury isn't severe, but given his age, we're worried about his stamina.»

«Hey, oldest Tang.»

«Yes?»

«Got any elixir pills?»

«We do. But this is...»

«Don't babble nonsense, just hand it over. Those stingy bastards who hoard medicine end up wasting it anyway. Should've used it all from the start, saying so.»

«...Understood.»

Tang Pae nodded and took out a small vial, offering it to Tang Soso. Tang Soso nodded, knowing it would greatly aid in the recovery of the wounded.

«And, you.»

«Yes, Dojang.»

Namung Dowi responded with a stern face, recognizing that he is being addressed.

«What about those guys?»

«...We've subdued them for now.»

It meant they hadn't killed them. Chung Myung spoke calmly, his voice slightly lowered.

«Destroy their dantians, sever their nerves, break their tendons. Even if they survive, they won't be of any use.»

«...Yes?»

«Why? Can't do it?»

Namung Dowi stared at Chung Myung for a moment before nodding with a grim expression.

«I'll do it.»

He raised his sword and approached the fallen thugs. Chung Myung clenched his jaw as he watched.

This was why he didn't treat Sapa as human beings.

If those bastards had only killed each other, Chung Myung might not have viewed them so poorly. At least that would have been a mutual agreement.

But Sapa's blades didn't distinguish between the powerful and the powerless.

Uncontrolled power wielded recklessly could become a disaster for someone. Small evils left unchecked by countless excuses could suddenly shatter someone's life.

The fallen one could be someone's parent, someone's child, or someone's loved one.

'I've become spineless too.'

Chung Myung bit his lip tightly.

In the past, he would have lunged forward and swiftly slit the bastard's throat before the old man could be harmed. But he hesitated for a moment, and that hesitation led to this outcome.

Excuses? Of course, there were plenty.

Protecting the common people may have been Chung Myung's sworn duty as a swordsman, but what he had to protect wasn't just them. That's why he couldn't help but hesitate.

But if even Cheongmyeong hesitated in that moment, if he endured for the sake of his own life and everything else he had to protect, then who would protect their lives?

Chung Myung surveyed the expressions of Cheonumaeng's members. Though they had clearly done a righteous deed, instead of relief, heavy emotions seemed to weigh heavily on everyone's faces.

Perhaps they were feeling similar emotions to Chung Myung. They might even be experiencing self-reproach for hesitating until the very end.

«When are you going to wake up, huh?»

Everyone looked up at Chung Myung's words.

«Tend to the wounded, and tidy up the rest of the people here. There's no time to waste.»

«Yes, Dojang.»

«Place the cart somewhere suitable below the mountain, and erase all traces of the wheels. Leave no sign that anyone had entered this village.»

«Yes.»

«What about those guys?»

Chung Myung glanced briefly at the unconscious Sapas, then turned to look at the middle-aged man.

«Is there a cave nearby?»

«A c-cave?»

«As long as it's an empty cave.»

«...There are plenty of caves around here. This is a remote mountainous area...»

«Assign a suitable person to guide us. Sahyeongs?»

«Yes?»

«Put these bastards in the cave and seal the entrance.»

«They'll die then.»

«They either live or die.»

«...Understood.»

Yoon Jong and Jo Geol, along with others, moved to handle the aftermath.

Watching them, Chung Myung turned his gaze to the collapsed elderly man. Perhaps the medicine from the Tang clan had started to take effect, as his pale sickly complexion was gradually regaining some color.

«Sasuk.»

«... Yes.»

«We have work to do.»

Baek Cheon nodded silently.

Understanding the feelings he must be experiencing, Chung Myung refrained from saying anything more. He had experienced a similar shock to Baek Cheon's when he had faced the reality of the common people after leaving Hwasan.

They had to help the common people. That's why righteousness existed to help the powerless.

It was a lesson heard countless times. But most didn't truly understand what it meant.

When one realized that their small hesitation and reluctance could become immense despair for someone, suspicion ceased to be a choice.

When Baek Cheon suddenly turned his gaze, he saw people who still couldn't approach this side. Despite the situation being sorted out here, they hesitated to approach Cheonumaeng's group.

Their fearful eyes were clearly visible on the mud-covered faces.

A sigh escaped Baek Cheon's lips for a moment.

Righteousness. He had thought that alone would earn admiration. Of course, he didn't do it hoping for that, but he had thought it would naturally lead to some respect.

But even though they had clearly done a righteous thing now, the returned gazes were still filled with fear and concern.

It wasn't unpleasant. It was just pitiful.

It wasn't because they didn't know there was no malice. It was because they knew and still couldn't do anything about it.

Just the instinctive fear of those who can dictate others' lives according to their whims. They would have to live their whole lives in that fear.

«Chung Myung.»

«What?»

«To be honest, I still don't know if what we did was right.»

Baek Cheon watched as others diligently erased any traces.

When considering all the circumstances, the likelihood of causing significant danger wasn't great, but it would still be difficult to avoid consequences for not intervening.

«If this mission fails because of this, or if anyone here gets hurt, I might never forgive myself.»

«...»

«But you know what?»

He sighed briefly before continuing.

«Even knowing all that, if faced with the same situation again... I'd still leap forward.»

Chung Myung grinned.

«Indeed.»

«...»

«That's enough then.»

Perhaps humans are beings who spend their lives doubting their own choices.

They want to remain steadfast, but they can't help but waver. What they need is simply an unwavering guidepost.

«That's enough.»

It was a moment when that guidepost was clearly etched into Baek Cheon's heart.