

## Chapter 1246

That's it. (1)

Cheonumaeng's group left the main hall, leaving the remaining elders silent for a while. People don't crumble when they're in despair, they crumble when the hope is gone. And the recent events had been enough to snatch away even their last shreds of hope.

Sigh...

Breaking the silence, a heavy sigh escaped Geum Yangbaek's lips.

«As soon as the storm subsides, instruct the disciples to leave.»

«...Haven't we already done that?»

«Some may still cling to illusions. When reality hits them, some may change their stance.»

«...»

«The elders are no exception.»

Geum Yangbaek turned to the elders and continued,

«Just because we've been with Haenam for a long time doesn't mean we have to be there until the end. Those who want to leave, leave. No one will blame you.»

Some elders murmured in response,

«What's the point of going wherever those marked for death go? Without martial arts, we're just worthless old men. Going back home, we might as well be beggars.»

«Yes, Sect Leader. Even our grandchildren won't welcome Haenam's disciples into their homes. They might worry about attracting the wrath of Sapaeryeon. With such concerns, how could we return to our families?»

Geum Yangbaek chuckled bitterly.

«That's true, we should have handled it better.»

«...We should have thought about it before.»

The atmosphere wasn't as heavy as expected. When they thought they could still do something, they expressed their emotions towards each other. But once they realized there was nothing more they could do, even those feelings softened.

«What about those who seek excommunication?»

«...They must be expelled.»

«Do we have to go that far?»

Geum Yangbaek nodded slightly.

«It's not because we resent those kids, but because we're worried. Sapaeryeon, and Jang Ilso, they won't stop at Haenam. They don't want any potential threats lurking behind. So can they just let those kids, who've learned martial arts, go freely?»

«...»

«If they've lost their martial arts due to the excommunication, Jang Ilso won't necessarily try to capture and kill them. He's ruthless, but not foolish, he knows the value of skilled fighters,»

Geum Yangbaek said, his eyes reflecting a sorrowful understanding. While it made sense logically, it also meant there would hardly be any Haenam martial artists left in the world.

«We shouldn't leave any room for regrets,»

Geum Yangbaek said, understanding the elders' sentiments.

«If the heavens are watching, they'll somehow ensure our legacy continues. Perhaps you know? Just as Hwasan, maybe Haenam will one day experience even greater prosperity than now.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«It will surely come to pass.»

Geum Yangbaek smiled as he listened to the elders. They spoke as if things would unfold as they hoped, but deep down, they knew the chances were slim.

Rumble...

As thunder echoed, Geum Yangbaek glanced out the window. The storm was still raging.

'I hope the storm never ends.'

He thought with a bitter expression, eventually turning away from the window.

\*\*\*

«...So, is it just over?»

Drenched disciples of Haenam, not even considering wiping the rainwater off their bodies, looked at Gwak Hwanso.

«No, Daesahyeong. They came all the way from Gangbuk, and there was absolutely no plan? If that's the case, what were they even doing...»

“Why are you blaming Daesahyeong?”

Lee Jayang retorted irritably.

“If you want to blame someone, go confront Cheonumaeng and their group directly. Those who don't have the courage to do that, why bother clinging to Daesahyeong?”

«No, it's not that...»

«It's not that? What else could it be? Obviously...»

«Stop it,»

Gwak Hwanso lightly grabbed Lee Jayang's shoulder, trying to restrain him.

«It's frustrating, isn't it?»

Gwak Hwanso sighed and continued,

«It seems even Cheonumaeng didn't expect Sapaeryeon to attack so quickly.»

«No, how could...»

«We're keeping an eye on Sapaeryeon and the coast, but isn't it difficult for those who were in far-off Gangbuk to know the situation here?»

«...»

«They probably felt just as bewildered seeing the hordes of Sapaeryeon flocking on the coast. Yet, they came all the way here, so we should be grateful.»

With a smirk, Gwak Hwanso stopped there. He wasn't one to advocate for anyone. At another time, he might have been the first to express anger towards them. Strangely, he didn't feel any resentment towards them now.

It wasn't about principle or logic. It was probably because the memories of sharing the drink lingered in his heart.

‘Ridiculous.’

How long had that time lasted? Regardless, the wound left by the neglect he felt from the Central Plains was still fresh. Thus, he couldn't help but feel gratitude towards those who had come here themselves.

«There's no point in harboring resentment. Haven't they done enough?»

«To be honest, I don't even know what they've done! If they were going to do this, they should've just stayed away instead of getting people's hopes up...»

«Let's not speak like that.»

Gwak Hwanso spoke with a bitter tone.

«Your father was a sailor.»

«Yes.»

«Then you should know, right? It's not uncommon for sailors who set out to sea to show their sons the ocean end up caught in a storm and never return.»

«I know.»

«The cruelty lies in the sea, not in the father. Even if ultimately, that choice cost a man his life, can you blame and condemn the father as foolish?»

«...I understand what you mean, Sahyeong.»

Though they said this out of frustration, in truth, the disciples of Haenam didn't harbor resentment or hatred towards Cheonumaeng either. Instead, it felt closer to gratitude.

After being ignored and dismissed for three years, they were the only ones who bothered to seek them out. They were the ones who suggested standing together.

When nobody else in the world seemed to need Haenam, they were the ones who said, ‘We still need you.’

«Jayang.»

«Yes.»

«When the storm subsides, prepare a sturdy boat for them to leave immediately.»

«...Do we really have to go that far?»

Lee Jayang, who had been grumbling, sighed deeply as he met Gwak Hwanso's determined gaze.

«Yes, we do. If it needs to be done, then so be it.»

«Alright. I'll ask for your cooperation.»

Normally, Lee Jayang would have protested vehemently, but seeing Gwak Hwanso taking charge like this, he couldn't keep up his tantrum.

«And, just in case, prepare a few extra boats separately.»

«Why? We barely have enough boats that can carry ten people.»

«There will be those who want to leave. They may not want to die, but they can't bear to live on Hainan island without Haenam's name.»

«Sahyeong...»

«Just make the preparations. That's all.»

Lee Jayang bit his lip.

«...Understood.»

«Good.»

With that, Gwak Hwanso closed his eyes.

'Those who want to escape...'

Perhaps, it was a statement directed at himself. If only he could, if only he had the chance, he would want to run away right now, to a place where he could survive. But he couldn't. He was Haenam's senior disciple. If someone had to bear the burden of Haenam's name and die, it had to be Gwak Hwanso.

«Everyone, think carefully.»

«Sahyeong, we...»

«Don't say anything you'll regret.»

With that, Gwak Hwanso rose from his seat and left the room.

Watching him go, the other disciples sighed deeply and began to leave one by one.

\*\*\*

«...It's exactly as Sahyeong said.»

A sigh of admiration escaped from Go Hong's lips. Yu Gong's words about there being nothing they could do resonated deeply. Even Sect Leader and the elders couldn't shake off a glimmer of hope.

«You're truly remarkable.»

A strange sense of relief filled Go Hong's heart. It was Yu Gong who could calmly assess the situation like this. If someone like him had decided to leave the sect, then Go Hong's decision to follow suit couldn't be wrong. But unlike Go Hong, who kept expressing admiration, Yu Gong didn't show much emotion.

«...Is that so?»

«Yes. Sect Leader said that once the storm subsides, those who intend to leave the sect will be formally dismissed. However, martial arts must be forfeited.»

«That's the right decision.»

«Losing martial arts is regrettable, but... What can we do? It's better than dying.»

Yu Gong nodded in agreement.

This was something they had been prepared for from the start. Going down to the village as martial arts practitioners would be more dangerous for them. They had to become insignificant. They had to become insignificant worms that Sapaeryeon wouldn't bother tracking down and killing, just to survive.

But once they survived, they could do anything, couldn't they?

«But how did you know? With all those formidable individuals coming, surely there must have been at least some plan.»

«It's not that they didn't have a plan.»

«Really?»

«It's just that Sapaeryeon is that fast and scary.»

Go Hong seemed to find it difficult to understand, but Yu Gong's gaze was no longer on him. Yu Gong simply stared blankly at the pouring rain.

It was just as he expected. Nothing had changed at all.

Realistically, it wasn't a situation where they could hope for anything different, so naturally, he thought it would turn out this way.

So it was definitely for the best. If unnecessary variables were introduced, things could have gone awry. If Sect Leader had harbored hope and Cheonumaeng brought in even some kind of backup, instead of sending the disciples away, Sect Leader might have mobilized everyone to fight Sapaeryeon, so things might have turned out differently.

With everything going as planned without any unexpected incidents, it was truly fortunate.

But...

'I don't know. Why do I feel so bitter?'

— You've held up well, young one.

Those words kept echoing in his ears. Strangely, the arrogant remark from this brat seemed to stick in his mind, refusing to leave.

«What are Cheonumaeng's guys doing?»

«They're holed up in their rooms, not coming out. Well, they have no shame, so what can we expect?»

«...That's true.»

Yu Gong slowly nodded his head.

Nothing had changed. Nothing at all. Everything would proceed as planned.

When the storm subsided tomorrow, they would leave, and Sapaeryeon would trample Haenam. Those who chose to stay with Haenam would accept death, while those like Yu Gong and Go Hong who chose life would walk their own paths, ignoring the screams echoing behind them.

With that, the name of Haenam sect would disappear from the world forever.

«Foolish...»

«Yes?»

«Never mind.»

Yu Gong shook his head.

«Be prepared. Just because we're in a hurry doesn't mean Sect Leader won't be too. We shouldn't delay unnecessarily and risk facing unforeseen obstacles. Once the excommunication ceremony is over, we should leave immediately.»

«Yes, Sahyeo... I mean, Hyeong.»

«Call me Sahyeong for now.»

«Ah... Yes, of course.»

Go Hong scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

That night, the storm that had engulfed Hainan swept over the land even more fiercely than the previous day. It was as if it stubbornly refused to let go of Hainan, clinging to it with its nails.

But when the next day dawned...

«...It stopped.»

The fierce winds and torrential rain abruptly ceased like a lie, leaving behind a calm and indifferent sea.