

Chapter 1102

If it's such a reward... Well, it's worth accepting. (2)

"It'll be okay now."

Tang Soso, after finishing the tidying up, smiled gently and neatly arranged her needles.

"Thank you."

"However, your body hasn't fully recovered yet, so you should rest and eat well."

"... Yes."

After tidying everything up, Tang Soso gently patted the cheek of the sleeping child nestled in the woman's arms.

"Hak is doing well too..."

At that moment, the woman instinctively pulled the child she had been holding closer to herself.

"Oh..."

The woman's eyes trembled.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay. I wasn't thinking."

Tang Soso scratched the back of her head with an anxious expression.

While the body might recover with acupuncture and rest, the wounds of the heart are not easily healed. Reflecting on what this woman had gone through, delicate and careful approaches were needed.

"I apologize."

As Tang Soso deeply bowed her head, the woman seemed unsure of what to do, tilting her head forward.

"No, it's really... truly, it's okay."

A strong sense of confusion appeared on the face of the woman holding the child.

"Even though you're treating me so well, I'm unable to learn, and I'm too afraid..."

"Please don't say that."

Tang Soso was at a loss for what to do. Although she had learned medicine, she didn't know how to handle situations like this.

"What should I do?"

If she just stepped back, the woman might blame herself for a long time. Yet, trying to comfort her might only make things more uncomfortable. It was a time when she couldn't decide what to do and was only pinching her thigh.

Thunk!

The sound of a blunt knock on the door echoed.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, the door swung open wide. However, there was no one there. All that was visible was the scenery beyond the door.

‘What...?’

Kiiiiih!

“Ah...”

Tang Soso’s gaze moved downward, then further down.

“...It was you?”

A snowy white weasel had an unbelievably discontented expression while flicking its tail.

Thump! Thump!

As if reproaching for not recognizing him sooner, Baek Ah angrily hit the floor with his tail.

He lifted a bowl the size of his body with his front paws, and carried it into the room.

The vessel contained the herbal medicine she had asked Chung Myung to bring. Tang Soso’s face contorted.

«No, this human...»

Was he implying that a simple task was too bothersome for a person and instead delegated it to an animal? Moreover, what kind of creature openly carried out such orders?

At this point, it was becoming difficult to distinguish whether the issue lay with the person or the animal.

Baek Ah, walking on its two unsteady legs, placed the bowl of herbal medicine near Tang Soso and let out a sigh, almost as if he was human.

«... You’ve been through a lot.»

It wasn’t something you’d typically say to an animal, but somehow, witnessing that sight felt like those words needed to be said.

Baek Ah glanced briefly at Tang Soso before swiftly turning around. Hastily closing the open door, he darted to a corner of the room and lay down.

A moment of silence ensued. Baek Ah glanced up, gazing intently at Tang Soso. His expression seemed to convey, ‘Don’t get too caught up in the hardship of the situation.’

«... Yeah. You must be exhausted too.»

Perhaps he was the one enduring the most hardship and exhaustion here. After all, that creature was constantly with Chung Myung Sahyeong. It would be best to not return quickly and avoid unnecessary suffering.

‘It’s quite fascinating when you think about it.’

Why does that animal stick around Chung Myung Sahyeong? While it seemed to have enjoyed all kinds of privileges as a spirit beast in Nanman Beast Palace, here, it wasn’t even treated as well as an ordinary weasel.

When Chung Myung gets bored, he gets kicked. If it’s slightly cold, he is used as a scarf.

During sleep, he serves as a pillow. And if Chung Myung gets irritable due to a lack of alcohol, Baek Ah needs to prepare a bottle to avoid vicious behaviors. He also handles all sorts of errands...

‘I wish Sahyeong...’

Is there no one to take care of that brat?

«W-Weasel...»

At that moment, a surprised voice erupted from the woman. Her widened eyes were fixated on Baek Ah.

«Oh...»

Indeed, to the eyes of an ordinary person, it might seem odd for a weasel to fetch herbal medicine, open and close doors, and walk on two legs.

«Don't worry. It's a kind... well, just a spirit beast.»

«A spirit beast?»

«Yes. Um... just consider it a very intelligent animal.»

The woman looked at Baek Ah in amazement. Sensing the gaze, he turned his head slightly to face the woman.

There was a subtle exchange of glances between the human and the animal. Having some thought, Baek Ah stood up abruptly. Approaching the woman cautiously, he jumped up and wrapped his body around her neck.

«Oh...!»

Startled, the woman instinctively held onto Baek Ah, but feeling the soft fur, she soon relaxed her grip.

«It's warm...»

«Wow.»

Tang Soso opened her eyes wide. Despite appearing quite easy-going due to being hit and bullied by Chung Myung, Baek Ah was, after all, a spirit beast with an unusually strong sense of pride. Where else would one find a Hwasan's disciple attempting to tame that pure white and velvety fur and ending up with claw marks on their face?

The one who never stayed by anyone except Chung Myung Sahyeong was now approaching a person on his own.

‘How fascinating.’

Meanwhile, Baek Ah, seeming discontent, tilted his head for a moment, then gradually slid down under the woman's neck. He slipped between the child and the woman, settled comfortably, and closed his eyes.

«It might be dangerous...»

«It'll be fine.»

Tang Soso softly murmured, ‘Because it doesn't want to face Sahyeong,’ but the woman didn't hear her words.

Relieved, the woman cautiously stroked Baek Ah's back. The fact that he appeared to be a small creature that posed no threat to humans gave her some comfort.

Seeing the softening expression on the woman's face, Tang Soso unknowingly nodded in agreement.

‘There seems to be some usefulness in that creature.’

Well, in fact, there was plenty of usefulness, albeit only towards Chung Myung Sahyeong.

The woman spoke in a slightly softened tone,

«It’s the first time I’ve seen a weasel follow a person.»

«Oh, really?»

Actually, it’s her first time too. Of course, whether it’s really following a ‘person’ is a bit of a question to ponder.

«...They say animals follow good people.»

At the woman’s words, Tang Soso’s expression became inexplicably complex.

«Well, yes.»

But eventually, she closed her eyes tightly.

‘I’m sorry. I feel like that’s a lie.’

Then there’s no way that Baek Ah would stick around Chung Myung. But what meaning is there in the truth of such things? As long as one’s mind is at ease.

Still, Baek Ah’s arrival seemed to have lifted the awkward atmosphere, which was fortunate.

«I apologize for earlier.»

«Oh, no. It’s nothing.»

«I was just a bit worried... Really... Are you okay?»

«What?»

There was a hint of concern on the woman’s face.

«From now on, I have to protect and take care of my child... But with such fear, will it be okay?»

Tang Soso couldn’t easily respond. She knew that an offhand ‘It’ll be fine’ thrown without thought ultimately only served to brush over the situation and move on.

«I...»

Just as Tang Soso was about to say something, a familiar voice came from outside the door,

«Soso, are you inside?»

Startled, Tang Soso turned around.

«Yes, Sect Leader! I’m inside with the patient.»

«May I come in?»

She quickly assessed the woman’s expression. Though the woman seemed slightly uneasy, she nodded slowly. Tang Soso rushed over and politely opened the door.

Soon, Hyun Jong entered the room with deliberate steps. When his eyes met the woman’s, he started to form a warm, friendly smile... but then, with a troubled voice, he asked,

«Why is that one over there acting like that?»

«Well...»

Baek Ah had by now adopted an expression of utter annoyance. That posture was just...

«They say animals resemble their owners.»

«That’s right...»

Hyun Jong bowed and quietly took his seat. Even to Tang Soso's eyes, the careful consideration behind each of his movements was evident. Every gesture and step seemed intentionally subdued, ensuring no hint of threat. To an outsider, he might have appeared as nothing more than a feeble old man who won't be able to hold a spoon in his hand.

«Are you feeling alright?»

«Yes? Oh...»

Seeing the flustered woman, Hyun Jong offered a gentle smile.

«I am Hyun Jong of Hwasan.»

«Sect Leader of Hwasan...»

As Tang Soso hastily tried to say something, Hyun Jong slightly raised his hand to stop her. It was a subtle sign not to utter anything that might unnecessarily burden the other party.

«After enduring much, I needed to sort out my thoughts. Thus, I didn't particularly seek anyone out. However, not coming now seemed impolite, so I've come here. Please forgive the rudeness.»

«Oh, no. That's not the case at all.»

The woman vehemently shook her head, visibly surprised.

«Everyone has been so kind... I'm not someone who should receive such treatment... Your warm hospitality leaves me at a loss.»

Continuously bowing her head, she expressed her gratitude. Observing this, Hyun Jong suddenly glanced at the child in her arms.

«The child looks incredibly adorable.»

«Yes...»

Hyun Jong smiled tenderly.

«Is there anywhere you can go with the child?»

At that question, the woman's face tensed awkwardly. After hesitating for a while, she finally spoke in a faltering voice.

«Anywhere... we have to go somewhere. Anywhere...»

«...»

«I've caused too much trouble. I apologize... I have no shame.»

Tang Soso glanced at Hyun Jong, momentarily taken aback. It seemed as if Hyun Jong was reprimanding the woman, though subtly.

Yet, there were two reasons why Tang Soso didn't speak up. Firstly, she dared not criticize the Sect Leader of Hwasan here, and secondly, she believed Hyun Jong was not the type to utter such words without any thought.

«Raising and protecting a child with the body of a woman in a foreign land is not an easy task.»

With Hyun Jong's words, the woman lowered her head with a sorrowful expression.

«The world is exceedingly warm, yet equally harsh. It won't be easy to decide where to go immediately.»

«Yes...»

Hyun Jong nodded slightly with a shallow sigh.

«Assisting the common people is our sects's duty, but we too have limitations in providing endless support.»

The woman nodded faintly. Her demeanor remained composed, but her trembling lips couldn't hide the overwhelming anxiety within her heart.

How could they not recognize her? How much trouble had she caused these people? Wasn't medical treatment at the doctors only a luxury for those who could afford it in the first place? To occupy a warm room without doing anything, to lie down receiving meals and treatment, these were luxuries she dared not even dream of. Now was simply the time to return to reality.

«I will surely repay this favor...»

«Please do so.»

«Um, Sect Leader...»

Tang Soso attempted to say something but was stopped again. Hyun Jong paid no attention to her and calmly observed only the woman.

«You're a mother with a child. You must stand on your own feet.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

It was when the woman nodded again. Hyun Jong inquired further.

«Do you happen to know anyone nearby?»

The woman couldn't bear the heavy heart and closed her eyes briefly. It seemed now she needed to rely on someone she knew before leaving this place.

Could she really have acquaintances all the way from Gangnam to here?

Indeed, it was an indifferent question, yet there was no hint of resentment towards the people before her. They had already given her so much.

Therefore, the woman replied calmly.

«Yes. I... I do. Please don't worry.»

«Oh, then, does this acquaintance happen to be skilled in cooking?»

«Pardon?»

The woman looked at Hyun Jong with a puzzled expression.

Upon which, Hyun Jong spoke with a hint of discomfort.

«We are staying in Jangwon longer than expected, and those rascals are eating everything in sight. It makes it difficult to find decent food. My disciples are trying to prepare meals, but it's hardly fit for human consumption. Hence, we're seeking help. If someone can cook just enough without ruining the ingredients, it's fine. Since this place is a bit distant from the inn, we're considering offering the room to the cook without much pay... in case you happen to know someone...»

«I-I...!»

«Yes?»

The woman looked at Hyun Jong urgently, raising her voice.

«I'll do it, I will! I'm good at cooking!»

«...»

«I can work really hard. Please let me do it! I'll do my best!»

«Hmm.»

«Please, Sect Leader! Please...»

Hyun Jong furrowed his brow with a troubled expression.

«But you seem too unwell to work... You don't seem to take your medicine properly...»

Before he finished speaking, in a panic, the woman quickly grabbed a medicine bowl placed on the ground and gulped it down. After downing the medicine in one go, she fearlessly looked at Hyun Jong and spoke as clearly as possible.

«See? I'm fine now!»

With a troubled expression, Hyun Jong looked at Tang Soso, his tone expressing his doubts.

«How do you feel about this person doing the job...?»

«I can do it, Sect Leader!»

«...»

«It'll take two days. In two days, I can definitely help her get well enough to work. There won't be any problems!»

«Is that so?»

Impressed by Tang Soso's spirited response, Hyun Jong slowly nodded.

«It seems finding a cook won't be easy. From now on, this person won't be just a temporary cook here but a legitimate member of Hwasan, receiving payment for work. Ensure there's nothing lacking in the treatment.»

«Yes! I'll make sure of that, Sect Leader.»

«Then.»

With a smile, Hyun Jong stood up. The woman, her face a mixture of emotions, nervously lowered her head.

«T-Thank you...»

At that moment, as Hyun Jong was halfway up, he asked,

«Oh, by the way, what should we call you from now on?»

Understanding the implication of his words, the woman spoke with a faintly trembling voice.

«...My name is... Chu Yeong [추영(秋榮)].»

«So, you're Ms. Chu.»

«And... this child is...»

Chu Yeong looked down at the child nestled in her arms. Her voice, raised again, no longer trembled.

«Hak. It's Lee Hak [이학(李學)].»

Hyun Jong replied with a gentle smile,

«Well then, I'll be counting on you from now on, Ms. Chu.»