

Chapter 1217

Who will help? (2)

«Enough of this.»

«No, what's wrong with what I said?»

The elder, seemingly unwilling to hold back any longer, shouted with an enraged voice.

«Frankly, if it were Cheonumaeng, things wouldn't have turned out like this. Even if they couldn't bring salvation to us, they wouldn't have ignored us for over a year as if we were nonexistent!»

«Be careful with your words. Gangnam Treaty...»

«Even if the situation is difficult, shouldn't we speak the truth! Did someone else negotiate the Gangnam Treaty for us? If they had even the slightest consideration for Haenam, would they have made such a treaty? What else could be a clearer indication that Shaolin doesn't think of us at all!»

«I said enough.»

«Isn't it true that everyone here thinks the same way!»

His words dropped like a bomb in the room.

«Even if we don't say it out loud, deep down, don't we all share the same thoughts? Shaolin has abandoned us. Perhaps they abandoned us not now, but several years ago!»

«...»

«Amidst all this, what's the point of calling out to Shaolin, who won't even come to us?!»

Frustrated sighs echoed throughout the room.

No one spoke openly, but who among them could have different thoughts? They simply suppressed their words, fearing the unbearable weight of what they might unleash.

The elder, biting his lips tightly, spoke as if he was vomiting out his words.

«Rather than enduring such a pitiful state of being on the verge of collapse, we should have thrown ourselves into Cheonumaeng first...»

«Enough of this!»

Someone's shout erupted like thunder. What followed was even more vehement.

«Who wouldn't know that! You should have spoken something that made sense from the start! Do you really not know who the true leader of Cheonumaeng is?»

«But...»

«Hwasan! Yes, Hwasan! It's the rightful owner of this position we hold!»

«...»

«What did Haenam do when Hwasan collapsed? Did you help them? Did you fight for them? No! Instead, did you rejoice at the opportunity that finally arose!»

Everyone's faces turned red.

It's an event of the past.

But they know. The only ones who can draw a line under the past are those who have not been affected by it. For those who have enjoyed the benefits of being part of Gupailbang, there is no way to escape responsibility for past choices.

Even if someone had voiced out that what we enjoy is actually unfair, it might have made a difference. There are times when silence is not golden, when one must speak up, yet those who remain silent when they should have spoken lose the right to speak up later.

«That Hwasan!»

The elder, who had been venting intense emotions, abruptly halted.

«What good sentiment does Hwasan have to welcome us into Cheonumaeng, after we shamelessly took their place instead of helping them when they collapsed? Would they come all the way to this distant land to save us, calling us comrades?»

«...»

«If you were in Hwasan's shoes right now, would you pity us for being in this situation? No! If it were us, we would seize the opportunity to fill the void left by Haenam, just as Haenam did in the past!»

Several elders bowed their heads deeply.

They realized anew what they had done. How had Hwasan looked upon them and with what sentiments?

Amidst the bloody tears they shed as the sect that collapsed, what bitterness had they swallowed while watching Haenam, now arrogantly occupying its place?

«If people have any sense of shame...»

The elder who had spoken thus far tightly sealed his lips. He knew some things were better left unsaid, especially as an elder of Haenam.

A faint sigh escaped from Guem Yangbaek's lips, which had been suppressed by the chilling atmosphere.

«The past... there's no point in regretting it now.»

Complex thoughts lingered in his mind.

«Elder's words hold some truth. Perhaps if we had bowed our heads to Cheonumaeng before the situation escalated to this point, things might have turned out differently.»

«...»

«When we still had something in our hands to offer, when we had something to give up. If we had apologized first and sincerely repented, the situation might have changed. But... haven't we already missed that opportunity?»

The image of Hwasan he had seen on the stage still vividly remained in Guem Yangbaek's mind.

While young disciples might have unknowingly displayed resentment towards Hwasan, the older martial artists like him and the elders busily avoided Hwasan's gaze.

Its gaze was too piercing.

'Even then...'

It might be an exaggeration to say they should have confessed their sins, but at least they could have bowed their heads. They could have expressed genuine regret for the current state of affairs, even if it was just empty talk.

But Guem Yangbaek didn't do that. Therefore, one cannot insist that all of this is solely the fault of their predecessors.

Implicit accomplices may be worse than active participants. They become silent accomplices because they want to avoid guilt but still reap benefits.

«Yes. Ultimately, it's karma.»

They are now paying the price for their actions. Despite being an orthodox sect that should uphold righteousness, they didn't think to alleviate the injustice suffered by others, instead seizing the opportunity for their own gain.

Perhaps it's more reasonable for him to remain silent, given his position as the Sect Leader of Haenam, but he couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. After closing his eyes tightly for a while, Guem Yangbaek struggled to speak.

«What about the disciples?»

«...They don't say anything, but they can't hide their anxiety.»

«I suppose...»

The silence felt oppressive, and the island seemed so desolate.

«Ja Yang.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

There's no use dwelling on the past. It's better to focus on what can be done now.

«If Gupailbang won't help us... if they have no intention of assisting us, then we should seek salvation elsewhere. Let's appeal to other sects to unite for the sake of Haenam.»

Ja Yang forced a bitter smile at those words.

«Who would come to our aid?»

Guem Yangbaek might not have expected anything when he uttered those words, but Ja Yang couldn't even accept such superficial consolation.

«If asking others to fight alongside Haenam is no different from asking them to die alongside Haenam, then who in the world would break through Gangnam and come all the way here?»

«Ja Yang...»

«If there were so many people overflowing with righteousness in the world... Haenam wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.»

Guem Yangbaek sighed briefly, his voice filled with despair.

«Still, shouldn't we at least try to grasp at straws?»

«Sect Leader... There are no straws to grasp in the water we've fallen into. Even if we wanted to send for help... there's no way to do it, is there?»

Eventually, Guem Yangbaek closed his eyes tightly.

«Why do you keep talking about losing hope in every little thing?»

Ja Yang wanted to retort, but he didn't even have the energy to speak. It was exhausting just to prop up his body, which felt like a soaked sponge.

«Sect Leader, perhaps it's better to abandon the island and escape...»

But Guem Yangbaek shook his head before Ja Yang could finish.

«Why don't you understand? The ones who are most eagerly awaiting us to leave this island are none other than those bastards from Sapaeryeon. Gangnam Treaty. Yes, that treaty that torments us is nothing but a reality for us as well.»

«...»

«The moment we leave the island, they'll have a reason to attack us. And... while we may be Haenam sect on the land, on the sea, we're just ordinary people. No matter how skilled we are in martial arts, what can we do in the vast ocean?»

«Sect Leader...»

«Whether we reach Gangnam or head to the sea, neither option promises a good outcome...»

«But does that mean we can just sit here and wait for death to come?»

Guem Yangbaek fell silent. He felt the frustration too. But what could they do? Drinking saltwater when thirsty only hastens death.

«Has the treaty's term already expired?»

«In terms of time, yes. But neither Sapaeryeon nor Gupailbang has mentioned it publicly.»

«Right... That's probably the case.»

There's no need to publicly acknowledge the fact that they've reached a point where war could break out at any moment. Gupailbang is ashamed to even mention the Gangnam Treaty, while Sapaeryeon doesn't want to stir up trouble by acknowledging it. Perhaps the official end of the treaty will coincide with the day Sapaeryeon's blades invade Haenam.

«There isn't much time left, is there?»

Despite their efforts to avoid it, they could feel it. That day was approaching rapidly.

«Im Gyeom.»

«Yes, Sect Leader.»

«...Send the younger disciples out of the mountains and back to the village.»

«Sect Leader?»

«Indeed, we cannot stop those who are willing to lay their bones alongside Haenam, but we must prevent the young ones who still don't know what they're doing. There's no guarantee that their involvement won't extend to the village, but at least it's better than here.»

At those words, Im Gyeom bit his lip.

That statement is akin to acknowledging that there is no longer a way for Haenam to resist the Sapaeryeon.

«I will see to it.»

«And... If there are any among the disciples who wish to be excommunicated, let them do so.»

«Sect Leader! That's...»

«People who want to live should live, shouldn't they?»

Guem Yangbaek nodded.

«To cling to Haenam's pillars and roots and die is enough for me. There's no need for others to do the same.»

The determination embedded in those words needs no explanation. Yet, all Ja Yang could do was release a frustrated sigh.

«What good will that do in the end...»

«...»

«Sapaeryeon are not ones to show restraint. They leave no room for reprisal. After dealing with the Haenam sect, they will meticulously search the island and root out anyone associated with it. That's Sapaeryeon's way... and also Maninbang's way, isn't it?»

Ja Yang's voice, mixed with sighs, weighed heavily.

«Where would a person without wings go if they were to leave? They would go to Haenam. Simply because they are from Haenam...»

Guem Yangbaek's fingertips trembled faintly.

Annihilation.

The word he had thought he would never face suddenly descended upon him like an unexpected storm.

As warm as Haenam may be, he felt so cold and lonely now.

'Why didn't I realize sooner that Gangho was such a cruel place? Why didn't I know that even our cries for help were nothing but a game for those in power?'

A weak laughter escaped his lips.

«Hahaha...»

A laughter more sorrowful than tears lingered over Sect Leader's residence for a while.