

Chapter 1249

That's it. (4)

Gwak Hwanso thought to himself,

‘What madness is this?’

At first, he was surprised, then bewildered, and finally, utterly dumbfounded. While Chung Myung ranted about his stupidity, Gwak Hwanso was a senior disciple of Haenam. He couldn't afford to be ignorant. There was no way he couldn't understand the meaning behind their words.

«S-so, um...»

He stuttered as he tried to speak.

«Now that the mission as Cheonumaeng's envoys is terminated, we won't discuss it further, but...»

«Yes?»

«Are you saying that you'll join Haenam as individuals, relinquishing all affiliation with Cheonumaeng?»

«Yes, exactly.»

Gwak Hwanso looked at Cheonumaeng's group, pushing food into their mouths with ease as if nothing was happening. He felt like the sense of reality he had desperately sought was slipping away.

Struggling to compose his thoughts, Gwak Hwanso finally uttered the most reasonable words he could think of.

«Are you insane?»

Was it excessive? No, not at all. From Gwak Hwanso's perspective, it was the most reasonable thing to say. What could be a more sensible thing to say to someone who is willing to sacrifice their own life?

«Hey, have you seen this rude bastard? Talking back to the Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan!»

«Chung Myung-ah, calm down!»

«You're the rude bastard who's always talking back to the Vice Sect Leader!»

Chung Myung got angry, but Baek Cheon just smiled.

«Do I seem crazy to you?»

«Well, it's not something I'd say in my right mind.»

«It's hard to argue with that.»

Baek Cheon shrugged nonchalantly.

«But what can we do? The decision has been made.»

Gwak Hwanso, who had been standing still, suddenly jerked as if something had dawned on him.

«So, are all the people here?...»

«Yes, that's correct.»

He couldn't find any words now.

'Are they really in their right minds?'

Who are these people here?

Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan, Young Lords of Namgung and Tang clans, and even the Lord of the Ice Palace. There's even Nokrim King, isn't he?

Of course, Nokrim King is sitting in one corner emitting an aura of «How did I end up tangled with these crazy people, sitting here like this? I just want to bite my tongue and die,» but nevertheless, they are all here together.

Gwak Hwanso could do nothing but scratch his head in confusion.

Naturally, he felt grateful. Despite everyone turning away from Haenam, they still came all the way here, and even after negotiations fell through, they stayed instead of leaving. How could he not be grateful?

In his heart, he felt like shedding tears and prostrating himself in gratitude right on the spot. But at this moment, Gwak Hwanso realized anew. He realized how rational he was as a person. No, perhaps he realized that there were countless others in the world who were more foolish than him.

«Do you not know what positions you are in?»

«...»

«You are the ones carrying the future of each martial arts sect. Why on earth would such people risk their lives in a distant land like this?»

«That's exactly why.»

«Exactly?»

Baek Cheon spoke calmly.

«As you said, we are the ones who carry the future of each martial arts sect. Therefore, every action we take can only serve as an example for our sects.»

«No, those who know about it...»

At that moment, Baek Cheon interrupted Gwak Hwanso's words with a firm voice.

«So, if we were to return like this, how do you think those who were waiting for our return would accept the situation?»

«...»

«We went all the way to Haenam, but things didn't go well. So, should we tell them that we turned away and fled before Sapaeryeon arrived?»

Baek Cheon nodded silently.

«We can't do that. If we did, we would only leave behind a precedent that when faced with a strong enemy, we abandon our comrades and flee.»

«...»

«So, we have to fight. Not because the enemy is strong and we should run, but because the enemy is strong, so we must fight. That's the minimum obligation of those who have gained benefits through choosing a righteous path and have principles they must uphold.»

«But what about Cheonumaeng?»

«Yes, of course, individual perspectives of sects and alliances may differ. Sometimes, even the highest authority must yield to such individual disagreements. However...»

Baek Cheon laughed softly.

«Well, what can we do? Alliance Leader isn't here. We might get scolded later, but for now, he can't do anything about us.»

«...»

As soon as those words were spoken, the faces of those nearby, especially the disciples of Hwasan, turned somber.

«If Sect Leader knows, he'll kill us.»

«But he's not Sect Leader anymore, he's retired Sect Leader.»

«No, even if Sect Leader knows, he'll kill us. Sahyeong.»

«Well, um...»

«Didn't you see Un Am Sasukjo when he was angry?»

«I don't think I've seen it...»

«I've seen it once. Um... I saw it, and...»

Just the thought of it made Jo Geol tremble with fear.

«Sect Leader shouldn't have changed... We're doomed.»

The faces of Hwasan's disciples darkened in an instant, but Baek Cheon remained clam.

«We can worry about what's coming later. Right now, we only need to focus on what's right in front of us.»

At that moment, Gwak Hwanso realized it with certainty.

'He's truly insane.'

What bizarre thoughts lurked within this seemingly composed person? His demeanor was polite, his face exuded trustworthiness, yet within him lay something truly terrifying. No wonder he was entrusted with the role of Hwasan's Vice Sect Leader.

His logic was erratic, his words lacked coherence. It was difficult to discern where to even begin addressing his statements.

Yet Gwak Hwanso couldn't bring himself to openly point out this fact. It wasn't because them joining was advantageous.

Comrade.

That one word from Baek Cheon, uttered so casually, forcefully sealed Gwak Hwanso's lips.

«We...»

Gwak Hwanso squeezed out the words that refused to come.

«We rejected Cheonumaneg's proposal.»

«Yes.»

«We firmly stated that we won't join Cheonumaeng.»

«Indeed.»

Gwak Hwanso stared directly at Baek Cheon, his eyes filled with intense emotions.

«Even so, are we still Cheonumaneg's comrades? Is it worth risking your lives to fight alongside us?»

«...Um... yes?»

Baek Cheon's expression seemed rather perplexed upon hearing this.

«Well, just because Haenam didn't join Cheonumaeng doesn't mean we can't fight together. We're still from the same orthodox sects, aren't we?»

«...»

«Sure, the relationship between Gupailbang and Cheonumaeng might be a bit awkward. But frankly speaking, it's the relationship between Cheonumaeng and Shaolin that is bad. Do we have any reason to hold a grudge against Haenam?»

Gwak Hwanso couldn't bring himself to respond and remained silent. Baek Cheon smiled and continued.

«The important thing is not that. What matters is that Haenam is currently facing Sapaeryeon alone, and we are here right now.»

His voice remained calm and composed from the beginning until now, as if he was simply stating a mundane fact that didn't warrant much attention or debate.

«So, we will just fight. I don't see why anything else is necessary.»

A moment of silence passed.

Gwak Hwanso's head drooped slightly. Emotions surged within him. He didn't want to show them to the others right now.

With his head bowed, he spoke in a subdued voice,

«Well... isn't it true that Hwasan Sect doesn't have favorable sentiments toward Haenam?»

«Well, honestly, it's not like we have warm feelings toward you either. There's some history between us.»

«But...»

«But that doesn't mean we should abandon Haenam.»

Gwak Hwanso bit his lip. He didn't know what to say. Where should he start, and how...

«And there seems to be a bit of misunderstanding... the stance of Cheonumaeng and individual sects and people may differ. But that doesn't mean if Cheonumaeng knew about this situation, they would abandon Haenam.»

«...»

«We simply came here without fully understanding the situation. If we knew, even if Haenam didn't join Cheonumaeng, we would have tried our best to assist Haenam with all our might.»

Gwak Hwanso bit his lip and asked,

«Is that... Cheonumaeng's way?»

«No.»

«...Huh?»

«This isn't the way of Cheonumaeng. It's the way of those who wield a sword.»

Gwak Hwanso's heart fluttered.

Speaking these words was too easy, indeed. Throughout his life, Gwak Hwanso had heard and spoken countless such words. But how many in the world could truly risk their lives? Yet here, in front of him, were a few of those rare people.

«...Thank you.»

At this moment, Gwak Hwanso also set aside his own position. This statement wasn't made as a senior disciple of Haenam, but simply as a disciple of Haenam.

«Even if it's just words, thank you for saying that you're willing to die with us...»

«Who said what?!»

At that moment, an uncomfortably sharp voice interjected, cutting off Gwak Hwanso's words.

«Um, excuse me?»

«Who said they're willing to die with you?»

«Um, no, not right now.»

«Ugh, is this guy really out of his mind?»

Chung Myung's face was distorted, while he was unleashing a barrage of curses.

«Who's going to die? It's this bastard! Am I crazy? Why the hell did I end up here? Even if I carefully settle in Hwasan's Plum Forest and receive praises for generations to come, it wouldn't be enough!»

«I hope I never see that sight.»

«It's a curse, a curse.»

«We should just throw him off the cliff.»

«Wouldn't it be better to bury him in Jongnam? It'll be a generational curse, won't it?»

As Chung Myung turned his head abruptly, glaring fiercely, the disciples of Hwasan hastily averted their gazes.

«Who said we're willing to die with you, you useless idiot?»

«Oh, um... isn't that the situation?»

«What situation? What are you talking about?»

«S... Sapaeryeon...»

«Hey!»

Flames seemed to spark in Chung Myung's eyes.

«Do we have to beg them to come and kill us if Sapaeryeon attacks? It's not like all of them are going to gather, and even if they do, they're not all going to fight. But here we are, acting like we've already got one foot in the grave, just like those spineless idiots from Gupailbang! Hey, you! You!»

«I, our forces...»

«Our forces can go freeze to death! It's not the strongest who wins, it's the winners who are the strongest. If you're going to talk about forces, then Central Plains should've been wiped out a hundred years ago!»

«That's right.»

«...Demonic Cult's bastards were really strong.»

«...They were even fiercer in the past. I wonder how they managed to beat them.»

«Compared to that, Sapaeryeon is nothing.»

Gwak Hwanso, bewildered, looked at everyone blankly. Then Chung Myung spoke bluntly.

«Listen up, you punk.»

«... Yes?»

«There is a difference between fighting prepared to die and just dying. Who said anyone's dying here? Don't talk nonsense. I'm here to fight those Sapaeryeon's bastards, not to die here.»

«Hwasan Geomhyeop...»

Chung Myung gave Gwak Hwanso a narrowed glance.

«So if you've got time to waste blabbering useless stuff, go get ready. We'll talk after we've eaten.»

«... What do you mean by talk?»

«Just talk.»

All eyes turned towards Chung Myung.

«We need to talk about how we're going to kill those Sapaeryeon's bastards.»

A twisted smile formed on Chung Myung's lips.