

Chapter 1231

So I heard that's true? (1)

For a moment, it felt like a part of his heart dropped down.

Though he had already suspected it, seeing the crushed plum blossom pattern with his own eyes made his heart sink.

It was absurd.

The value of the lives lost here under the name of Hwasan, or under any other name, was no different. All the fallen deserved equal respect.

So, there was no particular reason to attach significance to the name of Hwasan or the fact that the Plum Blossom Sword was buried here.

Yet, what made it impossible for him to look away from that plum blossom pattern was... perhaps because Chung Myung himself was nothing more than an ordinary person who had yet to fully accept it.

Chung Myung lifted his head silently.

The members of the group were staring at him with expressions that were difficult to describe. Chung Myung spoke briefly.

«Bury it.»

«Chung Myung-ah...»

«Tsk. We don't have time.»

Finally, Yoon Jong let out a long sigh. Then he started gathering the exposed weapons and bones towards the center of the pit. It seemed like he intended to make some kind of a burial mound.

Chung Myung didn't object to this either. And then, those who had been watching stepped forward one by one, silently helping Yoon Jong.

Standing alone, Im Sobyong quietly approached Yoon Jong and having no idea what to do patted the pile of dirt he had left behind.

Chung Myung glanced at him, then turned his gaze away. The sharp peaks of Hundred Thousand Mountains rose in the distance.

‘Sahyeong.’

Here, not only the disciples of Hwasan but also Chung Mun were buried. Chung Myung vividly remembered where they had met their ends.

To others, it might be a tale from a hundred years ago, but to Chung Myung, it was merely a matter of a few years past. If he set his mind to it, he might even climb that mountain and retrieve the remains of Chung Mun. Just one day, just a single day he could spare.

But...

Chung Myung slowly shook his head, trying to restrain himself.

‘It's meaningless.’

The dead are just the dead. Finding solace in tending to them is merely for the living. And if he knows Chung Mun as he did, Chung Myung knew he wouldn't appreciate such comfort. He would be the one to lament wasting his life on futile tasks rather than saving the lives that could be saved.

Chung Myung blankly pictured that image in his mind and chuckled softly.

Here, there is no longer anyone to hunt him as they did in the past. Chung Jin, who used to nag constantly, like hammering nails into his ears, Chung Mun, who looked at him straight like a compass needle and wished for him to walk the right path, and even Tang Bo who always whined inappropriately — none of them exist anymore.

Yet, still... Even so, the memories they left behind, the meaning they left, imprisoned Chung Myung's soul more strongly than any shackles.

'Cruel, truly.'

As Chung Myung sighed deeply, he observed the people making the burial mound. There was considerable sincerity in their hands making the mound.

'It's a splendid grave indeed...'

Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan, young lords of Namgung and Tang, the lord of Northern Sea Ice Palace, Nokrim King... There were no insignificant people among them. Seeing such people personally making the burial mound, isn't it a remarkable thing?

'Know it as an honor, you damned fools. My body might be lying somewhere out there.'

While bitterness lingered on Chung Myung's lips, Yoon Jong finished covering the last empty spot on the mound with grass and rose to his feet. With closed eyes he put his hands together, and the sound of Taoist scriptures flowed from his lips.

The solemn chants of Buddhist sutras came from Hye Yeon, along with the sincere chants of others, quietly spread through the tranquil mountain.

Until the brief chanting ended, Chung Myung continued to look at the sharp peaks shrouded in clouds in the distance.

«I can see it.»

«Really...»

«At last...»

The shabby looking Cheonumaeng's group exclaimed with faces unable to contain their excitement. Before them stretched a vast expanse of infinite blue.

«The sea!»

«Wow! We've arrived!»

«So, the sea really exists!»

Everyone, overcome with emotion, uttered a word or two.

«...It's broader than the Yangtze River.»

«It's not just a little wider, is it? You can't even see the end, really.»

«Tsk tsk. That's how the sea is supposed to be.»

«Huh? Has Sahyeong seen the sea before?»

«No. Is this your first time?»

The emotions of those feeling the sea breeze were indescribable.

«...How many days did it take?»

«About seven days.»

«We arrived earlier than I thought.»

«That's right.»

Now that they had finally reached the sea on their way to Haenam, there was only one thought on everyone's mind.

«We should've just taken a detour...»

«I told you...»

«...What kind of wealth or fame were we expecting?»

Everyone sighed in unison with gloomy faces.

If penetrating Gangnam was a bad choice, judging solely by the outcome, it certainly wasn't. After all, arriving at the coast in just seven days and nights with no significant sacrifices was not just decent but rather an astonishing achievement.

However, that was only the perspective from the outside. Those who had actually cleared that path couldn't comfortably evaluate it.

«...I still find it amazing how I didn't die of a heart attack on Hundred Thousand Mountains.»

«Were you scared too, Sahyeong?»

«Honestly, around halfway through, Chung Myung grabbed me by the collar and I barely managed to hold back my urge to cry, wishing to just turn back.»

«I actually prayed a little.»

«What did he say?»

«Would you rather die in my hands or in cultists' hands? Something like that.»

«In that case, it's better to die in cultists' hands.»

«Those bastards might be a bit less brutal.»

«...You've been through a lot.»

Baek Cheon quietly patted his shoulder as he overheard Yoon Jong and Jo Geol's conversation, offering them comfort. And he thought to himself, 'I really thought my heart was going to burst.'

Throughout the journey, Hundred Thousand Mountains remained silent. Ultimately, there might not have been a safer path than that.

The only issue was that the members of the group now present here were more familiar with the terror Demonic Cult can inflict than anyone else.

«Now that I think about, why am I suddenly feeling annoyed?»

Yoon Jong suddenly kicked Jo Geol.

«Ow! Why did you hit me out of nowhere?»

«If only you hadn't mentioned that name, we could've come here more comfortably!»

«...How am I supposed to suppress my thoughts?»

Every problem originated from that cursed Jo Geol. While crossing the mountains, Jo Geol suddenly blurted out,

'But what about those remnants of Demonic Cult we saw back then? This guy, Heavenly Executioner or something like that. What if he is here?'

Even though he replied that it was absurd, that it couldn't possibly be true, the words had already ingrained themselves in his mind, impossible to shake off.

From then on, in their minds, Hundred Thousand Mountains transformed from 'an empty mountain that was once Demonic Cult's stronghold' to 'a dangerous cave where Demonic Cult's remnants might be hiding.'

Thanks to this, their nerves were on edge, and by the time they rushed out of Hundred Thousand Mountains like they were being chased, they were almost on the brink of collapse. If it had ended there, Yoon Jong wouldn't have been so furious. The bigger problem was that the area they had to pass through afterward was Guangdong, the headquarters of Maninbang. Of course, now the majority of Maninbang's forces were concentrated on the Yangtze River, leaving the area almost deserted, but still, wasn't Guangdong Guangdong?

«...You've done well to arrive safely.»

«Who was the idiot who suggested penetrating Gangnam?»

«It was that Sapa trash!»

«...Thank you for informing us, Young Lord Namgung.»

Sighs escaped from everyone's mouths simultaneously. Their relief and regret mingled together.

«Anyway, well... Passing through Guangdong, there were about six or seven times when we were on the verge of death, but... as long as the outcome is good, everything's fine, right?»

«...Is everything really okay as long as the outcome is good? We need to fundamentally rethink this, Sasuk.»

«Isn't it better than messing up the outcome?»

«Well, that's true, but...»

Baek Cheon shook his head nervously.

«We were lucky. Of course, even if it's Sapaeryeon, it's impossible to completely control all the routes that people can take in this vast land of Gangnam... Still, I thought we would encounter enemies at least once in Guangdong.»

«That's right. Heaven helped us...»

Cough, cough!

«Heaven helped us...»

Cough, cough, cough, cough!

Yoon Jong, Baek Cheon, and Namgung Dowi all cast reproachful glances at the person who kept coughing. Im Sobyong, now haggard and half-alive from fatigue, wore the most triumphant expression in the world as he held his head high.

Finally, Yoon Jong spoke with a sigh in his voice.

«Well... It's not so much that Heaven helped us, but rather that Nokrim King chose the path well.»

«Hahaha! There's no need to acknowledge it! I just always do my best to dedicate myself to all of you. Hahaha!»

As they watched Im Sobyong flutter his fan happily, everyone shook their heads.

«... Yoon Jong, sometimes I really feel like you're a true Taoist.»

«Huh?»

«To be able to say that while looking at his expression... I wouldn't want to say it even if I were to die.»

«I agree, Vice Sect Leader.»

«Mm.»

Honestly, there was no denying Im Sobyong's abilities. Whether on the mountain path leading to Hundred Thousand Mountains or in Guangdong, without Im Sobyong's resourcefulness, they would have been in trouble several times.

«... Whether him being born into Sapa is unfortunate or fortunate.»

«Huh? Of course it's unfortunate, isn't it?»

When Namgung Dowi asked as if puzzled by Baek Cheon's statement, Baek Cheon's face twisted slightly.

«Consider the fact that he could be born into a sect like Demonic Cult or a government household.»

«... Being born a bandit was truly fortunate.»

«Is that so?»

It was truly fortunate for the sake of the world.

Baek Cheon lifted his head and gazed silently at the vast sea.

‘Anyway, we've arrived here safely.’

Although they should consider what comes from now on as the real challenge, the feeling of relief at having arrived here without any major mishaps was somewhat reassuring.

«But, Sasuk.»

«Yeah?»

«How are we going to cross to Hainan island?»

«Well, obviously...»

«Swim!»

At a sudden voice, everyone's gaze turned to one direction. Chung Myung, who was standing firmly on his legs, his arms crossed, was looking at them, as if to say, ‘Why are you suddenly asking such an obvious question?’

«Is there any other way to cross the water?»

«...Chung Myung. It's an island, you know, an island.»

«But what's the point? Is an island floating away or something? Since we'll end up there anyway, if we keep swimming, we'll eventually arrive.»

Namgung Dowi looked at Im Sobyong with a weak expression.

«Can you please provide some logical counterargument, Nokrim King?»

«...This is difficult for me too. I don't even know where to start with the rebuttal.»

«Well, still...»

«We need to come to some agreement...»

Watching Im Sobyong's perplexed expression, Namgung Dowi sighed repeatedly.

At that moment, a hand of salvation stretched out to them.

«Stop the pointless chatter and let's look for a boat.»

«But why bother...»

«That's enough.»

Baek Cheon cut off Chung Myung's words abruptly.

«Even if trouble arises and we have to swim half of the way, it's best to conserve our energy as much as possible. Since we have few people, we don't need a large boat, and if it's just a small fishing boat, it won't take long to find one.»

Chung Myung pursed his lips, but he didn't argue further, seemingly accepting Vice Sect Leader's decision.

«Alright. Let's scatter and search for a boat. But remember, we need to hide our identities as much as possible.»

«Yes!»

Exchanging glances, they dispersed from the spot.

Baek Cheon, the last one remaining in that spot, looked at a distant piece of land that looked like a dot on the horizon.

«Hainan...»

For now, reaching there was their priority.