

## Chapter 1244

That's all? (4)

A person truly becomes angry when they are confronted with the truth they want to avoid. That was exactly the sentiment among the people of Haenam present here. The words they knew but didn't want to hear, the events they saw but wanted to turn away from. This young man named Baek Cheon was pushing that unwanted truth in front of them and shouting it out loud. And because they were human, their reactions erupted in a similar fashion.

«What are you saying!»

«Even if you come here as a special envoy of Cheonumaeng, your words are too much!»

«Can you take responsibility for those words?»

Yet Baek Cheon didn't bother to rebut the vehement responses. He simply remained silent, listening to the torrent of words pouring out. He looked calmly at each person expressing their anger. His indifference gradually cooled the heated atmosphere until no one else spoke. Only then did Baek Cheon open his mouth.

His cold, impassive voice cut through the fervor of the crowd.

«Do I need to explain the reason why I said such words?»

Those few words, brief as they were, carried both consideration and a sharp edge.

The fact that Haenam was abandoned by Gupailbang is known best to those present here. Even those who haven't given up their last hope can only cling to the slim possibility of remaining hope, while those discussing reality are merely searching for a way to turn away their hearts.

There isn't a single person here who believes that Gulailbang will actively step forward to help Haenam.

'Discussing righteousness, discussing the boundaries.'

Baek Cheon's voice penetrated the ears of those unable to contain their boiling emotions.

"Engaging in discussions with flowery language, presenting lofty intentions to assert our righteousness, and gracefully confirming each other's positions without causing harm and gracefully stepping back."

"..."

«Yes... we can do that. However...»

Baek Cheon's gaze briefly shifted to the side. Through the slightly open door, they could see Haenam's disciples standing guard outside, swaying in the raging storm.

«However, now is not the time for that. Do you know what we saw along the coast on our way here?»

«... What did you see?»

«We saw numerous ships being requisitioned and new ships being built.»

At that statement, Geum Yangbaek bit his lip tightly.

«Requisitioned, you say?»

«Yes. They took away every small fishing boat without exception.»

In an instant, the faces of everyone in the room stiffened. If ships were being gathered, there was only one inevitable outcome: invasion. There was no need to verify the truth. The imminent attack of Sapaeryeon was something they had already felt in their bones.

«Sect Leader.»

Baek Cheon looked silently at Geum Yangbaek before speaking.

«The moment the storm subsides, Sapaeryeon will begin their advance on Haenam.»

«Vice Sect Leader...»

«We don't have time to waste with petty arguments. That's why I'm here to simply convey our position. Cheonumaeng sincerely hopes that Haenam will join us. We don't just want empty agreements: we recommend Haenam joins a place where one can truly extend a helping hand to those in need.»

Geum Yangbaek sank into his thoughts for a moment. In the silence, the restless elders murmured softly.

«Sect Leader, this is absurd. Voluntarily withdrawing from Gupailbang? This is unprecedented.»

«Yes, consider this. Even if we preserve the name Haenam, how will we handle the aftermath? How will Shaolin or Wudang treat us?»

«And what about the scrutiny from other sects?»

The opposing stance was equally formidable.

«Why bring up future consequences now? If Haenam falls, will there be a future?»

«That's not entirely wrong, is it? Gupailbang merely watches from afar. It's only natural to align ourselves with those who offer immediate help.»

«Leaving Gupailbang doesn't make us enemies, and Cheonumaeng is no place to be underestimated even by Gupailbang.»

As Geum Yangbaek fell silent, their voices gradually grew louder. Slowly opening his eyes while listening to everyone's words in silence, Geum Yangbaek looked directly at Baek Cheon.

«Vice Sect Leader.»

«Yes.»

«...To ask someone to leave Gupailbang is quite a demand. I trust you understand that naturally.»

«Of course.»

«To make such a recommendation your confidence must stem from firm conviction and belief in oneself, wouldn't you agree?»

«Yes. Indeed, Sect Leader.»

Baek Cheon nodded firmly.

«I have no doubt that joining Cheonumaeng is the right choice for Haenam, providing legitimacy, strength, and a promising future.»

«Legitimacy, strength, and... a future.»

Geum Yangbaek observed Baek Cheon and his companions with thoughtful eyes. They certainly seemed to have a future ahead of them.

‘Young ones.’

Now that he looked closer, each representative of the factions was remarkably young. Someone might interpret this as a disregard for Haenam’s traditions. However, Geum Yangbaek felt something new.

Cheonumaeng is evolving around the next generation. Haenam has already fallen behind in this evolution. He wanted to see it too. What Cheonumaeng, led by these young warriors, would become in the future. And what it would look like if the young Sect Leader of Haenam joined them. However, whether the future they possessed would also exist for Haenam was another matter altogether.

He spoke heavily,

«It’s embarrassing for me to say this, but the current situation in Haenam is too urgent to discuss legitimacy and future.»

«S-Sect Leader.»

«Quiet.»

A voice of confusion came from the back, but Geum Yangbaek raised his right hand slightly, neatly quelling any protest.

«Some may be moved by what Vice Sect Leader says, and some may empathize with the future he envisions, but... honestly, those words don’t resonate with me.»

Baek Cheon nodded silently. The current situation in Haenam is too dire to discuss such matters.

«I’m not saying we won’t discuss the future with Cheonumaeng. However, isn’t dialogue and negotiation possible only when both parties are equals?»

«Indeed.»

«In that case, I request Vice Sect Leader to candidly explain what he has prepared. If...»

Geum Yangbaek looked straight at Baek Cheon,

«...If Haenam joins Cheonumaeng, what can Cheonumaeng offer us?»

After a brief pause, Baek Cheon replied,

«We don’t have anything specific to promise.»

«...»

«If we must promise anything, it would simply be that, like now, when Haenam is in crisis and pressed against the wall, we will not turn a blind eye but stand by and protect.»

Geum Yangbaek’s eyes narrowed. Baek Cheon continued,

«And I believe that's more important than anything else. When you don't have to take risks for each other, you cannot say anything and make any promises. When you joined Gupailbang, did you expect them not to help Haenam in such a situation?»

«...Of course not.»

«But we've come this far without such agreements.»

«...»

«All we can offer is our faith, and all we desire is the same. The 'friendship' in Cheonumaeng is a bond formed not for profit, but for the sake of righteousness.»

Baek Cheon's gaze hardened.

«All we can offer is that righteousness. We will not be allies only when it's beneficial, but we will strive to be a presence that can help each other when needed.»

Geum Yangbaek looked at Baek Cheon with a curious expression. For a moment, a strange silence fell between them. Just as the Cheonumaeng's group guarding Baek Cheon's back and the elders guarding Haenam's Sect Leader's back began to sense something strange, Geum Yangbaek spoke up.

«Vice Sect Leader.»

«Yes.»

«I'll ask you directly. Is there anything Cheonumaeng can offer for Haenam, which now must face its final battle against Sapaeryeon?»

The elders looked surprised and turned their eyes to Geum Yangbaek. Unlike the Sect Leader they were familiar with, his words were unusually straightforward. It seemed almost too mundane a request for someone who had traveled a long way to assist Haenam.

At that moment, Baek Cheon spoke up.

«What Cheonumaeng can offer to resolve the current situation Haenam is facing is...»

All eyes focused on Baek Cheon's words. After a moment, his voice rang out, clear and somewhat ominous.

«...nothing.»

The rain poured outside, a fact that everyone was reminded of anew. The sound of rain, unheard until now, began to fill the silence. The chilling stillness spread throughout the main hall.

How long had the suffocating silence lingered?

Finally, Geum Yangbaek's composed voice broke the tension.

«As soon as tomorrow.»

«...»

«What you can offer to the sect, who may need to lower their plaque tomorrow, is the establishment of a relationship that can be helpful when needed.»

Laughter erupted from Geum Yangbaek's lips.

«But in this particular matter, you can't offer any help at all?»

Baek Cheon closed his eyes.

There were many things he could say. Countless words he wanted to express. But Baek Cheon chose to keep them all to himself. No, he couldn't bring himself to say anything. Because no words would be of any help to the current state of Haenam.

The advance of Sapaeryeon was faster than anticipated, and they arrived at Haenam without any preparations to fend them off.

«I'll ask again, Vice Sect Leader,»

Geum Yangbaek spoke, suppressing the multitude of emotions surging within him.

«Are those sent by Cheonumaeng for Haenam all who are here? Or are there other means prepared to aid Haenam?»

Even in his last words, there lingered a faint hope that couldn't be completely extinguished. But Baek Cheon shattered even that final hope.

«At present... those who are here are all there is, Sect Leader.»

No matter how powerful Cheonumaeng might be, there are only ten people here who can immediately lend their strength in the face of the impending invasion following the storm. Ten. It may not be a small number, but it is woefully insufficient to overturn the battlefield where one sect is fighting Sapaeryeon for survival.

Yes, it's actually insufficient.

«At most...»

Geum Yangbaek bit his lip, unable to continue his sentence.

«...that's all?»

Voices filled with anger, disappointment, and despair spread chillingly through the silence that engulfed the main hall.