Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 101

Did he set you up as a stand-in?

The next day, shortly after noon.

In-hyuk stepped out of his room after finishing his preparations.

"Let's get going soon," he said.

Hong Yu-geon, who had been lounging on the sofa, tilted his head as he looked over at In-hyuk.

When their gazes met, In-hyuk wrinkled his brow a little and spoke.

"... What?"

"It's just... I've been feeling it since yesterday... Something's different about you. Did you wear cologne or something? Or did you go meet a woman?"

"Quit talking nonsense and let's just go."

But no one moved. Van Hester, who'd been sitting on a chair near the entrance, was the same.

A brief silence fell.

Then Van Hester slowly stood up and pulled the three-section staff from his waist.

Chwarururuk—

"I suspected something strange since yesterday. You're not our boss."

"What?! Is that true?"

Hong Yu-geon sprang to his feet, facing off with In-hyuk.

In response, the person who looked like In-hyuk twisted his face into an expression never seen before.

"Ah... Shit. I was sure I wouldn't get caught."

Even his manner of speaking completely changed.

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester emanated an even more tense atmosphere, taking up defensive stances.

The person disguised as In-hyuk raised both hands.

"Whoa~ Whoa~! How about calming down, you two? We're friends, aren't we?"

"What the—? Who are you, calling us friends...? Wait, are you—Noah? Are you Noah Vantrail?"

"Who else but me could do such a perfect disguise?"

Hong Yu-geon's face twisted even further.

"What are you doing here? Where's our boss?"

"Mr. Kang? He hired me and then disappeared. He asked me to keep an eye on things here in his place."

"You don't know where he went? Actually, never mind that! Are you really Noah? Skinwalker Noah? I can't trust you—take off whatever you're wearing on your face first!"

Noah Vantrail.

Outwardly known as the "skinwalker," she was a female mercenary who, like Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, took on contract jobs.

However, while also working in intelligence centered on tracking and searching, she was a bit different; her specialty was a special kind of impersonation and disguise that allowed her to mimic anyone with a similar physique at over 90% accuracy.

"Crazy?! This disguise took me over an hour, I'm not about to remove it! Anyway, where have you two been all this while—what are you doing here?"

"Where did we last see you?"

Since they couldn't see her real face, they decided to test her.

Noah, still in In-hyuk's form, put on a disinterested expression.

"Casablanca, Morocco. You two were on vacation, I was finishing up a job, and we met at a bar called Marrakech. Satisfied?"

"Ah... it really is you."

With that answer, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester slowly relaxed their stances.

"Anyway, I'm here on Mr. Kang's job. He asked me to act as him until he returned, and that was the condition."

"What on earth is the boss thinking? And how does he even know you? Do you just hand out your business card everywhere?"

Noah's face twisted again for a moment before she hastily smoothed it out.

"Ugh... I nearly wrinkled my mask! Why do you keep talking nonsense? And business card? You guys gave him my info, didn't you?"

"How would we know your direct number?"

"Exactly! So how did Mr. Kang know something neither you nor I gave him?"

The conversation dragged on, with no answers to be found.

"As I always think, I have no idea what our boss actually does... Anyway, whatever. But do you really think you can fool everyone else? Do you even know who you need to fool?"

"He said it was just the wife and her secretary."

At this, Hong Yu-geon let out a sigh.

"They don't see us often, so they won't be as sensitive, but you still need to be careful."

"You two didn't notice until I came in yesterday either. So what tipped you off that I wasn't Mr. Kang?"

In truth, even Hong Yu-geon had only felt something was off; he hadn't suspected a fake.

So he turned to Van Hester, who had noticed.

"The smell."

"Huh? My smell? I tried to use as little scent as possible—there's no cologne or anything."

"There's a unique scent. But yesterday, maybe because of the boss's clothes, I didn't notice."

As a day passed, Noah's scent grew stronger than the scent In-hyuk had left behind.

"You a bloodhound or something? Anyway, are we going to keep this up? People are waiting for us outside."

They had a set schedule. And with In-hyuk having personally given Noah this job, it was hard to object.

At the same time, Hong Yu-geon found himself wondering.

"But why didn't he tell us and set you up as a stand-in? Did he think we'd say no?"

"Ah, I got snared. Mr. Kang said if I didn't get caught by you, he'd pay three times the usual fee. But you found me out in less than 24 hours..."

"Why? Are you just doing it for free now?"

"Are you crazy? Do you know how much labor and disguise materials cost?"

"So, what now?"

Noah, still with In-hyuk's face, pouted her lips.

"... Half price. Jeez! If I'd known this, I wouldn't have risen to the challenge."

"Someone else fell for one of our boss's tricks again. Well, fine. Grab your things and let's head out. And like I said before, you have to be extra careful not to get caught for real."

"You only caught me because you're you! Let's just get going."

At that, Noah, as In-hyuk, shifted into a serious air.

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At the same time, in front of the △△ Building in Hong Kong, at a café.

There, Norman McGrath, AMK Partners' branch manager in Korea, sat anxiously.

"What time is it?" he asked, though he was clearly wearing a wristwatch, to his secretary Yu Dae-hyeon beside him.

"It's 13:27."

"Already? Still three minutes to go?"

The air was tense.

At that moment, a middle-aged man with ash-grey hair, a thin build, and a crisp suit walked into the café and approached Norman McGrath.

"So we meet at last, branch manager."

At this, Norman McGrath and his secretary Yu Dae-hyeon immediately stood up.

"... Are you CEO Grimes?"

"That's right. It's the first time since we met in the alleys of Cheonggyecheon, isn't it?"

The identity of Gordon Grimes was none other than In-hyuk.

This time, after enlisting the help of Noah Vantrail, whose forte was disguise, In-hyuk had decided to meet Norman McGrath in person.

Of course, his current appearance was crafted using disguise skills he'd learned from Noah, with whom he'd had a connection in his original life as well.

Meanwhile, Norman McGrath was taken aback.

In-hyuk had just referenced when he'd called Norman to Korea for a personal meeting—a detail only the two of them shared, so no further proof was needed.

"It really is you."

Publicly, the name Gordon Grimes existed only on paper.

They'd only ever spoken by phone or message, so until now, Norman hadn't quite believed it.

"I'm grateful you chose to trust me so quickly."

"At first, I wondered if you might send a proxy, but hearing your manner of speaking, I'm convinced."

The two were conversing in English. Perhaps the mood from their phone calls carried over, for Norman McGrath seemed to have no doubts left.

Norman continued.

"Does this mean you're finally making your public debut?"

In-hyuk shook his head.

"No, I'm only showing myself this once. Anyway, since you have an appointment, shall we go?"

"Ah, yes, let's."

The group exited the café together and entered a nearby building.

Yu Dae-hyeon, Norman McGrath's secretary, announced their visit at the reception desk.

At the same time, In-hyuk cast a subtle glance out the window. He'd felt eyes on him on the way from the café to the building.

'Someone's tailing Norman, too?'

It was from a car at two o'clock. Of course, he didn't look directly.

Just then, a group emerged from the elevator and hurried over.

They were staff from SGA (Summit Global Advisors), a Hong Kong-based fund company.

"Thank you for coming. The CEO is waiting, so let's head up."

Guided by the staff, In-hyuk (as Gordon Grimes) and his group rode the elevator up.

Soon, they arrived at the floor where SGA's CEO's office was located.

When the doors opened, they were greeted by a woman with neatly cut black hair, wearing a crimson two-piece skirt suit, and her staff behind her.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Raven Delacroix, the CEO of SGA."

Her English was smooth and British.

In-hyuk, disguised as Gordon Grimes, smiled with deepened wrinkles.

"I'm Gordon Grimes of AMK."

"I've heard so much about you—It's an honor to meet you in person at last."

"I simply don't like showing myself, but I suppose that causes unnecessary suspicion."

"Hiding this much seems a bit much, don't you think? Oh, it's been a while, branch manager McGrath."

"How have you been?"

Raven Delacroix greeted Norman and the accompanying staff in a playful manner.

Once everyone was seated on the couches in the CEO's office, she began.

"They say CEO Grimes, you're from England?"

She'd investigated Gordon Grimes' background—an unusual feat, since little was known of him publicly.

"That's correct. CEO, you're originally from England as well, aren't you?"

"To be exact, I'm a third-generation immigrant. My grandfather moved from China to the UK in the 19th century. And now I'm working here, leaving my family behind in England."

"I see."

Warm tea was served.

"I must be nervous—I'm just rambling."

"It's fine. But actually, I have a tight schedule. Shall we get down to business?"

"Of course we should. You wanted the shares in Taeshin Group that SGA holds, correct?"

These were shares not secured during the recent market crash, but those long held by SGA.

"For that, sGA requested two things. One was to meet me in person, secretly."

"That's right. I've always wanted to meet the legendary investor everyone talks about."

Raven Delacroix smiled contentedly.

In-hyuk, wearing Gordon Grimes's face, smiled back.

"The other is that SGA wants something in return, correct? I'm here to propose a deal on both fronts."

Raven's eyes sparkled with interest.

"We're not in any hurry, so I wonder what you've brought us."

In-hyuk glanced at Norman, who then took out a prepared item from his bag and placed it on the table.

"How about shares in Taiwan SolarView?"

Raven Delacroix's expression stiffened.

"SolarView... That's the company AMK Partners invested in early and made sizable profits from, right? I know it's quite valuable, but I doubt it equals shares in Korea's Taeshin Group."

"Superficially, yes. But value can change, depending on timing and context. Especially considering the current situation in China."

"What do you mean?"

In-hyuk fixed her with a meaningful gaze.

"SolarView recently filed a major semiconductor inspection technology patent and saw huge growth."

"That's right. They even received a massive investment from FOURGMA in America because of it."

"So, what if SolarView isn't just launching another inspection patent—but is about to release a security chip for smartphones? And not only that, but a major supply contract has already been signed with a specific company."

Raven Delacroix's expression grew even more grave. She had no prior knowledge of this development.

Chapter 102

If It's Kang...

In-hyuk, in the guise of Gordon Grimes, sensed the clear shift in the atmosphere around him.

Meanwhile, Raven Delacroix met his gaze, now with the smile gone from her face.

"That's definitely information we missed."

"Would you mind sending the others out for a moment?"

"Why is that?"

"What I'm about to say may come across as disrespectful to you, ms. Delacroix, which is why I wanted to mention it first."

Raven Delacroix pondered briefly, then sent her staff outside.

"I'm curious to hear what you have to say."

Her tone carried a faint hint of sarcasm. In response, In-hyuk momentarily widened his eyes before lowering them and spoke.

"It's about the advisor for SGA. If even he didn't know this, then it must have been difficult for you as well, CEO Delacroix."

"..... How do you know that?"

Raven Delacroix's demeanor chilled noticeably.

SGA of Hong Kong was a company that had started as a private equity fund in 2021.

At the time, managed with the capital of various conglomerates, it grew rapidly with successive investment successes.

But two years before, a massive loss in ELS (equity-linked securities) products resulted in huge damages.

Of course, this wasn't an issue unique to SGA.

Businesses that invested in ELS products in Hong Kong, China, Korea, and other countries also suffered severe losses.

However, at the beginning of the previous year, after SGA's CEO was replaced by Raven Delacroix, who had been the branch manager in New York, the company experienced a rapid resurgence and was able to regain its former reputation in Hong Kong.

Still, the fact that someone else was involved in that process was a secret known only to her.

"I pride myself on my information network, you see—I don't lose to anyone in that regard."

Raven Delacroix let out a deep sigh.

"That advisor was impressive, but I suppose he still fell short compared to CEO Grimes."

"I was just a bit better, that's all."

"Aren't you being too modest? That advisor couldn't even figure out who you were, after all."

The way In-hyuk had figured it out was simple, in fact.

The secret advisor of SGA in Hong Kong—he was none other than In-hyuk himself.

Furthermore, In-hyuk had acquired SGA's falling shares by quietly rerouting part of AMK Partners' funds and installed Raven Delacroix as CEO.

That was why In-hyuk was now personally managing two of his own companies separately and negotiating while taking the lead himself.

"It's just a difference in our intel capabilities. So, what do you think? From SGA's standpoint, wouldn't the highly promising Chinese smartphone business be better than simply holding Taeshin Group's shares for now?"

Raven Delacroix, having paused to think, let out a sigh.

"I didn't expect you to make such an impressive proposal."

"The key to a proposal is making it so attractive there's no reason to hesitate. Shall I take that as your acceptance? Of course, you're free to conduct due diligence on SolarView before we sign anything."

In-hyuk, in the guise of Gordon Grimes, had already predicted even the further offers she might bring up.

"You really don't leave any openings, do you? Very well. If everything checks out, let's proceed with the contract. Will you be present then as well?"

"I doubt I'll have the chance to show my face for a while due to other matters. Branch manager McGrath will handle the due diligence and contract signing."

Finishing the conversation with a smile, In-hyuk stood up. As he exited, Norman McGrath, who had been waiting, approached him.

"Are you finished?"

"Yes, it went well. As long as there are no issues, you can just exchange the shares with a transfer contract."

After saying their farewells to Raven Delacroix, the group descended again.

Upon reaching the first-floor lobby, Norman McGrath, his face full of questions, spoke again.

"What exactly did you talk about in there?"

In-hyuk replied in a quiet voice.

"It seems SGA also has someone providing investment advice, similar to what I do."

"Really? Ah... so that's how they were able to grow so quickly, like us. Do you know who this person is?"

At that, In-hyuk paused to think and then shook his head.

"No. I haven't figured that out yet. Anyway, thank you for coming such a long way. We should part ways here."

"This is our first meeting... Aren't you going to join us for a meal?"

His tone was filled with regret.

"I still have important matters to attend to. Next time, if there's a chance, we'll eat together."

In-hyuk said this as he shook hands with Norman McGrath and the other staff.

They all looked elated, probably because not only had they seen the legendary Gordon Grimes in person, they'd even shaken hands with him.

"Are you sure you don't need a car?"

"I'll just take a taxi."

After saying his farewells, In-hyuk quickly scanned his surroundings and hailed a taxi.

At the same moment, a black vehicle some distance away began to move slowly, as if it had been waiting for this moment.

* * *

Third Deputy Director's Office, National Intelligence Service.

As soon as he heard the field agent's report, Im Deok-chang jumped to his feet.

"What?! Someone visited SGA in Hong Kong?"

"It was Gordon Grimes of AMK Partners. He arrived about an hour ago accompanied by Norman McGrath, the Korean branch manager."

"An hour ago? Why are we only getting this important report now?"

"There had also been security guards assigned to Norman McGrath, so identification was delayed. We did immediately tail them once identified, but... we just lost him."

Im Deok-chang couldn't help but frown at the meek voice.

"And the photos and immigration data?"

Within the organization, Gordon Grimes became a person of concern after AMK Partners established a branch in Korea and began to stand out.

But aside from his name and official identification, nothing was known, so they'd only been able to regularly monitor Norman McGrath's movements in Korea using the National Intelligence Service's resources.

"Here they are. However, we were unable to find any records of Gordon Grimes entering Hong Kong under that name."

The man in the picture was a lean British man with ash-grey hair.

Upon seeing the photo, Im Deok-chang grew suspicious.

"If it was that hard to track, he must've used a fake passport. But did he show up alone, without security or staff?"

"For now, yes."

"Now that I think about it... SGA had transferred investment in Texcellence to AMK Partners, which led to RSK's acquisition, right?"

"That's correct. After that, Texcellence successfully won the military uniform bid and, through its own factory and Taeshin Spintech, is making enormous profits."

Im Deok-chang let out a long sigh.

"That suggests he might have a real identity we don't know."

"Are you saying Gordon Grimes might not be his real identity? But isn't that the registered CEO of AMK Partners?"

"If it were real, there's no reason for him to avoid the spotlight like this. Anyway, even if he used a fake passport, he couldn't change his face, so make sure to thoroughly check recent records."

At that, the agent looked troubled.

"Then we'll need to send an official request... The overseas team will catch on."

As third deputy director, Im Deok-chang was originally responsible for industrial information and science/technology.

Overseas matters technically belonged to the first deputy director, but he had his own line for such things.

"If unavoidable, I'll explain to the first deputy myself. Just proceed."

It was a necessary decision under the circumstances.

After the agent exited, now alone, Im Deok-chang lifted the blinds to look outside, then pulled out his phone.

[Direct communication is only permitted in emergencies. What is it?]

A question came in English.

The person on the other end was Hannya, who had the same rank as Im Deok-chang in the organization.

"Do you have any personnel deployed in Hong Kong?"

[Hong Kong, all of a sudden?]

"Gordon Grimes of AMK has made an appearance. We've lost track of him, so I need a team to follow up."

The mood on the other end of the line instantly changed.

[Do you have immigration records?]

"He probably used a fake passport. We'll look for him internally. I'll send you the photo right away."

[Understood. We have four operatives who just finished a mission in Hong Kong. I'll assign them to you.]

There was no mention of what the previous mission had been.

Unless you investigated yourself, such details weren't shared.

"What's their level?"

[Three level-4 operatives and one level-3.]

"So it's a team that just wrapped up another job. Got it. If you give me a communication code, I'll share the last known location of Gordon Grimes. Ah, we also have agents of our own in the area, so make sure they don't run into each other."

[Understood. I'll relay that.]

The call ended.

Im Deok-chang placed his phone on the desk and sat down with a deep sigh.

AMK Partners had recently turned several of the organization's corporate projects upside down in sudden, unexpected ways.

Now, its owner, Gordon Grimes, had publicly appeared for the first time.

From the organization's standpoint, they had to find him by whatever means necessary.

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26th floor, hillwood URS Building, Hong Kong.

Inside a company called Lionport Trading.

There, Noah Vantrail, in In-hyuk's appearance, was sitting with Tae Ju-ha.

"Why are you so quiet all of a sudden?"

Noah Vantrail replied matter-of-factly to the question.

"I just don't have anything to say."

She had practiced the speech patterns and mannerisms that In-hyuk had told her in advance.

But perhaps because she was holding back from speaking too much, Tae Ju-ha's reaction was somewhat awkward.

"So... where will we be going after this?"

Of course, answers to questions she might ask had also been provided in advance.

"I'll let you know before we move."

"You said someone's been tailing us since Switzerland. Did they follow us here?"

Noah Vantrail was aware of that situation as well.

In fact, as they traveled to this location today, she had noticed for herself.

"Yes."

"And you're sure it's safe?"

"No problem."

Tae Ju-ha squinted slightly, narrowing her brow, and stared at Noah Vantrail in In-hyuk's appearance.

"It seems like this is something to be worried about. How can you sound so certain?"

But there hadn't been an example answer prepared for this question.

'If it's Kang... If it's Kang...'

Thinking hard, Noah Vantrail finally managed to answer with difficulty.

"Because I'm here."

At that forced answer, Tae Ju-ha's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Where does that confidence even come from?"

Sensing something was off about her reply, Noah Vantrail went quiet again.

"Let's just wait."

A short while later, the representative of Lionport Trading returned inside with documents in hand.

"It's ready. All you have to do is sign here and the process is complete."

His words were interpreted by In-hyuk.

The document was extended to Tae Ju-ha, who silently accepted the paper and pen and signed.

"It's done."

"以後會期待的. (I look forward to what's next.)"

Once again, Tae Ju-ha looked at In-hyuk, not understanding.

"They said they look forward to it."

She definitely understood the implication. She had heard similar words from company CEOs in Switzerland and Monaco.

"I don't know if this is really okay..."

"....."

Noah Vantrail, still in In-hyuk's appearance, could not say anything else.

He had only received a rough overview of the situation from In-hyuk and didn't know the details, so he felt it would be easy to slip up if she said anything more.

When the two of them went down to the first floor, Heo Yu-rim, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester approached.

Hong Yu-geon immediately came up beside and asked quietly in Spanish,

"We didn't get caught, right?"

"If we were caught, do you think we'd have just walked out like this?"

"Has the boss contacted you yet about when he'll arrive?"

"No."

Even In-hyuk had already handed his phone over to Noah Vantrail.

There might be another phone, but even Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester didn't know that number.

Just then, Hong Yu-geon received a message on his phone.

【HERMIT: To. Noah. One hour from now. South end of Gate 2, men's Restroom, Hong Kong International Airport.】

Hong Yu-geon also showed the message to Noah Vantrail.

"It's Mr. Kang. He's not watching us somewhere, is he?"

The timing was just too perfect.

"Anyway, let's get ready and head over. Until then, let's not say anything unnecessary."

"I know that."

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha, who had been walking ahead, turned her head.

"What are you all whispering about over there?"

"Uh, nothing."

Noah Vantrail, still in In-hyuk's guise, quickly switched to a different tone and walked up next to her.

Chapter 103

Harvest, for the first time in a while

After parting ways with Norman McGrath, In-hyuk hailed a taxi in front of SGA and set off.

Then, he got off once along the way, entered an alley, and switched to another taxi to return to Wong Kok.

This was the street where he had switched shifts with Noah Vantrail.

That place was always crowded, as it was famous for its night market, electronics market, and restaurants in Hong Kong.

From there, he went up to a skybridge three stories above the ground that connected two buildings and looked down below.

He could tell from their movement that these people weren't tourists or locals.

"Six in total? Two from the National Intelligence Service who have been tailing me since SGA, and the four new guys—are they from Kooou?"

Originally, after finishing the SGA business, he had planned to head straight to the airport and switch shifts again with Noah Vantrail.

But once he confirmed that even Norman McGrath had been targeted by the National Intelligence Service, he changed his plans.

"Should I do a harvest for the first time in a while?"

Murmuring quietly, In-hyuk bought a Buddhist rosary bracelet from a shop selling accessories.

After double-checking the suspicious figures below, he snapped the bracelet string and tossed one of the prayer beads beneath the feet of a man walking on the skybridge.

Crash—

"Ahh—!"

The man tripped, and a loud sound echoed.

Simultaneously, the gaze of the people searching below turned toward the back.

Sensing that their attention had shifted to him, In-hyuk started moving.

'The National Intelligence Service first.....'

Meanwhile, below, the men who had spotted In-hyuk—disguised as Gordon Grimes—on the skybridge, moved quickly.

After crossing the skybridge, In-hyuk entered a building.

There, he adjusted his walking pace with his stride, making sure the NIS agents—who had followed him up—could spot him.

By contrast, perhaps thinking their presence hadn't been exposed, the agents approached him carefully to avoid drawing attention from others.

Gradually, the distance narrowed from both front and back.

Then, using the crowd at a four-way corridor as cover, In-hyuk veered off to the right and out of their line of sight.

The agents, now having lost him, stood in the middle of the intersection, scanning the area.

After a brief discussion, they split up to search the surroundings.

"Urk—!"

At that moment, the agent who had turned right was struck in the side by something that flew out from next to him, leaving him unable to breathe.

At the same time, someone clamped a hand over his mouth, dragged him along, and he lost consciousness.

"One down."

The person who had attacked the agent was In-hyuk.

He dragged the man into a narrow alley between shops, seated him carefully, and then retrieved the phone and radio from the man's jacket.

[This is Alpha. Still haven't found him?]

The sound of the agent's colleague came from the radio.

Then, noticing the lack of reply, another question came in with a hint of suspicion.

[Beta, respond. What's your location, beta?]

In-hyuk turned off the radio, gently set it down on the man's abdomen, and moved on.

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Amidst the crowds moving through the electronics market in Wong Kok, a man in a casual black suit stood exuding a cold aura.

He was Ruben, a Level 3 agent from WID.

Listening to the frequency given by the Organization over his radio earpiece, his expression suddenly hardened. He quickly switched to another frequency and reported in English.

"NIS A2 radio connection lost. Presumed neutralized. NIS A1, please report current location."

It had been barely five minutes since the first NIS agent's radio went dead, and now the other agent had also gone silent.

He kept his report succinct.

Not long after, his subordinate Oliver's voice came through the radio.

[This is the men's restroom at the east end, third floor. NIS A1 is unconscious..... urk!]

But Oliver's transmission was abruptly cut off by a pained grunt.

Alarmed, Ruben furrowed his brow. Oliver's voice did not come back.

"Switching to frequency Code B."

Bzzzt—

The frequency changed with a burst of static. It was a pre-arranged backup frequency to prevent enemies from eavesdropping on their communications.

"Current position?"

[Gate 1, first floor.]

[Second floor, west corridor.]

Ruben was in front of Gate 2 on the first floor.

Everyone had set up a perimeter so as not to lose sight of the target, Gordon Grimes.

"We suspect there is an unidentified security detail present. Headcount uncertain. Kedrick and Leo, join up on the second floor and proceed to the third floor, west side, toward the men's restroom."

[Roger.]

[Roger.]

As the agents replied, Ruben also started to move.

"So, someone of that caliber wouldn't be out and about alone after all."

A few days ago, after completing his mission in Hong Kong, Ruben had received a sudden new assignment along with information about the target.

It was Gordon Grimes of AMK Partners—an investment tycoon whose name alone was known across America and Asia.

The objective was to secure and detain him, then wait for the Organization's visit.

But as it was a hastily issued mission, information about the target was sorely lacking.

"Still, for Oliver not to even react with CQC—he got taken out just like that....."

WID agents were trained in TMT (Tactical Murder Techniques) for lethal tactical skills.

Of course, skills varied depending on one's degree of proficiency, but standard special forces members could generally handle themselves.

Especially those WID agents with field experience were no strangers to killing.

The fact that someone suppressed such an opponent with barely a sound meant their enemy's skills were no joke.

Ruben headed up the east staircase to the second floor, where few people were present.

Even so, he checked out every person who passed by as he ascended.

"Current location?"

Radioing in, he heard Kedrick's voice.

[Approaching the men's restroom, third floor. About 20 meters to go. No anomalies so far.]

"Don't go inside yet, wait."

[Roger.]

No suspicious individuals had yet been found nearby.

Although the chances of an enemy still being in the restroom were slim, they took thorough precautions just in case.

As he kept walking, he arrived in front of the men's restroom.

Unlike the stairwell earlier, there was no one around.

The stores nearby all had their shutters down—it seemed this was a neglected part of the mall.

"Has anyone gone in or come out?"

At that, Kedrick glanced toward the entrance.

In front of the entrance to the men's restroom, which had no door, stood a sign reading 'Under Repair.'

"Looks like the target set that up."

"Then I'll go in with Kedrick. Leo, stand by outside."

Everyone nodded.

Ruben entered with Kedrick. Inside the small restroom, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

As they checked each stall, they found the door to the farthest one open.

Inside, the NIS agent tagged as A1 and Oliver were both unconscious, sitting together (in a manner of speaking) against the wall.

"Are they alive?"

"Neither is dead. But it doesn't look like there was a fight."

Neither of their clothes was especially disheveled, nor were there any external wounds.

This indicated that they had been rendered unconscious with a special attack.

Smack— Smack—

First, Ruben slapped Oliver's cheek. Oliver's eyes fluttered open as he surveyed his surroundings.

"... Team leader?"

"Are you coming to your senses? Explain what happened."

Oliver squinted hard, recalling his last memory.

"Ah, I found A2 and was reporting in over the radio when... Someone attacked me from behind... ugh."

His face contorted in pain, apparently from a severe ache in his side.

When Ruben lifted Oliver's shirt, he saw a distinct red bruise on the man's right flank.

"He was struck right in the xieyin point."

It was a vital point located under the ribs at the flank.

If struck hard enough to impact the intercostal nerve and the kidney, one could lose consciousness from the shock.

"Sorry, if only I hadn't let my guard down..."

"Any punishment for this will be after we return. More importantly, did you get a look at the attacker or any identifying features?"

"It happened so suddenly, I didn't see their face."

But as Oliver slowly stood, feeling around his jacket, he seemed to notice something unusual.

Ruben, reading the mood, frowned and asked,

"... What's wrong?"

"My tech gear is gone."

"What? You think the guy took your stuff?"

"That must be it."

Ruben paused to assess the situation, his face scrunching up even more than before.

"Damn. It was a diversion. Gordon Grimes is already gone."

"Should we go after him right away?"

"And where, exactly, would we chase?"

Due to the sudden assignment and the unregistered location, they didn't even have CCTV coverage.

By the time they regrouped and started pursuit, it would already be too late.

"So what do we do with this guy?"

He pointed at the NIS agent, still sitting against the wall.

Ruben stared at the man intently before murmuring quietly.

"Even if he didn't see us, we can't leave someone who overheard our conversation alive."

The NIS agent's eyelids quivered.

He had apparently awoken just recently and had been quietly listening to their exchange.

At that moment, Ruben drew a pistol with a suppressor from his jacket, put it to the man's head, and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Pfft—

* * *

Near Gate 2, Hong Kong International Airport.

Noah Vantrail, disguised as In-hyuk, stepped into a men's restroom near the airport.

Knock, knock—

Then came the sound of knocking, not from the front, but from the adjacent stall.

"Mr. Kang?"

"Good job."

With the reply, a bag was handed over the top. As planned, In-hyuk had retrieved Noah Vantrail's luggage from the designated location.

"Leaving a lady waiting in the men's room and then brushing it off with that kind of talk—isn't that going too far?"

At the same time, she handed over In-hyuk's belongings underneath.

"I paid enough for the trouble, didn't I?"

"Tch—! You could at least say something nice."

Noah Vantrail took a bottle of liquid from her bag, poured some on a cloth, and wiped at her eyes and neck.

Soon, a seam appeared on the skin covering her face, and she peeled it away with her hands.

"Whew—! That made me break out into a cold sweat."

After removing her wig, a beautiful woman with shoulder-length black hair was revealed.

"No problems, I hope?"

"Not really. Ah, but unfortunately, Yu-geon and Van saw through me."

"I thought you said no one could catch onto you?"

"Van is sharper than I expected."

Meanwhile, In-hyuk also pulled something out of his prepared bag and started removing his disguise.

Rip—

Hearing the sound, Noah Vantrail asked,

"What are you up to, Kang?"

"I was pretty much in the same state as you."

For when they'd switched shifts at Wong Kok, In-hyuk had been in his original appearance.

"You had a disguise? What exactly were you doing?"

"I don't recall that being part of the job description."

"... Tch."

After undoing his disguise, In-hyuk changed into the clothes he'd worn at the beginning.

"Could you do me one more favor?"

"What is it?"

"Could you get rid of my bag as well? I'll pay the standard fee."

Noah Vantrail hesitated, then gave a small reply.

"... Okay."

The bag was passed up and over like that.

Afterward, In-hyuk left the stall and checked himself in the mirror, touching up anything that was out of place.

Just then, the stall where Noah Vantrail had been opened and a man stepped out.

"Not changing back to your original appearance?"

At some point, she had transformed into someone else's likeness.

"Wouldn't it look strange if a man entered and a woman exited? Especially at an airport, where there are tons of CCTV cameras."

"You're very meticulous."

"I try to provide a service that keeps my client's actions from standing out. But where did you learn your disguise skills, Kang?"

Noah Vantrail had been surprised to find the same kind of remover in the bag In-hyuk brought her.

"I learned from someone."

"Yeah, but who?"

"You wouldn't know even if I told you. And, I've already sent the payment."

With that, In-hyuk wired the fee to her account.

bzzz—

"Hm? That's fifty thousand dollars more than usual, isn't it?"

The standard fee was 100,000 dollars—about 140 million won.

"I added more for your extra care. And I may have more jobs for you in the future."

"I'd be happy to get regular business from you."

Noah Vantrail's eyes sparkled as she checked the deposited amount.

Shaking his head, In-hyuk proceeded to regroup with his waiting companions.

Chapter 104

I Noticed Too!

As the sun was setting, WISE&WIRE Group's chairman Baek Ji-woong visited a safehouse on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

It was the same place he had met Im Deok-chang before. And this time as well, Im Deok-chang had arrived first and was waiting for him.

"How dare you try to pull that kind of trick on me?"

He shouted as he entered the living room. However, Im Deok-chang only looked at Baek Ji-woong calmly, without much reaction.

"What are you talking about?"

"You knew perfectly well what Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha are doing abroad and still tried to sell me the shares?"

The deal between the two had not yet been completed. At this, Im Deok-chang put on a look full of regret.

"From your standpoint, buying the shares is the only way, isn't it?"

"Then what about the power of attorney documents your side prepared? Were you just going to wipe your mouth and play ignorant?"

Originally, it was Baek Ji-woong who had made contact to get the power of attorney documents arranged.

But Im Deok-chang cut in and tried to make it look like his own doing, so Baek Ji-woong couldn't help but be enraged.

"Aren't we moving toward the same goal anyway?"

"Then you shouldn't have interfered at all from the beginning!"

"So what are you going to do about it? Looking at the situation, it seems Chairman Tae Gun-seung wants to transfer the shares to Tae Ju-ha. Don't you need to come up with a countermeasure too?"

With a sigh, Baek Ji-woong sat down on the sofa.

"Shouldn't you have thought about that before making a plan to stab me in the back?"

"If Chairman Tae Gun-seung hadn't made such a decision, none of this would've happened."

After Taeshin Group's eldest son and Taeshin Electronics CEO Tae Seok-hyun lost his position, Tae Seok-ho seemed the most likely heir.

Apart from him, there was no one to inherit the company, no matter how outstanding.

Of course, initially Kang In-hyuk, who achieved considerable results in a short time, was also a candidate.

But when the fact emerged that he was the illegitimate child of KQ Group Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, that became nearly impossible.

"So that justifies playing these games?"

"There's more important information than that. It just so happens you called me here, so I'll tell you. Maybe that'll lessen my responsibility a bit."

At the same time, Baek Ji-woong looked at him with a face full of distrust.

"You think that's going to be enough?"

Im Deok-chang gave a meaningful smile and began speaking slowly.

"What if it's information about Gordon Grimes?"

"... What? You found something out about him?"

"To be precise, he made his first appearance just a few hours ago. In Hong Kong."

"Hong Kong? Don't tell me, did he meet Kang In-hyuk?"

Coincidentally, the timing of the information Im Deok-chang acquired seemed to overlap with when Kang In-hyuk was in Hong Kong.

"No, he visited SGA in Hong Kong with Norman McGrath. I don't know what was said there, though."

"Did you conduct surveillance?"

Since Gordon Grimes was identified as a high-priority figure within the Organization, it was only natural.

"I had subordinates shadowing Norman McGrath, and Hannya mobilized a team in Hong Kong as well."

"So? What happened?"

"We lost him. There was a stealth guard tailing him."

That meant there was a security guard who didn't reveal his presence.

"You let such a perfect opportunity slip? Do you really think that makes sense? How about the entry records? In your position, you should be able to find out where he came from, right?"

He was referring to Im Deok-chang's authority as the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service.

"I checked already. Of course, I didn't expect him to enter under his real name, so I combed through three months of photo records. But he's nowhere to be found."

"... He's nowhere? Does that mean he entered the country illegally?"

"It's the same with the illegal entry info we have. Unless he has his own route, that is."

The atmosphere between the two suddenly turned heavy.

"Do you have a photo?"

"Here. I'll send it to you separately."

"You sure take your time with these things."

He displayed the photo on his phone. Upon checking it, Baek Ji-woong's brow twitched like a worm.

He tried to recall if he'd seen the face somewhere before, but nothing came to mind.

"I'm sure that's a face I'm seeing for the first time."

"That makes him all the more mysterious. But I never expected he would show up so abruptly."

Listening to him, Baek Ji-woong fell silent for a moment, lost in thought, before speaking.

"SGA... Could it be he met with them because of the Taeshin Group shares they hold?"

The W&W Group had tried several times to approach SGA for that reason, but SGA had always flatly refused even before a meeting could be arranged.

"You mean AMK Partners? Now that you mention it, they acquired Chulsan Capital and secured almost 6%. SGA had a little over 2%, so if that goes over too, that's nearly 8%... It's hard to say that's not dangerous."

"Of course it's dangerous! If AMK is working to swallow Taeshin Group, don't you realize that would be the worst case?"

Now even Im Deok-chang's mood grew serious.

"But if that's what they're planning, shouldn't other shareholders act too? I haven't seen any such moves yet."

"What if they already secured shares under borrowed names and don't need the help of other shareholders?"

"Shouldn't we have realized if such moves were being made?"

At the same time, Baek Ji-woong sighed deeply.

"Haa... You're not really one to talk, after losing Gordon Grimes."

"Are you trying to provoke me now?"

"More importantly, we need to find out what was discussed between AMK Partners and SGA. Has anything come to light? Don't hide anything from me."

Im Deok-chang shook his head.

"That's uncharted territory. You'd probably get answers faster by approaching them yourself."

It was yet another reply that made Baek Ji-woong sigh.

"Just what are you even doing... Anyway, I'll look into it myself. And don't you dare pull a stunt like that again, or I won't let it slide next time."

It was a stern warning. But Im Deok-chang offered a different proposal.

"More than that, what will you do if AMK Partners is really targeting SGA? If Kang In-hyuk is acting with AMK Partners backing him, that's even more of a problem. Not to mention, what will you do with the shares due to go to Tae Ju-ha? Maybe it's better to take action now."

Baek Ji-woong grew more conflicted.

"But right now, isn't Kang In-hyuk with her?"

If they tried to take out Tae Ju-ha now and Kang In-hyuk got caught up as well, every situation between KQ Group and Taeshin Group would become even more tangled.

"The two of them just went over to Vladivostok. I'm sure they'll visit the companies holding shares there too. That's four locations already. Who knows how many are left? If they come back to Korea after it's all done, what do you think will happen?"

Switzerland, Monaco, Hong Kong... Now Russia.

Chairman Tae Gun-seung had gone to great lengths to ensure the transfer, all without them even realizing.

That meant as long as Tae Ju-ha was alive, it was highly likely they'd be unable to stop the shares from being handed over.

"Is it possible?"

"The fact they're in Vladivostok right now is a blessing for us."

Im Deok-chang, as the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service, oversaw industrial and scientific intelligence.

His team wasn't an overseas team, but since so much tech leaked to China and Russia via the North Korea border, he managed some agents over there as well.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? If it succeeds, that's great, but if it fails, you'll take a big hit."

"That's why your vote, to help justify it, is all the more necessary."

He meant that if things went south, he'd use Baek Ji-woong as a shield.

Of course, Baek Ji-woong was fully aware of this. But as Im Deok-chang said, the situation was too dangerous to just watch idly.

"How about Hannya? Can you provide support?"

"They said they'll send not only the class 3 team that failed before, but another class 3 team and even one that includes a class 2 agent—three teams in total. That should be enough."

"So you set the board in advance."

"We had to move quickly, so there might be some holes. But this time, we absolutely can't fail."

After losing Gordon Grimes in Hong Kong, Im Deok-chang had already been reprimanded by the Organization.

Getting involved in Taeshin Group's affairs had only complicated things, and now he was starting to feel the pressure.

"Like you said, failure is not an option."

"Of course."

With that, Baek Ji-woong ended the conversation, went outside, and got into the car with Do Jung-geol, who had been waiting in front of the safehouse.

"Did the conversation not go well?"

Sensing the gloomy mood, Do Jung-geol asked cautiously. Baek Ji-woong replied with a deeply furrowed brow.

"See if there's anyone among SGA's executives who'd be willing to talk."

"That place... Isn't that where we once tried to make contact, but SGA put it off by refusing?"

Do Jung-geol was well aware, since it involved Taeshin Group's shares.

"There must be executives there dissatisfied with Raven Delacroix, their CEO. Track them down and try to set up a meeting through a shell company."

"Who should I put in?"

After thinking for a moment, Baek Ji-woong looked at Do Jung-geol, who sat in the passenger seat.

"Since it's important, you handle it yourself. I'll give you the information you'll need directly."

"Understood,"

Do Jung-geol replied without a hint of doubt.

Baek Ji-woong started to get a headache. He began to wonder if accepting Im Deok-chang's proposal had been the right choice.

* * *

In-hyuk was on a flight to Vladivostok with Tae Ju-ha.

Estimated travel time: about ten hours. Then, Hong Yu-geon, who was seated in first class, came from behind.

"Division director. Let's talk for a minute."

They hadn't had a chance to talk, since they ran into each other at the airport and boarded right away.

The two of them headed toward the galley at the back. Van Hester was there waiting for them as well.

After closing the aisle curtain and checking for anyone nearby, Hong Yu-geon spoke.

"Explícamelo ahora." ("Explain it to me now.")

He deliberately used Spanish so passersby couldn't understand. In-hyuk caught on to his intention and replied in the same language.

"You mean what I asked Noah to do?"

"That, and you need to tell us where you went after making Noah the acting CEO."

"I went to SGA. I wanted to buy the Taeshin Group shares they held. I didn't mention it because Noah insisted she wouldn't get caught."

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester shook their heads. Seeing that, In-hyuk smiled a bit.

"Van figured it out, right? But you didn't know till then."

"As if I didn't! I noticed too!"

"Doesn't seem like it... Anyway, the deal should work out fine."

As they were wrapping up, Hong Yu-geon had a question.

"But how did you get into SGA? That basically means Kang In-hyuk was in two places in Hong Kong at once."

"I went as Gordon Grimes. With a disguise, so I wasn't caught."

"A disguise? How?!"

"That's a trade secret. By the way, while you were with CEO Tae Ju-ha, nothing unusual happened, right?"

He'd checked with Noah, but asked again just in case.

"Not really."

"That's good to hear."

"What about you? Anything happen?"

"Not with the National Intelligence Service, but Kooou's guys were following me."

The two exchanged startled looks and stared intently at In-hyuk.

"Our CEO is going to drive us mad... So, then? What did you do?"

In-hyuk pulled out his phone from inside his jacket.

"I nabbed one of the guys and finally did some phone hacking again. I already sent the code to Mi-ah for analysis."

"Was the CEO's schedule planned in advance?"

He was asking if the SGA side had leaked information.

"Norman had the National Intelligence Service on him. Plus, when I lured the pursuers, I found out Kooou was intercepting the NIS radio."

"Does that mean Kooou really is inside the National Intelligence Service?"

"At the very least, they're connected. Anyway, Vladivostok's the last stop, so I'll see you both afterward."

With that, In-hyuk returned to his seat. Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester looked at each other and let out a quiet sigh as they watched him go.

Chapter 105

Bzzz...

Late in the afternoon, the flight departing Hong Kong arrived at the Vladivostok International Airport in Russia, passing through Shanghai, only just before midnight.

The travel time was about ten hours.

Even though they had sat in reasonably comfortable seats, Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim wore extremely exhausted expressions.

In-hyuk glanced at them with concern and asked,

"Are you okay?"

"... I'm dying here."

Her voice was on the verge of losing her temper.

"Let's go to the accommodation for now."

As she spoke, Tae Ju-ha looked over at Heo Yu-rim, who seemed just as worn out as herself.

"Is the hotel far from here?"

"About an hour by car."

"Haah..."

After leaving the arrivals hall, Van Hester moved separately to rent a car.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk stayed inside the airport, discreetly scanning the area with Hong Yu-geon.

Hong Yu-geon quietly approached and whispered in Spanish,

"Creo que también los tengo aquí. (It looks like they're here too.)"

It was past midnight, so aside from those who had just arrived and were leaving, the airport was almost deserted.

Of course, just like Hong Yu-geon, In-hyuk had already spotted the suspicious individuals.

"I know."

"But aren't there more of them than before? Do they have some kind of determination this time?"

"It probably means that Kooou holds a position in the National Intelligence Service that allows him to deploy as many agents as I can."

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha, visibly irritated, shoved her face in next to them.

"What are you whispering about? Don't tell me you're still be—"

In-hyuk swiftly covered her mouth with his palm.

"Unless you plan to announce we've noticed we're being tailed, be careful here."

"..."

It seemed Tae Ju-ha understood immediately, as she quickly nodded.

"The fact they're just watching us probably means someone in the group noticed our movements and put them on us."

Tae Ju-ha lowered her voice to almost a tenth of its previous volume.

"I was going to ask anyway—wasn't our destination supposed to be known only to us?"

"It could have leaked somewhere along the chairman's line."

Her worries aside, he couldn't mention the National Intelligence Service, in case he made a careless slip.

"Are you really sure we're okay?"

"We've been followed the whole way, but nothing has happened so far, has it?"

Truthfully, seeing the number of agents deployed this time made In-hyuk slightly uneasy as well.

'Just like Hong Yu-geon said, it looks like they're planning something.'

While he was thinking this, a message came through Ghost Link on his phone.

【NIS02: An agent belonging to Division 1 died from gunfire by another Division 1 agent in Wong Kok, Hong Kong. The agent was on standby for a mission.】

【NIS02: Division 1 Vladivostok team deployed, mission unknown.】

The sender's nickname belonged to someone In-hyuk had connected within the National Intelligence Service.

Looking through the contents, In-hyuk could only harden his expression. He could already roughly guess who the agent killed in Hong Kong was.

'Did they kill the agent I left in the restroom with them?'

Of those In-hyuk knew, that was the only one likely to be killed.

Plus, the second message was troublesome too.

Considering how many NIS agents he'd just spotted, it seemed to refer to the Vladivostok team.

Of course, he couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but that could be checked separately.

'If they're deploying a whole team to monitor us... it really means there's something going on.'

With that, he transferred some funds and left a reply for the contact.

【HERMIT: Division 1 Vladivostok Team. Monitoring Tae Ju-ha of Taeshin Group and Kang In-hyuk of Taeshin Asset Management at Vladivostok airport.】

Bzzz— Bzzz—

Despite the late hour, the reply came in less than a minute.

【NIS02: How did you know?】

【HERMIT: The method doesn't matter. Just consider it a service for your safety and our relationship.】

【NIS02: Thank you.】

That was where the exchange ended.

There was always the risk that the contact would associate HERMIT with In-hyuk.

But In-hyuk had calculated this, intentionally exposing information.

The reason was simple. The real identity of NIS02 was Shin Jin-hong, the deputy general manager of Division 2 at the National Intelligence Service.

'If the second deputy general manager is involved, some kind of brake will be applied, whatever happens.'

As this played out, Van Hester returned, together with a staff member, having rented two cars.

In-hyuk gathered everyone and they set off straight away.

Just as in other countries, In-hyuk had Tae Ju-ha ride in the front seat.

"If you're tired, you should get some sleep."

"How could I sleep while you're driving?"

"I'm fine."

He alternated checking the rear-view mirror and side mirrors. Sure enough, there was a car following them at a fixed distance.

The followers were professional enough not to make it obvious.

However, In-hyuk was a greater expert in tracking than they were.

Plus, his senses were now sharper than the average person, so he could distinguish them.

As the atmosphere quieted, Tae Ju-ha started speaking less, and before long, she had fallen asleep.

"Bzzz..."

She even started snoring a little.

* * *

In the deep hours before dawn.

The lights in the National Intelligence Service director's office were still on.

Director Jin Jong-man sat in a heavy silence, silently eyeing the deputy general managers, who had been summoned urgently.

It had already been ten minutes since this silence began.

No one knew why they'd been called.

The director provided no explanation, just let the silence stretch on, until Jin Jong-man met their eyes and spoke.

"First deputy director."

At the same time, Choo Jae-min, deputy general manager of Division 1, answered, slightly startled.

"Yes, director."

"Do you remember every single activity and whereabouts of your subordinate teams?"

It was an odd question, and Choo Jae-min hesitated before responding carefully.

"I focus on keeping track of their major missions."

"Then what is the Vladivostok team doing right now?"

At that question, both Choo Jae-min and Im Deok-chang, sitting next to him, stiffened.

"The team's mission is..."

Overseas missions were not to be disclosed even to the other division deputies.

Naturally, it was uncomfortable to discuss this here.

"You may speak freely. What mission is that team handling?"

"... They're preparing a case dealing with a technical leak set to move along the Vladivostok line."

"Are all the agents committed to that case?"

"The operation will collaborate with the domestic team according to procedure, so right now they're on standby."

At his answer, Jin Jong-man let out a deep sigh.

"Is the company involved in this technology leak Taeshin Group?"

"Pardon? I can't tell you the company name here, but it's not them."

"Then why did I hear that the Vladivostok team is trailing people from Taeshin Group visiting there?"

At that, Choo Jae-min looked shocked.

"... What do you mean? That team? Is there some mistake?"

"Would I say this without any basis?"

But Choo Jae-min couldn't recall any such information.

"Let me—I will check right now..."

Tap—

Before he could finish, Jin Jong-man showed a CCTV photo of a specific location on his tablet.

"Here are the agents deployed in Vladivostok. Still think I'm misinformed?"

The photos weren't just distant shots; they showed close-ups of the agents' faces, with precise affiliations and names listed.

Of course, the photo also included the images of Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha from Taeshin Group, arriving at the airport.

"..."

Momentarily lost for words, Choo Jae-min pressed his lips together.

Jin Jong-man continued, his face grave.

"Yesterday, one agent was shot dead by an assailant in Hong Kong! Now, the team is acting arbitrarily without notifying their supervisor? How am I supposed to make sense of this?!"

Choo Jae-min was already reeling from the first incident.

But now another unbelievable situation had exploded, making it even harder to grasp the situation or speak rashly.

Then, Jin Jong-man's gaze shifted to Im Deok-chang.

"Deputy general manager Im."

"... Yes, director."

"You checked the immigration material for Hong Kong International Airport handled by Division 1 yesterday. That doesn't have any relation to this, does it?"

At the same time, Choo Jae-min, whose head had been hung low, looked up at him.

Im Deok-chang answered quickly, thinking frantically.

"I received information from the corporate side that a person of interest appeared, so I checked."

"Was that just a coincidence?"

"... Yes."

"Then who was this person? The person of interest you just mentioned."

The coincidental timing meant the suspicion could not so easily be dismissed.

Im Deok-chang thought for a moment and answered carefully.

"It's Gordon Grimes, the CEO of AMK Partners, who has recently been a major influence in the domestic financial world."

Jin Jong-man knew that name well.

"So he appeared?"

"I haven't confirmed that yet. I was just investigating after hearing external information that he might visit a specific company."

Cold sweat formed on Im Deok-chang's forehead.

"Judging by what's happening in both Hong Kong and Vladivostok, it means someone's been violating our authority and moving agents. Therefore, contact that team immediately and recall them."

Choo Jae-min was startled.

"Then what do we do about the mission in preparation? If we replace the agents now, there'll be a disruption."

"Would you just leave agents operating without Organization approval?"

That too made no sense.

"Recall the rogue agent from Hong Kong as well. And thoroughly investigate everyone who came into contact with those agents."

A considerable amount of funding was invested in each mission.

Scrapping it meant the responsible parties would bear significant consequences.

But in this situation, no one could defy his orders.

Meanwhile, Shin Jin-hong, the second deputy general manager who had been summoned alongside the first and third, was doing his best to suppress his laughter.

He was, after all, the source of the situation Jin Jong-man described.

Of course, if only the other two had been summoned, it might have aroused unnecessary suspicion, so he was included as well.

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A few hours later.

Inside a suite of the five-star Fasiz Hotel in Russia, In-hyuk was awake, sitting quietly.

At that moment, he received a message from Hong Yu-geon.

【They withdrew quickly. Did they all get sudden diarrhea or something?】

Amused by the joke, In-hyuk nodded.

The information he threw to Shin Jin-hong, the second deputy general manager of the National Intelligence Service, had worked perfectly.

He then summoned Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester inside as well.

"Didn't think I'd ever use the saying that even dog poop can be useful."

Shin Jin-hong had been stacking up all kinds of corruption even before he became second deputy general manager.

In the original timeline, as soon as the administration changed, he swiftly faced a hearing to settle his accounts.

It was such a significant event then; In-hyuk couldn't not know about it.

At the same time, since he understood both Shin's carrots and sticks, he could use that knowledge now that he had returned to the past.

"But even though they retreated, that probably isn't the end."

In Hong Kong, Kooou used NIS agents like guides.

If the same is true now, it was clear they wouldn't just stand idle after retreating.

In-hyuk found it hard to fall asleep, endlessly turning over possibilities in his mind.

Chapter 106

Are You Really Out of Your Mind?

Im Deok-chang hurried back to his office.

This was because Jin Jong-man, the Director of the National Intelligence Service, had found out about what had happened in Vladivostok.

At that moment, an agent assisting Im Deok-chang entered.

"Is the situation that bad?"

"It's serious. Ah, for now, let's take care of the Russian section director first."

"Right now?"

"The Director already found out about the situation. Deputy General Manager Choo Jae-min will summon him right away. So, before he's called in, make it look like suicide and handle it."

Hearing this outrageous order, the agent asked calmly in response.

"Can't we just make it look like an accident?"

The methods for suicide were limited, and if he mismanaged it, the target might not actually die.

Of course, dropping him from a high-rise building would be certain, but the process of kidnapping and moving him was quite cumbersome.

"The mood's not great. It needs to be clear that he died from a guilty conscience, rather than having any suspicious circumstances."

"Understood."

The man was NIS Grade 6 Agent and simultaneously Grade 2 Agent Choi Dong-hoon from WID, the same organization as Im Deok-chang.

With that answer, Choi Dong-hoon kept the heavy atmosphere as he slowly walked out.

Left alone again, Im Deok-chang pulled out his phone.

[Yes, Hyottoko. ("예, 효토코.")]

It was WID Grade 2 Agent Li Wei-cheng, in charge of the Vladivostok mission.

Hearing the response in English, Im Deok-chang also replied in the same language.

"The situation has changed. You must have confirmed that the NIS agents also withdrew from your side, right?"

[I was just about to contact you about that. Shall we continue with the mission?]

They had intended to handle things using the NIS to avoid exposing their own organization as much as possible.

But with the surveillance gone, the risk of exposure had sharply increased.

Yet, it was difficult for Im Deok-chang to reverse a decision already made.

"No. Continue. Even if it becomes a bit excessive, make sure you finish it thoroughly."

[In that case, our traces might be left behind.]

"That's still better than handling it ambiguously. Otherwise, use your best judgment to act accordingly. Ah, and you must not kill Kang In-hyuk under any circumstances."

[..... It won't be easy, but I'll do as you say.]

Once the call ended, Im Deok-chang slumped down into his desk chair.

It was time to sort things out. First and foremost, the main question was how Director Jin Jong-man had learned what happened in Vladivostok.

"There must have been someone who tipped him off....."

As he pondered, he recalled Deputy General Manager Shin Jin-hong, who had been sitting across from him in the Director's office earlier.

Of all the section chiefs summoned and reprimanded, only Choo Jae-min and Im Deok-chang were blamed.

Of course, it could have been to impart a sense of collective responsibility because the situation was serious.

"Shin Jin-hong, huh..... But did that guy even have the ability to do something like that?"

Division Two was in charge of domestic affairs, counterintelligence, and anti-communist investigations.

Shin Jin-hong had always operated under the radar, taking bribes, covering up incidents, leaking information, and such.

He was the embodiment of corruption. A figure like him had neither the capability nor the interest to be keeping tabs on Division One's Vladivostok team.

"Section Chief Choi, come back in for a moment."

He used the internal call to summon Choi Dong-hoon back, who had just left.

As Choi stood before him, Im Deok-chang hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"Look into Deputy Director Shin for me. Not through the internal line, but through our own resources—check all his communication records, accounts, and everyone he's been in contact with recently."

By "our side," he meant the investigative methods of their own organization.

"You mean Deputy General Manager Shin Jin-hong from Division Two?"

"That's right."

"When do you need it by?"

"As soon as possible. Also, pull the CCTV footage from the hallway outside the Director's office and check Jin's phone and internal call records, too."

"I'll check right away."

With that, Choi Dong-hoon retreated.

* * *

The sun had risen over the sky in Vladivostok, Russia.

In-hyuk was standing in the hallway with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"What did the CEO do yesterday?"

"What?"

"I mean, how did the NIS guys withdraw? There's no way they'd leave that suddenly without some reason."

At Hong Yu-geon's question, In-hyuk simply shrugged.

"..... Nothing special."

"You really hide a lot, don't you."

As they were conversing in Spanish, the door to the next room opened, and Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim exited, carrying their luggage.

"Why are you all standing around here instead of waiting at the restaurant?"

"We're heading down now anyway. Did you sleep well?"

"As if I could sleep well!"

Apparently, it was because of being followed.

In-hyuk, hearing this, gave a puzzled look.

"I thought you slept fine in the car. You were so tired, you even snored......."

Startled, Tae Ju-ha quickly covered In-hyuk's mouth.

"I did not, okay?!"

"Anyway, let's head to the restaurant."

"I'm telling you, I really wasn't snoring!"

"If you say so."

With their bickering continuing, the group took the elevator down to the third-floor restaurant. They planned to leave after having lunch.

After ordering, Tae Ju-ha asked cautiously.

"Is anyone monitoring us here, too?"

"Not at the moment."

"How do you know?"

Ever since In-hyuk had detected their tail in Hong Kong, she had wondered how he always knew.

"I can just see it."

"That's not much of an explanation."

"Honestly, Yu-geon and Van told me. They're pros in this field."

Tae Ju-ha looked towards the two sitting at the next table, waiting for their food.

As their names were mentioned, they turned their heads, and their eyes met.

"Huh? Us?"

"You really are amazing."

"....."

Hong Yu-geon looked at In-hyuk as if to say, 'What are you trying to pull?' The truth was, it was In-hyuk— not the two—who'd first noticed they were being followed.

Soon after, the food arrived, and they began to eat.

"Are you really not going to tell me how many more places we have left to visit?"

When she pressed again, In-hyuk hesitated for a moment before answering.

"I'll tell you once we're done here."

"Really?"

"I think it should be okay now."

"Ah....."

She seemed to think it was because they were no longer being tailed.

It took about 30 minutes to finish eating.

Afterwards, they loaded their luggage into the car and headed to the company, their next destination.

It was just a five-minute drive away.

Once again, only In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha went upstairs. After about three hours, Tae Ju-ha returned with an exhausted expression.

"I don't know how my grandfather thought to establish companies all over the world like this."

"He must have planned ahead as the company grew."

"I get having them in Hong Kong or Russia, since there's no inheritance tax regardless of blood relation. But why Switzerland and Monaco? There are even ones in places like Sweden, singapore, even the Czech Republic."

As she said, the first two countries they'd visited weren't much different from Korea in that respect.

"He must have planned for any possible situation."

"Was it because someone could eventually find out about those companies?"

"Exactly."

"Ah......."

While watching Tae Ju-ha sigh, In-hyuk checked their surroundings.

"We're done here, too, so let's head to the airport."

"Where are we going this time? You said you'd tell me after we finished here."

"This is it."

"This is it? Really?"

"We can head back to Korea now."

As In-hyuk was leading her to the car, he quietly spoke in Spanish to Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"Even more dangerous guys have shown up. I don't think we'll get away without incident."

The two's eyes wavered—perhaps they hadn't found the threats yet.

But they didn't make any obvious moves, as that could tip off the enemy.

"Where?"

"Just below the roof of the building across from us."

Even after hearing that, the two didn't turn their heads.

"What should we do?"

"Let's just focus on moving first."

"But if they're only watching, then maybe their target is our route to the airport."

That was the most likely scenario.

In-hyuk couldn't disagree.

"Still, it's not feasible to deal with them right here."

He'd sensed three presences with his awareness, not only on the upper floor he'd told the others about, but also one hiding to the left and right.

If it was just those three, it wouldn't have been a problem, but considering they needed to get to the airport, clashing from the start wasn't the best choice.

"True..... But who do you think is the target? The CEO, maybe?"

"More likely Tae Ju-ha, the CEO."

The fact they'd been tailed meant the enemy had figured out why they were traveling around the world.

"Ah....."

"Let's split up immediately and put the safety of our passengers first. Take back roads, not the main road. And if we get chased, take a detour and use another route to head for the airport."

"What about you?"

"I'll leave my GPS on, so after you drop off Heo Yu-rim at the airport, one of you come back for me if you can. I'll hold out until then."

Hong Yu-geon sounded incredulous.

"What if things go south before that? You could get exposed fighting them."

"For now, let's just focus on escaping safely."

"Still, you should have brought more security....."

"That would only attract more attention."

Having a small group allowed them to move quickly through four locations.

Once the decision was made, they got back in their cars.

"What were you all talking about?"

"It was something important. You've put your seatbelt on, right?"

"Of course....."

Vrooom—

In-hyuk shifted the gear into drive and started off quickly.

Startled, Tae Ju-ha glared at In-hyuk.

"What's the rush? Are we being chased?"

He kept checking the rearview and side mirrors.

"We're about to be."

"By who? Don't tell me... We're being followed again?"

"Something like that. Either way, we need to get to the airport as fast as possible, so hang on."

The problem was that he had felt a faint killing intent from the gazes outside the building earlier.

This was definitely more than just surveillance.

Screeeech—

In-hyuk pressed harder on the accelerator.

Navigating around each car that appeared ahead, he alternated between the accelerator and brake, deftly cutting into open spaces.

"What if the police catch us driving like this?"

"If we get caught, there's nothing we can do. Though, I doubt they'll be able to catch us."

Bwaaang—

In-hyuk pushed the speed even higher.

Despite rapidly closing the distance with the cars ahead, he didn't hesitate, continuing to accelerate.

Then, a car finally appeared in the rearview mirror.

"Knew it, they're on us."

"Really? Kyaa—!"

Just before reaching an intersection, In-hyuk yanked the side brake and turned the wheel left, drifting the back of the car and immediately stepping on the accelerator.

"We need to shake them off, so it's going to be a madhouse."

"I get that, but still! This is just too much……!"

He changed direction at another intersection, squeezing through the cars, not forgetting to slip past quickly.

Startled by his driving, the other drivers honked their horns loudly.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, In-hyuk's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Taking one hand off the gearshift to reach for the phone, Tae Ju-ha gasped in surprise.

"In-hyuk! Watch out! Ahead!"

A car was approaching straight in front of them.

In-hyuk deftly dodged it, alternating quickly between the brake and accelerator, turning the steering wheel just enough to squeeze past.

At the same time, he pressed the call button on the phone and changed it to speaker mode.

"I'm busy. What is it?"

It was Hong Yu-geon on the other end.

[No one's following us, they all seem to be on your tail. Are you okay?]

"I'm working hard to lose them right now. It's chaos, so I can't stay on the line long. You guys just go to the airport. If there's an immediate flight to Korea, take it."

[Are you really out of your mind?]

Screeeech—

At the same time, In-hyuk turned the wheel again.

Chapter 107

Can You Swim?

Vladivostok, point 43.223300, 131.967558.

Li Weicheng, a Level 2 agent of WID, was standing on the rooftop of an abandoned building near the elevated interchange leading to the airport.

However, his expression had not been good for a while. Just ten minutes ago, the car carrying the target, Tae Ju-ha, had begun to flee at high speed.

"This is KIRIN. B Team, report on the pursuit."

A moment later, the urgent voice of a subordinate agent crackled over the radio.

[Current distance is about 80 meters. Pursuit ongoing.]

The distance had grown even greater since the last report.

"Predicted direction?"

[The target is now quite far from the eastern highway. Seems likely they'll head for the main road... It's hard to determine exactly.]

Li Weicheng let out a silent sigh.

"Things are getting complicated because they realized they were being tailed."

He kept staring intently at the elevated interchange he'd been watching all along.

If Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had gotten on the highway as expected, he would have needed only to block one route to the airport.

But now that the route had changed to a main road, the entire plan needed revision.

"This is KIRIN. Change of operation. C Team, as soon as the target approaches within 200 meters of PLAN Point, blockade both sides of the overpass."

[Roger.]

[Roger.]

Replies came from both locations.

Putting down the hand holding the radio, Li Weicheng gazed off into the distance.

"A Team, ready to snipe."

[Roger.]

[Roger.]

A man who had been standing behind approached him.

It was Ruben, a Level 3 agent who had been in Hong Kong just a few hours earlier.

Click— click—

Since Ruben was also part of A Team, he prepped his SVD sniper rifle and set up his position on the rooftop.

Watching him, Li Weicheng calmly communicated via radio.

"This is KIRIN. A Team will first attack the vehicle and process the target. If it is not possible to secure visibility for target processing, B Team will engage from behind."

[Roger.]

[Roger.]

[Roger.]

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More voices answered than before, each in order.

Time slipped by, and then radio contact from B Team, in charge of pursuit, came through.

[About 300 meters to the point. Target has entered the main road! Target has entered the main road!]

They were now 100 meters away from the 200-meter mark previously ordered.

Watching through the sniper scope, Ruben spoke.

"They're within sight."

Li Weicheng checked through the binoculars he held in his left hand.

There, on the road entering the interchange, he spotted a car plowing madly ahead.

"They're coming at that speed? That guy's truly insane."

The car seemed to be going well over 150 km/h, weaving smoothly through other vehicles.

"Change blockade point. Block the east only. Block the east only. Guide the target toward the bridge."

The operation changed yet again.

On the way to the airport from the interchange were both a bridge crossing the sea and a land route.

Not long after, a large sound erupted from around the area.

Bang— bang!

A massive container truck swung across the land route highway, blocking the way and then exploded.

Li Weicheng used his binoculars to confirm the target vehicle.

As planned, the explosion on the road would force the vehicle to turn and change direction.

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Screeeeech—

In-hyuk turned his wheel instantly upon seeing the explosion and the flames shooting up.

He had anticipated the land route would be blocked, so he headed toward the bridge.

Meanwhile, in the passenger seat, Tae Ju-ha finally regained her senses.

"Just now... what, what was that?"

"Someone is interfering with our route."

"Then what do we do?"

"We have to get to the airport, one way or another."

There were other small roads on the land route, but that was exactly where the enemies would want them to go. It was surely a trap.

So, as In-hyuk took the elevated road and turned toward the bridge, he slammed on the brakes.

Screech— bang!

Just then, something flew through the air, smashing the front windshield and passing between In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha, embedding itself in the back seat.

"Kyah—!"

"This is more dangerous than I thought."

"W-what is it?"

"Looks like a sniper shot."

"They're trying to kill us?!"

If In-hyuk had not braked at that precise moment, Tae Ju-ha would have been hit by that bullet.

'To be exact, she's the target, not me. Even earlier in front of the building, those gazes seemed to pass over me.'

If they were aiming for both, the first shot would have targeted the driver's seat.

In-hyuk reached across the passenger seat to push the seat back further and turned the wheel even more sharply.

"Kyah—! W-what are you doing?"

With Tae Ju-ha's scream, the car zigzagged even faster forward.

Bang— bang, Bang—

At the same time, with the car's erratic movement making aiming difficult, bullets struck only the hood or trunk.

"If you don't want to be hit, wrap your arms around your head and turn your body toward me."

"L-like this?"

"You're doing well. Please don't be too startled as I speed up."

The car passed through the elevated interchange and reached the entrance to the bridge.

"Of course, even here there must be a trap."

At that moment, as if waiting, something leapt out from the stone railing on the right side of the road.

They were people in coyote brown combat gear, armed with rifles.

They had been waiting, clinging to the guardrail with a cliff below, until the target arrived.

Simultaneously, In-hyuk yanked the side brake and cranked the wheel.

The car spun a full 360 degrees on what felt like an oil slick, skidding forward.

Screeeeeeeeech—

Tire screams and gunshots mixed as the car was showered with bullets.

Yet, the car didn't stop spinning and surged forward, smashing into something and sending it flying.

Boom— screech! Vroooom—

"W-what was that?"

There was a jolt, and the car stopped for a moment.

"Just something in the way got hit."

With that, In-hyuk opened the driver's door and picked something up. This time, he shifted into reverse and started backing up.

Vroooom—

"W-why are we going backwards?"

"It gives a better view this way. And absolutely do not raise your head."

As he kept reversing, In-hyuk pulled something back with his left hand.

Click, click—

"... Isn't that a pistol?"

"Seems someone dropped it."

"That's not the issue! Why do you have a gun? Don't tell me, you're going to shoot?"

Bang bang bang— bang, Bang—

Meanwhile, bullets flying at the car now aimed for the wheels, pouring in from straight ahead.

But In-hyuk continued making random lateral movements, dodging the bullets.

"We have to respond, too."

"Do you know how to shoot?"

"I served in the military."

"....."

After checking the pistol's rounds and reloading, In-hyuk braked again and turned.

Screech— bang bang, Bang bang—

This time, those hit by In-hyuk's shots were men firing back from the opposing stone railing.

They staggered as they were hit in the shoulders and thighs, but tried to recover their stances.

"D-did you hit them?"

"I'm not sure. Let's just try to get as far away as possible."

After spinning, the car faced forward again and sped away.

Because of the earlier altercation, other cars couldn't even get onto the bridge.

As a result, all traffic behind was jammed, and no one could chase.

The path cleared, so In-hyuk pushed the speed higher. Soon enough, the gunfire faded behind them.

Instead, most of the glass was shattered and the car body was riddled with bullet holes from the hail of shots.

"... Are we safe now?"

They had passed a third of the way across the bridge.

Calculating the distance from where the sniper fired, it was about 1.5 km.

Considering the sea wind and the maximum range of a sniper rifle, they were well out of effective range.

"For now, yes. But we can't relax completely."

"Why not? Are they going to chase us again? No, more importantly, who's trying to kill us?"

She had wanted to ask from the start but only now found time due to the situation.

"It must be someone with something to gain."

"It's because of the shares my grandfather set aside, isn't it?"

Anyone could have guessed that.

"I took precautions just in case, but this got rougher than expected."

"You said it's not over yet. Why?"

"Just the fact that they herded us onto this bridge means it's not the end. Someone's probably waiting up ahead."

Hearing this, Tae Ju-ha reclined nervously in her seat.

"T-then what do we do?"

In-hyuk eased off the accelerator and thought for a moment before replying.

"By any chance, are you able to swim in the ocean?"

A sense of foreboding washed over her at once.

"... Pardon? Why do you ask?"

"I think we might need to."

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Meanwhile, on the rooftop of the abandoned building, Li Weicheng calmly watched the scene and radioed in.

"Quickly tend to the agents hit by the car. Is the guy who got shot okay?"

[Ugh... It's not so bad I can't move.]

"Then get in the follow-up vehicle and move out."

These were the agents who had been struck when Kang In-hyuk spun the car and those inside who'd been shot.

While Ruben had ceased fire and turned his gaze from the car now outside sniper range, he asked:

"At this rate, the Shikai team will handle the cleanup."

That name referred to another Level 3 agent from China, like Li Weicheng.

Now, Shikai was waiting for the target on the far side of the bridge.

Thus, Li Weicheng kept watching In-hyuk's car pulling away across the bridge through his binoculars.

"You're sure Kang In-hyuk wasn't hit, right?"

Because only Tae Ju-ha was the target.

Even though Ruben had done his best, there was always a possibility a stray round bounced into him, so he asked anxiously.

"When I checked through the scope, he seemed unharmed. He also did his best to avoid the shots."

It had all happened in an instant due to the car's frantic motion.

Because of that, they had no choice but to let Tae Ju-ha go for now.

"Still, are you sure there's nothing odd in the information about Kang In-hyuk?"

"You're suspicious because of Kang In-hyuk's driving skills."

"Tactical driving is something one learns in special training. Could an ordinary office worker do that?"

Tactical driving is something taught to military, police, and security agents for survival and mission execution in hostile situations.

He'd even demonstrated something close to a stunt—beyond the reach of any civilian, which was strange.

"I wonder about that myself, but for now there's no way to find out."

"Hm..."

Then Li Weicheng picked up the radio again.

"This is KIRIN. Has the target been identified?"

[About 700 meters from arrival. Approaching the point. Personnel on standby.]

"Don't let them get away, no matter what."

[Roger.]

With a short reply, Li Weicheng once again brought up his binoculars.

From the starting point, he had a clear view of only Kang In-hyuk's car running on the open bridge, all other cars stuck behind.

"Hm? What's that...?"

At that moment, the car suddenly swerved hard left and right, then accelerated, crashing violently into the metal railing and flying off into the sea.

Ssshhhh—

At the same time, Shikai's voice came through the radio.

[Target crashed. Target crashed. Awaiting instructions.]

The only one who had to die was Tae Ju-ha.

If Kang In-hyuk also died here, the team would undoubtedly be blamed for failing the mission.

"Wait for a while nearby in case they emerge."

From where the car had plunged in, bubbles were rising madly to the surface.

Chapter 108

She's a Complete Seal

In-hyuk fell beneath the Amurman Bridge together with the car.

Freezing cold seawater surged into the car through every opening at an incredible speed. Simultaneously, the car was sinking even faster.

As this happened, In-hyuk unbuckled his seatbelt and looked at Tae Ju-ha in the passenger seat.

She seemed to be struggling with her seatbelt, holding her breath as if there was a problem.

So, In-hyuk brushed her hand aside and yanked the belt clip out, breaking it with sheer strength.

Kwah-jik—

"....."

The car was already filled with seawater, so he couldn't speak. Soon, In-hyuk grabbed her hand, pulled her out of the car, and began to swim.

Tae Ju-ha pointed upwards with her other hand—it seemed like she was asking a question.

In response, In-hyuk shook his head and pointed in another direction.

If they tried going up right away, the enemies waiting on the bridge would surely be lying in wait for them.

'Should I help her?'

He wondered if she might be struggling.

But then, Tae Ju-ha let go of In-hyuk's hand, and, barefoot before he realized, she started swimming.

'... She's a complete seal.'

She was so fast that she instantly shot past In-hyuk, who had slowed down out of concern for her.

Her survival instincts seemed much stronger than he'd expected.

Of course, that couldn't last long in seawater of 0–2°C. Running out of breath, she seemed desperate to surface.

So, In-hyuk grabbed her again and led her along. Going up now would get them riddled with bullets by the enemies waiting above.

'Was she barely hanging in there thanks to adrenaline from stress?'

The direction they needed to swim in was opposite to where they'd fallen in.

In-hyuk carried Tae Ju-ha in a princess carry and kicked his feet even harder.

Since they were moving rapidly, the brow on Tae Ju-ha's face seemed to twitch in surprise.

After swimming for more than a minute underwater, they reached their intended destination.

"Hoo...!"

His breath came out like smoke.

He lowered the now-blue-lipped Tae Ju-ha from his arms. She must have exceeded her limits, as she wasn't breathing.

So, In-hyuk had no choice but to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"Kuh-up—!"

As Tae Ju-ha regained her breath and tried to cough hard, In-hyuk hastily covered her mouth with his hand.

Once he confirmed she was okay, In-hyuk took out the pistol he'd concealed in his jacket from his shirt front and peeked over the knoll, showing only his eyes.

Three armed agents, dressed in coyote brown combat uniforms like the ones he'd seen before, were prowling near where the car had sunk.

Perhaps because things had been too quiet for too long, one of them set aside his gear and dived into the water.

'Why's he going in? Is he making sure we're dead?'

First, In-hyuk quietly checked the condition of his pistol and picked up a nearby rock.

The men above shifted their gazes around instead of focusing on one place; a reflexive habit drilled into them to avoid blind spots in their perimeter.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk went back down behind the knoll, calculated the timing when their lines of sight overlapped at a blind spot, and immediately popped up to throw the rock.

Shook—Puk!

The rock flew at high speed, striking the man at the back right in the neck.

Startled, another man swung his rifle, but In-hyuk was faster, his pistol already in his right hand.

Tatang—Thud!

This shot targeted the other man's head—striking his brow right as his head turned.

'Now there's only one left.'

In-hyuk threw the pistol toward the beach, ran over to the spots where the men had fallen, and snatched up one of the rifles.

Soon after, the man who'd checked below surfaced, sticking only his head above the water.

Tuthung—

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On the roof of an abandoned building, Li Weicheng was waiting for a radio call from Shikai.

Ever since Kang In-hyuk's car had plunged into the sea and failed to resurface for a long time, the last report had been that one man was going in.

Nearly five minutes had passed since then.

He grabbed the radio again.

"This is KIRIN. A2, transmit."

It was Shikai's radio code.

But only static replied—no response at all.

"A2. A2, transmit."

It was about 4 km across the bridge; he couldn't see the situation even with binoculars.

With radio silence ongoing, unease began to creep in.

"All personnel, withdraw from your positions. C Team to the airport, all others gather at A2 point."

With these orders, Li Weicheng packed up together with Ruben and headed downstairs to the car.

He couldn't drive across the bridge, as it was jammed with other vehicles, so he had to make a big detour toward the airport, eventually taking about 40 minutes to reach the area.

"Team leader! You need to come see this!"

Other team members had arrived earlier and were searching the area.

At one agent's shout, Li Weicheng hurried over. There, bloodstains were visible wetting the ground.

"Blood? But no bodies?"

"Bloodstains were also found near the knoll by the sea."

Li Weicheng glanced around and muttered, "Did all of them get taken out?"

Otherwise, three members of the A2 team couldn't have suddenly vanished off the radio like this.

But he was still puzzled.

Kang In-hyuk had fallen into the sea with Tae Ju-ha inside the car.

They might manage to survive, but the problem was the three armed men standing guard on shore.

Furthermore, Kang In-hyuk had had to protect Tae Ju-ha, making escape even harder.

"Could someone else have ambushed them? If you look at the traces, the bodies could have been thrown in the sea."

Ruben, who had quietly approached, voiced his doubts.

Li Weicheng let out a deep sigh at that question.

"Intervention in a sudden situation? While we lay the trap and waited, they were actually targeting us?"

"It's unlikely, but based on the circumstances, that seems most probable."

"With no bodies, it's hard to draw any conclusions."

Bzzz—bzzz—

At that moment, a call came in from C Team, who had gone to the airport.

"What's the situation?"

[We don't see anyone else for now.]

"So they went into the departures terminal... Stay there just in case."

The call ended quickly.

There were still questions left unanswered.

But there was another problem.

Given the shootout that had occurred earlier at the overpass junction, russian intelligence could be on the move as well.

Some agents, checking the area, approached.

"There are no traces of an escape west on foot on the outskirts."

"Same for the east."

They had checked the mountainside, not just the roadways.

But finding nothing there only made things look even more bleak.

"We're pulling out of here for now."

They had already wasted an hour reaching this spot.

No matter what method Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had used, it was almost impossible to track them down right now.

* * *

Tadak—tadak—

A crackling sound tickled her ears, and as the sensation of feverish heat and the acrid smell of smoke wrapped around her skin and nose, Tae Ju-ha slowly began to open her eyes.

"Are you awake?"

At that moment, In-hyuk looked over at her and asked.

Feeling fully alert, Tae Ju-ha tried to sit up from where she was lying but clutched her head.

"Ah..."

"You only just recovered—you should stay lying down."

A headache came crashing in, twisting her brow, so Tae Ju-ha gave up on rising.

"What... happened? Where are we?"

"As you can see, it's a nearby abandoned house. We hid here after escaping those guys, mostly because of the CEO's condition."

The scene of falling into the ocean flashed through Tae Ju-ha's mind.

"How did we get away?"

"With a lot of effort. That's how we're alive, as you see."

In-hyuk replied nonchalantly, poking at the fire in the knee-high drum in front of him to stir it.

Once again, Tae Ju-ha wrinkled her brow.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"I got lucky, knocked those guys out and stole a car nearby to get here."

"Knocked... out?"

Recalling his words, Tae Ju-ha realized there was more than just the car involved.

Her face paled.

Noticing this, In-hyuk picked up the pistol sitting next to him and showed it to her.

"By any chance... did you see?"

"Uh? What? See what?"

"When we came up after falling into the sea with the car."

In truth, Tae Ju-ha had briefly regained consciousness then.

Desperate to survive, she'd climbed up the knoll on pure stamina and witnessed In-hyuk doing something with the gun.

But there was no way she could mention it in this atmosphere.

"Did something... happen there?"

"Are you sure?"

With that, In-hyuk pulled back the slide on his pistol.

Cheolkeok—

"W-What are you doing?"

"Now that I think about it, the spot where you were lying had moved a bit when I came back."

"That... can't be."

Tae Ju-ha's gaze was fixed anxiously on the pistol in his hand.

"Is that true?"

"Well..."

In-hyuk stared straight at her, then slowly released the tension on the slide.

Cheolkeok—

"I was just trying to lighten the mood a bit. Also, I already knew you woke up back then."

"A joke? How can you joke about something like this—?"

Right then, Tae Ju-ha tried to jump up in anger, but was startled when she saw she was wearing unfamiliar clothes under the blanket.

"In this cold, I couldn't leave you in wet clothes, so I changed you—had no choice."

"All of them?"

"There's no point in only changing the outer layer, is there?"

"....."

Tae Ju-ha was struck silent, maybe because of his matter-of-fact tone.

In-hyuk switched back to the important topic.

"The others should be on a flight to Korea by now."

Having missed her chance to be angry, Tae Ju-ha answered quietly.

"... That's a relief."

"We'll make a move once the CEO feels a bit better."

"Are you planning to go to the airport? What if they're waiting there too?"

The people who had openly blocked the highway junction and engaged in a gunfight could do even worse if they wanted to kill Tae Ju-ha.

"That's why we have to be extra careful going back."

"How?"

"I'll figure that out, so the CEO should focus on recovering for now."

In-hyuk briefly checked outside through the window, then came back.

He swiftly disassembled the pistol and spread the parts out on the battered box to inspect them.

Watching this, Tae Ju-ha asked cautiously, with a shocked expression.

"When... did you learn to do that?"

"As a hobby."

"Killing people too?"

It was a sensitive question.

But Tae Ju-ha felt she had to confirm what she had seen.

While inspecting the barrel, In-hyuk replied slowly.

"I had no choice."

"It was too natural to sound like you didn't. Are you... a psychopath or something?"

With the question, Tae Ju-ha remembered the always-calm image of In-hyuk.

In-hyuk let out another sigh.

Just as she said, it really had become second nature. He'd shed so much blood in his previous life.

But it wasn't something he could explain to her.

"I can't really say I'm not. Ah, by the way, even though your phone got destroyed, don't try to contact anyone else. You could give away our location."

In-hyuk grabbed a can of sweet corn from somewhere, opened it, and handed it to her.

Click—

Tae Ju-ha held back further questions, even though she wanted to ask more.

No matter what, the fact that she was alive was all thanks to In-hyuk.

Chapter 109

Who Did He Make a Deal With

Im Deok-chang was in his office, furious at the message he had just received.

"You lost them? I told you to deal with it no matter what!"

The call had come from WID Level 2 agent Li Weicheng, who was currently in Vladivostok, Russia. His voice came back over the line.

[..... I'll accept any punishment.]

Im Deok-chang let out a long sigh as he listened to his uncomplaining answer. He knew very well that the man would never make excuses.

"Just explain exactly. What happened? How did you lose them?"

[It's like this.....]

Li Weicheng explained that Kang In-hyuk's side noticed they were being tailed and fled, leading to a car crash and bloodstains found at the end of the Amur Bay bridge.

Im Deok-chang let out a low hum.

"Are you sure Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha aren't dead?"

[The blood found was confirmed to be that of Shikai, who was in charge of A2.]

While the report continued, another voice overlapped from the other end, as if someone was telling him new information. Then Li Weicheng spoke up urgently.

[I just received a search report. There was a stolen vehicle in a nearby area. It's presumed Kang In-hyuk used that to escape together with Tae Ju-ha.]

"Have you checked the CCTV?"

[There's almost no CCTV installed on that road or the surrounding outskirts.]

An uneasy silence followed.

"What about monitoring at nearby airports and ports?"

[I've already posted all available agents.]

"How many are still left, excluding the missing agents?"

Each agent originally had their assigned location.

Since they'd hurriedly pulled people for this operation, those who couldn't be kept longer had to return to their posts after this ambiguous ending.

[Including myself, five remain.]

Out of an original twelve, three were missing and four had returned.

"Do you think you can find them?"

[Well, if they went into the sea, even if Kang In-hyuk survived, Tae Ju-ha may not be in good condition. We're searching local hospitals as well.]

It wasn't a guarantee.

Im Deok-chang pursed his lips and continued.

"It's going to be hard to supplement our manpower for now. So, find them and deal with Tae Ju-ha before she makes it back to Korea. Report the situation every two hours."

[... Understood.]

Once the call ended, Im Deok-chang tucked his phone into his inside pocket and called over his subordinate, Choi Dong-hoon.

"Are there any agents on outside lines who can operate out of Deputy General Manager Two's sight? The kind the people above wouldn't look for—real dirty ones."

"There are a few."

"Then narrow it down to about ten, and post them at the airports—Incheon, Gimpo, Busan. And at Donghae port."

Choi Dong-hoon asked worriedly.

"After the incident at Section One, the director will be keeping a close watch."

He was referring to the time overseas agents had acted without authorization.

The person behind it still hadn't been revealed, so Section Chief Choo Jae-min was left taking the blame.

Of course, Im Deok-chang wasn't free from scrutiny himself.

The records he left while investigating the situation in Hong Kong almost got him directly warned by Director Jin Jong-man, too.

"But what else can we do, just stand by? It's not like Hannya will send us reinforcements."

The news must have already reached Hannya, who oversees the WID agents.

Failing the mission officially after this humiliation would put Im Deok-chang's position in jeopardy.

"Didn't Chairman Baek's side provide support?"

"Would they be any different than us? That whole mess started when they randomly took out Daemyung, and that got a warning from Hannya—so I had no choice but to get involved."

It was six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Im Deok-chang let out a sigh and muttered to himself.

"We split up a perfectly healthy Organization just for greed, and now this is the price... When you need people the most, you end up shorthanded."

He was referring to the Aoshika incident.

Three years ago, when the current leader clashed with the original, Nomen, the in-fighting became a real war.

Agents under them split, fought, killed each other, and died.

The number loyal to Nomen was significant, so even though the current leader seized the top seat, the Organization suffered so much that the damage was impossible to ignore.

"I'll pick out the agents as fast as I can and mobilize them."

"Go ahead."

After Choi Dong-hoon left, Im Deok-chang, now alone, knew he had to call W&W Group Chairman Baek Ji-woong and report the situation.

He hesitated, knowing full well that the conversation would not be pleasant.

* * *

【Shootout at Amur Bay Bridge, Vladivostok, Russia! Vehicle crashes off the bridge... The passengers identified as Mr. K and Ms. T, a married couple of Korea's T Group, reportedly went missing while on a business trip abroad after being attacked...】

【Another attack on Taeshin Group Division Director Kang In-hyuk? The Russian side released an initial statement saying he was caught up in a shootout during his business trip to Vladivostok. Considering he's received several death threats in the past, it's assumed this is another attempt... Meanwhile, he was confirmed to be in the car with his wife and boss, Taeshin Asset Management CEO Tae Ju-ha...】

【KQ Group illegitimate child Kang In-hyuk, gone missing on Taeshin Group's overseas business? After several previous attacks, Division Director Kang In-hyuk was shot at and then his car crashed off a bridge in Vladivostok... KQ Group has yet to release any statement on the situation...】

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Several days after the incident, these articles suddenly began appearing.

Tae Seok-ho of Taeshin Group read the news and hurriedly knocked and entered the chairman's office.

"Father!"

At the shout, Tae Gun-seung, who was sitting on the sofa, turned a frosty gaze toward him.

"This is the office."

Tae Seok-ho sighed briefly before continuing.

"Chairman. The articles that just came out... Did you authorize them?"

He was talking about the incident involving Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha.

Taeshin Group had been plagued with scandals recently, so even though they knew about this matter, they'd kept it quiet.

Waking up to these reports, Tae Seok-ho had rushed in, shocked.

Tae Gun-seung stared at him.

"Is there a problem?"

"Of course, there's a problem. The company's stock price is plunging again over this. The shareholders are up in arms."

It was an obvious consequence.

Tae Gun-seung furrowed his brow deeply.

"My niece and her husband are missing. Is worrying about the stock price really all you care about?"

He'd tried to keep some distance, but seeing Tae Seok-ho's attitude made it impossible.

Sensing the moment, Tae Seok-ho quickly spoke.

"You're only saying that now? Do you think I'm not worried? And why did those two even go to Russia in the first place? Don't you know, either?"

"..... I don't. For now, all we can do is hope Ju-ha and Kang come back safe."

Faced with such a vague answer, Tae Seok-ho sighed again.

"I feel bad for them, but what I found suggests it's a near-impossible accident to survive. They fell into the Russian sea in this weather. No other traces have been found, either."

"Stop with the pointless talk and focus on your job."

Without meaning to, Tae Seok-ho balled his fists.

Part of him wanted to seize the chairman's seat right away, but with too few shares secured, he had no choice but to bide his time.

"You keep putting Taeshin Group at risk."

"And what's so risky?"

"Kang In-hyuk may be Ju-ha's husband, but he's still from KQ Group. Whatever you hope for from such a guy, you're endangering Taeshin Group."

"Don't you realize how much Kang brings in for us?"

"And what does it matter? Right now, we can't even confirm he's alive or dead. So, we need to prioritize the group! I'll block any follow-up articles until everything calms down."

With that, Tae Seok-ho walked out. Meanwhile, Tae Gun-seung, sighing again, picked up his phone.

【HETMIT : Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk alive. Set to return to Korea soon.】

It was a message that had arrived, without a number, several days earlier.

There hadn't even been any record at the cell tower, so there was no way to trace who sent it.

But it made one thing clear: there was someone behind Kang In-hyuk.

"Kang... Who on earth did you make a deal with...?"

Tae Gun-seung had always thought it strange how Kang In-hyuk seemed to suddenly develop exceptional capabilities.

It was nearly impossible for a person to change that much overnight.

No matter how much he looked, he couldn't find the cause. So, he'd kept Kang close, giving him tasks and watching him.

That had, in short order, both shaken and revitalized Taeshin Group...

"I just hope they come back safely."

Of course, he also understood why the danger had come for the two of them.

Someone had discovered that the shares to Taeshin Group, meant to be inherited by Tae Ju-ha, would go to her.

It was simple.

The balance between Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho had collapsed after the Taeshin Electronics incident, so using Ju-ha as figurehead was a temporary measure to maintain stability.

But it had put the two of them in mortal peril.

Regretting it belatedly, Tae Gun-seung let out another long sigh.

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After leaving the chairman's office, Tae Seok-ho entered his own office and immediately looked over at Reina Blackwood, who had followed him.

"This latest incident—are you sure it has nothing to do with your side?"

"You mean Kang In-hyuk's situation?"

"Do I sound like I'd be asking about anything else right now?"

The question had a slight edge.

Reina responded with her usual calm.

"I haven't heard anything different from the Organization."

"What about why those two went abroad?"

"Same for that."

"You're not exactly reassuring, are you? What do you people know, anyway?"

"Getting agitated won't change anything. Let's calm down."

Although Reina answered quietly, her own thoughts were just as complicated.

She'd gotten a brief update from her direct boss, Im Deok-chang, that the KIRIN team led by him had lost Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha in Vladivostok.

Because of that, a team had also been built domestically to track Heo Yu-rim, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester, who'd returned home without the pair.

But the three had vanished without a trace at Incheon International Airport, having anticipated someone would be watching for them.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho, getting increasingly frustrated, called for a glass of cold water and gulped it down.

"Ugh... They'd better not be thinking of me as a puppet. If this keeps up, I won't just sit back quietly."

Reina, hearing his threat, thought to herself that this was becoming a bit dangerous.

But with the Organization's plans already going off track, she couldn't just hand out information on her own judgment.

"In any case, I've just been notified that, while you were seeing the chairman, 2.5% more shares have been secured. There's not much left, so let's take it as good news."

"Until when is this supposed to go on?"

For a moment, Reina radiated a chill.

"Shall I recommend to the Organization that we get rid of the chairman first? I don't know what he wrote in his will, but if we stir things up, it's not impossible."

Tae Seok-ho knew exactly what she meant.

So he gulped and stared straight at Reina.

"Are you provoking me because you think I wouldn't go that far?"

"No. Frankly, simpler is better for us. It's just that—since we have to consider your public image as executive vice president—we're being a bit cautious."

Her words were more sincere than ever.

Tae Seok-ho watched her for a moment, then snorted.

"Clearly, I'd be the one losing more, so let's stop here. But if you keep this up, things really will get difficult for you."

Chapter 110

I Picked It Up

It was past midnight. Hong Yu-geon entered an officetel near Seodaemun district Station in Seoul.

After going upstairs and pressing the doorbell of room 1414, the door opened.

"Mr. Hong!"

Inside was Go Mi-ah.

She wore an extremely dejected look, thanks to the recent, abruptly cut-off reports about Kang In-hyuk's incident.

"Should I say it's been a while?"

"What's going on? Ah, come in first."

As the door locked, Hong Yu-geon sat at the dining table. He took out a USB from his pocket and put it on the table.

"The CEO told me to give this to you in case of emergency."

"What is this? And why can't I reach the CEO on the phone?"

Go Mi-ah picked up the USB with a puzzled expression.

"If there's a problem, it's probably due to a dead phone battery or tracking, right?"

"Really?"

With that explanation, Go Mi-ah walked over to her computer and plugged in the USB.

A folder opened automatically, revealing its contents. Program files were inside.

"This is..."

"Do you know what it is?"

At his question, Go Mi-ah opened the source code of the program and checked it line by line.

"This is the base code of a deepfake program called Ecoskin, which a foreign IT company was developing recently. But why does the CEO have this?"

"I have no idea. He just handed it over before splitting from Russia. Told me to give it to you in case something happened."

"I heard the security at the company that made this is no joke."

As she muttered quietly, her eyes caught sight of another file. There, messages left by In-hyuk were recorded one by one in numbered notes.

【1. Try combining your old 3D modeling code and lightweight code with the Ecoskin code.】

【2. The completion deadline is, at the latest, three days from now.】

【3. Leave messages using Ghost Link to mark the start and completion of the task.】

Go Mi-ah's eyes half-closed in exasperation.

"This... This is more of a work order than a letter, right?"

"Looks that way to me, too."

"But how did this guy know I created the 3D modeling code? Did he break into my server or something?"

"Come on! No matter how good the CEO is, even for him, that would be hard, wouldn't it?"

Go Mi-ah checked for any intrusion records on her server first.

Of course, Kang In-hyuk had never accessed it, nor did he have the ability to break in, so she found nothing.

"There really is nothing..."

"You actually checked for real... But can you do it in three days?"

"I guess he means for me not to sleep and just build it. Same as with that TN SOFT job last time—he sure finds it natural to work me to death."

Bzzz—Bzzz—

At that moment, Go Mi-ah's phone rang.

"Hm? It's the CEO."

"Pick it up quickly."

Since Kang In-hyuk's phone had been off until just now and they'd been unable to contact him, Hong Yu-geon urged her.

Go Mi-ah pressed the call and speakerphone button.

"CEO! What's going on?"

With her question, In-hyuk's voice came through the receiver.

[As you know, things got a little complicated over here. Did Yu-geon give you the USB?]

"I'm here too. I just handed it over and checked."

In-hyuk sounded somewhat relieved after hearing this.

[That's a relief. Mi-ah, please follow the instructions written there.]

"Ah, but how did you know I made the 3D modeling code?"

She'd been bothered by that from earlier.

[Is there anything I wouldn't know about you all?]

"Always dodging the question... So, when are you coming back? The news about the CEO is causing chaos right now. Some say you're dead."

[I'm not dead, so that's fine.]

"Then why the three-day deadline? And where did you get the base code for the Ecoskin program?"

In-hyuk calmly explained.

[It's a company I invested in early on through Norman. We also hold a share of their stock.]

"Really?"

[Later, we'll be collaborating with Plusystems, like with TN SOFT. Think of this as preliminary work to prepare for that.]

Go Mi-ah's expression grew deeply troubled.

"Don't you think giving only three days for prep work before a collaboration is too much? Two months just for a test sample and verification would be normal for a project like this!"

[I know you can do it.]

"Seriously—!"

When the thoroughly exasperated Go Mi-ah shouted, Hong Yu-geon, beside her, broke in.

"CEO! Where are you right now?"

[I can't say. I'm on the move for now.]

"Are you still being chased by them?"

[It's safe for the moment. But you never know, so I have to be careful.]

"What about us coming to you?"

[The risk of being tracked increases too much, so no. Stay there and protect Mi-ah and Secretary Heo. Stay low and don't do anything conspicuous until I return.]

A long sigh escaped Hong Yu-geon's lips.

"That's not our concern. Just focus on coming back safely, CEO."

[Got it. Then please, Mi-ah, I'm counting on you.]

Once the call ended, Go Mi-ah clutched her head in frustration.

"This crazy CEO! Always trying to work me to death!"

Because of In-hyuk's orders, she had done an incredible amount of work—collaborating with TN SOFT, code cracking, rebuilding the security system and servers for Taeshin Asset Management, working on the Plusystems program, and more.

Having seen so much of it all, Hong Yu-geon understood how she felt.

"Neither the CEO nor you seem very normal..."

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After his call, In-hyuk sat in a Siberian express train, watching the pitch-black night landscape whiz past the window to the raucous sound of the train.

The current location was aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway from Vladivostok to Moscow, a distance of about 9,000 km.

"With this, I've broken through their encirclement. Though I'll know for sure only once I reach the airport."

After leaving the connecting car and heading inside, he saw Tae Ju-ha sitting covered with a blanket around her middle row seat.

"Weren't you sleeping?"

"I saw you heading out for a call. Did you phone Korea?"

"I called Hong Yu-geon. Things are still noisy on their end about our disappearance."

A downcast look crossed Tae Ju-ha's face.

"If we go to Moscow like this... will we really be able to return safely to Korea?"

"As long as things go according to plan."

"Why do you never tell me what the plan actually is?"

"Telling you wouldn't help, CEO. It'd just give you more worries for nothing."

At this point, In-hyuk's sole objective was to get Tae Ju-ha back to Korea safely.

There were many matters along the way that he could not reveal, so he had no option but to keep secrets.

Tae Ju-ha stared intently at In-hyuk.

"I heard we had nothing after falling from the car. But you somehow procured food, clothes, cash—and even got us on a train without passports... How did you do it?"

"I picked them up."

"Are you really going to be like this?"

Most of what she just mentioned had actually come via a task broker from the underworld.

But since that was also not something that could be talked about, In-hyuk just shrugged.

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【Taeshin Asset Management CEO Tae Ju-ha, division director Kang In-hyuk missing in Russia for nine days. Even though the company had shown tremendous recent growth and potential, there's been no news of these two business leaders. Not even a body was found beneath the Amur Bridge, where their vehicle was discovered...】

【Two armed bodies discovered near the Amur Bridge. Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk suspected as primary targets of the attack... Russian investigative authorities have announced they're coordinating with the home country's embassy to proceed with the investigation...】

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Im Deok-chang anxiously read the news in the office of the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service.

It had already been nearly ten days, and the bodies of Shikai and Kedrick—who had been sent on the previous mission—had been discovered by the authorities.

and yet, not a trace of Kang In-hyuk or Tae Ju-ha had been found, making his unease grow.

"Surely... they're not dead out there, are they?"

Tae Ju-ha's death would've been a welcome event, but not Kang In-hyuk's.

Given that the bodies of his agents had been discovered, it was less likely the two had died.

It probably meant unexpected parties had saved them.

But then again, there was no reason for these two to remain missing for this long.

Bzzz—Bzzz—

At that moment, his phone rang, and the codename "KIRIN," belonging to Li Weicheng, appeared on the screen.

He immediately answered, and Li Weicheng's voice came through.

[Hyottoko. While reviewing CCTV at Yakutsk Airport, I spotted Gordon Grimes.]

"What?! Are you sure?"

A message containing a photo arrived. Just as Li Weicheng had said, it showed a clear shot of Gordon Grimes, who had previously been seen in Hong Kong.

"Did you confirm where he went?"

[He passed through the arrivals area and walked outside, but we lost him when he reached a CCTV blind spot. And Yakutsk has no nearby towns—Oymyakon is the closest, but it's about 1,600 km away by car.]

"So he must have gone there for a reason."

[That appears to be the case.]

Im Deok-chang's headache worsened.

Gordon Grimes was someone he had to contact without fail, regarding the TN SOFT incident he had failed at previously and also for future objectives.

He could request Hannya to send additional personnel to search Yakutsk.

But that might undermine his own standing even further.

"What's our current deployment?"

[I'm in Yakutsk, with one agent each at Vladivostok Airport and port, khabarovsk Airport, and Tynda Airport—all searching.]

They were blocking potential exit routes from Vladivostok.

"Everyone, stop your current searching and regroup in Yakutsk."

[Are we not calling for extra support?]

"Securing Gordon Grimes is the priority right now. Do as I ordered."

There were also agents stationed at domestic airports and harbors.

Though they weren't WID agents, the National Intelligence Service had uncovered enough to know how to use them—since they had no scruples about dirty work.

[Okay, I'll gather the agents and begin the search.]

"Do that. Ah, check all immigration records thoroughly. The Yakutsk airport is small, so there's bound to be something."

[Understood.]

Because there was still no trace of Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha, his attention had to turn to more pressing matters.

Their call ended this way.

Knock knock—

As if he had been waiting, assistant agent Choi Dong-hoon walked in.

"What is it?"

Choi Dong-hoon did not look happy.

"We just got word from Division 1... It sounds like there's been an incident off the Gulf of Guinea."

He was referring to the case of a Notex company vessel pirated in the Gulf of Guinea.

Even with the Korean government involved, the case remained unresolved.

But now there was word of an incident, and Im Deok-chang frowned in confusion.

"The Gulf of Guinea... is that the Delta Scourge carrying Hwain Techon's slush funds? What went wrong?"

"Delta Scourge has reportedly been attacked."

"... What? Even with hostages on board? Where? Don't tell me—the Portuguese government forces?"

As his questions piled up, Choi Dong-hoon's face looked even more grim.

"According to the investigation, the attackers were identified as Oruch Al Pasha. They've clashed with Delta Scourge often, and attacked during the fund transfer, wiping them out."

Im Deok-chang's face turned pale.

"Are you saying all the funds were stolen?"

"That appears to be the case."

It was about $1.4 billion USD.

In Korean won, that was about 2 trillion—a volume that would fill about half of a standard 20ft container with $100 bills.

"Then the Organization will mobilize agents en masse."

"I think agents in both Europe and Africa will be recalled."

From the beginning, the Delta Scourge's hijacking had all been faked.

It was a setup to move the container of cash via Notex, erase its trace by faking a hijacking, then launder the money and pass it to the Organization.

But an accident had occurred in the middle—so the Organization definitely wouldn't let it go.

"This will make it even harder to get extra manpower."

He had only just mobilized agents to search for Gordon Grimes.

But since they couldn't give up the search for Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha either, he decided to ask Hannya, wID's head, for help when the moment was right.

Now, with the Delta Scourge incident causing all the agents to regroup, even that was in jeopardy.

Im Deok-chang let out a long sigh and buried his head in his hands.