

Chapter 1252

To fight! And to survive! (2)

Haenam. Those who now seek to avoid those two characters[chinese characters], and those who embrace them in their hearts as they face the end of their lives.

Once upon a time, those who held the two characters of Haenam in their hearts watched Geum Yangbaek and Gwak Hwanso in silent awe.

However, the two did not show anything more. They simply remained silent as if it was not their turn anymore.

The silence of the two made everyone bearing the name of Haenam realize.

Whether to join and die together, or to stay here and watch over them, all choices now depended solely on oneself.

Therefore, the two did not hesitate. They did not proclaim loudly that this was just. Because only they could choose what the end of their lives would look like.

«Hoo.»

At that moment, breaking the deep silence, the sound of a sword being drawn was heard.

Shing. Shing.

Lee Jayang, drawing his sword, stepped forward and stood beside Gwak Hwanso. He did not say anything. He simply stood by Gwak Hwanso's side. If protecting the back of Geum Yangbaek was Gwak Hwanso's duty, then standing by his side was the duty of Lee Jayang.

Those moved by the sight chewed on their lips.

Shing. Shing.

Several more swordsmen stepped forward to join.

One, and then another.

There are those who walk a short path, just a few steps, yet for them, it is an infinitely distant and remote path.

Perhaps some still do not fully understand the meaning of that path. They may regret it when they face their final moment for the few steps they have taken now.

Yet still, they walked that path. There are few who can precisely explain the reason. They simply believe it must be done.

Shing. Shing.

Dozens, surpassing one and two, stood beside those who share the same name. And they raised their swords, which they had held by their side all their lives, to commit their will.

One more. And another.

Like waves pushing onto the shore, more and more joined their will to that of Geum Yangbaek and Gwak Hwanso.

But not everyone felt a burning fervor at the sight.

«...Sahyeong.»

Yu Gong bit his lip slightly at Go Hong's shaky voice.

'Why...'

Why would they insist on such an act so late?

The game was over. By carrying out the excommunication and sending them to the village, they could neatly tie up their connection with Haenam.

But why would someone suddenly engage in such foolishness at a time like this?

Those who step forward and those who stand still.

The contrast was stark to the point of being cruel.

Sect Leader, Geum Yangbaek, insisted on not carrying out the excommunication ceremony to alleviate the burden on those leaving the sect. But from Yu Gong's perspective, this situation only brought greater shame than the excommunication itself.

At least carrying out the excommunication required the courage to suppress one's own shame. Facing death swept up in a whirlwind, it seemed more courageous to come forward and endure the condemnation.

But not in this scene.

In this dire situation created by Geum Yangbaek, those who would betray Haenam could only stand there like stone statues. They watched the backs of those who had pledged their lives to the name of Haenam.

What made Yu Gong even more ashamed and pained was precisely their backs.

Originally, those leaving Haenam should have stepped forward to face the criticism. They should have left this place amidst the looks of disdain from those who would mock them as cowards and try to assert their superiority. Those looks, that hostility contained within, would have steadied Yu Gong, keeping him from wavering.

But at this moment, those who stepped forward did not look back.

No one looked at those left behind. No one showed the scornful gaze of Haenam to those who abandoned it. Those left behind to those who had already stepped forward became irrelevant.

This fact made it hard for Yu Gong to bear.

«Sahyeong... How could this happen?»

Go Hong, perhaps sensing the atmosphere, asked Yu Gong with evident anxiety etched on his face.

But Yu Gong, instead, coldly brushed him off.

«Why are you asking me that?»

«Um, what?»

«Didn't you hear Sect Leader's words? It's up to each person to choose.»

«But... Sahyeong...»

Yu Gong didn't respond further, tightly pressing his lips together as he glared only at Geum Yangbaek.

'How much more miserable must people be made before you are satisfied, Sect Leader.'

In this moment, Yu Gong learned painfully that sometimes kindness can be more tormenting than malice.

Even now, more people joined the group stepping forward. But not all martial artists are like that. Eventually, as the situation persisted with no one else stepping forward, the elders who had been silent joined the ranks of those who stepped forward.

The number of those stepping forward exceeded half of the sect's members.

But that also meant that nearly half of those who decided to leave the sect didn't join them until the end.

Though they were divided almost equally in number, the atmosphere was completely different.

Those stepping forward don't bother to check who is left behind. In their eyes, they see Sect Leader who has staked everything on the name of Haenam, the outsiders who have come from afar to join him on that path, and the rugged path they must traverse together.

But for those left behind, all they can see are the backs of those who have resolved to walk the path they didn't choose. So they can't help but lower their heads, unable to look straight ahead.

Geum Yangbaek spoke to those who stood before him, leaving them to face the consequences of their decision.

«There's no need to hang your heads.»

What Geum Yangbaek said wasn't admonishment or rebuke.

«If courage is about being able to risk your life, then it's also courageous to restrain your impulses and survive. No one can blame you for that choice.»

Geum Yangbaek gazed quietly at those who remained before closing his eyes.

«But... from this moment on, you are no longer disciples of Haenam. We won't revoke your martial arts, but we will prohibit the use of Haenam's martial arts and erase your names from the sect's records.»

Everyone knows it.

That was the path meant for those who remained. If they were to use martial arts half-heartedly, Sapaeryeon would surely track them down and attempt to kill them. If that happened, even if those heading for Gangnam drew attention, Haenam would inevitably face destruction.

But the human heart is not so simple. Despite knowing that it was words meant for their benefit, their heart still ached.

«Even if you're no longer disciples of Haenam, the fact remains that you are people of Hainan Island living together on this land. We will head to Gangnam to protect our name.

Those who remain here will uphold the life of Hainan's person.»

The heads of those remaining drooped even lower.

No matter how well it's packaged, in the end, they are nothing more than deserters who have forsaken the name of the sect. And more than anyone else, they know that truth well.

Perhaps it would be easier to flip in anger and receive curses in return. But Geum Yangbaek didn't do that. He simply wished for their lives to continue calmly.

This fact made those left behind feel even more ashamed.

«Leave.»

Startled by Geum Yangbaek's sudden command, those who were at a loss amidst the torrent of emotions looked at him in surprise.

«There's no benefit in prolonging the farewell. Descend the mountain now. With that, consider our connection severed.»

«Now, Sect Leader.»

«Go.»

With those words, Geum Yangbaek firmly closed his eyes.

Those who had been watching his reaction bit their lips in silence. And then, one by one, they began to bow. Finally, with a respectful gesture to their master, they turned and, with slumped shoulders, headed towards the mountain gate.

The disciples are leaving.

Some showed tears, some bowed their heads as if bearing a guilt, some cursed, and some couldn't contain their anger and struck their chests.

Those who turned away and those who didn't look back.

Once they shared the same dream and believed unquestionably in each other as family, but now their paths have diverged, never to reunite.

And, until the very end, Yu Gong, the last remaining, simply bit his lip and watched those who bore the name of Haenam.

Though his heart urged him to leave, his feet wouldn't move.

After watching them for a while, Yu Gong bit his lip until it bled and finally spoke.

«Just because you stayed doesn't mean you've done anything remarkable.»

Yu Gong wasn't sure why he said such words.

In truth, there was no reason to blame them. There was no need to force anything. According to his reasoning, he made a rational choice, while they were nothing more than those who made foolish decisions. Then he could just mock them and leave.

«Just because we stayed doesn't mean we're cowards. Just leave your sense of superiority at that.»

Lee Jayang frowned.

«You...!»

But just as he was about to say another word, Gwak Hwanso lightly grabbed his arm and shook his head.

«... Sahyeong.»

«That's enough.»

Gwak Hwanso nodded and looked at Yu Gong.

«Yu Gong.»

«...»

«I have one request.»

«What...»

«When we leave, please look after the remaining disciples of Haenam from time to time.»

Yu Gong frowned at Gwak Hwanso.

«I am no longer a disciple of Haenam.»

«I know.»

Gwak Hwanso smiled faintly.

«But out of the respect for the time we once spent together, can't you do that much?»

Yu Gong stared at Gwak Hwanso in silence, then abruptly turned his body. Without looking back anymore, he walked towards the mountain gate.

Lee Jayang gritted his teeth at the sight.

«That damn...»

«Enough.»

Lee Jayang glanced at Yu Gong as he walked out of the gate, then turned away. There was no need to pay any more attention to them now.

«Sect Leader.»

The departing ones had left. Nevertheless, Gwak Hwanso, representing the remaining ones, opened his mouth, pledging to uphold the name of Haenam.

«Now, what should we do?»

«Hmm.»

Geum Yangbaek nodded and looked around. And among those who received his gaze, Im Sobyong stepped forward.

«Alright! From now on, you all need to move quickly. First, go to the nearby coast and get a boat-«

«Get a boat, you say?»

«No.»

«No?»

Im Sobyong smirked wickedly.

«Not to get one, but to destroy all the boats along the coast.»

«Uh... pardon?»

«All of them! Every single one! Doesn't matter if it's a fishing boat or a ship, smash them all!»

«Uh... yes?»

«Move!»

«...»

A sense of foreboding crept in, suggesting that something unexpected was about to unfold.