Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 151 ·Were You Disappointed?

Were You Disappointed?

In-hyuk, disguised as Gordon Grimes, arrived near City Hall Station at the "Azur Bay Hotel."

Afterward, together with Marc Laurent, the other mercenaries also got out of the car and entered the lobby. The noticeable presence of security drew people's attention.

Still, In-hyuk didn't pay the slightest attention and went up to the floor where the suite was located.

Marc Laurent's squad members were guarding the front of the suite as well. Because of this, they seemed to immediately radio the inside to report the situation.

Click—

Before long, the door opened and Norman McGrath poked his head out.

"You've arrived, boss!"

The atmosphere was extremely welcoming.

In-hyuk hesitated for a moment but then followed him inside along with the security guards.

"Is something good happening?"

Norman McGrath was still smiling.

"It's because things with the Taeshin Group are progressing just as you predicted, CEO."

"Is that really something to be so happy about?"

"Aren't you pleased as well? You'll be able to control Korea's leading corporation after less than a year of preparation, won't you?"

The combined market capitalization of Taeshin Group's holding company and its major affiliates exceeded 400 trillion won.

They were giddy at the thought of holding enough shares to exert influence at the shareholders' meeting for such a company.

"You know my plan, and yet you're that pleased?"

He was referring to putting Jung Min-seop forward as the next CEO.

From his perspective, he'd endured all the hardship, only to hand managerial control to someone else, so he might well be dissatisfied.

"Well, that doesn't mean the profits to be gained from Taeshin Group disappear."

"So, you're just happy because you'll make money, huh?"

"Hahaha—! Something like that. By the way, what brings you to Korea?"

Gordon Grimes's visit had not been scheduled at all on AMK Partners' side.

Norman McGrath was thus quietly puzzled by the sudden meeting.

"There's something important I need to share. But before that... could everyone else leave for a moment, except for you, branch manager, and Marc Laurent?"

Inside the suite, both Norman McGrath's subordinate staff and Sandrix's security unit were present.

With a gesture from In-hyuk, disguised as Gordon Grimes, the two men signaled the others to leave.

Before long, only the three were left in the suite's living room.

"You ran a bug sweep, right?"

"We checked thoroughly just before your visit."

"That's a relief."

Nodding, In-hyuk brought his hand up to his neck and peeled off Gordon Grimes's face.

Immediately, Norman McGrath and Marc Laurent were both shocked, furrowing their brows.

"C-CEO?"

"……?"

Soon, In-hyuk's face, hidden behind the mask, was revealed.

The two men wore expressions of utter shock.

In the meantime, In-hyuk tidied his disheveled hair with his palm and removed the voice modulator from his neck.

"Shall I introduce myself again, Branch Manager Norman McGrath?"

"H-how is this...? Are you really Division Director Kang In-hyuk of Taeshin Asset Management?"

On the other hand, Marc Laurent, not knowing who Kang In-hyuk was, was surprised for a different reason.

"That disguise technique... Could it be, is it related to Skinwalker?"

Sandrix's Marc Laurent had connections with Noah Vantrail.

At his question, In-hyuk raised a hand to halt him and first looked at Norman McGrath.

"You're right. As you said, the last time we met was at the hospital where Chairman Tae was admitted a few days ago, wasn't it?"

Norman McGrath let out a sigh and slowly opened his mouth.

"Heh... So was it Kang In-hyuk who was Gordon Grimes from the start? Or have you just been pretending to be CEO Gordon Grimes for a while?"

Given what he'd just witnessed—the disguise technique—and considering what In-hyuk had done at AMK Partners, he wondered if he might be one of his close associates.

"I am both Gordon Grimes and Kang In-hyuk. Of course, from the very beginning."

With his answer, In-hyuk sent something via his cell phone.

Shortly after, a message arrived on Norman McGrath's phone.

【Gordon: Even after this, do you still not believe me?】

It was a message window only the two of them could use to communicate.

Suddenly, something occurred to Norman McGrath.

"But, when I called the CEO at the hospital, wasn't Division Director Kang In-hyuk with Chairman Tae Gun-seung?"

While talking on the phone, he'd even glimpsed In-hyuk conversing with Tae Gun-seung through the hospital window.

Unless In-hyuk could clone himself, it was a situation that was hard to understand.

"Sometimes someone else plays the role of Gordon Grimes in my stead."

"So... from the beginning until now, was it Division Director Kang In-hyuk who designed and directed all this?"

Gordon Grimes's reputation was built on his unrivaled knack for being first to invest and perfect timing in pulling out. His foresight seemed almost prophetic, so people even thought he might be a legendary investor returning to the field.

But the man standing before them now was, until recently, the almost invisible Kang In-hyuk within Taeshin Group.

To be even more honest, they'd thought he was just a chaebol son-in-law who'd lucked into the role at AMK Partners thanks to nepotism.

"Are you perhaps disappointed because it's me?"

"N-no, that's not it...."

"Do I need to go over what we discussed near Cheonggyecheon for you to believe me?"

It was the private conversation they'd had when meeting face-to-face for the first time.

Only then did Norman McGrath's eyes begin to show an air of trust.

"You really are the CEO...."

"I suppose Marc Laurent won't be able to understand the situation yet."

Marc Laurent scratched his head as he watched from the side.

"I honestly don't quite get it."

"I have my reasons for hiding my identity. And, for the next phase of my plan, I'm revealing this only to you two right now."

Norman McGrath, still with doubts, asked,

"Then, are there others who know your real identity besides us?"

"Counting the one who helped establish AMK Partners before you, that makes four more."

"Is it your two security guards and your secretary?"

By that, he meant Hong Yu-geon, Van Hester, and Baek Si-hwan.

He recalled seeing them next to In-hyuk during Greenbyte Labs' due diligence.

"Only up to the security guards. And this fact is officially top secret, so even if we meet outside, you mustn't acknowledge me. And make absolutely sure not to mention this to any other staff."

In-hyuk's voice grew heavy.

The two men instantly understood and nodded.

At that, In-hyuk smiled again.

"Marc Laurent, as per the contract, you will be exclusively in charge of AMK Partners' top management security. There may be dangerous times ahead, so I'm relying on you. Of course, you'll be generously compensated for it."

Marc Laurent recalled his earlier question.

"I understand. But, are you really acquainted with Skinwalker?"

"She is working with me. The double I mentioned earlier is her."

"Heh...."

"So, you've worked together before?"

In-hyuk knew of the relationship between Sandrix and Noah Vantrail from his previous life.

But not wanting to give anything away, he only threw out the question.

"We've worked together on a few operations. But, CEO, just how many languages do you speak?"

Marc Laurent had watched In-hyuk speak Korean to Jung Min-seop at Myeongdong earlier. He'd also spoken French with Marc, and English with Norman McGrath.

Norman McGrath also had a question.

"Now that I think about it, you spoke Cantonese at the meeting in Hong Kong SGA, right? And Spanish with your security guard, too."

That made at least five languages.

And each one was impressively fluent, surprising them both again.

"I can use a few more as well. I learned them for business."

"Then, how do you obtain your investment information? Much of what AMK Partners has done would be difficult for even national intelligence agencies to figure out."

That was something he'd always wondered about while following Gordon Grimes's

instructions.

Now, facing the man's true identity, the questions came pouring out.

"If I told you that, I'd lose my value, wouldn't I?"

"Ah... sorry. Guess I got a little too excited."

"It's only natural to be curious. Anyway, threats related to the Taeshin Group may come up in the future. For example, just like with the Velbyte Technology incident."

On hearing that, Norman McGrath's face hardened.

Marc Laurent asked,

"If you mean Velbyte, are you referring to the terrorist incident in Arizona?"

Sandrix had been active in the Middle East and Africa, but the incident in America had been so major, they'd heard of it.

"That's right."

"I heard the bodies found in that case belonged to agents of foreign intelligence services. Are you saying they were targeting AMK Partners?"

"To be precise, back then they were targeting Chairman Tae Gun-seung."

Unaware of the root cause, Norman McGrath was again astonished.

"Then, do you also know who took care of those guys?"

After a brief hesitation, In-hyuk replied,

"I do."

"Who? Don't tell me you have a separate force under your command?"

Marc Laurent also looked on with awe.

It was a case where a team of 12 armed agents, some belonging to foreign intelligence services, had been wiped out. Circumstantially, they had all been on the same side.

That would mean the opposing force was either of similar size, or an elite squad with higher skills.

However, the investigation didn't find any trace that might identify the culprits.

"Something like that. But I can't reveal who, so please leave it at that."

Marc Laurent's eyes sparkled even brighter.

Seeing that, In-hyuk started to feel slightly uneasy.

'Is his curiosity sparked again?'

Sandrix's Marc Laurent was the sort of man who had to test someone's skills himself if he became interested in their strength.

"Anyway, what I just said is also confidential. Executive Director Jung Min-seop will give his answer before the end of this extraordinary shareholders' meeting."

As they got to the real topic, Norman McGrath's expression also turned serious.

"If he doesn't accept, do we proceed as planned?"

He meant the plan for AMK Partners to acquire Taeshin Group.

Of course, they'd also considered ways for AMK Partners to run Taeshin Group on their own afterwards.

But the public image of Taeshin Group, having become foreign-owned in all respects, would not easily recover in Korea's eyes.

That was why they'd even contemplated splitting the group, as they had explained to Jung Min-seop.

"We'll reconsider once the results are in."

In the first place, In-hyuk hadn't anticipated things would go this far. He'd planned to leave Chairman Tae Gun-seung untouched and neatly take down Tae Seok-ho.

But Tae Gun-seung's health declined faster than expected, and Tae Seok-ho seized the opportunity.

With the situation now in full swing, In-hyuk could only proceed with his own methods.

"Then, as you said, we'll carry on as planned."

"Then I'd better disappear before those guys catch me again."

In-hyuk entered the bathroom and donned the mask he'd just taken off. He concealed the seams with some chemicals he'd brought, then returned to the living room.

The people in the living room looked at the once-more Gordon Grimes with fascination.

"I'm counting on you. Oh, and tell Noah I'll be in touch."

The last remark was directed at Marc Laurent.

Chapter 152 ·Who Doesn't Know That?

Who Doesn't Know That?

The National Intelligence Service's third deputy director, Im Deok-chang, sat with an anxious expression.

Before long, Choi Dong-hoon knocked and entered. The atmosphere was grim.

"We've confirmed he left the hotel, but after that, he disappeared in a CCTV blind spot."

Just as he had feared.

Im Deok-chang almost slammed his fist down on his desk, but quickly calmed himself.

"Of all places, how could we lose him in Seoul, with CCTV and black boxes everywhere?"

What they were looking for was Gordon Grimes, who had appeared in Myeong-dong about two hours prior. They had learned of his presence almost by accident.

While monitoring Chairman Tae Gun-seung's movements for the upcoming temporary shareholders' meeting, they detected director Jung Min-seop's visit, followed him, and noticed suspicious behavior.

Afterward, they hurriedly deployed available WID agents, but the agents were overpowered by suddenly-appearing guys, and their pursuit was delayed.

Of course, they managed to chase him using Seoul's extensive CCTV network up to the hotel, but, as had just been reported, lost him again.

"..... I'm sorry."

"It wasn't a deepfake again, like last time, was it?"

He was referring to what happened at the Russian airport.

They had only realized later that the footage had been a deepfake, created with advanced technology.

"There were eyewitnesses, so that's not the case this time."

"Who were the guys who overpowered our agents?"

"It was a mercenary group named Sandrix. Considering they've recently acquired the security company BlueForce, it seems they've reinforced their security system due to the Bellbyte Technology incident."

Given the situation was almost akin to terrorism, it was understandable.

Still, the fact that the WID agents had been subdued so easily left a bitter taste.

"Are they famous guys?"

"They're composed of former special forces from Europe and Asia. Their main operations have been in the Middle East and Africa."

"And?"

"As for their abilities, they're top-tier. However, their ideology doesn't match with ours."

"What do you mean it doesn't match?"

"They prioritize their own beliefs over their missions. So instead of being deployed to warzones, they're mainly known for operations based on VIP protection and rescue."

It was a very detailed report.

Im Deok-chang looked at Choi Dong-hoon with a suspicious expression.

"Have you encountered them personally?"

"I came across them at Bokoro in Chad during my practical training as a camp detachment."

"Did you clash with them?"

"We had no choice, as we were conducting sweep training targeting nearby villages."

'Sweep' in a warzone means to wipe out the enemy.

But what Choi Dong-hoon meant was that, for training purposes, all innocent civilians in the village had been swept away.

"The result?"

"Of the 11 participants in the training, only three, including myself—the instructor—survived."

"Was there any damage on the Sandrix side?"

"..... As far as I know, none."

Listening to the questions and explanations, something dawned on Im Deok-chang.

"I vaguely remember that. Wasn't it the biggest loss ever suffered at the camp? So why did Hannya just let Sandrix be?"

The camp could have been compromised because of the trainees.

"At that time, Hannya was in charge over at UID."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Of course, later there was a discussion about dealing with Sandrix, but at the time, they were guarding a group of UN officials engaged in UNICEF activities in Sudan. It seems Hannya hesitated, fearing exposure of the organization."

Im Deok-chang was lost in thought for a moment.

"For AMK Partners to hire such guys as security guards... there must be something up. But there's no way to know right away..."

The fact that they had lost Gordon Grimes in the end was the cause.

In addition, their agents at the scene had been overpowered by those guys. That suggested their movements had been exposed ever since they began tailing Jung Min-seop.

And on top of that, BlueForce—once one of the top three security companies in America—had also been acquired by AMK Partners. The intent to get serious was clear.

"What should we do about division director Jung Min-seop from Taeshin Trading?"

That was the second biggest issue.

Since he had met with Gordon Grimes, it was necessary to find out what had been discussed.

"If we contact him, it might give those guys an excuse."

This time, things might not end with just being overpowered.

"Could it be... have they realized someone is behind Tae Seok-ho, and now they're using Jung Min-seop as bait?"

The core of the Taeshin Group's temporary shareholders' meeting was a battle over shares.

AMK Partners might have planned to use Jung Min-seop as a card to pressure Tae Seok-ho.

"If it really is a trap, shouldn't we avoid contacting him?"

Already, WID agents nearly got exposed while tailing Jung Min-seop. If Sandrix hadn't let it go so easily, it could have been dangerous.

That made Im Deok-chang all the more cautious.

"For now, let's just monitor Jung Min-seop. Check his communication logs in real time."

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, the phone vibrated in Choi Dong-hoon's pocket.

"Excuse me for a moment."

When Im Deok-chang gestured for him to go ahead, Choi Dong-hoon turned away to take the call.

After listening briefly, he put it on mute and spoke.

"Deputy Director, there seems to be a problem with the aftermath of the Hwain Techon case."

"What? What kind of problem?"

"Looks like the guys transferring the funds overseas pulled something in the process."

"I thought there was no missing money?"

About 1.7 trillion won in slush fund had been siphoned from Hwain Techon.

When moving such an amount, it had to be handled thoroughly.

Choi Dong-hoon answered carefully.

"Seems they've skimmed off a portion for themselves and then filled the gap. But, in the process, it looks like they've left a ledger behind."

"A ledger? Surely, it doesn't include records of the fund's origin?"

"Because the funds were initially dispersed, the guys left quite detailed records to keep track of it themselves."

On hearing that, Im Deok-chang's face darkened.

"Why are all your answers so vague? You didn't secure the ledger?"

"Apparently, someone beat us to it. The guys in charge of transport thought they might get caught, so they hid even deeper, and we only found out just now."

Im Deok-chang's face twisted in response.

"Do you call that an explanation—! So do we know who took the ledger... Could it have been the person who tipped off director Jin Jong-man?"

"Judging by the circumstances, that's the most likely case."

Unless you were an insider, it was impossible to know about the connection between Notex and Hwain Techon.

But now, National Intelligence Service Director Jin Jong-man had started to uncover the shell companies between the two firms. Soon, he was getting ahold of domestic information, posing a threat.

Only one place came to mind.

"This must be Skull's doing again."

The only force hindering the ambitions of the Hongu Society.

But their identity still hadn't been uncovered.

"But how did the information get through?"

Neither Jin Jong-man's movements nor his communication logs showed anything suspicious. Of course, they had thoroughly investigated Choo Jae-min, Shin Jin-hong, and everyone close to him, but the same result.

The questions only piled up, deepening the mystery.

Choi Dong-hoon cautiously offered his opinion.

"If that ledger falls into the Director's hands... it's over, isn't it?"

"Who doesn't know that?"

"I think it would be best to deal with the Director before it's too late."

Since there was still no sign of movement, it didn't seem like the ledger had reached Jin Jong-man yet.

If so, like Choi Dong-hoon suggested, it might be best to nip the problem in the bud.

"I can't act unilaterally, so let's discuss it and decide. In the meantime, keep a close eye on Director Jin's movements."

"I'll report as soon as there's a problem."

Choi Dong-hoon withdrew.

Left alone, Im Deok-chang pulled out a hidden cellphone from his drawer.

* * *

A week passed in a flash.

The second floor auditorium of Taeshin Trading was bustling again for another temporary shareholders' meeting.

AMK Partners, Orbis Investment, and Lumen Holdings, who held shares, were present like last time.

Standing quietly amidst the scene, Taeshin Trading's executive director Jung Min-seop was deep in thought.

'What was Gordon Grimes thinking when he said that to me?'

It was because of the proposal he received from him the previous weekend.

【We're thinking of filling it again with someone from inside Taeshin Group with no complications.】

Gordon Grimes's words kept echoing in his head. He also wondered if it was a lie.

'Even if it was a lie... there was no need for him to say that to me.'

Jung Min-seop had worked at Taeshin Trading for more than thirty years after joining in his late twenties. He had worked as hard as anyone, pouring his soul into making Taeshin Group what it was today.

Now, Taeshin was his pride and dignity.

He also wanted Chairman Tae Gun-seung's beliefs and principles to continue more than anyone.

But Tae Gun-seung's sons, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, didn't satisfy those wishes. They cared only for their own gains instead of the advancement of the company.

That was why Jung Min-seop wanted a professional manager to lead the company, instead of having Chairman Tae Gun-seung hand it over to his bloodline.

At that moment, someone approached him.

"It's been a while, executive director."

It was none other than Kang In-hyuk, son-in-law to the Taeshin family and division director of Taeshin Asset Management.

"Ah, division director Kang, what brings you here...."

"I hold a small portion of shares in Taeshin Trading too. Not enough to influence the shareholders' meeting, though."

"I see."

Jung Min-seop answered vaguely and looked around the auditorium.

But In-hyuk initiated another conversation.

"Are you troubled by something?"

"Pardon?"

"Your face looks serious. And you can speak comfortably with me."

Jung Min-seop realized he'd let his worries show too much, and coughed awkwardly.

"Ahem—! If you say so."

"What do you think will happen at this shareholders' meeting? I heard that with the chairman's shares entering as company-held shares, executive vice president Tae Seok-ho now has the advantage."

Saying this, In-hyuk glanced over to where AMK Partners were gathered in one corner of the hall.

He made eye contact with Norman McGrath, whose true identity was now known to him, and with Marc Laurent, who was in charge of security.

They looked rather satisfied.

'Are they enjoying a game where everything's been decided in advance?'

Meanwhile, after some thought, Jung Min-seop answered.

"I've heard you're fairly close to AMK. Haven't you heard anything from them?"

"It's strictly business. We're not personally close, so it's hard to ask about the shareholders' meeting."

"... I see?"

Silence fell again.

In-hyuk watched him from the side.

'I guess he still can't help but worry.'

In-hyuk had approached him to gauge the mood. As expected, the mood was one of deep worry, apparent on his face.

The time for the temporary shareholders' meeting drew near.

Like last time, department manager Lee Yoon-seok from the General Affairs Office took the podium.

"Aren't you going up, division director?"

Jung Min-seop pointed at the podium and asked.

All members of the Taeshin Group family except former chairman Tae Gun-seung and In-hyuk were seated up there with the board.

"Am I really qualified to go up there?"

"Still, you've done much for the Group. Taeshin Asset Management has grown greatly thanks to your efforts."

"Even so, I can't enter that fence."

He had never intended to either. He was only staying in Taeshin Group for his own objectives.

While the conversation continued, department manager Lee Yoon-seok presented the voting items. Then, as at the previous meeting, the shareholders began walking to the voting booths one by one.

Chapter 153 ·I Didn't Think It All Through

I Didn't Think It All Through

The auditorium where the temporary shareholders' meeting was being held was in turmoil.

It was because more people were skeptical about the rumor that the proposed appointment of the new CEO had been voted down last time.

Tae Seok-ho, who was sitting on the stage watching the scene, grew slightly anxious.

"There won't be a problem this time, right?"

It was a question thrown at Reina Blackwood, who was standing next to him.

"You know the odds for AMK went down after former chairman Tae Gun-seung gave up his shares. In this situation, there's no way things could turn against us."

Tae Seok-ho knew that very well. That was why he'd persuaded the board to agree to purchase Tae Gun-seung's shares.

Of course, it was a stretch for the group, but it was an unavoidable measure to secure the CEO position.

"I hope it's fine..."

While he murmured to himself, Reina turned her gaze to the AMK Partners faction and then to Jung Min-seop, who was standing at the back of the auditorium.

She had heard through Im Deok-chang that Gordon Grimes had met him in Myeong-dong. However, she didn't inform Tae Seok-ho of this—

partly because, even if he knew, there was nothing he could do.

There had even been suggestions from inside to abduct Jung Min-seop.

But he was guarded by a mercenary unit called Sandrix. It was also known that AMK Partners had hired them, so moving rashly wasn't an option.

Meanwhile, voting ended and the counting began.

Sarak— sarak—

Only the sound of papers being unfolded and checked echoed in the auditorium.

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In-hyuk completed his vote as a shareholder with Jung Min-seop and returned to observe the results.

He could hear shareholders whispering around them.

"It won't get voted down again, will it?"

"Come on... No way that'll happen again."

"Is it so bad for AMK Partners to take over?"

"But what if Taeshin Group gets split up and sold? Who's going to take responsibility for our country's economy then?"

"Direct management would be better than having the founding family run it, right? AMK Partners turned around quite a number of companies."

"But in the end, it'll just become a foreign corporation, so what's good about that? The first thing they do will be to cut people, starting with cleaning up the finances, right? Plus, what about the technologies owned by Taeshin Group?"

These echoed most of the concerns circulating among the public.

Then, the counting finished, and the tallied result sheets were delivered to department manager Lee Yoon-seok.

Even then, Jung Min-seop's expression was extremely grave. At the same time, Gordon Grimes' words kept echoing in his mind:

【We don't do business without conviction.】

Jung Min-seop's gaze turned toward the people from AMK Partners. There wasn't even a hint of anxiety in their demeanor.

If anything, they seemed to already know the outcome of the meeting.

Eventually, on the stage, Lee Yoon-seok began to speak.

"I'll now announce the results of the vote on the new CEO appointment."

In that instant, every shareholder's attention was focused on him.

Lee Yoon-seok, looking even more nervous than before, read out the results.

"In favor, 66,434,640 shares. Opposed, sixty..."

Swallowing and nervous murmurs could be heard between his words.

"67,381,296 shares. Abstained 1,315,952 shares. As the majority has voted against, the appointment of Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho as CEO has been rejected."

The shareholding ratio was 43.7070% in favor, 44.3298% opposed. In terms of shares, that was a difference of about 9.5 million shares, or only a 0.0062% gap.

Tae Seok-ho's fist on the armrest shook violently as he sat on stage.

In the end, his appointment as CEO had been voted down at the second temporary shareholders' meeting as well.

In-hyuk, seeing that things had gone according to plan, turned his gaze to Jung Min-seop, whose eyes were wide in shock.

"Rejected again? How could..."

He thought that having Tae Gun-seung's shares converted to company-held shares had settled everything.

But now it was clear even that, too, had played into AMK Partners' hands.

In-hyuk glanced at the stage and clearly saw Tae Seok-ho's chillingly hardened expression.

In that situation, In-hyuk said to Jung Min-seop in a calm tone.

"Looks like AMK Partners really took full control this time."

"Y-yes, it seems so."

"Then now, all that's left is for you to decide, executive director."

"That's... what? Director Kang! Don't tell me, you..."

But In-hyuk didn't bother to answer and walked out of the auditorium.

Jung Min-seop, staring at his retreating back, was flabbergasted. Earlier he'd claimed he knew nothing, but the words just spoken said otherwise.

This wasn't simply a matter of following AMK Partners' requests.

"Phew..."

Unable to just stand by after seeing the outcome, Jung Min-seop immediately sent a message on his phone.

It didn't take long to receive a reply from a restricted number.

Bzzz— bzzz—

【I look forward to working with you.】

Upon reading the content, Jung Min-seop swallowed and glanced up at Tae Seok-ho on the stage.

Meanwhile, up on the stage, Tae Seok-ho abruptly stood up to leave.

At that moment, Yoo Chi-beom, the legal team leader of Taeshin Trading, approached hastily.

"Executive Vice President. The court has received a new request to hold another temporary shareholders' meeting."

"A shareholders' meeting?"

A document was handed to Tae Seok-ho.

Upon looking it over, he could immediately see who the request had come from.

"So that's what they were aiming for?"

This time, the shareholder requesting the meeting was AMK Partners. Even more, the proposed agenda made Tae Seok-ho's brow furrow even more.

【1. Replacement of management and the board of directors of Taeshin Trading】

【2. Appointment of CEO】

What was more shocking was the name suggested for the CEO.

"... Jung Min-seop?"

As he muttered in disbelief, his head snapped around.

He couldn't help but meet Jung Min-seop's gaze.

"Was this the plan all along?"

Next to him, Reina Blackwood was also confirming the details.

At the same time, she could guess what kind of conversation Jung Min-seop and Gordon Grimes had exchanged.

"Let's not do this here. Let's go upstairs."

"Did you people know about this in advance?"

"This was beyond our expectations."

Tae Seok-ho, still standing on stage, almost yelled out.

But with the shareholders and board members still present, he had no choice but to hold back his agitation.

"Let's talk upstairs."

Barely managing to restrain his anger, Tae Seok-ho headed to his office with Reina.

"Now, talk. Did you people know about this in advance?"

The moment the office door closed, he threw his question.

Reina answered with a shallow sigh.

"As I told you before, how could we have known they'd put forward executive director Jung Min-seop as CEO?"

"So how did the shareholder meeting end up voting the proposal down? Even after buying up my father's shares as company shares, how could that not be enough?!"

There'd been uproar over fears that Taeshin Group would be swallowed by a foreign corporation.

Even most shareholders in the auditorium seemed to prefer Tae Seok-ho as CEO.

There was every reason to believe it was a sure thing this time.

But the proposal was narrowly rejected by just 0.0062%.

"The shares we couldn't account for must have ended up with AMK Partners."

"Do you think I'm asking you because I don't know that?!"

Even a court request had arrived for the next temporary shareholders' meeting. From the start, if they'd gone through the company, the board wouldn't have passed it—a move clearly anticipated.

With this, there was no way for Taeshin Trading to avoid the meeting.

Moreover, with the rejection of the latest item, it had now been confirmed that the majority of shares were in AMK Partners' hands.

That meant, under the current circumstances, stopping management replacement or Jung Min-seop's appointment as CEO was impossible.

"We have two weeks until the next temporary shareholders' meeting. We need to find another way before then."

"What other way? Are you thinking about dealing with Jung Min-seop? Even if you did, once the management and board are replaced, it's all over anyway!"

He had concluded that Jung Min-seop was merely a puppet put forward by AMK Partners.

And such a puppet, if not Jung Min-seop, could be anyone.

"Exactly. I didn't think this all through. Looks like it's time to end this too."

"... What? Keuk!"

Before he realized it, Reina had stepped right up to Tae Seok-ho and grabbed him by the throat.

Despite her slender arms and fingers, the strength choked off Tae Seok-ho's breath.

"W-What are you—!"

"It was us who let you keep your life anyway. So killing you is our right as well."

Then Reina pulled something out from her collar and shoved it into his mouth, making him swallow it.

When she let go, Tae Seok-ho collapsed to the floor, sinking to his knees.

"Keup! Kuk! Kuk!"

With a dreadful feeling, Tae Seok-ho tried to cough it out, but it was too late—he had already swallowed it.

Reina crouched before him with an enigmatic smile.

"What you just swallowed was a cyanide capsule. Usually, it takes about 10 minutes for the gelatin coating to dissolve, but this one was specially made—so maybe a minute at most."

"W-Why are you... doing this to me..."

"Do you really not know? As you said, you've become useless to us, so I have to clear out the useless things first."

Reina smiled refreshingly down at him.

"Keuup—!"

Within moments, Tae Seok-ho's vision blurred and it became impossible to breathe.

Clutching his chest, he shuddered and then froze, his breath stopping.

Reina, who had calmly watched the scene, pressed her fingers to his wrist to confirm his pulse.

Afterwards, the security guards outside entered the office, carrying something to the desk.

It was a handwritten will in Tae Seok-ho's script, and a plastic bottle containing cyanide capsules.

"All done. You can go downstairs now," said one security guard, reporting.

With a sigh full of regret, Reina asked, "Nothing left behind, right?"

"We disposed of all the data, and handled anything else that could become evidence."

"And the Wiper?"

This was a kind of malware designed to delete all data.

"We set it so that, when accessed on the server under Tae Seok-ho's ID, it will activate at a designated time."

"Well then, I'll be going. Clean up thoroughly."

"Don't worry."

The security guards were WID agents. They planned to stay and testify that Tae Seok-ho had committed suicide before withdrawing discreetly.

Reina, now looking a little bitter, left the executive's office and got into the elevator. Before long, she arrived in the underground parking lot where her car was waiting.

But both fire shutters blocking the exits were down.

"Looks like I fell into a trap."

Reina tried to get back on the elevator, but the 'Maintenance' sign was already displayed.

She called the staff who were supposed to be waiting in the car, but no one picked up. It appeared they had also been dealt with by someone.

Clack—

Fortunately, the emergency stairwell was open.

But she could not relax.

"Someone's probably waiting upstairs..."

After a brief thought, Reina called the agents who were supposed to have stayed above.

[Yes. USGAI.]

"Things don't look good. All of you, get out of there right now."

[Without even finishing the final cleanup?]

If the security guards vanished now, it would be difficult to convincingly present Tae Seok-ho's death as a suicide.

"Personnel come first. The basement exits are sealed, so take the east stairs and meet on the first floor."

There was no other way now.

After ending the call, Reina started up the stairs.

A moment later, the sound of sirens rang out from above.

Chapter 154 ·How Dare You Come Here!

How Dare You Come Here!

In-hyuk was sitting and drinking coffee at the lobby cafe on the first floor of Taeshin Trading.

Today, having left Baek Si-hwan at the office, he was freely moving around.

On his phone screen, there was an image of Reina Blackwood entering the emergency stairs from the underground parking lot.

However, since there were no CCTV cameras in the emergency stairwell, it was difficult to check the situation.

Meanwhile, through the earphones plugged into his ears, he heard Mi-ah's voice.

[The Wiper program has been installed on the Taeshin Trading server. What should I do about this?]

Previously, starting with Taeshin Asset Management, the entire group's computer network had its security system upgraded. Of course, at the center of that operation was Mi-ah, who had been hired at the time.

"What about the IP address?"

[It was installed using Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho's account. The IP is also from the office. It's set up to execute in 30 minutes.]

Whatever happened, the situation was set up so Tae Seok-ho would take the blame for everything.

Just then, the owners of the siren sound that had been audible for a while arrived at the front of the Taeshin Trading building and entered.

It was an ambulance.

"We're here because we heard there's an emergency patient due to poisoning."

The Taeshin Security staff at the entrance looked puzzled as if they had no idea.

The paramedic continued,

"We heard that EVP Tae Seok-ho is the patient. Do you know anything about this?"

"P-please wait a moment."

The staff, startled, approached the reception desk and called the executive vice president's office.

However, only the ringing tone continued for a long time, and no one answered.

Feeling the urgency, one staff member took the paramedic and headed to the elevator.

Shareholders and staff who were leaving the auditorium also witnessed this scene. At the same time, the murmuring grew louder.

Watching this unfold from the cafe, In-hyuk spoke to Mi-ah, who was waiting for an answer.

"Reactivate the elevator, and just delete the timer setting for the Wiper program installed on the server."

[Leave the program?]

"We need to leave traces. Anyway, with the current security system, some traces will remain regardless. Except for things you handle."

Currently, the Taeshin Group's computer network was built on the TCL Code, perfected with TN SOFT and Mi-ah's technology.

Because of that, some traces would inevitably remain, so Reina Blackwood had tried to use the Wiper program to delete them.

Of course, Mi-ah, who held the master key to the TCL Code, was an exception.

[I erased only the timer. So what about the rest?]

"I'll tell you when the time comes. Oh, and I'll stop by the workshop this evening."

Mi-ah spoke up in surprise.

[This evening?! That's no good!]

"Why?"

[We agreed to have a farewell party and dinner after work.]

"Didn't you take a day off today?"

Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to talk like this during work hours.

[Of course I'm on leave. After work, I'm meeting my team at a beef restaurant near Jonggak Station.]

"Oh... you're really working hard on socializing."

[Do you think it's easy for experienced hires to get along with others, not being from the regular recruitment intake? I have to do all sorts of things to make it work!]

"Y-yeah..."

As In-hyuk murmured quietly, he changed the CCTV screen on his phone to the door leading to the emergency stairs at the east back entrance of the building.

Not long after, the door opened, and Reina Blackwood and her security guards came out, looking nervous as they scanned their surroundings.

Meanwhile, the Taeshin Trading lobby's security staff started moving urgently.

The news of Tae Seok-ho's death had been communicated through the paramedic.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha's name appeared at the top of In-hyuk's phone screen, and a call came in.

"Save all the CCTV footage of any important scenes separately."

[Ok—! I'll be hard to reach after 6 p.m!]

"Oh, and..."

After issuing the rest of his instructions, In-hyuk confirmed the call was disconnected and then connected the call with Tae Ju-ha.

"Yes, I've answered."

[Where are you right now?]

Her voice was very urgent.

"I'm at the 1st-floor lobby cafe. Is something wrong?"

[I think something has happened to my uncle!]

"Excuse me? Come to think of it, I saw an ambulance and people heading upstairs earlier."

Even the people who had just left the auditorium seemed to have heard the news, and their voices grew louder.

[Really?]

"I'll check the situation and get back to you."

After the call, In-hyuk sent a message to Norman McGrath and took the elevator up.

【Gordon : Tae Seok-ho deceased. Stand by in accommodations. Next temporary shareholders' meeting will proceed as scheduled.】

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At the same time

Tae Seok-hyun, who had stayed in the auditorium after the shareholders' meeting, hurried up to the executive office floor upon hearing the sudden news.

Security staff were standing guard around Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho's office.

After passing them and entering, he saw a heavy atmosphere—and Tae Seok-ho's figure collapsed beneath the paramedic's feet.

"... What in the world happened?"

The paramedic was checking Tae Seok-ho's condition.

Meanwhile, among the security staff, the person in charge came over and explained the situation from the lobby up to now.

"When the ambulance arrived upstairs, he was already deceased. We have called the police as per protocol, and more details will be known after the investigation proceeds."

Upon hearing this, a chill formed on Tae Seok-hyun's face.

"Is...is Seok-ho really dead?"

"I'm sorry, but you can't stay here."

The security chief signaled to the guards who had been standing nearby.

Understanding the gesture, they carefully led the dazed Tae Seok-hyun away.

In-hyuk also arrived at the executive office floor. In front of the elevator stood Tae Ju-ha.

She was looking at Tae Seok-hyun, who was being led out without even being able to enter inside.

"Are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh, you're here."

"The situation looks serious."

"....."

Tae Ju-ha couldn't respond.

And In-hyuk maintained a calm expression.

Soon, the police arrived, set up a police line, and inside, the detectives in charge and the forensics team busied themselves with serious discussions.

After some time, Tae Seok-ho's body was carried out in a body bag.

'Did he not expect that joining hands with those guys would end like this?'

That was In-hyuk's first impression as he watched.

In the previous life, Tae Seok-ho had killed himself for real after losing Taeshin Group, which had come under In-hyuk's control through Bluewall.

In the past, it was by his own hand, and now in this lifetime, by the hand of Reina Blackwood, to whom he had entrusted the future... That was why Tae Seok-ho's fate felt all the more pathetic.

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【△△ Group executive, board appointment rejected at temporary shareholders' meeting, then takes extreme action!】

【Executive A of T Group ends life by own hand amid management dispute and despair at defeat to foreign capital...】

【Fierce takeover attempt by foreign private equity firm A, tragic end for T company executive!】

【Executive A of T company found dead in company office in Seoul, "suspected suicide". T company announces the funeral will be a small family gathering...】

【Foreign firm A private equity fund pressuring domestic T Group for acquisition? Corresponding tragic consequence for the company executive!】

【T Group's computer network temporary shutdown on △△ date and time! Company claims it was for network inspection...】

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The news of Tae Seok-ho's death, the second son of former Chairman Tae Gun-seung of the Taeshin Group and a candidate for next management leader, once again stirred up public opinion.

Moreover, the negativity spread toward AMK Partners, who had been in a management dispute with Tae Seok-ho.

While those reports were coming out, In-hyuk rode in a car driven by Baek Si-hwan to a funeral hall on the outskirts of Seoul.

The entrance was crowded with reporters who seemed to have been waiting there for some time. This was the funeral of Taeshin Trading's Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho.

However, due to the presence of Taeshin Security staff, the reporters could not enter.

"If you don't have any business inside, you can go in first."

"... Thank you. I'll come again on the day of the burial."

When In-hyuk got out, Baek Si-hwan drove away again.

Watching the car fade into the distance, In-hyuk let out a sigh through his nose and loosened his tie slightly. As he was about to head inside, a call came in via Ghost Link.

It was Norman McGrath.

[Is this a good time to talk?]

To his question, In-hyuk confirmed there was nothing suspicious nearby.

"Go ahead."

Now that they knew each other's identities, there was no need to disguise their voices.

[You must be having a hard time with this sudden situation.]

"Isn't AMK Partners struggling more than I am?"

Public opinion was holding AMK Partners responsible for Tae Seok-ho's suicide. Because of this, reporters were crowded even at the hotel lodging used by Norman McGrath and staff.

[It's not as expected, but nothing ever goes perfectly clean. By the way, there's something I wanted to ask, but couldn't bring up last time.]

"What is it about?"

[It's about Orbis Investment and Lumen Holdings. They seem to be remaining and supporting us at the temporary shareholders' meeting... Did you do something, CEO?]

Both companies were global private equity funds and fierce rivals of AMK Partners.

There had been several clashes in the course of investment projects until recently, so seeing their actions without any special coordination was indeed strange.

"I had some connections, so I did some business."

[Surely, do those people also know your identity, CEO?]

"No, they don't. Only the people I mentioned last time and branch manager and Marc Laurent know. So please be careful when communicating."

The reason he revealed his identity to those two last time was because the focus of Kooou would inevitably intensify after the resolution of the Taeshin Group's management dispute.

If In-hyuk couldn't reveal the existence of Gordon Grimes during that process, there could be cases where contact was an issue, so as Kang In-hyuk, he also prepared ways to contact them.

[I conduct bug sweep detection every time before we talk, so there's no need to worry about that. Then, see you at the next temporary shareholders' meeting.]

The call ended just like that.

In-hyuk put his phone in his pocket and entered the funeral hall annex.

Since it was to be held quietly as a family gathering, they were using the entire building. There were no mourners, so the atmosphere was calm except for the sound of Choi Tae-eun, Tae Seok-ho's wife, crying.

"You're here?"

Tae Ju-ha, who was at the funeral, spotted In-hyuk and approached him.

"I was finishing up some work, so I'm a little late. Are all the others inside?"

"That's right, but... Just a moment."

Tae Ju-ha led In-hyuk into a side room of the funeral hall and spoke.

"Isn't this incident really strange? As soon as it happened, uncle's secretary and security team all disappeared."

Their sudden disappearance seemed strange to anyone.

But even though the police and prosecutor's office handled the matter, there were no other statements.

Moreover, those around them also seemed to just watch in silence, finding it difficult to speak up due to the atmosphere.

Of course, In-hyuk knew the reason.

'The guys still have people in the police and prosecutors, so they must have blocked it.'

But it was hard to explain this to Tae Ju-ha.

"They'll conduct a proper investigation if something comes up."

"Shouldn't we pressure the police more?"

"At the moment, there's no evidence. Unfortunately, the server went down at that very time, so it's also difficult to track where those people went."

Because the security system was paralyzed, no footage was left.

Tae Ju-ha wore an exasperated expression.

"Really, what is happening..."

"For now, let's not talk here—let's go in."

In-hyuk entered Tae Seok-ho's funeral room together with her. Then, from her place as chief mourner, Choi Tae-eun, who had been weeping, shouted,

"How dare you come here?!"

Chapter 155 ·Rational Thinking (思考)

Rational Thinking (思考)

Choi Tae-eun's scream, which sounded almost like a desperate cry, was directed at In-hyuk, who was standing beside Tae Ju-ha.

She immediately strode up to In-hyuk and even slapped his cheek.

Slaaap—

"It's because of you that he ended up like this! If you hadn't brought those guys in, this wouldn't have happened!"

She blamed him for being the cause of the close connection between the Taeshin Group and AMK Partners.

In-hyuk stood silently without a word. But Tae Ju-ha did not remain still.

"Auntie!"

"Who's your auntie?! If your father's family hadn't brought you in! If they hadn't been so worried about losing their place at the table that they married you off to that man! My husband wouldn't have ended up like this!"

As soon as Choi Tae-eun found out Tae Seok-ho had died during the temporary shareholders' meeting, she fainted. When she came to, she was immediately interrogated by the police, and the initial conclusion had been that it was suicide.

Now, blaming In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha, she poured out all her resentment, believing them to be the cause.

"That's enough!"

At that moment, Tae Gun-seung, who had been sitting on a nearby sofa, burst out in a loud voice.

Immediately, silence spread through the funeral room.

Letting out a long sigh through his nose, Tae Gun-seung looked at the photo of Tae Seok-ho set up at the front of the room.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, Song Tae-ho, Tae Gun-seung's secretary, felt his phone vibrate and stepped outside. He returned not long after, looking extremely serious.

"Chairman. It seems there has been a problem in Vice President Tae Seok-ho's case."

With those words, Song Tae-ho handed over the phone he was holding.

The screen was filled with just-published articles.

【T Group Executive A, Evidence Points to Murder, Not Suicide! Video of Suspects Fleeing Secure...】

【T Group's Second Son A, Once Thought to Have Committed Suicide, Murder Video Reported. Main Offender Is Secretary B, Accomplices Are Security Guards...】

【Anonymous Tip Overturns the Case! Truth of T Group Executive A's Case Confirmed by Anonymous Tip from Press Illegally Filming Site!】

...

There were videos included with the news.

The footage looked to have been shot from a building across from Taeshin Trading. It captured through the window what had happened in Tae Seok-ho's office that day.

Tae Seok-ho, while being strangled by Reina Blackwood, his secretary, had been forced to swallow something and then collapsed.

Afterward, she left the room, and though the security guards lingered, they all exited shortly after.

Upon seeing this, a deep crease formed between Tae Gun-seung's brow.

"So this was all the work of that secretary woman?"

"At least, from the video it seems so."

Tae Gun-seung also found it odd. His secretary and security guards suddenly changed, and then vanished with the news of death.

He had checked with the prosecution and police multiple times through Song Tae-ho, but only received the answer that the investigation was ongoing.

"Set up a meeting with the Prosecutor General as soon as possible. Of course, check what the prosecution will say about this incident before then!"

"I'll inform them right away."

Meanwhile, the others present were checking the same articles Tae Gun-seung had seen.

They were all shocked by the video evidence showing Tae Seok-ho's death was a murder, not a suicide.

Tae Gun-seung shifted his gaze to In-hyuk, who was standing with Tae Ju-ha, as he remained calm, unlike the rest of the family.

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A few hours later.

Police and the National Forensic Service arrived and reclaimed Tae Seok-ho's remains for re-examination.

It was a different team from before. Since there was evidence that prosecution and police tried to cover up the incident, they were replaced immediately.

Naturally, the funeral could not continue.

The Taeshin family members watched this quietly from the funeral room, and Tae Gun-seung muttered softly.

"To think his life ended by the hands of someone he brought in himself... In the end, it is Seok-ho's karma."

With the situation as it was, Tae Seok-ho had no one to blame but himself, unless he had been murdered.

However, Choi Tae-eun's anger toward In-hyuk had not subsided. She believed AMK Partners had been involved in Tae Seok-ho's decision, regardless of how things had unfolded.

Tae Gun-seung also sensed this and let out another sigh.

"Everyone, don't cause a fuss until the funeral resumes. Especially the second family, stop any wild thoughts."

"Isn't that too much?"

Choi Tae-eun answered back.

Tae Gun-seung stared at her with a hard expression.

"What do you mean?"

"I know my husband did wrong to you, Father! But that's not a sin worthy of death! Shouldn't you at least consider what drove him to it?!"

She was referring to stripping Tae Gun-seung of his CEO position during the temporary shareholders' meeting.

"Do you think I'm acting this way because of that?"

"Isn't it?"

"If I still cared about that position, I wouldn't have given up my shares!"

"You shouldn't have just stood by—you should've helped him! We're not strangers, are we? He's still your son! Isn't it the least you could have done for your own son?"

Now she began blaming Tae Gun-seung as well.

At that point, Tae Seok-hyun, who had stayed silent all along, stepped forward.

"As his older brother, I'm also saddened that Seok-ho ended up like this. But how is that Father's fault? In the end, wasn't it Seok-ho's own greed that led to this?"

"Greed?! So are you saying you ended up the way you did because you didn't have greed, Hyung?"

"What did you say?"

"Sister-in-law! You shouldn't talk that way!"

Now, even Lee Sun-hye, who had been standing quietly by Tae Seok-hyun's side, stepped in.

Their quarrel quickly escalated into an argument among the three, making the funeral room even more chaotic.

Tae Gun-seung pressed his temple as if a headache was coming on.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk walked over to Tae Gun-seung.

"I don't think there's any reason to stay here any longer. I'll be going first."

"I was going to leave anyway. There are things I've been putting off, too."

"I'll go as well."

Tae Ju-ha apparently decided she could not stay in this atmosphere either.

Thus, In-hyuk left the funeral hall together with them.

When they reached the parking lot, they saw Baek Si-hwan, who had left earlier, standing in front of their car.

"Why did you come back?"

"I saw the article. The funeral probably won't continue, so I returned."

To others, he seemed like a quick-witted and efficient secretary.

But to In-hyuk, he was nothing but a rat, always ready to sneak in at the slightest opening.

"I was debating whether to call a taxi in front of reporters. Good timing."

In-hyuk watched as Tae Gun-seung's car pulled out, then he and Tae Ju-ha got into their own car. Tae Ju-ha, too, had to wait for her ride, having already sent Heo Yu-rim ahead.

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Leaving the funeral home, Tae Gun-seung headed not to his residence but to an apartment complex in Cheongdam neighborhood. Soon, a middle-aged man came out and got into the car.

"What brings you all the way here?"

The man was Jung Min-seop, Executive Director of Taeshin Trading.

"Didn't you see the articles as well? Because of that, the police reclaimed Seok-ho's body. The funeral was suspended, so I came right over."

"Then you should have called me."

"The thirsty man digs the well, after all. Besides, I figured you might have things to say as well."

This was about the agenda that AMK Partners had requested for the temporary shareholders' meeting at Taeshin Trading.

Replacement of executives and the board, and nomination of a new CEO. Since Jung Min-seop's name had come up, it was only natural for Tae Gun-seung to be curious.

"I apologize for not telling you sooner."

"I'm not asking for an apology. Knowing your character, you wouldn't have initiated something like this yourself."

After all, it was about being appointed CEO of Taeshin Trading, the holding company of Taeshin Group, backed by nothing less than AMK Partners.

What's more, if the executives and board were replaced, most of the internal confusion would be reduced.

"Hmm... I received a proposal from CEO Gordon Grimes. He asked me if I'd like to become the CEO of Taeshin Trading."

"You met him in person?"

It was rumored that Gordon Grimes first appeared at SGA in Hong Kong. Since his identity had always been unclear, countless entrepreneurs were curious about him.

Tae Gun-seung was one of them, so naturally, he was more interested in the meeting than the proposal itself.

"At first, I received the proposal anonymously, so I didn't even know it was him."

"Heh... So, what made you accept?"

"I just couldn't bear to watch Taeshin Group collapse like this. So I made my decision on the day of the shareholders' meeting..."

"So AMK Partners, or rather Gordon Grimes, had anticipated even that."

You can't add agenda items in the middle of a temporary shareholders' meeting—that means it had to be registered in advance.

Even putting the proposal to appoint Jung Min-seop as CEO in the agenda.

"In the end, we were just dancing in the palm of his hand."

Tae Gun-seung made a faint smile.

"If I get the chance, he's someone I definitely want to meet. What was your impression?"

Even though they were about to lose control of Taeshin Group, it was genuine curiosity that preceded everything else.

"He looked, at most, perhaps early 50s, and spoke Korean more fluently than I expected. He wasn't impulsive, but made every move after careful calculation."

"So he's meticulous, huh. Well, that's the only way he could have hidden his identity while moving such a large company."

It was an honest expression of admiration, just as before.

"... I truly apologize. Even after receiving the offer, since I didn't know how the shareholders' meeting would go, I couldn't inform you."

"It was an unpredictable situation for anyone. Besides, since I threw my shares up in the air, it inevitably looked like I was supporting Seok-ho."

"Maybe that, too, was part of AMK Partners' plan."

Referring to the fact that they had been controlling the shares since the agenda to dismiss Chairman Tae Gun-seung as CEO. Without that, it would have been difficult for Tae Seok-ho's side to confidently proceed with the temporary shareholders' meeting.

In the end, they had all been played by AMK Partners.

"And yet, after all that, they decided not to take over Taeshin Group directly, which is even more baffling."

"I have no idea what they're thinking."

"Still, you're a hundred times better than someone who doesn't care for Taeshin. But you do need to be tougher than before. Of course, with all you've been through to reach that position, I'm sure you know that already."

He was emphasizing that what's needed in running a business isn't reckless attachment or greed, but rational thinking.

Of course, Jung Min-seop understood this well, just as Tae Gun-seung said.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. Sorry for calling you over so late."

"Not at all."

"Take care of yourself, and when things settle down, let's have a meal."

With those parting words, Jung Min-seop got out of the car.

Simultaneously, Song Tae-ho and the driver, who had been waiting nearby, got back into the car.

"Drive safe, Chairman."

"You know, you never do call me comfortably, do you."

The car soon drove off.

Jung Min-seop, silently watching the departing car, bowed deeply in its direction, holding the posture for a long time.

Under the faint glow of the streetlights in the darkness, hot tears streamed down his cheeks and dropped to the ground.

Chapter 156 ·It's a Kind of Tactic

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6j8Ua1aM2z4M615Nfz2c516N7Toh4lbOaTdc2w2Y4jbF7jdN1zbMb55Z8moY318Z8D2Qa22ZbmeY6ocN6D9Acx5Y5j9Ua12NozaN1i6Mbz3ZeieNoDeV5j3Z5W9JdkbN3DbBdheI9i8waI5deG3F6n8Iej102i0Ifn40e=5

It's a Kind of Tactic

【T Group executive A—murder suspect Reina Blackwood (age 33) and six others wanted.】

【Mysterious death of T Group executive, signs point to disguised poisoning and suicide... Meanwhile, manipulation by prosecution, police, and National Forensic Service personnel is also suspected...】

【Reina Blackwood and six others internationally wanted, banned from leaving the country considering possible escape abroad...】

【Death of T Group executive A disguised as suicide, trust in investigative authorities shaken.】

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The video of the death of Taeshin Group executive vice president Tae Seok-ho spread rapidly through media and the internet. Simultaneously, serious suspicion spread through the investigative agencies, causing complete upheaval.

Despite it being past midnight, Im Deok-chang, who was at the National Intelligence Service, let out a deep sigh as he read the articles and shared materials from law enforcement.

"This is a total mess..."

Based on the results of the Taeshin Trading temporary shareholders' meeting, he judged it impossible to stop AMK Partners' dominance. Due to that, Reina Blackwood requested approval to deal with Tae Seok-ho, and Im Deok-chang allowed it.

He had concluded the Taeshin Group project was as good as a failure.

Moreover, he had even revealed his identity to him. In a situation gone wrong, he couldn't leave any traces behind.

As a result, he tried to sway public opinion to destroy AMK Partners' domestic image as well.

But the situation was completely flipped when a video was submitted showing Reina Blackwood killing Tae Seok-ho.

"Where did the information first leak from? Or rather, how much do those guys know about us?!"

His frustrated muttering continued.

Then, an alarm sounded on his phone. Im Deok-chang opened his drawer and took out another phone he had hidden inside.

A call came in with a blocked caller ID.

He pressed the call button, and a familiar voice reached him.

[Sorry for the late contact. I just arrived at the destination. About three hours until departure.]

It was Reina Blackwood.

Im Deok-chang sighed at the sound of her voice.

"Hoo—! Is the situation safe?"

[No tails, and we finished checking the stowaway route.]

"Then tell me the situation. Didn't you finish and wrap up the job?"

After Tae Seok-ho was killed, there shouldn't have been any CCTV or witnesses.

[I definitely checked. The Wiper installed on the server worked without any issues after we pulled out.]

According to the news, Taeshin Trading's network had suffered a shutdown and paralysis, and follow-up articles mentioned the damage would take significant time to recover from, so it was only natural to be suspicious.

"Don't you realize what kind of situation your mistake has caused?"

[Whoever looks at this, it's obvious the timing was targeted. Did you find out who submitted the video?]

"Of course I checked. But they claim they never submitted anything. Someone used their server just to upload the video."

[What about tracing it?]

With nothing she could do right now, Reina kept asking questions.

"If there were any leads, I wouldn't be sitting still like this."

Not only did the signal bounce through dozens of IPs, but ghost IPs were even mixed in between. In the end, it was impossible to track the perpetrator.

[Then what are you going to do now?]

"There are a lot of things to handle immediately. For now, you take the agents and go to the camp."

[What should I do about Kureha, who's on standby in New York?]

Originally, Reina planned to join Kureha after dealing with Tae Seok-ho and then proceed with another project.

Kureha, who had gone ahead, was suddenly left hanging.

"Hannya will handle those people. So just make sure you get out of Korea safely."

[... Understood.]

With that, the call ended.

Im Deok-chang, still holding the phone, let out another sigh.

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With plenty of time until morning.

About 65 km southwest of Incheon, in the southern forests of Ul Island, seven people kept themselves low and hidden.

They were WID agents, former bodyguards of Reina Blackwood and Tae Seok-ho.

"Is it about time to move?"

At Reina's quiet murmur, one agent checked his wristwatch. The faint green backlight illuminated his face and those of the others nearby.

"I think it's good to move now."

Everyone quietly emerged from the woods and headed for the rocky coast.

Reina swept her gaze around the area. It wasn't because she sensed anything in particular. If anything, it was too quiet, and her expression was full of suspicion.

KURURURUNG—

Suddenly, thunder sounded in the sky as the wind picked up.

Before long, the waves grew with the rising wind, and rain began to fall, brushing across her vision.

"I figured we'd be tailed and laid out a trap... Are they not showing up this time?"

She picked up her radio as she muttered.

"Anything found in the woods?"

CHIJIJIK—

A man's voice crackled through the static.

[This is Beta. Nothing so far.]

[This is Charlie. Nothing.]

[This is Delta. No one found.]

A full four teams. A total of twenty WID agents had been stationed on the island for the ambush.

Hearing the responses in the rain, Reina let out a low hum. She recalled what happened after dealing with Tae Seok-ho at Taeshin Trading.

Normally, if they had simply escaped by car from the underground parking lot, everything would have ended quietly.

But by blocking the way with the fire system, they raised the threat level and forced even the WID agents masquerading as security guards to pull out.

Their escape together through the first floor was caught by CCTV, leaving obvious evidence behind.

"Was it really just a waste?"

After Skull had outmaneuvered her so many times, she tried reversing the trap this time.

But maybe even that was within the palm of their hand, as nobody got caught.

The rain kept pouring harder.

At that moment, one of the agents finished a radio call and approached.

"The boat is ready. Should I call it in?"

Reina, glancing around with an expression full of regret, spoke.

"Call them. There will be more chances later."

The agent responded and turned on a flash, blinking it at regular intervals.

Soon after, a boat appeared in the distance, cutting through the waves toward them.

* * *

【Murder of T Group executive A disguised as suicide, all involved from prosecution, police, and the National Forensic Service to be punished!】

【Murder disguised as suicide: T Corporation executive A, confirmed collusion within investigative agencies... Legal consequences unavoidable!】

【National Forensic Service implicated in major corporate executive's case. Prosecutor General declares "thorough punishment"! Whereabouts of suspects currently unknown...】

【T Group executive A's funeral, delayed by the reinvestigation, is again held as a private family ceremony. Burial completed without incident...】

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A few days later.

In-hyuk came to work as if nothing had happened.

Baek Si-hwan, who followed him into the office, handed over a set of result sheets.

"This is the welfare project investment list you asked about last time. I only included records deemed important—details are uploaded to the cloud."

"I'll check it out. By the way, the security guards will finish their leave and return before noon. Manager Baek, focus on your admin work as usual."

At those words, Baek Si-hwan let out a faint sigh through his nose and replied.

"If you ever need anything, just ask."

"I will."

After he left and the door was closed, In-hyuk checked Ghost Link on his phone.

【Norman: Confirmed the shares Tae Seok-ho held have been spread out, and I finished buying up the extra 6.2% that came up with the downward trend.】

In-hyuk hadn't missed a beat, even during the funeral.

With this, even excluding the 12% held by Tae Gun-seung, he now secured 38.5% of the shares.

As such, unless Tae Gun-seung handed his shares elsewhere, no other party could secure more than 38.3%.

He had, in effect, become owner of Taeshin Trading, the actual holding company of Taeshin Group.

【Gordon: Good work.】

【Norman: All we did was relax in a hotel and vote.】

【Gordon: For the next step, proceed as previously advised.】

【Norman: If you have any other instructions, just let me know anytime.】

The reply was full of loyalty.

In-hyuk nodded as he checked other messages.

"Hm...?"

He noticed a previously unchecked message that caught his eye.

【YM23: Recently, the deputy representative has been driving himself around on some schedules, without a driver.】

This came from someone he had poached at Yulmyung Law Firm.

The firm not only handled the will of Chairman Tae Gun-seung, but also managed domestic affairs for AMK Partners' Korea branch.

In addition, in a previous life, Vice President Byun Sang-hoon ousted the current CEO Choi Myung-jin through illegal means, causing a huge scandal there.

"Is he meeting a discreet client? It's not quite time for him to make his move, though."

In-hyuk wired a payment for the information fee to the owner of the account and sent a reply.

【HERMIT: Five times the usual rate if you find out the destination or the person they're meeting.】

Normally, he didn't make unreasonable demands of his informants—just asked for what they naturally saw or heard.

But this time, he was pushing because the source in Yulmyung was someone due to be kicked out after causing trouble.

Since he'd be discarded anyway, it was useful to employ him for crucial intelligence.

【YM23: Ok.】

Greed for money must've convinced him, as the acceptance was instant.

"No wonder he gave Tae Seok-ho those damaging legal leaks so easily in the past."

Satisfied, In-hyuk nodded as he checked the rest of the information.

KNOCK KNOCK—

At that moment, a knock sounded and two familiar faces entered.

"Division Director! Have you been well?"

It was Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

They had gone on a "business trip" disguised as vacation and came back tanned.

"Did you rest well?"

"Well enough."

Conscious of Baek Si-hwan, surely eavesdropping outside, they lightly lied and closed the door.

"Ah, you uploaded everything we retrieved from the DRC (Dominican Republic of the Congo), right?"

At the question, Hong Yu-geon took a USB drive from his pocket and handed it over. He slumped onto the sofa as he spoke.

"I forgot to give you this one."

"Why didn't you upload it?"

"The satellite transceiver we were using in the Congo broke."

In-hyuk plugged the USB into his computer and began checking the contents one by one.

"So, these are the records tracking their movements through the food supply route."

"You have to eat to live, wherever you are. By the way, why didn't you deal with Reina Blackwood?"

In truth, the two had returned to the country days before to watch over Reina Blackwood. At In-hyuk's order, they filmed the video of Tae Seok-ho's death and reported it anonymously.

Of course, they also knew she would try to flee through Ul Island after going on the run.

Given all that, when In-hyuk did not pursue her afterward, unlike usual, they found it strange.

"There was probably a trap this time."

"A trap? How do you know?"

"Despite the video evidence and her being wanted, her movements slowed down. That means something special was prepared."

"You could predict that?"

Even Kooou had been tricked by In-hyuk several times, so they were likely on edge.

"It's a kind of tactic."

"Anyone would think you're a war veteran, hearing that. So, what do we do next?"

"There's plenty to do, so don't rush me."

At In-hyuk's reply, Hong Yu-geon clicked his tongue.

"Tch—! I thought things were mostly wrapped up and there'd be nothing to do! Shouldn't have asked."

Chapter 157 ·Thank you for the offer, but...

【Taeshin Trading appoints Jung Min-seop as new CEO. Full restructuring of the board of directors implemented!】

【Management dissolved, a fresh start: Taeshin Group launches under the Jung Min-seop regime!】

【Executive Director Jung Min-seop promoted to CEO of Taeshin Group Holding Company... Full-fledged organizational renewal begins!】

【AMK Partners to collaborate with Taeshin Group as an investment destination! Has decided not to intervene in management... In response, Taeshin Trading declares total overhaul! A new board formed with new CEO Jung Min-seop!】

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Over the course of about forty-five days, Taeshin Trading held three temporary shareholders' meetings. In the end, with the shares secured by AMK Partners, the proposals passed swiftly.

In that situation, In-hyuk visited the office of the CEO of Taeshin Trading at the summons of the newly appointed CEO, Jung Min-seop.

"So, Chairman, you're here too."

He spoke upon noticing Tae Gun-seung sitting on the sofa.

"I've stepped down completely from my position, so there's no need for such formality. Just call me comfortably."

"... Then, what should I call you?"

"Hm! Isn't 'grandfather' better?"

"Alright, then."

With that reply, In-hyuk sat on the sofa opposite Tae Gun-seung.

Jung Min-seop, sitting at the seat of honor in the center, wore an awkward expression as he spoke.

"The reason I've called Division Director Kang here is because of what we'll be dealing with going forward."

At that, In-hyuk scratched his chin with a finger.

"What's the matter you wish to discuss?"

"Even though we've replaced the management and the board, their influence hasn't disappeared completely. In time, they'll try to seize power in one way or another."

Everyone present had made their way up the ladder under the guise of various business schemes back when Tae Gun-seung was head of the conglomerate.

Naturally, with management rights now completely transferred to AMK Partners due to the new shareholding, they couldn't wield power for now, but with time, they might seek another chance.

"You're wondering if I have information to keep the board in check, rather than just the former management."

Apparently the right answer; Jung Min-seop nodded slowly.

"That's right. I thought, since you were the one who shook up the group through the TF division before, you might have some insights stored."

Back then, even Taeshin Group affiliate executives and even Tae Seok-hyun, then CEO of Taeshin Electronics, were ousted.

"The crucial details from that time were all reported to the former chairman."

Tae Gun-seung spoke up this time.

"There was a lot I failed to grasp back then. Perhaps what was reported to me wasn't everything."

"Aren't you just hoping that's the case?"

Because it was a significant matter, Jung Min-seop had even called in the ailing Tae Gun-seung for this meeting.

"You're not denying it."

At Tae Gun-seung's mutter, In-hyuk let out a slight sigh.

"I half-expected you'd summon me like this."

In-hyuk took a USB drive from his inside pocket and handed it to Jung Min-seop.

"... So you really had it?"

"It's audit material on executives and previous board members who weren't filtered out during the personnel reform."

Across from him, Tae Gun-seung looked a bit troubled.

"So you've had it all along. But why didn't you tell me?"

During the organization reform, In-hyuk had culled corruption in the group so thoroughly that no one could easily track down the perpetrators.

But since this particular matter hadn't been brought up at the time, Tae Gun-seung found it odd.

"Even if I had reported it, you would have let things be."

"I would, really? Why do you think that?"

"The executives and board members pending audit were in charge of major projects at the time. Even if rotten, they were keeping business running smoothly, surprisingly so. Of course, I can't say they were totally clean."

Tae Gun-seung and Jung Min-seop looked at In-hyuk with a sense of wonder.

Meeting their eyes, In-hyuk tilted his head.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Tae Gun-seung responded.

"I didn't know you could analyze things so thoroughly. During personnel reform, you were like a bulldozer."

Jung Min-seop cut in beside him.

"Division Director Kang was known as the Grim Reaper. And the bulldozer was you, Chairman."

"Me?"

"Didn't you know everyone in the company called you that?"

"Oh, is that so? Now that I'm not chairman, you're speaking so freely?"

The atmosphere between the two had clearly become more relaxed.

In-hyuk carefully interjected.

"It would be better to use the data in the USB right away rather than sitting on it."

"Use, huh?"

"With a foreign company having acquired over thirty percent of Mulsan's shares, our external image isn't good. The stock price has also dropped significantly. If these contents burst out while trying to recover, the losses will be even greater."

"You mean, 'a small fissure becomes a great chasm'."

A small gap can eventually lead to a huge crack.

"What kind of card you hold matters, but when you use it is even more important. As CEO, you'll know once you look at the contents."

"And if I don't act as you recommend, we'll get burned?"

"It wouldn't be beyond saving. But whether it's now or later—I'm just speculating on the potential damage at either time."

Jung Min-seop and Tae Gun-seung both expressed admiration again.

After clearing his throat, Jung Min-seop spoke gravely.

"Hm! So, about that... Division Director Kang, how about joining the head office as an executive and working alongside me? I'd be even happier if you'd also take on the board together."

From affiliate division director to head office executive.

It was nothing short of an extraordinary offer.

Given what In-hyuk had accomplished in a short stint as TF division director, it wasn't surprising he'd receive such an offer.

Even Tae Gun-seung, sitting nearby, had thought about it when he was chairman.

So he quietly watched, thinking Jung Min-seop's offer only natural.

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't think I can accept."

Both men looked surprised.

"Why not?"

"You know the reason well, CEO. As does Grandfather."

"Well, that's..."

"Hm..."

Their words faded.

Everyone knew.

With it revealed that In-hyuk was the illegitimate child of KQ Group Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, should he rise to an executive at the head office, it would likely stir up misunderstanding.

"So, I intend to leave Taeshin altogether."

This time, Jung Min-seop stared at In-hyuk in surprise.

"Did you get an offer from somewhere else? Or...?"

Again, he trailed off.

Of course, In-hyuk fully understood what he was implying.

"If you mean KQ Group or AMK Partners, no—I haven't."

"Then what are you planning?"

Tae Gun-seung too had naturally assumed In-hyuk would go to one of those two.

But at In-hyuk's resolute answer, he followed Jung Min-seop's question.

"Don't tell me you're thinking of starting your own company?"

In-hyuk gave a slight smile.

"That's right."

"Why go to such lengths? AMK Partners surely recognizes your abilities and would take you, and at KQ Group, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu would fall over himself to offer you the successor's seat."

It wasn't wrong.

"As I said before, I have no intention of joining KQ Group. At the same time, I'm not interested in just being handed a ready-made platform at AMK Partners."

"Ha... Is that how you'd describe their business infrastructure?"

"I couldn't think of a better analogy."

Tae Gun-seung and Jung Min-seop each looked troubled.

Then Jung Min-seop spoke carefully.

"Are you planning to base your venture on what you did at Taeshin Asset Management?"

"I'm thinking of combining investment and management consulting."

"Consulting? Like what you did in the TF division?"

"Exactly."

Jung Min-seop looked at In-hyuk with lingering regret.

"Well, what do you say to accepting investment from Taeshin Group and moving forward together? I doubt even AMK Partners would raise an issue with that."

"But then nothing would change. I want to build my foundation on my own capability."

Tae Gun-seung, after a moment of silence in the wake of In-hyuk's firm answer, asked,

"Have you discussed this with Ju-ha?"

"Not yet. I'm waiting to tell her as soon as she gets home."

"Then perhaps... No, that's not for me to meddle in."

He stopped himself mid-sentence.

But of course, In-hyuk knew what he was going to say.

'He must be worrying about divorce.'

It had come up in passing before. If it did come to pass, In-hyuk would be severed entirely from Taeshin's umbrella.

However, right now, In-hyuk wasn't particularly considering divorce.

In the tasks he had left to do going forward, being a married man wasn't necessarily a bad condition.

'At least no one would try to push another woman on me, and if anyone tried to approach, I'd have a perfect excuse to refuse.'

In his previous life, businesspeople who valued In-hyuk's abilities had tried to introduce daughters or female relatives to tie him down.

It was such a persistent issue during his quest for revenge that this situation actually felt much easier.

"Well, if that's all, I'll take my leave. There's still a lot for me to wrap up."

Jung Min-seop and Tae Gun-seung realized that it would be hard to keep In-hyuk.

"Take care getting home."

"We'll meet again soon."

After saying goodbye, In-hyuk left the office.

Once the door closed, Jung Min-seop let out a sigh and looked at Tae Gun-seung.

"Division Director Kang always seems to strike the heart of the matter when you least expect it."

Tae Gun-seung, too, let out a sigh, signaling agreement with Jung Min-seop's words.

"He's made plenty of moves we never expected."

"If I may, I think Division Director Kang has a closer connection with AMK Partners than we thought."

"... On what grounds?"

So far, Kang In-hyuk had only handled superficial business at the request of AMK Partners.

In that process, Kang In-hyuk simply took charge of M&A operations and detailed tasks related to investment prospects.

"It felt like he knew I'd been offered the CEO position by Gordon Grimes of AMK Partners."

At the same time, Tae Gun-seung's eyes widened sharply.

"Are you sure?"

"He didn't say it outright. But after the last temporary shareholders' meeting ended in defeat, he threw out a remark about 'decisions.' It seemed he already knew what the outcome would be, same as the offer I received."

"So you're saying... Kang knew all that, to the extent that he's that close with AMK Partners."

"That's my guess. Of course, even if he does know, it changes nothing."

As Kang In-hyuk had already said he was quitting Taeshin Asset Management.

"What do you think of Kang's abilities?"

"If we evaluate objectively, they're by no means low. In all situations, he's cool-headed and decisive. If you look at Velbyte Technology and other project cases, he has quite the eye for investment as well."

"So it's been about a year and a half since he started acting like a changed man."

Jung Min-seop nodded.

"I find that strange too. He used to be an average employee with decent ability, but now he's a real focal point."

"It's not bad for our Ju-ha, but in some ways, it's worrisome."

"Afraid someone else might poach Division Director Kang?"

"You never know."

Saying so, Tae Gun-seung wet his throat with the lukewarm tea in front of him.

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Chapter 158 ·Red Witch

After leaving Taeshin Trading, In-hyuk went straight back to Taeshin Asset Management.

He then visited the CEO's office to bring up the reason for his visit to Tae Ju-ha.

"What did you call me to Mulsan for?"

"CEO Jung Min-seop said a few things, but nothing important."

At this rather dismissive explanation, Tae Ju-ha let out a shallow sigh through her nose.

"Then, what's the reason you wanted to see me?"

This time, In-hyuk thought for a moment before speaking.

"I'm planning to quit Taeshin Asset Management."

"What? What do you mean...!"

"Just as I said. I'm going to finish up only the matters I have to handle in the MP Division, then I will organize my departure."

Tae Ju-ha still had a puzzled expression.

"So, why are you quitting?"

"I don't think there's anything left for me to do here. So I'm thinking of pursuing something I've wanted to do on my own."

"No matter what, isn't this a bit too sudden, especially without any prior notice?"

At this, In-hyuk scratched his cheek.

"It would have been sudden, no matter when I told you."

Perhaps because he spoke so nonchalantly, Tae Ju-ha's brow narrowed.

"So, after quitting here, what are you planning to do? Are you going to KQ Group...?"

She thought the same as Tae Gun-seung and Jung Min-seop.

"I'm planning to start a company. I've already made all the necessary plans."

"What about funding?"

Although In-hyuk was the son-in-law of a chaebol family and division director of Taeshin Asset Management, he had not actually received much money from the company.

"The initial funding isn't much, so it's fine."

"I suppose you have no intention of changing your mind."

"If I did, I wouldn't have brought it up at all."

Tae Ju-ha let out a long sigh.

"How long do you plan to stay?"

"Two weeks."

Her face became even more complicated after hearing there wasn't much time left.

"Will the ongoing projects be concluded by then?"

"They're almost finished. After that, the internal team can handle things."

If the work was incomplete, she might have tried to hold onto him a bit more.

But In-hyuk gave her no opening at all.

"It can't be helped. Actually, with CEO Jung Min-seop taking office, Mulsan and each affiliate are doing a personnel reshuffling. We'll just assign new staff to match."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Tae Ju-ha had also proved her competence, building herself up from the bottom.

After working at the New York branch and becoming CEO of Taeshin Asset Management, her management skills had really begun to stand out.

Even compared to other third-generation chaebols, In-hyuk readily admitted her skills were not lacking.

"Anyway, once you leave, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu won't just sit quietly. Won't he pressure you even harder than before?"

"It's already been a mess. But I have no intention of joining them."

"Excuse me for saying so, but in your stubbornness, you really resemble him."

"Are you criticizing me for quitting?"

In response, Tae Ju-ha couldn't help but laugh lightly.

"You can joke like that?"

"I'm not joking. In any case, just bear in mind what I've told you."

Having wrapped up the conversation, In-hyuk went downstairs to his office.

Baek Si-hwan, who was sitting at his desk, followed in and handed over some result sheets.

"These are the results of AMK Partners's second welfare project investment review. I've marked the places that were negative about the deep site and on-site due diligence."

In-hyuk made several marks in red pen on the result sheets, then handed them back.

"Please put together a team to conduct due diligence on the locations I marked. I want the results in three days."

"I'll prepare right away."

"Oh, and there's an upcoming personnel reshuffle. If you have a preferred division, let me know. Like when you first came, you can apply to move to another affiliate as well."

At this, Baek Si-hwan looked a bit confused.

"Are you suggesting I move to a different division?"

"In two weeks, I'm leaving this place."

Simultaneously, Baek Si-hwan was taken aback.

"What? You mean, you're resigning as division director?"

"That's right. I just informed the CEO as well."

Baek Si-hwan's eyes darted back and forth in thought.

With the recent temporary shareholders' meeting, the Association's Taeshin Group project had failed.

And yet, Baek Si-hwan's job wasn't over. He was supposed to stay by Kang In-hyuk's side, gaining his trust, and probing the relationship and communications with AMK Partners.

But with this sudden resignation notice, it was only natural that he felt thrown into disarray.

"Are you moving to another company?"

In-hyuk purposely gave an exasperated expression.

"A lot of people have been asking me that today."

"Uh... sorry."

"As I said before, I'm quitting. I have no reason to explain what happens after that to you, Manager Baek. So go finish what you were working on."

Chastened by In-hyuk's words, Baek Si-hwan couldn't say more. He bowed his head slightly and left.

As the door closed, Hong Yu-geon raised an eyebrow and spoke.

"He seemed to be working hard at your side all this time. Isn't this a bit harsh?"

"Enough that he wasn't able to do anything so far. Now that I'm leaving, there's no need to keep an eye on him."

This was exactly why In-hyuk had kept Baek Si-hwan close—to feign trust and make him continue to act favorably toward himself.

Because it was impossible to predict what tricks Baek Si-hwan might pull while nearby, In-hyuk made sure he bound himself up tightly.

"But that guy, and the organization behind him... they're really something."

At Hong Yu-geon's admiration, Van Hester nodded as well.

From the beginning until now, Baek Si-hwan's actions had been thorough. He'd even grown close to many people within the MP Division.

If they'd gone back in time not knowing he was a traitor, they might have trusted him again.

"I've laid out the groundwork, so it's time I moved."

"Is your resignation letter the first step?"

"I've had this place under my control for some time, anyway."

The majority of Taeshin Trading, the Taeshin Group holding company, was owned by AMK Partners.

As a countermeasure, they had placed Executive Director Jung Min-seop as CEO, but rumors were swirling that a foreign company had taken over a domestic one.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to leave?"

Hong Yu-geon was aware of all this, which is why he was concerned.

"I wouldn't have been able to do much more from here anyway. It's actually easier to handle things from outside."

"Oh... so you're really aiming to become the true boss now?"

"Quiet."

In-hyuk turned his eyes back to his monitor, focusing again.

* * *

Chairman Baek Ji-woong of WISE&WIRE Group was on the phone with Baek Si-hwan.

"What? Kang In-hyuk is leaving Taeshin Asset Management? Is he going to the head office?"

This was Baek Ji-woong's misunderstanding.

Baek Si-hwan corrected him.

[No, he's leaving entirely. He apparently just informed CEO Tae Ju-ha.]

At the same time, a low sound escaped Baek Ji-woong's lips.

Initially, the reason Baek Si-hwan had been placed with Kang In-hyuk was because of a request from Tae Seok-ho.

As the connection between Kang In-hyuk and AMK Partners had become more prominent, they had kept watch, hoping to gain trust and see if there was more to the relationship.

However, once the complex ties with Tae Seok-ho became apparent, In-hyuk didn't give them many openings to dig deeper. In the end, none of the information they'd obtained thus far was useful.

"Judging by his actions, it doesn't look like he'll go to KQ Group... Could he be moving to AMK Partners?"

It was the most plausible option.

[I asked him myself, but he didn't answer.]

"Leaving at this timing... really an unexpected move. With Taeshin Group's management and board reshuffled, the head office would definitely try to retain Kang In-hyuk, you know. There have been internal calls for it, too."

There were still quite a few of their people remaining within Taeshin Group, so they could stay on top of the news.

[Due to this, Kang In-hyuk recommended I transfer somewhere new after he leaves. What do you want me to do?]

Baek Ji-woong sighed.

After a recent failure, his elder authority had been restricted. Now, with the possibility that Kang In-hyuk had close ties to AMK Partners, it was difficult to keep Baek Si-hwan near him.

Also, according to what he'd heard from Im Deok-chang, the National Intelligence Service had, using the Notex incident, traced connections to Hwain Techon.

No clear evidence had surfaced yet, but at the current pace, it could become public anytime.

"The Taeshin project is as good as failed... so tie that up cleanly and join the Gordon Grimes tracking effort."

Baek Si-hwan sounded surprised at this order.

[Is there a team already in place?]

"Tengu is preparing it directly."

[Weren't they working on Yulmyung?]

With Shojo, formerly Supreme Prosecutors' Office deputy chief prosecutor Jung Yoon-ju, now dead, there was a big hole in the legal team.

Because of that, Tengu had suggested a new route by working with the law firm Yulmyung.

"I think they want to tighten internal discipline this time."

[But will Hakushikijou really just sit by?]

Anyone inside the Association knew Hakushikijou and Tengu were in a rivalry.

"That's what's odd. I doubt he actually wants them to fail, but there's something hands-off about it. If things go wrong, it'll affect the Association anyway."

The latest atmosphere inside the Association had been relayed by his wife, Kwon So-jeong.

Even then, Hakushikijou hadn't strongly opposed Tengu's plans.

[Should I join that team, then, and monitor the situation?]

Baek Ji-woong smiled at his question.

"You're quick on the uptake. They said they needed you, since you'd already been watching Kang In-hyuk, who was linked to AMK Partners. There won't be a problem."

[Understood. I'll transfer as soon as I wrap up matters here.]

The call ended.

Baek Ji-woong pondered quietly for a moment, then summoned his secretary, Do Jung-geol.

"Kang In-hyuk is leaving Taeshin Group. Find out through internal channels if there's any other news about that."

"I'll get on it right away."

"And has there been any further word from the National Intelligence Service? About the Notex case?"

Do Jung-geol handed over a tablet.

"I was just organizing a report on that. Apparently, Director Jin Jong-man and Deputy General Manager Choo Jae-min are investigating a shell company related to Hwain Techon."

"They must not trust Im Deok-chang, whom they put in charge."

"That seems likely."

The tablet showed a detailed record of the National Intelligence Service agents' movements under the orders of the two men mentioned.

As Baek Ji-woong recalled this odd situation, he drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Have you found out how they managed to get that close?"

Im Deok-chang had also reported that he couldn't track the traces.

But Baek Ji-woong hadn't stopped there—and was investigating other leads.

"Even the agents assigned by Hyottoko couldn't spot anyone meeting with them."

"And communication logs?"

"Also nothing unusual."

"No way they figured it out themselves... How did Skull pass on the information?"

They had already determined the source of the leak was Skull.

The only possible party targeting their Association was that one.

While deep in thought, Do Jung-geol spoke up cautiously.

"If I consider various angles... maybe they have a form of contact we can't track."

"Like what?"

"The most obvious would be something untraceable or a technology that leaves no evidence."

"That sort of thing is possible now?"

Do Jung-geol hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"There is a hacker that Hyottoko once tried to recruit."

"A hacker?"

"A hacker who operated on the dark web under the name 'Red Witch'."

Baek Ji-woong's eyes gleamed.

Chapter 159 ·Just Leave Them Alone?

The atmosphere in the W&W Group chairman's office had subtly sunk. Baek Ji-woong, who had been listening to Do Jung-geol's story, asked languidly.

"Do you have any information on that hacker known as the Red Witch?"

"No personal details are known, but starting from at least 2022 until early last year, a data trading site on the dark web called 'The Red Witch's Store' was operated. Hyottoko tracked it using the National Intelligence Service's network, and just as he was about to catch her with bait, he lost her."

Baek Ji-woong cocked his head in curiosity.

"Are you saying that hacker has skills Skull would want to use?"

"Even though we managed to access the site, we couldn't find the location of either the operator or the server. That's why, at the time, we used a massive transaction as bait."

"So, what's the current status?"

At that, Do Jung-geol hesitated before replying.

"That 'The Red Witch's Store' dark web site I mentioned earlier was shut down as soon as she disappeared. And since then, there hasn't been any trace of activity."

"You said that was early last year, right?"

"That's correct."

Baek Ji-woong fell into thought, shrouded by the room's peculiar mood.

"What if, starting then, the Red Witch began working with Skull? What if she started targeting us from that point on, leaving no trace?"

Nothing was certain. But for now, if there was even the slightest possibility, it had to be checked. Sensing this, Do Jung-geol cautiously spoke up again.

"As I just mentioned, the Red Witch is at a level where, unless she surfaces again, she's impossible to find."

"Was the Red Witch famous in the dark web?"

"She was well-known in that circle as a first-class wizard-level elite."

"Then, isn't there bound to be at least one guy among current dark web operatives who used to know the Red Witch?"

Do Jung-geol easily understood what he meant.

"I'll try to reach out to everyone related and see if I can find anything."

"Don't make too much noise while you do it."

"I'll be careful."

With that response, Do Jung-geol immediately left the room.

* * *

A few days later.

In-hyuk grabbed his jacket and left the office with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester. Baek Si-hwan, who had been sitting at his desk, stood up.

"Heading out somewhere?"

"I'm just going to meet someone. I'll be back within the hour."

Thus, In-hyuk stepped out of the company and arrived at a café not far from Taeshin Asset Management.

There, he spotted Norman McGrath and Marc Laurent from Sandrix. Since Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester knew them as well, they exchanged brief nods.

Meanwhile, Marc Laurent pulled a device from his pocket and turned it on.

"You can talk openly now."

It was a bug-blocking device. As they heard him, Norman McGrath spoke first.

"It really isn't easy to quietly take the initiative in these matters."

He was remarking on In-hyuk's activities under a concealed identity.

"That's why I made you that proposal, branch manager."

"Huh... I seem to remember things rather differently. Back then, it felt more like a threat than a proposal."

When they first met, In-hyuk had threatened him by revealing everything he'd done as a lobbyist—projects where he'd pocketed kickbacks in FOURGMA, as well as information about how far deals with competitors had gone regarding SolarView.

"Well—! At the time, I needed you, branch manager, so it was unavoidable. Still, aren't you satisfied with where you are now?"

Since joining AMK Partners, Norman McGrath had been soaring. Of course, whenever sums in the hundreds of billions or even trillion-won scale began flowing in unexpected directions, he felt a bit nervous, but each time that led to unrealized profits, he felt a thrill.

"I can't deny that."

"I was a little worried you might still hold a grudge about that."

"Hahaha! I didn't expect the division director to think that way. By the way, there's a rumor going around Taeshin Asset Management that you're stepping down. What are your plans?"

"That word got around already?"

Not even a week had passed since he'd told Tae Ju-ha he intended to resign. The news spread faster than expected.

"Your position in this field isn't a light one. And besides, the public connection with our firm can't easily be ignored, right?"

Indeed, his greater value was not so much his competence, but the connection to AMK Partners.

"No wonder I've had relentless calls from headhunting firms lately. That must be the reason."

"Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu is probably raising the biggest fuss."

A wry smile appeared on In-hyuk's face. Somehow, after hearing word of his resignation, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu had been phoning constantly since the next day.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, In-hyuk's phone, sitting atop the table, vibrated. After glancing at the screen, In-hyuk could only sigh.

"He's calling now too."

"Persistent, isn't he?"

In-hyuk pressed the reject call button at once.

"He's a troublesome fellow."

"He must really be worried about KQ Group. Can't be helped—when the successor is a complete mess. In a way, it's a pitiful burden."

He knew all about Kang Do-young's incompetence and KQ Group's complicated internal situation.

"Well, sorry for dragging you out for something troublesome."

"Not at all. For someone in your position, these kinds of visible meetings are sometimes necessary."

The main reason In-hyuk suggested meeting was to stage a scene of contact with AMK Partners. Of course, there were surely people watching based on Baek Si-hwan's information by now. Marc Laurent, having spotted a few, quietly signaled Norman McGrath.

"Two just came into the cafe, and there's a car out front with people surveilling."

In-hyuk had noticed their presence even before Marc Laurent had.

"Just as expected. How far ahead are you seeing things?"

"It's just too obvious not to."

At that, Norman McGrath smiled.

"What are your plans? If you're coming to AMK Partners, I'm all for it."

"If I joined, this meeting would be too much of a cliché."

"Then are you off to another firm?"

In-hyuk shook his head.

"I plan to found my own firm focusing on investments and management consulting."

This answer caught Norman McGrath off guard.

"A company?"

"I need justification to work independently without interference."

His expression did not change.

"So, you'll use that company to move more freely."

"That's right. Though outwardly, I'll try not to attract too much attention."

"Given your status, many people will take notice anyway."

Since his relationship with AMK Partners could not be overlooked.

"Still, at least I get to choose my own projects."

"Then could we request an investment too? Say, with a short-term target return of 300%?"

It was joking, mixed with some seriousness. Seeing how much more relaxed Norman McGrath had become, In-hyuk grinned.

"That's a return rate that would require bankrupting a company to achieve."

"I doubt that's impossible for you."

AMK Partners currently commanded an astronomical sum. If they moved with intent, even big conglomerates wouldn't just be shaken—they could be toppled.

"First, I'll need a suitable office space in Seoul. That's partly why I wanted to meet you."

"In that case, how about a building owned by AMK Partners? After acquiring shares in Taeshin Trading, we're moving into a different building, so there's plenty of space."

Not a bad offer, so In-hyuk nodded.

"In that case, BlueForce will likely handle security, so safety should be solid."

"As it happens, we're engaging a company with an excellent security system for the new building."

"Oh? Which company?"

Norman McGrath's face brightened with pride.

"It's called Plusystems. Recently, it's become well-known in New York and Silicon Valley, and their security systems are more capable than you'd think. Oh! And they're also collaborating with TN SOFT, one of our investments."

Hearing that name for the first time in a while, In-hyuk couldn't help but acknowledge Norman McGrath's abilities.

"You've done your research well. Coincidentally, I had them in mind as well."

"Really?"

"They're a company managed by us at AMK Partners."

"Ah, I see... Wait, what?"

Norman McGrath had nodded naturally, but then looked shocked.

"Unofficially, Plusystems is a subsidiary of AMK Partners."

"Is that for real?!"

Plusystems, which had been amassing huge funds through the sale of security systems and software, was directly tied to AMK Partners. It was no wonder he was so surprised.

"It was established and managed by us even before you joined. The headquarters runs it through funding and shell companies, which is why you didn't know."

"Man... how far ahead have you been thinking?"

"I just got lucky, that's all."

"If you get lucky one more time, you'll conquer the world."

It was only a joke said out of amazement, and yet, for In-hyuk, it wasn't exactly impossible now. With the experiences and intelligence from his past life, he'd risen to this unprecedented dominance.

"You flatter me."

"Hahaha—! Anyway, as I said, I'll make the preparations. And may I match the office furnishings for you?"

"I'll handle that. I need to show myself moving around a bit, for appearances' sake."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Having wrapped up matters smoothly, the group stood up. Norman McGrath headed to the parking lot, accompanied by Marc Laurent and their security guards. In the meantime, In-hyuk, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester started heading back to the company.

"Those guys are still following us."

Like Marc Laurent had earlier, Hong Yu-geon had also noticed the surveillance.

"That's because they want to see what we do after meeting Norman."

"Should we just leave them?"

"They're only here to keep an eye on us. As soon as they realize we've noticed, they'll pull out."

There was no need to stir up unnecessary trouble on a busy street.

"But what are you going to do about the DRC (Dominican Republic of the Congo)? Now that you've nailed down the food supply routes, shouldn't you make a move?"

He was talking about the Kooou camp. According to their current investigation, there were at least thirty people staying there. Still, compared to the scale of the camp confirmed by Naya in Mongolia, that was about half.

'Did they split their forces, or did they get rid of the ones they found useless?'

He was reminded of the guys he'd dealt with in Silicon Valley. No matter how much they intended to kill civilians, he doubted they'd send such incompetent agents.

Besides, there'd been someone who handled the finishing shots from a distance. Turning these thoughts over, In-hyuk entered the company building.

Chapter 160 ·Damn Director

As In-hyuk returned to the office, a knock sounded from behind him.

Knock, knock, knock—

"Division director. May I have a word with you?"

It was Noh Dongjun, who used to be an entry-level colleague and was now the team leader of PEF Team 2 in the MP Division.

"Come in."

With a glance, the others—Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester—exited the room. In the meantime, Noh Dongjun entered cautiously and sat down on the sofa with In-hyuk.

"Aren't you busy with what your team is working on these days?"

"It's mostly wrapped up. But there's something I've been hearing... is it true?"

Originally, In-hyuk had planned to tell the division staff all at once next week. Yet, as rumors began to spread and people got restless, Noh Dongjun came by, unable to contain his curiosity.

"If you're asking whether I'm quitting here... it's true. I'll be working until next week, then I'm leaving."

Noh Dongjun was startled.

"It's real?! Why are you leaving?"

"You're not asking because you actually don't know, right?"

"Ah..."

He immediately recalled that In-hyuk was the illegitimate child of KQ Group's chairman, Kang Cheon-gyu.

"No matter what I do here, it'll be hard to earn good looks from people. And it'll only get heavier to climb higher from my position."

"If you leave, what will you do then? Are you even thinking about joining KQ Group?"

It was already the third time he'd been asked the same question. In-hyuk was tired of explaining and scratched his head.

"... I can't tell you that much."

"You just made that 'I can't be bothered to explain' face, didn't you?"

"Well, sort of."

"Whew. When the story broke out of nowhere, I wondered if you'd bolt right away. So it ends up like this after all."

"What can I do?"

"Has your replacement been decided?"

"The CEO will take care of it."

"There's going to be a war among department managers and up. Executives too, I bet."

Currently, the Taeshin Asset Management MP Division had substantial investments connected to AMK Partners. Naturally, whoever replaced In-hyuk would inherit all that, making it a gold mine compared to other departments.

"It doesn't matter to me, since I'm the one leaving."

"Don't you feel regret for all the business you started here?"

Anyway, those projects were only the groundwork for In-hyuk to build his voice within Taeshin Group. Of course, others had no way of knowing that...

"It's not like I made money from those projects."

"I guess so?"

"If your curiosity's settled, then go get back to work. I have a lot to finish before I go."

In-hyuk made a point of switching to formal speech, to which Noh Dongjun clicked his tongue.

"Tch—! I came here to check on you out of concern, you know."

"Worry about what's left of your own company life."

"Let's grab a drink before you go. That much is okay, right?"

"A drink?"

"Even better if you're fine with it doubling as an MP Division dinner-slash-farewell party."

Noh Dongjun always talked about having dinner whenever a project succeeded. But each time, In-hyuk would ask CEO Tae Ju-ha to provide the company card and send everyone off without him.

"I don't like stuffy events. Let's just grab a simple drink later."

"Ok—!"

As Noh Dongjun left, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester re-entered as if handing off a baton.

"Were you here because the division director is leaving?"

"There's all sorts of talk going around."

"He's a pretty blunt guy. You said you joined together, right?"

"That's right."

After In-hyuk replied, Hong Yu-geon nodded and asked something else.

"By the way, what are you going to do about the National Intelligence Service? With the ledger we got for you before the business trip, shouldn't we be wrapping up Im Deok-chang too?"

He was referring to the documentary evidence that the $1.4 billion found in Notex had come from Hwain Techon. In-hyuk had traced that lead with shell companies and asked them to keep the documents safe.

"The NIS director already revealed the Notex and Hwain Techon info to Im Deok-chang and ordered an investigation. From his side, he's already trying his hardest to cover any tracks."

"But we have the ledger, don't we?"

Just as Hong Yu-geon said, once the ledger was handed over, Im Deok-chang would be fully isolated.

At the same time, the various cases he had intervened and manipulated would inevitably re-surface.

However, there was one thing that bothered In-hyuk.

"The problem is how much influence Im Deok-chang has within the NIS."

"You're saying the NIS director could get taken down instead."

"Their ability to infiltrate is stronger than we thought."

They had even operated NIS agents overseas. Furthermore, they had infiltrated multiple companies, including Taeshin Group. Such an operation would have been impossible without considerable funds and organizational strength.

"Do you have a separate plan in mind?"

At that, In-hyuk accessed Ghost Link via his computer and entered a secure server. All materials collected from Kooou agents were compiled there.

He opened the data folder extracted from Jung Yoon-ju's phone and reviewed its contents. Of course, any encrypted content had already been fully decoded by Mi-ah.

"Just from the orders issued by Jung Yoon-ju, you can tell she was pretty high up. And judging by Im Deok-chang's current external position, he wouldn't be below her."

If things went sideways, the entire NIS could fall into Im Deok-chang's hands.

Naturally, the government wouldn't sit still, but given his grip on power, a surefire way to corner him was needed.

"So then?"

At Hong Yu-geon's follow-up, In-hyuk muttered again.

"If the NIS director would just show some reaction, things would be clearer..."

So far, In-hyuk had sent two messages with information to Director Jin Jong-man of the NIS. He had never once received a reply.

That alone told In-hyuk how cautious Jin Jong-man was. But with no exchange, sharing information was hard, and coming up with a way to bring down Im Deok-chang was difficult as well.

Bzzz— bzzz—

Just then, as In-hyuk focused on the monitor, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

"This guy's no different from the rest."

Checking the contents, In-hyuk smiled despite himself.

*

Late at night.

NIS third deputy director Im Deok-chang had been summoned by Director Jin Jong-man.

"So, you're saying the domestic shell company officials tied to Notex had already fled?"

He was now reporting on the investigation he had been assigned previously.

But Jin Jong-man's expression was clearly displeased.

Meanwhile, Im Deok-chang watched his reaction carefully—to check if the missing ledger had ended up with Jin.

"So far, yes."

"And Seunghwa Foundation and Seunghwa Trading?"

Im Deok-chang handed over another set of result sheets.

As Jin Jong-man read through them, his gaze grew sharper.

"Nothing of note so far."

The sheets contained the transaction history and trade details of the two previously mentioned companies. According to Im Deok-chang's report, there was nothing clearly problematic.

"Hm..."

Jin Jong-man let out a low hum.

After watching him for a moment, Im Deok-chang carefully spoke up.

"About the source of that information you mentioned before—are you sure about it?"

He was referring to the tip about the links between Hwain Techon and Notex.

Jin Jong-man looked up from the sheets and stared at him.

"What if I'm not sure?"

"From what we've investigated, it's hard to find a connection. In fact, I'm concerned the info may have been planted just to confuse the NIS investigation."

Im Deok-chang was determined to shift the NIS's focus away from Hwain Techon, intending to smother the case as evidence-inconclusive with tracks as clean as possible.

"Just wrap the case up on your side, Deputy Director Im."

"... Should I really conclude it that way?"

He made sure to double-check, just in case.

"I'll check with my informant for any additional info. Then we'll decide for sure."

For a moment, Im Deok-chang's eyes flickered.

"May I ask where that tip came from?"

"Why? Do you think I'd get info from somewhere ridiculous?"

At the sharply raised voice, Im Deok-chang could only swallow his curiosity.

"N-no, sir."

"Just do as I said and get it wrapped up. If there's nothing further, you may go."

"Understood, excuse me."

With that, Im Deok-chang returned to his office.

As if waiting, Choi Dong-hoon came in right after.

"Did the report go well?"

"I think I managed to sever the connection to Hwain Techon, for now."

"For now...?"

At his question, Im Deok-chang explained further.

"It's not dismissed, just on hold. Even with the evidence erased, the damn director still doesn't believe it."

He could only see it as an intention to dig in endlessly.

"He must have received info through a channel he trusts."

"If not, there's no reason for him to be this persistent."

"Isn't it time to make a decision, then?"

He meant to take care of Director Jin Jong-man.

But just replacing the position wouldn't guarantee a solution to this mess.

Of course, if Im Deok-chang took over, it could be possible.

However, if any consequences of the case blew up abroad before he took office, it'd be impossible to avoid responsibility. Instead, Im Deok-chang could end up shouldering it all.

"This is becoming a real headache. Oh, you've still got people tailing Director Jin, right?"

"I've got three teams moving discreetly. No unusual activity reported yet."

"He'll probably contact the informant soon, so keep on him. If you have to, it's fine to kill the director, but make sure the informant survives—no matter what. You can rough them up, just don't kill them."

Once the order was given, Choi Dong-hoon stepped out again.

...

...

Same time.

NIS Director Jin Jong-man gazed at the office door that Im Deok-chang had just exited, then let out a long sigh. He furtively checked the phone in his hand.

【NISoo: I don't know who you are, but I need more solid information.】

【HERMIT: The true culprit behind the Notex and Hwain Techon case. Related to Im Deok-chang. If you want to catch him, just hint that you'll meet the whistleblower.】

It was a brief exchange from earlier in the day. A file was attached with the reply.

It contained the ledger tracking fund flows within domestic shell companies Im Deok-chang had been instructed to investigate.

Along with it, Jin learned that the money originated from Hwain Techon.

There were too many suspicious parts for Im Deok-chang not to notice if he had looked even a little more carefully.

"So this is how they stab you in the back, huh?"

Back when he faced Im Deok-chang earlier, Jin Jong-man had barely suppressed an outburst of anger.

For him to have orchestrated things so meticulously, Jin realized he wouldn't be able to snare Im Deok-chang just by demanding answers on the spot.

After a moment, he typed a reply behind the last message.

【NISoo: I did as you said.】

Bzzz—bzzz—

This time, rather than a reply, a call came in.

Jin Jong-man hesitated briefly, then pressed the answer button.

"You've... called."

[That's my first time hearing your voice, Director Jin.]

It was a mechanically altered voice.

"What's your plan from here?"

[Can you act as bait, Director?]

The abrupt question made Jin Jong-man's brow furrow deeply.

The nuance he had been wary of from the start was now confirmed.

"If I pretend to meet with you, are you saying Im Deok-chang may try to kill me?"

[Im Deok-chang won't act directly, especially after what happened with Jung Yoon-ju.]

When he heard Jung Yoon-ju's name, a chill went over Jin Jong-man's face.

"... Were those two in it together?"

[I determined and confirmed it. When the NIS tried to play games with the prosecution, didn't Im Deok-chang hesitate?]

At that counter-question, Jin Jong-man recalled the time.

After Jung Yoon-ju's death, Im Deok-chang had abruptly shifted gears and started pushing much harder.

After a long silence, Jin Jong-man let out a heavy sigh.