

## Chapter 1235

So I heard that's true? (5)

The weather in Hainan is capricious. When the sun shines hot, strong storms and typhoons often sweep through intermittently. Consequently, those living rooted in the land of Hainan tend to take most typhoons in stride.

However, as Haenam's Sect Leader Geum Yangbaek gazed through the window at the raging typhoon, a profound sorrow settled on his face.

'It's overwhelming.'

His mind was as tumultuous as the scene before him. As the Sect Leader of the great Haenam sect, he should be guiding everyone, but the burden on his shoulders felt unbearably heavy.

'I'd rather...'

He glanced at the swaying trees, forcing a hollow laugh. Wishing everything would be swept away by this typhoon wasn't a thought befitting a leader of a sect.

'I've grown weak.'

No, perhaps it wasn't that he had weakened, but rather that those he had to contend with were too formidable. Whether it was Sapaeryeon or Gangho as a whole.

Knock. The sound of the wind piercing through and knocking on the door was heard.

«Sect Leader, it's Im Gyeom.»

«Come in.»

The door creaked open, letting the wind rush into the room. A scroll adorning the wall shot up in the air, then tumbled to the ground.

Geum Yangbaek's gaze landed on the fallen scroll. Specifically, the characters written on it. «意氣如海 俠義如浪» — Spirit as vast as the sea, chivalry like waves. Eight characters symbolizing Haenam.

Unconsciously, Geum Yangbaek closed his eyes tightly.

«The wind is strong, Sect Leader.»

Im Gyeom remarked, looking at the open window. Geum Yangbaek slowly nodded.

«Let it be. It won't be as tumultuous as within me.»

«...»

«What's the situation?»

«Well...»

Im Gyeom took a short breath before speaking.

«I intended to send the young disciples as instructed, but...»

«Hmm.»

«As the typhoon started, I decided to postpone it until the wind subsides, for the time being.»

«I see.»

Geum Yangbaek nodded slowly.

For seasoned veterans, it might be bearable. But sending out children who could barely walk in this storm was not the wisest choice. Since there would be no enemy invasion while the typhoon raged, it wasn't a bad decision.

«Do the children obey willingly?»

«Some resisted, but what could we do? Even if it meant scolding them, we had to send them out.»

«... Well done.»

«And...»

Im Gyeom glanced at Geum Yangbaek's expression before continuing.

«As for the excommunication you mentioned...»

Seeing Im Gyeom's expression, Geum Yangbaek sighed and spoke.

«There's no need to hesitate. Let's not waste any time.»

«Yes. Among the four hundred and seventy-six disciples in Jinsan\*, including the elders in the main mountain, seventy-eight have requested the excommunication.»

Geum Yangbaek closed his eyes again in silence. Perhaps due to the chilly wind blowing in, his face appeared even paler.

«... There are fewer than I thought.»

«...»

«Are the children's sentiments towards the sect deeper than I anticipated?»

«Well...»

Im Gyeom hesitated slightly before responding. But under Geum Yangbaek's urging gaze, he finally relented with a deep sigh.

«The words spoken by Sect Leader may not be entirely wrong, but among the disciples, there seemed to be a strong belief that even if they were to go down to the village and get excommunication, Sapaeryeon would not acknowledge it without causing a commotion.»

«...»

«So instead of just being scattered and picked off one by one, they think it's better to resist here and now...»

A chuckle escaped Geum Yangbaek's lips.

«True. I suppose so.»

«It seems the disciples who desire the excommunication are inclined to choose any chance, no matter how slim, of making out alive.»

The two didn't delve into the sincerity and solidarity of those desiring excommunication. It was now a meaningless endeavor.

If the disciples lacked devotion to Haenam, it was the fault of the Sect Leader and elders who had led Haenam astray all this time, and if they lacked righteousness, it was because the Sect Leader and elders had failed to set an example of righteousness for the disciples.

No matter who was to be blamed, it ultimately ended up as spit on one's face. What could be said at this point?

«The excommunication ceremony... Yes, we've decided to carry out the ceremony as soon as the typhoon passes.»

«The excommunication ceremony?»

Geum Yangbaek scoffed. What significance did it hold now?

«Very well. Just send them out. Erasing a name from the records in the sect isn't such a big deal.»

«...Sect Leader, that's not...»

«Hmm?»

As Geum Yangbaek looked at him with a puzzled expression, Im Gyeom replied with a troubled look.

«I didn't say I would carry out the excommunication ceremony. It's the disciples who want it.»

«What did you say?»

«Well... It seems they feel the need for a solid shield when Sapaeryeon starts their investigation.»

At that moment, an indescribable disappointment flashed across Geum Yangbaek's face.

«Haha... Ha...»

When the sun shines down on the top of your head, you don't see any shadows. It was the same in Haenam. When the sect's power was at its peak, everything seemed fine.

But at this moment, Geum Yangbaek was painfully aware.

'What on earth have I been doing all this time?'

Geum Yangbaek pondered. He had thought he was doing his best to carry on the legacy of his predecessors in the sect. But when adversity struck the sect, he inevitably realized that what he had believed in all along was nothing but an illusion.

«... Well, then I guess I should do it.»

«Sect Leader...»

«It's what those leaving the sect wish for, isn't it? Shouldn't we grant them that one thing?»

Watching Geum Yangbaek murmur bitterly, Im Gyeom bit his lip tightly.

«It's an unreasonable request.»

«Perhaps. But what can we do? It's our responsibility if we failed to instill those values in them.»

«But...»

«Let's leave it at that.»

Geum Yangbaek let out a deep sigh, his face showing signs of exhaustion.

«Elder Im.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«Has there been any communication from outside?»

«...Perhaps due to the typhoon, there's still no word...»

Geum Yangbaek sighed again in self-reprimand.

How many hours had it been since the typhoon started, yet there was still no sign of the anticipated messenger due to the storm? It meant they probably weren't coming in the first place.

His gaze returned listlessly to the window. The black clouds filling the sky seemed to reflect the current situation in Haenam.

'The typhoon will eventually pass, and the sun will rise again. But...'

Was there a day dawning anew for Haenam as well?

«Sect Leader...»

At that moment, Im Gyeom cautiously spoke up.

«I believe it's time to make a decision.»

«...A decision?»

«It's not that Ja Yang is wrong. But isn't it clear that simply enduring isn't providing any answers? Perhaps...»

«Are you saying there will be answers if we don't endure?»

Geum Yangbaek spoke with a tired voice.

«Yes, Sect Leader. Considering that Sapaeryeon isn't directly targeting the commoners... It doesn't seem like there will be significant issues for the remaining people. So...»

«Do you think I haven't considered that possibility?»

«...»

«Didn't I say it? The ones most eager for us to leave this island are none other than Sapaeryeon. If we leave this island, our only options are the lands of Gangnam and Linyi. Is there even one place among them that is friendly to us?»

«Well...»

Geum Yangbaek nodded.

«It's not about choosing between life and death. It's about choosing where to die. It's not human to leave a place where we've put down roots, even if it means leaving to die while clinging to the thread of life a little longer.»

«Sect Leader...»

Geum Yangbaek raised his head and stared intensely at Im Gyeom.

«Elder Im.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«Do you truly want to find a solution?»

For a moment, suspicion flickered in Im Gyeom's eyes. He felt a strange tension due to the slightly changed tone of Geum Yangbaek's speech.

«...Are you saying there's a solution?»

«A solution... Well, there might be. There is indeed one solution.»

«What solution is it?»

«All we want is for the name Haenam to survive and for the disciples here to preserve their lives, isn't it?»

«That's correct.»

«To achieve that, wouldn't we have to endure any possible humiliation?»

Im Gyeom's face stiffened in an instant.

«S-Surely... You can't mean...»

«There is a way. A way to ensure the survival of the name Haenam, even if it means spreading it far and wide.»

Geum Yangbaek chuckled, mocking himself.

«Surrender to Sapaeryeon, bow our heads to Jang Ilso's feet, and at least the disciples will be able to preserve their lives.»

«Sect Leader!»

Im Gyeom's voice exploded louder than the thunder outside.

«Are you saying this now?»

«Paegun Jang Ilso will surely accept. No, he won't just accept — he will welcome it with open arms. He will be able to become the leader of Sapa with Gupailbang at his feet, something no one has been able to do so far. He'll gladly extend his favor to us.»

«Enough!»

Im Gyeom glared at Geum Yangbaek with bloodshot eyes.

«Even if you say it's just foolish words, it's not something the Sect Leader of Haenam should say! How could you utter such treacherous words?»

«Tracherous?»

Geum Yangbaek smirked.

«What's so treacherous about it? What's so noble about those who enjoy the fruits of others' labor, who steal what should rightfully belong to their benefactors?»

«Sect Leader!»

«...In the first place, we weren't much different from Sapaeryeon. We were just pretending.»

Geum Yangbaek slumped weakly in his chair. He knew it was absurd. He just wanted to voice it out loud for once.

«So... If that's not the case, then we must simply accept it.»

«...If no one is willing to help, then we can't do anything on our own. Our opponents are Jang Ilso, Sapaeryeon, and merciless Ho Gamyong. Against those who even have played a trick on Shaolin, what can we hope to achieve? They probably anticipate our moves and have set traps for us.»

Im Gyeom bowed his head deeply. He couldn't deny those words.

«What should we do...»

Rumble!

Following the feeble murmurs, the sound of thunder and lightning strikes echoed.

«I believed...»

“...”

«...I believed that rising high, gaining fame, and receiving praise meant we were accomplishing something. But that wasn't what truly mattered. Even if our sect, now just a shell, receives lavish praises, what does it really mean?»

“...”

«...We should have fulfilled our duties. We should have remembered why Haenam is Haenam. We're only paying the price now for being swayed by what we shouldn't have been. I'm just... sorry to the disciples who are bearing the consequences of the wrong choices made by the predecessors and me.»

«Sect Leader...»

Geum Yangbaek's gaze drifted into the distance.

Somewhere across the sea, they must be there.

'I should have met them in person and apologized at least once.'

Now, since it's impossible, all there is to feel is heartache. He can only hope that his feelings will someday be conveyed...

Crash!

At that moment, the door burst open violently.

«Sect Leader!»

Immediately, a drenched elder, Ja Yang, rushed in, his expression as if he had seen a ghost.

«What's the matter?»

«Sapaeryeon? Has Sapaeryeon arrived?»

The two men, now alert, rose from their seats.

«N-No, it's not that...!»

«Then?»

Ja Yang shouted with a face drained of color.

«You must come and see! Guests! Guests have arrived!»

«Guests?»

As Geum Yangbaek was about to question the absurdity of the statement, Ja Yang shouted again.

«H-H-H-Hwasan!»

«Huh?»

Almost a scream echoed through the room.

«Hwasan is here!»

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\* 진산(鎭山) — can be interpreted as Guardian Mountain — This term refers to a large mountain located behind each village (usually to the north), also known as the principal mountain or “Jinsan.” It is a concept in Feng Shui geography.