

Chapter 1225

Is this okay? (5)

«Are you done?»

«Yes. Now it's ready.»

«Hmm.»

Tang Soso smiled brightly and looked back at Yu Iseol. Yu Iseol was not someone who usually rushed people. So, for her to repeatedly inquire like this was quite unusual.

'She seems worried.'

Tang Soso noticed Yu Iseol discreetly glancing at the village children. The children, with frightened faces, continued to peek out from behind their mothers' skirts and watch them.

«Are you worried they might be hungry?»

Tang Soso asked, to which Yu Iseol responded with a slightly gruff voice.

«...It's tough.»

«What do you mean?»

«Being hungry.»

«...»

«Especially when you're young.»

Tang Soso was momentarily speechless. Upon reflection, Yu Iseol must have endured days as a hungry child, clutching her empty stomach.

Tang Soso couldn't relate to such memories.

«We're done now. I'll distribute it quickly.»

«Okay.»

«By the way, besides just watching, could you also bring some bowls?»

«Sure.»

Tang Soso chuckled softly as she watched Yu Iseol hurry off to fetch the bowls.

Originally, they hadn't planned to go this far. They had already saved their lives, so they could have just continued on their way.

The problem arose when it came to dealing with the grain stored in the cart. If they disguised the bandits' escape by pretending they left with the grain, they needed to get rid of it. But none of the villagers were willing to touch it, despite knowing that Sapaeryeon wasn't likely to investigate to this extent.

So, Tang Soso took it upon herself to handle it. Normally, someone like Tang Soso, a valuable «medical practitioner,» wouldn't have been doing this, and someone like Jo Geol would have cooked the rice. But Jo Geol was occupied with other tasks now.

Glancing briefly at the sun, Tang Soso checked the pot. It was necessary work, but they couldn't afford to waste time. If they didn't finish before the others returned from erasing the tracks of the cart, it would all be for nothing.

«We're done! Come and eat!»

«...»

«Hurry up!»

As the villagers hesitated to approach, Tang Soso, who had opened the pot, vigorously scooped rice with a ladle and generously filled the bowls brought by Yu Iseol.

«Here you go! Come on!»

They were still unable to approach, Yu Iseol, who had been staring at the villagers in hesitation, reached out and grabbed a spoonful of rice that Tang Soso had scooped out. She then shoved it into her mouth.

«Mm.»

Chewing the rice with fervor, Yu Iseol swallowed it down. Seeing the villagers cautiously approaching, she firmly grasped another handful of rice.

«We, we should...»

Only then did the anxious villagers start to approach cautiously. Tang Soso welcomed them with a bright smile, alleviating their fear of Yu Iseol's expressionless face.

«Come, come! Hurry up and eat! We made more food than we expected. If you don't take it quickly, Sago will eat it all.»

«T-Thank you...»

Starting something new is always difficult. The villagers rushed forward to receive the rice that Tang Soso was serving. It was just plain rice without any proper side dishes, but their movements were eager, driven by their intense hunger.

Through tattered clothes, protruding rib bones could be seen. Seeing this, Tang Soso's face briefly stiffened before brightening up again with a warm smile.

«Feel free to have more rice since there's plenty available! It's not the grain I brought, but help yourselves,»

Tang Soso said with a spirited expression as she quickly scooped more rice into the bowls. Baek Cheon, who had been inside the village head's house, stepped outside and observed the situation.

«It doesn't look good.»

Upon hearing this, a middle-aged man who introduced himself as Hyeong Wook let out a deep sigh.

«It may sound strange coming from me... but I'm relieved that we can receive grain like this, even in these circumstances.»

Considering that just moments ago, they were on the verge of losing their lives at the hands of Sapaeryeon, the severity of the situation became apparent.

«A month... no, even just another half a month, and we would have starved to death rather than being killed by a sword.»

«Was the harvest not good?»

Hyeong Wook shook his head.

«You may not know, but living off this land isn't easy. Typically, we gather various things from the mountains to sell down below and use that money to buy grain.»

«Yes, that's true.»

«However... it has become increasingly difficult to obtain grain in recent years. Naturally, the price of grain skyrocketed... and later, grain became scarce in the market, so even if we gathered herbs, there was no one to buy them, and even if there were buyers, the money couldn't buy grain.»

Hyeong Wook explained.

«Ah...»

Baek Cheon nodded, understanding the implications of the situation. It was evident that the hardships began with the rise of Sapaeryeon after Gangnam treaty.

«Despite managing somehow until now... I had almost lost hope, thinking there was no way out...»

Baek Cheon said with a stiff expression.

«Is it worse here because it's in the mountains?»

Hyeong Wook shook his head.

«No, sir. We are relatively better off compared to others.»

«Really?»

Baek Cheon asked, surprised.

«Even so, being in remote mountainous areas, there are hardly any troublemakers who come all the way here to cause a ruckus, aren't there? Those who resort to such actions are usually from larger towns, so people there are truly struggling to survive day by day.»

Hyeong Wook explained, casting a glance at the villagers who seemed to be devouring their food like being possessed.

Baek Cheon turned his head with a shocked expression.

Their pitiful appearance filled him with sympathy and sorrow. And yet, was their situation considered relatively better off?

So what exactly is happening elsewhere?

«Well... When people go down the mountain to go to the market... There are corpses scattered along the road. Half-rotten corpses.»

the man replied hesitantly, clearly troubled by the words he had to utter.

«People are starving to death, but we can't even muster the courage to clean it up.»

he continued, his voice heavy with despair.

«Because we don't have the strength. And... even if we do clean it up, someone else will die again anyway.»

Baek Cheon looked at him with a blank expression, then turned to Im Sobyong. Im

Sobyong shrugged in response.

«Isn't this something you were already suspecting?»

«Jang Ilso's purpose was... to swallow up Gangbuk. Why would someone like that... This, this won't help at all...»

Baek Cheon muttered, his voice trailing off in disbelief.

«Yes. That's correct. Jang Ilso is indeed like that.»

Baek Cheon fell silent, understanding the implications of Im Sobyong's words.

«However, the other members of Sapaeryeon don't think so. They never had much interest in Gangbuk to begin with. What's more important to them is that a place they had been opportunistically plundering under the guise of orthodox sects has now completely fallen into their hands.»

«I don't understand...»

Baek Cheon muttered, biting his lip until it bled.

«Even though they're called Sapaeryeon, they do not know what loyalty is or what they should protect, but even so, if they've become the leaders, they wouldn't be foolish, would they? Are you saying they don't know what will happen if they plunder their own territory?»

In essence they are parasites attached to ordinary people, they wield their swords and learn martial arts, but how would they survive without anyone to exploit? While orthodox sects sustain themselves through donations from the people in their region and earnings from the trades they operate.

But if the people in those regions are impoverished, where will they earn money to sustain their sect?

«They're not so ignorant as to not realize that. Even though Nokrim is also Sapa, we don't ever exploit people like this.»

Ultimately, if the number of people traveling through the mountains decreases, the ones who suffer the most are Nokrim. Therefore, they generally avoid harming those who travel through the mountains whenever possible.

Punishing those who violate that principle wasn't just the government's duty, rather, it was also the responsibility of Nokrim. When bandits kill people left and right, plunder, and flee to other mountains, Nokrim doesn't experience external attacks but rather internal conflicts among the bandits.

“Normally, it wouldn't come to this. But... this time was different, wasn't it? Have you forgotten what happened with Sapaeryeon?”

“...”

“Certainly, if our foundation disappears, both the evil and righteous sects cannot survive. But that's not the situation we're considering. After all, if we lose and fall into the enemy's hands, everything will be taken away.”

Finally, it dawned on Baek Cheon.

The Black Ghost Fortress, Haomun, and even Surochae must have known that someday they would have to compete among themselves to determine the leader of the large group known as Sapaeryeon.

So, they plundered, gathered funds and stocked provisions without looking back.

“Harassing people and committing crimes... They don’t care about that, do they?”

“Dojang. It seems you’ve forgotten, but that’s how Sapa has always been. Will those who live by upholding righteousness join Sapa?”

“...”

«Normally, the higher-ups would have restrained the mob to some extent. But when war is imminent, what’s the point of forcibly controlling the lower ranks to reduce morale? It would only lead to losses if those who deemed other places better decided to leave.»

«No... «

«While it might be possible to control Maninbang at such a time, it’s impossible with other sects.»

Baek Cheon’s expression showed understanding, yet also a sense of confusion. No, perhaps he understood but didn’t want to accept it.

Seeing him like that, Im Sobyong let out a strange laugh.

«You were aware of it, weren’t you?»

«...»

«If there was such turmoil in Gangbuk, wouldn’t you have imagined what was happening in Gangnam? Even those pushed out of here to Gangbuk have made people’s lives miserable. How could those who have to withstand even harsher adversities here not feel desperate?»

It was bitter to swallow the truth.

They simply hadn’t considered it.

After the Gangnam Treaty, seeing how the public sentiment had become so grim because of those who had been driven out to Gangbuk, it was something Baek Cheon could have easily anticipated...

Even as he headed towards Gangnam, his mind was solely focused on Haenam. He had no concern for those living here. That fact made Baek Cheon feel immensely ashamed.

Im Sobyong shrugged and spoke.

«Well... there’s no need to look so serious. Things will get better. Jang Ilso isn’t a fool, as Dojang said, and the power struggles within Sapaeryeon have already been settled. They’ll probably start managing things properly now. It’s like when they distributed the grain this time.»

«...»

«But.»

Im Sobyong’s calm voice cut through Baek Cheon’s ears sharply.

«The fear that one’s life could be taken away by someone’s whim, the fear that one must bow their head meekly no matter what happens due to lack of power, and the resulting sense of helplessness and despair... Those will never disappear as long as the dominance of Sapaeryeon continues.»