Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 131 : A Bizarre Appearance

A Bizarre Appearance

Taeshin Trading's executive vice president, Tae Seok-ho, was sitting at his desk reviewing documents he had received via email.

His hands were trembling, and he sighed deeply.

This was because the documents stated that the management rights of the H&T Fund he had managed in New York had been completely taken over by another company.

"So it's come to this after all. But of all companies, why...?"

In the first place, the H&T Fund had started running into financial troubles and became unstable after Noah Gardner, who had managed it, disappeared.

Eventually, the other directors who held shares couldn't hold out any longer and sold them off, leading to the current situation.

Of course, this was inevitable unless the capital was replenished. But because the company that acquired the fund was AMK Partners, Tae Seok-ho felt even more disgruntled.

Just then, someone knocked, and Reina Blackwood came in. Perhaps sensing Tae Seok-ho's grim expression, she placed the documents she had brought on the desk and asked,

"Is something wrong?"

"I lost a company I was running to a place I really didn't want to lose it to."

"Are you talking about the H&T Fund?"

As soon as that name was mentioned outright, Tae Seok-ho's expression hardened.

"You already knew?"

"I can't help you without looking into matters concerning the executive vice president. I'd heard that after CEO Noah Gardner disappeared, several companies were attempting to acquire it."

"You know it ended up going to AMK Partners, too?"

This time, it was Reina whose expression stiffened. She hadn't known about that detail.

"So AMK had its eyes on that place too. It wasn't included when I checked, so I had no idea."

"So you're saying they suddenly intervened."

Although the H&T Fund had encountered management problems, the bonds, patents, stocks, and so on that it held were valuable enough for other companies to covet.

However, Tae Seok-ho had put Noah Gardner at the front as a shield to erase any trace of connection with Taeshin Group.

When that relationship broke down, all Tae Seok-ho could do was watch as the H&T Fund slipped out of his hands.

"There's something even more important going on right now, though."

"Who doesn't know that?"

He was hinting, asking how the preparations they had discussed earlier were going.

Reina, knowing what he meant, went straight to the point.

"The operation I mentioned before—the location is almost decided. The timing is still up in the air, though."

"Where is it?"

"It's a place you're quite familiar with, Executive Vice President."

Reina pulled up an article on her tablet and showed it to him.

[Velbyte Technology, presumed to have acquired land for a factory in Sedona, Arizona, America. The site is confirmed to be owned by Greenbyte Labs, but the companies haven't released precise statements....]

Looking at this, Tae Seok-ho exchanged a meaningful glance with Reina.

"So you intend to deal with Father here?"

"That's right. But it will depend on the event being held there."

"Why?"

"The location and circumstances are ideal. And, if something happens, there's someone who can act as the trigger."

He immediately knew who she meant.

"Kang In-hyuk? But... will the chairman really go all the way to America himself, especially considering his age?"

Even in Seoul, he often represented the chairman, Tae Gun-seung, at events due to the latter's age.

"Do you think we would prepare all this without adequate reason or intelligence?"

"Don't tell me—you acquired information that my father will attend? How?"

Tae Seok-ho had tried everything to work on Tae Gun-seung's close aides, but there were no openings.

They were fiercely loyal, which meant all he could do so far was bide his time until the chairman's luck ran out. Reina gave a light smile.

"Since I promised to help, I'm pulling all strings possible."

"Then what's the reason for using Kang In-hyuk in the operation?"

He raised his earlier question again.

"He's survived several assassination attempts already, so the suspicion will naturally fall on him. Of course, you'll need to be present at the scene as well, Executive Vice President."

"If it's for an alibi... is that really necessary?"

A memory flashed through Tae Seok-ho's mind—the shootout between Redfall and Warborn. The fear that bullets could fly anytime, anywhere still sent chills down his spine.

"Eliminating suspicion is essential. Besides, I and others will make sure you're well protected, so don't worry."

The explanation made sense, but it was hard to trust easily.

If those aiming for Kang In-hyuk attacked, and Chairman Tae Gun-seung died in the crossfire?

Just that would leave Kang In-hyuk with no justification to remain in Taeshin Group.

Riiiing—Riiiing—

At that moment, the internal call rang, and the voice of a female staff member who handled secretary duties alongside Reina Blackwood came through.

[Executive Vice President, Division Director Kang In-hyuk of Taeshin Asset Management is here to see you.]

Tae Seok-ho and Reina Blackwood looked at each other in surprise, but Tae Seok-ho replied without hesitation.

"Let him in."

As soon as he answered, the door opened and In-hyuk entered.

In-hyuk glanced at Tae Seok-ho and Reina Blackwood, who was standing before him.

"This visit may be rather unannounced, especially since you're busy."

"No problem. Please, have a seat."

The two sat facing each other on the sofa. Reina didn't leave but stood quietly behind Tae Seok-ho.

"What brings you here without notice?"

"There's something I'd like to ask."

"And what would that be?"

In-hyuk, with a calm expression, looked at him and spoke.

"As you know, Velbyte Technology—a company in which Taeshin Asset Management recently acquired shares—is about to hold an opening ceremony for its company and new factory. We plan to invite key figures from Taeshin Group as well."

That explanation alone let Tae Seok-ho know why In-hyuk had come.

It was in line with the plan Reina had just explained.

Some cloudy points were cleared up, but Tae Seok-ho had suffered too much at In-hyuk's hands to simply feel good about it.

"... Are you saying I'm invited, too?"

"You're one of the main figures in Taeshin along with the chairman, Executive Vice President."

Somewhat surprised, Tae Seok-ho's expression became even more startled.

"To be honest, that's unexpected. Given our relationship, I wouldn't have thought you'd make such a request."

He deliberately brought to the surface the real nature of their strained relationship. But In-hyuk's expression remained unchanged.

"I was just doing what the chairman asked of me. And it pertains to Taeshin Asset Management business. Also, the matter with you, Executive Vice President, is no different."

"So you mean I'm not the problem here? Still, is there any real reason for me to go? If it's about Taeshin Asset Management's image, wouldn't the chairman's attendance be enough?"

It wasn't a wrong point. But In-hyuk shook his head.

"The value of our Velbyte shares will keep rising. But for potential investors, it's not only Velbyte itself, but also the reputation of the company behind it. I want to make it clear that there are no internal conflicts within Taeshin Group."

Tae Seok-ho gave a small laugh at this.

"Heh. In the end, you're asking me to lend my face for your own gain?"

"It's not just for my benefit, but for Taeshin Group's. You, too, know how far Velbyte Technology's business could go."

Its technology reduced power consumption by nearly 60%—revolutionary in itself. If it could be integrated into various devices, it would be a groundbreaking technology no business would want to miss.

"You have some long-term vision. But isn't their technology still hard to apply to ultra-compact devices?"

As of now, their low-power tech only worked for small- and mid-sized gadgets, though that still covered company equipment and consumer electronics.

But if it reached the smartphone level, the possibilities would be endless.

"If latecomers develop something better than Velbyte, that's one thing, but until then, it's only a matter of time."

You couldn't stop tech copying in any industry. No matter how tightly it was kept under wraps, once products hit the market, imitators would appear.

Often, the company with the original idea would even lose out to the copycats.

But In-hyuk was making bold predictions, and Tae Seok-ho chuckled wryly.

"Do you really think no one else can catch up?"

Of course, In-hyuk knew why he was being asked this.

"No. Similar technology will emerge elsewhere."

"So you're saying there's something more?"

In-hyuk shrugged.

"Anyway, will you be able to attend the opening ceremony?"

At this, Tae Seok-ho paused before answering.

"If it's for main figures in Taeshin Group, does that mean the chairman will go as well?"

"I'll check with him after your decision, so I'm not sure yet."

"Is that so?"

Earlier, Reina had spoken as if Tae Gun-seung's attendance was certain.

Feeling a bit surprised inside, Tae Seok-ho didn't take his eyes off In-hyuk.

"So what will you do?"

"I'll attend. It may be uncomfortable, but if it's for Taeshin, I have to."

"Thank you. We'll send your invitation soon."

With that, In-hyuk stood up. Baek Si-hwan, who had been waiting, opened the door and followed beside him as he left.

"Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho agreed to attend. Please include him on the guest list."

"Understood."

"Other than the chairman, please call each person on the list for confirmation."

When directed, Baek Si-hwan brought up a relevant point.

"What should we do if someone not on the list inquires about the event?"

For Velbyte Technology, this was the first time that AMK Partners, which had only invested so far, was entering manufacturing.

While the venture was operated through an affiliate joint venture, it was an opportunity for people in the related industry to form good relationships.

In Korea, AMK Partners's only known local connections were the Korea branch and Kang In-hyuk of Taeshin Asset Management, meaning the opening ceremony would be a crucial opportunity for those operating in related industries.

"In that case, sort through the list and submit it to me for review."

"As you say."

With that, In-hyuk walked with Baek Si-hwan toward the chairman's office.

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Past midnight.

W&W Group's chairman Baek Ji-woong arrived at an apartment construction site on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province, riding in a car driven by Do Jung-geol.

The construction, bustling during the day, was quiet now, with no security in sight. Baek Ji-woong followed Do Jung-geol inside.

"I'll go alone from here."

"Yes, sir."

Baek Ji-woong walked alone into the central hallway of a commercial building whose concrete frame was the only thing finished.

"You've arrived?"

At that moment, a deep voice echoed with a question.

"It's been a while. ... Nomen."

With that greeting, a man in a black suit slowly approached from the far end of the dark corridor.

The two drew close—just five steps apart. Moonlight flowed in from the window overlooking the outside, illuminating their figures.

At the same time, Nomen's appearance came into view. Like the other elders, he wore a mask.

But his was different: a bizarre mask that completely covered his head, with dozens of jumbled eyes and mouths.

"It's been four years."

His appearance and his voice sent shivers down Baek Ji-woong's spine.

"... It has."

Baek Ji-woong's answer was delayed, as if he was hesitating.

Nomen's calm voice continued, pressing on with a heavy atmosphere.

"You wanted to meet like this to confirm something, didn't you? What is it?"

Chapter 132 : A Huge Bait

A Huge Bait

Nomen's voice echoed down the dim hallway.

Baek Ji-woong, upon hearing his question, paused for a moment before speaking.

"I'd appreciate an honest answer. Did you happen to move Akaoni?"

Akaoni (赤鬼) was currently the predecessor of WID, the armed organization under the Hongu Society.

With the internal strife of the Hongu Society, it had also become the only armed force of Aoshika (青鹿).

"If you mean Akaoni, then it's always busy moving in unseen places."

Baek Ji-woong let out a sigh at the evasive answer.

"That's not what I'm asking. I want to know if you've directly clashed with Kurotora."

Kurotora (黑虎)—that had originally been the name of the branch under Hakushikijou. It was also the name they abandoned after taking control of the Hongu Society's original headquarters. But to Nomen and him, the current Hongu Society would always be Kurotora.

"Directly... no, that's never happened."

"Then does Aoshika have nothing to do with Skull?"

At the renewed question, Nomen, face obscured by his expressionless mask, tilted his head.

"Skull... they've been hindering Kurotora's business recently, right? But why are you trying to link Skull to us?"

"Because Skull knows TMT and is attacking Kurotora. If it's not Aoshika, I guessed it must be some group with roots like ours who also bear a grudge against Kurotora."

Nomen seemed to understand, falling silent before opening his mouth to speak.

"For now, our Aoshika is definitely unrelated to Skull. Insofar as I know, there's no group acting independently of our plans either."

"Is there no one suspicious internally?"

"Not that I know of. And if there were a group as formidable as Skull, would we really be in this situation?"

The current Hongu Society believed Aoshika had been destroyed. But they had only stepped back for a while. Like the current Hongu Society, they quietly grew in size, spreading out here and there while laying the groundwork for the future.

Baek Ji-woong understood his words.

But his suspicions remained: What did Skull want from the current Hongu Society, and how were they attacking without leaving traces, while knowing about TMT and its members?

"I realize that. But Skull's true identity is so unclear..."

"I completely understand that sentiment. If we could contact Skull, we'd even consider poaching them."

"You mean... poach them?"

"The enemy of my enemy could become a friend. But since we can't meet Skull... that's the biggest problem."

The only trace of Skull was the person wearing a skull-shaped mask. That was all they had confirmed.

Then Nomen spoke again.

"Is that the extent of your curiosity?"

"That's all for now."

"You could have asked by message—was there a reason you needed to meet face to face like this?"

Baek Ji-woong let out a long sigh.

"It was important to me. I had to see you in person to be certain."

Nomen nodded in response.

"I don't particularly like it, but if this relieves Chairman Baek's doubts, it's a relief. By the way, since we're meeting in person... it seems our plan will be moved up sooner than expected."

At that, Baek Ji-woong was taken aback.

"Wasn't the original schedule at least three years away?"

"It's thanks to Kurotora's current situation. Their Laudandi Project has been shaken due to AMK Partners, creating an opening. And Hwain Techon's funds have been siphoned. But is it alright for you, Chairman Baek? Didn't you say your authority had been restricted because of all this?"

Baek Ji-woong let out a low groan.

"It's partly due to those foolish people, but... I also made mistakes."

He was referring to Jeon Hae-in from KQ Group—while helping her through Daemyung Detective Agency, he left traces that ended up botching the job.

"If necessary, I can lend you some of Akaoni's men to act quietly from behind the scenes."

It was Nomen's way of showing concern.

But Baek Ji-woong shook his head.

"No. There's no need for that right now, and Hyottoko is surely watching me closely. I can't risk leaving traces that would harm our cause."

"Thank you for prioritizing the organization. Still, if you ever need anything, just let me know. I always say this, but you're very important to us, Chairman Baek."

And with that, their conversation came to an end.

Nomen stepped back into the darkness—his figure fading until it was nowhere to be seen.

Watching him vanish, Baek Ji-woong let out another sigh as he exited the building.

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【Velbyte Technology's production countdown! As the opening ceremony approaches, corporate leaders are lining up to attend...】

【Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion's joint-venture, Velbyte Technology, launches! As production nears, companies from various countries are showing interest in distribution and manufacturing...】

【Unprecedented Swordsmanship corruption! Under Prosecutor General Kim Jeong-heon's command, more swordsmanship prosecutors caught for misconduct, with additional crimes uncovered—massive trials are expected...】

...

...

South Korea was in an uproar with so much news pouring in.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha spent around 20 hours together in the air, arriving only in the morning at Sedona Airport, Arizona, America.

The Velbyte Technology opening ceremony was scheduled for the next day.

The two, accompanied by Taeshin Security's security guards, exited the arrivals hall.

As they headed towards the car waiting at the airport entrance, Tae Ju-ha let out a sigh.

"Phew... it's hotter here than I thought."

In midday, Sedona's temperature could rise up to 30 degrees.

"But the nights are chilly, so don't dress too lightly."

"I know this is surrounded by desert, but I can't figure out why Velbyte would build a factory here."

In fact, Greenbyte Labs' factory site was purchased under Velbyte Technology's name.

"I heard it was mainly because land is cheap. Also, typhoons rarely happen here, and it's midway between Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion. The major cities of Phoenix and Tucson are within a 300km radius, so hiring staff won't be too hard."

Tae Ju-ha nodded as she listened to the explanation, then the two got into their car, protected by security guards.

In-hyuk glanced at the escort cars and drivers around them—most of whom he recognized as Taeshin Security staff, including those he'd seen in his previous life, such as Baek Si-hwan.

'How many more are there among them...'

He was referring to Kooou's agents.

Recently, Kim Seong-tae, whom In-hyuk had disguised himself as, also belonged to them.

Since In-hyuk never guessed their real allegiance in his past life, it bothered him now even more.

Tae Ju-ha then turned to In-hyuk and asked,

"My grandfather and the others are supposed to arrive in the afternoon. What will you do in the meantime, In-hyuk?"

"I'll stop by the hotel briefly, then check on the preparations for the opening ceremony."

"Is there something you need to do there?"

The main operating executives of Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion handled the preparations for the joint-venture's opening.

"I heard Mark Campbell, the CEO of Greenbyte Labs, is here as well. While I'm here, I'd like to talk with him."

After considering for a moment, Tae Ju-ha asked again.

"Maybe I can come too?"

"You too, CEO?"

"I thought it'd be good to say hello in advance. I also want to see what Velbyte Technology is like."

"Then let's go to Velbyte straight from the airport, not the hotel."

Upon hearing the plan, the car changed direction. After driving for about twenty minutes, they arrived at the Velbyte Technology building, on the northwest side of Sedona.

People bustled about, preparing for tomorrow's opening ceremony.

"In America, if it's not a financial city, the buildings have such low ceilings—it feels strange."

"They've got plenty of land, after all."

"Is there a factory here too?"

"This site only has the office and research lab. The actual plant is in Flagstaff, about an hour north."

"Was it necessary to separate them?"

"Sedona is also a tourist city. Velbyte Technology's line of business is electricity, so the research lab could be here."

As they continued their discussion, they slowly walked around Velbyte Technology's two-story campus.

It was then that a blond, middle-aged man—Mark Campbell, CEO of Greenbyte Labs—strode over.

"You're here, Division Director!"

With a hearty greeting, he shook hands with In-hyuk.

"Long time no see, CEO Campbell."

"Indeed! How have you been?"

"I've been busy, thanks. This is Tae Ju-ha, CEO of Taeshin Asset Management."

When introduced, Tae Ju-ha also extended her hand for a handshake.

"I'm Tae Ju-ha."

"Ah, hello. When I saw you from afar I had a feeling—you must be the madam. Pleased to meet you!"

Mark Campbell shook her hand vigorously, nearly making her fall over.

"I-I'm glad to meet you too," she managed.

Formalities done, In-hyuk asked,

"Is the opening ceremony preparation going well?"

"It's fine so far. But there have been so many requests to attend that it's been troublesome."

"That many?"

"They must see the potential of this project. To be honest, I didn't expect production to become possible this quickly."

It was thanks to In-hyuk supplying the necessary funds and AMK Velion providing the required technology for success—Mark Campbell had repeatedly thanked In-hyuk for this.

"I'm glad things are going well."

"And as you asked, a special security team has been arranged for the guests' safety. I've also coordinated with your security team to avoid any friction."

"Thank you. Team Leader Lee Yoon-cheol, please meet the contact person and collect the relevant details."

He said this, glancing at the second team leader of Taeshin Security standing behind.

Mark Campbell then excused himself briefly.

"I'll bring over the person in charge."

After a while, they returned and shared the security details with Lee Yoon-cheol.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk looked around.

Frankly, under his usual preferences, whether it was a joint venture or a project's success, he wouldn't have made an event on this scale.

Yet, he arranged for the Taeshin family to attend this opening.

'Given the geography, it'll be hard for snipers to be positioned in buildings. Maybe they'll use something like a bomb?'

Not long before, word had leaked to Tae Seok-ho via Cheong Geumbang regarding Taeshin Group's proxy shares.

For Tae Seok-ho, it would have been a nerve-wracking situation.

But given the current calm, it meant they were waiting for the right moment.

'I've set the stage for him—he won't be able to resist moving.'

In other words, the Velbyte Technology opening was thrown out as a huge bait.

Of course, it bordered on madness. If Hong Yu-geon were here, he'd have tried to stop it.

Maybe that's why In-hyuk sent him away on a business trip with Van Hester regarding this plan.

Just then, In-hyuk received a message on his phone.

It was now past midnight in Korea—the message was from Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: CCTV access complete. I'll start with the roster. But does this count as overtime?】

Chapter 133 : I Told You to Relax Your Expression

I Told You to Relax Your Expression

About 500 meters west of Velbyte Technology, on the mid-slope of a mountain.

There, Li Weicheng, a WID-level 2 agent, was inspecting the weapons with his subordinates.

Click—click—

"This is KIRIN. Beta transmission."

Li Weicheng's request through the radio was answered.

Crackle—

[This is BETA ONE.]

"Report the situation."

"We finished setting the traps three minutes ago. Also, Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha just arrived. They're checking the surroundings."

It was the voice of Ruben, who had previously tried to kill Tae Ju-ha along with Li Weicheng.

He had now infiltrated within Velbyte Technology.

"Anything unusual so far?"

[The infiltration team has finished deployment, and there's nothing unusual yet.]

"Then be careful so that no bugs get caught in the trap."

[Roger.]

With this answer, Li Weicheng looked through a military telescope set up to the side.

He could see people moving inside the grounds of Velbyte Technology beyond the round lens. However, most of the view was blocked by a two-story building, so he could barely see.

He spotted Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha passing by.

"It would have been better if things had been like this."

He recalled Tae Ju-ha, whom he couldn't deal with in Russia. And given this field of view and location, the 500-meter distance was still within his sniping range.

Of course, he would have to precisely determine the spot where Tae Ju-ha would stop for a moment...

Besides, the assassination order against Tae Ju-ha had been withdrawn, so there was no reason to target her.

"... Huh?"

Suddenly startled, he took his eye off the lens and looked around. He felt a sharp gaze coming from somewhere.

The others, who had been checking their weapons, looked around in alarm.

"What's that? I swear someone was staring at us."

He murmured and scanned around.

But all he could see was a mountain made of red rocks and patches of greenery.

"Pick four people and split into two patrol teams. If you encounter any witnesses, handle it as cleanly as possible."

As if they had already assigned roles, four agents, equipped only with pistols, went out on patrol.

Oliver, a grade 4 agent and Ruben's subordinate, slowly approached him.

"Is there a problem?"

"I feel like there's someone nearby. Or maybe I'm just being sensitive."

Li Weicheng kept silent, waiting for the patrolling agents to return.

. . .

At the same time,

In-hyuk turned his head, sensing a strangely familiar gaze from behind, before facing forward again.

"... Is it those guys?"

"Excuse me?"

Tae Ju-ha, who was beside him, asked after hearing his muttering.

"No, it's fine. Let's keep looking around."

The source of the gaze wasn't nearby.

At least 300 meters away, in the direction of the red rock mountain at the northeastern part of the grounds.

'As expected, those guys didn't miss the opportunity and showed up.'

Just then, a message arrived from Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: There are six people different from the initial list. Two of them are identified, and I found the other four in the Sedona Airport arrivals record. But their identities are different from the updated staff list.】

Photos and materials were attached.

In-hyuk glanced over four pictures, having separated briefly from Tae Ju-ha. Among the staff he'd checked around earlier, some faces came to mind.

"If they've already infiltrated... it must be about the bombs, right?"

Their movement was more serious than he had expected.

In-hyuk, a little surprised inside, sent a message somewhere.

"I think we're ready, so let's head back now."

"Did you check everything you needed?"

They had looked around Velbyte Technology's office as well.

Tae Ju-ha wore a satisfied expression, having talked business with Mark Campbell.

"I think that's enough."

"Then, are we going back to the hotel?"

"I think we should. If we rest, we can come again tomorrow."

Together, In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha moved by car. The hotel was about five minutes away.

Before long, they arrived at the hotel lobby, which consisted of private villas.

"Ju-ha!"

A voice called Tae Ju-ha from one side of the lobby.

It was Tae Su-jin, executive vice president of Taeshin Department Store and the eldest granddaughter of chairman Tae Gun-seung.

Next to her was her husband, Ha Do-kyung.

"Unni! You came early?"

"I came as soon as work was done. How have you been?"

The two seemed delighted and greeted each other by holding hands.

Standing quietly, In-hyuk briefly nodded to Ha Do-kyung, who was standing beside Tae Su-jin.

"How have you been, brother-in-law? Well, judging by how your business succeeded and we're all here, you must have been fine, right?"

Tae Su-jin greeted In-hyuk as well.

But since they weren't close enough to speak informally, he responded formally.

"Yes. I've been fine."

"That's good. If it's still before lunch, how about joining us? I know a nice restaurant nearby."

With the question, In-hyuk met Tae Ju-ha's gaze.

"If you're okay with it, let's go together."

"You're fine with it?"

"Sure."

The four of them, along with their security guards, went to the restaurant.

After finding seats and ordering food, Tae Su-jin struck up another conversation.

"I sent a floral arrangement when you became MP division director. Are you taking care of it well?"

When he set up the new office on the sixth floor, he had seen various floral wreaths sent from here and there.

Honestly, In-hyuk hadn't cared, so he hadn't bothered to check who sent what.

"Floral arrangement...?"

"You didn't know?"

"The staff are probably taking care of it."

He recalled sometimes seeing some staff watering the flowers.

With that explanation, Tae Su-jin smiled.

"You're more indifferent than I thought. People say that about you a lot, don't they?"

"I suppose I do hear it more often than not."

Tae Su-jin was Tae Seok-hyun's eldest daughter. However, for some reason, she had a different atmosphere from her ambitious parents and younger brother, Tae Yeo-jun.

Just the fact that she could have a casual chat with Tae Ju-ha proved this.

"I've heard you're doing really well lately. I heard you gave my father a real blow at the last meeting, too?"

She was referring to when her father, the CEO of Taeshin Electronics, Tae Seok-hyun, had been dismissed.

"There were some uncomfortable issues."

"If you're worried about me, don't be. Honestly, I always thought something like that would happen someday."

She responded more calmly than expected.

It also showed what she felt toward her father, Tae Seok-hyun.

"You must have been disappointed in him for a while."

"Honestly, how could I not be? Even when we were young, the way he treated Ju-ha... On the surface, he pretended to be on good terms with uncle but was always busy fighting for management rights."

In-hyuk found himself nodding subconsciously, admiring her objectivity.

Thus, the three of them chatted quietly while eating their food.

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Late afternoon.

Taeshin Trading's Tae Seok-ho arrived at Sedona Airport, bringing his father Tae Gun-seung, and other family members, Choi Tae-eun and Tae Seung-hyun.

Of course, his secretary Reina Blackwood and Taeshin Security's guards were with him.

"What are the others up to?"

Tae Gun-seung's secretary, Song Tae-ho, answered right away.

"CEO Moon and division director Kang In-hyuk arrived in the morning, toured the opening site, then had lunch with Ms. Tae Su-jin's family, and are now at the hotel."

This was confirmed by the security guards assigned to each person.

"And Seok-hyun's family? Do we know when they'll arrive?"

"They are expected to arrive on an evening flight."

"Tsk—!"

Tae Gun-seung, clearly displeased, got into the vehicle with the others.

As they walked a little apart from the group, Tae Seok-ho asked Reina in a cautious voice.

"There won't be any problems with the preparation, right?"

"I've set a plan across several stages, so it will be handled securely. It might be a bit noisy, but you'll be safe, executive vice president."

Before he knew it, Tae Seok-ho sighed as he got into the back seat.

His wife, Choi Tae-eun, and son, Tae Seung-hyun, got into another car.

So inside this car, there was only Reina and guards related to her.

"Is it just one person we're dealing with?"

"If possible, I plan to make things bigger. That way, your objective will be more certain."

She was referring to other members of the Taeshin family, including Tae Seok-hyun.

After all, they, too, were heirs who could one day inherit Tae Gun-seung's fortune and become obstacles later.

"How far are you talking about?"

"How far do you want it to go, executive vice president?"

The question returned as a question.

Tae Seok-ho couldn't answer. He wondered what Reina was really thinking.

"I won't get involved in that. You handle it."

"Still, you're leaving the choice to me just because they're blood relatives?"

"Think what you want."

Shortly after, the line of vehicles entered the reserved hotel.

Upon entering, the people who had arrived earlier were waiting in the lobby of the private villa.

In the lead, Tae Gun-seung spotted In-hyuk and approached him.

"Kang, you're working hard."

Maybe he was tired after more than 20 hours of flying; his hand gripping the cane trembled slightly.

"Thank you for coming all the way here."

"Don't mention it! This is a very favorable event for Taeshin, of course I had to attend. Executive vice president Tae Seok-ho, don't you think?"

Using the title meant this was an official occasion.

Of course, Tae Seok-ho understood this and replied, a little subdued.

"Yes, chairman. You're right."

"It must be before dinner for everyone. Let's sit and eat together. Where are we supposed to eat?"

"We've prepared the hotel restaurant."

As secretary Song Tae-ho responded, the group moved. They entered a separate room set up by the hotel and sat around a long table.

Before long, steak and various other dishes arrived.

Everyone quietly began eating, following Tae Gun-seung's lead.

Of course, their secretaries sat at another table. However, the atmosphere was very poor at the table where Baek Si-hwan was sitting with Reina Blackwood.

Noticing this, Reina spoke first.

"Why don't you relax your expression? People will start staring."

Her voice was so low that the people around them couldn't hear.

But Baek Si-hwan heard it more clearly than anything else.

"This is how I always look. What's going on with the plan?"

At his question, Reina's smile deepened.

"What? You haven't heard from the chairman yet?"

"He said you'd tell me."

"Seems like the chairman lost some of his nerve after being disciplined for calling everyone together last time."

Baek Si-hwan hadn't heard about this, so his mind became crowded, his brow creasing.

"... Calling everyone together? Discipline? What are you talking about?"

"I told you to relax your expression. Besides, you have nothing to do in this plan anyway, so just keep quiet. Don't step up for no reason and ruin things."

She spoke with a very firm voice.

Baek Si-hwan wanted to stab a steak knife into her face but held back.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, Reina's phone vibrated on the table with a message.

She flashed a twisted smile at Baek Si-hwan, but her face hardened as she checked the content.

Chapter 134 : There's Always the Option to Sell

There's Always the Option to Sell

In the restaurant, In-hyuk's seat was immediately to the left of chairman Tae Gun-seung.

From that position, he could faintly see Reina Blackwood's expression reflected in the glass.

Soon, Reina Blackwood quietly stepped outside with her cellphone in hand.

'Did she perhaps receive some news from those guys?'

It was because he had just received a message from Noah Vantrail right before dinner.

【Skinwalker: I found some guys that seem to be from Kooou. But I got caught while surveilling them so I had to pull out quickly and left some traces. They'll be a lot more cautious now.】

Along with the message, a photo had arrived. There were a total of eight people halfway up a red rocky mountain. In-hyuk recognized one of them.

'It was Li Weicheng from the MSS, wasn't it? But to think Kooou had managed to infiltrate that far...'

MSS (Ministry of State Security) referred to China's state intelligence agency.

In-hyuk had come to know of him while conducting operations related to China during his time with UID.

Now that Li Weicheng and the operatives had discovered signs of Noah, they would surely have notified someone.

After seeing Reina Blackwood's expression just now, he could make a guess.

On another note, he was honestly impressed by Kooou's infiltration prowess.

"Is there something bothering you, Mr. Kang?"

Chairman Tae Gun-seung, noticing In-hyuk's slightly stiff face, asked him.

"Oh, I guess I'm a little tense thinking about the big event we've been preparing for starting tomorrow."

As he gave a halfhearted excuse, Tae Gun-seung nodded.

"True. A company that might draw a new line in the history of electrical engineering is about to be established, and you're about to own a share in it, so it'd be strange if you weren't concerned."

The real reason, though, was the people targeting the lives of the Taeshin family.

But since he couldn't say that, In-hyuk just responded affirmatively.

"In practice, Greenbyte Labs and AMK Bridge will be running things, but since we have to be concerned from an external standpoint as well, I suppose it's even more so."

"Anyone might say you don't have much reason to complain."

Economic news outlets and experts were predicting Bellbyte Technology's future profits would be at least in the trillions of won.

Taeshin Asset Management had obtained shares in such a company simply by investing in one of the parent companies, Greenbyte Labs.

Because of this, companies that hadn't recognized the value of the then-small Greenbyte Labs and AMK Velion up close were now belatedly trying to get in line, but neither company was allowing any additional investment.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk made eye contact with Tae Seok-ho, who sat across from him.

Tae Seok-ho maintained a calm demeanor, but the corners of his lips curled up faintly.

'So he must know something about the plotting being done by Kooou.'

He had previously thought Reina Blackwood was controlling the information, but judging by his reaction now, Tae Seok-ho knew quite a bit.

"We're not that well-off. I'm just worried that envious types might try to stir something up."

Tae Gun-seung nodded in easy agreement.

"True, after all that's happened to us, I can see why you'd be concerned."

"Thank you for understanding."

With such conversation, their meal drew to a close.

Everyone was quite tired from the long flight, so they moved to the reserved rooms.

That was when Tae Seok-ho called to In-hyuk.

"Do you have a moment to talk?"

"... Of course."

"Come to my room."

In-hyuk followed him to a private unit situated about halfway down the hallway.

Tae Seok-ho sat on the living room sofa, inviting In-hyuk to take a seat as well.

"Thanks to you, everyone from the Taeshin family is going to gather, for once."

"I appreciate the compliment. But may I ask, why did you want to see me separately?"

Intent on not spending too long with him, In-hyuk tried to get straight to the point.

At this, Tae Seok-ho took a deep breath as he looked at In-hyuk.

"Recently, I found out why you went abroad with Ju-ha."

As he had anticipated this, In-hyuk kept a calm face.

"The chairman was very concerned about that, but you seem to be quite capable yourself, executive vice president."

"It wasn't too much noise, was it? But when I tracked things back from there, a lot of things surfaced."

"So, what is it that you want from me?"

After all, Tae Seok-ho couldn't have called him out just to confirm the facts.

"First... who was the one who received the proxy over the shares?"

"You weren't able to find out even that?"

"It's a shortcoming in my skill. So, who is it?"

At his persistent questioning, In-hyuk let out a sigh.

"Sorry, but that's difficult to answer."

"The chairman told you to keep it secret?"

"Something like that."

This time, it was Tae Seok-ho's turn to sigh.

"Let's be blunt: just how much longer do you think the chairman will live? Besides, my brother did something silly and even damaged Taeshin's prestige. So, who else is there to succeed Taeshin in a situation like this?"

He wasn't wrong. In-hyuk knew that very well.

In his previous life as bodyguard Kang In-hyuk, when he helped Tae Seok-ho ascend to chairman of Taeshin Group, he had thought the same thing.

But Tae Seok-ho failed to lead Taeshin Group well.

Backroom politics for business were the norm, and he had been busy squandering the subsidiaries' funds for his own gain.

No wonder he eventually lost out to In-hyuk, who had fought his way to the top at Bluewall.

"I think that's for the chairman, not you, to decide, executive vice president."

At that, Tae Seok-ho's expression crumpled in displeasure.

"Are you seriously suggesting the chairman would pass over me in favor of one of his grandchildren?"

He meant Tae Su-jin, Tae Yeo-jun, Tae Seung-hyun, and Tae Ju-ha.

Of them, Tae Yeo-jun and Tae Seung-hyun were most greedy for Taeshin Group.

But for all their ambition, neither had ever shown tangible results.

At least Tae Su-jin was clean as executive vice president of Taeshin Department Store, and Tae Ju-ha had managed to elevate Taeshin Asset Management—a subsidiary—to a full-fledged affiliate.

"If there's no one in the family the chairman favors, he could always appoint a professional manager."

"Heh... Do you really think the chairman would entrust the Taeshin Group, which he built over a lifetime, to some outside manager?"

In-hyuk also knew that would be difficult. That's why he had tried to check Tae Seok-ho's true intentions so he could pass the seat to Tae Seok-hyun instead.

Of course, even that had been possible only by In-hyuk manipulating things in Tae Seok-ho's favor.

'No matter how many times I look back, he really was just a pushover.'

As the conversation went on, a sense of self-reproach started to creep in.

Tae Seok-ho composed himself and spoke again.

"Taeshin's future. If you think about yours and Ju-ha's future too, I'd be a better choice. That's the best path for Taeshin."

"Then, assuming you become the next chairman, would you be willing to completely separate Taeshin Asset Management?"

Tae Seok-ho's brow furrowed.

Currently, the value of Taeshin Asset Management was second only to Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics.

If things went as they were, it could be listed as a public company any time.

If such a company were removed from Taeshin, it could not only hurt the group's valuation, but also destroy existing shareholders' trust.

"Are you saying we should give up a whole affiliate?"

"You're seeking shares to become the next chairman of Taeshin Group. That's the condition, so isn't it fair enough?"

The reason Tae Seok-ho was stepping up like this now was that he couldn't fully trust Reina Blackwood.

Although she was collecting proxies from other shareholders, there was no guarantee she would support him unconditionally.

Moreover, if the person who had been delegated shares from chairman Tae Gun-seung died during the current scheme, even those shares could end up in limbo and things would get even more complicated.

"But you know the value of that company, too. Do you really think mere proxies are enough to justify it?"

"If you're talking about the businesses tied in with AMK Partners, I'm the one in between."

"No matter how much business depends on people, the subject is always the company. Who knows about the future, but how do you think you can make it work for now?"

Whether because his emotions were stirred, Tae Seok-ho's voice began to rise.

But In-hyuk remained perfectly calm.

"There's always the option of selling Taeshin Asset Management's shares to Greenbyte Labs. Or selling to AMK Partners, which would increase Taeshin Asset Management's operating funds."

As Tae Gun-seung had said earlier, Bellbyte Technology's value would only keep rising. Of course, turning over such shares would be foolish from Taeshin Group's standpoint.

But In-hyuk was speaking with a seriousness that could not just be dismissed as a joke. It was more earnest than ever, and Tae Seok-ho's face became grave.

"Certainly, AMK Partners could pay handsomely considering the future value. But you know better than anyone that whatever the price, it'll never be enough."

"I know that well. Which is precisely why, considering that I could be cast out at any time, it's better to plan for the future."

Kooou, behind Tae Seok-ho, was also connected to KQ Group.

Their wish was for Tae Seok-ho to seize Taeshin Group and for In-hyuk to seize KQ Group.

Naturally, In-hyuk had guessed at this intention from circumstances so far. And if Tae Seok-ho took the chairman's seat, In-hyuk would never be able to keep his position.

He'd do whatever it took to drive him out.

"And what do you think I'm going to do to you?"

"You know my situation. No matter how good the performance, it'll be hard for Taeshin to keep someone like me—an illegitimate child of KQ Group—around."

"So if I won't separate Taeshin Asset Management, you'll sell Bellbyte shares to AMK Partners instead. You really think that's possible?"

"I don't see why not."

Becoming increasingly frustrated, Tae Seok-ho let out a deeper sigh than before, creasing his brow.

"Aren't you going to regret anything you said today?"

"Not particularly."

"Let's just pretend none of this conversation happened."

"Understood. I'll take it that there's nothing else you wish to say, and will be on my way."

Without a hint of hesitation, In-hyuk left his room.

In the hallway, he made brief eye contact with Reina Blackwood, Tae Seok-ho's secretary, before quietly passing by.

As the door clicked shut behind In-hyuk, Tae Seok-ho asked carefully,

"Does your side still judge that Kang In-hyuk can't be dealt with?"

At his suspicious question, Reina cocked her head.

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

"Never mind that. I'm asking for your honest thoughts."

Reina's eyes rolled in a sly manner.

"It's the same as ever. He's still useful."

Her answer was firm.

And with that, Tae Seok-ho, who'd been silently listening, closed his mouth and reentered his room.

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After finishing his conversation with Tae Seok-ho, In-hyuk returned to his own room.

As the door locked, he quietly spoke towards the small inner room.

"Did you bring what I asked for?"

At his question, footsteps sounded, and a person disguised to look exactly like In-hyuk approached and spoke.

"Tsk! How did you know?"

"I have good instincts. You told Mi-ah to erase the external CCTV footage of you coming in, right?"

Noah Vantrail had disguised herself as In-hyuk.

"I couldn't exactly leave without saying anything... Anyway, I've taken care of it. Here's what you asked for."

She handed over the bag she was carrying.

When he unzipped it, masks sculpted into East Asian male faces and various chemicals were visible.

"Thanks."

"Do you really know how to use these?"

"I told you I've done it before."

Taking the bag, In-hyuk went into the back.

About thirty minutes later, he emerged looking like a completely different person, using a mask and wig.

"How do you know how to disguise yourself like that?"

"Just worked out by chance. Anyway, I'll be counting on you until tomorrow. Make sure you don't get spotted."

"I'm not even going to say it... Be careful."

At her parting words, In-hyuk slipped out the window.

Chapter 135 : It's About to Blow

It's About to Blow

【Bellbyte Technology Opening Ceremony held at Sedona Headquarters! The main guests include the parent family of Taeshin Asset Management, key business partners, and Arizona State Governor Hele Carver...】

【Tourist attractions Sedona and Flagstaff. Now there are predictions that they will also become sites of job creation...】

【Among the three shareholders of the joint venture Bellbyte Technology, Taeshin Asset Management, thanks to division director Kang In-hyuk's foresight, invested in Greenbyte Labs...】

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The next day.

From the early morning, due to the breaking news, people began to flood the streets of Sedona, Arizona, America.

Since only the invited knew the exact date, time, and place, most reporters had arrived late after reading the exclusive news articles.

By late afternoon, the opening ceremony began.

The office site of Bellbyte Technology quickly filled up with those who had been invited.

Tae Ju-ha, looking at In-hyuk who was standing next to her, spoke.

"There are more people than I expected."

Of course, the current In-hyuk was actually Noah Vantrail in disguise.

"That means that many people have been curious about this place."

"If it was for publicity, shouldn't you have released the articles earlier?"

"We aren't ready enough for that yet. There might be trouble, just in case."

Tae Ju-ha nodded.

Meanwhile, Noah Vantrail, disguised as In-hyuk, thought to herself.

'If it was going to be like this, we could've just come forward directly.'

Right now, a miniature in-ear microphone was attached inside her ear. She was listening in real time to In-hyuk's answers and repeating them.

Noah turned her head slightly and said to In-hyuk,

"You never said we'd have to meet this many people! How much longer do I have to keep doing this?"

The dignitaries invited to the opening ceremony were seeking out In-hyuk and other key figures from Bellbyte Technology to talk business.

Of course, every time that happened, In-hyuk provided appropriate answers to get through the crises, but for Noah, it was a huge hassle.

[Bear with it a little longer. You know I have a lot to do here as well.]

At this moment, In-hyuk was also moving in another person's appearance.

So Noah looked around the opening ceremony, but couldn't spot In-hyuk.

"You're not about to go take out those guys at Rock Mountain by yourself, are you?"

[I need to do that too. Anyway, it's going to get busy, so if something's hard to explain, just brush it off. Say we were lucky or something.]

"Damn it—!"

Noah barely managed to suppress the curse and returned to her composed expression.

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About 500 meters away from Bellbyte Technology, Rock Mountain was pitch-dark as the sun had set.

There, Li Weicheng of WID was watching the opening ceremony with binoculars.

There were no other buildings around, and only that spot was brightly lit, making it easy to observe.

"If it keeps going like this, there shouldn't be a problem..."

Next to him, Oliver quietly asked,

"We still haven't identified who was watching us... Will that be alright?"

The search team had only found traces of someone staying about 200 meters away.

From the situation, it seemed someone had been surveilling them and left immediately.

As a result, they had relocated.

"Considering the operation is going smoothly, they might be up to something."

"Then shouldn't we change the plan?"

"Could we even do that now? Besides, we're just plan B. The real operation is going to take place inside."

Li Weicheng checked the situation again through the binoculars, then picked up the radio.

"This is KIRIN. BETA ONE, transmit."

Ruben, in charge of the infiltration team, responded over the radio.

[This is BETA ONE.]

"How is it so far?"

[No problem at checkpoint.]

That meant everything was fine.

Li Weicheng nodded and continued on the radio.

"Remember, you must not withdraw until you've confirmed the target has been neutralized."

[Roger.]

There was little time left before the operation.

At the opening stage, Bellbyte Technology officials would come out one by one to give congratulatory speeches. When the target stepped up to the podium, the infiltration team was going to detonate the pre-installed gas trap.

Then Ruben's voice came back over the radio.

[Operation start timer: 1 minute.]

The countdown had begun.

Li Weicheng checked his watch as he peered through the binoculars.

As the seconds passed, the other agents nearby gripped their rifles tightly. If the primary operation failed, they would have to run straight toward the target.

Time passed, and the moment Ruben announced approached.

"...?"

But nothing happened.

Ruben's voice came over the radio again.

[This is BETA ONE. Trap failure. Trap failure. The remote isn't working.]

They had checked it over and over for today's operation.

Despite that, the gas trap was not working, and veins stood out on Li Weicheng's forehead. At the same time, memories of their failed operation in Russia flashed across his mind—this time, they had to succeed.

"Plan A is a bust. BETA ONE, switch to Plan B. We'll enter, except for the sniper team."

[Rog—!]

At that moment, Ruben's response was cut off with an odd tone.

Li Weicheng and the other agents, who were just about to move, froze in place.

"This is KIRIN. All remaining agents, switch frequency to Code B."

Ruben's voice did not return.

If someone had gotten to him, the radio might have been seized.

Meanwhile, after switching frequencies, another BETA team member's voice came in.

[This is BETA TWO. BETA ONE has disappeared. BETA ONE— argh!]

This time, the transmission was cut with a violent noise.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Li Weicheng spoke again on the radio.

"Switch to frequency Code C. All remaining members, move in. Infiltration agents, discard radios and execute Plan C."

After that, their faces set in steely determination, they pulled their masks down to their necks. Grabbing their weapons, they sprinted toward the opening ceremony site.

* * *

Disguised as someone else, In-hyuk released his grip from a man whose neck he'd just twisted.

Thud—

The man's body, life extinguished, slumped to the ground. Beside that corpse lay another man, already dead.

"Does that handle everyone who was in the opening ceremony grounds?"

Last night, after switching places with Noah Vantrail, In-hyuk had snuck into the venue, tampered with the gas trap's ignition device, and waited for the infiltrators. When the opening ceremony started and the Kooou agents withdrew, he quietly picked them off one by one.

Thanks to handling this as quietly as possible, the people at the ceremony were completely unaware.

"Noah. How's the situation on your end?"

He moved positions as he asked, waiting for her response.

After a moment, Noah answered with a muffled sound.

[No problems yet. What's the boss up to?]

She now referred to In-hyuk by the term Hong Yu-geon and Go Mi-ah had used, not "Kang" anymore.

"I just dealt with some dangerous guys. In about ten minutes, something's going to blow up over there."

[Huh? Blow up? What's blowing up?]

After moving a bit farther from the Bellbyte Technology premises, In-hyuk sent a message somewhere using his cellphone.

"It's about to blow."

BOOM— KA-BOOM—!

At that moment, flames shot up from the warehouse farthest from the ceremony, accompanied by a huge explosion. At the same time, through his earpiece, he heard the shocked shouts of people inside.

[Are you insane?! What are you doing? Wait... was that the boss who blew it up?]

"Help evacuate people. And be careful of the secretaries and guards at Baek Si-hwan and Tae Seok-ho's side."

[And what about you?]

"I have to take care of the cockroaches swarming this way."

During the day, only the red rocks of Rock Mountain could be seen—a desolate place. But as night fell, dark ridges and glittering stars filled the sky.

"I need to return the favor we got in Vladivostok."

Clack—clack—

In-hyuk drew a pistol from his waistband and checked the magazine—it was one confiscated from the Kooou agents he'd just dispatched.

After putting on a skull mask, he closed his eyes, letting them adapt to the darkness, then slowly opened them again.

"That way, huh?"

He could see people rushing in from a distance.

Hiding behind a boulder, he waited for them to pass by.

Just as Noah had determined, there were eight in total—including Li Weicheng from MSS, as he'd seen in the pictures.

'Three... Two... One.'

The Kooou agents rushed right by, unaware of In-hyuk, who hid all signs of his presence. When enough distance was gained, the moment became In-hyuk's opportunity.

Bang— ta, Bang— baang—

Loud gunshots echoed over the dark mountains.

Of those racing toward Bellbyte Technology, the last four fell forward, each struck cleanly in the back of the head.

"Scatter!"

It was Li Weicheng, shouting from the very rear. The agents who hadn't been hit instinctively dove, turning to attack the direction the bullets had come from.

Rat-tat-tat— ra-ta-ta-tat— rat-tat— pwak— pwak—

Heavy impacts struck the rocks between bursts of rifle fire.

"They even prepared a sniper unit, so I guess they were going to force it if the trap failed."

Noah had sent photos during her surveillance showing the presence of sniper rifles.

That's why In-hyuk had waited in a spot out of the possible shooting angles, coming around from a hard-to-target direction.

But as soon as he attacked, their positions shifted in response and they targeted him instantly.

"Well, that too was within expectations."

In-hyuk sent another message on his phone.

An explosion erupted near where the Kooou agents were spread out.

BOOM—!

After disabling the ceremonial gas bomb, he'd planted a second bomb nearby, so when it went off, a great brightness engulfed the area.

At that moment, In-hyuk dashed from behind the boulder, grabbed a rifle from one of the downed Kooou agents, and kept moving between piles of rocks.

Ratatat— ratat—

Amid the confusion, he dispatched two more agents, then hid among the rocks again.

Pwapak— pak—

Late gunshots from snipers—unable to use night-vision because of the explosion—struck the rocks he'd just vacated.

"An XM177 will do just fine."

That was the model of the rifle he'd just picked up.

He checked the magazine, then guessed the positions of the last snipers based on where their bullets landed.

"About 300 meters, maybe?"

The rifle's scope was a fixed magnification, good for short-range.

But with In-hyuk's heightened senses, it was enough.

"Shot."

Bang— ratat—

He fired, the 5.56mm round flying fast.

In-hyuk could faintly see what had happened after the shot.

"Clear."

With that, he had taken out both the sniper and the spotter, who calculated distance, wind, and temperature nearby.

"Now, only two left?"

He'd known their numbers from the start.

In-hyuk turned the muzzle to track the last two's location.

Chapter 136 : Chairman—!

Chairman—!

WID's Level 2 agent, Li Weicheng, was dazed from the explosion that had just erupted nearby. His mind spun as he tried to account for where things had gone wrong.

Overwhelmed by a stifling sense of suffocation, Li Weicheng tore off the mask, now soaked with blood.

"Ugh... Was I in their grasp from the very beginning?"

He had just heard the quiet ring of a gunshot.

Afterward, no more sniper attacks followed. He was certain the enemy had been taken out.

Li Weicheng first drew his pistol from the holster at his right hip.

Click—

But the sound of the slide didn't come only from his own pistol.

Simultaneously, a heavy, menacing murderous intent he hadn't noticed at all until now suddenly froze his entire body from just behind him.

"余計なことはしない方がいいだろう. (It'd be best not to do anything unnecessary.)"

The one who had seized Li Weicheng from behind was In-hyuk.

Upon hearing Japanese, Li Weicheng tossed away the gun he was holding a few steps ahead.

Bang—

At that moment, a gunshot echoed.

Startled, Li Weicheng glanced over his shoulder. There, he saw Oliver's head, which had been rolling about nearby with him, now slumped to the ground.

Naturally, Li Weicheng switched to Japanese to speak.

"... Skull, is it?"

"Skull? Ah, so that's what you people call me?"

At his retort, Li Weicheng slowly turned around.

Amid the flames rising from the explosion, he saw In-hyuk, wearing a black skull mask.

"As expected... Was your backer AMK after all?"

"So that's how you connect it on your end? Then your backer would be Kooou, right?"

At this new question, Li Weicheng's expression hardened.

The organization was called Hongu Society. The Japanese pronunciation for Hongu was 'Koyu'.

With the similar pronunciations and his muddled head, it sounded alike to him.

"So you even knew that much?"

A faint chuckle leaked from behind In-hyuk's mask.

"Is an agent from China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) really that easily surprised?"

With those words, Li Weicheng's face stiffened even more.

"H-how did you..."

"Imagine what would happen if the U. S. government found out who you really are... and where you belong."

"You son of a—!"

Bang—

With not a trace of hesitation, In-hyuk pulled the trigger.

And with a hole pierced right through his forehead, Li Weicheng collapsed on the spot.

* * *

At the same time.

With two explosions in quick succession, fire trucks and police cars swarmed into the Bellbyte Technology site.

Firefighters frantically sprayed water on the warehouse where the explosions occurred. Those who'd evacuated to the entrance watched the scene under the protection of the police.

Off to one corner, Tae Seok-ho, wearing an extremely displeased expression, quietly spoke to Reina Blackwood.

"Is this the plan you mentioned on your side?"

"..."

Reina was just as perplexed. She had lost contact with Li Weicheng, who was in charge of the operation.

"I waited only for today. I was told all our aspirations would come true after today. So what is this? Nothing is going right!"

"It seems things have taken an unforeseen turn. Let me check the situation first..."

"What's the point now! Do you think checking is going to change anything?"

Tae Seok-ho almost shouted, then barely held himself back.

Reina exhaled a shallow sigh and replied with a sharpened tone.

"So, are you thinking of severing ties with us?"

He'd momentarily forgotten, swept up by excitement.

That the security guards around her, including Reina, were all from the organization...

He pulled himself together, forcing his agitation to subside.

"Ahem... I went too far."

"Think carefully about what kind of relationship you want with us. I'll get back to you once we confirm what happened."

Reina turned her gaze to the still flickering flames, which were finally beginning to die down.

Originally, the explosion was supposed to happen on the podium while Tae Gun-seung was giving his words of blessing.

She didn't even consider the possibility of the agents messing up the bomb installation.

It was obvious that someone else had interfered. At once, one party came to mind.

'No way... Skull? But how?!'

Simultaneously, her gaze moved to the crowd of AMK Partners and AMK Velion staff.

Gordon Grimes wasn't there, but AMK's Korean branch manager, Norman McGrath, and other key personnel were present.

She'd heard speculation from Elder Im Deok-chang that Skull and AMK Partners might be connected.

But looking at Norman McGrath and the others now, it seemed clear they hadn't anticipated any of this.

'Is AMK really connected to Skull? No, if a leak had come from our side, they would've made sure this place wasn't targeted in the first place.'

All sorts of thoughts ran through her mind, but she couldn't find a satisfactory answer.

One thing was clear: the operation had failed.

At that moment, a police transmission sounded from the radios nearby.

[Unit 23, six armed bodies found near the fire site.]

Reina clearly heard it. And in these circumstances, it wasn't hard to guess whose bodies those were.

Meanwhile, a short distance away, Tae Gun-seung, chairman of Taeshin Group, sighed.

"On such a fine day, how could something like this happen... Cough! Cough!"

He turned his gaze to Kang In-hyuk, who was standing with Tae Ju-ha. Adversity had struck Bellbyte Technology at the very start, a project they had painstakingly built.

Yet, even in this chaos, Kang In-hyuk commanded rapid evacuation in a loud voice.

Fortunately, despite the double explosions, the fire hadn't spread elsewhere.

"Chairman. Shouldn't you go to the hospital now, just in case?"

His secretary, Song Tae-ho, asked with a deeply worried look.

The Taeshin family was trying to get Tae Gun-seung on an ambulance brought by the fire trucks. But he refused and stayed with the others.

"There's no injury, so why would I go?"

"You must consider how much you were startled."

"Well, I've lived long enough anyway. Dying like this doesn't sound too bad."

Tae Gun-seung gazed at the flames, now steadily dying down.

Those present did likewise. Meanwhile, reporters at the opening ceremony busily filmed the scene and the VIPs nearby.

Elsewhere, "Kang In-hyuk"—in reality, Noah Vantrail—was preoccupied by the loss of radio communication.

But with Tae Ju-ha and Baek Si-hwan at her side, it was hard to say anything now.

At that moment, In-hyuk's voice came through the ear microphone in her ear.

Ssshh—

[Are there any injured? If you can't speak, answer with the knock code.]

One knock for "Yes."

Two knocks for "No."

It was a method used in the military for emergencies.

Noah Vantrail tapped her ear twice.

Tap, tap—

It meant there were no injuries.

[Good. It's all handled here. I reek of gunpowder right now, so let's check in and swap locations in two hours.]

Tap—

Noah finished her reply with her fingers.

Right then, Song Tae-ho's shout came from one side.

"Chairman—!"

Tae Gun-seung, who'd been getting up, suddenly staggered and collapsed.

Shocked, people rushed to him. The waiting ambulance whisked him off to the hospital at once.

* * *

【US, Bomb Terror at Sedona Bellbyte Technology's Opening! Multiple bodies of armed personnel found near the company... Two explosions occurred, further investigation required, says police at the scene...】

【Taeshin Asset Management's Division Director Kang In-hyuk, another terror attack?! Confirmed to have suffered attacks in Silicon Valley, Vladivostok, and now Sedona, totaling three...】

【US, Taeshin Group's Chairman Tae Gun-seung loses consciousness during Bellbyte Technology bombings! Chairman Tae, who was unharmed, collapsed among evacuees and was taken away by ambulance...】

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Within just a few hours, the international press exploded.

There had been many reporters covering the Bellbyte Technology opening, drawing so much attention. So, even if nobody deliberately spread the news, those reporters on-site rapidly posted follow-up articles as soon as information came out.

Meanwhile, due to Tae Gun-seung's sudden loss of consciousness, the Taeshin family found themselves not at their hotel, but at the hospital.

A Black doctor in a white coat spoke gravely.

"He must have suffered significant psychological shock. Given his age and his test results, it appears he's been overworked and his fatigue level is very high."

"So, he's not in any immediate danger?"

This was from Taeshin's eldest son, Tae Seok-hyun.

But the doctor's serious expression didn't budge.

"We'll have to wait until he regains consciousness to know for sure."

In the private hospital room, the family and secretaries listened to the doctor's words in silence.

After the doctor left, quiet hung over the room.

Then Tae Seok-hyun, brow deeply furrowed, looked around and spoke.

"Where did that guy disappear to in the middle of all this?"

They hadn't seen Kang In-hyuk among those gathered in the patient's room since earlier.

"He said he had to step out to make a quick work call."

Tae Ju-ha offered an explanation, but Tae Seok-hyun's face clouded even more.

"Work, now?! Do you know who's to blame for Father's condition?!"

Just then, as if on cue, the door opened and In-hyuk entered.

Tae Seok-hyun immediately strode up and grabbed him by the collar.

"Father's lying like that and you care about work?!"

Even though Tae Seok-hyun shook him, In-hyuk didn't even budge.

Instead, he calmly glanced at the people around him and at Tae Gun-seung, lying on the bed.

This was the real In-hyuk, not Noah Vantrail. He had just switched outside with her and entered as if he'd been in the hospital the whole time.

'He's been overdoing it lately... Is this how it was always going to turn out?'

That thought reminded him of how, in his past life, Tae Gun-seung had met his end.

Originally, Tae Gun-seung died of a heart attack alone in his study early next year. Both the hospital and police ruled it natural causes at the time.

But now, knowing what he did about Kooou's existence, In-hyuk couldn't take that at face value.

"If this is my fault, I apologize. But right now, rather than carrying on like this, shouldn't you move to control the press? Or at least release an article to explain things in a favorable light?"

"What?! Is that really something to say now?!"

"Or do you want Taeshin Group's stock to nosedive because of the chairman's condition?"

It may have sounded cold, but that was reality.

Besides, Chairman Tae Gun-seung had collapsed in front of the other evacuees at the explosion scene.

Reporters were already busy covering that. When the market opened, it would be clear what would happen.

Then Tae Seok-ho spoke up.

"It might be a bit late, but I know people in the media, so I'll try to manage things. Still, with all this attention, total suppression is impossible. We'll need to handle this carefully."

"Thank you. And if you share the details with me, I'll handle the foreign press. It should be possible if I make a request to MK Partners."

In-hyuk's matter-of-fact response made Tae Seok-ho's brow twitch, as if In-hyuk was bragging about his connections with AMK Partners.

But now was no time to bring that up, so Tae Seok-ho just collected his phone and headed out.

Chapter 137 : Come to My Office

Come to My Office

The next day, the bomb terror incident that had occurred at Bellbyte Technology and the hospitalization of Chairman Tae Gun-seung became an even bigger wave, stirring public opinion.

Along with this, the existence of Kang In-hyuk, who had already been attacked in terror attacks both in Silicon Valley and Vladivostok, was naturally mentioned once again.

As the situation began to settle, Norman McGrath, the branch manager of AMK Partners' Korean branch, gathered reporters. The reporters fired off questions, the flashes going off wildly.

"I heard that many unidentified bodies armed with personal firearms were found in this incident. Does this mean that there's a force targeting either Bellbyte or AMK?"

"Is this unrelated to Kang In-hyuk, the division director at Taeshin Asset Management?"

"What's the exact scale of the damage?"

"Do you know the condition of Taeshin Group's Chairman, Tae Gun-seung?"

The interview site was an empty lot near Bellbyte Technology, where the aftermath was being managed.

Not far away, police and firefighters were still investigating the events that had unfolded the previous night.

As Norman McGrath, bombarded with the reporters' questions, tapped the microphone set before him, Thoom— Thoom—

the speakers on either side reverberated, forcing the reporters to fall silent.

"To begin with, there were no guests directly injured at the Bellbyte Technology opening ceremony."

"Then what about Chairman Tae Gun-seung's condition? Do you know that Taeshin Group's stock price is being affected right now?"

"Please explain in more detail!"

The reporters didn't miss a beat, pressing forward.

Even so, Norman McGrath didn't lose his composure and waited for them to quiet down before speaking again.

"Taeshin Group will give a separate statement on that, but to keep it simple... For now, his life is not in danger. However, given his age, the hospital is monitoring his condition, and the group said they would give a later interview."

"Have you identified the terrorists?"

"Was the intention to threaten Bellbyte Technology through terror?"

"Who killed the terrorists? Is there a suspect?"

"When can we expect an official statement from the police?"

Once again, a barrage of questions was fired off. The seriousness of the situation attracted a lot of attention, and the initial reports that went out first only heightened speculation, causing countless rumors to swirl.

"The investigators are still working to determine the facts. Since Governor Hele Carver of Arizona was among the honored guests, the U. S. government is also showing great interest and will likely conduct its own investigation."

As soon as he finished, the reporters seemed eager to jump in again, so Norman McGrath quickly continued.

"And, as of today, Bellbyte Technology has begun production. Soon, we'll be opening bids for distribution and sales rights to companies in various countries. If sales exceed our targets, we may consider outsourcing production itself. So please, refrain from any speculative or unfounded reports beyond what I've stated."

Click— click, click—

With the sound of flashes, the startled reporters' fingers danced rapidly over their keyboards.

After the interview, Norman McGrath stepped down from the temporary platform and slipped into an area shielded by vehicles.

His secretary, Yoo Dae-hyun, handed him a cold water bottle.

"It seems the reporters are hounding us even more persistently than expected," he said with concern.

With a sigh, Norman McGrath took a drink first.

"Whew... This situation is really blowing up. Kang In-hyuk—what is that guy doing to attract all this mess?"

"Is this happening because of Taeshin's division director Kang In-hyuk?"

Yoo's expression was genuinely curious.

"How would I know? I just said what everyone else is thinking. It's not like he's got some misfortune-attracting ghost attached to him."

"But then, who really took care of those terrorists?"

There were a total of 12 unidentified bodies found in and around Bellbyte Technology.

All were equipped with the same model of radio and personal firearm. That alone suggested a clear link—they had targeted Bellbyte Technology.

Moreover, evidence of a trap using the gas pipeline was found under the ceremony platform, confirming a bomb attack.

"I have no idea. Maybe we have a guardian angel or something watching over us..."

"With all due respect, that sounds more like a scary angel. Wouldn't a grim reaper be more fitting?"

"Not a bad analogy. Anyway, there's a mountain of aftermath to deal with. I just hope CEO Baker and CEO Campbell keep their composure and handle it well..."

He was referring to Rachel Baker and Mark Campbell, co-CEOs of Bellbyte Technology.

Both retained their original CEO titles at AMK Velion and Greenbyte Labs, and now jointly headed Bellbyte Technology as well.

Even though Rachel Baker held 50% of the shares—more than Mark Campbell—she had been installed as co-CEO thanks to the backing of Taeshin Asset Management.

"For now, I'll send regular reports after checking with CEO Rachel Baker."

"Let's hope there are no problems."

No sooner had Norman McGrath got into his car than a call came through, just as if it had been waiting for him.

He asked everyone else to leave before taking the call.

"... Yes, CEO."

The caller was Gordon Grimes.

[I've checked the report from the Bellbyte side. It seems the situation is rather complicated from the news coverage.]

Of course, it was actually In-hyuk.

Not knowing this, Norman McGrath could only sigh heavily.

"Corporate credibility hasn't dropped much, but there are some voices of concern."

[At least we're not the kind of company that has to worry about our shareholders.]

AMK Partners, after all, was still a privately held company, with all shares owned internally.

Despite its phenomenal growth attracting numerous massive offers of investment in exchange for shares, it refused them all.

Thus, AMK Partners presented an unbreachable fortress.

"If this sort of thing keeps happening, I worry about your safety as well. Is that why you keep your identity hidden?"

Movers and shakers in the business world were desperate to uncover the real face of Gordon Grimes, the head of AMK Partners.

Plus, ever since rumors had spread of his brief appearance in Hong Kong, it was even more the case.

[Something like that. Even so, we've met twice, haven't we?]

First when Norman McGrath was scouted, and again in Hong Kong.

"In Seoul, I only heard your voice..."

[Back then, and now, I have to remain cautious. And with the current situation, I think AMK Partners will need its own security team.]

"Are you saying I should recruit more personnel?"

Currently, only Norman McGrath had a security guard assigned to him at AMK Partners' Korean branch.

While there was a company security staff, no real professionals capable of handling threats at this level.

[Let's take this opportunity to acquire a security company. For personal protection, we'll contract a foreign mercenary unit for security work.]

"... The whole company and a mercenary unit? But if it's that important, wouldn't it be best for you to handle it directly, CEO?"

Security and personal protection were directly linked to the safety of AMK Partners' executives and employees.

This burdened Norman McGrath, as branch manager, with responsibility.

[As an incentive for overseeing the Bellbyte Technology matter, I'll award you 3% of our shares. That should give you enough power to make important decisions, don't you think?]

"T-Three percent...?"

At present, one unlisted AMK Partners share was worth about 200,000 won. According to experts, the total market value was about 23 trillion won. So, 3% was nearly 700 billion won—enough to leave Norman McGrath utterly dumbfounded.

[I considered your hard work so far. Of course, given the situation, it could also be called hazard pay.]

Besides, AMK Partners' value was only set to climb further thanks to Bellbyte Technology. Should it ever go public, those 3% shares would be even more valuable.

"D-Do I really... deserve this?"

Even now, Norman McGrath was drawing one of the highest salaries and incentives around, having already built up considerable wealth. Yet, Gordon Grimes was proposing to give him even more.

[As I said, such a sizable share won't always be a source of happiness.]

There was a great responsibility to bear along with the money. Norman McGrath understood that better than anyone.

"Thank you for your trust."

[I look forward to working with you. I'll send the share transfer paperwork, as well as materials for the security company and the mercenary unit to hire as security guards. You can handle the contact and contracts from there.]

"Understood."

The call ended. Setting his phone down, Norman McGrath found his heart pounding so fiercely that his shoulders trembled.

Then, still in the car, he noticed a strange tension among the reporters outside. Opening the car door, he asked his secretary, Yoo Dae-hyun,

"Is something up?"

"A new article just came out about the Bellbyte incident."

"An article?"

Norman McGrath took the tablet from him. The moment he saw the content, his brow furrowed deeply.

* * *

CRASH—!

A loud sound echoed through the office of the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service in Korea.

The office's owner, Im Deok-chang, had just swept everything off his desk, and his feet were surrounded by scattered items.

"Who the hell are these bastards?!"

At that moment, the door opened and his subordinate, Choi Dong-hoon, entered.

"Deputy Director! Are you all right?"

Though Im Deok-chang's expression was sharp, Choi Dong-hoon calmly approached him.

"I see you've read the article."

"Find out immediately where that information came from!"

His finger pointed at the only item left on the desk—a tablet. On the screen was the article Im Deok-chang had just read.

【U. S., Bellbyte Technology Terror Incident! Was it a crime committed out of jealousy by a foreign government? Reports indicate that some of the suspects involved may have been agents of certain national intelligence services...】

The article didn't end there; it continued with follow-up reports. Choi Dong-hoon did not move to follow Deok-chang's orders, but answered calmly.

"If we try to trace the source of that article now, it'll only reveal our own tracks."

"So you're saying we should just sit and do nothing?!"

They had just carried out an elaborate operation to deal with Tae Gun-seung.

Li Weicheng's team had infiltrated as staff for the opening, and handled the bomb installation and external logistics seamlessly.

The bomb did explode, but instead of taking out Tae Gun-seung, it had only burned down an unlucky warehouse. Plus, all the VIP guests at the ceremony survived, leaving only Bellbyte Technology and Taeshin Group as the focus of attention.

"For now, since Chairman Tae Gun-seung is hospitalized in Flagstaff, it'd be best to finish him off there, even if it's a stretch."

"I've already given Reina the order, so she'll act when the opportunity comes. Here, we need to figure out how Li Weicheng's team's records were exposed."

The problem was critical: agents from WID, having infiltrated a foreign intelligence agency, were now publicly revealed.

Naturally, that agency would want to know why armed agents had died in Sedona, Arizona.

Ring-ring— Ring-ring—

Then, the internal phone rang, and the voice of NIS Director Jin Jong-man came through.

[Come to my office.]

It was an abrupt summons. Im Deok-chang scratched his head and sighed deeply.

Chapter 138 : Fish to a Cat

Fish to a Cat

The Director of the National Intelligence Service, Jin Jong-man, waited for the deputy general managers with an anxious expression. Before long, Choo Jae-min from the First Division, Shin Jin-hong from the Second Division, and Im Deok-chang from the Third Division came in and sat on the sofa.

"You all know about the incident that occurred in Sedona, America, right?"

The three of them slowly nodded, waiting for the next words.

"Is this an unfamiliar picture to you? Doesn't it look familiar, Deputy General Manager Choo?"

The question was directed at Choo Jae-min, and it wasn't hard for him to answer.

"It looks similar to the Songchon incident on our First Division's side."

"So, I'm not the only one who noticed? What about the other deputy general managers?"

Shin Jin-hong and Im Deok-chang glanced at each other, reading the room.

"I think so as well."

"It seems that way..."

Im Deok-chang, who answered last, felt uneasy. The situation he had been worried about was occurring because of Jin Jong-man's summons.

Jin Jong-man continued.

"If the same problems are happening at other intelligence agencies like ours, then Songchon is just a shell. It means there are others pulling the strings."

To this concise explanation, Choo Jae-min raised a question.

"If it's really the same context... where is the true power behind it?"

"If I knew that, would I be this frustrated? Besides, something else came over through the NIS tip-off department."

A crisp document, as if just printed, was placed in front of them.

"Don't tell me..."

As Choo Jae-min murmured, Jin Jong-man continued his explanation.

"It's the personal info of the Bellbyte terror case suspects that some of the press set their own embargo on. Chinese MSS, Russian SVR, and Brazil's ABIN. Out of twelve bodies, three belonged to agents working for government-run agencies."

"How did you get this?"

"Get, really. Some blind guy just threw it into the NIS tips. Of course, we couldn't trace the IP. Probably the same guy who leaked to the press."

The situation had become even more grave. It meant there was a force capable of planting moles not only in the NIS but also in other countries' intelligence agencies.

"Deputy General Manager Shin."

At that call, Shin Jin-hong answered in surprise.

"Yes? Ah, yes... Director."

"You don't still think Songchon is the one behind all this, do you, after seeing this?"

It was he who had reported that the rogue agents' handlers were Songchon.

Beads of cold sweat formed on Shin Jin-hong's forehead. Since he was in charge of investigating Songchon, it was an awkward position.

"No, sir. I'll confirm again and submit an updated report."

"No. This time, Deputy General Manager Choo will handle it. It was under First Division's jurisdiction to begin with."

A similar situation had unfolded at other intelligence agencies.

Because of that, Jin Jong-man could no longer harbor any suspicion toward Choo Jae-min.

"Then, what should we do about the investigation you mentioned previously?"

He was referring to the investigation into Hwain Techon, the Seunghwa Foundation, and Seunghwa Trading.

Since the other two deputy general managers weren't privy to it, he didn't specify.

Jin Jong-man hesitated for a moment. This was because, in the message sent by HERMIT, he sensed that an NIS insider was also involved.

If he handed over something Choo Jae-min was investigating smoothly to someone else, there was no telling what might happen.

"I'll take care of it."

"I'll transfer all the material to you."

"Go ahead."

During the conversation, Im Deok-chang showed interest and spoke up.

"Is something going on? If there's anything I can help with, let me know."

Jin Jong-man looked at Im Deok-chang, briefly pondering.

He wondered if Shin Jin-hong and Im Deok-chang, along with Choo Jae-min, were related to the Notex case.

He had previously instructed Im Deok-chang to dig into the Prosecutors' Office and Deputy Prosecutor General Jung Yoon-ju.

However, after Jung Yoon-ju's death, the prosecutorial side spiraled out of control.

Even the Prosecutor General had gotten involved to root out widespread corruption.

"Then, Deputy General Manager Im, you take charge of that."

"Which one, sir?"

"The relationship between Hwain Techon and Notex. And a detailed investigation into the Seunghwa Foundation and Seunghwa Trading."

With this explanation, Im Deok-chang straightened his face and asked back.

"Wasn't the Notex side already concluded with the report I made on the Korean staff member the other day?"

Im Deok-chang had assumed that was it. But suddenly, not just any company, but one that had funneled money to Notex, Hwain Techon, was brought up, unsettling him.

"We had information. That's why we're digging into the two companies. How far have we gotten?"

At this, Choo Jae-min glanced around and explained.

"All the shell companies connected to Notex have shut down, so tracking the traces proved difficult. But with some hard-won cooperation from the authorities, tracking the flow of funds confirmed links to domestic shell companies."

"Then, Deputy General Manager Im, you'll take it from there."

The source of the $1.4 billion discovered in the Notex incident was still unknown.

In that situation, the NIS had tracked the flow of funds to evidence passing through Korea.

If that got into hands abroad, not only the NIS but even the Korean government would be in serious trouble.

"Even if there was a shell company in Korea, it may have just been a stopover."

To Im Deok-chang's mumbling, Choo Jae-min, who recently handled the investigation, added,

"The Korean side also shut down, but it wasn't a short-term operation, so there will be some trace left. That's why we've already requested cooperation from the Financial Supervisory Service and the National Tax Service."

This meant the investigation was already well underway.

Im Deok-chang, unable to reveal his inner thoughts, spoke as calmly as possible.

"If you hand over the material, I'll handle it from there."

Thus the meeting ended.

Im Deok-chang immediately strode down the hallway and into his office.

Reading the tense atmosphere, Choi Dong-hoon, who followed him in, spoke first.

"Is there a problem?"

"The Director has been quietly tracking the Notex funds."

"... What? But wasn't that..."

Choi Dong-hoon also remembered that it had been resolved previously.

"I thought I'd swept it under the rug well, but someone passed on info, so Deputy General Manager Choo was looking into it."

"How far have they gotten?"

"They've tracked it all the way to domestic shell companies. With the National Tax Service and the Financial Supervisory Service mobilized, they'll trace the fund routes soon."

If that trail led to Hwain Techon and the W&W Group, things would become uncontrollable.

Of course, W&W Group fell under Baek Ji-woong and Kwon So-jeong's remit, but traces related to Hwain Techon were the NIS's job—he couldn't easily shift the responsibility.

"So we need a tighter wrap. Shall we move now?"

"The issue has even reached domestic operations, so if we move carelessly, we'll leave traces. Just make sure to cut the bridge in between."

"Understood."

"Oh, and check out everyone Director Jin Jong-man has met or talked with or messaged recently. Find out the source of the info as well."

Because confirming the source was necessary.

Just then, a message from Choo Jae-min, Head of First Division, appeared on his computer.

[First Division Choo Jae-min: I've uploaded all the material to the cloud.]

This was about the handover.

* * *

Norton General Hospital in Flagstaff, Arizona, America.

In a private room there, Taeshin Group chairman Tae Gun-seung still lay unconscious. As he had not woken up for days, they just kept watch over him.

However, since the rest of the child could not be away from the company indefinitely, they had returned home.

Of course, some had suggested transporting Tae Gun-seung to Korea.

But since it was unclear when he would awaken, and the trip wouldn't end in just an hour or two, the doctor had not approved it.

Thus, only In-hyuk, Tae Ju-ha, Tae Seok-hyun, his wife Lee Sun-hye, and the secretaries and security team remained at the hospital.

"I think I'll have to stay here longer. Make sure all important matters are shared directly via report regardless of the time."

Right now, In-hyuk was on the phone with Noh Dongjun, team leader of PEF Team 2.

There was a matter in the ongoing investment project that needed his personal handling.

[That's no problem, but... are you sure? There's chaos here with all the articles these days.]

That news about Tae Gun-seung had leaked to the media.

"It'll be noisy for a while."

After ending the call, In-hyuk turned to Baek Si-hwan, who had been standing in the back.

He must have heard about the Bellbyte Technology incident, with Kooou wiping out twelve people, yet he looked calm.

Even Reina Blackwood quietly stood by Tae Seok-ho, but couldn't hide all her faint killing intent radiating from her body.

"Manager Baek, you should go back to Korea on tonight's flight."

"Any specific instructions?"

"Sort out the incoming reports more and share them. It's a bit much to keep responding to everything from here."

Most of his time had been spent at the hospital.

"Shouldn't you return with us, division director?"

"I brought the chairman here, so I must see to him until the end. So don't worry about me."

"Then I'll go get ready for the return first."

Baek Si-hwan didn't argue further and quietly withdrew.

Just then, In-hyuk felt a vibration from his phone.

[NIS02: The Notex funds are assumed to be related to Hwain Techon. The NIS Director instructed Im Deok-chang to investigate domestic shell companies.]

[NIS02: Bellbyte case, assumed forces besides Songchon. Suspect identities have been reported.]

It was a message from Shin Jin-hong, Deputy General Manager of the NIS, sent via Ghost Link.

Reading it, In-hyuk clicked his tongue.

"Leaving fish in the care of a cat, huh."

NIS Director Jin Jong-man, not knowing Im Deok-chang was part of the hidden powers, had assigned him the Hwain Techon case.

He had expected as much, but it still felt strange seeing it play out as predicted.

"But if Im Deok-chang makes a move now, there'll be no turning back."

It was originally a method intended for Deputy Prosecutor General Jung Yoon-ju at the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

He had planned to trap her with prosecutor corruption and then completely destroy her with collected evidence.

But because Jung Yoon-ju foolishly took the initiative herself, he had to dispose of her swiftly and cleanly.

"I'm reusing a scenario I never got to play out, so it's not bad. But it's quieter than I expected."

In-hyuk stood by the window at the end of the hallway.

The security guards from Taeshin Security were guarding the entrance to Tae Gun-seung's hospital room, and the rest of the hallway was quiet—it was late at night, after all.

Of course, he hadn't been talking about the atmosphere.

After Tae Gun-seung collapsed, Kooou hadn't shown any movement.

Since they had tried to go after Tae Gun-seung even using armed forces, he thought she'd try again.

"I doubt they gave up... is it because of the security guards?"

Tae Seok-ho and Reina Blackwood had returned to Korea. Of course, that alone wasn't enough to dispel all suspicion.

Clack—

Just then, the hospital room door opened and Tae Ju-ha walked out.

"Are you done with your call?"

"I just finished."

"Where did Manager Baek go?"

She'd seen him leave the room earlier.

"He had some company liaison work, so I told him to return on a night flight. He went to pack his things."

"Oh..."

"Is it all right for you to stay here, Director Ju-ha? It must be inconvenient to work here."

She was also the CEO of Taeshin Asset Management, with a mountain of work waiting.

But she couldn't leave the hospital, worried about her grandfather, Tae Gun-seung.

"I'll stay until grandpa wakes up."

In-hyuk nodded. Then, he shifted his gaze toward the corridor behind her.

He saw a nurse with a strange air about her passing in front of the station.

Chapter 139 : I'm Sorry!

I'm Sorry!

Tae Ju-ha waited for In-hyuk's response. However, when In-hyuk cast a glance over her shoulder, she asked again.

"Is there something behind me?"

"No, not at all. By the way, are you going to sleep at the hotel again tonight?"

"I have to, since there's no one else I can entrust this to. And I also want to."

Even though they had hired a private caregiver, Tae Ju-ha continued to stay by his side.

Of course, Tae Ju-ha and In-hyuk weren't the only ones who decided to stay in America.

Tae Gun-seung's eldest son, Tae Seok-hyun, and his daughter-in-law, Lee Sun-hye, were also there, but after staying in the hospital for just two days, they disappeared.

"You're working so hard."

"You're the same, In-hyuk—you're not returning to your lodging either."

That was because they each felt some measure of responsibility for Tae Gun-seung's condition.

Of course, it wasn't that In-hyuk felt guilty or anything like that.

It was just that the loss of Tae Gun-seung at this point would be too early for his own plans.

"This situation happened because of my invitation. When the chairman accepted so readily despite his age, I feel like maybe I should have thought it over once more."

"This was all for Taeshin Asset Management's sake. Even though there was an accident, public opinion is starting to recognize that Taeshin Group is showing major interest in Taeshin Asset Management and Bellbyte Technology."

That was the ostensible goal. It was all just bait that In-hyuk had set down...

Moreover, with Chairman Tae Gun-seung collapsing, Taeshin Group's stock price was also steadily slipping as an added bonus.

"In any case, don't overdo it."

"Are you... worried about me?"

Feeling a bit awkward, In-hyuk scratched his cheek and tried to change the subject.

"We can't have two people collapse here. By the way, why did you step out?"

"Oh, I was just getting some fresh air."

"I understand. Still, please always take a security guard with you, just in case."

"It is uncomfortable... but I guess I should."

The exact cause of the Bellbyte Technology incident had not been clarified.

On top of that, ever since the incident in Vladivostok where Tae Ju-ha and In-hyuk barely escaped with their lives, she always moved about with a security guard.

As Tae Ju-ha wandered off away from the other security guards,

In-hyuk walked toward the station area and quietly spoke to a nurse who was sitting alone.

"What are you doing here?"

The nurse, busy typing on a keyboard, glanced at In-hyuk and gave him a subtle smile.

"What do you think? I'm working."

"You can actually do a nurse's job?"

Her true identity was Noah Vantrail, disguised as a nurse.

In-hyuk sneakily glanced at the monitor of the computer she was typing on.

As expected, she had Notepad open, writing something unintelligible.

"This much is a piece of cake. But how long is the boss going to keep this up? Is it because of the chairman?"

"For now, yeah. There's a chance those guys might come after us again. But really, why did you show up like this?"

"I heard that Baek Si-hwan, that secretary, is over here too. I didn't want to get tracked by talking on the phone next door, so I came here in person."

Noah Vantrail had already heard through In-hyuk just how far Kooou had gotten.

"So, why did you come?"

"I saw some suspicious guys outside coming in. Did you know about that?"

"Really?"

"You seem to already know."

Originally, as soon as the incident happened, the plan was to send Baek Si-hwan straight back home.

But with the way the aftermath was playing out, and for other reasons, he insisted on staying, so they let him.

And earlier, he left the area without any resistance whatsoever.

He moved so obediently that it was only natural to become suspicious.

"I figured it was about time they showed up."

"I can't tell if you're good at reading things or just reckless... Need a hand?"

Noah teased him, though she clearly looked unsure if In-hyuk could really handle it.

At that moment, In-hyuk felt the atmosphere around him thin out.

"Wait a second."

He moved straight to the window at the end of the corridor and scanned the view outside.

Noah, who had followed behind, cocked her head and asked,

"What is it?"

"Their presence is gone."

"... Huh? You can notice something like that?"

To be honest, it wasn't so much their presence as their killing intent and the weight of their gaze.

Of course, at close range, he could sense most people's presence anyway...

"I'm sensitive to these things."

"Are you sure they've pulled out?"

"I think so. But why would they leave? Did their plans change?"

The people dealt with at Bellbyte Technology had clearly been after Chairman Tae Gun-seung. And behind them stood Tae Seok-ho.

Though Tae Gun-seung was still unconscious, as long as he was alive, he would surely be an obstacle to the plan.

"Maybe they came up with another method?"

"... No way."

While he muttered that, a voice sounded from behind.

"In-hyuk! What are you doing over there?"

Tae Ju-ha, who had gone out for some fresh air, had gotten off the elevator and spotted In-hyuk with Nurse Noah.

"Uhm, well..."

For a second, In-hyuk didn't know what or how to explain.

That's when Noah, feigning surprise, spoke up.

"Oh my! You have a girlfriend, don't you? I'm so sorry!"

And with that, she hurried past Tae Ju-ha and down the emergency stairs.

"...."

At that moment, he got a strange sense of déjà vu and Go Mi-ah's face flashed through his mind.

"Were you doing something with that nurse?"

"No, it's a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding? A misunderstanding about what?"

In-hyuk started getting a headache.

"I have something important to check, so if you'll excuse me for a moment."

"In-hyuk."

In the end, he thought it best to avoid the situation.

So, ignoring Tae Ju-ha's call, In-hyuk headed toward the break room.

"Mi-ah or Noah, why do they always do this to me...?"

Muttering under his breath, he entered Ghost Link on his phone and called Go Mi-ah.

[Mmmmmm—! What is it at this hour?]

"Are you eating something?"

[It's lunchtime now.]

It was past 8 PM here. In Korea, that made it just past noon.

"Oh, sorry. More importantly, can you update me on the head office situation?"

[Why, what's up?]

"I thought the people who were after Chairman Tae Gun-seung showed up, but they left. It seems something is happening at head office."

[Really? I'll check as soon as I'm done eating.]

"And can you get me the list of all arrivals at airports near Flagstaff for the past three days? Within a 300-km radius."

Go Mi-ah was startled.

[What?! Do you even know how many airports are within that range?]

"Maybe just over ten?"

Meanwhile, having finished her search, Go Mi-ah shouted loudly.

[Exactly eigh!teen!]

The number somehow sounded a bit unpleasant.

"I'm counting on you."

[Geez—! How soon do you need it?]

"As soon as possible."

[Thanks to the boss, my workload just exploded! Anyway, fine.]

With that, the call ended with Go Mi-ah's complaint.

* * *

Taeshin Trading executive vice president's office.

Tae Seok-ho sat at his desk, scrutinizing documents with a calm expression.

Then, after a knock, Reina Blackwood entered quietly and handed over a file.

"As you requested, I withdrew the team we sent to the chairman."

"Well done. They didn't get caught pulling out, did they?"

"Not at all. We withdrew right before they were deployed. But... are you really sure about this?"

Reina had been ordered by Im Deok-chang to make absolutely sure of finishing off Tae Gun-seung.

Of course, Tae Seok-ho was briefed as well and, with his approval, a separate team under his command had moved.

But at the very final moment, Tae Seok-ho had reversed the decision.

"Is there any guarantee we'll succeed this time, when we've already failed once? And even if we do, with what happened at Bellbyte, who do you think would be blamed?"

The investigation was now heading in the direction that Kang In-hyuk or Bellbyte Technology had been targeted.

If Tae Gun-seung was openly attacked, suspicion would surely fall on the Taeshin Group's succession structure.

Once Tae Seok-ho finished his calculations, he began implementing a new plan.

"I understand what you mean. But if you go ahead and the chairman wakes up, it'll really be out of control."

"He's been unconscious for three days. Even if he does wake, it'll take time for him to return to business. Besides, Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk are tied up with the chairman, so this is actually a golden opportunity."

Reina let out a small sigh at his words.

"Soon, there will be official notice of an emergency shareholders' meeting."

This time, Tae Seok-ho let out a long breath.

"So now an irreversible situation is set to begin."

"Do you think you have the winning hand?"

"I've already acquired all the shares necessary. And with things as they are, the directors who were on the fence aren't likely to side with Tae Seok-hyun."

Currently, Tae Seok-hyun had more than 30% directly favorable shares.

In addition, there were about 18% shares held by small shareholders or under uncertain names.

The shares previously friendly to Tae Seok-hyun could easily shift.

Plus, if KQ Distribution is thinking of making Kang In-hyuk the successor, they'd likely hand their shares to Tae Seok-ho.

"The shares held by Lumen Holdings, Orbis Investment, and AMK Partners are the biggest obstacles."

"Didn't you say together they hold about 15%?"

"According to the current tally, it's exactly 14.83%."

"That's a significant amount."

So far, Chairman Tae Gun-seung's direct shareholding was about 20%.

Combined with the shares of Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Ju-ha, that made just over 30%.

If those three companies sided with the chairman, their total would be about 45%.

If they skipped the emergency shareholders' meeting, it'd be fine, but if they opposed, it could be a huge variable.

"Fortunately, those three companies haven't made any contact as of now. Still, we can't let our guard down."

"As per the articles, as long as we get a majority among those present, that's enough."

"If things proceed as planned, there shouldn't be any problem."

Even as Reina said that, she felt an ominous premonition.

But with Tae Seok-ho acting so triumphant, as if success was certain, it was hard for her to speak up.

"Of course it should go that way."

"And just in case, I'll make arrangements on the Flagstaff side so that even if Chairman Tae Gun-seung wakes up, he won't be able to return easily."

"What sort of arrangements?"

"Just tying up a foot or two. Of course, I'll make sure it goes unnoticed."

Even now, she wanted to make absolutely sure of finishing Tae Gun-seung for good.

"That should suffice."

Having finished her report, Reina stepped out. Then, entering the break room next to where the secretaries worked, she called Im Deok-chang.

[Did something go wrong?]

Currently, Im Deok-chang was irritated, busy handling matters regarding the domestic shell companies between Notex and Hwain Techon on orders from Jin Jong-man.

"No, nothing's wrong. It's just that something is bothering me."

[What is it?]

"I've set up the notice for the shareholders' meeting, but AMK, Orbis, and Lumen are obstacles. Are we really okay? I was thinking, maybe I should probe them indirectly through W&W Group."

They were companies holding almost 15% of the shares.

If their moves weren't clearly understood, they could become a critical variable.

[If you've already sent the notice, then the train has left the station. Besides, there's a week left before the meeting, and it's too late to try to contact them now.]

"Understood. I'll do as you say."

Unable to go against him, Reina could only nod.

Chapter 140 : Rather Than Ruin Everything

Rather Than Ruin Everything

In-hyuk stepped outside for a moment while Tae Ju-ha was in Tae Gun-seung's hospital room.

Standing beneath the streetlight in the pitch-black darkness, he checked his phone and a subtle smile crept onto his lips.

"Is this why they turned people away?"

【Taeshin Trading Co., Ltd. Emergency Shareholders' Meeting Notice】

– Date & Time: 2026, Month △△, Day △△, at △△PM】

– Location: 2nd floor auditorium, Taeshin Trading head office, △△-gil, △△-daero, △△-gu, Seoul

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Agenda Items

– 1. Dismissal of CEO

– 2. Appointment of a new CEO

– 3. Other important matters

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It was clear this was a plan that came from Tae Seok-ho's mind.

Otherwise, there would've been no reason for the force Kooou sent to come right up to the front and then turn back.

Of course, the related message was not sent to In-hyuk directly.

Since, on the surface, he didn't own a single share of Taeshin Trading, there was no way for him to receive it.

It had been relayed through AMK Partners, Orbis Investment, and Lumen Holdings, which possessed shares of Taeshin Group.

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha rushed out, accompanied by security guards.

"In-hyuk! Something big happened!"

He already more or less knew what the matter was, but he couldn't show it.

"What's wrong?"

"Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho has started something!"

She quickly showed him her phone screen. On it was the detailed meeting notice for the emergency shareholders' meeting of Taeshin Trading, which had just arrived.

Tae Ju-ha had also received the notice because Tae Gun-seung had previously transferred her a small portion of shares.

Of course, the content was the same as what In-hyuk had just received.

"It looks like they're taking advantage of the fact that we're stuck here."

"What is Uncle thinking...?"

Then a message arrived on Tae Ju-ha's phone.

Since they were both looking at the shareholders' meeting notice, In-hyuk was also able to check it.

【We're going in first.】

It was a message from Tae Seok-hyun, Tae Ju-ha's father.

He must have moved immediately after getting the emergency shareholders' meeting news.

"Even if Father-in-law goes in there, there's probably nothing he can do."

Although Tae Seok-hyun also held shares in Taeshin Trading, inside the company he had been dismissed at Tae Gun-seung's instruction, so he couldn't exercise any authority.

"I think so, too... but that's not the real issue! If things keep going like this, Uncle will..."

"The real question is whether the chairman can wake up within a week. And even if he does, the fact that Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho went this far shows he secured enough shares to feel confident."

"So what do we do now? Should I try to meet with the shareholders...?"

"It's probably pointless. Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho must have planned for that, too."

Since Tae Seok-hyun's ousting, the first round of the successor contest had already shifted toward Tae Seok-ho.

With the balance broken and now a shareholders' meeting being called, it was obvious whose side the shareholders would take.

"I still have those shares I was holding in trust, right?"

About 12% of the shares hidden overseas. Tae Ju-ha was the only one who could exercise those rights now.

"The shares held by the chairman total 8%. Even if you add those in, it makes a bit over 20%. Well, with your 27,000 personally owned shares, that's about 0.02% more."

In the end, it was still just a little above 20% total.

"Does that mean there's no way?"

In-hyuk put on a serious face as though he were contemplating deeply, then spoke.

"You never know. If a major foreign company holding Taeshin shares decides to act, it's not completely hopeless."

Tae Ju-ha herself had confirmed exactly where that was with her own eyes during the previous Taeshin Electronics share war.

"Should we go right now and try to talk to them? If they'd support the chairman..."

"Do you really think that's likely?"

Normally, a foreign company unrelated to daily operations would treat a shareholders' meeting as nothing more than an opportunity.

What's more, with articles circulating about Chairman Tae Gun-seung's health, it's obvious they'd support the next CEO nominee in the interests of Taeshin Group's stability.

"Honestly, I know it's a long shot... But I can't just sit by and do nothing!"

Tae Ju-ha also judged coldly in her own way.

Still, she didn't want to leave her uncle Tae Seok-ho's actions as they were.

After a moment, In-hyuk cautiously continued.

"I don't know if it will help, but I have connections at AMK Partners that could at least set up a meeting with Lumen Holdings. There's no guarantee, but would you like to try?"

"Really? Come to think of it, AMK Partners has shares too! Couldn't you talk to them?"

She finally recalled that In-hyuk's relationship with AMK Partners was no light matter.

"I can try, but in the end, they act on business. They'll be prioritizing profit above all else."

"Still."

"I'll talk to them for you. But don't get your hopes up."

"Thank you. Then, I'll talk to Lumen Holdings... but what about the chairman?"

If she left with In-hyuk, only the secretary, Song Tae-ho, and security guards would remain with the chairman.

"I'm just coordinating by phone anyway, so I should stay here. Besides, there's no guarantee my being there would make a difference. It'll be better if the person with actual authority over the shares goes."

"Is that really okay?"

"It's probably better than not going at all. So, what do you want to do?"

With her brow furrowed, Tae Ju-ha considered intensely for a moment.

"You're sure you can really set up this meeting?"

"If it's just a short conversation, yes."

"All right. I'll go. If they get involved, maybe others can be convinced too."

It seemed she was determined to hold on to even this small hope.

"Understood. I'll make the call. Will you be heading out right away?"

"I must. Please take good care of the chairman."

Tae Ju-ha immediately called Heo Yu-rim at the hospital room.

As the security guards brought the car around, she took her bag and set off.

After seeing her off to the parking lot, In-hyuk returned to the hospital room.

Tae Gun-seung still lay quietly on the hospital bed with his oxygen mask on, eyes closed.

"They're all gone. But your body must be stiff—how long are you going to keep pretending?"

At that, Song Tae-ho, Tae Gun-seung's secretary, looked at In-hyuk in startlement from beside the door.

Soon after, Tae Gun-seung's eyes slowly opened above his oxygen mask.

"... Since when did you know?"

With that question, Song Tae-ho approached and removed the oxygen mask from Tae Gun-seung's mouth.

"From the second day."

"How did you figure it out?"

"Every time CEO Tae Ju-ha and I stepped out, the bedding was always a mess. And your heartbeat was too steady. You kept the tempo slow, but still."

With Song Tae-ho's support, Tae Gun-seung was able to raise himself up against the head of the bed.

"I knew you had sharp eyes, Kang, but not this sharp."

"I am a bit sensitive. But who else knows about this?"

At In-hyuk's piercing question, Tae Gun-seung responded with a slow sigh.

"For now, only Director Song, the guards in charge of the hospital room, and the attending doctor."

"Did you think other children might realize?"

"Those guys? You mean my second, who left immediately after I got like this, or the first, who cried and said he'd stay by my side, then hasn't even shown his face?"

Tae Gun-seung had either been told or learned of all this himself.

Perhaps as a result, his look grew ever heavier with disillusionment.

"Then you already know what's happening right now."

"... Seok-ho finally made his move. He must see it as his chance."

"Anyone would see this as an opportunity. No matter how he did it, he must have gathered enough shares to feel confident while you were unconscious."

"That's probably true."

He seemed to have more or less anticipated this situation.

"Then have you prepared any countermeasures?"

"Not especially. I never planned on collapsing, after all."

Tae Gun-seung's collapse had been genuine.

Given the situation, In-hyuk hadn't imagined he'd go to such lengths.

"You acted without any plan, then."

"My grip on the group is weakening by the day. It was bound to come to this eventually."

"But you could have pushed back much more than this."

In the end, Tae Gun-seung had essentially left the door open for Tae Seok-ho, as if saying, "Let's see if you can do it."

"But any resistance would have only lasted until the end. You saw what happened after I collapsed."

Meaning the share price of Taeshin Group had dropped again.

That drop ended up as yet another opportunity for Tae Seok-ho.

With everything that followed, things unfolded exactly as Tae Gun-seung had expected.

"I don't really understand."

"And yet, you're the one connecting Ju-ha to Lumen Holdings?"

"Tae Ju-ha wanted something—anything—to grab onto."

"She does care for Taeshin. Still, I didn't realize you had a connection there as well."

"It's through my contacts at AMK Partners. And I wouldn't go so far as to call it friendship, so there's no assurance of results."

Tae Gun-seung nodded slowly.

"Then, do you know what AMK Partners actually thinks?"

Like with Tae Ju-ha, he seemed curious about the direction of the shares they held.

"I only take orders from their side. I don't know what their plans for Taeshin Group are."

"Still, you must have heard something."

"Nothing at all."

"That's a shame."

"And you're worrying about that while starting all this?"

At In-hyuk's sharp criticism, Tae Gun-seung chuckled lightheartedly.

"Heheh—! Of course, it's not like I don't worry."

"Either way, news that you're awake should reach Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho soon enough. Of course, he must've expected you might wake up late and planned accordingly."

After thinking for a moment, Tae Gun-seung spoke.

"What if... I just handed management rights of the group to AMK Partners?"

At those words, In-hyuk's eyes widened.

"You mean you'd hand Taeshin Group over to a foreign company?"

This was none other than Taeshin Group, one of the largest corporations in Korea.

In-hyuk almost thought Tae Gun-seung was making a joke.

But Tae Gun-seung's expression was more serious than he'd ever seen.

"If it's just going to be ruined by owner risk, wouldn't that be better?"

"But even if the directors go along, the shareholders may put up tremendous resistance. They may as well just side with Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho instead."

"You never know. If there's a foreign company willing to take the helm, all I have to do is raise my hand and it's over."

With his holdings, including those overseas, Tae Gun-seung had about 20%.

If the rest of the shares were roughly split between Tae Seok-ho and a foreign company, the verdict would rest on the toss of his hand.

"I don't understand your intention, Chairman."

It was possible that, having poured his life into managing a Korean corporation, Tae Gun-seung would be branded a traitor at the end for handing it to foreign interests.

Surely, he was more aware than anyone.

Still, Tae Gun-seung's expression did not change.

"I'll get some more rest, and then come back to Korea when the time is right."

With a glance, Tae Gun-seung signaled Song Tae-ho, who slowly lowered the bed's backrest again.

Watching all this, In-hyuk shook his head and left the hospital room.