

Chapter 1253

To fight! And to survive! (3)

A small fishing boat rocked violently in the oncoming waves.

«Ouch!»

«Be careful. If you fall, you'll get swept away!»

«You worry too much. Do you think I've only done this once or twice?»

«True. And all those who've gone before us said the same thing.»

«This weather feels ominous...»

The fisherman pulling in the net grimaced as he looked at the net he had just raised. It was empty. He clicked his tongue in frustration.

«Looks like we won't have much of a catch today...»

«After a typhoon, it's always like this. Stop complaining and get to work.»

«Anyway, it seems like today's a lost cause. How about we fold up early and go for a drink?»

«Are you crazy? We've been starving throughout the whole typhoon, and if we go home empty-handed today, my wife will skin me alive.»

«There won't be much left anyway.»

«What do you mean?»

Under the scorching sun, the men with sunburnt, tanned skin pulled in the nets tirelessly, feeling restless.

Despite the relentless beads of sweat dripping down their faces, their expressions were filled with joy rather than hardship. No matter how tough the work at sea was, it was incomparable to the agony of being stuck on land with nothing to do.

«We should catch something before sunset.»

«Exactly!»

It was at that moment, as they cast their eager gazes upon the indifferent sea.

«Huh?»

One of them, pulling in the net, sounded alarmed.

«Uh, hey, what's that over there?»

«What are you talking about?»

«There... over there, can't you see the ships?»

«We're in the middle of the sea, what's so surprising?»

«No, there! Those ships over there! They're coming towards us!»

«Huh?»

The workers straightened their hunched backs and lifted their heads. Sure enough, the sight of dozens of massive ships heading towards the island in the distance became clear.

«Wait... is that...?»

«Those? Those ships?»

In a moment of realization, they recognized who was aboard those ships and shouted in alarm.

«Turn the boat around!»

«Quickly! Quickly, move aside! Don't let them collide with us!»

«But what about the nets...»

«Forget about the nets! Just hurry!»

The fishing boats hastily abandoned the nets they were pulling up and scattered in all directions. Moments later, the large ships cut through the sea path they had cleared.

The fishermen trembled in fear as the passing ships loomed over them. Giant flags hung from the ships, bearing the crimson character for «Supremacy [覇(覇)].»

«S... Sapaeryeon...»

«Those bastards...»

It wasn't their first time seeing Sapaeryeon's ships. For the past three years, their fleet had been patrolling the seas, keeping a watchful eye on Hainan Island.

However, they were just surveillance ships, and it was the first time that a fleet of this size came to Hainan under the flag of Sapaeryeon.

Those who knew what that meant looked at the ships moving away with despair.

«.....Please.»

It felt like the strong smell of blood was already reaching their nostrils.

«Any reports?»

«Yes, commander! According to the surveillance team monitoring the island, it seems there have been no sightings of anyone leaving the island.»

Ho Gamyong nodded lightly.

‘Is it wisdom or foolishness?’

There might not be much choice. But sitting idle won't change anything, especially when one finds themselves at a dead end.

After all, when an ordinary person reaches a dead-end road, they tend to sit and hesitate rather than trying to find a way out.

«Is there still no movement?»

«So far, no, commander.»

A hint of amusement flickered in Ho Gamyong's eyes.

«Even the most capable people can become useless. Even the Sect Leader of Haenam.»

From the perspective of Haenam sect, taking a boat to leave the island isn't a favorable option. Regardless of where they go, they cannot escape the nets laid out by Ho Gamyong.

Ultimately, they will only meet a more miserable death.

However...

«If they had engaged in a naval battle, there might have been a glimmer of possibility.»

What Ho Gamyong feared the most was their opponents attacking with their ships. Even if they were formidable fighters individually, their abilities would be limited while on board a ship together. Moreover, the soldiers of Manibang were not familiar with naval combat, so the odds would tilt in favor of the attackers.

‘If only we could bring in Surochae, then there would be no need to worry...’

However, that was not an easy task. Surochae was essential in confronting orthodox sects’ bastards. Also, any reduction in Surochae’s forces would be noticeable and could have significant repercussions.

‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter much.’

Even if they were to engage in naval warfare, it would only be a minor inconvenience. While perfect preparation would be ideal, sometimes speed is more critical than perfection. In Ho Gamyong’s judgment, what mattered most in this situation was not perfection but swiftness.

«How much longer until arrival?»

«We are expected to arrive within half an hour.»

«And the distance from the coast to the mountain?»

«If we advance at full speed, we can reach it within an hour.»

«About an hour and a half, then... Let’s allow for a margin of two hours.»

The languor settled in Ho Gaemyeong’s eyes as he gazed out to sea. Yet, his mind was swiftly assessing the situation even in this moment.

It was the task entrusted to him by Jang Ilso. Not a single inch of carelessness was permitted.

«Considering Haenam’s Sect Leader’s disposition, he’ll probably be encamped at his stronghold, waiting for us. Wide open gates, you know.»

«...Surely he wouldn’t be that careless?»

«It’s not about carelessness, it’s about what they consider natural. The thoughts of these orthodox bastards can be absurd at times, to the point where it’s hard for us to comprehend.» Those who believe that fighting head-on and dying according to their skill level is honorable. Especially as the crisis intensifies, such tendencies become more pronounced, typical of the Central Plains’ sect.

Only recently, an anomaly like Hwasan has emerged, making their behavior seem odd. Just a short while ago, most of the Central Plains’ sects exhibited such behavior.

So, from the perspective of Sapaeryeon, it’s incomprehensible.

If Sapa is inferior in skill compared to their opponent, it’s only natural for them to resort to poison, set traps, or even take hostages to ensure victory, as they see it as the ‘result’.

«Commander.»

At the voice calling from beside him, Ho Gaemyeong turned his gaze.

«Was it Ryeonju’s order to wipe out that island?»

At the question, a slight grimace crossed Ho Gaemyeong’s face.

«How many times must I say it for you to pretend to understand? It's only Haenam Sect that needs to be erased.»

“Of course I know. What I'm asking is not about Haenam, but about how to deal with those heading towards the other direction.”

It was a chilling tone. Ho Gaemyeong let out a long sigh.

«That won't happen, Blood Sword Squad Leader [Hyeolgeom Danju — 혈검단주(血劍團主)].»

«That remains to be seen.»

Ho Gaemyeong's eyes narrowed uncomfortably.

While there was no problem with him controlling those at the level of the unit leaders [Daeju — 대주(臺主)], it was impossible to completely suppress those at the level of squad leaders [Danju — 단주(團主)], whether by force or power. Especially when he was moving alone without Jang Ilso's support.

This was because, compared to his power within the faction, Ho Gaemyeong did not possess strong martial arts.

Though his position was higher, their martial prowess was more impressive. Thus, to some extent, a horizontal relationship had to be maintained.

Of course, unless Ho Gaemyeong tried excessively to suppress them, they too couldn't do anything against him, protected by Jang Ilso's favor...

«After a long journey, even the children are tired. If we return without seeing blood, they might cause trouble on land.»

«It's not you, but the Blood Sword Squad, right?»

He didn't outright deny it.

A sigh escaped Ho Gaemyeong's lips.

«Keep it under control. So as not to incur Ryeonju's wrath.»

«I'll try.»

With those words, Blood Sword Squad Leader Goe Yang [괴양(崩壤)] turned away coldly, distancing himself as if he didn't want to be any closer to Ho Gaemyeong.

Watching Goe Yang's monstrous figure, Ho Gaemyeong furrowed his brow.

‘Every single one...’

No matter how hard he tried, the moment they even slightly distanced themselves from Jang Ilso, they revealed their vicious nature.

In the bloody mess of what Sapa was, there were lunatics who couldn't be contained, deemed as public enemies [공적(公敵)]. The fact that they were the greatest force of Maninbang was both its greatest advantage and its greatest weakness.

Encountering their strength, they swiftly turned Maninbang into rulers of Guangdong within a short period of time, yet their uncontrollable ferocity divided the power of Maninbang, making it impossible to unify.

The only one who could leash them was Jang Ilso, unparalleled figure of Maninbang. Even the name of Ho Gamyong, undeniably a second in command in Maninbang, meant nothing to them. He could only try to coax and manipulate them just enough.

Sigh.

It was somewhat annoying to Ho Gamyong, but that was all. His gaze turned towards Hainan Island.

‘But they will be a disaster for them, literally.’

The sight of Hainan Island soaked in blood seemed already visible.

«Maintain maximum speed.»

«Yes!»

Responding to Ho Gamyong’s command, the fleet accelerated even more towards Hainan.

«Hurry up!»

«Yes, Sahyeong!»

The disciples of Haenam dashed around, sweating profusely as they drilled holes in the bottom of the ships anchored along the coast. Gwak Hwanso anxiously watched their actions.

«Will it be done in time?»

Turning his gaze away from the ship, he responded to Chung Myung’s question.

«We’re working on it right now.»

«It might be better to just smash them instead of wasting time like this.»

«Our enemies aren’t fools. If all the ships are suddenly found broken upon reaching the coast, they’ll suspect something is up.»

«Hmm.»

«Trust me. We are people who have lived by the sea. Until the enemies arrive, they will be floating on the water. But once they try to board the ships, we can make them sink.»

As Chung Myung glanced briefly at Im Sobyong, he shrugged and said.

«So we tried to make it look like boats were smashed by a typhoon, but it might seem a bit unnatural. This would be better.»

«Do you think those Sapa bastards have enough brains to figure that out?»

«...Are you comparing them to pigs or dogs?»

«Why insult dogs and pigs? What wrong have they done?»

«Did you have a vendetta with Sapa in your past life or something?»

«You’re saying something strange. What kind of grudge do you have to bear for criticizing Sapa bastards? If you look at it objectively, Sapa bastards are worse than bugs.»

Im Sobyong silently slumped his shoulders. At that moment, Namgung Dowi approached them with a puzzled look.

«But if that’s the case, wouldn’t it be better to smash all the boats on the island? Why just the ones on this coast?»

Amidst the barrage of words without even catching a breath, Im Sobyong, who found a suitable scapegoat, looked at Namgung Dowi with an exaggeratedly surprised expression.

«Wow, what an idea. Even stupid Sapa wouldn't think of that.»

«...Excuse me?»

«If we destroy all the boats, wouldn't it tie the feet of Maninbang who have landed here?»

«Well...that's true?»

«So let's confine venomous Sapa bastards on Hainan Island? Then what will happen while those bastards are repairing their ships?»

«Uh...»

...Hell will probably break loose. They'll likely unleash their wrath on the residents of Hainan.

Realizing what he had said, Namgung Dowi quickly tried to correct himself. But Im Sobyong didn't give him a chance and seized the opportunity.

«Ah, indeed, the prestigious Namgung clan, who have endured as the stronghold of blood and honor for hundreds of years. Indeed! Indeed! To achieve such feats, one must not consider human lives even as valuable as ants...»

«S-stop it! That's not what I meant!»

«It's okay, it's okay. It could be. From the perspective of the Sapa bastards, it's a very clever idea. But if that's the case, why not just switch sides to a more suitable faction at this opportunity...»

«Where are you coming up with this nonsense! Shut up!»

Finally, watching Namgung Dowi and Im Sobyong bickering, Tang Pae shook his head. That guy sure became foul mouthed.

But strangely, as he watched them, it seemed odd. Despite their seemingly bad relationship, they strangely seemed to get along well at times.

Then it happened.

«Uh... Hwasan Geomhyeop.»

«Huh?»

Gwak Hwanso, who was leading the disciples, hesitated and asked Chung Myung.

«May I ask something?»