

Chapter 1232

So I heard that's true? (2)

«How did it go?»

«Well... um...»

Yoon Jong returned flustered, scratching the back of his head with an awkward expression.

«There's not a single boat, not even a wooden plank, Sasuk.»

«Is that so?»

Baek Cheon furrowed his brow in confusion as he asked.

«How about your side, Young Lord Tang?»

«Same.»

Namgung Dowi, who was in the same group with Tang Pae, shook his head nervously.

«We need to check for boats first to make contact with people and buy one, but there wasn't a single boat near the coast. Not even a fishing boat in sight, even in what seemed like a fishing village.»

Baek Cheon frowned deeply, lost in thought.

‘What's going on here?’

Certainly, there could be a shortage of boats. While this place once served as a dock to head to Hainan island, it had been several years since Hainan and Gangnam had any contact. It wouldn't make sense to leave the boats lying around, and even if they were taken to a useful location, it wouldn't be strange.

However, the absence of even a fishing boat in a place bordering this vast sea seemed utterly absurd.

«Perhaps we should inquire about the reason...»

Before Namgung Dowi could finish his question, he shook his head.

«Didn't Nokrim King instruct us to minimize contact with people? Even if we had seen a boat, which we didn't, it wouldn't have been appropriate to approach them without caution.»

«... Well done.»

Difficult as it was for them to accept, if Im Sobyong's words were true, then Jang Ilso surprisingly had a somewhat decent reputation in Guangdong.

While Jang Ilso was merciless to those versed in martial arts, he seemed relatively lenient towards those who were not.

As a result, they couldn't be certain that the common people would side with them, regardless of their affiliation.

Moreover, if any of those they made contact with had family members who pledged allegiance to Maninbang, it could lead to irreversible consequences.

‘Gangnam is indeed a challenging place.’

Even contacting ordinary commoners required caution...

«...Once the situation becomes clearer, we can devise a plan, but we mustn't act rashly, right?»

Baek Cheon nodded slowly at Tang Pae's words. At that moment, Chung Myung, who had been harassing Seol Sobaek, interjected harshly.

«Let's just swim.»

«...Wait a moment.»

«Why do you keep wasting time unnecessarily? You have strong arms and legs.»

«Our limbs are weaker than you think.»

«That's because you've neglected your training!»

Sigh.

Baek Cheon shook his head as if he were fed up.

Meanwhile, Yu Iseol and Tang Soso could be seen running towards them from afar. The expressions on their faces were clearly urgent.

«Sahyeong.»

«What's going on, Samae?»

«Sasuk! You need to come with us and look at it!»

Without hesitation, Baek Cheon swiftly followed them.

The rugged men, stripped to the waist, were burning a large log. The weather in humid Southern Sea was already hot, and the heat from the fire added to it, covering their bodies in sweat in an instant.

«Hurry up!»

«How's the work on that end?»

«It's going smoothly. We should be done in about three days...»

«Too late! Finish within two days! If we're not prepared before the military arrives, we're all dead!»

«We'll definitely finish within two days!»

The burly leader glanced around and shouted loudly.

«Move quickly! If we don't finish preparing on time, there will be dire consequences!»

«Yes!»

The workers hurriedly went about their tasks.

Baek Cheon, hidden in the bushes, narrowed his eyes as he watched.

Along the coast, large and small boats were lined up tightly. He wondered why they couldn't find even a small fishing boat, only to realize that they seemed to have gathered all the boats in the area.

‘But why make more boats here?’

Roughly estimating, there were about five more ships being constructed. Though not large in size, the fact that they were increasing the number of boats there was significant.

Baek Cheon carefully retreated without making any noise. Those who surveyed the situation together exchanged determined looks.

«It must be Maninbang.»

«Seems like it.»

«Then those ships...»

Tang Pae nodded with a grim expression.

«They must be heading to Hainan. There would be no need to requisition boats unnecessarily, so they must have gathered them recently.»

Baek Cheon sighed heavily.

But Jo Geol, not understanding the implications, tilted his head in confusion.

«Sahyeong, what do you mean?»

«...It means those boats are now useful. Don't you need boats to go to the island?»

«Oh?»

«It means Sapaeryeon is preparing to advance towards Hainan island.»

Understanding dawned on Jo Geol's face. He quietly approached the bushes again, surveyed the coast, then returned with a grave expression, murmuring to himself.

«All those boats?»

«...Well, how many troops are they planning to send...»

Jo Geol shivered while a chill ran down his spine. While on land, estimating the size of the troops was not as straightforward, but on the sea, it was different. The number of boats indicated the size of the force heading towards Hainan.

«It seems they're mustering quite a force.»

Im Sobyong, who had been silently listening, chuckled.

«After all, it's none other than Jang Ilso. Once he sets his mind to something, he won't stop until he completely eradicates Haenam sect. He was that kind of man from the beginning.»

«...»

«More importantly, it seems like things have gotten more urgent than we expected...»

Im Sobyong tapped his head with the fan. Seeing everyone's serious expressions, he spoke with a somber tone.

«From the perspective of Sapaeryeon, there's no urgent need to move out so hastily. Internal stability hasn't been fully secured yet, so they could afford to move leisurely... It's quite puzzling.»

He fell silent as if contemplating something before nodding.

«If there's a reason, it must be one of two possibilities.»

«What would that be?»

«Either Sapaeryeon's internal reorganization finished much faster than we anticipated...»

«...»

«Or the presence of Haenam sect is disturbing Jang Ilso more than we imagined.»

«Would Jang Ilso really be that concerned about Haenam? At best...»

«I used to think the same, but after seeing the situation in Guangdong, I roughly understand. To Jang Ilso, Guangdong is like a well-tended garden. Despite being the leader of an evil sect, he gained the people's favor, and it's a perfect base with no risk of being invaded by enemies since it's far from Gangbuk.»

«...I see.»

«Even if the war between Sapaeryeon and orthodox sects ends in orthodox sects' victory, unless it's a decisive victory, it'll be difficult to advance to Guangdong. Why is that?»

«Hundred Thousand Mountains...»

«Exactly, Young Lord Namgung.»

Namgung Dowi let out a sigh.

Having passed through Hundred Thousand Mountains themselves, they understood. It's practically impossible to advance through that terrain. Guangdong, with Hundred Thousand Mountains as a natural barrier, is the safest stronghold for Jang Ilso.

«But if Haenam is lurking behind, the situation changes. We might see Haenam as a thorn in Sapaeryeon's back, but to Jang Ilso...»

«...An enemy who might set my garden on fire at any moment, that's what it means.»

«Yes. So, he would want Guangdong to be perfectly secured. Even if problems arise elsewhere, Guangdong must be protected.»

Baek Cheon frowned.

«Logically, it makes sense, but is Jang Ilso really that concerned about the future? From what I know of him...»

«Don't misunderstand, Vice Sect Leader.»

«What misunderstanding are you talking about?»

Im Sobyong spoke with a serious tone.

«The way the world sees Jang Ilso might be as a lucky man who achieved great victories one after another to reach his current position, but Jang Ilso hasn't always been winning.»

«...»

«Before his name became known, his life was precarious, barely surviving until his reputation was established. That's how Sapa is. They tend to crush any sprout with promising potential before it becomes a threat.»

Chung Myung nodded in agreement.

«Jang Ilso has endured countless evil beasts coming after him, sometimes retreating, sometimes losing, sometimes suffering great losses, to reach where he is now. Don't think of him simply as a madman obsessed with war. What he wants is to grasp everything within his reach. He knows what needs to be prioritized to achieve that.»

Perhaps no one besides Chung Myung held as unfavorable feelings towards Jang Ilso as Im Sobyong did. Given his assessment, there was no reason not to believe him.

Im Sobyong tapped his head with the fan.

«Well. It's not very meaningful to speculate on the reasons for their hasty movements now. What's important is... soon, those ships will be loaded with men from Maninbang and dropped off at Hainan island.»

«...»

«At the island where there's nowhere to escape.»

With a visibly anxious expression, Namgung Dowi asked,

«How much time do we have left?»

«Well, considering that those building the ships were originally from Guangdong... Those who will board those ships are probably on their way here now. Judging by when the newly built ships will be completed...»

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Im Sobyong, who had been tapping his shoulder with the fan steadily, nodded.

«At most, it will take about four days. It won't take any longer than that.»

A groan escaped Baek Cheon's lips.

«Damn it.»

It was expected, that it would be at least several months before Sapaeryeon made any moves. They would first prepare for war with Gangbuk, and only then would they target Haenam sect. So, coming to Haenam with a small group was to discuss opinions with Haenam sect. However, if things continued like this, recommending joining Cheonumaeng to Haenam would be meaningless. In just four days, the whole sect would disappear. What good would Cheonumaeng be then?

«What will you do, Vice Sect Leader?»

«Sasuk... What will you do?»

Baek Cheon pondered with a stiff face. There were two options: quickly admit their lack of strength and retreat, or hurry to Haenam to inform them of the situation and devise a plan together.

«...There's no need to think too long.»

'I'm relieved that we managed to traverse Gangnam,' Baek Cheon thought to himself. If they had chosen a more leisurely route, they might have heard news of Haenam's downfall before even reaching the peninsula.

«First, we're going to Haenam.»

«...Isn't that too risky?»

«Even if it's risky, I don't think the people here are in a situation where they can't escape.»

Baek Cheon spoke with determination.

«But Haenam might not be aware that Sapaeryeon will attack at this point. Shouldn't we at least inform them of that?»

Everyone nodded at the suggestion. Even in this situation, there were those who thought realistically.

«But how are we going to get to Hainan island? All the boats seem to have been confiscated by those guys. Should we try to steal one at night?»

Without answering Namgung Dowi's question, Baek Cheon silently looked off to one side.

«...Vice Sect Leader?»

Feeling a sudden ominous atmosphere, Namgung Dowi asked in a trembling voice.

Baek Cheon turned his gaze away from the distant sea and fixed it on one person.

«...Is it doable?»

«Yeah, it is.»

«Is it really doable?»

«Come on, do you think I've been living a lie?»

Chung Myung chuckled and replied.

«It's only about fifty li at most. Even if you just lie down on your back and swim, you'll arrive in half a day.»

Baek Cheon nodded and looked at the others.

«So I heard that's true?»

«...»

«...»

Silence fell over them.

For the first time, Namgung Dowi felt the urge to stab Baek Cheon's clear and sparkling eyes.