Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 121 : Boundary Line of Palm and Fingers

Boundary Line of Palm and Fingers

Those in the workshop focused their attention when they heard In-hyuk's muttering.

Go Mi-ah was the first to speak.

"This? What's strange and where?"

Though she only understood computers, she could generally sense if there was a problem or not.

So, when In-hyuk raised his doubt, she tilted her head in confusion.

"Just looking at it, there's not much difference from an ordinary company. But on the cash flow statement, the funds going into the foundation are considerably large. About 30% of the net profit."

"Is that a lot?"

Go Mi-ah, along with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester beside her, didn't know for sure either, so they just cocked their heads in confusion.

"Usually, about 20–30% of net profit goes to dividends. The remaining 70–80% is used for reinvestment. But this isn't reinvestment—it's giving 30% to the foundation? And it's not like the foundation is a nonprofit where the profit cycles back, so it doesn't make sense."

What was even stranger was the structure itself, which let such a large amount of funds flow from the head office, the trading company, into the foundation.

'It feels like some kind of protection money is being sent...'

As In-hyuk thought about this, he voiced another question.

"What about the personnel records for the CEO and chairman of Seunghwa?"

"If you switch to a different category, they're here."

The tablet's screen changed.

Listed there were the photos and backgrounds of Go Byeong-seop, CEO of Seunghwa Mulsan, and Lee Pil-jo, chairman of the Seunghwa Foundation.

In-hyuk had a rough idea of their names.

In his previous life, he hadn't thought anything special of them, but now that he found certain things suspicious and looked closely, everything seemed off.

"This hasn't changed either..."

The former CEO of Seunghwa Trading was Lee Seung-hwa, the father of the current Seunghwa Foundation chairman, Lee Pil-jo.

But when Lee Seung-hwa died of illness, Lee Pil-jo didn't succeed his father as CEO and instead installed Go Byeong-seop, a professional manager, as the current CEO.

The official reason given was to take responsibility for supporting education in South Korea rather than running the business.

Of course, In-hyuk hadn't believed that at the time.

And now, based on the overall situation he grasped, it was obvious that the true owner of Seunghwa Trading was Lee Pil-jo.

As In-hyuk was muttering to himself, Go Mi-ah asked back.

"What hasn't changed?"

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester beside her looked confused too, not understanding what he meant.

"It's nothing."

Of course, he couldn't tell them about the memories from his past life, so he glossed it over.

Then his gaze fixated on the personal information of the two individuals.

'Should I break in and hack their server myself? Or should AMK or another group just acquire Seunghwa Trading outright?'

The quietest method would be infiltration.

But In-hyuk needed to consider the attention focused on him.

'No... if Seunghwa Trading is important to those guys, they would have taken measures to prevent an easy takeover.'

As he sorted out his thoughts, In-hyuk looked around at the group.

"By the way, how long are you going to keep pretending to be Go Mi-ah?"

At this, the other two stared at Go Mi-ah with tense expressions.

Go Mi-ah puckered her lips in a long line and clicked her tongue.

"Tsk—! When did you notice?"

The Go Mi-ah before them was actually Noah Vantrail in disguise.

"You haven't once offered the side dishes you just finished making and set aside to cool."

Of course, there were other things that caught his attention, so he'd known from the start.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It's something like that—just call Go Mi-ah over."

"Che."

With a regretful expression, Noah sent a message.

After a short while, the sound of a passcode being entered was heard at the entrance, and the real Go Mi-ah walked in.

"Wow—! Just now you looked just like the boss, and now you look exactly like me!"

"You came here looking like me?"

As Noah shrugged her shoulders, In-hyuk let out a deep sigh.

"Now that Go Mi-ah is here, can you do something about that face?"

"Wait a sec. Let me use the bathroom."

Noah, wearing a mischievous expression as Go Mi-ah, tapped the real Go Mi-ah on the shoulder and went to the bathroom.

Meanwhile, the real Go Mi-ah looked at her curiously, then spoke.

"How far did you get in the discussion?"

"We were looking at the personnel info of Seunghwa Trading and the foundation. But, Hong Yu-geon, are you okay?"

He had looked distinctly uncomfortable for a while.

"Didn't you say you were only hired as a freelancer?"

"I did."

"Then why are you here now?"

"If we're going to work together in the future, you need to know some things. And for Mi-ah to pay you your fee, she needs to hear some things directly herself."

Hong Yu-geon looked dissatisfied on several fronts.

Of course, In-hyuk knew the reason very well.

"If it's about your dark past, we can put it all in order today."

"You think that's easy?"

Click—

At that moment, Noah, having removed her disguise, came out of the bathroom.

She now looked like an East Asian woman with a black bob and black eyes.

Of course, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester already knew that appearance well from having worked with her before.

"What were you talking about?"

"Well..."

As he was just about to answer, Hong Yu-geon's fierce gaze bore down on him. It was a clear, wordless warning not to say anything.

"... Just talking about this and that."

When Noah met Hong Yu-geon's eyes, he looked away. His past must have been terribly embarrassing.

Soon after, In-hyuk turned to Noah and continued.

"I'll calculate your commission and transfer it to whatever account you want. If you're worried about tracking, I can pay you in cryptocurrency or cash in a foreign bank."

"And how much do you think I'll ask for?"

He hadn't mentioned the exact amount yet.

As Noah grinned, In-hyuk shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll give you enough for your skill. If we're going to work together long-term, I can set it as an annual salary. Of course, the danger pay and costs incurred for missions will be counted separately."

Just like he had done for Go Mi-ah, Charybdis (Hong Yu-geon), and Van Hester, In-hyuk was planning to properly compensate her.

But Noah looked him up and down, as if still suspicious.

"Really? Then I'll take an annual contract. The amount is $400,000."

"Hey! Are you insane? That's...!"

About 570 million won in Korean currency. At the same time, Hong Yu-geon burst out, aghast.

In-hyuk glanced at Van Hester, who immediately moved to clamp a hand over Hong Yu-geon's mouth.

"$400,000 okay with you?"

Even considering industry standards for security, that wasn't a small amount.

Even overseas, $300,000 was pretty much the maximum.

Noah's gaze grew even stranger as she stared at In-hyuk.

As far as she knew, even if In-hyuk was married into the Taeshin family, he wasn't exactly rich himself.

Of course, while he was achieving great results at Taeshin Asset Management, that was growing company funds, not In-hyuk's personal assets.

"You can really pay that?"

"If you think you'll regret it later, I can raise it."

"Then four... five hundred?"

Noah hesitantly raised the amount, her face a little timid this time.

In-hyuk stared at her as if to say, "Are you serious?"

"Or four... seven hundred?"

"Let's keep it simple—make it five hundred. Like I said, hazard pay and other things will be figured in separately."

So now it rose to 710 million won.

As the decision was made, Noah, not understanding why, looked back and forth between Hong Yu-geon, Van Hester, and Go Mi-ah in shock.

"You have that much money? How?"

"Well, I have enough to spend on this."

"Wait, then how much do Yu-geon and Van get?"

Noah directed her attention to the two.

But they only shrugged and said nothing. Hong Yu-geon remained firmly silenced by Van Hester's hand.

Watching them, In-hyuk scratched his cheek with his finger.

"So what will it be? Do you accept $500,000?"

"Alright! Deal! But can you really pay that? Even if you could, hardly anyone ever actually gets that much set as a baseline."

As a monthly salary, it'd be about 56 million won.

While short-term contracts can net over $100,000, annual salaries are set regularly, so even companies have trouble paying that much.

"You'll find out as we keep working. Just tell Go Mi-ah your preferred payment method, and she'll put the money through for this job."

Go Mi-ah handed over a piece of paper and a pen.

"Oh, unni. Please give me your main phone too. I'll program it so it won't be traced."

"Huh? Oh... here."

Noah handed over her phone and the note with her account information, looking dazed.

Not long after, in her phone left on the desk, a deposit notification popped up.

【Alpine Bank of Switzerland】

【Amount Credited USD 50,000】

As she confirmed the contents, Noah's expression turned even more incredulous.

"What on earth do you do?"

"Just... someone who makes a lot of money?"

"Are you kidding?"

In-hyuk replied with a slow smile.

"Last time, there was a deputy general manager named Jung Yoon-ju from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office who followed me, along with various people forming an organization. You could call it a sort of cartel. And I plan to track them all down and deal with them."

At that moment, Noah's expression grew much more serious.

"Is this some kind of underworld group? Is Kang a high-ranking member? But for something like that..."

The room was barely 15 pyeong, packed with computer equipment.

For a place where a six-figure annual salary was being discussed, it looked incredibly humble.

In-hyuk answered, still smiling.

"It's similar. But it's not like we're fighting for justice."

"Then what for?"

"Because those guys tried to kill me. Given the circumstances, I have no choice but to strike first."

Noah looked even more dumbfounded at the answer.

"Isn't a deputy general manager at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office a huge position? If your opponents are people on the level of someone like that, the organization must be big..."

"Right. And they've got their own army. They kill people without a second thought. You should at least know that much. Go Mi-ah, show her that."

At In-hyuk's request, Go Mi-ah displayed a photo of Kooou's tattoo on the monitor.

As she saw the screen, Noah wrinkled her brow and slowly spoke.

"... What is this?"

"It's a mark those guys bear on their bodies. The location is..."

"Inside of the left ring finger, at the boundary line between palm and fingers."

Since Noah knew the precise location, even In-hyuk couldn't hide his surprise.

"How do you know that?"

"Because those guys killed my entire family! More importantly, do you really know people with this tattoo?"

The playful smile on her face earlier had vanished, and now there was a frosty edge.

At that, In-hyuk recalled the ones Noah used to seek as her enemies.

"You mean Revenant, your family, right?"

Noah's expression hardened even further.

"How do you know about that?"

Revenant was a mercenary group that operated mostly in Africa and picked up the newborn Noah Vantrail to raise her as family 33 years ago.

But about 13 years ago, it was wiped out in an attack by unknown enemies. Noah Vantrail was the sole survivor.

'I found out about this when I researched Noah's past... So it was Kooou who destroyed them?'

In-hyuk had little trouble deducing the situation.

Chapter 122 : Red Letters on an Ashen Background

Red Letters on an Ashen Background

In-hyuk stared at Noah as she waited for his answer.

If he had taken more interest in her past, he might have discovered traces of Kooou, the mastermind behind Baek Si-hwan, much earlier.

Of course, maybe not...

"Before I hired you as a freelancer, I did a bit of background checking."

"How much do you know?"

"You were picked up and raised by mercenaries from Revenant right after you were born, and you became an elite mercenary, learning all sorts of knowledge and combat techniques there. Then, thirteen years ago, everyone except you was wiped out by some mysterious enemies."

Noah, who had been standing with a hardened expression, clenched her fists tightly.

"I just so happened to realize that you and I have the same goal. What do you think? I feel like this is a reason for us to join forces, not just work together."

"Are those guys really your target?"

"That's right."

"How far are you planning to take things?"

Now, only anger remained on Noah's face.

"All of them. Not a single one left."

"Can you take responsibility for those words? If you plan to stop in the middle, let's consider this contract null and void from the start."

It was clear she was thinking of ignoring In-hyuk and moving on her own.

But In-hyuk, perhaps without realizing it, emitted a terrifying atmosphere.

"Stop halfway? If anything, I'll go further than you, not less, so that'll never happen. Actually, if you get dissatisfied with the way I do things, you can drop out yourself."

His hardened face and eyes filled with killing intent turned to Noah.

Noticing the ominous air, she carefully spoke.

"What did those guys do to Kang?"

Up to just a moment ago, Noah had been pushing the conversation from her own perspective.

But seeing the horrifying vibe radiating from In-hyuk's whole body, she felt curious.

"Hmph... I've died to them once."

"... Died? Then who is this Kang standing in front of me now?"

"I died, and then I came back to life."

Unable to comprehend anymore, Noah glanced at Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

Of course, they had no idea what In-hyuk meant, so they just shook their heads.

A sigh soon escaped from Noah's lips.

"Hearing you say such nonsense, I guess you won't explain properly... So what's the plan? How far has it progressed? How much do they know?"

She wanted detailed information for her revenge.

As questions poured out, In-hyuk calmly collected himself and replied.

"I've figured out most of the general outline."

"The general outline... you mean, Jung Yoon-ju?"

"I don't know exactly what her position is, but if she's the deputy general manager at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, that's definitely not low. The other people are the same."

"Who else is involved?"

At her question, In-hyuk glanced at the others.

"For starters... Im Deok-chang, the deputy general manager at the Third Division of the National Intelligence Service."

"You dug that deep?"

"And the couple who are the chairpersons of WISE&WIRE Group, Baek Ji-woong and his wife."

At this answer, Noah's face twisted suddenly.

"Prosecutors weren't enough, so now you're saying the National Intelligence Service and a conglomerate too? No, why did those guys kill my child?"

She was referring to the mercenary group, revenant.

"I don't know at the moment. But if a group was active enough to wipe out Revenant thirteen years ago, it's bigger than we think. And back then, they must have had a reason for targeting Revenant."

"Is there a way to find out that reason?"

In-hyuk scratched his forehead and answered.

"We'd have to rob their original headquarters, or grab someone likely to be involved."

"Are you saying we won't know until everything's over?"

Because both options seemed difficult to get answers from quickly.

"No. The latter might be worth a try."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Just a hunch for now. Go Mi-ah. Can you hack into the Defense Ministry or administration servers?"

To that, Go Mi-ah frowned fiercely.

"Not impossible... but why those?"

"There's someone I need to find. The name is Jeon Eun-seong. The keywords in the Ministry of Defense are Defense Intelligence Command, major or lieutenant colonel."

"A soldier? Hold on a moment."

Go Mi-ah's fingers typed quickly on the keyboard.

Observing, Noah cautiously asked what was going on.

"Jeon... Eun-seong? Who is he?"

"Suspected as a member of Kooou, and involved in military affairs."

"Kooou?"

Since that name hadn't been explained, Noah tilted her head in confusion.

"It's a temporary name for those guys. When we shook down one of the lower-level grunts, the name 'KOOU' came up."

"KOOU... that's Japanese, isn't it? Is it a group connected to Japan?"

"It could be, or it could be a cover."

If it was an organization connected to state government, they might be using it to conceal their true affiliation.

"Was there anything else?"

"There was also information about a mercenary camp in Naya, Mongolia. But they must have gotten wind of us because they moved a long time ago."

"All the way to a camp? Well, if they wiped out my child, anything less would be stranger. Then I'll dig into that angle, too."

In-hyuk shook his head.

"No. Whatever you're thinking, just do the job I asked for."

"Why? Wouldn't more information lines be better?"

"We don't know how far their influence reaches yet. On the contrary, if we use those lines, we might get traced ourselves. That's why I'm moving this way, too."

Hearing that, Noah looked worried.

"I don't know how much money Kang is hiding, but those guys have enormous power and resources in this country. Can you really pull it off? With just the people here?"

It was a tense atmosphere, as if things could turn sour without the right answer.

"What if I told you AMK Partners is my company?"

That was the name of the investment firm that grew at breakneck speed in Asia and North America, and Noah also knew it.

But she couldn't immediately connect it with In-hyuk's words.

"What? AMK? That place belongs to Kang?"

"I started it. Norman McGrath is the branch manager for public operations, but I coach things from behind the scenes."

"Do you have proof?"

In-hyuk sighed briefly and answered.

"I don't know if this will convince you, but... try flipping AMK around."

"KMA? What's that?"

"The initials of her name."

In-hyuk pointed at Go Mi-ah, who was sitting in front of the computer.

Noah's eyes widened as she raised her voice.

"Ko Mi-ah? You named it after her?!"

"I didn't name it myself. I told them to just come up with something, and that's what happened. If you need funding or financial records, I can show you."

As he said that, In-hyuk looked at Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

But they, too, were just as surprised as Noah.

"What the... you guys didn't know either?"

That was the end of their astonishment. In-hyuk simply shook his head in disbelief.

* * *

[What's the status of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's investigation into the reported prosecutorial corruption? The Anti-Corruption Division at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office announced that they are handling the case, stating that identifying the whistleblower was intended as part of verifying the veracity of the report...]

[The SPO has kept silent on the identity of the prosecution corruption whistleblower! They explained that, since it's such a significant case, it's for their safety...]

[Breaking news! The whistleblower has been identified as Mr. K, who has been missing since about a year ago and was a staff member of the Taeshin Group's security team...]

...

...

Jung Yoon-ju, the deputy general manager, let out a long sigh as she skimmed through an article in her office at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Just then, department manager Jo Moo-yeol of the Anti-Corruption Division came in cautiously after knocking.

"I've checked with the media outlet that released the whistleblower's identity."

"What did you find out?"

"They said the report came to them anonymously. The information included black box footage from a PC bang near where the tip was uploaded, along with identity details. We've obtained all the files for the investigation."

Jung Yoon-ju's sigh only deepened.

"Have you ordered a search for the anonymous whistleblower?"

"Yes. But how long must we suspend the investigation?"

There was a huge gap between what had been announced to the media and the actual situation.

Of course, it was none other than Jung Yoon-ju herself, the Supreme Prosecutors' Office deputy general manager, who had ordered things to turn out this way.

"We announced that we'd proceed with the investigation due to public opinion, but can we be certain everything in the whistleblower's report is true?"

"Don't we have to verify those things first?"

"What if it turns out to be false? Not only will the prosecution have been swayed by a single report, we'll be branded as idiots who turned on our own organization, won't we?"

There were 18 people implicated in prosecution corruption. Nearly half of them were her people.

She could cut them all off without hesitation, but that would weaken her own power within the prosecution, which made the choice difficult.

"Sooner or later the media will sniff around to see how far the investigation has progressed. If nothing comes of it, we may end up in an even worse position."

"Are those involved in the corruption in insignificant positions? If we handle it the wrong way, it could just damage the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's authority. That's why we need to find the whistleblower first—because we have to confirm how and where they got such evidence, or else we could face major blowback."

Her explanation made sense, at least on the surface. Jo Moo-yeol understood, but couldn't help his frustration.

He even considered moving without informing Jung Yoon-ju.

But, within the Anti-Corruption Division, except for himself, almost everyone else was one of Jung Yoon-ju's people.

No matter what, word would get back to her eventually.

"What if the article comes out before we find the whistleblower?"

That would be the worst-case scenario.

Jung Yoon-ju understood this and frowned.

"If that worries you, then instead of standing here, wouldn't it be better to focus on finding the whistleblower?"

In the end, the result was more postponement.

Jo Moo-yeol let out a very obvious sigh, nodded his head slightly, and left the office.

Once the door closed, Jung Yoon-ju let out a groan.

"Whatever the reason, it's a relief that they used someone already dead as the whistleblower."

She had ordered the Anti-Corruption Division to find the whistleblower in order to buy more time from the start.

This whole incident was meant to be swept under the rug, eventually shifting blame to department manager Jo Moo-yeol and sending him to a convenient location.

...

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Jo Moo-yeol, having just left the deputy general manager's office, didn't return straight to the Anti-Corruption Division.

Instead, he stood on the building's rooftop. He just wanted to get some air to ease his stifled mood.

Last mid-year, when the Rizeburn incident erupted, he had been at the main office of the Daejeon District Prosecutors' Office, but was abruptly promoted to department manager at the Anti-Corruption Division of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Because the incident was so grave, they chose someone as clean as possible for the role.

But here or there, things weren't much different.

"Are you alright?"

His Samu-gwan, Kim Sang-jun, approached from behind and asked.

Jo Moo-yeol, who had been sighing continuously, turned his head.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"When you're frustrated, you always come up to the roof, boss. When I heard you went to see the deputy general manager, I figured you'd be here by now."

Kim Sang-jun, the Samu-gwan, had worked with Jo Moo-yeol with the same sense of purpose in the past, so unlike other prosecutors or staff, he was on Jo Moo-yeol's side.

"You know me too well, Samu-gwan Kim."

"So, did you get the deputy general manager's approval again?"

Kim could get a general idea of the situation just from Jo Moo-yeol's mood.

"Well, no."

"Then what should we do now? If this goes on, you might end up shouldering all the blame alone."

It wasn't hard to imagine the worst.

And since Jo Moo-yeol's predecessor had been one of Jung Yoon-ju's people, he knew the risks well.

"There's no approval from above, and the people below won't help, so... what can you do?"

If he limited the investigation to just regular prosecutors among the 18 implicated, it might have been doable, but he couldn't avoid touching the chief prosecutor line suspected of being connected to them.

Lost in complicated thoughts, a vibration buzzed in his pocket.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

A message had arrived.

"... Hmm?"

He was sure he had turned on the screen, but red letters appeared against an ashen background.

Chapter 123 : Areum Cleaning

Areum Cleaning

A few days later, a café near the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Jo Moo-yeol, the department manager of the Anti-Corruption Division at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, waited there for someone after work.

Aggravated by the situation in which he could not proceed with any of the important investigations, he was filled with nothing but irritation.

At that moment, the wind chime on the café entrance jingled as a man walked in.

He slowly approached Jo Moo-yeol and greeted him.

"Good evening, prosecutor Jo Moo-yeol."

After confirming the man's face along with the voice, Jo Moo-yeol froze stiffly.

"You... Kim Seong-tae?"

It was a face he had seen several times even after verifying the identity of the informant.

"That's right."

"Was it you, Mr. Kim Seong-tae, who sent me those messages...?"

"Isn't that why you came here, prosecutor?"

About a year ago, the only trace of missing Kim Seong-tae was a black box recording from a car near a PC bang.

Moreover, his coworkers didn't know much about him, and since he was an orphan with no relatives, not even the smallest clue was found.

Jo Moo-yeol sighed deeply.

"You just dropped those tips and disappeared... What have you been doing all this time?"

"I had a lot built up—there was nothing else I could do."

"What does that mean?"

"I was almost killed by the very people I followed. Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju was among them too. The only way I could survive was by reporting in that way."

At Kim Seong-tae's explanation, Jo Moo-yeol furrowed his brow.

"... Is that true?"

"That's also why I was in hiding for nearly a year."

"But weren't you a security guard for Taeshin Group? Why did you almost get killed by Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju and the others?"

"That was only a cover—I was actually part of an organization called KOOU. Anyway, here is a video of my confession and other evidence."

Kim Seong-tae took out a blue SD card from his coat and placed it on the table before standing up.

"If you would rather come to the prosecution office with me..."

"Didn't you hear who I said almost killed me?"

"Ah..."

Because it was the name of Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju, the number two at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, which stood right across from the café.

"I don't care what you do with the evidence on the SD card. Just don't ever look for me again."

"Kim, Kim Seong-tae!"

Despite Jo Moo-yeol's call, Kim Seong-tae left the café in quick strides.

Of course, Jo Moo-yeol didn't just sit idly by; he followed after him.

But Kim Seong-tae had already turned into the alley behind the café and immediately disappeared from view.

Just then, a black van stopped on the road behind, and Jo Moo-yeol was grabbed and pulled inside.

"What the hell are you—!"

Jo Moo-yeol's cry was cut off. The closed door and the vehicle sped away from the scene.

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At the same time, at the Taeshin Asset Management M&A/PEF office, Baek Si-hwan was getting ready to leave work.

Suddenly, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

【010－△△△△－9339】

It was the number of a burner phone that Chairman Baek Ji-woong used for emergencies.

Startled, Baek Si-hwan put down his bag and went into a small, empty conference room.

"Yes. Please speak."

He responded in a heavy voice, and Baek Ji-woong spoke from the other side.

[Can you talk?]

"I'm still at the office, so not for long. But why are you calling?"

Baek Si-hwan had recently even refrained from meeting Baek Ji-woong regularly to avoid leaving any trace of their relationship.

n this situation, a direct call to the office from anywhere was enough to make him tense.

[Did you see the latest article about the prosecution?]

"I saw it. You mean about Kim Seong-tae, whom we dealt with a year ago, coming out as an informant."

[That's right. That's why I called. Are you sure about what you handled back then?]

At that time, Baek Si-hwan had visited to confirm the escape after Pyo Jun-woo, from the KQ security team, was caught, and ran into Skull.

After confirming that some were leaking information, he killed them with a gun to be sure.

After all, Baek Si-hwan had even suffered for a while because of a knife wound to the shoulder thrown by Skull at that time.

"I'm sure. I made sure everything was handled cleanly through cleaning so that the bodies wouldn't be found."

[You left before cleaning was finished because of your injury back then. Are you still sure?]

Faced with a follow-up question, Baek Si-hwan sensed something strange.

"If you check with Areum Cleaning, you should be sure. And I wasn't the one who killed Kim Seong-tae—it was Skull. He stabbed him in the neck, making survival impossible."

[Then how do you explain Kim Seong-tae appearing in the middle of Seoul about an hour ago?]

"... Kim Seong-tae appeared? That's impossible."

[That impossible thing actually happened, which is why I'm calling you!]

By now, irritation was thick in Baek Ji-woong's voice.

"Regardless of the process, when I returned after Skull was done, Kim Seong-tae was definitely dead. I'd stake my life on it."

Baek Ji-woong let out a sigh at Baek Si-hwan's very firm voice.

[Are you saying someone is playing games?]

"Someone's definitely up to tricks. Where did he show up?"

[He met the department manager at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office who got the tip and handed over other evidence. We chased after him because of the urgency, but Kim Seong-tae escaped and we only secured the prosecutor.]

Baek Si-hwan's expression grew darker upon hearing the explanation.

"It's a trap."

[... What? A trap?]

"Do you have anyone at the site besides regular agents—a senior officer, for instance?"

Baek Ji-woong hesitated for a moment out of surprise before answering.

[Probably Shojo went to check on things.]

"That's exactly what they want! You need to quickly gather backup and move right away."

[What?]

"Get Shojo out of there immediately. If you send me the location, I'll head there too."

Just then, Baek Ji-woong's urgent shout came through.

[No! You stay where you are.]

Unexpected at this response, Baek Si-hwan was bewildered.

"Excuse me? But..."

[If teams get mixed up in a critical situation, it could backfire. Better to let Shojo's group handle it.]

"If it really is a trap set by the enemy, our own forces won't be enough."

Baek Si-hwan recalled the incidents at Daemyung Detective Agency and the UID safehouse.

At that time, their agents' skills weren't lacking—it was just that the enemy's ability was overwhelmingly superior.

He realized he needed to prepare countermeasures regardless, not letting down his guard.

[Let's leave it at that.]

The call ended there.

Standing quietly in the conference room, Baek Si-hwan wondered how the situation was unfolding.

But since he couldn't disobey the orders of his superior, Baek Ji-woong, he grew increasingly anxious.

He returned to his seat, then knocked on the division director's office door.

Knock knock—

"Director, if there's nothing else, I'd like to leave work now."

Inside were Kang In-hyuk and security guard Hong Yu-geon.

Kang In-hyuk, seated at his desk looking at a monitor, turned toward him.

"Alright."

"See you tomorrow, then."

Having finished his farewells, Baek Si-hwan immediately headed for the elevator, taking out his phone.

* * *

How many hours passed?

Jo Moo-yeol, who had blacked out, slowly opened his eyes.

"So in the end, you couldn't catch him?"

A familiar voice echoed nearby.

Someone answered from another direction.

"Sorry. Kim Seong-tae was more agile than we expected."

"Still! How can you lose him in the middle of Seoul?"

Amid conversation some way off, Jo Moo-yeol checked his own state.

His head was covered by cloth, so he could only see faint and patchy blobs of light.

There was also a pungent chemical smell stinging his nose.

"Ugh, cough! Cough—!"

The coughing echoed in the damp room.

Concurrently, the conversation halted, and the sharp sound of high heels approached.

Click— Clack—

"If only you'd kept quiet like I told you."

It was a voice right in front, through the cloth.

Jo Moo-yeol recognized its owner.

"Really... Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju?"

Even though he thought it might be her when he heard the voice earlier, he had doubted it.

With a short laugh, an answer followed.

"Hmph. Does that really matter now? Since the first tip went to the Anti-Corruption Division, I had someone keep tabs on you just in case. Of course, my suspicions were right. The informant came to you directly, after all."

He still couldn't verify if it was really Jung Yoon-ju due to the cloth on his head,

but from everything he heard and her unmistakable voice, Jo Moo-yeol groaned inwardly.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Don't you already know the reason? Ah, bring that over. The SD card Deputy Department Manager Jo received from Kim Seong-tae."

A man nearby, Kim Hyo-jun—Jung Yoon-ju's closest aide and a WID Grade 2 agent—brought over a tablet and SD card. He was the one who had spoken with her earlier.

Connecting the SD card to the tablet and opening the folder, Jung Yoon-ju's expression gradually hardened as she checked the contents.

"Kim Seong-tae, this crazy bastard... Was he following me all this time?"

At the same time, Jung Yoon-ju's sharp gaze shot at Kim Hyo-jun.

Due to her position, he couldn't provide close bodyguard detail, so he had only watched from afar.

But since another shadow had gone unnoticed, she rebuked him.

"... Sorry."

"Haaa—!"

On the screen were recent photos of Jung Yoon-ju with the main culprits of prosecution corruption, along with the account details of corrupt prosecutors, the source of which was unknown.

If this had been exposed by Jo Moo-yeol, even the Prosecutor General would have had to press forward with a full investigation.

At that moment, Kim Hyo-jun looked at another man approaching and spoke.

"President Lee has arrived."

A middle-aged man with a large, fleshy build cautiously approached, glancing around anxiously.

Jung Yoon-ju pulled out a red mask from her coat, as if slightly drunken.

The man was startled and spoke first.

"Sh-Shojo, what brings you to a humble place like this?"

This man was Lee Bong-soo, the person in charge at the place they were currently at—Areum Cleaning.

"I need to check something. About Kim Seong-tae, who was supposedly handled here about a year ago. Are you sure he was dealt with?"

Lee Bong-soo's brow furrowed as he started thinking.

"Kim Seong-tae? May I check the records, if you'll allow?"

"Go ahead."

Lee Bong-soo stepped out and entered an office on one side of the building.

Not long after, he carefully fetched a file and handed it to Jung Yoon-ju.

"As you said, the agent named Kim Seong-tae was retrieved and handled by us."

Inside the file was a Polaroid photo of Kim Seong-tae's corpse. The face was identical to the Kim Seong-tae Jo Moo-yeol had met hours before.

Jung Yoon-ju's expression hardened.

"Are you sure this is Kim Seong-tae?"

"Who would I lie to in front of? I assure you—it's definitely him!"

"Then a dead man has come back to life? Or is someone using a disguise...?"

A photo, sent by agents, captured the meeting between Jo Moo-yeol and Kim Seong-tae.

Kim Seong-tae's face had no notable discrepancies compared to the corpse photo just confirmed.

If it was a disguise, it meant a professional had been involved in this case.

Jung Yoon-ju's face turned frigid as she was about to speak again.

"Immediately—"

Thunk—

Suddenly, all the lights went out and darkness enveloped them.

Chapter 124 : Isn't This Common Sense?

Isn't This Common Sense?

The entire Areum Cleaning building, set on a mountain slope in Okcheon-myeon, yangpyeong-gun, Gyeonggi Province, was without power.

Everyone was flustered, shining their phones or flashes around to illuminate their surroundings.

Meanwhile, Kim Hyo-jun stuck close to Jung Yoon-ju, staying alert to their surroundings.

"Has there been any instance of a power outage here recently?"

He asked Lee Bong-soo.

"Ah, no! That has never happened before!"

"Then it must be the enemy. Shojo, I think it's best for you to get out of here for now. Everyone, arm yourselves!"

Even now, agents were shining their flashes around.

As soon as Kim Hyo-jun's order was given, they drew pistols and knives from their inner pockets.

Jung Yoon-ju sensed the atmosphere had turned very bad.

"Can we get out from here?"

"From now on, we'll act prioritizing Shojo's safety. And since it seems this place has been exposed to the enemy, I think it's necessary to initiate lockdown."

Lee Bong-soo, listening to the two speak, was bewildered.

"Huh? By lockdown, you mean..."

Pussyyuk—

Before he could finish, Kim Hyo-jun drew a silenced pistol and fired.

A bullet hole appeared in the center of Lee Bong-soo's head, and he collapsed to the floor.

"What should we do about Prosecutor Jo?"

As the question was asked, in the darkness, the trembling Jo Moo-yeol flinched.

Originally, the plan was to extract more about his connections to Kim Seong-tae and other necessary information here, then dispose of the body through Areum Cleaning.

However, in this sudden darkness, and with the enemy possibly appearing at any moment, he would only be a burden.

"Take care of him."

"Understood."

Kim Hyo-jun pointed his gun at Jo Moo-yeol's head, which was tucked in a sack.

Without the slightest hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

Shuaaak— Puk, pak!

At that moment, something flew in from somewhere and struck his wrist, causing the pistol to fire into the floor.

"Kuh... It seems the enemy has appeared."

Meanwhile, other agents calculated the source and shone their flashes, but no one was there.

"Team C, proceed with the search!"

With the new order, four agents moved out.

Kim Hyo-jun felt throbbing pain from his wrist. There was no blood, but pain surged all the way to his forearm, heightening his tension.

Shuuuuk— Pewpak, pak!

As if waiting for that moment, something else flew in, striking the C Team agents who had split off.

"Keurgh—!"

"Keup!"

They heard bodies hit the ground in the darkness, but confirmation was difficult.

Judging from the fact nothing had pierced his wrist, it was certainly not a silenced pistol or anything similar.

The remaining agents heard their colleagues' sharp screams, and their faces turned grim.

"I'll take Prosecutor Jo with me."

Kim Hyo-jun grabbed Jo Moo-yeol and retreated with Jung Yoon-ju.

The fact that someone had just tried to stop him from being killed meant he could be used as a hostage for now.

It was still pitch black, but Kim Hyo-jun knew the layout of the Areum Cleaning building well, so he managed to find and descend the stairs.

The other agents followed. With the enemy possibly lurking anywhere, no one dared relax their guard.

They moved from the third to the first floor. All that was left was to make their way to the parking lot where the car was.

"It might be best to call for backup, just in case."

"... Alright."

Jung Yoon-ju took out her phone.

But at the very top of the screen, the signal icon displayed an 'X'.

"What is this..."

Kim Hyo-jun's expression hardened when he saw it, and he tried activating his radio.

But all he got was noise.

"They seem to be using a communication jammer. I'll get you to the car as safely as possible for now. If they came after us with the jammer, the range probably isn't large. Once we get out of here, we should be able to contact help."

It was a straight 50 meters to the parking lot—but if they followed the pathway, it was at least 100 meters.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't be much, but with the unknown number of enemies, even that distance was dangerous.

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Meanwhile, on the still-dark third floor of the Areum Cleaning building, someone slowly appeared.

A man wearing a black full-face skull mask, combat attire, and military boots—it was In-hyuk.

He had just neutralized all the C Team agents by Jung Yoon-ju's side following Kim Hyo-jun's orders.

He knew Jung Yoon-ju would be nearby from the start.

Of course, he had heard so from Noah Vantrail, who had tailed her.

"Are they already down on the first floor?"

A voice, altered by the mask, leaked out softly.

In-hyuk pulled a phone from the corpse of Lee Bong-soo lying on the floor.

He connected a USB, automatically deactivated the lock, and transferred all files to Go Mi-ah's server.

He did the same for the other phones from the agents he'd knocked out earlier.

"Not much jamming time left, so I need to wrap this up quickly."

A jammer with a strong effect drains its battery quickly unless powered externally.

In-hyuk checked the timer on his wristwatch and walked to the window.

He saw a group heading for the car in the darkness.

In the mountain forest encircling the building, he also noticed a small light blinking in a regular pattern.

It was Van Hester, his companion, giving him a sign.

[Jammer Time Five M]

The Morse code meant there were five minutes left before the jammer stopped.

With communications disabled, they used this method instead.

"That'll be enough."

He replied with an 'understood' signal using the flash hanging from his neck, then opened the window.

Without hesitation, he raised a pistol he had taken from the agents and pulled the trigger.

The target was about 60 meters away. Hitting it in the dark with a pistol took skill.

Pufushuk— Pfshuk—

The rear members of the group heading toward the parking lot fell to the ground with sharp gusts of wind.

Since returning to the past, In-hyuk's senses were several times sharper than an ordinary person, letting him land his shots with ease.

Papapak— Pak— Papak—

As return fire started, the area around the window where In-hyuk was shattered.

"These guys aren't amateurs, that's for sure."

Even though his silenced shots only flashed for an instant, the enemy had tracked the impact points and pinpointed his location.

Naturally, In-hyuk had already ducked and was moving away from the window toward the stairs.

At the same time, heading for the vehicle, Kim Hyo-jun noticed the sudden silence from the third-floor window and shouted,

"Cease fire!"

The gunfire slicing through the air stopped, and silence returned to the darkness.

Jung Yoon-ju asked carefully.

"What just happened?"

"The enemy fired at us from inside the building."

"From there—where you couldn't even see us properly?"

It was a night without even moonlight. The building itself was barely visible through the gloom.

Kim Hyo-jun and the other agents had only made rough guesses at the shooter's location to fire back.

"The enemies' skills seem much higher than expected."

"So what do we do now?"

"Our only option is to detour to the next building and get out of here."

"The car?"

"In our current situation, the car is dangerous too."

If the enemy had attacked them head-on, they could have at least fought back.

But this was an ambush, not a frontal assault.

With the enemy's numbers and positions unknown, retreat was the only way to survive.

Having decided, Kim Hyo-jun took Jung Yoon-ju and Jo Moo-yeol (hands tied, a hood over his head) and moved toward the adjacent warehouse.

"My phone is picking up a signal again."

"Looks like the jamming's stopped."

Papak— Pak— Papak—

Almost simultaneously, power was restored—streetlights and building lights all came on.

Wincing at the sudden brightness, Kim Hyo-jun pressed against the warehouse wall, moving into the shadows to avoid being seen.

Kwaang—

Suddenly, a tremendous explosion shattered the warehouse windows and weak walls, sending fire surging out.

Everyone pressed against the wall was thrown by the blast.

"Kuheuk..."

Kim Hyo-jun groaned, fighting to remain conscious as he checked his surroundings.

Jung Yoon-ju and Jo Moo-yeol appeared to have fainted, lying motionless on the ground. Other nearby agents staggered from the shock, too.

Pufshuk— Pufufshuk—

From the Areum Cleaning building, the skull-masked man approached slowly, putting down agents with his pistol.

Kim Hyo-jun looked around desperately for the gun he'd dropped during the explosion.

But In-hyuk, in the skull mask, closed in before he could find it.

"So this was as far as you got, after all that running?"

"You... did you predict we'd escape this way and even plant a bomb?"

"If you've had any military training, setting up booby traps on escape routes is just common sense, isn't it?"

With the question, In-hyuk grabbed Kim Hyo-jun's left palm and opened it.

Kim Hyo-jun's face hardened.

"Why are you targeting us?"

"Is that important?"

"Is AMK behind you?"

"What, did I have some grudge against them?"

No true answers came—only more questions.

"Why the hell—!"

Click—

Before he could finish, In-hyuk aimed the pistol at him. Then, with his left hand, he gently took off the skull mask.

Seeing the face beneath, Kim Hyo-jun's eyes went wide.

"... Kim Seong-tae?"

In-hyuk had disguised himself inside the mask.

"You'll never know who I really am. And thanks for leading me here."

Pufshuk—

As the trigger was pulled, Kim Hyo-jun's head dropped to the floor.

In-hyuk turned his attention to the unconscious Jung Yoon-ju.

"Did you really think I'd just leave you behind quietly?"

Jung Yoon-ju's body twitched. She had just come to and had quietly listened to the conversation between In-hyuk and Kim Hyo-jun.

Of course, In-hyuk had already noticed her breathing had changed.

"You do understand your situation? After all, you're the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's deputy general manager."

This time, In-hyuk pressed the pistol to her head.

Startled, Jung Yoon-ju slowly lifted her head, gritting her teeth as she saw In-hyuk's face—now looking like Kim Seong-tae.

"... Was this whole thing a trap to lure me in?"

In-hyuk smirked.

"I had no idea the catch would be this big. So if possible, I'd like you to answer my questions honestly."

Jung Yoon-ju's eyes trembled faintly.

"Don't expect anyone to save you. A firetruck is on its way, but I intend to deal with you and disappear before they arrive."

"If you're just going to kill me anyway, what sort of answer do you expect?"

"You might resent dying alone. Aren't you angry at Baek Ji-woong, Kwon So-jeong, and Im Deok-chang, too?"

Jung Yoon-ju's mind spun in confusion. The enemy clearly knew more about their side than she had anticipated.

"If you know that much already, what do you want to hear from me?"

"The name and location of your leader."

At In-hyuk's icy words, Jung Yoon-ju's lips trembled. Lines of tension deepened on her face as she thought.

"I don't know their identity! Low-ranking staff like me aren't told those things!"

"...'Their'? So there's more than one?"

"T-That's..."

Pufshuk—

The pistol aimed at her head fired.

Sirens wailed in the distance. The warehouse continued to burn after the explosion.

"Unfortunately, time's up."

In-hyuk muttered quietly, taking Jung Yoon-ju's phone.

Chapter 125 : Suddenly, a business trip?

Suddenly, a business trip?

WISE&WIRE Group Chairman's Office.

Baek Ji-woong sat in his seat, wearing earphones.

[Th-that's...]

[Fwoosh—]

[Unfortunately, time's up.]

He had been eavesdropping on Jung Yoon-ju's phone through her device for some time.

Of course, the person herself had no idea.

Thanks to having bribed someone nearby, he was able to install a surveillance program without her noticing.

Only background noise buzzed through the earphones, then suddenly Skull's voice could be heard.

[Baek Ji-woong?]

At the same time, the muscles on both sides of Baek Ji-woong's jaw tensed as his eyes widened.

[... Or is it Im Deok-chang? I thought you were executives working together. In the end, were you always wary of each other?]

"This bastard..."

Because it was just eavesdropping, even if Baek Ji-woong responded, the other side couldn't hear him.

[As you heard, I know about you all. So you'd better hide well. If I get annoyed, I won't hesitate to put a bullet through all of your heads.]

Click—

With that, the surveillance program's signal was cut and nothing more was heard.

The program had been wiped from the phone. A heavy mood filled the chairman's office.

Do Jung-geol, who had been listening with him, spoke up cautiously, face dark.

"Shouldn't we have sent in support troops to capture them?"

Even though they realized it was a trap from Baek Si-hwan's call, they hadn't taken any direct action.

"If we had? And could we have caught them?"

Skull appeared disguised as the late Kim Seong-tae, used Jo Moo-yeol as bait, and even dragged out Jung Yoon-ju.

Of course, it was also a problem that Jung Yoon-ju herself reacted too sensitively and showed up in person.

Of all places, she took him to Areum Cleaning...

Moreover, Skull had anticipated Jung Yoon-ju's escape route and set explosives.

If Baek Ji-woong had sent support, the bodies of other agents might have been sprawled there as well.

"At the very least, this incident will leave tracks pointing to our organization."

Areum Cleaning was a company that handled those the organization needed erased without a trace.

Considering the special chemicals and equipment used there, plus today's corpses and firearms, it was bound to become an issue one way or another.

"Let's first cut ties with Seunghwa Chemicals, the company that supplied the materials. Make sure all related material from Areum Cleaning and the other companies is disposed of without exception. Go deal with it in person. I'll report to the Organization in the meantime."

"Understood. I'll get right on it."

Left alone, Baek Ji-woong felt a headache coming on.

He took a sip of whiskey from the corner of the office and stood by the window, looking out over the lights illuminating Seoul.

"We don't know him, but he knows us..."

That was how Baek Ji-woong and the Hongu Society had always lived.

An organization possessing overwhelming power and money unknown to the world.

They quietly manipulated events from the shadows, unnoticed by anyone.

But now, the dusk of what he once believed was an everlasting organization started to become faintly visible.

"Are we now the prey?"

The corners of Baek Ji-woong's lips curled upward. For some reason, a dry chuckle escaped before any real worry.

"Keuk keuk keuk! Us, hunted prey... I'm curious to see how you'll act. Skull..."

Muttering the name they had given, Baek Ji-woong gazed down at the city with a cold look.

* * *

【A number of armed bodies were discovered with signs of an explosion at a western Gyeonggi Province cleaning service company... Among the deceased, it was revealed that A, a high-ranking prosecutor from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office, was present. The survivor is said to be Prosecutor B from the same office...】

【The cause of the Gyeonggi Province cleaning company explosion is presumed to be a chemical leak and a short circuit in the electrical system in the warehouse... The surviving prosecutor B from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office has yet to regain consciousness...】

【Another shootout after the recent southern Gyeonggi shooting? The identities of the armed deceased found at the cleaning company are currently being checked by prosecutors and police...】

...

...

As usual, In-hyuk arrived at work and took his seat.

Hong Yu-geon, sitting on the sofa with a stiff face, glanced outside the office and spoke cautiously.

"Aren't you going to explain what happened?"

He was referring to yesterday's Areum Cleaning incident caused by In-hyuk.

After the operation, In-hyuk returned with Van Hester and switched places with Noah, who was disguised as him, then went home immediately.

Van Hester had just watched from afar.

Not knowing the situation, Hong Yu-geon grew increasingly frustrated.

"It's just as reported. Everyone's dead except Prosecutor Jo."

Hong Yu-geon almost raised his voice but forced himself to lower it again.

"That's not what I mean...! Why use bombs, even? Where did you get something like that?"

"I didn't get it from anywhere in particular. Plus, just like the article says: they're saying it was an accident caused by chemicals and a short circuit."

"Chemicals? A short circuit? You expect me to believe that?"

Still, In-hyuk shrugged his shoulders. He had no intention of denying Hong Yu-geon's suspicion.

"It's not hard. If you understand a few chemical properties and set up a simple trigger, that's all it takes. Plus, those guys were armed and there were a lot of them."

"You could have waited. Or asked for my help. You left Van outside just to keep watch, didn't you?"

Clearly, he was upset because he was worried for In-hyuk.

"It was a golden opportunity that came unexpectedly. I had no choice. At least I took care of someone who appeared to be an executive."

Hong Yu-geon exhaled sharply through his nose, perhaps due to the indifferent answer.

"Still! Why make a mess all on your own!"

"There's no need to involve more people than necessary."

"Ugh... I can't believe this."

In-hyuk looked at an article displayed on his desk monitor.

Deputy Prosecutor General Jung Yoon-ju's death.

Kooou must have worked hard to get her to that position in the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Of course, someone from their side could quickly fill the vacant seat.

However, if the next person in that position was also a Kooou loyalist, this incident would serve as a warning.

It would say that they, too, could be taken out just like this.

"With things getting this noisy, the enemy will lay low for a while. We should wrap up the tasks we've put on hold."

"So, back to work immediately?"

"We get paid, at least."

"Small comfort."

As their bickering calmed, Van Hester, who had been quietly observing, smiled softly.

Hong Yu-geon voiced another question:

"So, are these now our main concern?"

"What?"

"The succession structures of Taeshin Group and KQ Group."

Lately, those stories appeared regularly in the news.

Since Taeshin Group's current chairman, Tae Gun-seung, was well into his nineties, speculation and concerns were inevitable.

As for KQ Group, rumors continued to swirl thanks to In-hyuk newly emerging as an heir candidate.

"I don't think it's something I need to worry about."

"Both companies are a mess. Plus, if you go around the office, there's even talk of madam being put forth as a candidate, fronted by the division director."

He meant Tae Ju-ha.

"It's not impossible, but she probably has no interest."

"Why not?"

"It's too much to handle. Besides, her uncle is a major problem."

Even now, Tae Seok-ho was eagerly after the next chairman's seat.

But strangely, things had been quieter than expected lately.

"So the division director is totally uninterested?"

"Why should I take over a rotting company?"

"Still, it's a big organization with a strong foundation. With your skills, you could merge it with AMK and shake things up."

It was a decent option.

Of course, In-hyuk had considered it as well.

"Too much hassle. And you two, you'll be away on a business trip for a while."

"Business trip? Out of the blue?"

They weren't regular employees, and their job was to ensure In-hyuk's safety.

For them, a "business trip" meant leaving their posts.

"It's about Noah. Track down the new location of the camp moved from Naya in Mongolia. It had to be a large-scale operation, so there will be traces left."

"We're to do that? But our faces have already been exposed—it might be risky."

There was a risk of being traced themselves. If that happened, it could expose In-hyuk as the mastermind behind all recent events.

"Tracking and intel gathering is your speciality. Noah will provide masks and equipment for disguise."

That was one of the reasons In-hyuk had brought in Noah Vantrail.

He could make disguises himself, but only Noah could prepare equipment that others could use with ease.

"When you checked before, there was nothing left at those sites, right? How long are we meant to keep looking?"

"A month. If you don't find anything by then, just come back."

Hong Yu-geon sighed.

"If we're gone, won't the enemy target the division director again?"

"I already told you, things will be quiet for a while."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It doesn't really matter if you're here or not. I only used you guys as bodyguards because of the immediate situation. Don't tell me you've gotten too comfortable here?"

He'd only reluctantly accepted the two as security guards to avoid taking Tae Seok-ho's security team.

"Fine! This is getting annoying! Right, Van?"

Van Hester just shrugged in response.

Hong Yu-geon scowled deeply, his brow wrinkling.

"Tch—! You need more than one hand to clap! So when do we leave?"

"As soon as possible. I'll process your absence as leave. Talk to Go Mi-ah about flights and expenses, and remember, you may be tracked. Make sure you throw off any tails, understood?"

He was telling them to switch identities once they left a certain zone.

Naturally, both understood without difficulty.

"We're not amateurs..."

"I'm counting on you."

"Haaa... Looks like we'll have a rough time ahead."

Just then, someone knocked on the office door.

"Yes, come in."

As the frosted glass door opened, Heo Yu-rim, Tae Ju-ha's secretary, peeked in.

But something about the atmosphere suggested bad news.

"Division director, do you have a moment?"

"What is it?"

"It's just... former CEO Tae Seok-hyun and madam came to see you earlier."

With Heo Yu-rim's explanation, In-hyuk quickly grasped the situation.

Still, he hid his thoughts and replied neutrally.

"Is there some kind of problem?"

"I overheard earlier—former CEO Tae Seok-hyun raised his voice. There seemed to be an issue... The CEO just told me not to enter."

Currently, Tae Seok-hyun had stepped down from his CEO post at Taeshin Electronics due to corruption charges.

Since then, he hadn't been placed in another affiliate and was left floating without a position.

As the only viable candidate, Tae Seok-hyun was under focus, but with Tae Ju-ha's name also mentioned, he was clearly feeling threatened.

In-hyuk paused for a moment, lost in thought.

Chapter 126 : Can't Be an Aristocrat

Can't Be an Aristocrat

Taeshin Asset Management CEO's Office.

There, the voices of Tae Ju-ha and Tae Seok-hyun, who were in the middle of a conversation, grew louder.

"Didn't I say you're the only one who can help me right now? Besides, I'm your father! If you don't step up, who will?"

Sitting across from him, Tae Ju-ha could only sigh inwardly. While doing so, she glanced over at her stepmother, Lee Sun-hye, who was sitting beside Tae Seok-hyun in a dignified posture. From the very beginning until now, she hadn't said a word. She just sat quietly, only watching to see how Tae Ju-ha would react to Tae Seok-hyun's urging.

"I understand your position, Father. But as I said earlier, how could I possibly make a request to Grandfather? He's not someone who would listen to me."

The reason the two of them had sought out Tae Ju-ha was precisely for Tae Seok-hyun's recovery. And not just through anyone, but by asking her to speak directly with Chairman Tae Gun-seung. Of course, it was odd for a father to ask his daughter—his own child, at that—to persuade his own father. But for Tae Seok-hyun, now isolated within Taeshin Group, Tae Ju-ha was his only remaining hope.

"Are you really going to do this? Who do you think helped you become so successful in the first place! Even that guy, In-hyuk—it's because I introduced you to him that things went this well!"

Tae Ju-ha, caught off guard, cautiously opened her mouth.

"That's true. You were the one who arranged for me to marry him. And thanks to that, this company is enjoying profits bigger than expected."

"Exactly! Isn't it all thanks to me? So—"

"No, that's not it. The company is doing well not because I got married, but because In-hyuk has done so well. The one Grandfather trusts is not me, but In-hyuk. So, shouldn't you have gone to him instead of bringing this up to me?"

"That's..."

It was Kang In-hyuk who ousted Tae Seok-hyun from the CEO position at Taeshin Electronics. Naturally, for Tae Seok-hyun, In-hyuk was as much an uncomfortable presence as Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

"In any case, I can't go to Grandfather about you."

"Tae Ju-ha!"

At that moment, Lee Sun-hye, who had remained silent, finally opened her mouth for the first time. Startled by her sudden outburst, Tae Ju-ha stared straight at her. As their eyes met, Lee Sun-hye let out a long sigh.

"We fully understand if we fell short as your family. But surely there are limits. What if your father fails to reclaim his position like this? And if the chairman's seat goes to your uncle's son next? What do you think will happen to you then?"

It wasn't concern or worry. She was threatening her by bringing up Tae Seok-ho. Of course, it wasn't exactly wrong. And Tae Ju-ha herself had worried about that point as well.

Knock, knock—

Just then, with the sound of a knock, Heo Yu-rim's voice was heard.

"CEO. Kang In-hyuk from the MP Division is here. Shall I have him wait?"

There was no schedule for Kang In-hyuk to visit the CEO's office today, so Tae Ju-ha was slightly taken aback.

"We've finished our conversation, so let him in."

With the response, the door opened.

As In-hyuk entered, he spotted Tae Seok-hyun and Lee Sun-hye.

"Oh, Father-in-law and Mother-in-law, you're here. Have you been well?"

It was a very ordinary and friendly greeting, but for the two, it was anything but.

"Hmm... not particularly well."

They couldn't have been. In-hyuk asked even as he clearly knew this.

"It would be nice if you two could just relax for a bit. Or maybe the two of you could travel together. When I went to Switzerland and Monaco this time, it was actually pretty nice."

It was an obviously mocking suggestion packed with nuance. But Tae Seok-hyun only exhaled through his nose, suppressing his anger.

"What happened at Taeshin Electronics was just to handle the recovery. You know, when running a company, inevitable events happen, don't they?"

"It's hard to call a loss of over 800 billion won 'inevitable'."

"I'm only human. I only tried to make the business a success..."

"That kickback you tried to get through the contract with the Chinese company, right?"

Instantly, Tae Seok-hyun's face hardened. That particular issue hadn't been made public during the meeting.

Tae Ju-ha, too, looked at In-hyuk by the door with a startled expression.

"How did you..."

"I obtained further testimony from an associate of Swentech detained by Interpol. The actual production costs were significantly cheaper than what was contracted. Even if the contract hadn't been a scam, problems would have arisen."

Lower unit costs meant there was no way the products would have been sound.

"But..."

"Do you think the chairman isn't aware of this?"

Whatever Tae Seok-hyun was about to argue died in his throat.

In-hyuk, with a cold look, stared right at him and spoke on.

"I think the chairman turned a blind eye to you just once. But instead of staying quiet, you came to your daughter and made things difficult for her."

"Mm..."

"Is there anything more you'd like to say?"

"We'll be leaving now."

"You! Are you really just going to...!"

"Ssst—!"

Lee Sun-hye tried to say something more, but Tae Seok-hyun silenced her and headed toward the door.

"We won't go far."

"....."

In-hyuk stepped aside so they could leave. Then, watching their backs as they exited—without even bothering to close the door—he turned to Tae Ju-ha.

"I don't think there was anything on today's agenda... So what brings you here?"

"Secretary Heo asked me."

Just then, Heo Yu-rim, who had accompanied Tae Seok-hyun and Lee Sun-hye to the elevator, returned and met Tae Ju-ha's eyes.

"Secretary Heo?"

"Ah... I heard the noise from outside and thought the CEO was in trouble."

Heo Yu-rim's voice grew progressively smaller.

Tae Ju-ha seemed to understand why, and offered a bittersweet, sorrowful smile.

"I'm fine now. Please go and continue with your work."

Bowing her head, Heo Yu-rim retreated.

In the meantime, In-hyuk took the seat Tae Seok-hyun had occupied.

"Aren't you going back, In-hyuk?"

She clearly thought he would.

In-hyuk met her gaze, looking right into her eyes.

"Since I'm here, I actually have something to tell you."

"What is it? Are you planning another major move?"

Not long ago, he had brought in the semiconductor production deal between Taeshin Semiconductors and Taiwan's SolarView through AMK Partners. Given the number of companies involved, the process was complicated, and the profit for Taeshin Asset Management wasn't even substantial. Nevertheless, since it was expanding international business, the staff in charge of the field welcomed it. Beyond that, In-hyuk continued to bring in minor M&A cases, investments, bonds, stocks, and other subcontracts connected to AMK Partners, raising overall profits. From the perspective of Taeshin Asset Management, it was certainly a good thing. However, Tae Ju-ha worried about the increasing burden on In-hyuk.

"Soon, the joint venture between Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion will be established."

Tae Ju-ha looked surprised.

"It's already gotten to that point?"

"The plant site is Sedona, Arizona, America. Acquisition, investment plans, all the documents are complete, and I'll need to go over there soon to finalize it."

"Has the name of the joint venture been decided?"

"It's Velbyte Technology. A name combining Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion."

Nodding at In-hyuk's explanation, she said,

"That's great. Since the recent research was successful, there'll probably be big headlines soon."

Greenbyte had already managed to reduce power consumption by 60% in their development.

It was a technology that kept output the same with much lower power required.

As long as there were no setbacks in production, they'd practically secured tremendous sales in advance.

"It's all thanks to your full support for the investment."

Tae Ju-ha became a bit embarrassed.

"It was you, In-hyuk, who pushed things through forcefully. We didn't even know such a company existed. But how did you know to invest in them from the start? Did you know it would work out?"

It was something everyone was curious about. Also, no one had managed to uncover In-hyuk's information channels for investment.

"If I told you that, wouldn't I be giving away all my secrets?"

"I guess that was a pretty obvious question."

"But I've more than contributed to the company, haven't I?"

"But I wonder how long that'll last... Ah!"

Suddenly, she remembered the earlier conversation about divorce that had been cut off. Tae Ju-ha realized too late and covered her mouth with her hand. Of course, In-hyuk also knew exactly what she was thinking.

"I still have a lot left to do here, so let's put that on hold for a while."

"Are you really sure you'll be okay?"

Because talk about the next successor within Taeshin Group hadn't stopped.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho was quickly making contact with presidents, CEOs, and executives across every affiliate company.

Of course, there were shares entrusted to Tae Ju-ha for checks and balances, but because that was not publicly disclosed, it didn't have any immediate impact.

For now, Tae Gun-seung and In-hyuk, who was swiftly establishing himself, were the only real threats to Tae Seok-ho.

"I can handle it. As long as Chairman Kang doesn't keep bothering me."

Bzzz— Bzzz—

At that moment, In-hyuk's phone vibrated. An unknown number popped up on the screen.

"... Who is it?"

"I'm fine, go ahead and answer it."

"Excuse me, then."

As he pressed the call button, a coarse voice came through the line.

[You finally picked up. How about having dinner with me this evening? Are you free?]

At the same time, In-hyuk frowned deeply.

The caller was none other than Kang Cheon-gyu.

"... I'm busy."

[No matter how busy you are, you can spare time for a meal. I'll come nearby on your schedule. Or you can come to me.]

As In-hyuk kept declining, Kang Cheon-gyu shamelessly proposed alternatives. Though that hadn't really been different before...

'Was he always like this?'

KQ Group's Kang Cheon-gyu, like Taeshin's Chairman Tae Gun-seung, was notorious for being a stubborn lone wolf.

Always dignified, he never let even his son's issues slide easily in business.

Yet, the Kang Cheon-gyu In-hyuk had been seeing recently was acting more like a child whining for someone to become his successor.

"I'll go to you. But I can't spare much time. And I'm not going to repeat myself."

[I understand. I'll set the time and place and send you the details.]

When the call ended, from across the desk, Tae Ju-ha cautiously asked,

"Was that... Chairman Kang?"

"Yes. I can't be an aristocrat."

Just seconds ago, they'd been talking about him, and then he'd called.

In-hyuk glanced around, half-suspicious that Kang Cheon-gyu might have planted a bug or camera somewhere.

"With Chairman Kang's situation, it's no wonder he would want someone like you."

Back when Tae Ju-ha first heard that In-hyuk was Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's biological child, her first worry was that he'd leave immediately.

"I have no interest. Anyway, as I said earlier, I'm planning to leave the country soon, so I'll organize my work accordingly."

"Take care."

Exchanging farewells, In-hyuk left the CEO's office immediately.

Chapter 127 : The World's Gone Mad

The World's Gone Mad

It was almost time to get off work.

As In-hyuk tidied up his desk and prepared to leave, he glanced at Baek Si-hwan, who stood up as if he had been waiting.

"Today, I have a dinner appointment with Chairman Kang of KQ, so you should go home first."

"... Understood."

Ever since Baek Si-hwan had left work in a hurry a few days ago, the atmosphere had grown noticeably quieter than usual.

So, In-hyuk rode the elevator together with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester. Coincidentally, the meeting place was "Hoam", a Korean set menu restaurant in Cheongdam neighborhood. It took about thirty minutes to arrive due to rush hour traffic.

"Don't tell me you booked this place on purpose?"

That's because it was run by Jang Hyung-cheol, the former owner of Chulsan Capital and now the CEO of AMK Bridge.

When they went inside and gave the name for the reservation, a staff member guided them. Standing in front of the door was Noh Geun-cheol, the secretary. As he greeted them and opened the door, Kang Cheon-gyu, who had arrived first, came into view.

"How long have you been waiting?"

"Not that long. Here, bring out the food, will you? Executive Director Noh, you should go eat first as well."

Noh Geun-cheol bowed to him and closed the door.

After that, only the two of them were left in the room. As In-hyuk wiped his hands with a warm towel, he spoke to Kang Cheon-gyu.

"You didn't call me here just to eat... So what is it you wanted to discuss? Oh, and like I said on the phone, no talk about successors, please."

By drawing the line from the beginning, a bitter look flickered in Kang Cheon-gyu's eyes.

"Do you think I would have contacted you myself just to talk about that? Not to mention, I only called because you didn't answer Executive Director Noh's call."

"You must have been desperate then."

"Hahaha—! Looks like I ended up bothering you by accident."

"I'm glad you realize it."

Their light conversation was interrupted when the food arrived.

While slowly sampling the dishes, Kang Cheon-gyu glanced at In-hyuk for his reaction.

"If you have something to say, just say it."

"Oh, you don't mind?"

"It doesn't matter if we talk after eating or now—it's all the same."

Kang Cheon-gyu grinned and spoke slightly more openly.

"There's that joint venture between Greenbyte Labs, which is managed by Taeshin Asset Management, and AMK Velion, right?"

At the mention of it, In-hyuk stopped his chopsticks halfway toward the side dishes.

"It's not officially established yet. Are you interested in that place?"

"The main procedures have mostly finished, haven't they? I heard Greenbyte Labs' performance tests were a success."

Tae Ju-ha had also known about this. Still, it hadn't been publicly announced. No matter how hard they tried to keep things under wraps, rumors about such a high-profile business inevitably spread.

"You're well-informed."

"When something's interesting, you naturally find different ways to get information."

"So what Chairman Kang wants is the rights to import and distribute the products produced by the joint venture in Korea?"

Kang Cheon-gyu smiled, clearly impressed.

"You catch on fast. Or did you already expect this?"

"I've been getting contacts about this from all over. Well... not as much as you've found out, Chairman, but most are just testing the waters."

He seemed a little more pleased for the compliment.

"It's only natural to act when you want something! So, what do you think? There isn't any place in Korea better-positioned than us for them, right?"

Since what he said wasn't wrong, In-hyuk nodded.

Sensing this as a positive sign, Kang Cheon-gyu's smile grew wider.

"It's certainly not a bad idea, but if I give that up without any risks attached, there'll be a lot of talk."

If this were simply a business-to-business relationship, there would be no problem at all.

However, In-hyuk was both the director of the MP Division at Taeshin Asset Management, which owned 25% of the joint venture Velbyte Technology, and Kang Cheon-gyu's illegitimate son.

Understanding this, Kang Cheon-gyu's expression grew notably serious.

"There'll definitely be people who try to use it against us."

"You already knew that, didn't you?"

He had run KQ Group for decades. There was no way he hadn't realized the implications of what In-hyuk just pointed out.

"Hmmm...!"

"You intended to tie me to KQ Group and make things difficult for me again, didn't you."

"You're quite perceptive."

"Isn't it obvious you keep pushing for it?"

Kang Cheon-gyu couldn't have expected that In-hyuk wouldn't notice.

"If it were you, you'd probably try to make a business out of the exclusive sales rights."

"You sound confident."

"If someone who's handled distribution all their life loses this to someone else, they might as well drop dead. So, shall we have a drink?"

With that, Kang Cheon-gyu lifted the pitcher of liquor on the table.

"Why not."

Gradually, both their glasses were filled.

* * *

【Gyeonggi Province Cleaning Company Shooting Survivor, Prosecutor B: Was High-ranking Supreme Prosecutors' Office Official Prosecutor A Behind It? Several days after regaining consciousness, B testified to the investigating police that Prosecutor A had personally attempted to kill him by orchestrating his abduction... He claimed he couldn't see the face because of a hood but was sure of the voice—it was Prosecutor A...】

【Officially, Prosecutor A refers to Deputy General Manager Jeong ○○ of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office... Meanwhile, the relationship between the deceased armed personnel and the suspect is still under investigation by police and prosecutors...】

【Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion's joint venture named 'Velbyte Technology'! They announced reaching 60% in their power-reduction experiments and stated that production would begin as soon as they secured the necessary equipment and completed electric appliance certification...】

【Production countdown for Velbyte Technology's power-reduction tech products by the joint venture! Taeshin Asset Management, which had invested in Greenbyte Labs, has reportedly secured a 25% stake in Velbyte Technology... Investors are eagerly watching for its future value to skyrocket...】

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"The world's gone absolutely mad..."

This was in the Executive Vice President's office at Taeshin Trading.

Tae Seok-ho muttered this as he stared across at Reina Blackwood, who sat opposite him.

"Are you still going to say this isn't your people's doing?"

He was referring to the shooting incident involving the deputy general manager of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Reina let out a shallow sigh.

"If I said no, would you even believe me?"

"There's not much difference between what you and I do."

Tae Seok-ho himself had once tried to hire the Redfall mercenaries through the now-late Lee Jae-jun to kill Kang In-hyuk, only to fail.

"It was an accident caused by one of our executives messing around without permission. Of course, it's not like we suffered heavy losses."

"Even after all that? And why did you leave the surviving prosecutor alive? Wouldn't it have been better to take care of him?"

With the survivor's testimony, the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's deputy general manager was named as the mastermind behind the armed attack. Given the gravity of the situation, the government, let alone the prosecutors and police, would certainly not sit still.

"If we did that, there'd be no scapegoat for this mess."

"So, you're putting it all on Deputy General Manager Jung Yoon-ju?"

"Every incident needs a scapegoat."

"There's a lot of attention on this incident... Are you sure it'll wrap up smoothly?"

"That's up to the Organization to handle."

In fact, Reina had already asked her immediate superior, Im Deok-chang, about the situation after the incident—she knew Tae Seok-ho would ask. But she hadn't received a satisfactory reply, so what she just said was all she knew as well.

A brief silence settled before Tae Seok-ho spoke again.

"Is there still a lot left before the share acquisition is done?"

"Between what you secured by reaching out to shareholders and what we've been authorized to take over, it's just a bit over 28%. About 3% remains."

"So it's just about time to make a move."

"We're getting ready already. But are you really okay with this?"

At her repeated confirmation, Tae Seok-ho stared at her intently.

"You think I'd back out now?"

"It's just, this concerns your father. If you regret it after we've already started, the Organization won't let it slide."

There was a threatening undertone to her words.

Tae Seok-ho knew it all too well and sighed.

"I've already crossed the Rubicon. Now, only one of us can make it out alive."

The shareholder movements would have already reached Tae Gun-seung by now.

Naturally, Tae Gun-seung would know who was orchestrating this as well. With that, the only thing left was who would survive, so Tae Seok-ho needed to strengthen his resolve.

"I'm glad you're firm on this. I'll proceed with everything as planned, no holdbacks."

"Please do. By the way... is it really alright to leave Kang In-hyuk be? He doesn't seem interested in switching over to KQ Group at all from the look of things."

Even the news article just now had covered Velbyte Technology and Taeshin Asset Management.

It was a project Tae Seok-ho wanted, but Taeshin Asset Management was now a fellow affiliate, not a subsidiary of Taeshin Life as before.

Even if Tae Seok-ho became chairman, he couldn't arbitrarily exercise the affiliate's Velbyte Technology shares without Tae Ju-ha's approval. Moreover, as long as Kang In-hyuk continued to be involved there, the place would be like an impregnable fortress.

"Once this is settled, he wouldn't be able to stay anyway. And it's not like you'd just sit back and watch."

Currently, Taeshin Asset Management's various projects, linked with AMK Partners, were growing rapidly. For Tae Seok-ho, they appeared like ripe fruit.

Of course, even if Kang In-hyuk had started them, it would be hard to roll them back now. So Tae Seok-ho hoped that if Kang In-hyuk disappeared, he could claim the results for himself.

"Even after I take the chairman's seat, I'll have to find a way to drive him out if he sticks around."

Bzzz— Bzzz—

At that moment, the phone on Tae Seok-ho's table vibrated.

After checking the screen, Tae Seok-ho glanced strangely at Reina.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Let's get to work."

"..... Alright."

Leaving the tense air behind, Reina withdrew from the room.

Now alone, Tae Seok-ho walked over to the coat rack and took another phone from his inside jacket pocket. He had asked his wife to get him a separate phone because Reina Blackwood was always keeping an eye on him. When he powered it on, a message arrived.

After reading, Tae Seok-ho's brow furrowed intently.

"So that's why Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk went overseas?"

On the screen was a list of companies the two had visited in Switzerland, Monaco, Hong Kong, and Russia, as well as detailed profiles of the staff working there.

With that, he immediately understood why Reina Blackwood had stayed so quiet.

"Did they think I'd lose my mind if I found out?"

He felt vaguely annoyed.

"Or are they up to something else?"

Judging by the situation, either Kang In-hyuk or Tae Ju-ha had obtained rights to 19 million shares of Taeshin Trading and 8.5 million shares of Taeshin Electronics—about 3.3 trillion won in assets. If Tae Seok-ho didn't take the right precautions, he might not even be able to claim the chairman's seat.

Tae Seok-ho put the phone away again and sat with a strange expression.

Chapter 128 : More Than a Comrade's Honor

More Than a Comrade's Honor

A few days later.

In-hyuk received a message at the Taeshin Asset Management office.

【Bluemetal03: Looked into Taeshin Group's Tae Seok-ho and Tae Ju-ha, as well as Kang In-hyuk's activities overseas. Completed transmission of investigation materials.】

The sender was a senior member of the Cheong Geumbang, an underground organization in China. Moreover, Cheong Geumbang was a group that In-hyuk had controlled in his previous life.

Naturally, he knew not only the weaknesses of those executives, but also the information on surrounding groups Cheong Geumbang needed to expand its power.

"So they only now got around to checking into this... Does that mean those guys haven't shared what they know?"

Because if it were Kooou, it was something he would have known right away.

At the same time, the faces of Reina Blackwood came to mind. Ostensibly, she was Tae Seok-ho's close aide, appearing to help, but behind the scenes, she was controlling the flow of key information.

While muttering to himself, In-hyuk looked over the empty office. Neither the typically boisterous Hong Yu-geon nor Van Hester, who would stand munching on suspicious(?) snacks, were around.

Both had left the country to track Kooou's camp.

At that moment, his phone vibrated again with another message. This time, it was from Go Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: Finished the cipher decryption and uploaded it.】

He had previously asked her to analyze the agents' device records copied at Areum Cleaning.

In-hyuk accessed the private cloud on his computer.

【Guest5436: Okay.】

【Red Witch: I don't know if these guys are slow learners or just don't realize they've been breached. They keep using Japanese as the decryption keyword.】

【Guest5436: Maybe they think we haven't cracked the code yet.】

【Red Witch: They're dumber than I thought.】

【Guest5436: Still, we should stay cautious, just in case. Either way, thanks.】

After finishing the exchange, In-hyuk checked the contents. The records acquired from the agents this time were quite different from before.

In the past, infiltration was about monitoring and dealing with key executives, but now these were conversations between people strictly carrying out combat operations.

'Are there separate fields of responsibility within the organization?'

Moreover, the agents In-hyuk had dealt with this time were all unfamiliar faces. That alone meant he had never encountered them in his previous life, and suggested the size of Kooou was likely even larger than he had expected.

'Their armament too...and at this level, they're on par with official government agents. But the Kooou keyword I came across for the first time, and the fact I never found any trace...'

At any rate—Baek Ji-woong, Kwon So-jeong, Im Deok-chang, and now Jung Yoon-ju...

People who held key posts in corporations, government agencies, and the Ministry of Justice were all moving with a single purpose.

Had In-hyuk not gotten in their way—had he died as originally fated together with Tae Ju-ha—many things would have changed.

"There's not as much on record as I thought."

Apparently they regularly changed out their communication equipment.

As he went through things one by one, another message arrived from Go Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: Almost forgot. I found records on someone named Jeon Eun-seong, too. Just uploaded them—take a look.】

Since she'd hacked into the servers of both the Ministry of Defense and the executive branch, it had taken some time.

Still, she found the material quicker than In-hyuk had anticipated.

He closed the folder he'd just been viewing and opened the folder labeled "Jeon Eun-seong."

A familiar photo and its details appeared.

【Ministry of Defense Personal Record】

—Name: Jeon Eun-seong

—Date of Birth: 1977, MM-DD

—Affiliation: Military Intelligence Command, Administration Division

—Rank: Lieutenant Colonel

—Service Period: Commissioned MM-DD, 1998 ~ Discharged 2025/02/DD

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A sharply-eyed man in military uniform, looking both neat and slightly boyish for his age.

Jeon Eun-seong, in In-hyuk's previous life, had been his superior and training instructor at UID. He had learned everything about combat from him, and their service together had been without any major trouble until discharge.

Of course, Baek Si-hwan, who was currently working out in the adjacent office, had also served under him.

"So he retired last year? Was that the same before?"

He had never bothered to look up Jeon Eun-seong's status after discharge, so this was new information. It also raised questions.

"If Baek Si-hwan was connected/poached at UID...why not me?"

His service with Baek Si-hwan had overlapped by about two years, during which In-hyuk had higher marks in mission performance, combat skills, tactics—everything.

A bitter look came over In-hyuk's face. The trust built through joint operations with Baek Si-hwan was now tainted by the memory of returning from death in a previous life.

But his train of thought did not stop.

"Don't tell me...they belonged to Kooou even before joining UID? The same goes for Jeon Eun-seong."

The combat technique, TMT, taught at the organization was said to have originated with the formation of UID. And yet agents not part of UID but of Kooou knew and used TMT.

If his guess was correct, Jeon Eun-seong had always been like Baek Si-hwan.

One supporting piece of evidence: after military retirement, there was no sign of activity record for Jeon Eun-seong within the country.

"If Jeon Eun-seong is training agents at their camp, it all fits. If that's true, those guys need to be a lot more careful."

In-hyuk sent a message to both of them through Ghost Link.

* * *

A safehouse on the outskirts of Suwon, Gyeonggi Province.

Im Deok-chang of the National Intelligence Service stepped out of a car that had rolled up the driveway in the darkness.

Inside, the first to arrive was Kwon So-jeong of W&W Group.

"Why are you so late?"

"I can't close out NIS business on my own terms, you know."

"Never mind. Just sit down. Everyone else must be waiting."

"Let's."

The two sat together on the sofa.

A National Intelligence Service agent who had come with Im Deok-chang, Choi Dong-hoon of WID, set up a portable projector on the table, started it, then stepped outside.

After the laptop was connected, images of three people appeared on one wall.

It was Hakushikijou, Tengu, and Hannya—who recently convened in Japan by video.

As the screen, flickering with noise, normalized, Hakushikijou spoke up first.

[We're all probably feeling heavy-hearted by the bad news.]

He meant the death of Shojo, one of the elders, as well as Jung Yoon-ju, the deputy general prosecutor at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Because it was news no one could miss, everyone fell respectfully silent.

Hakushikijou continued.

[But for the sake of our society's safety and goals, sacrifices must sometimes be endured... For now, Shojo will shoulder all the responsibility for this situation.]

Everyone nodded, quietly but in agreement.

To them, the existence of the society always outweighed even the honor of comrades.

At this, Tengu's image spoke up.

[Then the vacant seat of Shojo needs to be filled—do you have anyone in mind, Hakushikijou?]

It was why the society had been reconvened.

When asked, Hakushikijou thought quietly for a moment before continuing.

[What we need right now is, as with Shojo before, someone who can shield us from legal oversight. But the current prosecution is going to be in turmoil from an anonymous tip-off.]

No one knew how long the prosecution would be under scrutiny.

Even if they filled the slot with a new person, there was no guarantee Skull wouldn't find and punish the candidate just as before.

Hearing this, Tengu gave a wry, almost mocking laugh.

[Hmm... How about we move our legal network to law firms and use prosecution only for funding? In the legal world, connections like school, region, and blood ties run deeper than anywhere. That way we can cover not just the prosecution but the courts too.]

But Hakushikijou looked dissatisfied.

[The suggestion isn't bad, but established law firms have both strong power and a lot of ambition. There's a risk they'll use us as a shield rather than us using them.]

[Given ongoing operations, maybe we have to accept that risk? If we poach and promote someone unremarkable, it won't be much better than Shojo.]

[More importantly, now is the time for safety rather than risk. You know well what's happened since Shojo...]

There had been an explosion and gunfire at Areum Cleaning that attracted government attention.

Because of that, every detail of Jung Yoon-ju the deputy general prosecutor's background, movements, and weapon sourcing would be under investigation.

Of course, the society had already cleared almost every possible track.

Nevertheless, they had still suffered at the hands of Skull, so there was no relaxing entirely.

[How about the thoughts of others? Kitsune, since your husband recommended Shojo, surely you've considered the replacement?]

The address Kitsune referred to Kwon So-jeong.

Having quietly watched the situation, she was slightly flustered now that the arrow pointed at her.

"I think Tengu makes a valid point. Considering especially the projects at Taeshin Group and KQ Group that we're preparing, legal protection is essential. It's hard to judge if a hastily appointed prosecution figure could handle it."

With her vote cast Tengu's way, Hakushikijou's gaze behind the mask shifted to Im Deok-chang.

[Hyottoko, your opinion?]

[Sheer strategy is important, but safety must be the top priority for now. As previously shared, the NIS is tracking Notex's shell companies. To activate any line without secured safety would threaten the future of our society.]

In the end, the tally came to two votes each.

Thus, attention naturally turned to Hannya, who had yet to speak.

[Do you have an opinion?]

This time, Tengu threw the question—purposefully tense, as his faction was well-known.

Hannya maintained silence for a while longer, then slowly opened his mouth.

[Legal protection is key for now, but you should not overlook the combat strength Skull has revealed.]

With Jung Yoon-ju—Shojo's—death, there were 12 agents with him besides 2nd-tier Kim Hyo-jun.

Of these, two were third-tier, ten were 4th-tier.

All belonged to the Operations Division, specialized for combat beyond what the Intelligence Division offered.

They had not only been tracked to Areum Cleaning but destroyed to the extent that even the scale of damage they suffered remained unknown.

As head of force generation and distribution at the Hongu Society under the name WID, Hannya could not take this lightly.

Again, silence fell.

Then Hakushikijou spoke.

[Hannya's point stands. Let's suppose Skull wields power comparable to ours—and is even aware of TMT.]

At that, Hannya's eyes widened almost into holes.

[Skull knows about TMT? Was this previously shared?]

Hakushikijou raised a hand to calm his stern tone.

[It's something to get worked up over, but please calm yourself. I only learned about it recently myself. During the Pyo Jun-woo abduction incident in Korea, Skull asked about it. Chairman Baek has been keeping that fact secret until now.]

As the name of her husband came up again, Kwon So-jeong—Kitsune—wore a shadowed expression.

Chapter 129 : There Even Seemed to Be Restaurants

There Even Seemed to Be Restaurants

Hakushikijou, Tengu, Hannya, and Hyottoko's gazes gathered on her.

In the increasingly heavy atmosphere, Kwon So-jeong did not think for long before she spoke up.

"I heard about that matter as well. I was also told that had it been Aoshika, there wouldn't have even been a need to ask."

TMT was created within UID, a military development project.

Also, it had already begun when Aoshika served as the original headquarters of the Hongu Society, so it was impossible he didn't know.

Hannya then asked a question.

[TMT is an extremely important matter. I understand you do not ignore speculation, but why did Chairman Baek hide it?]

"The connection with Aoshika is extremely important to us. Chairman Baek is aware of this as well, which is why he intended to investigate internally and give a report to avoid any confusion."

[So, was there a result?]

Skull had already driven a significant number of members within the organization to their deaths.

Just for that fact alone, it would have been difficult for Kwon So-jeong to prevent whatever punishment descended on Baek Ji-woong for hiding that information.

"I feel regretful as well. If punishment must be meted out, I'll accept it humbly."

A short silence followed.

This was because Baek Ji-woong, along with Kwon So-jeong, managed the Hongu Society's operating funds through W&W Group.

[What does Tengu think? Is it alright to leave Chairman Baek as is?]

He was being asked because Baek Ji-woong's faction belonged to him.

Hakushikijou had Hyottoko and Hannya; Tengu had Kitsune and Shojo.

It was balanced 3 to 3 within the organization.

But with Shojo's death, that balance was already broken.

As Baek Ji-woong was not an elder, his voting rights were not significant.

However, if this situation also reduced Kitsune's position, Tengu could become isolated.

Hakushikijou obviously knew what decision Tengu would make and thus asked first.

[..... He still has much to do. I cannot leave it all to Kitsune, so how about we just partially restrict his authority within the organization until then?]

[That seems reasonable. What does everyone else think?]

At Hakushikijou's question, the other elders paused to contemplate.

Then the previously incensed Hannya stepped forward.

[Will that suffice? Granting Chairman Baek, who isn't even an elder, rights equivalent to one in the first place was a problem. On top of that, the chaos was caused because he recommended Shojo for elder, and there was even information concealment with unknown intent. Is simply restricting his authority enough?]

[So, are you saying we should carry out punishment ahead of important events?]

True punishment, in the position of elder, was singular.

It was dismissal. This meant the Hongu Society would take one's life by its own authority.

Kwon So-jeong found it difficult to take anyone's side and thus kept silent.

Meanwhile, Hakushikijou spoke again.

[Let's all calm down. Like Hannya says, it isn't something to be brushed off lightly. But as Chairman Baek has planted more than a few seeds, punishing him would result in a significant loss for our society.]

As the mood quieted, he continued.

[Tengu's point has merit, so just this once let's have Hannya yield. Of course, Chairman Baek's authority will be restricted until things are restored. Manpower will also be reduced to the minimum currently deployed. Kitsune, if you don't want to be implicated, it'd be best to refrain from unnecessary actions.]

It was a reminder for her to properly manage her underlings.

"..... Understood."

[Then the issue remains of who will replace Shojo... Earlier, Tengu, you suggested a law firm? Did you have a particular place in mind?]

Returning to the main agenda, Tengu cleared his throat.

[Ahem... First, I think we should consider Yulmyung Lawfirm and M&B.]

[They're the second and third largest in the country.]

[They should at least be that big to exert influence. It's not that I didn't also consider Lawfirm Heonwoo, the top in the industry, but that place is just too formidable...]

[It can't be helped. Then, is the groundwork ready to connect with either of them?]

This was the most important point. If the firm's CEO wasn't willing to side with the society, these discussions were pointless.

[Would I have made the proposal unprepared? I've spoken at length with the CEOs of both firms. Especially Yulmyung Lawfirm acts as legal advisor for AMK Partners' Korea branch. If things go smoothly, won't this benefit us?]

AMK Partners was a company that had inflicted great humiliation on them. Moreover, for the society's objectives, it was a place they absolutely had to contact by any means.

[So, between the two, you're saying Yulmyung is preferable?]

[For now, yes.]

The atmosphere settled again.

Everyone waited for Hakushikijou, who was next to respond.

[What is the percentage chance for connection?]

[Over 80%. I've already spoken sufficiently with their vice CEO, and as soon as a decision is made, we intend to expel the current CEO.]

Upon Tengu's explanation, Hakushikijou's expression became subtly complicated.

[This time, I shall support Tengu. How about the others?]

In the end, the matter was put to a vote, with even Hakushikijou's agreement included.

A gaze full of suspicion leaked from behind Tengu's mask.

But unless the replacement for Shojo became his own person, the balance in the Hongu Society would break. Even if Hakushikijou's actions seemed suspicious, he had no choice but to accept.

Hannya quietly raised his hand, signaling his agreement to the vote.

After that, Kitsune—Kwon So-jeong—and lastly Im Deok-chang, who followed Hakushikijou, raised their hands in succession.

[It is decided. Tengu, proceed with connecting to Yulmyung Lawfirm's vice CEO. Once the vice CEO secures the CEO position, we'll discuss conferring the status of elder.]

At that moment, Tengu's brow furrowed beneath his mask. This was the result he had suspected from the beginning.

'So if I fail to install him as CEO, I'll have to be prepared for the consequences. Outwardly, it looks like he's only acting for the society's benefit, but he's plotting to take control of internal interests for himself.'

However, with the decision already finalized, there was no going back.

Nor could he refuse to put the law firm into Shojo's old seat as he had planned—for then it might end up being filled by Hakushikijou's person.

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【Prosecutor General Kim Jeong-heon wields the sword against prosecution corruption! After the death of Supreme Prosecutors' Office senior prosecutor Jeong ○○, the Prosecutor General ordered the immediate establishment of a special anti-corruption team, and the investigation is underway....】

【18 prosecutors, 28 charges. Numerous other corruption allegations are also being internally investigated... Prosecutor General Kim Jeong-heon announced directly to the people that he would take the lead in eradicating corruption....】

【With armed corpses found at a Gyeonggi Province cleaning company, a connection was discovered between Jeong ○○ of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office and contacts stored in the phone he possessed....】

【In the Gyeonggi Province C Corporation shooting incident, it has been confirmed that Supreme Prosecutors' Office prosecutor Jo Moo-yeol was abducted....】

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Investigations into prosecution corruption, previously stalled, began to accelerate.

The death of deputy general manager Jung Yoon-ju and the publication of follow-up articles kept the topic in the spotlight.

Articles were even tying the prosecution corruption and deputy general manager Jung Yoon-ju together, so the Prosecutor General had no choice but to act.

In-hyuk, riding in the car's backseat, set down a tablet displaying those articles.

"How much farther?"

"About ten minutes to go."

Currently, he was in a car driven by Baek Si-hwan, headed toward Incheon International Airport.

Baek Si-hwan glanced at him in the rearview mirror before asking carefully.

"I didn't get a chance to ask... Are you leaving the country?"

"No. I'm just going to meet someone."

The car kept moving.

As they reached the vicinity of the airport, In-hyuk handed him a slip of paper.

"From here, please go to this place. Ah, and don't put it in the navigation—just find your way there."

Rather than an address, the note contained a hand-drawn map.

At In-hyuk's odd request, Baek Si-hwan double-checked the map on the slip and then drove on.

After driving about twenty minutes farther, they arrived at Yongseungsa, a Buddhist temple at the far western edge of Yeongjong-do.

"I'll go alone. Please wait here."

"Isn't it still dangerous?"

"There was no tail as we came. And Manager Baek, you didn't leak our movement either, did you?"

At that strangely nuanced remark, Baek Si-hwan hesitated for a moment.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk got out, left the parking lot in front of the temple, and walked inside.

It was a modest-sized temple. Past the one-pillar gate stood only a small Avalokitesvara Hall and the main hall.

He walked around to the back of the main hall, where a foreign man stood with his hands behind his back.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

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Meanwhile, still in the car, Baek Si-hwan circled around through the forest to approach the area near Yongseungsa.

He looked around in search of Kang In-hyuk and, seeing him head toward the rear of the main hall, cautiously followed.

"Who did he come all the way out here to see?"

Such clandestine movement was something he'd never seen in Kang In-hyuk's routines before.

Baek Si-hwan drew closer to the area behind the main hall.

Soon after, he glimpsed Kang In-hyuk's profile and, partially blocked by a tree, another man.

"Is he a foreigner?"

He wanted to get closer to overhear their conversation, but paused, worried that stepping on twigs or walking through the undergrowth would make noise.

Instead, he took out his phone and zoomed in as much as possible to capture images of Kang In-hyuk and the other man.

The two seemed to move in roughly the same space.

'What language are they speaking?'

He tried to read Kang In-hyuk's lips, but it wasn't Korean at least.

At that moment, the other man turned sideways, revealing his face.

'That, that man—!'

Shocked, Baek Si-hwan nearly cried out but barely suppressed the sound.

The person Kang In-hyuk was meeting was none other than Gordon Grimes, CEO of AMK Partners.

'How could he be here? Kang In-hyuk clearly said he had never met him...'

His curiosity only grew about what the two of them were discussing.

With his mind in a whirl, Baek Si-hwan started to message Baek Ji-woong, but hesitated.

Even if he reported the situation, there probably wouldn't be any immediate reaction, but if word of this meeting got out, he would be the first to be suspected.

'Still, better to mention it now than have it come out later.'

Making his decision, Baek Si-hwan messaged Baek Ji-woong.

【KARAS: Kang In-hyuk in secret contact with Gordon Grimes. Do not mention this incident. High risk of exposure. No reply necessary.】

He only included the crucial points. Not long after, a reply came back.

【Code 007: Investigate and report the situation in the greatest possible detail.】

Baek Si-hwan wanted the same.

But there were no extra personnel—nor had he ever imagined those two would meet.

While Baek Si-hwan was agonizing, behind the main hall Kang In-hyuk and Gordon Grimes continued their conversation in French.

This was because the language contains many similarly pronounced words compared to others.

"Kang! After business, what do you want for lunch?"

"How about grilled clams or seafood kalguksu in Eulwang-ri? On my way here, it even seemed there was a restaurant nearby famous for marinated crab."