Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 111

We Were Outmaneuvered by a Bluff

WISE&WIRE Group Chairman's Office.

Baek Ji-woong's head throbbed from the recent events.

First, the disappearances of Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha. It had already been more than two weeks, and there was still no word from Im Deok-chang.

On top of that, funds had been seized when the Gulf of Guinea pirates, Delta Scourge, clashed with Oruch Al Pasha.

"How are they even handling things...?"

Just then, after a knock, his secretary, Do Jung-geol, entered.

"Chairman. It seems there's a problem with the situation in Russia."

At the same time, Baek Ji-woong's brow furrowed deeply.

"Russia? Don't tell me this has to do with Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha?"

"There was intelligence that Gordon Grimes appeared at Yakutsk Airport not long ago. The agents searching for Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha were deployed there."

Since it was quite an important situation, Baek Ji-woong accepted it with a nod.

"So? What happened?"

"Well, here's the problem. Gordon Grimes appeared at airports in Singapore and Dubai in sequence after that."

"Are you saying they went on a wild goose chase?"

"That's not it. There are no traces that he used the airports or ships."

Baek Ji-woong's expression grew grave.

"So it's just like in Hong Kong. How is this possible? Is it perhaps deepfake?"

He was referring to the technology that implements a virtual person in a video.

"I believe that's likely. Perhaps to confuse us after leaving traces in Hong Kong."

"If that's really the case, he's exceptionally meticulous. Hyottoko got caught by it."

"Also, since we had to deploy people searching for Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha to that lead, the Organization will probably have something to say as well."

His headache getting worse, Baek Ji-woong pressed his temples with his fingers.

"I'm already out of my mind from the Delta Scourge incident, and now there's this... It's enough to drive someone crazy."

"If Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha show up safely, Hyottoko's side might try to drag you into things as well."

"I'll make sure to draw a line there."

bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, Do Jung-geol's phone started vibrating from his pocket.

"Excuse me for a moment."

The call didn't last long, but Do Jung-geol's expression became even more serious.

"Chairman. Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha have boarded a flight from Moscow to Korea."

"What?! Where did you get this information?"

"It's from the W&W Days desk. There have been reports to other media outlets as well that the two are returning."

Baek Ji-woong's face turned cold.

"They used their situation to set the stage. If all focus is on them, nobody can make a move. But how did they get from Vladivostok to Moscow?"

"Don't you think they used a car or a train?"

WID agents had been conducting surveillance at Vladivostok and nearby airports until just a few days earlier.

Of course, gaps could have opened there.

Had they broken through the airport, they would have come straight to Korea, but since they were arriving from Moscow, it was a different story.

"How much of the shares do the companies visited by Tae Ju-ha hold?"

"Taeshin Trading has 12%, Taeshin Electronics about 5.22%. However, there are no records so far of any official transfer on paper."

Baek Ji-woong found this odd.

"So, in the end, it wasn't a share succession?"

Even after time had passed, the share situation hadn't changed.

This meant that the companies visited by Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had acted differently from what was expected.

"That's what it seems."

"We were outmaneuvered by a bluff. We moved too hastily."

Do Jung-geol, seemingly confused, titled his head.

"But wasn't that not their intention?"

"You're right. It was our own rash judgment and actions. That's what ended up exposing us."

He was referring to the incident of killing a National Intelligence Service agent in Hong Kong.

Of course, they had erased as many traces as possible, but the National Intelligence Service would surely have lingering doubts while tracking them.

A short silence followed. Then Do Jung-geol's phone vibrated again—this time with a message.

"... Chairman. News just arrived from the Hong Kong SGA."

A few days ago, he had personally gone to Hong Kong to ask SGA about Gordon Grimes's visit.

He had tracked down and connected with SGA executives and staffers dissatisfied with the current CEO, Raven Delaquora.

"Really? What do they say?"

"They're in the process of transferring Taeshin Group's shares held by SGA to AMK Partners."

With that answer, Baek Ji-woong looked even more serious.

"Did you hear the terms?"

"They say it's in exchange for SolarView shares. The deal hasn't closed yet, but if there are no issues with SolarView's due diligence, it'll proceed."

SolarView was a semiconductor company in Taiwan. It was also the spark that started whispers about investments by AMK Partners.

"... SolarView's share price did rise quite a bit, but it shouldn't be enough to trade for Taeshin's shares."

The gap in scale was enormous.

He couldn't grasp the rationale immediately.

But SGA, which had shown significant investment success until recently, wouldn't strike a deal with AMK Partners at a loss.

"Should I look into that side as well?"

"We have a mountain of things to do, and none of it's coming together..."

Do Jung-geol quietly waited for his instructions.

Baek Ji-woong, lost in thought, finally opened his mouth.

"We can't make any moves on SGA right now, so leave them be. Instead, try arranging a meeting with Norman McGrath. As for Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha, there's no point interfering anymore, so let them be."

After all, Taeshin Group shares abroad had not gone directly to Tae Ju-ha, so now he needed to move on to other matters.

Just then, a new message arrived on Baek Ji-woong's phone.

bzzz— bzzz—

It contained no words, just an image made up of strange symbols and lines.

【—┼◎┼—】

After checking the message, Baek Ji-woong's expression went cold.

"Have they finally decided to make a move at the top?"

Do Jung-geol, watching his reaction, cautiously asked,

"Has... something happened?"

"The Council has called a gathering."

A meeting for the organization's executives.

The last time had been four years ago, when the head of the Organization changed. Since then, there had only been top-down directions.

"I suppose it's to draw up countermeasures."

To this, Baek Ji-woong let out a snort.

That might be what anyone would think. But his own thoughts were different.

"Is it that they've only now realized how serious this is, or are they finally ready to cut off anything unnecessary after watching until now? We'll have to see."

Baek Ji-woong let out a meaningful sigh.

* * *

In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha were en route to Incheon International Airport, having transferred at Shanghai Pudong after departing Moscow.

The whole trip, including layovers, took 18 hours.

The journey from Vladivostok to Moscow had already been grueling, so Tae Ju-ha was practically half-passed-out any time she sat down.

"Ungh..."

About an hour after leaving Shanghai, Tae Ju-ha stretched and sat up, seeing In-hyuk doing something on his tablet he'd purchased in Moscow.

"... Aren't you tired?"

She asked because, despite all the travels, she'd barely seen In-hyuk sleep.

"I'm fine."

At that monotonous answer, Tae Ju-ha stared at him for a moment, then cautiously asked,

"Are you really never going to tell me where you went for three days, leaving me alone in Moscow?"

As she said, In-hyuk had vanished for three days.

His destination was Naya, Mongolia—a place reachable in about seven hours by plane from Moscow.

But the reason he went was because of the camp in Naya mentioned by Pyo Jun-woo, a KQ Group security guard and agent of Kooou.

In the end, however, only traces of tents remained, suggesting that the group had already moved on.

"Are you that curious?"

"How could I not be curious?"

Since In-hyuk continued to keep quiet, Tae Ju-ha was growing increasingly frustrated.

In-hyuk casually opened his palm.

When Tae Ju-ha saw that, she narrowed her eyes.

"You're not about to pull the old 'If you want to know, it's 500 won' joke, are you?"

She was trying to lighten the mood.

In-hyuk silently withdrew his hand.

"....."

"Pfft—!"

Tae Ju-ha, not having seen this side of In-hyuk before, couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"You seem a lot better than before."

"... But is it really okay for things to get so big?"

She was referring to how they'd tipped off the domestic press about their return.

Naturally, with the reports, everything had exploded, and news articles were still pouring out.

"If we're highly visible, no one will try anything rash."

"But doesn't that make us more of a target?"

Given the harrowing experiences they'd had, her worries had grown.

"Don't worry. I've prepared something for that."

"Did you know something?"

"What is it?"

"Every time you say something like that, things always get bigger."

When they drove into the sea, when they traveled from Vladivostok to Moscow, when he made her wait alone for three days before getting on this plane together...

Nothing ever happened quietly, so she couldn't help but be anxious.

"It was necessary."

"I might not understand, but I survived thanks to you, so I'm sure there was a reason."

"I appreciate you seeing it that way."

Silence fell again. After another hour of flight, they arrived at Incheon International Airport.

Most of their luggage was local, so they didn't have much to carry. With just a single bag, In-hyuk walked to the arrivals hall with Tae Ju-ha.

As the doors slid open, countless camera flashes went off at their appearance.

At the same time, Heo Yu-rim, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester, together with Taeshin Group's security guards, approached and surrounded them protectively.

"CEO! Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?"

Heo Yu-rim came closest, thoroughly checking on Tae Ju-ha's condition.

"I'm fine. What about Secretary Heo?"

"I barely got any sleep, worrying about you, CEO."

They'd spent about two weeks in Russia without even the chance to contact them.

This had been In-hyuk's doing to avoid leaking their location, but it had also compounded everyone's anxiety.

Just then, Baek Si-hwan approached.

"Division Director."

Hearing him, In-hyuk merely squinted in the flurry of camera flashes around him.

"It's been a while."

"On head office instructions, a hospital appointment has been made. Please transfer to the vehicle first."

"Head office? You mean the chairman?"

At that, Baek Si-hwan hesitated, then replied,

"It was Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho. And he also asked that interviews be conducted in consultation with the head office, for the sake of the company's image."

He could tell what they were aiming for.

Of course, In-hyuk didn't intend to listen at all.

"Tell the executive vice president it's not his place to interfere. And Manager Baek, I understand your position. However, you should choose more carefully what to relay and what not to."

Meanwhile, the reporters blocked by Taeshin's security guards were shouting questions.

"I heard this is another life-threatening incident—how did you escape?"

"We heard your car crashed! Can you tell us about that?"

"This is the fourth reported assassination attempt! Have any suspects been identified?"

"Why didn't you reveal your survival earlier?"

Listening to their voices, In-hyuk slowly moved forward.

Chapter 112

HERMIT

The reporters, who had been blocking the arrival gate at Incheon International Airport, moved aside in response to In-hyuk's movements.

Even during that time, the questions continued to be thrown at him. In-hyuk watched for a moment and then touched his tablet.

"I've just sent photos to each media outlet."

As soon as he began to speak, the reporters gradually closed their mouths, until only the noise within the airport echoed.

"Some of you reporters are included, so you'll be able to check. And the people in the photos are those who have systematically watched and tailed CEO Tae Ju-ha and me during our business trips to various countries."

At the same time, the reporters' eyes widened.

"Are you saying that the people in the photos are related to the recent attack?"

"Do you know who's behind it? Or do you have someone or an organization in mind?"

"Are they people you personally know?"

In-hyuk waited, making eye contact with the reporters, until they quieted down again.

Overwhelmed by the tension, they quickly snapped their mouths shut.

"I don't know where they belong. But just by seeing that the people changed each time I visited another country, I thought it couldn't be a regular organization. I expect the media won't overlook this and will write about it."

Finishing his words, In-hyuk moved away from the reporters.

Of course, the reporters didn't stand still and pursued him further for more answers.

In response, Taeshin's security guards blocked the surroundings and escorted them safely to the car.

Once they were inside, Tae Ju-ha, sitting next to In-hyuk, stared at him.

"Is this what you meant when you said not to worry earlier?"

"I can't solve it myself, so I have to borrow others' hands."

Tae Ju-ha was dumbfounded.

"And you're not provoking them even more this way?"

"But I can't just sit still, can I?"

"..."

In the passenger seat, Baek Si-hwan poked his head out.

"Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital?"

"Yes. Just take us home."

With In-hyuk's firm answer, Baek Si-hwan hesitated momentarily before continuing.

"And... Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho wishes to meet with Division Director as soon as possible."

"Understood. I'll contact him myself."

The mood grew heavier.

And so, the car carrying In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha left the airport for their home in Hannam-dong.

* * *

Bang—

The loud noise had come from the office of the Director of the National Intelligence Service.

The director, Jin Jong-man, as before, had the deputy general managers from each division seated before him.

"These are all our agents. What do you think?"

On the table between them lay a stack of photographs.

The brow of Choo Jae-min, first deputy general manager, twitched.

"... I have no excuse."

It was because all the overseas team agents belonged to the First Division.

Already, the problems in Hong Kong and Russia had caused chaos, and now another incident had erupted, leaving Choo Jae-min even more troubled.

Meanwhile, Jin Jong-man swept his gaze over Choo Jae-min and the other deputy general managers with a grim face.

"Is this also the work of Director Nam? Are you saying that man reached beyond his own jurisdiction?"

The one now mentioned was Nam Chan-woo, head of the Asia Branch of the National Intelligence Service, who had been found a few days earlier hanged in his residence.

At the time, a will was found claiming he had moved agents without authorization.

Of course, that alone couldn't excuse the agency from responsibility, so Jin Jong-man had tried to finish the matter as quietly as possible.

He also ensured the police and prosecutors handled Nam Chan-woo's suicide quietly.

However, the problem flared up again when Kang In-hyuk, who had just returned from abroad, distributed the photos during an interview.

Cautiously, first Division's Choo Jae-min opened his mouth.

"To be honest, there are too many suspicious points for it to just be Director Nam's doing. If he were skilled enough to mobilize agents in Europe, wouldn't he have chosen to flee rather than commit suicide?"

"You're saying... he was forced to commit suicide? But they say there were no signs of homicide. The burner phone he used to contact the Hong Kong agents was also found there."

A significant amount of evidence pointed to Director Nam Chan-woo as the culprit.

Yet, given the newly discovered circumstances, even that seemed strange.

"I think more investigation is needed. Including the agents in these photos."

"That would be digging further into the First Division. Are you sure?"

"I can't claim I'm not responsible. But clarifying the doubts must be for the good of the National Intelligence Service."

Listening to Choo Jae-min's reply, Jin Jong-man glanced at Shin Jin-hong and Im Deok-chang.

"What do you two think?"

The pair exchanged wary glances.

Then Shin Jin-hong of the Second Division spoke first.

"I also think a reinvestigation is necessary."

Naturally, everyone's gaze turned to Im Deok-chang.

Meeting the others' eyes, he cautiously spoke.

"I'm of the same mind. If something's suspicious, we need to reinvestigate. If this issue becomes public, it'll be too much for the National Intelligence Service to handle."

Thus all three division deputy general managers agreed.

Director Jin Jong-man wore a dignified expression from his seat at the center.

"For now, I've ordered all agents in these photos to return to Korea. Unless I say otherwise, that won't be revoked. If anyone tries to flee, even if the reputation of the NIS is ruined, we'll pursue them by any means necessary and apprehend them."

At that, Im Deok-chang's expression hardened slightly.

He had secretly warned the relevant agents through other channels to go into hiding, but he didn't know if that was before or after Jin Jong-man's orders.

Knock knock—

At that moment, Nam Min-seong, secretary to the director of the NIS, entered after knocking.

"What is it? I told you not to disturb unless it's urgent."

"There's urgent news from Europe."

"Urgent news?"

"They raided Oruch Al Pasha's hideout in France."

It was the place where Delta Scourge had clashed with Notex's large vessel from Portugal.

The incident, which occurred recently, had made huge waves as all Korean hostages were murdered during the confrontation.

Because of the criticism that the Korean government's response was too slow, the NIS had continued receiving information from surrounding countries.

The other deputy general managers also listened in surprised silence.

"What happened?"

"The raid succeeded. They killed or captured nearly all of Oruch Al Pasha's key members. But..."

He trailed off at the end of his explanation.

Jin Jong-man tilted his head.

"There's more?"

"One of the items Delta Scourge seized from Notex's cargo was over 1.4 billion US dollars in cash. The French are requesting the Portuguese government to investigate Notex."

"One point four billion dollars? That's almost two trillion won... Don't tell me they were caught transporting illicit funds?"

"For now, that seems to be the clear direction of the investigation."

That amount was equivalent to the monthly operational budget of the Korean Ministry of National Defense—an enormous sum that no country could take lightly.

"There's no way Notex didn't know about the funds being transported. What was in the background report on the Korean employees who died during the fight?"

"I anticipated this and prepared it. Briefly, they were all orphans who had been working in Portugal on employment visas."

When Jin Jong-man checked previously, there had been nothing special.

In fact, because they had no relatives, no one stepped forward directly to protest about the incident, which had worked in the government's favor.

"Form a separate team and dig deeper. If any of them are found to be related to the 1.4 billion dollar shipment, that could raise new problems later."

"Understood."

After Nam Min-seong left and the door closed, Im Deok-chang spoke up cautiously.

"If it's all right, can I take charge of investigating those personnel?"

"The third deputy director?"

"You're going to have First and Second Division handle the overseas teams, right? Since this issue can't be taken lightly, it might be better for me, rather than the director level, to handle it."

After glancing around at the others, Jin Jong-man asked Choo Jae-min.

"Is that all right with you, Deputy Director Choo?"

Investigating the deaths of Korean citizens overseas naturally related to the affairs of the First Division, which oversaw the relevant area.

"I don't have a choice."

As he gave his nonchalant answer, Jin Jong-man was about to continue when he felt a vibration inside his jacket.

bzzz—

Reading the message, his expression hardened. He then glanced at Shin Jin-hong and Choo Jae-min.

"Hmmm. Let's do as decided. For the investigation of the European branch agents, Deputy Director Shin Jin-hong will lead, with Deputy Director Choo Jae-min assisting."

Shin Jin-hong looked uneasy. Investigating the inner workings of the NIS meant that any lack of results could put him in serious trouble.

"... Understood."

"You may go now. Ah, Deputy Director Choo, stay behind—I have something to discuss with you. And, call in Secretary Nam outside."

The people in the office changed according to his directions.

Nam Min-seong, who entered later, saw the note Jin Jong-man handed over. He left for a moment, then returned with some equipment.

"Check this, please."

As Jin Jong-man gestured, placing a finger to his lips to signal silence to the surprised Choo Jae-min, Nam Min-seong powered on the equipment and moved around the room.

It was a bug detector.

A little later, Nam Min-seong came closer and reported quietly.

"There doesn't seem to be any unauthorized device installed."

"No issues with the equipment?"

"None at all."

Jin Jong-man made a complicated face and sent him out again.

Choo Jae-min, who had been watching, cautiously asked,

"... Was there a reason? Did someone bug the office?"

The NIS was always extremely vigilant about security.

Of course, wiretapping and bug detection were routine, especially for those in important positions.

The director's office, in particular, was more tightly secured than any other.

"I just received a message like this."

【HERMIT : Hwain Techon slush funds, Notex, Delta Scourge, National Intelligence Service.】

Upon checking the content, Choo Jae-min's face also turned grim.

"Did it arrive just now?"

He recalled seeing Jin Jong-man checking his phone earlier.

"That's right."

"Notex—as in the Gulf of Guinea incident...?"

"Exactly. But an unknown source lists Hwain Techon and Delta Scourge along with the National Intelligence Service... How are we supposed to interpret this?"

"Ah... That's why you checked for eavesdropping."

Since the message matched the contents just discussed, anyone would naturally be suspicious.

"So, what's your take?"

Of all the deputy directors, Choo Jae-min had always backed Jin Jong-man from behind on his way to the top.

So, when the First Division incident broke out, he hadn't initially suspected him.

But as it fell within his territory and was severe, scolding him was unavoidable.

Of course, this actually supported the idea that Choo Jae-min wasn't the culprit.

Anyone in their right mind would know not to cause trouble from a position where they'd be the first suspect.

After thinking for a moment, Choo Jae-min replied.

"... For now, I think this is closer to a tip-off than a threat."

"Your reasoning?"

"Hwain Techon, Notex, and Delta Scourge are names that have recently dominated the headlines. Connecting those three must mean there's something there."

"And why mention the National Intelligence Service? To stir up internal dissent?"

He said this, conscious of the possible ploy to scatter their attention.

"Even to someone like me, in charge of overseas affairs, the Hwain Techon situation looks suspicious. Such a big company suddenly falling into bankruptcy through a funding shortage is odd."

"So you think it's worth investigating?"

"I'd like to look into it if it's all right. Besides, while Deputy Director Shin is investigating, I'll barely be able to handle First Division duties."

Jin Jong-man looked at the message on his phone and answered.

"All right, do it. Keep it as quiet as possible."

"Understood."

"And bring in a specialist in telecommunications for tracing. We need to find where this message originated from. Do it without letting Deputy Director Im know."

"Understood."

Whether the second and third deputy directors could be trusted still remained a question.

Chapter 113

An Appropriate Analogy

As In-hyuk traveled by car, he put down the phone he had been holding.

A few days had passed since he had returned from Russia.

During that time, speculation-filled articles about the surveillance at the airport had been pouring out from various sources.

Interview requests also kept coming in, but he had refused them all.

Was it because he had fallen into a moment of contemplation?

Hong Yu-geon, watching him through the rearview mirror with a hint of concern, spoke up.

"Boss, is something wrong?"

"Not really. I just used the Hwain Techon matter as bait for the National Intelligence Service Director."

Hong Yu-geon tilted his head.

"Bait? Weren't you going to hand over all the material tracking the accounts through the shell company?"

That material contained the records of how funds had been laundered from Hwain Techon to Notex.

"There's no point in handing it over now—it'll only make it look more suspicious. And since we don't know where Kooou is inside the National Intelligence Service, it's not easy to just hand it over without caution."

"Are you going to move according to what you think? The National Intelligence Service Director could also belong to Kooou, right?"

Up until now, it had been assumed that Kooou existed within the police, prosecution, and the media.

That was why, whenever something happened, they could shape the narrative as they wished.

In response, In-hyuk had either stirred up a bigger incident or set up distractions to make it difficult for them to act so easily.

"It's not the National Intelligence Service Director."

"How do you know?"

It was originally because of his experience from the future. This was the period just before the start of autumn this year.

The National Intelligence Service would be charged with the illegal surveillance of high-ranking foreign officials, leading both the Director and the First Division head to be tried and imprisoned.

Those individuals were the current director, Jin Jong-man, and Choo Jae-min, the deputy general manager in charge of foreign affairs.

If those two had been Kooou, or if they'd been excluded due to internal issues, it wouldn't be surprising if they'd already been eliminated instead of imprisoned.

But in In-hyuk's memory, even several years later, the two were still alive.

"There's a way I know."

"So do you know which executive in the National Intelligence Service is Kooou?"

"There's someone I suspect."

"Who?"

It was the same as in his other memories.

After Director Jin Jong-man and Deputy General Manager Choo Jae-min, both holding key posts, were detained, the next person to become Director...

"Third Deputy Director, Im Deok-chang."

At In-hyuk's answer, Hong Yu-geon was confused.

"How did you know that?"

They were people who'd had no reason to cross paths.

At least as far as Hong Yu-geon knew, In-hyuk had no relationship whatsoever with Im Deok-chang.

"I have my own way."

"Tsk! But if you already know, wouldn't going straight for that be the fastest route?"

It wasn't a wrong point. In-hyuk hadn't overlooked that either.

"At the moment I don't know how many of Im Deok-chang's people are inside the National Intelligence Service. And even if I said something, they wouldn't believe me. Stir the flames unnecessarily and things get too noisy."

"So you're going to make them realize it first?"

"Right. It's a situation where over 1.4 billion dollars were sent overseas. No matter how tightly Hwain Techon tries to hide things, there are always records. When the National Intelligence Service starts tracking, someone will get caught."

That's why he had intentionally thrown in only simple words as bait.

"Hope things go just as you say, boss."

"It doesn't really matter what happens. Either way, it'll serve to keep them in check."

Until recently, among those whom 'HERMIT' had contacted, there had been no heads of government officials.

Sure, he'd had plenty of chances to contact them, but to avoid suspicion, he had purposefully approached high-ranking subordinates first and gathered information that way.

"Still, I just can't figure you out."

A little while later, the car driven by Hong Yu-geon pulled into the Taeshin Trading building.

Arriving at the underground parking lot, they found Baek Si-hwan already waiting, who opened the backseat door first.

"Have you waited long?"

"No, I just arrived."

"Are the investment documents I approved progressing smoothly?"

Since returning from Moscow, In-hyuk had been working rapidly to clear the backlog at Taeshin Asset Management.

Fortunately, the work he'd settled before the incident in Vladivostok left him only about two weeks behind. Though that was no small feat...

"I've confirmed that we'll submit a progress report within a week. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also inquired about a visit following the incident in Russia."

Some suspects had died in the incident, so an investigation was required in some form.

And because both In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had gone through a tough time, the inquiry reached them only after a while.

"Please inform them that we'll set a date soon."

With that, their group boarded the elevator, heading for the chairman's office.

When the elevator doors opened on the chairman's floor, a middle-aged man and a young woman radiating an unpleasant vibe were waiting.

"Did you come to see the chairman?"

It was Tae Seok-ho and Reina Blackwood. At his question, In-hyuk let out a sigh from his nose.

"We were called. Is there something you need from me?"

At In-hyuk's calm reply, wrinkles appeared on Tae Seok-ho's brow.

"I thought I already asked to see you through Manager Baek. Didn't you hear?"

"I did. But as you know, there's been a lot of backlog, so I haven't had the time."

"Wouldn't it be possible to spare some time after seeing the chairman today?"

In-hyuk glanced at the watch on his left wrist.

"Unfortunately, I have another appointment. And you seem busy too, so if you'll excuse me."

Without waiting for a response, he skirted past them at the elevator.

Tae Seok-ho then raised his voice.

"If you keep acting like this, it won't do you any good."

In-hyuk paused.

"Me? Or you, Executive Vice President?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you'll find out in time, won't you?"

Uttering that meaningful phrase, he made his way to the chairman's office.

Song Tae-ho, the chairman's secretary, was waiting and quietly opened the door.

Leaving the others behind, In-hyuk entered alone; Tae Gun-seung was seated there, wearing a strange expression.

"It was a bit noisy outside."

"Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho wanted to see me later."

"Was that it? Well, it's been noisy for various reasons. More than that, you came later than I expected. I thought you'd show up right away."

In-hyuk pursed his lips and sighed again.

"I've just had too much work. Has CEO Tae Ju-ha been here already? I figured she'd come straight since she has so much to ask."

Tae Gun-seung fixed him with a steady gaze.

"Don't you talk at home, even if you meet?"

"We come home at different times. It's hard to see each other in person at work unless there's a reason."

An expression of regret crossed Tae Gun-seung's face.

"As Kang mentioned, Ju-ha came straight here and was quite flustered—probably wondering why the Taeshin Group shares were entrusted to her."

"And what did you say?"

Originally, the shares stored overseas should have been transferred not through delegation, but by inheritance outside the bloodline.

That was how In-hyuk reclaimed those shares in place of Tae Seok-hyun.

But in this life, Tae Gun-seung had made a different decision.

"I told her I might pass the Taeshin Group to her, and it shocked her."

"She didn't like it?"

Tae Gun-seung responded with a faint smile.

"She's a kid who knows her own strengths. Still, she's been ambitious and worked her way to where she is now."

It was a tone of admiration.

"True. Traveling to various countries seemed to burden her."

"She's different from other kids. Bringing Ju-ha here is the only thing Seok-hyun did right."

"But if you want CEO Tae Ju-ha to inherit Taeshin, that's difficult."

Tae Gun-seung exhaled deeply and quietly asked,

"Why do you think so?"

"She's never dealt with filth; her convictions are unyielding. Because of that, even Taeshin Asset Management will eventually hit its limits."

Tae Gun-seung's eyes widened a little at that direct response.

"So you're saying there are limits."

After briefly thinking, In-hyuk replied cautiously.

"There are. And recently, my hands have also been stained with blood."

"... Blood?"

"When I nearly died in Vladivostok, I killed a man. The article said the body was just found."

He meant those men in combat uniforms described in the reports as attack suspects.

Tae Gun-seung had seen the articles and couldn't have missed it.

"You... You killed them?"

"It was to survive. If not, it'd have been me and CEO Tae Ju-ha found in the sea, not them."

"It was you, Kang, and Ju-ha who nearly died there... Whatever the case, it was self-defense."

"I'll probably have to visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the incident anyway."

"Yes, I'm sure it caused a stir there."

Though it was called a simple hit on the Taeshin family, in reality, it was nothing short of terrorism in the middle of Vladivostok.

Of course, the Russian side also needed a thorough investigation, so they had asked In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha to visit.

"A bunch of rumors will still come out."

"But isn't there an even more important topic you haven't mentioned?"

"..."

A brief silence followed before Tae Gun-seung spoke again.

"Who tried to kill you and Ju-ha? If it were anyone else I might not ask, but you must have at least some idea."

"I'm just a regular office worker. Aren't you overestimating me?"

"Hahaha—!"

At that, Tae Gun-seung burst into laughter despite himself.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I didn't expect a joke from you."

"It wasn't a joke."

The atmosphere quickly grew somber.

"Hrm! I suppose there are no normal office workers left in the world."

"... Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Anyway, Kang, you mean Ju-ha inheriting is out of the question."

"She won't be able to withstand it."

"But you're by her side. With the shares going to her and your management skills, it should be possible."

It was, in effect, saying he would use In-hyuk as a shield to secure management control—something In-hyuk had long anticipated.

"You know my position; the shareholders and board would never approve."

Because Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of KQ Group, had been exposed as his blood relative.

That was why In-hyuk was repeatedly pressing the button on his phone, which had been buzzing in his pocket since earlier.

Bzzz— bzzz—

Noticing the vibration, Tae Gun-seung glanced over.

"If it's important, you can answer."

"It's not... It's Chairman Kang from KQ. He hasn't given up since I returned to Korea, even though I've ignored him."

"Ha... Never thought the great Chairman Kang would get that kind of treatment."

In-hyuk shrugged.

"Well, he's persistent even after I refused. But I'm here today for something other than a report."

"You're preparing something else?"

"Soon, mobricks, China's largest smartphone company, is starting production of a smartphone in partnership with Taiwan's SolarView."

Tae Gun-seung sighed and replied.

"I've heard news about Mobricks, but SolarView is a semiconductor company, isn't it? What's the link?"

"Not long ago, they developed a high-performance semiconductor for smartphones. They've been quietly collaborating with Mobricks since early last year."

"Hmm... And what does this have to do with us? As you know, with China's relationship with America and their market size, American and Korean products can't compete."

In-hyuk nodded in agreement.

"Our focus isn't on the phone itself, but the component production technology inside it. For the semiconductor production, they need Taeshin Semiconductor's diode reliability and packaging technology. If we proceed with that, the recent stock downturn should recover."

Tae Gun-seung could only sigh once more.

"How far have negotiations gone? But wait, will SolarView truly propose this to us instead of their own domestic firms?"

"Even though SolarView has this breakthrough, mass production is still unstable. And as a Taiwanese company, they're wary of China. That's why they want Taeshin's name at the forefront—just as you keep me next to CEO Tae Ju-ha."

It was a very apt analogy. Tae Gun-seung, perhaps unsettled by the comparison, responded with a soft laugh.

Chapter 114

The Visitor

A space with a large, round table the color of rich walnut, and four chairs.

Except for that space, the surroundings were shrouded in darkness.

The light above was only cast down as far as the table.

After a moment, a door opened and people entered, accompanied by the light flowing in from outside.

Two men and two women. They entered quietly, took their places, and sat down.

Three of them took something out from their pockets and placed it on the table.

They were all masks.

The comical expression of Hyottoko belonged to Im Deok-chang of the National Intelligence Service; the kitsune—the pointed ears and protruding snout—was Kwon So-jeong, wife of the head of the W&W Group; the mask with a crimson, drunken-looking face, shojo, was Jung Yoon-joo from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

The last person to enter was Baek Ji-woong, the chairman of the W&W Group.

However, since he had no mask, he simply sat quietly.

Once everything was ready, Im Deok-chang spoke first.

"それでは始めましょう. (Then, let us begin.)"

After speaking in Japanese, he pressed a button on the table, and three semi-transparent screens appeared in a triangular formation at the center of the circular table, each displaying red characters.

【紅】【友】【會】

This was the Honguhoe (紅友會), signifying a brotherhood forged in a crimson spirit.

Soon the characters vanished, and three masked figures appeared.

Different from the previous masks...

There was Hannya, with icy blue eyes, fearsome protruding fangs, and two large horns.

Tengu, with a stern expression and long nose over a red face.

And lastly, Hakushikijou, whose wrinkled brow, narrow eyes, and long white beard were set in place.

After a moment of silence, Hakushikijou, with a voice distorted by a modulator, spoke from the screen.

[As you all know, our group's fortunes of late have not been favorable. To name just a few... The failure to secure TN SOFT, setbacks in acquiring shares of Taeshin Group, and the failed funds transfer at Hwain Techon. On top of that, we've lost multiple operatives and had to close several branch offices.]

As Hakushikijou spoke, the expressions of the four who were present darkened along with the surroundings.

He continued.

[Because of this, there have been considerable setbacks in our original plans. Determining that internal recovery would be difficult, we decided, inevitably, to issue a summons for the first time in four years.]

National Intelligence Service, supreme Prosecutors' Office, and major conglomerates.

Even the four sitting here in the open wielded considerable influence within South Korea.

The impact of such people uniting for a cause could not be underestimated.

Yet the somber mood revealed how differently things had turned out from what they had hoped.

It was then that Tengu spoke from the screen, breaking his silence.

[We spent three years rebuilding our group after it was cut in half. The matter was sensitive, so we operated as covertly as possible. But not only did things go awry from the very first step, how do you explain exposing our operatives in Russia?]

A silence fell over the group.

Im Deok-chang, as Hyottoko, swallowed hard, his Adam's apple moving. Everything Tengu mentioned had been under his authority.

"As you know, the Vladivostok incident in Russia was not my unilateral decision. During the operation, we discovered traces of Gordon Grimes—already flagged as a person of interest by our group—which left us with no choice but to send in operatives."

Eventually, he had drawn Baek Ji-woong into the decision to eliminate Tae Ju-ha.

Naturally, Baek Ji-woong did not take this sitting down.

"I have something to say about that as well. As Hyottoko said, I did agree. However, as I reported, my agreement was only about dealing with Tae Ju-ha over the Taeshin Group shares issue; I did not agree to the entire operation."

"What kind of sophistry is that? You agreed, but you won't take responsibility?"

"I submitted several reports on Kang In-hyuk through my subordinate, Baek Si-hwan. The need for caution was clearly stated. But Hyottoko disregarded this and led the operatives, not just failing the operation but exposing them, too."

Im Deok-chang could not immediately respond. He had been the one to request those reports several times.

He clenched his fist and glared at Baek Ji-woong across the table as if he wanted to kill him.

Hakushikijou spoke again.

[Exposure is one thing, but Gordon Grimes was a ruse planted by an external force occupying the airport servers. Failing to see through that was Hyottoko's mistake. But the person who squandered operatives by closing branch offices without authorization is also not blameless.]

This time it was a rebuke aimed at Baek Ji-woong.

As this was coming from Hakushikijou, one of the highest-ranking executives, no one could take it lightly.

Baek Ji-woong, of course, decided he couldn't stay quiet under these circumstances.

"If this summons is simply to assign blame, then there are many here who must be held responsible."

Kwon So-jeong and Jung Yoon-joo, sitting to his sides, shot sharp looks at him.

Kwon So-jeong's problem was that the $1.4 billion she siphoned off through Hwain Techon ended up in the hands of the French government.

And Jung Yoon-joo failed to handle things in the prosecutor's office when the plan fell apart.

As no one was free from blame, Baek Ji-woong purposely brought up the issue forcefully.

On the screen, Hakushikijou was silent for a moment, then spoke again.

[I didn't expect the chairman to speak so boldly with Kitsune seated at your side.]

"This is for the group, isn't it? And I would think those above us know best that now is the time for solutions, not assigning blame."

If scapegoats had been needed, Baek Ji-woong would have been dealt with when he disposed of the Daemyung Detective Agency branch without authorization.

He provoked everyone, thinking that he knew the organization's tendencies and movements well enough himself.

Tengu's gaze from behind the mask shifted to Baek Ji-woong.

[As the chairman said, we are not gathered here to debate right and wrong. What we need now is a game-changer to set the winds back in our favor.]

[Does Tengu have something in mind?]

In response to Hakushikijou's question, tengu hesitated slightly before answering.

[First, we need to erase the traces of exposure. Hyottoko, how is the National Intelligence Service dealing with the Russia situation?]

The question was directed at Im Deok-chang.

"I am currently the person in charge of dealing with our operatives who were moved in Europe by myself, and the investigation into the funds discovered in Notex's luggage, centered on the Second Division. They are currently investigating a Korean employee of Notex."

[How are you handling it?]

Tengu asked in return.

"If I were to deal with the European operatives just like I did when I was head of the Asia branch, it would only draw more suspicion. So I think we have to clean things up by eliminating some parts of Songchon's overseas unit."

Songchon was a secret organization within the National Intelligence Service, rumored among government high-level officials and entrepreneurs.

It was not fiction; Im Deok-chang was currently managing it.

[You think that's the only way to keep things clean?]

"We're already under suspicion. If the matter isn't wrapped up with a convincing result for the Director, they'll trace it back to Songchon and possibly discover us as well."

Tengu nodded in his masked form.

[It sounds unavoidable. Do the others agree?]

This was directed at Hakushikijou and Hannya, who had remained silent.

[I agree.]

[I concur.]

With those answers, Im Deok-chang exhaled a small sigh of relief.

Hakushikijou moved to another topic.

[If the National Intelligence Service's side is to be cleaned up using Songchon, what about Notex? If they are tracked, could it not endanger the connection to Hwain Techon and even the W&W Group?]

Im Deok-chang tensed again.

"I am to be in charge of the investigation of the Korean employee at Notex."

[When was that decided?]

"... About a week ago. However, I intended to report only after preparations were complete and command authority was confirmed."

At this, Hakushikijou gazed at him quietly.

Tengu took over the questioning.

[By taking it on, do you mean to resolve it personally? Couldn't something strange be discovered inside the National Intelligence Service?]

The Korean employees at Notex had been WID agents from the start.

While handling the funds, they'd been in charge of surveillance and security, and died in Oruch Al Pasha's attack.

Of course, their true identities had to remain secret forever.

"I'll wrap up the matter in a way that avoids undue suspicion within the NIS. Of course, should anything go awry, I'll cut it off at my level."

This situation had left him quite isolated.

Had he not taken over this matter from the Director, Jin Jong-man, things might have become even more precarious.

[Let's trust you to it. Does anyone else object?]

Everyone gave their silent assent.

But as there was still an important matter left, Hakushikijou spoke again.

[Now we must decide how to handle the missing funds. Does the W&W Group have a plan?]

Baek Ji-woong cleared his throat and responded.

"We're planning to liquidate some companies we were working on after the Hwain Techon case. Not all of them, but we expect to raise at least $300 million immediately."

That was more than 400 billion won.

[So you intend to bring forward the replenishment from other companies as well.]

There was still a shortfall of $1.1 billion. Bringing it up required companies as big as Hwain Techon, which would not be easy and would take time.

"Given the Hwain Techon case, it's difficult to raise such a sum all at once. If too many things like this happen, traces might be left behind."

Everyone understood.

[None of us are unaware of the situation, so let's use this to take care of the immediate emergency.]

Tengu and Hannya simply nodded in silent agreement, as before.

In this way, most matters covered by the summons had been discussed.

At that moment, Hannya, who had been silent since a single earlier reply, opened his mouth.

[There's one other matter I'd like to share.]

Hannya was responsible for overseeing and training WID operatives.

Normally, he almost never spoke up, so everyone looked a little surprised.

[And what is that?]

Tengu queried, and Hannya continued.

[Someone visited the area where our camp used to be.]

With that explanation, everyone's faces grew tense.

Even Hakushikijou and Tengu's mask, on the screens, seemed subdued.

Tengu put forth the next question.

[By the area where the camp used to be... do you mean the Naya region of Mongolia?]

[Correct.]

The WID camp was an extremely secret location.

Even the top executives knew only roughly where it was, and no one could visit it without Hannya's approval.

It was so far from any local village that an accidental visit was virtually impossible.

[Have you identified who it was?]

[I took a picture.]

At his answer, one side of the screen filled with a photograph uploaded by Hannya.

Several people's expressions became even more grim at once.

"... Skull."

It was a photograph of a person in a black combat suit and a full-face skull mask.

[Is this the same 'Skull' as in the earlier reports?]

Hannya, never having seen him in person, asked dubiously.

Im Deok-chang explained.

"From the mask, I'd say so. We also suspect that this outfit is the standard attire of those in the organization related to Skull."

Because Skull appeared so unpredictably, they believed he was not just a single person.

[Then Skull appearing in Naya... that must have been due to information leaking from the Korean side.]

The atmosphere grew more serious at Hannya's grim utterance.

Skull had first appeared when he infiltrated the KQ Group disguised as a security guard and killed Pyo Jun-woo and other operatives.

At the time, Pyo Jun-woo had disclosed the Naya region, and Baek Si-hwan, then a second-class agent, silenced him—but it was already too late.

Naturally, this information had reached the Organization, and Hannya immediately relocated the camp.

And yet, Skull had found his way to that very spot.

The atmosphere around the round table grew even heavier.

Chapter 115

Not Really

【NIS02: Third Deputy Director visits Japan. Additionally, the third deputy director plans to investigate Notex's Korean staff involved in the Gulf of Guinea incident.】

In-hyuk checked the message in the division director's office at Taeshin Asset Management.

At the same time, he opened another message he'd received a few hours earlier.

【W&W5344: Chairman Baek Ji-woong and his wife are on a business trip to Japan.】

The messages came from people he had connected/poached within the National Intelligence Service and the W&W Group.

It was no coincidence that both had moved to the same place at the same time—their movements were bound to seem suspicious.

With that, he entered a different channel of Ghost Link and sent a new message.

【Guest5436: Can you check the departure records at Incheon International Airport?】

This was sent to Go Mi-ah from the account he first used in Ghost Link.

【Red Witch: That's not hard. Who are you looking for? You don't know where they entered?】

【Guest5436: National Intelligence Service third deputy director Im Deok-chang, W&W Group's Baek Ji-woong and Kwon So-jeong. Destination is Japan for now. Please check which airport. If possible, also their route outside the airport.】

【Red Witch: Hold on.】

After a brief wait, a reply came back.

【Red Witch: All three arrived at Narita Airport in Japan. Entered two hours apart. According to the N-System records, they all went to a golf course called Itako Country Club.】

【Guest5436: Can't check the internal CCTV?】

【Red Witch: Figured you'd ask. I accessed the membership system, but it looks like security is managed offline—nothing came up. The names you mentioned weren't on the reservation list either.】

In-hyuk fell into thought for a moment.

The very fact that these three people visited the same place was strange.

"Are they having a meeting arranged by the organizations they belong to?"

Muttering, he wrote another message.

【Guest5436: Can you check the owners of all vehicles that entered the golf course on that day via entrance CCTV? If it's a rental car, also the renter.】

No immediate response came.

【Red Witch: All of them?】

【Guest5436: Yes, all of them please. I'll pay one million won per car.】

【Red Witch: Ok! I'll bleed your account dry.】

That concluded the conversation.

In-hyuk turned his attention back to the computer to review the documents awaiting his approval.

Ddiririri—ddiririri—

At that moment, the internal call rang and Baek Si-hwan's voice followed.

[Division director, you have a guest on the first floor.]

"A guest? I don't recall any meeting scheduled for today."

In the first place, In-hyuk had never called anyone to the office before.

[It's Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu from KQ Distribution.]

At the sound of that name, In-hyuk's brow furrowed.

"Haa... Understood. Please bring him up."

[Should I escort him somewhere else?]

Usually, when a VIP visited, they were led to a conference room or separate lounge.

Of course, there was no lounge at Taeshin Asset Management, so the conference room was the obvious choice.

"I have a lot to do. Please bring him here."

[I'll do that.]

Not getting a response, Kang Cheon-gyu had resorted to coming to the company himself.

It wasn't long before there was a stir in the MP Division's office. That alone was enough to know who had arrived.

Soon after a knock, the door opened and Kang Cheon-gyu entered along with his secretary, Noh Geun-cheol.

"What would you like to drink?"

"A hot coffee would be good."

In-hyuk glanced at Noh Geun-cheol.

"I'm fine."

"I'll have a cold canned drink, please."

Baek Si-hwan, having stepped out, returned with the drinks as ordered.

"You can return to your work now. I'll call if I need anything."

"... Understood."

Baek Si-hwan's voice was tinged with disappointment as he left again.

In-hyuk then sat opposite Kang Cheon-gyu and opened his canned drink.

Click—

"I didn't expect you to come in person, chairman."

"I had no choice. You made me worry about everything and then I couldn't even reach you after you returned to Korea."

Kang Cheon-gyu had been stunned the moment he saw reports of In-hyuk's attack in Vladivostok, Russia.

What's more, the person involved had gone missing for two weeks—his concern only grew day by day.

"If you weren't in some remote place, you must have seen it on the news."

"That's not what I mean. And you left the country while I was preparing the press conference. Did you know what I was planning to do in advance?"

It was all too coincidental that In-hyuk had left Korea at that timing.

"No, it was just a coincidence."

"Really? Then, by not responding to my calls... does that mean you refuse to become a KQ man?"

In-hyuk let out a deep sigh.

"I clearly refused last time as well."

"And you added conditions. You said you'd consider it when things were settled within the company."

That had been when they found the listening device at Kang Cheon-gyu's residence.

He had figured that even if he could sort out Kang Do-young, Kang Cheon-gyu wouldn't be able to deal with Jeon Hae-in, who owned some KQ Distribution shares.

"I've heard that my article has stirred things up within KQ Group. But I haven't heard any talk of matters being settled."

Kang Cheon-gyu smiled faintly.

"So you didn't lose interest."

"You're an investment business partner, after all."

In-hyuk waited for him to explain.

"Anyway, I'm planning to keep CEO Jeon Hae-in from getting involved in the management of KQ Distribution by separating the department store completely for her."

That was the surest method. But it came with the biggest problem as well.

"Will she give up her shares?"

"I wouldn't handle things carelessly. Still, I need your strength for that."

After a moment's thought, In-hyuk had no problem guessing the method.

"So you plan to blackmail her using the slush fund she diverted through department store and other affiliates."

Kang Cheon-gyu looked surprised.

"... You knew about the slush fund?"

"Just judging from KQ Department Store's management situation, I suspected there'd be problems. At the very least, tax evasion, embezzlement of renovation funds, false sales figures."

"Anyone would think you could read companies' fortunes."

It wasn't fortune-telling—in the original future, he already knew Jeon Hae-in would be investigated by prosecutors.

"So, if you're asking me to get involved, does that mean you want me to clean up the aftermath after you cause a stir?"

"That's accurate. No spiritual powers or anything, right?"

"... I'm not in the mood for jokes."

When In-hyuk turned more serious, Kang Cheon-gyu's smile faded, too.

"If you come to KQ, you'd have to do this anyway. It'll look great to shareholders and the board."

In the end, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu planned to use his wife, the KQ Group matron Jeon Hae-in, as a sacrifice to bring in In-hyuk as his successor.

"I'm not eager. And I only said I'd consider it if things were settled, not that I'd join KQ no matter what."

That had been the exact condition.

And as befitting a chairman, Kang Cheon-gyu came up with a crafty trick.

"To be honest, it's frustrating. Is it because of your wife? If so, you two could join KQ together without divorcing. Naturally, I can prepare the position CEO Tae Ju-ha wants."

Wrinkles appeared on In-hyuk's brow. Clearly there was a major misunderstanding.

"As I said before, I have lots to do here. This isn't something for you to decide based on your own ambitions, Chairman Kang."

Was it because of the slightly tense atmosphere? For a moment, Kang Cheon-gyu was at a loss for words, sipping his coffee with a strange look.

"Maybe I spoke too strongly because I believe you can achieve what I couldn't."

"I'm not someone who realizes other people's dreams. And if you want something, do it yourself."

A brief silence passed before Kang Cheon-gyu asked back.

"Usually, wouldn't you wonder what I want from you?"

"Not really. And if you can't handle management, rather than leaving it to me, hire a professional manager."

He showed no sign of backing down.

Kang Cheon-gyu let out a long sigh through his nose.

"I'll be heading back for today."

"I have a lot of work, so I'd appreciate it if you left quickly."

"No matter what, I'm your father—aren't you being too harsh?"

"I just don't feel anything. And I'll only see you out to the office door."

In-hyuk stood and opened the door himself. It was more a signal to get out quickly than a gesture of politeness.

"You're really too much."

"It's you who's being too much, chairman."

Kang Cheon-gyu, looking disappointed, walked out with Noh Geun-cheol. The office staff busied themselves whispering as they watched the two leave.

Then Noh Dongjun cautiously approached In-hyuk.

"Why did Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu come all the way here? Wait—was he trying to take you with him?"

Apparently, Noh Dongjun had become comfortable speaking informally again.

"Well, something like that."

"Really? Then should I sprinkle some salt?" [T/N: A joke—like warding off bad luck.]

Surprised, In-hyuk stared at him, leaning against the door.

"....."

"What? If he wants to poach you, it's bad for our company! Or is it awkward because he's your dad?"

"You sure can run your mouth."

Noh Dongjun shrugged.

"It's my livelihood—I'll say what I have to. Besides, our division only runs well with Director Kang In-hyuk."

" 'Director' only at times like this? I heard you even got angry when people in the company gossiped that I might be dead?"

At that, Noh Dongjun scratched his head, looking sheepish.

"Huh? Of course I did!"

"But what's this I heard about you saying I'd survive no matter what thanks to my cockroach-like vitality?"

Noh Dongjun was startled, laughing awkwardly.

"Oh, you heard that?"

"You talked about it so much it even reached me."

Noh Dongjun quickly moved away from In-hyuk.

"Ah, I forgot, I have a meeting with Finance Team! I'll get back to work, director!"

His only solution was to escape. Noh Dongjun grabbed some nonexistent materials and disappeared out of the office.

Watching that, In-hyuk could only shake his head.

"Honestly..."

Bzzz— bzzz—

His phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a breaking alert from an economics article.

Checking it, In-hyuk smiled.

【Taeshin Semiconductor: Expected to participate in the semiconductor production process for Taiwan's SolarView and China's Mobricks joint smartphone project? Currently in contract negotiations, their diode stability and packaging technology have been recognized...】

【Taiwan SolarView confirms HK$1 billion investment from Hong Kong's SGA! Having secured investment, solarView is expected to successfully supply semiconductors for Mobricks' next-generation smartphones....】

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The business that Chairman Tae Gun-seung had discussed with him was quietly progressing and had now surfaced publicly.

Of course, it wasn't due to independent coverage—Taeshin Group had distributed a press release.

"This will prop up the stock price for now."

In-hyuk glanced at Baek Si-hwan, seated at the secretary's desk behind him.

As always, he showed no unusual movements. He was merely moving to earn In-hyuk's trust.

I wish this novel gets a K-Drama adaptation...

Chapter 116

Calm Down

Night had fallen.

In-hyuk was sitting in his office, checking the list of vehicle owners and renters who had accessed Itako Country Club—data Go Mi-ah had sent him via cloud—on his tablet.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Baek Si-hwan poked his head in.

"Aren't you leaving for the day?"

It was already a little past the expected time to finish work.

"I still have some materials to review, so you go on ahead."

"... Is there anything I can help with?"

"No."

As In-hyuk declined firmly, Baek Si-hwan bowed his head slightly and headed toward the elevator.

From his seat on the sofa, Hong Yu-geon, who had been watching, muttered apathetically.

"That kid is something else, too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way he stays so quietly and brazenly every day, even with Chairman Baek Ji-woong behind him. Just by how he behaves, you'd think he was the very definition of a loyal subject."

Memories of the previous life In-hyuk had spent with Baek Si-hwan at his side flickered through his mind.

At the end of that, he remembered facing Si-hwan's face for the first time just as his own breath gave out.

Crunch—

At that moment, the tablet screen warped as one corner cracked under the strength of In-hyuk's grip.

"What kind of strength... Did you eat a wild ginseng or something when we weren't looking?"

"I suddenly remembered someone unpleasant."

"Whoever that is, if he can make our boss feel this bad, his life probably won't end nicely."

It was an earnest mutter.

Shortly after, In-hyuk opened the cloud file he'd been reviewing earlier on his computer.

As he flipped through the vehicle owner information page by page, his hand suddenly paused.

"This person visited that place?"

His murmur made the atmosphere turn grim, and Hong Yu-geon came closer.

"Someone you know?"

The personal info listed just name, age, nationality, and a few simple facts.

But with the memories from his previous life, In-hyuk could easily spot anyone he'd seen even once, or anyone with significant social influence.

"From the Prosecutors' Office."

"... The prosecution?"

"To be exact, supreme Prosecutors' Office Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju."

"That's really high up, isn't it?"

"Right. Just below the Prosecutor General. And look at that—on the same day as Im Deok-chang, Baek Ji-woong, and Kwon So-jeong, she visited the golf club."

Hong Yu-geon fully understood the seriousness of the situation.

"Should we tail her?"

"No. She'll have agents around her like the others, so we might get caught instead. And she's not someone careless enough to make herself so easy to find."

Anyway, it wasn't certain that Jung Yoon-ju belonged to the same group as them.

Even if she did, the mere fact that they'd met up all the way in Japan showed how meticulous they were; there was little chance any obvious evidence would present itself.

"So, what do we do?"

"We make her move on her own."

"There's a way to do that?"

Van Hester, seated a little off to the side, also looked curious.

With that, In-hyuk curled his lips in a slight smile.

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Seoul, office of the Deputy General Manager of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

The room's owner, Jung Yoon-ju, was speaking on the phone in a quiet, chilly voice.

"Whether it's overzealousness or some laughable sense of justice, are you telling me you can't handle even that much by yourself?"

The person on the other end was Ahn Seung-joo, deputy General Manager at the Busan District Prosecutors' Office.

He was also high up, but couldn't quite compare to the Deputy General Manager at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

[As you know, since the Chulsan Capital incident, chief Prosecutor Park Du-seok has been in a very foul mood.]

Park Du-seok at Busan District Prosecutors' Office was the very person who, during the RyzeBurn incident when the mood among prosecutors and police in the capital region became unsettled, tried to leverage the Chulsan Capital case to move up, but failed.

"Always, the greedier someone is, the nastier their intentions... So, you're saying you can't conveniently bury the Sungkwang Construction case?"

Sungkwang Construction had recently come under investigation by the Busan District Prosecutors' Office for embezzlement, breach of trust, and kickbacks involving subcontractors.

The problem was that Sungkwang Construction's Chairman Woo Jae-deok was connected with the organization Jung Yoon-ju belonged to.

As they covered for each other, the prosecution simply had to lend some strength here.

Sensing trouble, Jung Yoon-ju pressed for more.

"... So things are loud at the moment—do we have nothing usable to serve as a distraction?"

She wanted another case to shove to the front to draw public attention away, while working out how to resolve the critical matter.

[There's the neglected case of the lawmaker's son and a police bribery case.]

"Who is it?"

[The lawmaker is Bae Seong-gil, who's in his third term as a city councilman, and the police officer is an inspector at Dongnae Police Station.]

Jung Yoon-ju furrowed his brow and clicked his tongue.

"Knew it, it's always the kids... But why did you shelve the case if it was just an inspector?"

Although being an inspector was decently high ranking, it wasn't especially so.

And the size of the case was big enough that Busan District Prosecutors' Office could have exposed it already; it was odd that it had been left alone.

[It involved taking bribes from a local gang. The offender turns out to be the nephew of the Nambu Provincial Agency chief. There's faint evidence that some of the money passed on to the chief himself, so we kept it on ice.]

Listening, Jung Yoon-ju shook her head.

"What a mess... Let's blow both cases in sequence then."

[You mean both?]

"Councilman Bae is a slippery one—he'd rather sacrifice his son to keep his position. Wait until the situation calms, then have Deputy General Manager Ahn use the police card to negotiate. If you time it right, it won't be hard for us to cover things up for them."

A sigh drifted through the receiver from Ahn Seung-joo.

[I understand. What about Chief Prosecutor Park, who'll keep after Sungkwang Construction?]

That was the critical issue left.

"Wasn't it well known that Chief Prosecutor Park and Councilman Bae used to be thick as thieves in their town? I hear they've fallen out these days, though I'm not sure what over. If you pretend you'll help with his son's matter, I'm sure you'll get something out of that."

A sigh escaped Ahn Seung-joo once more.

[I'll proceed as you say.]

After ending the call, Jung Yoon-ju removed the glasses perched on the tip of her nose and placed them on the desk alongside her phone.

"What a mess, just full of lacking brats..."

Her gaze drifted to the inside of her left ring finger.

There, where the palm met her finger, was a small tattoo. You'd have to really look to notice it.

At the same time, she recalled that organization meeting they had in Japan recently.

"... What on earth is about to happen?"

The sigh escaped on its own.

Plans had started to go awry since the RyzeBurn incident.

A huge number of people—businessmen, children of high-ranking officials, celebrities—got caught up.

Among those exposed were even many who had been protecting RyzeBurn on the prosecution and police side, and some of them were connected to Jung Yoon-ju.

Many of those connections had been wiped out.

The scale and fallout of the case were so enormous, even Jung Yoon-ju couldn't act as a shield.

If she got pulled in, she'd face the same fate, so the only option was to keep her head down as much as possible.

Drrring—Drrring—

Just then the internal call sounded, and the secretary for the deputy general manager spoke.

[Deputy General Manager. The Head of the Anti-Corruption Division, Jo Moo-yeol, is here to see you.]

"Let him in."

The door opened with that reply.

As Jo Moo-yeol walked to the desk, Jung Yoon-ju exhaled through her nose.

"What's the matter?"

"We received a whistleblower tip at the Anti-Corruption Division."

He extended the file he was carrying across the desk.

Picking it up, Jung Yoon-ju tilted her head and read through it. Simultaneously, Jo Moo-yeol began to explain, his voice heavy.

"Several prosecutors are accused of abuse of power, brokered bribery, investigation cover-ups, indigenous corruption, and so on... In total, there are 28 cases."

"Twenty-eight?"

"And 18 prosecutors are implicated: specifically, two chief prosecutors, five department managers, and eleven regular prosecutors."

"Whew..."

Jung Yoon-ju's face twisted as she stared at the file.

Just as Jo Moo-yeol said, it listed the real names, affiliated district prosecutors' offices, and detailed the various corruption allegations.

The problem was that it included connections and photos of meetings with certain individuals serving as evidence, property registers if bribes were involved, and case records of incidents that had been covered up.

"Even just on the face of it, these are too serious to overlook, so I brought them directly."

"... Have you confirmed the veracity of these claims?"

"A few are already under investigation by us. As for the rest, just on content alone, it's hard to consider them unrelated."

Something struck Jung Yoon-ju.

"Who sent this?"

"It came anonymously via email, so we haven't identified the tipster yet. We've requested an IP trace for verification."

"For now, hold off on these cases, and focus on finding the whistleblower first."

That order made Jo Moo-yeol uneasy.

"Given the seriousness, wouldn't it be best to investigate simultaneously?"

"Let's first find out the tipster's intentions. Since this concerns the prosecution's reputation, we must clarify everything before acting, or we could have problems."

"But...."

"Just do as I say."

Jo Moo-yeol withdrew.

"... Understood."

"Report to me as soon as you find anything about the tipster."

With those additional instructions, Jo Moo-yeol left.

Left alone once more, Jung Yoon-ju couldn't smooth out the frown that had creased her brow for some time.

Nearly half the prosecutors named in the anonymous tip were her own people.

If the investigation advanced as things were, the problem could grow out of control.

It might even turn into a second RyzeBurn crisis.

"Just who... how did they find out all this?"

These cases were ones only insiders could possibly know.

Besides, it wasn't the type of thing the people involved would ever speak openly about.

The matters weren't linked by case, either; this was a systematic attack on the prosecution itself.

Unless someone had organized an investigation and targeted them, it was impossible to know this much.

Jung Yoon-ju, to check the situation, called up one of the chief prosecutors listed on the whistleblower memo.

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At the same time.

In-hyuk sat in a private room at the 'Hoam' restaurant in Cheongdam neighborhood, waiting for Jang Hyung-cheol, who used to own Chulsan Capital but was now the CEO of AMK Bridge.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

At that moment, a message arrived.

[... Delivered.]

After checking the contents, In-hyuk nodded just as the door to the room opened.

Jang Hyung-cheol, whom he had arranged to meet today, had arrived.

"So you really did survive after all."

There was a faint air of resentment to his tone.

In-hyuk cracked a slight smile.

"Were you hoping I hadn't?"

"You came back to Korea a while ago, but you only contacted me now. I thought you were dead."

Jang Hyung-cheol clicked his tongue and sat across from him.

"Thank you for worrying."

"Tsk—! Who's worrying? Still, considering what happened, you came back without a scratch."

"Just lucky, I suppose."

On those words, Jang Hyung-cheol's face twitched.

"This isn't the first time... Just like last time, isn't it all because of KQ's Jeon Hae-in?"

The fact that In-hyuk was the illegitimate son of KQ Group's Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu was now common knowledge.

In such circumstances, it was obvious whom In-hyuk's existence threatened.

"Well, who knows?"

"It's obvious to anyone. There's no one in this business who doesn't know how vicious that woman's temper is."

"I hear the Russian authorities and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are looking into it, so all we can do is wait."

Of course, he didn't expect results. The forces at play behind the scenes—like Kooou—would suppress things anyway.

Still, Jang Hyung-cheol's voice grew more vehement, not knowing that.

"It's obvious! Your talent threatened her, that's why!"

For some reason, he seemed genuinely agitated.

In response, In-hyuk raised both hands to calm him down.

"Let's calm down a bit."

"Hoo..."

"In any case, I wanted to meet today both to exchange greetings and discuss business."

"Business?"

In an instant, the fierceness left Jang Hyung-cheol's expression.

Chapter 117

The Head of Aoshika

In-hyuk, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the sight of Jang Hyung-cheol's suddenly sparkling eyes, took a sip of the water beside him.

"If you want to hear the story, could you do something about that look in your eyes first?"

"Hm? What are you talking about?"

"You're already making so much money, but you still want more?"

Only then did Jang Hyung-cheol back down a little, clearing his throat.

"Hrmm—! It's not so much greed as it is expectation. You and AMK, both, keep raking in huge profits from whatever you touch. How can I just sit back and watch that?"

"You're good with words."

"Well, what can I do? I just have to take whatever comes my way. Hahaha—!"

In-hyuk shook his head at his brazen answer.

Jang Hyung-cheol stopped laughing and continued speaking.

"So, what kind of business is it? If it's according to the nature of Bridge... is it a corporate loan case?"

This was because they were now a financial company under AMK Partners, not just a moneylending firm.

Of course, what they did wasn't much different from before, but their image, credibility, and stability were all better than before.

"That's right. There's a company with strong growth potential. We're planning to expand this time."

Jang Hyung-cheol cocked his head slightly.

"Then wouldn't it be fine to have Taeshin Asset Management invest? Or just acquire it."

"We're already investing. But we can't keep doing it with no strings attached. Also, we're not considering an acquisition. The other side doesn't want that either."

"I see. Do you have any material?"

In-hyuk handed over the envelope he had placed next to him.

"It's a company called Myungshin Tech. Please take a look, discuss it internally, and decide."

"If I just blindly trust your proposal, wouldn't that look like I have no discernment? I'll check carefully and then decide. But... are you really okay?"

He was bringing up the incident where their lives had been targeted.

Jang Hyung-cheol's expression was filled with worry.

"Well, I'm not dead, so I guess it's fine."

"How can you say that? Weren't those the guys who used guns and even bombs to carry out a terror attack?"

However, their real target had been Tae Ju-ha, not In-hyuk.

What he felt during the escape from Vladivostok was that they had moved meticulously to kill her.

'It means information about the company with Taeshin Group's shares was leaked to those guys. But Tae Seok-ho still seems unaware of this.'

Next to Tae Seok-ho was Reina Blackwood. Just like Baek Si-hwan, she was confirmed to be affiliated with Kooou.

If information wasn't shared between them, then it was clear they were being thoroughly exploited.

After a brief moment of thought, In-hyuk smiled faintly.

"I'm taking precautions too. I don't intend to be taken down easily, either."

"Huh... is it really as easy as you say? Of course, you being safe so many times is impressive, but at this rate, you could get sniped."

From the look of things, Kooou was clearly working to determine the heirs of both Taeshin Group and KQ Group.

In-hyuk, at this point, was the biggest concern for Taeshin Group Chairman Tae Gun-seung and a leading candidate for KQ Group's next successor.

Because he now wielded such influence, Kooou also couldn't move against him easily.

Of course, In-hyuk wasn't being careless either.

He was always keeping his location and destination concealed and prepared for whatever might happen.

"If those guys needed that kind of method, I'd already be dead. So there's no need to worry too much."

"I still wonder if you'll really be okay."

"In any case, please review the material I just gave you. If the company accepts, it would look good for AMK Partners to acquire it as well."

Jang Hyung-cheol let out a hearty laugh.

"In that case, wouldn't you benefit more than me since you already invested in the company?"

"We're both going to profit. I'm counting on you."

"I should be the one thanking you. And I really hope you don't get hurt."

It was a sincere concern.

Having finished their important conversation, the two began their meal.

* * *

A few days later, at a UID safehouse on the outskirts of Suwon, Gyeonggi Province.

Jung Yoon-ju, the deputy general manager and prosecutor at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, hurried into the house, which was lit up inside.

Inside, chairman Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group and Im Deok-chang, the deputy general manager of the National Intelligence Service, were already waiting.

"What's the reason you suddenly called us together?"

The question came from Im Deok-chang.

Jung Yoon-ju, walking up to the sofa, placed the envelope in her hand down with a grave expression.

"Please take a look at this first."

Im Deok-chang, looking puzzled, pulled out the photos from the envelope. Baek Ji-woong, who was seated beside him, checked the contents as well.

A brief silence passed, then Jung Yoon-ju spoke again.

"Two days ago, the Anti-Corruption Division at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office received a tip about prosecutor corruption. When I looked into their identity, it turned out to be someone who belonged to Taeshin Group's security team but suddenly went missing about a year ago."

Sensing something odd, Baek Ji-woong called Do Jung-geol, who was standing further back, to confirm.

"I think it's Kim Seong-tae, a Level 4 intelligence agent from TSS who was managed by our side."

That explanation made Baek Ji-woong's face twist slightly.

Meanwhile, Jung Yoon-ju asked, her curiosity piqued.

"You say 'was'—so they're not anymore?"

After exchanging a glance with Baek Ji-woong, Do Jung-geol finished the explanation.

"About a year ago, when an operation failed and we tried to extract a compromised agent, the tail was caught and he was disposed of."

"Are you sure?"

"We didn't leave a body behind. But was this really taken two days ago?"

Because according to Jung Yoon-ju, the agent—already presumed dead—had appeared to disclose information about prosecutor corruption.

"How can you say that, even after seeing this?"

Kim Seong-tae in the photo was captured on a vehicle's black box.

It was discovered only after searching around a nearby internet café, because the IP address used couldn't be tracked.

With a serious expression, Baek Ji-woong spoke up.

"Right now, the only suspicious group is Skull."

At the time, it was Skull who subdued Kim Seong-tae, Pyo Jun-woo, and other agents at the scene.

It was obvious that only their side would have a reason to suspect or impersonate him.

"Is there any reason for them to deliberately disguise themselves as Kim Seong-tae and do this?"

While still examining the photos, Im Deok-chang interjected.

"It's a kind of warning."

"... A warning?"

Baek Ji-woong echoed, drawing Jung Yoon-ju's attention.

"I don't know exactly how they did it, but by putting forward Kim Seong-tae—who is already dead—they're warning us that they know about us."

Everyone's expressions turned grim, apparently convinced.

Then, Baek Ji-woong let out a long sigh through his nose.

"For now, we should report this to the Organization."

"And this tip about corruption—does it pose a problem?"

At Im Deok-chang's question, a long sigh escaped Jung Yoon-ju's lips as well.

"It was information about corruption involving 18 prosecutors. Some of them are under my command, so I'm troubled about how to deal with it."

"That's what they were aiming for. But there's no way they know exactly who are your people. So non-targets are likely mixed in."

But that didn't mean they could rest easy. Everyone in the room understood this, so no one relaxed.

After pondering for a moment, Baek Ji-woong spoke up.

"Were you unable to track where the person disguised as Kim Seong-tae went?"

"They disappeared in an area with low CCTV coverage. The email was sent from a PC café, so there were no fingerprints, and because they used cash, there were no other leads."

"They're extremely thorough. How on earth did they find out about us...?"

"So this mess started because you failed to deal with Skull at the outset."

That muttering was clearly provocative.

However, even Baek Ji-woong couldn't protest, as Im Deok-chang's point wasn't wrong.

"Shouldn't we be coming up with countermeasures?"

"We don't know anything about those guys, do we?"

So far, all they'd discovered was someone with an unidentified, full-face skull mask.

Moreover, Skull had also appeared not long ago in Naya, Mongolia, where the WID camp had been located.

They didn't know the details, but it felt as if the threat had come far closer than expected.

Lost in thought, Baek Ji-woong cautiously opened his mouth again.

"... How about the hypothesis that AMK Partners is behind them?"

"AMK?"

"The timing of their involvement lines up with AMK Partners' emergence. Plus, they have plenty of capital, and they've interfered with our operations multiple times—taking TN SOFT away from us, for one."

Im Deok-chang's brow furrowed at the mention of his failure.

"Hrmm! Would AMK have a reason to target us?"

"If Aoshika is behind them?"

Everyone's face hardened.

Aoshika had been the original headquarters of the Hongu Society, which they all once belonged to, until four years ago.

However, due to internal strife and taking a huge blow, the society's head, Nomen, vanished along with it.

Given their knowledge of the Hongu Society, the strongest opposition would likely be from there.

"If they had enough strength to grow their business and force like that, would we have been able to withstand them?"

Again, this wasn't wrong.

After a moment, Baek Ji-woong shared a story he had kept under wraps.

"What if the guy even knows about TMT?"

At the same time, Im Deok-chang's face became even more twisted.

"What are you talking about?"

"During the Pyo Jun-woo extraction, the guy also asked about TMT."

At this, Im Deok-chang jumped to his feet.

"Why are you only saying this now?!"

TMT (Tactical Murder Technique) was a combat skill developed by the Organization, along with the military special force UID under the Ministry of National Defense.

There weren't many agents who had mastered it, but unless someone belonged to WID or UID, knowledge of TMT was impossible.

Obviously, for Skull to ask about TMT meant there was a connection to the Organization.

"If it were Aoshika, there's no way they'd ask about that."

The special force UID began in 2016 and was disbanded in 2023.

Given the period when Aoshika was ousted from the Organization, if Aoshika were targeting Hongu again, they'd go after executive members, not TMT.

"Still, shouldn't you have reported it?"

"Even if I did, would anything change? We still don't know anything about those guys."

Im Deok-chang's breathing became rough, as if he were snorting.

"So, even if Skull's backer is AMK Partners, the chances of it being connected to Aoshika are slim?"

"Most likely."

"Then it's even more perplexing. If it's unrelated to Aoshika, what reason would AMK Partners have to target us?"

With one major hypothesis dismissed, it became even harder to connect the dots.

As frustration mounted, Baek Ji-woong slowly continued.

"They might be moving with a similar goal and structure as us. So for now, the best we can do with nothing to go on is just try fitting things together."

"But will that get us anywhere? We haven't even figured out Gordon Grimes' location or identity after he finally showed himself."

There was still too much shrouded in mystery.

"I'll have to put them under close surveillance. Speaking of which, is the vetting of the former Notex staff proceeding smoothly? To avoid arousing suspicion from the director, we need to be thorough."

By changing the topic, Im Deok-chang's face grew even harsher.

"So now you want a report on a problem from your side that I'm cleaning up?"

"I just want to know something."

"I'll handle it, so don't worry."

With that, the conversation ended, and Im Deok-chang was the first to leave.

Jung Yoon-ju, still watching from the living room, kept silent for a moment, then turned to Baek Ji-woong.

"Honestly, I don't know if this situation is okay."

"What can we do, even if it's not? We just have to keep moving forward...."

They had already crossed the point of no return. Now, all they could do was somehow carve out a path forward.

"I'll take my leave, too."

"See you next time."

"Not like this, I hope."

Jung Yoon-ju also headed for the door.

Not long after, the sound of a car departing from outside the safehouse was heard.

Baek Ji-woong met eyes with Do Jung-geol. After briefly checking outside, Do Jung-geol returned and gave a nod.

Baek Ji-woong pulled out his phone from his coat and made a call somewhere. When the line connected, he spoke carefully.

"Skull has found out about TMT. Nomen."

That was the name of the original head of the Hongu Society—Nomen, the head of Aoshika(青鹿).

Chapter 118

What Confession!

【28 Cases of Prosecutorial Corruption Reported to the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission and the Ministry of Justice! Regarding this, a total of 18 prosecutors whose real names have been revealed—2 sitting chief prosecutors, 5 department managers, 11 regular prosecutors... The reports included evidence of entrenched local corruption, abuse of power, concealment of investigations, receipt of solicitation money, and accompanying photos...】

【The Supreme Prosecutors' Office Received the Tip-Off on 28 Prosecutorial Corruption Cases First, yet Remains Silent? Moves First to Identify the Whistleblower's Identity... Whose Investigation Is This For?】

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It initially erupted around small internet media outlets and WeTube channels that typically handled only gossip.

Afterwards, major media outlets could no longer ignore the story and began picking it up one by one.

The world inevitably became noisy again, with no signs of quieting down.

"Hey... No, division director! Division director! Did you see this?"

Hong Yu-geon, who was sitting on the office couch reading an article on his phone, rushed over to In-hyuk in a fluster.

He was so surprised, he almost called In-hyuk by the wrong title.

"Oh, that? I already knew about it."

"Huh? You already knew?"

As Hong Yu-geon tilted his head in confusion, Van Hester also turned his gaze toward them.

"Don't tell me, you're the one who leaked it, division director?"

"That's right. It's spreading nicely, just as intended. With this, the prosecutors won't be able to keep quiet for a while."

Doubt blossomed on both their faces, and then Hong Yu-geon frowned as he asked,

"The article says the prosecutors are trying to identify the whistleblower. That means someone acted. Did you leak it directly? When?"

Since In-hyuk had been with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester most of the time, he'd hardly had the time to do it himself.

"I had someone do it."

"Who... Wait, you mean Noah Vantrail?"

"That's right."

"Why her?"

"She's skilled. So I hired her freelance this time. And Noah surprisingly agreed without hesitation."

At that, Hong Yu-geon's face looked even more disgruntled.

"We're here too, you know."

"Can either of you perfectly disguise yourselves as someone else?"

"Well, that's..."

Hong Yu-geon was at a loss for words right from the first question and became speechless.

"Sometimes I need someone trustworthy who can quietly collect information or stand in for me. Trust matters."

"What about us?"

"You're both already recognizable."

"... Tch."

In-hyuk spoke again, watching as Hong Yu-geon clicked his tongue in resignation.

"Anyway, you'll be working together from now on. If you run into her, don't always bristle so much."

"What, do I look like someone who picks a fight every time I see her?"

"I'm saying it because I know you have your reasons."

Hong Yu-geon looked at In-hyuk in surprise.

"What? Did she tell you everything?"

In-hyuk was aware of the matter between the two.

However, he'd only learned about it while working with them in his previous life, not this one.

Naturally, he couldn't explain that, so he just shrugged his shoulders.

"How much did she tell you?"

"If you mean confessing to Noah while she was undercover during a mission... I just found out myself."

Hong Yu-geon's face instantly turned bright red.

"W-what? Confession?! What confession!"

"With your taste, it's possible. There's not much age difference between you, right? Aren't you two years older than her?"

"She's definitely not my type!"

His vehement denial only made it look more suspicious. In-hyuk smiled, deciding not to tease him further.

"All right. I'll accept that. Anyway, I only hired Noah because I need her, so don't cause unnecessary trouble."

"Tch..."

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, a message came in via Ghost Link.

【Skinwalker: It's the people who came looking for the woman we tailed last time.】

The message came with photos attached.

The person Noah was assigned to monitor was Jung Yoon-ju, a deputy general manager at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

It wasn't possible to plant anyone with National Intelligence Service deputy general manager Im Deok-chang or W&W Group chairman Baek Ji-woong, since those places were so closed-off.

But Jung Yoon-ju's office could be entered by outsiders as long as they had an access card, making surveillance like this possible.

"Those are the people Jung Yoon-ju manages. Looks like there are some new faces besides those on the list I reported."

Hong Yu-geon, reviewing the contents next to In-hyuk, looked puzzled.

"How can you identify people so quickly like that?"

These details about prosecutorial corruption connected back to his previous life.

At the time, even as the head of Bluewall, In-hyuk hadn't been able to easily bring down Taeshin Group, a mainstay of Korea's economy.

He'd needed legal protection to cover up corporate crimes and had thoroughly dug up dirt on relevant prosecutors to secure their cooperation.

"Just the people with problematic records."

"What kind of information network are you using? At this point, you're putting the National Intelligence Service to shame."

"I don't lose out to them."

Despite having such power at the time, he hadn't been able to uncover the activities of the organization Kooou.

Now, in hindsight, it was obvious that Baek Si-hwan, who mainly handled Korean operations, had deliberately kept that hidden.

"That's some insane intelligence..."

"That's enough about that."

Bzzz— bzzz—

Then In-hyuk's phone vibrated again, this time with a call.

"I figured it was about time someone reached out."

The name displayed on the screen was Do Jung-geol, the secretary to W&W Group chairman Baek Ji-woong.

When he answered, Do Jung-geol's heavy voice came through.

[The chairman would like to meet with you. Are you available this evening?]

"I think I can be."

[Then I'll send you the time and location.]

In-hyuk finished the call and looked Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester in the eyes.

"Chairman Baek wants to see me."

"Chairman Baek of W&W? For what?"

"How should I know."

Soon after, a message arrived with the meeting time and place from Do Jung-geol.

Then, as In-hyuk sent something via Ghost Link to someone else, he muttered,

"Looks like it's about time for the other side to start moving too."

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The place they arrived after work was a high-end restaurant on the outskirts of Seoul.

As In-hyuk got out of the car, Do Jung-geol, who'd been waiting, approached.

"It's best if you go in alone."

Among those who got out with him was Baek Si-hwan.

In-hyuk turned to Baek Si-hwan and said,

"I'll be back, so please wait here."

"... Will you be all right?"

"There shouldn't be any issues."

He then glanced at Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester before following Do Jung-geol inside to a separate building at the restaurant.

Several rooms lined the hallway. The silence was so deep that only the creak of the floorboards echoed loudly.

Deep inside, Do Jung-geol opened a door.

Inside, WISE&WIRE Group chairman Baek Ji-woong had already arrived and stood to greet In-hyuk.

"Thank you for coming all this way. Ah, you must be hungry—bring out the food."

Baek Ji-woong caught Do Jung-geol's eye.

As if on cue, after a short wait, an assortment of Korean set menu dishes and entrees in brass bowls were brought to the table.

"The food here is excellent, that's why I often visit. Let's eat while we talk."

"Of course."

As the meal began, a short silence passed.

After about twenty minutes, when they had eaten a fair amount, In-hyuk noticed the chairman had lowered his chopsticks and spoke.

"I think we've eaten enough for now. Please, go ahead."

"I suppose I did little else but make Director Kang eat after bringing you here."

"Not at all."

Another brief silence settled, before Baek Ji-woong gazed at In-hyuk and spoke.

"I heard you had a tough time in Vladivostok?"

"I nearly died there."

"How did you manage to get all the way to Moscow, over 6,000 kilometers away, and make it back?"

In-hyuk rolled his eyes slightly and replied with a question.

"Did you ask me here just to hear about that?"

"I heard those after you used bombs and guns. You escaped from guys like that—wouldn't you be curious in my position?"

Baek Ji-woong was one of those involved behind the scenes. He'd gone out of his way to set up this meeting, clearly trying to feel things out.

"My security guard is ex-military—it helped me survive. But it seemed too risky to contact anyone there, so I used a broker and moved by train."

He recounted it as briefly as possible; it was all factual, so no one could get in trouble even if they tried to investigate.

"You must have had a rough time."

"My wife suffered more than I did."

He deliberately slipped in a familiar term to refer to Tae Ju-ha, making it sound more personal.

There was a subtle shift in Baek Ji-woong's demeanor before he opened his mouth again.

"To be honest, that's not the real reason I called you here. But before we get to that, I'd like to ask you one more thing, if that's all right."

"If it's something I can answer, of course."

"What are you planning to do about KQ Group? Frankly, that was my biggest question and the real reason I asked to see you. I wanted to hear your thoughts directly."

It was a well-known fact among Korea's business leaders that In-hyuk was chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's illegitimate son.

Articles about it kept surfacing, along with constant interview requests.

Of course, he'd refused all interviews, so most were just speculative pieces.

Normally, the owner's risk would have caused KQ Group's stock to fall, but with the downfall of the only heir Kang Do-young and In-hyuk's record at Taeshin Asset Management, shareholders saw it as a good sign.

The stock actually rebounded and climbed higher than before.

"I didn't expect W&W Group's chairman to be interested in KQ Group's matters."

"It's a competitor and I'm also a shareholder."

Unable to get the desired info through Baek Si-hwan, Baek Ji-woong had clearly come himself for answers.

"I actually turned down Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's offer. Didn't you know?"

Baek Ji-woong gave a thin smile.

"I heard as much. What I'd like to know is why you refused."

In-hyuk hardened his expression for a moment.

"I didn't expect the chairman to take an interest in my personal affairs. But I'd rather not discuss that part. Frankly, I find it unpleasant."

Whether it was the aggressive atmosphere, Baek Ji-woong slightly backed down.

"Ah, I suppose I was too blunt."

"Please, just get to the real reason."

After a brief thought, Baek Ji-woong stared at In-hyuk.

"Have you ever met Gordon Grimes, the CEO of AMK Partners, directly?"

In-hyuk replied blandly, without any change in expression.

"No, I haven't."

"Then how did you establish business with AMK Partners?"

"They contacted me first. They set up a Korean branch, but it's more in name than substance—Norman McGrath, the branch manager, handles the overseas business. So, they asked me to handle mergers and acquisitions with Korean companies."

"Was it the Raisen Energy deal that caught their eye?"

That deal with AMK Partners had been a major investment led by In-hyuk as team leader at Taeshin Asset Management, and it drew a lot of attention as it was a move others couldn't have predicted.

It was In-hyuk's breakthrough.

"I'm told that was the reason. Thanks to that, I got to expand the M&A and PEF side of the business considerably."

Baek Ji-woong's eyes never left In-hyuk's.

"Then can you introduce me to CEO Gordon Grimes of AMK Partners? Or at least pass along my message?"

"Me?"

"As you know, AMK Partners' Organization never meets with anyone. Norman McGrath is an available contact, but even he's not easy."

AMK Partners had been beating Kooou to coveted acquisitions in a range of business fields.

With even Gordon Grimes making a public appearance in Hong Kong, Baek Ji-woong was getting desperate that he hadn't been able to secure a meeting.

Chapter 119

Could There Be a Traitor?

In-hyuk had always known that, eventually, someone would ask him to arrange a meeting with Gordon Grimes.

Of course, Baek Ji-woong was also included in the scope of those possible requesters.

Although it happened a bit later than he had anticipated...

"I can't arrange an actual meeting, but I can deliver a message. I'm not directly connected to Gordon Grimes myself, so I can't be sure if it'll even reach him."

After considering for a moment, Baek Ji-woong answered.

"Then, would you just tell him I want to meet? And mention that it would absolutely not be a disadvantage for AMK Partners."

"Understood. Then, is that the only reason the chairman wanted to see me today?"

In-hyuk finished by drinking the water placed beside him. At that, Baek Ji-woong hesitated before asking,

"Are you truly... not thinking of going to KQ?"

"Didn't we already finish that conversation earlier?"

"No matter how much I think about it..."

Knock, knock—

That was when Baek Ji-woong's secretary, Do Jung-geol, poked his face in along with a knock.

"I told you not to interrupt unless it's something serious."

Do Jung-geol bowed his head and approached him.

"I'm sorry. There's been an important call..."

With his answer, Do Jung-geol offered the phone he'd been holding forward. Upon checking its contents, Baek Ji-woong's expression hardened.

"It looks like I'll have to take my leave first today."

"Please go ahead."

"And I hope you make a wise choice."

With those words, Baek Ji-woong left the room with Do Jung-geol.

Left alone in the room, In-hyuk tilted his glass to the floor, and upon hearing the sound of a car starting outside, began to move.

When he entered the parking lot, Baek Si-hwan, who had been waiting in the car, got out.

"Did the conversation go well?"

"More or less."

Baek Si-hwan looked curious, his face full of questions since he hadn't been able to join them inside.

Of course, that might just be an act. However, compared to his previous reactions, this didn't seem like a lie.

'He didn't even seem to know about today's meeting. Did they cut him off from the information so he wouldn't catch on?'

The car In-hyuk entered started to move.

* * *

About two hours earlier.

In the office of National Intelligence Service director Jin Jong-man, the deputy general managers of the First, second, and Third Divisions sat together as they had previously.

The purpose was to receive reports on the tasks previously assigned.

Shin Jin-hong, deputy general manager of the Second Division, spoke first.

"It was discovered that Songchon was involved behind the unauthorized movement incident of the overseas team. Nam Chan-woo, the Asia branch head who has already passed away, was one of them, and ultimately, the one managing it is thought to be Im Seung-hwan, the Deputy Director of the Bureau of External Security Intelligence, who is currently missing."

After hearing this, Jin Jong-man's face twisted into a scowl.

"Are you telling me that the deputy director himself was behind this Songchon place?"

Within the National Intelligence Service, a deputy director wasn't a low rank.

But if he went as far as to use a member of the overseas team under Choo Jae-min's command without permission, it raised questions about whether he had enough strength to do so.

Shin Jin-hong continued with a nervous bead of sweat.

"A burner phone that had been used to communicate with the unauthorized agents was found at Im Seung-hwan's home, and from his computer, we discovered evidence that roughly 50 billion won were used for purchasing cryptocurrency."

"Does that mean he's laundered the funds so there's no trace, and then disappeared?"

"That's how it appears."

"And have you determined where those funds originated?"

At Jin Jong-man's now-sharp question, Shin Jin-hong cleared his throat again.

"Hm... Those are in overseas accounts under borrowed names, so getting cooperation from local authorities will take some time."

"What about the agents who've returned? Did they all follow Im Seung-hwan's orders?"

"They say the orders were delivered via a disguised voice. And their pay was deposited in those alias accounts upon the completion of separate assignments."

Nothing was completely clear.

Frustrated, Jin Jong-man swept his eyes over Shin Jin-hong and the other deputy general managers nearby.

Just then, his cellphone started vibrating.

bzzz— bzzz—

When he checked the message, his face hardened.

"For now, keep all information on Songchon strictly confidential. Deputy General Manager Shin, report to me as soon as you get the account records."

With the first report finished, Jin Jong-man now turned to Im Deok-chang.

"What about the investigation into Notex's Korean staff? Did anything suspicious turn up?"

"They were people who received normal work visas and worked at foreign companies."

"But they were all orphans. How do you explain that?"

It wasn't just one or two—the entire group had the same background.

Notex wasn't even a Korean company, and yet all these orphans got work visas to Portugal, which was odd.

Im Deok-chang hesitated ever so slightly before explaining.

"All five were from an orphanage supported by Seunghwa Foundation. They received both the necessary job training and recommendations there, and that's how they ended up employed at Notex."

The Seunghwa Foundation was one of the top five education foundations in the country.

"So, does that mean Seunghwa Foundation is linked to Notex?"

"From what I found, seunghwa Foundation's parent company, seunghwa Trading, maintains friendship exchanges with many domestic and foreign companies. The Foundation recommends its sponsored individuals for jobs based on that network."

Jin Jong-man let out a shallow sigh.

"So, you're saying there's no issue with the backgrounds of Notex's Korean employees?"

Im Deok-chang responded cautiously, just to confirm:

"Not from anything I could find."

After thinking for a moment, Jin Jong-man spoke up again.

"So, it must be Notex itself that's the problem. What about the investigation deputy general manager Choo led?"

At his question, Choo Jae-min took out documents he had prepared in advance and handed a copy to everyone.

"No suspicious funds have been traced into Notex directly, so we focused on their shipments. We identified shipments with unclear origins, and through backtracking, we found shell companies."

Everyone let their gaze fall upon the materials documented for the shell companies.

【Brighton Solutions】

【Bluehaven Asset】

【Lexford Pacific】

【Silverwood Capital】

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As he reviewed those documents, Im Deok-chang's fingertips trembled slightly.

He never imagined that the investigation into Notex, which he thought had been isolated in the overseas team incident, would be assigned to Choo Jae-min.

Worse, the shell companies used to move funds to Notex had also been traced.

During that, Jin Jong-man pressed, based on what he had just heard:

"Did you identify the owners of these shell companies?"

"You can find that on the next page, but they're all foreigners whose whereabouts are hard to establish. Also, the companies have already filed for closure. We'll need to either officially request information from the local governments or launch our own quiet investigation."

The source of the 1.4 billion dollars discovered in Notex's shipments was being hunted in France, portugal, and several other countries.

There was a high probability that the traces found by Choo Jae-min had also been picked up abroad.

"Everyone's on high alert, so don't expect cooperation. See that this investigation is carried out as quietly as possible."

"I'll mobilize the available Europe team."

"And with Deputy Director Im Seung-hwan missing, the Songchon group is probably still poorly understood. Just in case, put together your own independent team."

"Understood."

With the main parts of the discussion covered, Jin Jong-man looked at the other deputy general managers.

"I've heard things are getting noisy on the prosecution's side these days. You all heard about this?"

Everyone nodded with serious expressions.

Then Choo Jae-min spoke up:

"As far as I have confirmed, the first tip-off went to the Anti-Corruption Division at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office. But instead of investigating, they tried to secure the whistleblower's identity first, which led to trouble."

Choo Jae-min hadn't just heard through the news—being NIS himself, he checked the prosecution's information lines and monitored the situation.

"That's right. Everyone's in an uproar over that. After that, tips went to the Ministry of Justice and the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission, making things worse."

Im Deok-chang cautiously joined the conversation, since his fellow executive, Jung Yoon-ju, was at the center of that story.

"Why bring up the prosecution now, sir?"

"A shell company surfaced in the Notex incident. Foreign agencies are investigating. If any link to our country surfaces there, what do you think will happen?"

This time, Shin Jin-hong quickly answered:

"Our National Intelligence Service will be the first target of suspicion."

"Exactly. What's more, you never know when the Nam Chan-woo branch incident will catch the wind of public opinion."

At the moment, public outrage was already high over the prosecution corruption scandal as well as the recent attack on the Taeshin Group family in Vladivostok.

If an NIS scandal broke out, everyone here could struggle to keep their posts.

"Are you planning to escalate the prosecution incident?"

Im Deok-chang's careful question was met by a slow nod from Jin Jong-man, who wore a thoughtful expression.

"The prosecution already shot themselves in the foot. Even if we add fuel to the fire, no one will suspect us."

"Is there really any need to make things bigger? If the truth comes out... it could endanger you, director."

He pretended to worry about Jin Jong-man, but in reality, he was concerned that Jung Yoon-ju's involvement could expose the organization.

"We might end up being the finale for the NIS."

"But there's no evidence yet that a Korean company was involved in the Notex affair. If it's Portugal, odds are it's mafia black money."

If you only looked at the surface, Im Deok-chang's opinion was plausible.

But Jin Jong-man kept his stern expression and spoke calmly.

"I'm saying, let's be prepared. So don't assume it'll be nothing and, since Deputy General Manager Im has finished his work, probe the Supreme Prosecutors' Office side as well."

"Me, sir?"

"You completed the investigation into Notex staff without issue, didn't you?"

Ironically, the timing fit too perfectly. But since the matter was related to Jung Yoon-ju, it was also awkward to delegate it elsewhere.

If they were careless, targeting the Supreme Prosecutors' Office as a scapegoat like Jin Jong-man wanted might allow the fire to start from Jung Yoon-ju and spread to the entire organization.

"... Yes, sir. I'll do as you say."

Actually, it would be safest to create a loophole so that Jung Yoon-ju could escape, while sacrificing other prosecutors.

Jin Jong-man, unaware of this hidden intent, nodded.

"That covers everything for now; everyone may go. Oh, deputy General Manager Choo, I need a word with you, please stay behind."

Shin Jin-hong and Im Deok-chang stood up, both wearing uneasy expressions.

Soon, only Jin Jong-man and Choo Jae-min remained in the office.

When the atmosphere quieted, Choo Jae-min stood and used a detector he had prepared in advance to check the surroundings.

"Nothing is bugged this time, either. But do you really think there's a traitor among the deputy general managers?"

In response, Jin Jong-man held his cellphone out to him.

【HERMIT: prosecution scandal, deputy General Prosecutor Jung Yoon-ju, whistleblower tracking, National Intelligence Service.】

"It came in during the conversation earlier."

Choo Jae-min recalled seeing him check his phone mid-discussion.

"This is it? But the contents..."

"This time, it names exactly."

"Is that why you ordered Deputy General Manager Im to probe the Supreme Prosecutors' Office?"

"Exactly. And once again, the National Intelligence Service is included as a keyword. That means someone from the NIS is involved this time as well as last time."

At that, Choo Jae-min's expression darkened sharply.

Chapter 120 : Falling into the Antlion Pit

Falling into the Antlion Pit

The atmosphere in the office of the Director of the National Intelligence Service was icy cold.

A traitor, not in any other organization, but within the National Intelligence Service itself.

Of course, trust within government agencies had already been shattered by the existence of the internal group called Songchon.

"If you mean a traitor... could it be Songchon?"

At this suggestion, Jin Jong-man wore a subtle expression.

"But there are a lot of suspicious points about that too. For starters, I don't even know why they were monitoring Kang In-hyuk from Taeshin."

The reason Songchon was exposed was because Kang In-hyuk himself revealed he had been followed by surveillance all the way from Switzerland to Russia.

Afterward, the Asia branch chief, Nam Chan-woo, was found dead by suicide, and as soon as Deputy Director Im Seung-hwan of the National Security Bureau disappeared, traces of Songchon emerged.

Of course, it could simply be evidence left behind in Im's rush to escape, but it was difficult to shake off a feeling of suspicion.

"We did investigate Kang In-hyuk as well, but there was nothing unusual in his history."

"Then is there only something unusual in his recent record?"

This meant everything that had happened to In-hyuk in the past year.

Choo Jae-min also found this part highly unusual.

"But there were no suspicions of insider trading or any other illegal acts. There were merely incidents of violence in self-defense and accidental manslaughter."

In-hyuk had faced death several times. Most recently, he had even suffered a terrorist attack in Vladivostok, Russia.

At that time, In-hyuk personally visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to give his statement regarding the soldier-of-fortune who tried to kill him.

Moreover, since explosives and firearms had been used, it was difficult to see the homicide as intentional, so he was able to get through the incident without much trouble.

It was then that Choo Jae-min suddenly recalled something and spoke again.

"Come to think of it, was the message trace unsuccessful?"

Last time, a request had been made to call in an expert for communications tracking.

Nothing had been shared since, but it had been awkward for Choo Jae-min to ask first, so he had just waited.

However, the look on Jin Jong-man's face was now full of worry.

"The message originator apparently routed messages through dozens of overseas servers on the dark web. And somehow... It even goes through foreign military satellites, so if you trace it the wrong way, you'll not only get caught, but might only leave traces of intrusion."

Choo Jae-min's face darkened all the more.

"Could it have been CIA or MI6?"

"Their system is completely different. And they have no reason to approach us in this way."

"So, it's not an easy place to deal with."

"On the other hand, I'm jealous."

"Pardon?"

"I don't know who made it, but if only our National Intelligence Service could use such a communications system, how great would that be?"

He meant it sincerely.

But given the current situation where friend or foe couldn't be determined, he set aside his envy and continued.

"Anyway, for now, it's hard to find a way to figure out who sent the message, so let's focus on what we can do."

"What would you like me to do?"

"Dig into Deputy General Manager Im Deok-chang and the Supreme Prosecutors' Office separately. And, assemble reliable teams to investigate Hwain Techon, Seunghwa Trading, and the Seunghwa Foundation."

"You suspect Deputy General Manager Im because of the Notex staff investigation, right?"

They were being told to thoroughly investigate everything Im Deok-chang was in charge of.

Meanwhile, the mood around Jin Jong-man grew even heavier.

"That's right. Of course, I haven't found a connection between Notex and Hwain Techon yet. For now, since the shell company has come up, we should follow it both ways. And if Notex really is involved, there's no way nothing would come up from the dead staff members."

But Im Deok-chang had already reported that he found nothing suspicious about them.

That was where Jin Jong-man's suspicions began to sprout.

"I'll move as quietly as possible."

"... Do so."

After exchanging farewells, Choo Jae-min also stepped outside.

Left alone in the office, Jin Jong-man looked again at the message displayed on his phone.

HERMIT.

As the name suggested, the other party thoroughly hid their identity, but dropped key words about situations that could become dangerous for the National Intelligence Service.

At first, he thought it might be bait for internal conflict within the agency.

But as he followed the keywords and investigated, things he hadn't known or had felt uneasy about started to come together.

...

...

At the same time.

Deputy General Manager Im Deok-chang of the Third Division, who had hurriedly returned to his office, immediately sent messages to the organization's executives from his phone.

【Code Hyottoko: National Intelligence Service, Notex shell company exposed. They plan to stir public opinion with a Supreme Prosecutors' Office investigation and prosecutorial corruption.】

This had just been decided in a meeting with Director Jin Jong-man and the deputy general managers.

Ten minutes later, Baek Ji-woong was the first to call.

[What has happened? The National Intelligence Service found the shell company?]

What was connected to their side was Hwain Techon, set up by the W&W Group.

Naturally, this unexpected turn of events posed a threat for Baek Ji-woong.

"It's exactly as you heard."

[How did they find out?]

Im Deok-chang sighed.

"Do you take the National Intelligence Service lightly?"

[Who found out?]

"The Second Deputy General Manager."

[Did that guy even have that kind of ability?]

Im Deok-chang also knew well that his ability was lacking.

It was equally mysterious to him how Shin Jin-hong had found out about the shell company.

"For now, we need to come up with a countermeasure before anything else. Was there some carelessness on the shell company side?"

The discovery of $1.4 billion in cash in Notex's cargo had triggered international suspicion.

Of course, they had arranged for the shell companies and laundering routes to avoid a trail, but erasing all traces perfectly was impossible.

[How much exactly did they find out?]

"For now, only up to the shell company. But the Second Division will keep investigating, so if there's anything left, it needs to be removed as much as possible."

If the trail eventually led all the way to Hwain Techon, it would be impossible to contain the situation.

[I already took care of everything I could. From here on, shouldn't you be the one to handle things?]

"This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't transferred funds to Notex in such a reckless way."

There was a brief silence on the line before Baek Ji-woong spoke again.

[Have you thought about the kind of personnel it takes to move that level of funds without a trace?]

At this sharp rebuttal, Im Deok-chang let out another sigh.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight right now. You can imagine how frustrated I must be... We need to solve this situation, with the National Intelligence Service digging into Notex and the Supreme Prosecutors' Office."

[It's not like I have a solution either! And I'm overwhelmed just dealing with Taeshin and KQ.]

"I'll do my best on my end to clean up anything possible. But W&W can't just sit still either. If we're not careful, this whole affair could expose the organization's outline."

The National Intelligence Service was practically at their doorstep.

Of course, Baek Ji-woong understood the situation well.

[Do your part well too. If this goes wrong, you'll have the hardest time getting out yourself.]

He had already offered up some members of the internal group Songchon to Director Jin Jong-man as a sacrifice.

And although he had pinned the blame on the now-disappeared Deputy Director Im Seung-hwan, not all doubts had been dispelled, so caution was necessary.

"If it comes to that, you should know I won't go down alone."

As soon as the call ended, a call came from Jung Yoon-ju at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

The reason was obvious, just like with Baek Ji-woong.

Im Deok-chang let out a long sigh and pressed the call button.

* * *

After parting ways with Chairman Baek Ji-woong, In-hyuk had just dropped Baek Si-hwan off at the station and was on his way home.

In the calm, his phone vibrated.

【NIS02: Deputy Director Im Seung-hwan of the National Security Bureau, the figure behind Songchon, has disappeared. Report related to Notex shell company. The director plans to investigate prosecutorial corruption to use as a shield. Stayed to talk with the First Deputy General Manager. Details unknown.】

It was a message from National Intelligence Service Deputy General Manager Shin Jin-hong, delivered via Ghost Link.

"Looks like things are heating up at the National Intelligence Service too."

At these muttered words, Hong Yu-geon glanced at In-hyuk in the rearview mirror.

"What kind of trouble did you stir up now?"

"I gave the list connecting Hwain Techon and Notex through a shell company to the Second Deputy General Manager."

He had intentionally let it be known through Shin Jin-hong, not the director.

That way, he would attract minimal suspicion and could close the net on Im Deok-chang.

"How much of the game have you already set up?"

"Pretty much everything important. Fortunately, even the director is moving just like I wanted."

"Aren't they suspicious?"

"Of course they are. But they can't help but bite at the bait scattered around them."

Right now, the National Intelligence Service was practically a ticking time bomb.

In such volatile circumstances, it was possible to predict what Director Jin Jong-man, with public opinion on his mind, would do next.

Of course, In-hyuk hadn't spread info about corruption to have the prosecutors take the lead on purpose...

"You're now pulling the strings of not just the prosecution, but even the National Intelligence Service? Our boss... honestly, terrifying."

"It's not 'pulling strings'—it's mutual exchange of necessary information and benefits. I just create the flow I want in that context."

Hong Yu-geon groaned.

"That's even scarier, isn't it?"

"What's wrong with a win-win?"

"Is it really a win-win? Whoever deals with the boss ends up falling into an antlion pit."

Those who began dealing with In-hyuk and Ghost Link fell into two categories.

People who only ever received information beneficial to themselves, and people who sold information for sums of money that were hard to even imagine.

Either way, dealing with the masked existence calling himself HETMIT was akin to gambling.

So Hong Yu-geon's comment wasn't wrong.

In-hyuk smiled at this.

"It's not like I'm doing this for everyone's happiness."

"This is the first time I've ever worried about my own 'ally' in my life..."

As they talked, In-hyuk's phone rang.

It was Go Mi-ah, who should be at home by now, having finished work.

[Hey~ Boss! The investigation material on the Seunghwa Foundation and Seunghwa Trading came in. Should I send the file or do you want to pick it up yourself?]

This was information In-hyuk had passed to Shin Jin-hong.

"Is there something in the file to worry about?"

Usually, she would just upload the file and send a message, so it was curious she was calling directly.

[There's something a bit suspicious.]

"I'll come get it myself, then."

He turned the car toward Go Mi-ah's workshop, arriving there about thirty minutes later.

"What's so special in what you found?"

Seunghwa Trading and the Seunghwa Foundation hadn't stood out in particular in his previous life.

When he first heard the name again, what came to mind was the restaurant "Seunghwa's Set Menu," where he used to meet with Tae Seok-ho for secret talks.

That's how common the name Seunghwa was to In-hyuk.

Go Mi-ah pushed her tablet forward.

"There's nothing special about the publicly disclosed capital flows of Seunghwa Trading."

Up to that point, there was no difference from In-hyuk's memories.

"And?"

"There was nothing special in the internal systems either, so I was just going to leave a backdoor, but I found a blocked area."

In-hyuk examined the part she had found by hacking on her tablet.

He didn't know computers as well as Go Mi-ah, but he understood the basics well enough.

"Is access completely impossible?"

"It's an offline server, so you have to connect from the inside."

"Are you sure the server is inside the building?"

"That I can't be completely sure of. It could be stored externally, with only the entry processor at the company."

The serious tone made In-hyuk grim.

He scrolled through the tablet to check on Seunghwa Trading again.

"... Hm? This capital structure is a bit strange."

His gaze lingered on the balance sheet of Seunghwa Trading, collected through Go Mi-ah's hacking.