

Chapter 1245

That's all? (5)

Elders' bewildered voices echoed from all directions.

«Just ten?»

«Are you saying those here are all?»

«How could this...»

Cheonumaneg's group guarding Baek Cheon's back seemed rather perplexed by the reactions.

«...Sahyeong. Why is everyone reacting like this?»

Jo Geol whispered, looking puzzled, to which Yoon Jong smiled bitterly and replied,

«Perhaps... they thought we were just an advance team.»

«An advance team?»

«With just ten of us coming all the way to this distant land... They probably thought we led more people and crossed the sea ahead of everyone else.»

«Oh...»

Jo Geol looked at the elders of Haenam with a confused expression.

While Jo Geol might find it quite confusing, in reality, it was a perfectly natural reaction for them. From Cheonumaeng's perspective, they had sent prestigious figures and leaders of each faction to demonstrate the utmost sincerity. But from Haenam's perspective, it was inconceivable that such esteemed individuals would operate independently without any backup.

To think that any sect leader would abandon their own sect and single-handedly venture into enemy's territory? This goes against the norms of both Gangho and common sense in society. So naturally, it was assumed that there must be others who came along separately. It was a misunderstanding born out of not being able to thoroughly inquire about each other's situations.

«Then what the hell are you all here for?»

«Leaving Gupailbang to join Cheonumaeng? Are you planning to use even the last remnants of a doomed sect to bolster your name?»

«This is outrageous!»

The anger of the elders erupted like a blazing fire, pouring onto the group.

Some were shocked by the intense reaction, their eyes widening. Others furrowed their brows. Despite the dire situation at the main hall, it seemed unreasonable to show such a reaction considering that they had risked their lives to come here for them.

«That's enough...»

«Sect Leader! How is this any different from saying they'll skin a sick tiger?»

«It's a maneuver to take the name without offering any help! Why should we be treated like this?»

«That's enough!»

Suddenly, Geum Yangbaek's voice erupted like a wild beast's roar.

The bewildered elders looked at Geum Yangbaek. They had been by his side for a long time as elders, but they had never seen him so enraged before.

«These men from the Southern Sea...»

As Geum Yangbaek glared at them with icy eyes, the elders all bowed their heads deeply.

«Even if their actions were different from what you expected, the fact remains that they risked their lives to come and help Haenam. Isn't that so?»

«Sect Leader...»

«Yet, while there are others who should be helping us, we don't say a word to them, but instead criticize those who have at least shown concern for us. No matter how deceitful the human heart may be, is this truly how the elders of Haenam should behave?»

The elders could only bow their heads even deeper, unable to meet Geum Yangbaek's gaze. With a fierce glare at them, Geum Yangbaek let out a small sigh. He turned his head to look at Baek Cheon again and said,

«I apologize for showing such an ugly sight. Everyone is desperate...»

«No, Sect Leader. We should have prepared more...»

«No, it's not. I am grateful for your understanding.»

Geum Yangbaek smiled bitterly, but unlike before, there was a distinct shadow in his smile.

«I understand what you're saying, Vice Sect Leader.»

«Sect Leader, but...»

«No.»

Geum Yangbaek shook his head.

«Not bringing more help along doesn't mean we've turned our hearts away. We just had unfounded expectations.»

«...»

«Even if, as those foolish elders say, you came from Cheonumaeng just to use our name...»

«Oh, that's...»

«Yes, I understand. That's unlikely. While I may be the Sect Leader of Haenam, I don't believe Haenam's name carries enough weight to move everyone here.»

Geum Yangbaek chuckled ruefully.

«If by some chance you did come with such intentions, it would be excessive to let you benefit from your efforts just because we acknowledge them.»

Geum Yangbaek seemed to have made up his mind. Baek Cheon bit his lip nervously.

Then, Geum Yangbaek slowly nodded.

«However, Vice Sect Leader, I'm sorry to say that I will decline Cheonumaneg's offer.»

«Sect Leader...»

«The reason is simple.»

Geum Yangbaek raised his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. Though his eyes were directed upward, he seemed to be contemplating something else entirely.

«Haenam may belong to Gupailbang, but it was never truly part of it. It was merely a hastily filled void after Hwasan disappeared.»

Though his words were tinged with sadness, his tone remained stoic.

«As such, despite being part of the same Gupailbang, we faced implicit discrimination. And perhaps underlying that discrimination was disdain for us, the islanders from the Southern Sea.»

«That's...»

«Islanders are not to be trusted. Islanders have no loyalty. Islanders betray as easily as they eat, changing their attitudes as swiftly as the sea.»

Geum Yangbaek chuckled bitterly.

«Perhaps the emotions I'm describing are difficult for you, mainlanders, to understand. And... perhaps even for the Ice Palace, it might be hard to comprehend. It's about enduring what it takes to intervene between those who face discrimination and those who discriminate.»

Baek Cheon asked Geum Yangbaek as if he couldn't understand.

«But, Sect Leader, then there should be even less reason to hesitate, shouldn't there? As you mentioned, no matter how much Haenam struggles, it's still challenging to truly become part of Gupailbang. However, Cheonumaeng doesn't discriminate against members from any sect. It even recognizes Nokrim as a member of the alliance. So...»

Baek Cheon stopped speaking midway.

He felt it was rather futile to repeat such persuasion, but more than that, it was Geum Yangbaek's smiling expression that bothered him. That smile didn't sit right with him.

Geum Yangbaek spoke up.

«What do you think faith is, Vice Sect Leader?»

«Um... Yes?»

«Exactly. What do you think faith is?»

Baek Cheon couldn't answer immediately. It would be easy to answer what faith is, but what Geum Yangbaek wanted to know wasn't that.

Seeing Baek Cheon's silence, Geum Yangbaek spoke.

«I believe faith is what one proves in the end.»

«...»

«Vice Sect Leader, Haenam has been a sect that's been difficult to trust until the end, a sect that might eventually turn away. No matter how much we cry out for collaboration, no matter how we justify otherwise, their deep-rooted prejudices haven't disappeared.»

«...»

«It's not just about the issue of power. Even without power, people in Haenam who aren't of our sect face discrimination and prejudice simply because their skin color is different, simply because they don't live on the mainland.»

«Sect Leader...»

«Yet if we, the great Haenam Sect, abandon Gupailbang and join hands with Cheonumaeng at the last moment, as you mentioned, what will they say?»

Geum Yangbaek didn't wait for Baek Cheon's response.

«That's right.»

«...»

«They truly were untrustworthy islanders, after all.»

Geum Yangbaek lowered his head after pausing for a moment.

«Vice Sect Leader, we are not fools. We are not so foolish as to not know that the sects of the Central Plains, including Gupailbang, have already abandoned Haenam. It was inevitable, even though we knew... even though we already knew.»

«Sect Leader, it was they who abandoned your trust first.»

«Even if that's the case, what will that change? In the end, all that remains is the fact that Haenam did not uphold their faith.»

Baek Cheon sighed.

«If we were to take Cheonumaneg's outstretched hand in the end... We may tarnish the reputation of Gupailbang by revealing their lack of devotion to the world. However... the disdain towards those who remain will only intensify. Isn't it human nature to magnify the minor flaws of others more than your own major mistakes?»

Even Baek Cheon couldn't refute that.

«Thank you, Vice Sect Leader. Regardless of the reasons, there are no words other than gratitude for risking your life to come all this way.»

Geum Yangbaek bowed deeply. Baek Cheon hesitated to protest, but he withdrew his hand halfway.

It was because Geum Yangbaek began speaking in that state.

«However, unfortunately from Haenam's perspective, we cannot accept that proposal.

Haenam sect may come to an end like this, but the people of Hainan island still need to carry on with their lives. I hope you understand Haenam's position, considering even that aspect.»

«Of course, I understand.»

Baek Cheon said with a bitter expression.

«So... What will you do now?»

«Well...»

Geum Yangbaek raised his head and smiled faintly. Thanks to Baek Cheon's persuasion, he felt some clarity in his mind.

«Some will leave, some will surrender, and those who remain will continue to prove themselves. And what I will do is stand together with those who strive to prove themselves and share their fate.»

Baek Cheon fell silent.

«When I thought I saw a way to survive, I thought I could fight against prejudice for a lifetime. I thought it was fine to change sides at least once. But if the end is already decided, then we must end it with dignity in the name of Haenam.»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes with a heavy heart.

‘I should have come a little earlier.’

There was nothing he could do. Therefore, he couldn’t say anything.

Whatever words he spoke now would only amount to an insult to Haenam.

«The typhoon will soon pass. Living on the island for a long time naturally teaches you that.»

Geum Yangbaek looked at Baek Cheon and those behind him as he spoke.

«When the typhoon passes, leave the island. We may be the ones who should bury our bones here, but you are not. No one will bother to chase after a small boat leaving the island.»

Unconsciously, Jo Geol grabbed his thigh. The calm words strangely pricked his heart.

«So, if you return to the Central Plains, just convey one thing. Haenam has upheld its faith in the Central Plains and Gupailbang and fulfilled its duty as an orthodox sect.»

With his eyes closed, Geum Yangbaek spoke quietly.

«That alone is enough.»

Baek Cheon, who had kept his gaze fixed on Geum Yangbaek, finally turned his head away and directed his attention to someone else for the first time.

However, the person who received his gaze returned it with emotionless eyes. Baek Cheon sighed briefly and rose slowly from his seat. Then, he courteously addressed Geum Yangbaek.

«I have clearly understood the intentions of the Sect Leader.»

Geum Yangbaek also rose to face Baek Cheon.

«I wish you good health and a safe journey back.»

It was the bitter end of the discussion, and the outcome was a complete breakdown.