

## Chapter 1247

That's it. (2)

A slightly chilly breeze brushed against his arms.

Geum Yangbaek gazed blankly at the clear sky above.

‘So indifferent...’

Even Geum Yangbaek, who had lived with the belief that most of life was determined by his own efforts, had found himself looking up at the sky a few times in his lifetime.

But every time he did, the sky coldly ignored his wishes.

‘It wasn't such a great wind after all...’

Was it too much to ask for the typhoon to not ever stop, or even just to blow for one more day?

天網恢恢疎而不漏 — The net of heaven is wide-meshed, but nothing slips through. Yet, at this moment, Geum Yangbaek couldn't help but resent that wide and loose net.

«Sect Leader.»

At the voice from behind, Geum Yangbaek gently closed his eyes.

No matter what wells up in his heart, he is the Sect Leader of Haenam. He must show the demeanor befitting the Sect Leader of Haenam until the end. It's the responsibility for everything he has done so far, and it's respect for those who pledged to protect Haenam with their lives.

«Where are the guests from Cheonumaeng?»

«Hwanso has already prepared the boats yesterday and informed them of the location.»

«Hwanso?»

«Yes.»

A sigh escaped from Geum Yangbaek's lips as he recalled the image of Gwak Hwanso. Just as sailors grow through storms, it seems that martial artists also grow through crises. Despite having talent with the sword, Gwak Hwanso's impulsive nature was a problem. Seeing that he could show such consideration now, it's even more regrettable.

«So, have they left?»

«We haven't confirmed it, but it seems they've left quietly, judging by their absence.»

«Hmm.»

«Isn't it awkward to leave without showing your face?»

«... What's there to be awkward about? I am just grateful.»

Geum Yangbaek let out a short sigh.

«Im Gyeom.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«Excluding Sapaeryeon, they will likely be the last people to see Haenam.»

«...»

«What do you think? As the Sect Leader of Haenam, was I adequate?»

Although Geum Yangbaek wasn't looking at him, Im Gyeom bowed his head respectfully, expressing his utmost admiration.

«You were excellent, Sect Leader. The messengers of Cheonumaeng surely recognized that fact.»

«I see...»

Geum Yangbaek offered a faint smile.

«Nevertheless, it's fortunate that they were the ones who witnessed Haenam's end.»

«Will Gupailbang try to conceal their own flaws, while they strive to expose the flaws of Gupailbang?»

«It's not about that.»

With a contemplative expression, Geum Yangbaek gazed back up at the sky.

«Perhaps they will continue to walk the path of righteousness in the future. After all, they have come from afar to help us.»

«...That seems likely.»

«If positive words about Haenam come from their mouths, won't people around the world also remember Haenam fondly?»

When Im Gyeom remained silent, Geum Yangbaek clicked his tongue briefly, as if to dismiss any unnecessary concerns.

«Prepare yourself. We must hold the excommunication ceremony soon.»

«Do you really need to go there yourself, Sect Leader?»

«It's always better to be certain. We shouldn't instill the idea they did something wrong in those who are leaving. And by following the proper procedures, there might be a slightly higher chance of avoiding Sapaeryeon's evil grasp.»

«I understand, Sect Leader.»

Geum Yangbaek turned towards his quarters.

'It's been a while since I wore this official robe.'

And this robe would not leave his body until the moment of his death.

\*\*\*

The faces of the Haenam's disciples were filled with a deep-seated tension. The moment they confirmed the typhoon had passed, the realization set in that Sapaeryeon could attack Haenam at any moment.

«Is war really going to break out now?»

«Yes, that's right. You heard it then. Sapaeryeon is constructing ships.»

«So, once those are finished, they'll come. How long will it take?»

«Well, if those bastards who don't even know what a ship looks like saw it and recognized it as a ship, it shouldn't take more than a day. Maybe it's already done.»

«But doesn't it take at least five days to salt a ship! Isn't that common sense, Sahyeong!»

«Well, that's if they plan to use the ship regularly. If it's just for a few trips back and forth to Haenam, it doesn't matter if it leaks or not. They just need it to last a few days.»

Upon hearing this, the disciples swallowed their breath as if they had been stabbed in the chest with a dagger.

«Anyway, once Haenam is dealt with, there will be no need for them to use the ship. Sapaeryeon aren't fools, they must be considering that.»

«So... does that mean they could attack us as soon as tonight?»

«Well... if they're in a hurry, then yes.»

As more people began to grasp the situation, the tension escalated uncontrollably.

«Oh...?»

«Huh?»

«Um... by any chance, um...»

One disciple, glancing around cautiously, quietly asked the person next to them.

«Has the number of participants for the ceremony been finalized?»

The person who heard this question looked at them with a deadly gaze.

«Why? Do you want to ask Sect Leader to include you in the ceremony at this point?»

«Oh, no, Sahyeong. How could I even think of that? I am devoted to Haenam to my core.»

«But?»

«...But, um... I may not be, but I think there might be some among the other Sahyongs who want that.»

Upon hearing this, the other person let out a deep sigh.

«Not entirely false.»

After all, they too were struggling with the same temptation.

If one receives excommunication, they can at least save their life. Then, afterward, they can try something else. If everyone dies and disappears, the martial arts school known as Haenam will vanish from the world. Wouldn't it be better to falsely accept excommunication and attempt the revival of Haenam rather than letting it disappear altogether?

Lost in such contemplation, So Yeorip [소여립(昭與立)] suddenly chuckled.

‘It seems we really want to live.’

It's remarkable how even someone like him rationalizes excommunication as a means to survival.

As So Yeorip sighed, his eyes widened suddenly. He spotted Gwak Hwanso heading outside.

«Daesahyeong! Where are you going?»

Gwak Hwanso, halfway out the door, turned to look at So Yeorip.

«Are you going to prepare for the excommunication ceremony?»

«No, not yet.»

«Then...»

Next to Gwak Hwanso, Lee Jayang frowned and shouted.

«We're going to clean the hall where Cheonumaeng stayed!»

«Uh... what? Why...? There's no need to clean it again, right?»

So Yeorip asked, puzzled. If it's the hall he's talking about, it must be the guest hall. Why bother cleaning it now when there will be no more guests at Haenam?

But despite the questioning looks he received, Gwak Hwanso just chuckled briefly.

«Don't worry about it. I'll just be gone for a moment...»

«Instead, he says it's the last time, the last time! Anything should end neatly at the last, but he says we can't end any part of Haenam like that!»

Everyone stared blankly at Gwak Hwanso.

But some of them, who were preparing for the excommunication ceremony, couldn't bring themselves to face him and simply bowed their heads.

Lee Jayang grumbled irritably.

«You've become quite the exceptional senior. What's the big deal if that hall is a bit dirty?»

«So, I'm going alone, right?»

«That's enough! Are you planning to turn me into a lackey, leaving me to clean up while you relax?»

«If you're going, then go, and if you're not, just say so. Why complain so much if you're going anyway?»

«It's frustrating, that's why! You weren't always this blocked up.»

«People say your true nature comes out at the end, and well, this must be mine.»

«That's ridiculous...»

«Enough, let's go. If you really don't want to, just stay here.»

As Gwak Hwanso started to walk ahead, Lee Jayang grumbled irritably and reluctantly followed behind. Then, nearly half of the disciples in the hall suddenly stood up and rushed out.

«Daesahyeong!»

«We'll take care of it.»

«Daesahyeong, please stay here! This is something we should handle! You just need to give the orders...»

Gwak Hwanso sighed deeply.

«I'm just trying to do something because I feel frustrated. Just let it be.»

«We're frustrated too. Let's go together then.»

Gwak Hwanso looked at the line of disciples standing in front of him and nodded silently.

«Alright, let's go. If we all go together, we can finish the cleaning before the ceremony.»

«Yes.»

Gwak Hwanso moved forward without further hesitation.

It was absurd, even by his own reckoning. Cleaning at a time like this.

If he hadn't felt the weight of it being the last time, Gwak Hwanso wouldn't have entertained such thoughts.

But with the sense of the end looming over him, he couldn't simply let it be.

This place, where he took his first steps and spend his life, would soon vanish without a trace in flames. Yet, he wanted at least this final moment to be pristine. It was all he could do now. So, he was grateful for those who shared his blocked-up thoughts.

‘In the end, it’s only the disciples that the sect leaves behind.’

No one else in the world would help them. Not even fellow residents of Hainan island, who had begun to keep their distance after realizing the situation. Yet here they were, the disciples of Haenam, embarking on their final moments, spending their time on insignificant tasks like cleaning the guest hall.

That’s why they were disciples of an orthodox sect.

‘When it’s time to die, it’s with them.’

Arriving at the guest hall, a small smile formed on Gwak Hwanso’s lips.

The hall, now devoid of people, was overwhelmingly silent. It felt desolate, almost melancholic, as if even the slightest sound of an ant’s footsteps would echo through the still air. Taking in the sight in silence, Gwak Hwanso paused for a moment.

«...Sahyeong?»

«It’s nothing.»

Only after being called out, Gwak Hwanso forced a bright smile and exclaimed,

«Let’s finish quickly. We’re short on time to clear everything, from the empty bottles to the vomit stains.»

«But those were from Jayang Sahyeong.»

«Who, who said that?»

«I saw it with my own two eyes.»

«Trying to frame me...»

As Lee Jayang’s face turned red, Gwak Hwanso chuckled and said,

«You threw up there, so you clean it up.»

«Oh! But, but it wasn’t me, Sahyeong!»

«Come on, let’s hurry, everyone!»

«Yes!»

Some disciples rushed towards the entrance, ready to grasp the door handle, when suddenly, the door creaked open.

Thunk!

«Ow!»

A disciple, who had hit his face on the door, stumbled backward and fell.

«What’s going on?»

«Huh?»

Surprised disciples of Haenam widened their eyes, staring at the open door. Emerging from it was Chung Myung, with swollen eyes and a bird’s nest on his head, scratching his stomach with one hand.

«What’s happening? Why is everyone gathered here so early in the morning?»

Momentarily speechless, Gwak Hwanso stared blankly at Chung Myung.

Why is he still here?

«Um...»

«Hey, you.»

Startled by Chung Myung calling him, Gwak Hwanso involuntarily responded,

«Yes?»

«Where's the dining hall? Why isn't there any food?»

At that moment Gwak Hwanso's astonishment soared through the sky.