

Chapter 1250

That's it. (5)

Geum Yangbaek looked at the people in front of him alternately, wearing a puzzled expression.

«So...»

His current confusion stemmed not from failing to understand what he heard, but rather from understanding it all too well.

Blinking a few times, he scrutinized the person sitting in front of him once again.

Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan seemed to have finished his tasks and was sitting at the back, leaving his place to someone who sat with an openly displeased expression.

Upon closer consideration, this arrangement might make sense.

Although momentarily overshadowed by the fact that Baek Cheon, as the Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan and the representative of Cheonumaeng, had come all the way here, in reality, the true symbol of Cheonumaeng's influence across Gangho was this person.

‘Hwasan Geomhyeop.’

No matter how formidable Hwasan was, and even though the Vice Sect Leader of Hwasan had now acquired a position where no one in Gangho could dare to disrespect him, all of that paled in comparison to the four characters[chinese characters] — Hwasan Geomhyeop.

«Well...»

After a brief cough to calm his bewildered mind, Geum Yangbaek cautiously spoke.

«So, um... you are staying here and fighting with Sapaeryeon...»

«Let's cut to the chase, Sect Leader.»

«...»

«What's your plan now?»

«Oh?»

Geum Yangbaek blinked blankly. What plan? Wasn't that a question they should be asking this side instead?

Then, as if frustrated, Hwasan Geomhyeop interjected,

«Oh, you mentioned fighting Sapaeryeon. How are you planning to do that?»

«Well... um...»

How? Was there even a need to discuss «how»? Simply defend the headquarters and fight to the last man standing...

«Just defending the headquarters and fighting to the last man standing until we're all wiped out. But surely you wasn't entertaining such complacent thoughts, especially as a head of a great orthodox sect?»

Cough.

A sudden cough escaped Geum Yangbaek's lips.

«Ah, of course not, right? After all, it's not like just a few lives are at stake here. You wouldn't act as if it's all over already. Especially being a leader of your caliber.»

«...»

«Right?»

As Geum Yangbaek couldn't give a proper response, Chung Myung's face twisted in an instant.

«I knew it.»

«...Uh...»

«But seriously, have these gentlemen all just lived reading heroic novels? Do they think people dying is such an easy matter?»

«Chung Myung-ah, you should watch your words in front of Sect Leader.»

«Sect Leader has two lives, so it's okay if he dies recklessly?»

«Still, we should be careful with our words.»

Seeing Chung Myung expressing his annoyance so clearly, Geum Yangbaek couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

«So... um...»

«What is it?»

«...Are you, the members of Cheonumaeng, including Hwasan Geomhyeop...»

“Just speak comfortably. This isn't an official gathering anymore.”

“Is it still okay...?”

“It's better to be at ease. That way, we can talk more freely.”

“...Alright then. Do you really think you can win against Sapaeryeon?”

“That's how it should be.”

«That's obvious.»

«Of course.»

«That's the plan.»

In a moment of disbelief, Geum Yangbaek silently observed the faces of those who responded.

«Well, it's just that...»

«Why? Is there a problem?»

«While I understand your determination, isn't there something called reality?»

«Reality?»

Chung Myung burst out laughing.

«Hey, mister.»

«...Chung Myung, he's the Sect Leader.»

«But isn't he a mister?»

«But still, you should call him Sect Leader.»

«Tsk.»

Chung Myung frowned, reluctantly correcting himself.

«Yes, Sect Leader. You mentioned something about reality, but is my point hard to understand?»

«Hmm?»

«If we go by Sect Leader's words, realistically, the fate awaiting those remaining here is nothing but being struck down by Sapaeryeon's sword and dying, isn't it?»

«...»

«So, is it so hard to understand the idea of giving them a proper fight before you go down?»

Geum Yangbaek furrowed his brows.

«I don't know how my message was conveyed, but just because we're here doesn't mean we were willing to die without a fight. Of course, we planned to take at least one more enemy with us. Isn't that obvious?»

«Now we're getting somewhere,»

Chung Myung chuckled and said.

«Let's go a little further.»

«A little further?»

Geum Yangbaek's face became more serious, as if being drawn into Chung Myung's words.

Chung Myung gestured impatiently and exclaimed,

«Hey, explanation!»

«Ahem! Allow me to explain,»

Im Sobyong stepped forward and took a seat.

«Of course, it's certain that in terms of terrain, Haenam's Mountain is a suitable place to defend against enemy attacks. Occupying the mountain and intercepting those who climb is considered a textbook strategy in military tactics.»

«Yes, that's true.»

«However, the problem is that this won't be a fight that ends just because we hold out. The moment we decide to defend the mountain, we'll be surrounded, and it ultimately comes down to how long we can hold out before we perish. The attackers will also lose their urgency.»

Geum Yangbaek spoke with a troubled expression.

«I understand what you're saying. But it seems you've overlooked one thing. This place isn't just a mountain. No matter how vast Hainan Island may be, it's still limited by the geographical constraints of being an island. Even if we abandon Haenam Mountain, we can't utilize the vast terrain. Surrounded by the sea, it will ultimately become a game of tag.»

«That's also correct.»

«And if it comes to that, the civilians living on the island will inevitably suffer. Moreover, in such a scenario, Haenam's disciples sent to the villages will inevitably catch the enemy's attention.»

At that moment, Im Sobyong's eyes softened as he looked at Geum Yangbaek.

He had thought of him as someone who merely talked in theories, but it turned out he had a practical understanding of the situation.

«So, Haenam sect cannot leave this mountain. To ensure the survival of the common people on the island even after Sapaeryeon's attack, we need to provide them with clear objectives and terrain to occupy.»

«Are you saying, Sect Leader, that we should push all potential targets for Sapaeryeon's attack into this mountain to minimize damage elsewhere?»

«Exactly.»

Geum Yangbaek sighed heavily.

«I truly appreciate your sentiment. However, we are not foolish enough to cling to such a method. Over the past few years, we have been contemplating how to fight when Sapaeryeon attacks. The conclusion we reached is only this one.»

«Hmm. Your words make sense indeed. Being on an island, if the goal is to minimize harm to others, then ultimately, there may be no other choice.»

«I'm glad you understand...»

«But.»

Interrupting Geum Yangbaek, Im Sobyong grinned.

«That's a story about being trapped within the confines of an island.»

«...What?»

Geum Yangbaek seemed to ask what Im Sobyong meant. Im Sobyong smiled and elaborated.

«There is a way that perfectly fulfills all the conditions mentioned by Sect Leader. It's a method that doesn't require defending this place but completely eliminates the risk to Hainan Island and ensures the safety of your disciples sent to the villages. It's a method that focuses all attention solely on Haenam sect.»

«No, where on earth...?»

As Geum Yangbaek was about to speak, he suddenly fell silent. It dawned on him, what Im Sobyong meant. Although he had never considered it before and deemed it absurd, there was one method that perfectly fulfilled those conditions.

«Surely...?»

«Yes.»

Im Sobyong smirked.

«When your own house is on fire, you have no choice but to focus solely on extinguishing it.»

«...»

«Once we lead Haenam sect to step foot on Gangnam, they won't even spare a thought for Hainan Island anymore.»

«Are you saying this with a sound mind?»

«Of course, I am.»

Geum Yangbaek's mouth gaped open in disbelief. Glancing around, he noticed that not only Im Sobyong but also everyone else in the group had an indifferent expression.

«S-so, you're suggesting that instead of defending here, we should actually launch an attack on their stronghold in Gangnam?»

«Yes.»

«And you're presenting this as our current strategy? Do you have any idea what might happen if we do that?»

At that moment, Chung Myung interjected with a grunt,

«What might happen?!»

«What do you mean, what might happen?»

«Oh, I mean, what might happen.»

«This is so frustrating! Obviously, if that happens...»

Geum Yangbaek's words trailed off as he realized the obvious: everyone would die.

Haenam's disciples who step foot on Gangnam territory will all die. But...

'Isn't it the same situation right now?'

In a moment of confusion, Geum Yangbaek fell silent with his mouth tightly shut. The silence was broken by the sound of Chung Myung clicking his tongue.

«Tsk tsk. That's why pretentious guys like you are nothing but trouble.»

«...»

«You have the courage to defend your home and die, but you don't have the courage to fight and die elsewhere?»

Geum Yangbaek couldn't muster any response. He just stared blankly at Chung Myung.

«If you're going to die anyway, might as well die fighting fiercely.»

«...»

«If Sect Leader wants to truly show Haenam's spirit, then you shouldn't die here. Even if you die, you should go and die there. I don't think I need to explain which option is better, do I?»

Geum Yangbaek unconsciously clenched and unclenched his fist.

Conflicting thoughts about the absurdity of the strategy and the truth in Chung Myung's words swirled in his mind.

«Well then...»

Geum Yangbaek looked around with a stern expression.

«Do you all intend to charge into enemy's territory with Haenam and end up as a shattered jade*?»

Although he briefly questioned if the term «shatter like jade» was appropriate here, he couldn't think of a better expression at the moment. Chung Myung replied bluntly,

«No.»

«Excuse me?»

Geum Yangbaek furrowed his brows. What exactly was their stance then?

«Listen carefully, mister.»

«Sect Leader.»

«Right. Yes. Listen carefully, Sect Leader. There's no path for us to go and die. There are ways with higher chances of survival, even if just a little.»

«...»

«Our plan is not to die in Gangnam.»

Chung Myung lifted the corners of his mouth slightly.

«We're going back the way we came.»

«R-returning?»

«Yes.»

Chung Myung's tone was firm.

«We'll lead Haenam back through Gangnam in reverse. We'll try to save even one more life to reach the Yangtze River.»

Geum Yangbaek's eyes widened to their maximum. If successful, Haenam's name would spread throughout the land. And even if they failed, it would be a hundred times better than perishing here. The important thing was that the probability of survival was clearly higher with the journey to Gangnam.

«Now look here. That's...»

«If you truly are Haenam's Sect Leader, then rather than accepting the end of Haenam humbly, you should try to find a way to carry the name of Haenam by any means necessary. That's what a true Sect Leader of Haenam should do anyway.»

«But...»

At that moment, Chung Myung's face, which had been filled with irritation until now, sank into a chilly calmness. The cold gaze sent shivers down Geum Yangbaek's spine. Chung Myung spoke.

«I will open the way.»

Geum Yangbaek was frozen in place, unable to move. However, unlike him, Baek Cheon casually corrected Chung Myung's statement.

«It's not just you. It's us who will open the way.»

Chung Myung nodded immediately.

«Yes. We will open the way. So, Haenam only needs to decide one thing: whether to believe in the slightest possibility and fight, or to give up everything and die here quietly.»

Geum Yangbaek remained silent.

«You said you wanted to leave something behind, didn't you?»

“...”

“Listen carefully, Sect Leader. Those who give up fighting because they can't win have nothing to leave behind to the world. The only ones who leave something behind are those who did their best until the end.”

Geum Yangbaek felt as if those words struck him like a heavy hammer.

“I gave you the way. All that remains is a choice.”

Chung Myung narrowed his eyes and stared intently at Geum Yangbaek.

“So, what’s Haenam’s choice?”

Geum Yangbaek remained silent, biting his lips tightly. Normally, Chung Myung would have tried to break down his opponent with logic, but at this moment, he simply waited for Geum Yangbaek’s decision. He knew that this was not a path someone could push him into.

After much deliberation, Geum Yangbaek finally parted his heavy lips.

“From now on...”

All eyes were on Geum Yangbaek.

“What can Haenam do for you?”

Chung Myung grinned. It was an answer he could not like more.

*옥쇄(玉碎) — broken/shattered jade. The phrase stems from chinese history and literature which means roughly “A true man would rather be a broken jade than an intact tile.” It means that a man would rather die heroic death rather than live as a tile/brick.