

Chapter 1085

That's the duty of a true Taoist. (5)

«Why...»

A soulless voice escaped Jo Geol's lips as he weakly stirred with the ladle.

«Why me...»

His eyes rolled back.

Disciples of Hwasan, or rather, beings one might now call useless surplus humans, gathered to witness him endure the pain.

«Well done.»

«He had some skill with the sword.»

«Be careful with your words, Sijus. Everything in this world has some usefulness, even if small. Amitabha.»

«...So, was he born to endure this pain?»

Accursed individuals.

Jo Geol, grinding his teeth, glared at the onlookers.

«Why?»

«...No.»

«Why?»

«...»

«What? Just because I grew up in a nice place! When did I ever do such a thing?»

It wasn't a false statement.

Nowadays, if she enters any mountain bandits' den, she can easily become a fearless bandit leader, but there was a time when she was 'The golden branch with jade leaves'* of the Sichuan Tangga.

Wasn't she of such a prestigious status that even Jo Geol, who grew up in quite a luxury himself, could not dare to compete against?

So, it's possible that they have never tasted Mieum [a kind of rice porridge]. That could happen...

«...Even so, eating Mieum? Is that even possible for a person?»

«Isn't turning the impossible into possible a virtue of Hwasan?»

«Don't nod your head, Sasukjo!»

Jo Geol shouted at Un Geom, who was nodding in amazement. No, why nod your head there!

«And! Even if that's the case, does it make any sense that no one here had this porridge before?»

«...I'm sorry.»

«I apologize...»

The esteemed members of the prestigious families in Hwasan sect, Baek Cheon and Tang Soso subtly avoided Jo Geol's gaze.

«Well, these children of noble families, let's leave that aside. But why are you, who are from the streets, like this?»

Yoon Jong, Yu Iseol, and Chung Myung.

The three well-known orphans of Hwasan sect looked at Jo Geol with sullen faces. Among them, Yoon Jong was the only one who showed a slightly apologetic expression.

«Sorry. I lack any talent in cooking.»

«And Sago?»

«Me?»

Yu Iseol pointed to her face with her finger and tilted her head.

«I had none.»

«What do you mean?»

«The kitchen.»

«...»

«I was usually picking fruits, digging tree roots... Just when I was thinking about whether I should eat bugs, Sect Leader said...»

«I-I apologize! I was wrong! I'm sorry!»

Enough. It feels like his heart is about to crumble...

«Okay. Hurry up and stir the Mieum. But is it normal for it to take this long?»

«No...»

Jo Geol sighed as he looked at the enormous pot in front of him.

'Is this even human food? It's more like animal feed.'

Just for one bowl, they all rushed in as if that would fill their stomachs. Whether they wanted more or not, whether they had to prepare a lot in advance, whether they were saving grains for a sick person...!

Adding scoop by scoop like that, the enormous pot was filled to the brim with Mieum until it threatened to burst.

«If we prepare one pot like this, even the biggest clinic in Luoyang won't be able to finish it in a day.»

But what can you do? If it feels wrong, you should have joined earlier. Jo Geol sighed as he stirred the Mieum. His eyebrows twitched slightly.

«The fire seems a bit weak...»

«Really?»

Wooddddeuk.

At that moment, Chung Myung, with an indifferent face, tore off the railing of the ship. Then, he broke it into pieces and tossed it into the flames beneath the pot.

«More?»

«No. The fire is fine now, but... Chung Myung.»

«What?»

«Is it really okay like this?»

«What? This?»

Chung Myung held up the remnants of the wood in his hand, or something had been called a railing just a moment ago.

«...Huh.»

«Why does it matter? It's not my ship.»

«...»

«And logically speaking, if those water rats' ship sinks and their stomachs break, isn't that a good thing?»

Upon hearing this, Hye Yeon smiled with a happy expression.

«Chung Myung's virtue is admirable. Amitabha Buddha.»

It seems like even that monk has completely lost it.

«No, if you're going to do that, shouldn't you at least not do it on the deck? What if the ship catches fire?»

Chung Myung looked at Jo Geol with puzzled expression.

«Why does it matter if there is water all around? Whether there's a fire or not, what's the big deal?»

«The ship could catch fire!»

«Is it good if the ship catches fire? Can't you understand the words of your Sahyeong?»

At this point, Jo Geol gave up on further conversation. It's better to play baduk while holding a white stone** than to argue with this guy about logic.

After driving everyone away and vigorously stirring the porridge, Jo Geol soon put down the ladle he was holding and removed the pot from the fire.

«...It's done.»

«Sure?»

«Sure.»

The three famed orphans of Hwasan sect, who held firm and clear negative sentiments towards the rich, looked at Jo Geol with eyes that were far from friendly.

«It's awkward that son of a merchant is cooking Mieum.»

«Food you can't eat.»

«Does it make you sick if you eat it?»

Jo Geol shouted in frustration.

«No! Merchants often travel, so they learn to make food on the go! I learned too, I did!»

Baek Cheon smiled and put his hand on Jo Geol's shoulder.

«Geol-ah.»

«Yes?»

«Clear up the misunderstanding. We're not doubting that knowledge.»

«...Is that so?»

«We're doubting you. The person. Don't be upset about that.»

‘Ah, I just wish everything would fall apart. Really.’

At that moment, Tang Soso, who had tasted the Mieum by sneakily dipping a ladle, nodded.

«This should be enough.»

«Really?»

«Oh, oh.»

«Finally, Geol found his use. It took a long time.»

Namgung Dowi, who had been watching the chaos from a distance, turned to Im Sobyong with trembling eyes.

«Uh... well...»

«Yes?»

«Um... it might be impolite to ask this between us, but...»

«Feel free to ask.»

«...Is the atmosphere here always like this?»

Im Sobyong chuckled and patted Namgung Dowi's shoulder.

«Young Lord.»

«Yes?»

«You need to get used to it.»

«...»

«At first, you might think these people are crazy, but if you make an effort, you can somehow understand. Well, even if you don't understand, you'll learn to let it go. It's not easy, but with Young Lord's tenacity, it's possible.»

«...»

Meanwhile, Tang Soso, who was busily transferring the Mieum to the prepared bowls, quickly headed to the cabin. Yu Iseol hurriedly followed her.

Before Tang Soso closed the cabin door, she pulled back a bit and said,

«Enjoy the remaining food. We haven't eaten anything either.»

«Sure.»

As the cabin door closed, everyone's gaze turned to the pot on the deck.

«Yeah, we haven't eaten anything.»

«...Isn't it like three days of starvation?»

«I didn't even think about it.»

A moment of silence passed.

Grumble.

Breaking the silence, everyone's attention shifted to the sound coming from someone's stomach. Soon, they all subtly approached the pot.

Ddalgak.

Baek Cheon, who dipped his spoon into a bowl filled with Mieum, laughed out loud finding it amusing.

«...There's truly no shortage of pots and dishes. It seems like they brought in a ship that Surochae was using until recently.»

«Strange kindness from an unexpected place, that bastard Jang Ilso.»

«There was even rice. Can you believe they went as far as providing us food?»

«...I wouldn't have eaten it if Soso wasn't involved.»

«Me neither. How can we trust that bastard?»

Having someone to confirm the absence of poison makes worries about food less pressing. It doesn't seem like the rice was intentionally provided, probably leftovers from Surochae who carried it as emergency rations. Nevertheless, the crucial point is that there was grain to fill their stomachs.

Baek Cheon subtly turned his head, looking beyond the ship. Currently, their boat clung to the right bank of the Yangtze River, heading upstream. This way, they could quickly disembark in Gangbuk if the pirates attacked.

Initially, they considered using the ship only for crossing the river and traveling on safe land. However, that wasn't a feasible option when dealing with a child and a patient.

Eventually, they found a compromise between a more comfortable journey and a safer route. Fortunately or unfortunately, during their journey so far, there were no other pirate ships in sight. At most, they passed by some anchored ships.

It's highly unlikely, but there was a lingering suspicion that Jang Ilso didn't tie up all the pirates so they could leave Gangnam peacefully.

«Anyway... even if everything seems calm now, the Yangtze is the pirates' den, so who knows when something might happen...»

«One more bowl.»

«Sure. You cook porridge really well.»

«This isn't porridge, it's Mieum, they said?»

«Is there a difference?»

Even as Baek Cheon spoke, the Mieum in the pot continued to decrease rapidly. His gaze became a bit anxious. After three days of hunger, who wouldn't be in a hurry?

Baek Cheon's words quickened a bit more.

«Let's be more vigilant. If it was just us, it wouldn't matter, but here...»

«Do we have soy sauce? Or salt?»

«It seems like he didn't season it because the patient is eating it.»

«There was a pantry over there. Want me to look for salt?»

«Never mind. Just eat. It's decent enough.»

«No, guys, listen to me...»

Even Un Geom, Im Sobyong, and Namgung Dowi quickly emptied their bowls. In the end, Baek Cheon abandoned his preachings and rushed toward the pot.

«Leave some for me to eat, you damn lot!»

The deck was instantly filled with the sounds of eating and spoons clacking. Truly, it was a combative meal.

«...Still no news?»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«Hmm.»

Hyun Jong let out a deep sigh. His gaze unknowingly drifted away from the river towards Gangnam beyond it.

«Now might be the time to cross the river...»

«It's not possible, Sect Leader. Hasn't Chung Myung assured us? If anything happens, they will definitely get in touch. They are capable of doing that, aren't they?»

«...That's true.»

Hyun Jong exhaled heavily.

If they rushed across haphazardly and the situation went awry, the kids might not contact them in time, leading to potential trouble. Given the circumstances, Hyun Jong and the other members of Hwasan could do nothing but wait anxiously in this place.

«Let's go down a bit more.»

«We've already come a long way, Sect Leader.»

«I know. I understand. But shouldn't we consider the possibility that the kids might not be able to contact us? In case of trouble, shouldn't we head to the nearest place they can quickly reach?»

«...That's a valid point, but...»

Un Am let out a deep sigh.

They had already moved westward from the mouth of the river for quite a while. It happened because there was a simultaneous desire to hold their ground and the urgency to head towards the kids as quickly as possible in case something happened.

Kkaddeuk.

Hyun Jong abruptly started biting his nails, his face reflecting worry and anxiety. Seeing this, Un Am couldn't bring himself to say that it wasn't the right time.

«Well, just a bit...»

That's when it happened.

«Sect Leader! A pirate ship passed by just now!»

«...And why is that such a big deal?»

Hyun Jong showed an indifferent reaction, as if he had no interest unless it was the news about the kids.

«Well, you see, the ship was all torn up, like it had been in a battle. Smoke was rising from it, giving the appearance of a significant clash.»

«What?»

Hyun Jong looked up in surprise.

«Who's on board?»

«It's hard to confirm from a distance...»

Hyun Jong anxiously surveyed the surroundings with a worried look in his eyes.

«If there's a fight with Surochae on the Yangtze now, our kids are the only ones who can be involved, right?»

«It's not necessarily that simple... Well, it is, but... No, it's not, but...»

Even Un Am's composed face crumbled at that moment.

«Let's head downstream!»

«Yeah! That makes sense! Inform the kids! We're moving! Right now!»

«Yes!»

And so, the disciples of Hwasan, with a firm resolve, started running downstream at full speed.

«But why did you keep this fire burning?»

«It's warm.»

«That's true.»

The disciples of Hwasan gathered around the bonfire on the deck.

«Ah, it's warm.»

With faces resembling cats sitting in front of a fire.

*It is an expression used to describe something exceptionally beautiful and valuable, akin to precious elements like gold and jade. In the past, it referred to 'the descendants or family of the king,' but nowadays, it is often used to mean 'precious children.'

**He refers to playing a board game baduk [바둑] with black and white stones.