

Chapter 1220

Who will help? (5)

As they watched the carriage moving through the narrow alleyway, the group whispered as quietly as possible.

«...It looks like there's something loaded onto the carriage.»

«It seems to be grain.»

«Why would Sapaeryeon be carrying grain?»

«Maybe it's confiscated?»

«If it's confiscated, shouldn't they be heading in the opposite direction?»

«...Is that so?»

Doubt filled everyone's eyes. However, their questions were soon answered as they overheard the conversation among the people pulling the carriage.

«Damn it!»

A rugged-looking man riding at the front of the carriage growled with frustration.

«Why do we have to do this kind of thing?»

Then, a man following behind, dressed like a civilian, chuckled and replied,

«If we're told to do it, we have to. Is there any other choice?»

«We should be given tasks that make sense! It's not like I've lived this long just to rob those idiots, and now we're supposed to distribute grain. Ridiculous.»

At that moment, members of Cheonumaeng exchanged perplexed looks.

'Distributing grain?'

'Sapaeryeon?'

The sudden turn of events left Cheonumaneg's members in a state of confusion, but before they could gather their thoughts, the conversation continued.

«What on earth is Jang Ilso thinking...»

«Shh!»

As the rugged man became increasingly agitated and crossed a line, the person next to him looked around with a contemplative expression.

Startled, Cheonumaeng's group instinctively lowered their bodies even further, hiding their presence more thoroughly.

«Are you crazy? Why would you say something like that and risk getting caught in such a situation?»

«Why worry about getting caught? Who else is here besides us?»

«Loose lips sink ships! Keep blabbering like this, and you'll have a noose around your neck before a month passes! Do you even know what kind of world we're living in?»

«...Damn it.»

The rugged man ground his teeth in frustration.

«We're barely scraping by to survive, and they want us to give away this precious grain to those worms! What are they thinking?»

«Perhaps the higher-ups have their reasons.»

«Reasons? Then does that mean Lord Mangeum Daebu had no reasons?»

«Hey! Why bring up that name?»

At the mention of Mangeum Daebu, the man's face turned pale. His eyes darted around as if he was afraid someone might have overheard.

However, the rugged man with the stern face continued to raise his voice.

«Why? Can't I even mention his name?»

«Well...»

«I mean, let's be honest. When Lord Mangeum Daebu was still alive, did we ever lack money to buy drinks? Back then, we had nothing to fear from the world! But ever since those damned Maninbang bastards took over and became the rulers...»

«Hey, shut your mouth for real! What are you trying to accomplish with all this talk?»

«I'm barely making ends meet, and now they want us to give away what little we have to those useless people! It's infuriating!»

Listening intently to the conversation between the two, the disciples of Hwasan exchanged glances.

«Are they from the Black Ghost?»

«...Seems like it.»

«Jang Ilso must be really pushing them...»

The expression in Im Sobyong's eyes grew more serious.

Though it sounded like common complaints, the information conveyed in their conversation was quite significant.

Firstly, the fact that the grain carried in the cart was being distributed to the commoners on Jang Ilso's orders. Secondly, despite it being Jang Ilso's command, the response to it within their ranks was not favorable.

'That makes sense...'

Jang Ilso is probably stockpiling resources on a massive scale in preparation for the war with Gangbuk. Despite Maninbang swallowing the entire Black Ghost Fortress and gaining immense wealth, it would have been difficult to both prepare for war and provide satisfactory rewards to their subordinates. Under these circumstances, it's no wonder that positive remarks were hard to come by when the obtained resources were distributed to the commoners.

«What good has come from the Maninbang's rise for us? We were living decently, only to be dragged to the damned Yangtze River, forced to stand there twice, and now we're barely released, yet they expect us to pull these carts!»

«That's right...»

«Gangbuk campaign is nothing for us. What good does it do me to do that? It's only good for those higher-ups. For me, it's just about making some money and enjoying a drink tonight! Isn't that right?»

The man glanced back at those following him, seemingly seeking agreement. Although no one of lower rank dared to speak out, their expressions clearly indicated agreement with the man's words.

«Exactly. Who doesn't know that? Keep spouting off like that, and you'll end up stripped bare while still alive. Sure, I may have joked about being a Sapa like those from Shinjuopae, but... those Maninbang bastards aren't even human.»

«...»

«The guy who badmouthed Ryeonju last time, do you remember what happened to him when he got caught by Maninbang? I mean... it's been almost twenty years since I first heard about the Sapa, and I never imagined someone could kill a person so brutally.»

The rugged man seemed to empathize with that statement, exhaling sharply without saying anything.

«Even though the Demonic Cult bastards are brutal, they'd be shocked by Maninbang guys. We wouldn't die so painfully just by hearing their name, without even going to Ryeonju!»

«Damn it!»

The rugged man ground his teeth.

«The way the world has turned...»

«Tsk tsk. Don't blame it on that. Still, we're better off than those assigned to the Yangtze River and Haenam. We don't even have to worry about being watched.»

«Better that way. Is this what we're reduced to?»

«Really, you need to calm down.»

«I'd rather have a clean death with a sword than living like this. This kind of life...»

As the man spoke, he suddenly made a peculiar expression. Then he asked,

«... How much further do we have to go to reach the village?»

«We'll arrive soon.»

«Was this the last one?»

«After stopping here, we'll head to Hyeong Yang.»

«Hyeong Yang...?»

The rugged man chuckled and nodded.

«It's a village deep in the mountains. Let's hurry.»

«...»

«Hurry up. We need to arrive before sunset!»

«Yes!»

As the cart resumed its pace forward, the group, hidden from view, rose to their feet once the cart was almost out of sight.

With complex and strange glances, they silently observed the direction in which the cart disappeared, then turned to each other, exchanging looks.

«Well... nothing unusual, right?»

«Even if Jang Ilso ordered to distribute the grain, it's unlikely anything serious would happen, despite them being Sapa.»

«Exactly. They know how fearsome Jang Ilso can be.»

«We have a long way to go, so let's not waste time unnecessarily.»

«That's all true. So...»

Exchanging glances, they all nodded in agreement, having stated the obvious.

«Let's go look.»

«Just follow and look.»

«We just need to watch for a bit. If nothing happens, we can continue on our way.»

«But there could be delays...»

«If we don't go, it's over!»

With a grim expression, Im Sobyong held his face in despair.

'I've been avoiding main roads to avoid being noticed.'

It's not that they fear being noticed by people — it's that people fear being noticed by them!

«Um... I hope it won't happen, but just in case, I want to mention... where we are right now is the middle of Gangnam.»

Im Sobyong stated clearly.

«Even if I don't explicitly stop you from going, if something happens, don't intervene.

Things could escalate into something irreversible. Do you understand what I'm saying?»

«Ah, of course.»

«We wouldn't even think of doing anything like that.»

«We need to confirm what Sapaeryeon is up to. This could be crucial information, you know?»

Turn off the light in your eyes and speak... If anyone sees it, they will think that a pack of tigers has emerged from the bushes. Why are you straining your eyeballs so much?

Baek Cheon glanced at everyone and then spoke up.

«No one should act without my permission.»

«Yes, Vice Sect Leader.»

«Good.»

Baek Cheon's eyes gleamed sharply.

«Let's just confirm what's happening.»

As the Cheonumaeng's group swiftly moved through the narrow path, they soon stumbled upon a small village. Judging by its modest size, it seemed to be a small community reliant on hunting or slash and burn farming.

«Is this the place?»

«Shh.»

They lowered their voices and climbed up the hillside, finding a vantage point from which they could clearly observe the situation in the village. The grain cart they had seen earlier was parked in the village square, and about thirty people who appeared to be villagers stood there with anxious faces.

«Is this the entire village?»

The rugged man furrowed his brow.

«Yes, yes! W-we are the only residents of this village.»

«It's the work of Sapaeryeon. They know what will happen if they deceive us, right?»

«Oh, sir... How could we dare deceive you? Everyone in our village is gathered here as instructed, without exception, even nursing infants.»

«I see...»

The man nodded and counted the number of people before him.

«Thirty-two... For a village deep in the mountains, that's quite a number,»

he tapped the sacks of grain on the cart and shouted loudly.

«Listen up! Ryeonju has taken pity on you and sent this grain. Be grateful for everything Ryeonju bestows upon you.»

«Is it really true?»

«Do you think I would gather you all here just to joke around?»

«Of course not! We are just so grateful...»

The villager looked at the sacks of grain on the cart in disbelief. They had been trembling, fearing another raid by the cold-hearted Sapaeryeon, and now, to receive grain was beyond surprising.

«Express your gratitude to Ryeonju. Remember the name of Ryeonju, the benefactor of Sapaeryeon, commander Jang Ilso.»

«Yes, yes! We will forever be grateful and never forget this kindness!»

Tears welled up in the villager's eyes. With the severe drought this year, they had been barely surviving on some tree bark. Who could have imagined that the notorious Sapaeryeon would distribute grain like this?

To receive food from the villain who divided and conquered was an unexpected blessing, more appreciated than the kind words of a distant Buddha.

The rugged man said with a sneer.

“Is that so? Are you grateful?”

“Yes! Yes! Sir, we are truly... truly thankful. The grace of Ryeonju is as vast as the sea.”

“Well, well.”

“And on behalf of the village, we also express our gratitude to the heroes who brought these grain all the way here.”

“Haha. You have nothing to thank me for.”

“No, no. How could we...”

“I guess you don’t understand what I’m saying.”

“Um... What?”

In that moment, the man drew the blade from his waist like a flash and struck the villager’s chest with a single blow.

Thunk.

“What... What are you doing!”

Before the other men could react, it was already too late.

The villager stared wide-eyed at his chest, which had been split open, and collapsed to the ground with a soft thud.

Shrieks erupted from all around.

“I told you. There’s nothing to be thankful for.”

The rugged man, his face splattered with blood, grinned wickedly.