

## Chapter 1251

To fight! And to survive! (1)

«Commander!»

A person burst into the silent quarters, but the one reviewing the piled-up ledgers on the desk didn't even glance at the intruder.

«Commander.»

«Wait.»

The man obediently waited in silence.

After a moment of further perusal of the documents, the man at the desk inscribed his signature on one side of the ledger with a quill and closed it shut.

«Send these documents for approval.»

«Yes.»

The person waiting responded politely.

«Summon those who prepared these ledgers and lock them in the dungeon.»

«Yes, commander.»

«Especially...»

The ledger he was holding was tossed onto the desk.

«The person responsible for these ledgers should have their dantian destroyed, their tendons cut, and be imprisoned in the underground dungeon. And confiscate their assets. If anyone resists, treat them the same way.»

«If you end up in the dungeon in that state, you won't last long.»

«Oh really? Nearly made a mistake there. In that case, retrieve them from the dungeon before they die and behead them. Can't just leave them to die by exhaustion.»

«...As you command!»

The military commander of Sapaeryeon closed his eyes and pressed his throbbing temples with his fingers.

“People are truly unpredictable creatures. What do they consider more important, their lives or an insignificant sum of money?”

Despite knowing full well that getting caught embezzling from the treasury of Maninbang would result in severe punishment, there were still a significant number of those who, at the slightest opportunity, would quietly resume their misdeeds.

It was infuriating, but what could be done? It was the path he had chosen.

Ho Gamyong slowly opened his eyes and spoke.

«Report.»

«Yes, commander! All preparations for departure have been completed.»

«Late.»

«...I have nothing more to say.»

Ho Gamyong's gaze turned to meet the wide open waters. The sky was blue, the clouds had cleared, and although the waves were still high from the recent typhoon, it seemed navigable without much trouble.

«Haenam...»

Ho Gamyong slowly rose from his seat.

«There's no point delaying it any longer. Prepare the troops for boarding.»

«Yes, commander!»

The reporting man bowed deeply and rushed out. Glancing briefly at the paperwork he hadn't yet attended to, Ho Gamyong soon discarded any lingering thoughts and began to move.

'Handling Haenam first and then returning to wrap things up should be fine.'

It shouldn't take too long, after all. However...

«Mun Bang [문방(文房)].»

«Yes, commander.»

«Have there been any reports regarding the movements of Gupailbang or Cheonumaeng?»

«The last report we received was three days ago, but there hasn't been any significant movement reported until then.»

They wouldn't be able to reach this place within three days, no matter what measures they take from where they are positioned along the Yangtze River.

«As for Gupailbang, that's understandable, but Cheonumaeng...»

A faint smirk played on Ho Gamyong's lips.

«There's nothing they can do, is there?»

«Not likely.»

«... Yes?»

Ho Gamyong spoke calmly.

«If they knew the situation, they would have done something. They are those kinds of people.»

«But this place...»

«Whether it's Haenam or not — doesn't matter. At least to prevent us from concentrating here, they would have initiated a fight on the Yangtze River. Yet, the fact that they're not moving indicates that our movements haven't been detected by them.»

Ho Gamyong immediately subtly adjusted his assessment of Cheonumaeng. Their intelligence network seemed even weaker than he had anticipated. At least concerning Gangnam.

'Gupailbang? No, even if they knew, they wouldn't have passed on the information to Cheonumaeng. No... That's not it. If they knew, they would have leaked the information to instigate a conflict between Cheonumaeng and Sapaeryeon. That old man is capable of such schemes.'

As he organized his thoughts based on the information he had acquired, a puzzled voice from Mun Bang brushed past his ear.

«...I don't quite understand, commander. If we're talking about the side related to Haenam, wouldn't it be Gupailbang's side? Why would Cheonumaeng move? What benefit do they have?»

Ho Gamyong didn't respond to the question. There was no need to explain and make them understand. Assessing the situation and making decisions was Ho Gamyong's role. They only needed to follow his orders.

'If they have moving based on benefit, they wouldn't endure this hardships.'

What bothered him was the inability to discern the principle behind their actions. They might have their reasons, but from his perspective, he couldn't grasp that principle at all.

Only Jang Ilso seemed to somewhat grasp their movements, but...

'What matters now is not this,'

Ho Gamyong thought, briefly setting aside his thoughts and quickening his pace.

Regardless of the circumstances, the events in Haenam would serve as a significant warning to them. A clear warning showing what would happen if anyone dared to oppose Sapaeryeon. Therefore, it needed to be dealt with decisively and ruthlessly.

«At this point, it doesn't matter what we do. Whether it's Gupailbang or Cheonumaeng, all they'll hear about is the news of Haenam going up in flames.»

That's why he had taken matters into his own hands.

«Complete all preparations within an hour. We're heading to Hainan Island.»

«Yes, commander!»

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«Sahyeong. Isn't it because of our excommunication ceremony that we've gathered here?»

«...I thought so too.»

«Then why are they standing there like that?»

«Well, I wonder?»

The disciples of Haenam, who hadn't yet been informed of the situation, looked at Cheonumaeng's group with puzzled faces. Indeed, from their perspective, the situation could only seem strange.

Of course, excommunication ceremony wasn't necessarily something to be hidden from others, but wasn't it somewhat awkward to display it so openly?

Whether a disciple had committed a wrongdoing and faced it or had voluntarily left the sect, it was a private matter from the sect's perspective.

«Weren't they supposed to leave after having a meal?»

«Are they really going to stay until the ceremony ends?»

«...Doesn't make sense, does it?»

However, the reason they couldn't openly criticize those who intruded here without notice was because the person standing with Cheonumaeng's group was none other than Geum Yangbaek, the Sect Leader of Haenam.

Sometimes, one action speaks louder than a thousand words. Isn't Geum Yangbaek's mere presence there itself clear evidence that their actions have been tolerated at the sect level?

«Daesahyeong, Daesahyeong! Have you heard anything?»

Those who still couldn't grasp the situation eventually sought out Gwak Hwanso. He was the last person they had spoken to before this, as far as they knew.

«Sect Leader will tell you.»

«Yes?»

«For now, wait.»

«...Understood.»

Though skeptical, they couldn't press further. The atmosphere was too stifling to even continue the conversation comfortably.

'I just don't get it.'

Lee Jayang furrowed his brows. It was a recurring feeling. Those who visited Haenam often crossed boundaries too frequently.

What kind of place is this exactly?

A place to instill guilt in those leaving the sect? No, it's not that.

This is the place where those who pledged to protect Haenam despite the dire circumstances gather to reaffirm their resolve as they bid farewell to those departing.

It's supposed to be a pure moment, all the more so because of the situation. However, with impurities like those present, it's hard to find peace of mind.

'The young disciples of Cheonumaeng are said to be the brightest talents in the world.'

But there's nothing more unbelievable than rumors. Can they truly be called talents with such obliviousness?

As Lee Jayang struggled to calm his discomfort, Geum Yangbaek ascended the platform. The disciples of Haenam immediately straightened their posture, awaiting his words.

«Today... Originally, an excommunication ceremony was planned for those leaving Haenam.»

Originally? Those who sensed that something was amiss perked up at Geum Yangbaek's next words.

«However, the ceremony will be skipped. Instead!»

Geum Yangbaek exclaimed firmly, capturing the attention of the disciples.

«I intend to share our plans for facing our enemy, Sapaeryeon, with everyone!»

Lee Jayang furrowed his brow.

'What is he suddenly talking about?'

How they would face them had already been decided...

«I, Geum Yangbaek! As the Sect Leader of Haenam, will lead the disciples of Haenam to the lands of Gangnam controlled by Sapaeryeon.»

His words hit like a thunderbolt, causing all the disciples of Haenam to startle.

«What?»

«Sect Leader!»

«Gangnam?»

Of course, they had considered the possibility that Sect Leader might pursue another course of action. Given the circumstances, it was understandable that they might either die or embark on a journey across the distant seas.

But Gangnam? Who in their right mind would jump into the tiger's den to escape the wolf?

But Geum Yangbaek didn't wait for their understanding and continued.

«And! The members of Cheonumaeng here will also join us, heading to Gangnam along with our Haenam.»

This time, all eyes were focused on those standing below the platform. Amidst the multitude of gazes, they simply stood there calmly, as if their mere presence was proof enough of the truth of all that was being said.

«Now, Sect Leader, why such a sudden...»

«I'm not forcing anyone!»

Geum Yangbaek shouted.

«The reason we're not holding a separate excommunication ceremony is because facing it in front of everyone might be the only path for someone. Those who aren't prepared to face the end with Haenam should stay on this island. That way, they might survive.»

“...”

«But!»

Geum Yangbaek clenched his fists and shouted.

«But those who are willing to fight under the name of Haenam until the end! Those who are willing to risk their lives and open a path of glory! Follow me! We will break through Gangnam, pierce the enemy's heart, and head for the Yangtze River. And it will be at the Yangtze River, not in Hainan, where we continue the fight against the treacherous Sapaeryeon!»

“...”

«Those who believe in me!»

Geum Yangbaek shouted, looking around at everyone.

«And those who cannot abandon the name of Haenam, step forward! I will gladly cross the sea with them. We will make known to the world that the spirit of Haenam is alive!»

Amidst the heavy silence, the disciples of Haenam simply watched Geum Yangbaek. Filled only with intense determination, devoid of any logic, they couldn't grasp how to react to his impassioned words.

Then, at that moment, the previously silent Gwak Hwanso stepped forward slowly until he stood facing Geum Yangbaek.

«Disciple Gwak Hwanso dares to ask Sect Leader a question.»

«Speak!»

Gwak Hwanso bowed and asked in a clear voice,

«What is the reason, Sect Leader, that you wish to fight in Gangnam instead of here?»

Upon hearing this, Geum Yangbaek took a deep breath. Then he replied,

«Some say, ‘Fishermen understand the laws of the sea and comply with it.’»

“...”

«How about it? Is that statement true?»

Some nodded in agreement.

«Indeed. It is not the case. The best way to comply with the sea is not to venture into it. If you don’t sail the boat, you won’t be unable to return from the sea, where everything could change at any moment! Countless tragedies unfolding in Haenam will not be repeated.»

Geum Yangbaek declared firmly with resolute eyes.

«Nevertheless, we set sail into the sea. Despite knowing how dangerous it is, despite knowing we may never return! Yet, we still steer the boat and cast the nets. Because that’s the path of the fighter, that’s the path of the one who resists!»

Everyone here is a child of the sea, fighting against it. So, there is no one here who cannot understand Geum Yangbaek’s words.

«For us, Gangnam is like a stormy sea. So what? Are we going to lay our boats at the dock and starve to death while gazing at the sea? Are we going to accept death, believing that venturing into the stormy sea is a reckless act?»

No. No one would do that. At least not anyone from Haenam.

«The reason for going to Gangnam?»

Geum Yangbaek took a deep breath and roared out.

«To fight! And to survive! No matter how reckless it may seem, those who live by the sea would understand. There is nothing more reckless than just waiting for death!»

His gaze turned towards the group from Cheonumaeng.

«Our guests have reminded me of something I had forgotten. Things that we, who live by the sea, should have understood before anyone else. The simple fact that if we want to protect and survive, we must stand up and fight!»

Finally, Geum Yangbaek’s gaze settled on Gwak Hwanso.

«So, that’s why we’re going. No matter how fearsome Sapaeryeon might be, they’re not as terrifying as the stormy sea.»

Gwak Hwanso nodded slowly, then drew the sword at his waist.

«My father also never returned from the sea.»

“...”

«When I was a child full of resentment, I hated my father for that. But... now that I have reached the age where I have to take responsibility for someone else, I have finally come to understand my father's choices. Sometimes you have to take risks.»

Their eyes met in midair.

“If Sect Leader wants to head to a place called Gangnam.”

Gwak Hwanso held out the sword he was holding.

“Disciple Gwak Hwanso, as a disciple of Haenam, will follow that path!”