Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 161 ·This crazy—!

Hannam-dong, UN Village 2nd Street.

It was a large two-story mansion on a plot of about 2,600㎡, with a single-story annex and a large yard at the back.

"Is this really the house I'll be living in from now on?"

The protagonist, who let out an exclamation, was Mi-ah.

Standing next to her, In-hyuk nodded.

"This place was prepared with safety as the top priority. The barrier past the yard rises 3 to 5 meters high, so no one will be able to approach easily. Of course, BlueForce will be on guard 24 hours a day, so it won't be dangerous."

Mi-ah, who was looking around the house and yard, widened her eyes and spoke.

"Security? Don't tell me they'll be stationed here?"

"They'll take turns guarding the entrance and the yard during security hours. The rest will stay in the building next door."

"Building next door?"

Mi-ah, standing in the yard, turned her gaze to the side.

There was a three-story multi-family house there.

It was the only building in the area that could look down on the current house from above.

"That's right. That's the BlueForce residence. If there's a problem, they can rush over immediately."

"You really thought this through... Did you buy that building too, by any chance?"

"If you want to be thorough, you have to. If you're worried about the money, don't. I paid for it out of my own earnings."

Mi-ah stared at him as if incredulous.

"Isn't this all a bit much? Don't you think so, guys?"

She directed the question to Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, who stood behind In-hyuk.

But they only shrugged their shoulders, giving no answer.

With a sigh, In-hyuk took her to the basement, continuing his explanation.

"That's how important what you'll be doing is from now on. In the basement of the mansion, I've set up server equipment that can be linked with Plusystems' Quantum Pulse."

"That's thorough, too."

"And..."

While descending the stairs to the basement, In-hyuk stopped walking.

"What is it?"

"The place you wanted."

The walls on both sides were covered with oak-toned timber boards.

In-hyuk turned the light fixture installed at the top of the wall to the side.

Click—

At the same time, a part of the left wall swung inward like a door, revealing a 15-pyeong-sized space.

"What's this? A hidden room?"

"Looks like the previous owner used it to hide a slush fund. They even hired outsiders for cleaning and equipment checks, so you can use it without worry."

"The person who lived here before, too?"

"It had been left alone for a really long time. The previous owner apparently didn't know about this room, since the opening device was broken."

At such a strange explanation, Mi-ah tilted her head, puzzled.

"Then how did the boss find out?"

"I just found it while checking the server equipment downstairs. I've got a knack for this kind of thing, you know."

In-hyuk's information gathering skills were impressive, enough to leave Mi-ah, a hacking expert, speechless.

"I'm at a loss for words. Anyway, thanks. I think I'll put it to good use."

"You can change the security system however you want."

Having explained the general setup and confirmed the server equipment, they returned upstairs to the living room, and Mi-ah asked a question.

"So, what exactly do I need to do here?"

She was skeptical, perhaps because the preparations seemed excessive.

In-hyuk just shrugged in response.

"I'm sure everyone knows my main target is Kooou."

Mi-ah, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester nodded.

"From now on, I'm going to go after the core of those guys. That'll make them much more sensitive, and we might make mistakes in the process. If we slip up, it'll all be over."

The most terrifying enemy is one with nothing to lose.

Ever since Jung Yoon-ju died, Kooou had probably started getting tense, so In-hyuk needed to be just as prepared.

The others seemed to understand him, growing serious.

Then Hong Yu-geon asked a question.

"Did the bait catch on the Im Deok-chang side for sure?"

He knew that In-hyuk had spoken with Jin Jong-man, the National Intelligence Service director, not long ago.

"They won't be able to just sit still there either. But Im Deok-chang would never act himself."

"Then what will you do?"

After a brief pause, In-hyuk looked at Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester and asked,

"Which do you want to choose, A or B?"

Sensing a bad feeling, Hong Yu-geon furrowed his brow slightly.

"What's A, and what's B?"

"A is a barely dangerous job. B is a quickly dangerous job."

At the odd explanation, Hong Yu-geon and the others tilted their heads in confusion.

"They're both dangerous jobs, though."

In-hyuk just shrugged again.

Sighing, Hong Yu-geon looked at Van Hester.

"What do you think?"

"If being quick for B means driving, we'll go with A."

With the question, both men turned their eyes to In-hyuk.

"As expected, Van has good instincts."

While Van Hester smiled, Hong Yu-geon, with his lips three feet forward, asked,

"So what exactly are we supposed to do?"

"Well..."

In-hyuk began explaining slowly.

The faces of his quietly listening companions quickly turned pale with shock.

* * *

Just past midnight.

Jin Jong-man, the National Intelligence Service director, was driving alone down the road.

After a drive that lasted over two hours, he finally arrived at Hangyeryeong Rest Area in Gangwon Province, at an altitude of 920 meters.

It was almost three in the morning. Because it was so late, there were no other parked cars.

Jin Jong-man, still in the car, let out a long, tense sigh.

"What am I supposed to do out here...?"

He had come because of a message from 'HERMIT'.

Of course, as director of the National Intelligence Service, he hadn't agreed to any plan that made him a decoy easily.

But he knew better than anyone the dire situation inside the NIS right now.

Things were so bad, he couldn't even trust the driver or secretarial agents closest to him.

"And will this really lure them in?"

On his way, he hadn't noticed any tail. Nor had he found any bugs or tracking devices in his car.

Just then, Jin Jong-man glanced at the phone he'd left on the dashboard.

"... No way?"

At that moment, as if on cue, it vibrated, and a call came in.

On the screen, the name 'HERMIT' appeared.

[Now, please come to the back of the rest stop.]

Jin Jong-man was wondering if there was tracking software installed on the phone.

But there was no way to check in this situation, so he left the call connected and went outside.

Rounding the back of the rest area, a dark figure was standing there.

"... Are you HERMIT?"

The person who appeared in front of him was none other than In-hyuk.

However, he was now wearing a black skull mask and combat attire.

"You can hang up the call now, can't you?"

[You can hang up the call now, can't you?]

Because of the short physical distance, In-hyuk's disguised voice created a howling effect through the receiver.

"What is it you intend to do here? Are they really following me...?"

In-hyuk quickly covered his mouth with a gloved hand. Then he walked away in the direction opposite to where Jin Jong-man had entered, scanning the surroundings.

Jin Jong-man, too, cautiously peeked out.

Soon after, they saw four vehicles climbing up out of the darkness.

"Still think you can't trust us?"

"How did they...?!"

He looked again at the phone he'd been clutching. Now his suspicion was turning into certainty.

"If you know why you were tracked, may I have this for a moment?"

"You knew about it from the start?"

"Im Deok-chang is cornered, so he'd have prepared thoroughly."

With those words, In-hyuk took his phone and plugged in a USB drive from his pocket.

"What's that?"

He only returned the phone once the progress bar on the screen hit 100%.

"It's a cleaning program. Now, let's go down."

"... Down? Down where?"

"Where else? To shake them off, we have to go to the bottom of the mountain. There's no time, let's move."

In-hyuk pushed him toward the woods behind the rest area.

"How far up are we going?"

After climbing the steep slope for five minutes, Jin Jong-man was very tired.

While they paused, they could hear sounds of people following from below, picking up on their presence.

"We're here."

In-hyuk moved aside the branches covering a tree trunk.

An off-road motorcycle appeared.

"You expect us to ride this down?"

"Would you rather walk?"

"...."

When Jin Jong-man fell silent, In-hyuk tossed him a helmet.

"If you don't want to die, get on the back. Now."

The shadows of those drawing near grew clearer in the darkness.

Jin Jong-man, with no time to hesitate, put on the helmet and climbed behind In-hyuk.

Buaaaang—

At the same time, a loud sound echoed as the engine started.

From below, seeing the brake light, those chasing them sped up as well.

"Don't fall off."

In-hyuk cranked the throttle and shot forward.

With hair-raising maneuvers skimming past trees, Jin Jong-man screamed.

"Aaaagh—!"

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At the same time.

Im Deok-chang was sitting in his National Intelligence Service office.

He wasn't in a good mood, having just received some news.

"What? A motorcycle in the mountains?"

It was a report from the agents sent to handle Jin Jong-man and secure the information provider.

[Charlie Team is tracking their direction and likely route with a drone, while we're moving by car.]

"Didn't you confirm who the guy is?"

[Maybe they knew of our moves, but we couldn't confirm in time. Will let you know as soon as we secure them.]

"Keep communications up and don't lose them!"

Im Deok-chang shouted, then leaned back into his chair with a sigh.

Meanwhile, Choi Dong-hoon, who had been standing in front, played back video captured with a drone on the monitor.

But only the rapid-moving motorcycle's lights could be seen through the trees; the rider's identity was obscured.

"Riding through the mountains at that speed?"

Choi Dong-hoon, who had moved beside him, was shocked as well.

"They're definitely no amateur."

"If that's an amateur, the world has gone insane."

After a few minutes,

Grotesque exclamations from the agents on the phone could be heard.

[Huh? Huh? Wha...?]

Of course, Im Deok-chang could see the reason, because he was watching the drone footage.

The motorcycle and the pursuing car on the road were nearly level.

Then suddenly, the motorcycle veered and leapt off the road's edge onto a cliff. It soared across the cars and road as if flying, then disappeared back into the forest.

"This crazy—!"

"Did you see that just now?"

The situation unfolded so fast that Im Deok-chang was clutching his chest in shock.

"What are you talking about?"

"The motorcycle rider was wearing a skull mask."

"So it's Skull again?"

"Looks like he's finally fallen into our trap."

Even after Reina Blackwood left, she'd left a trap for him.

But when Skull didn't show up during the escape, all they could do was keep watching.

So Im Deok-chang spoke into the receiver.

"The enemy is Skull. Do not let them escape, no matter what it takes!"

Screeeech—

Given the situation, the agents seemed to be changing direction urgently.

The chase as seen through the drone continued on.

Watching the screen, Im Deok-chang swallowed and spoke to Choi Dong-hoon.

"I need to hit the restroom for a bit."

It seemed the tension was getting to him.

He went out into the hallway and entered the bathroom.

Moments later, two male agents entered, nodded to Im Deok-chang in greeting, and approached the urinals.

"On duty tonight?"

It was a polite question.

But the two agents exchanged glances instead of replying.

Sensing something off, Im Deok-chang tensed.

In that instant, one man grabbed him from behind, and the other stuck a handkerchief over his mouth.

It didn't take long for all strength to drain from Im Deok-chang's body.

"Whew... He's disgustingly heavy."

"Let's pack him up and move."

The agents' true identities were Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, disguised with the help of Noah Vantrail's techniques.

Chapter 162 ·Did We Fall into a Checkmate?

In-hyuk continued to ride through the mountain path with Jin Jong-man on the back of the motorcycle.

"Aaaagh—!"

Meanwhile, Jin Jong-man's screams never ceased from behind.

That was because the speed at which they were shooting past trees in the forest was truly terrifying.

"Could you quiet down a bit?"

"Aaaagh—!"

But Jin Jong-man's screams kept echoing.

As a result, In-hyuk was on full alert, occasionally glancing up. He had known since the beginning that a drone was following them.

BRRRMMM—

At that instant, he turned the handlebars, running along the mountain ridge, then climbed a slope.

With his fast speed, the motorcycle lifted into the air.

At the same moment, In-hyuk took his right hand off the handlebar and threw an iron bead, the size of two finger joints, behind them from within his jacket.

THUNK—

The motorcycle broke out of the forest, landed on the road, and kept going.

Meanwhile, the drone flying overhead was struck by In-hyuk's iron bead and plummeted.

"..."

At some point, Jin Jong-man's screams had stopped.

He was left speechless, having just witnessed In-hyuk's actions and the result.

At that moment, the vehicles from the Kooou side, whom they had briefly shaken off, started to close the distance from behind.

"We'll go back into the forest."

"Then why did you come out?"

"Had to bring down the drone. And if you keep screaming like that, I'll bring you down too, Director."

It was difficult to target the drone from within the forest.

In-hyuk soon dropped down through a gap in the guardrail and entered the woods again.

SCREEECH—

The pursuing vehicles abruptly stopped, trying to relocate the now-disappeared motorcycle.

Since even their drone had crashed, they could no longer track which direction In-hyuk was heading.

"Damn—!"

The man in the passenger seat picked up his phone.

"This is BETA. The target has become difficult to pursue. Since the target can't stay in the forest forever, we'll search the nearest roads."

But there was only silence on the other end.

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About thirty minutes later.

The motorcycle, still running through the woods, finally stopped in front of a road.

"Whew—! Why are we stopping?"

"We'll transfer to a vehicle from here."

In-hyuk got off the motorcycle with Jin Jong-man and covered it with nearby branches.

When they climbed up to the road, there was a car already parked.

"... Was everything moving according to your plan?"

"You'll see."

Jin Jong-man was still in disbelief.

Everything, from racing a motorcycle through the dark forest, downing the drone, and shaking off the chasing cars—it all seemed unbelievable.

Not to mention he had been riding on the back the whole time, making it all the more amazing.

"What exactly do you do?"

"The guys chasing us will be coming down from above. I'll explain on the way."

"Hmm..."

The flow Jin Jong-man had hoped to lead was cut off.

Clearing his throat, he climbed into the passenger seat.

"Then hold on tight. We're leaving here as fast as possible."

"... What?"

As In-hyuk started the engine, the instant Jin Jong-man threw a question back, In-hyuk spun the car 180 degrees in reverse.

From that moment, he picked up speed, racing through seven consecutive downhill corners without slowing down.

"Aaaaaaaagh—!"

With the car skimming the guardrail, Jin Jong-man in the passenger seat could see the pitch-black cliff below.

Having barely kept it together on the motorcycle, Jin Jong-man's screams erupted again.

'You said you'd explain in the car!'

The crazy cornering and acceleration lasted for nearly twenty minutes.

But eventually, as the grade and corners eased and houses began to appear, In-hyuk slowed down.

"This should keep those guys from catching up." Read the latest chapters at novelping(.)com.

Before they knew it, the car was entering Yangyang.

"Are you trying to kill me by heart attack?"

"You're still alive, aren't you?"

Jin Jong-man was about to voice his complaints, but gave up.

"Whew... So, what's really going on? What's behind Deputy General Manager Im Deok-chang?"

"You already guessed there's someone behind him?"

"Honestly, with his abilities, he's nowhere near enough to pull off the Notex and Hwain Techon incidents."

He seemed to have a pretty clear grasp of Im Deok-chang.

"Then why not hear it directly from him?"

"You mean from Deputy General Manager Im? But he's—"

Jin Jong-man, who'd come from the National Intelligence Service, had confirmed that Im Deok-chang was inside headquarters.

"We've already secured him."

With that answer, Jin Jong-man stared at In-hyuk in shock.

"Don't tell me... Did you infiltrate the National Intelligence Service using me as bait?"

"Precisely, it was to use you as bait and also to filter out traitors within the agency. Among those tracking today, there were bound to be agents on the inside."

Jin Jong-man's expression grew even colder.

"So, you set this up to draw the internal agents out? By the way, who are you that Im Deok-chang is after you?"

He couldn't help but have many questions.

Especially since In-hyuk was still wearing a full-face mask with a black skull drawn on it.

Unable to even read his expression, Jin Jong-man felt even more frustrated.

"They call me 'Skull.'"

"Are you telling me to call you that too? Then what about HERMIT?"

A skull and an ascetic hermit—neither had a positive connotation.

"Call me whichever you feel comfortable with."

"Honestly, 'Skull' just sounds like some edgelord, so I'll just go with Hermit."

"Well, it's not much different either way."

A strange lull fell with the bizarre shift in topic.

Soon, Jin Jong-man spoke again.

"What kind of relationship do you have with Deputy General Manager Im for all this to happen?"

"Isn't everything just a matter of friend or foe? If you're not an ally, you're an enemy."

"So who's behind Deputy General Manager Im?"

In-hyuk, hands on the wheel, asked in turn:

"Can you handle it?"

Jin Jong-man thought briefly but then answered.

"I can't back out after coming this far, can I?"

Even if it wasn't for the drone, Im Deok-chang would have realized that the informant was Skull.

Naturally, Jin Jong-man would also be tied up with him, so even if there'd been no dealings, it would be hard to deny their connection.

In-hyuk shot him a sidelong glance, smiling behind his mask.

"In that case, let's go see Im Deok-chang. It'll take a while, so I'll tell you what's behind him on the way."

The two of them quickly exited the streets of Yangyang they had just entered.

* * *

Choi Dong-hoon, at the third deputy director's office in the National Intelligence Service, went looking for Im Deok-chang, who'd said he was going to the restroom.

But even after searching for over twenty minutes, Im Deok-chang was nowhere to be found, so Choi visited the security office to check the CCTV first.

"... He never left the office."

On the footage, the third deputy director's office door remained closed at the relevant time.

After that, only Choi Dong-hoon could be seen coming out and looking for Im Deok-chang, restrooms included.

"Any sign of tampering?"

"That is..."

The person in charge at the security office tapped the keyboard, checking the state of the server where the CCTV footage was stored.

"As of now, none..."

Choi Dong-hoon couldn't just stand by.

"The third deputy director has been kidnapped within headquarters. Trigger an emergency code, seal all entrances, and search the building now!"

"W-what, now?"

"You want to wait until tomorrow?"

"What's going on?"

A voice came from the security office door.

It was Choo Jae-min, the head of the First Division.

Upon seeing him, Choi Dong-hoon clenched his teeth but spoke calmly.

"Deputy General Manager Im is missing within headquarters. All signs point to abduction."

Choo Jae-min tilted his head and asked back.

"An abduction within headquarters? Does that even sound plausible?"

"He said he was going to the restroom, but there's no trace of him anywhere in the CCTV—from the office to the hallway to the restroom entrance. That doesn't just suggest abduction, it means someone's hacked the National Intelligence Service's servers."

With his detailed explanation, Choo Jae-min's brow twitched. Find the original chapter at novelping.com.

"Is this true?"

The question was directed at the person in charge.

"I'll need to check in detail."

Getting frustrated, Choi Dong-hoon turned his head and raised his voice.

"What more do you need to check?!"

Choo Jae-min shook his head at the sight.

"Have the security team check for hacking. And as for you, come outside and give me a full explanation of the situation instead of making a fuss here."

Within the National Intelligence Service, as a Level 6 agent, Choi Dong-hoon had no choice but to follow Choo Jae-min's orders.

So the two stepped into the hallway.

Then Choi Dong-hoon, with a hint of suspicion, asked Choo Jae-min:

"By the way, didn't you leave earlier in the evening? When did you come back—!"

Suddenly, someone tackled him from behind and clamped a damp handkerchief over his mouth.

As Choi Dong-hoon struggled, his strength faded from the drugs, and he slumped.

Meanwhile, Choo Jae-min, grinning smugly, wheeled over a cleaning cart from the emergency stairwell and loaded Choi Dong-hoon into it.

"Second gift all wrapped up."

"Let's hurry up. Otherwise the CEO will get here first."

"Even so, it'll take some time for him to come all the way from Gangwon Province."

Choo Jae-min's real identity was Hong Yu-geon, and the man who had tackled Choi Dong-hoon from behind was Van Hester.

The two bantered lightly as they quickly left the area.

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A few hours later.

With his vision blocked by a hood, Im Deok-chang groaned, then heard Choi Dong-hoon's voice.

"Deputy General Manager, is that you?"

"Ugh... Chief Choi?"

Clinging to consciousness, he waited for a reply.

"Yes, it's me. Can you see anything right now?"

"N-no... What the hell happened?"

He fleetingly recalled being attacked by someone in the restroom.

"I can't see anything either. I'm tied up and blindfolded, so I can't figure out what's going on."

Im Deok-chang realized his own hands and feet were also tied to a chair.

"Same here..."

But besides Choi Dong-hoon, he didn't sense anyone else nearby, so he spoke cautiously.

"What in the world happened to you?"

"I was attacked in the restroom. But why are you here?"

"I was ambushed too. One of those guys was disguised as Deputy General Manager Choo Jae-min."

A long sigh escaped Im Deok-chang's lips.

He hadn't considered that the enemy would infiltrate the National Intelligence Service just to target him directly.

Then another thought struck him.

"What happened to Skull? Did the tracking unit catch him?"

If the tracking unit had succeeded, that outcome might help him escape.

But the atmosphere felt grim even before Choi Dong-hoon replied.

"... Judging by what I saw last, it seemed they failed."

"So this is what it's like to be checkmated?"

Once again, heavy silence followed.

Just then, dull footsteps approached.

"So you still have the presence of mind to chat after getting captured?"

With the disguised voice echoing, both Im Deok-chang and Choi Dong-hoon fell silent.

The person approaching them was In-hyuk.

In-hyuk pulled the hood off Im Deok-chang's head.

At the same time, Im Deok-chang looked around at the still-darkened surroundings, trying to get his bearings.

"This place is..."

"You don't recognize it? It's the safehouse of UID you guys used until recently."

UID was a special unit under the Ministry of Defense, originally created by the Organization as an experiment. Naturally, unless you were related to the Organization, you wouldn't know about it.

With that, Im Deok-chang's eyes went wide as he stared at In-hyuk in the skull mask.

"... How do you know about UID? Don't tell me, Skull, are you one of those guys who got disposed of?"

"No. I was discharged without a problem from there."

Given such incomprehensible information, Im Deok-chang's eyes wavered.

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Chapter 163 ·Shouldn't You Shut His Mouth

Since the Organization's UID was a prototype special unit, it held many secrets.

Because of this, UID members not related to the Organization where Im Deok-chang belonged became surveillance targets even after discharge.

However, there had never been any reports of problems regarding this until now.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why? I know about TMT, which you told me, too. Do you still think it's unrelated?"

This was information that the W&W Group's chairman Baek Ji-woong had kept hidden until recently.

Because of this, even within the Organization, there had been speculation that Skull's true identity was Aoshika(青鹿).

Meanwhile, In-hyuk observed the minute changes in Im Deok-chang's expression and movements beneath the mask. Mentally, he seemed very unsettled.

"....."

Im Deok-chang pressed his lips tight. It signaled he would say no more.

Seeing this, In-hyuk reached across and pulled off Choi Dong-hoon's hood, who had been sitting quietly opposite. He, too, looked around before locking eyes with Im Deok-chang.

Having heard the conversation just now, he kept his mouth shut.

"I didn't bring you guys here expecting to get information out of you, anyway."

With that, In-hyuk drew a handgun from his waistband and loaded it.

Click—

Im Deok-chang's face went cold and tense as he carefully spoke up.

"What... what are you going to do?"

If In-hyuk simply intended to kill him, there would have been no reason to bring Choi Dong-hoon along as well.

"At the very least, I should set the stage like I did for Jung Yoon-ju's death. That way, your higher-ups will try to pin everything on you just like before, creating an opening for me."

"... What?"

A faint laugh escaped from beneath In-hyuk's mask.

"Ha. Do you not realize how I managed to get your tail?"

Even then, Im Deok-chang's expression was one of confusion.

"Hwain Techon, Notex, Delta Scourge. And Oruch Al Pasha."

Just those four keywords made Im Deok-chang's eyes tremble violently.

"So that business was your doing too!"

His enraged shout rang out, echoing around them.

It was from that point that Im Deok-chang's standing within the National Intelligence Service began to waver significantly.

"It's suspicious from the start that those guys, who smuggled out a colossal $1.4 billion in domestic funds, got hit by pirates without any precautions. So I just slipped some info to neighboring pirates."

"You bastard...!"

Clatter—

Even with his hands and feet bound, Im Deok-chang thrashed as if to hurl himself at In-hyuk.

"I don't know who the real bastard is. You made hundreds of people jobless, laundering money through legitimate businesses—don't think you're in any position to talk."

"Grrgh."

"Oh, and it's not like I'm doing this out of some pathetic sense of justice. I just don't like what you people are doing."

The exchange was barely a conversation, but then Im Deok-chang sensed something was off.

"You... aren't you just a lackey?"

"That's just what you guys think."

Bang—

With those words, In-hyuk raised the pistol he'd been holding and shot Choi Dong-hoon in the chest.

The force knocked Choi Dong-hoon back, chair and all.

"....."

Im Deok-chang, witnessing the scene, swallowed hard.

In-hyuk raised the gun back to aim at him.

"What I need right now isn't information. I already know more than enough about you all."

At this point, Baek Ji-woong and even the Seunghwa Foundation had already been identified. Of course, there could be more that had yet to be uncovered.

Especially considering the "Aoshika(青鹿)" name that Baek Si-hwan had mentioned the first time they clashed.

Click—

He pressed the muzzle tightly to Im Deok-chang's forehead.

"Tengu—!"

At Im Deok-chang's sudden outcry, In-hyuk paused before pulling the trigger. This story is hosted at novelping.com.

It was a word without obvious meaning.

Im Deok-chang watched In-hyuk, eyes shrewd.

In-hyuk instantly understood what he intended.

"Are you trying to test just how much I know?"

"If you spare me... No, if you just get me safely out of Korea! I'll tell you what that word means—everything I know!"

A feeling of hollow amusement escaped him.

"So you're going to sell out your comrades to save your own skin?"

"Comrades? Do you think we're tied together by something like that?"

Jung Yoon-ju had to be dealt with in haste due to the circumstances.

But he hadn't expected Im Deok-chang, considered to be on her level, to blabber so easily.

"So it's more of a master-servant relationship, huh. Still, why should I trust your information? Or, it might already be something I know."

Thinking briefly, In-hyuk adjusted the gun, which had shifted slightly from his forehead.

"That's for you to decide after you hear it later."

"So you're not going to tell me now."

"If I do, I'll have no way to stay alive."

Im Deok-chang's expression showed he was sure In-hyuk had taken the bait.

"It's a waste of time, so I wasn't planning to use this method. But if you're really this talkative, I might have to reconsider."

"... What?"

"Did you think I only knew about TMT and didn't know how to use it?"

TMT: Tactical Murder Techniques, a martial arts technique for killing.

Its essence was to take only the practical techniques from various martial arts and ingraining them through habitual training.

Furthermore, one had to fully know every pain point or vital that threatened a person's life, so they could target them regardless of the specific technique used.

In other words, In-hyuk could inflict the greatest pain a human could feel.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's going to get noisy, so I'd better shut your mouth."

With that, In-hyuk took off one of Im Deok-chang's socks and stuffed it in his mouth.

"Mmmph! Mmph!"

Im Deok-chang, dazed and panicked, began screaming incomprehensible sounds.

"You can really look forward to this. Of all the guys who've experienced this, they died if anything—none ever managed to keep their mouths shut."

With his right hand formed like a knife, he stabbed into Im Deok-chang's left side. For an ordinary person, it would be impossible to stab anything—even a hand, let alone a knife—in there.

Yet In-hyuk pushed three knuckles deep, to the point that Im Deok-chang's ribs seemed about to break through the skin beneath his clothes.

"Uuuuuuugh! Uuugh—!"

At the same time, Im Deok-chang's body froze and trembled, choking screams muffled by the sock.

"It's one of the vital points near the solar plexus. Even if it's not exactly the liver blow point, hitting here is a critical attack."

"Uuugh—! Uuh! Uuugh!"

Im Deok-chang frantically seemed to try saying something, But In-hyuk's hand didn't stop—instead, he twisted it in deeper.

"Uuugh!"

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Meanwhile, on the second floor of the safehouse, three people clustered together were watching the events on the first floor through a video feed.

Like In-hyuk, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester wore skull masks and combat attire.

Accompanying them was Jin Jong-man, director of the National Intelligence Service, who had come to the safehouse with In-hyuk.

"Puedo dejar que siga así? Creo que me moriré si hago algo mal. (Should we really let him keep going? I think he'll die if he does something wrong.)"

"Ya hay uno muerto. (One's already dead.)"

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester murmured to each other in Spanish, showing slight(?) concern.

On the other hand, Jin Jong-man, unable to understand the two, wore a grave expression.

It was because he had now come to know Im Deok-chang's true nature. This story is hosted at novelping dot com.

'Did I actually approve of putting someone like that as deputy general manager at the National Intelligence Service?'

Not that he'd thought the man was particularly just to begin with.

But he'd assumed that at least some minimal patriotism would remain, having risen to such a high post as an agent.

Yet seeing him now, Jin Jong-man thought he might sell out the country itself at any time.

Suspicion even crept toward the president, since delegation powers extended as high as deputy general manager appointments.

At that moment, Im Deok-chang's voice emerged from the video and stairway—

His mouth was now free, the sock pulled by In-hyuk's hand.

[Huff— huff—! I-I'll tell you anything... please... j-just stop...]

In the end, unable to withstand the pain, Im Deok-chang's pupils were unfocused, drooling as he kept pleading something.

* * *

Around the time office workers started commuting, Baek Ji-woong, chairman of WISE&WIRE Group, left his house and got into his car.

"How long has it been since we lost contact with Hyottoko?"

As he asked, Do Jung-geol replied from the front passenger seat.

"As of now, it's just over four hours."

Baek Ji-woong, looking out the car window, sighed and continued questioning.

"What's the situation in detail?"

"Director Jin Jong-man moved based on intel that there was an attempt to contact the informant regarding Notex and Hwain Techon. During a pursuit near the Hangyeryeong rest stop, he lost them; meanwhile, contact with both Hyottoko and USHI—who were commanding agents inside the National Intelligence Service—was lost, and they've disappeared since."

USHI was the codename of Choi Dong-hoon, who assisted Im Deok-chang.

Do Jung-geol added further explanation.

"In addition, the informant has been identified as Skull."

Baek Ji-woong's expression grew colder at this.

"So it really was a trap. What are the predicted scenarios?"

Do Jung-geol hesitated briefly before opening his mouth.

"First, there's information that Hyottoko may have missed some evidence while investigating the Notex, Hwain Techon incident. If he judged he couldn't cover it up, he might have sent out adjacent agents then escaped."

"And the second?"

"Abduction. The rendezvous with the informant was bait; while agents were focused there, someone could have infiltrated the National Intelligence Service and kidnapped Hyottoko and USHI."

Both scenarios were plausible.

That's how cornered Hyottoko, a.k.a. Im Deok-chang, must have been inside the National Intelligence Service.

Of course, the fact that the informant was Skull was the biggest problem.

Still, it was hard to believe Skull could have infiltrated the NIS to kidnap both men without leaving a trace.

"Is there still no update on the NIS internal situation? Not even from CCTV?"

"The agents pulled into the pursuit, sensing something was off, are on standby outside and haven't returned. And Songchon-affiliated agents were operating on Hyottoko's direct orders, so we couldn't check them on our end."

Even the agents on standby sensed that something was going wrong.

"Anything else?"

"That's all for now."

Frustration welled up, almost choking him.

"If we're assuming it's a trap, then we have to take the latter scenario and act... but since it happened inside the NIS..."

Even if he wanted to make a move right away, there was no clear way.

Still, some kind of action was absolutely necessary.

"For now, mobilize all NIS agents on standby and start searching. Even if it's not just the NIS, dig through every nearby CCTV recording."

"I'll order it immediately."

"And check the location of Director Jin Jong-man's family too. If necessary, we might need to use them as hostages."

"Yes, sir."

The moment the conversation ended, Do Jung-geol immediately took out his phone.

Baek Ji-woong looked out the window again.

If something happened to Im Deok-chang as well, it meant that two elders would already be dead.

Of course, depending on his own perspective, it might not be a bad outcome.

But the pace was much faster than expected.

If he wasn't careful, the entire vortex might sweep up even the plans he'd been secretly preparing.

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Chapter 164 ·It Doesn't Matter

The UID safehouse on the outskirts of Yeoju-si, Gyeonggi Province, had brightened as the sun had risen.

There, In-hyuk, wearing a skull mask, gazed at Im Deok-chang, who had a bullet hole in his forehead.

Just moments ago, Im Deok-chang had ranted endlessly about the Hongu Society—its name, its structure, his position in it, and recent activities. He had provided far more information than expected.

Tread, tread—

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon came down from upstairs and spoke.

"That Elder guy, he had a much looser mouth than I thought."

Behind him were Van Hester and Jin Jong-man.

As he looked at them, In-hyuk muttered blankly.

"He was one of those guys who valued his own safety over the organization. More importantly, since Director-nim heard everything from upstairs, you probably understand what's going on, right?"

The question was thrown to Jin Jong-man.

The information spilling from Im Deok-chang's mouth had left his mind complicated.

"If that guy told the truth, then those pursuing their own interests with power and force are moving in an organized way behind the scenes, and Im Deok-chang was among the elders, right?"

"You understand it well."

In-hyuk originally hadn't expected Im Deok-chang to divulge this much information.

He had brought him just to show Jin Jong-man a fragment of the situation, but they ended up sharing substantial intel.

"Just from the names they gave themselves, it seems likely the organization originated from Japan. And if I speculate further, odds are high it's a pro-Japanese group."

The 'Hongu' of the Hongu Society was pronounced the same as Kooou, the name In-hyuk had found.

The elders' names were Hakushikijou, Tengu, Hannya, Hyottoko, Kitsune, and Shojo.

Im Deok-chang of the National Intelligence Service was Hyottoko, Kwon So-jeong from W&W Group was Kitsune, and Jung Yoon-ju from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office was Shojo.

As all the names were in Japanese style, it was only natural for Jin Jong-man's thoughts to drift in that direction.

"I think the same. So, what will you do next?"

Jin Jong-man fell into thought again, then spoke up.

"First, we need to carry out some internal reshuffling at the National Intelligence Service before launching any investigation."

"That won't be easy."

Among the new information was the fact that Im Deok-chang was actually the real boss of the Songchon, a secret group within the National Intelligence Service.

That alone showed how rotten things had grown internally.

"We can't just let guys like that fatten themselves on power and the economy."

Through the eyeholes of his mask, In-hyuk scanned Jin Jong-man's expression. It looked as if he had made up his mind.

"I trust you'll handle things well. As for the situation here, just proceed with the investigation as things appear on the surface."

"On the surface?"

In the meantime, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had gone outside, only to return with a bundle of bags and laid their contents out.

"These are records and ledgers about collusion between Hwain Techon and Notex. The two people connected to this were killed while trying to leak this information. The initial investigation will be run by the prosecution and police, but the National Intelligence Service can't just sit idly. The evidence shows it involves foreign firms, after all."

Jin Jong-man nodded as he understood the contents.

"You're telling me to uncover the truth about the Hwain Techon case. But what's truly important is the link to W&W Group, right?"

He, too, had heard from Im Deok-chang that the real owner of Hwain Techon was Kwon So-jeong from W&W Group.

"Do you think any evidence remains?"

"Well....."

Even the traces found so far had only been barely discovered, and that was thanks to someone outside the National Intelligence Service.

Jin Jong-man had to accept that reality.

In-hyuk continued.

"If you can uncover it, then do so. But it won't be easy."

"I'll do my best."

Before he realized it, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had gone upstairs to collect all the equipment installed there.

When preparations were complete, In-hyuk again looked at the face of Im Deok-chang, who lay dead with open eyes.

"You'll need to be more careful from now on."

With that, the four of them erased all other traces from the safehouse and left. Follow the newest chapters on NovelPing.

* * *

[Two men found dead in an abandoned house on Yeoju's outskirts—evidence of firearms use discovered... a pile of result sheets left at the scene? Connection to recently bankrupt H Company?]

[Two bodies found in Yeoju abandoned house! Investigators secure documents related to H Company's bankruptcy. Background investigation intensifies!]

[Intentional bankruptcy at H Company? Two bodies found alongside traces of missing large funds!]

[Police: "Clear signs of firearms use; investigating connections to H Company bankruptcy documents."]

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Four days had passed since the chase in Gangwon Province.

During that time, various articles filled the media.

Jin Jong-man, head of the National Intelligence Service, was sitting in his office reading those articles.

Then, there was a knock, and Choo Jae-min, the First Division head, entered and spoke.

"We've ensured that the identities of the third deputy director and the agents involved in the case are not exposed, and regarding the Hwain Techon bankruptcy, the prosecution is coordinating the investigation with our First Division."

"... Good work."

With his answer, Jin Jong-man sighed and furrowed his brow. Even now, Im Deok-chang's agonized screams from the Gyeonggi Province outskirts seemed to echo in his ears.

Choo Jae-min watched him with concern before continuing his report.

"We are tracking the whereabouts of agents who have been unaccounted for since four days ago, but so far, there is no account, credit card transaction, or communication record."

"They've all gone into hiding."

"That seems to be the case."

There was a moment of silence.

After gauging the mood, Choo Jae-min carefully spoke up.

"Director-nim... May I ask—just what happened?"

The sudden deaths of Im Deok-chang and his associate, Choi Dong-hoon.

The result sheets and ledgers related to Hwain Techon's slush fund found at the scene.

The missing National Intelligence Service agents...

Everything was shrouded in confusion.

But Jin Jong-man, as if he'd expected it, had directly assigned the case to Choo Jae-min and given detailed instructions on how to proceed.

Anyone would find that strange.

Jin Jong-man again fell into thought, then spoke cautiously.

"In the early morning four days ago, I went to meet the Hwain Techon informant, and I was chased and almost killed by an unidentified group. Thankfully, I survived thanks to the informant. That's also when I learned Im Deok-chang was the real boss of Songchon and a traitor within the National Intelligence Service."

He withheld the events that took place at the safehouse.

If he revealed even that, he would have to specify by whose hand Im Deok-chang and Choi Dong-hoon had died. Of course, as he did not know HERMIT's true identity from their encounter, there was nothing more to say.

"I see."

Hearing his answer, Jin Jong-man's gaze sharpened.

"I know what you're thinking. But there's not much I can tell you right now. I can't say it's necessarily in the National Intelligence Service's best interest, either."

"Then..."

"But if it were truly a threat to us, I wouldn't be handling it this way."

What concerned Choo Jae-min most was the identity of the informant.

Circumstantially, that person was the prime suspect in the Im Deok-chang and Choi Dong-hoon murders.

But Jin Jong-man's words weren't wrong, so he couldn't just press ahead recklessly.

"I understand what you mean."

"For the time being, the third deputy director position will be vacant, which means more work for you. Until the President appoints someone new, I'll need you to endure a bit more hardship."

With his request, Choo Jae-min bowed and left.

Left alone, Jin Jong-man sighed once more and made a call on his cellphone.

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In-hyuk sat in his office, replaying in his mind all the information Im Deok-chang had divulged. This story is hosted at novelping.com.

Hakushikijou, Tengu, Hannya, Hyottoko, Kitsune, Shojo.

The Hongu Society had six elders, each leading the organization from a different sector within Korea.

With just W&W Group's mistress, the National Intelligence Service's deputy general manager, and the Supreme Prosecutors' Office's deputy general manager, the scale was already impressive.

Yet even those three, he'd said, were below Hakushikijou, Tengu, and Hannya.

'What kind of guys are these?'

Even though he seemed to know more, Im Deok-chang claimed ignorance to the end, likely to leave himself some chance to survive.

'It's possible one of the other elders is in Seunghwa as well.'

That was because of the suspicious flow of capital found in Seunghwa Trading and a security system more robust than expected.

Furthermore, among the companies linked to the real business behind Areum Cleaning, there was also Seunghwa Chemicals. However, that company was closed right after Jung Yoon-ju and the agents were dealt with by Areum Cleaning.

The timing was too perfect to ignore the connection.

bzzz— bzzz—

Just then, his phone buzzed in his pocket. In-hyuk checked the display and pressed the call button.

"I didn't expect you to call back so quickly."

The caller was Jin Jong-man, director of the National Intelligence Service.

Of course, In-hyuk's voice was being modulated, just as it was during the last meeting.

[The situation is quieter than I expected, so I got worried.]

With the deaths of Im Deok-chang and Choi Dong-hoon, the truth about Hwain Techon's bankruptcy was beginning to surface.

At the same time, it had come to light that the owner of the $1.4 billion found in the Notex shipment was Hwain Techon, so the government was handling things as discreetly as possible.

But because nothing was getting stuck in the process, a sense of unease was beginning to creep in.

"The guys must have given up trying to deal with this incident. If they act carelessly, they could be exposed, just like Im Deok-chang."

[True. Up until this incident, we hadn't even the slightest inkling of their existence... They must move very cautiously.]

"Is that why you called?"

In response to In-hyuk's question, Jin Jong-man was silent for a moment, then continued.

[Later, I realized those guys came after my child. If I hadn't evacuated them ahead of time, things could have ended very badly. It's thanks to your warning. I'm grateful.]

His voice carried sincerity.

"If they wanted to control you after losing Im Deok-chang, that's the only way. Still, don't let your guard down."

[Naturally. Also... last time, I didn't get the chance to ask something.]

"What is it?"

[Can you guarantee that your organization isn't an enemy to us?]

He had been saved himself, and his child's life as well, but it wasn't an issue he could pass over without suspicion.

"Regardless of my answer, would it really be a confirmation for you?"

[What do you mean?]

"Relationships depend on perspective. Just as yesterday's friends can become today's enemies, nothing is certain when you don't know where each party stands."

Perhaps understanding, Jin Jong-man fell silent for a moment.

[I was careless with my words. Then, may I ask: do you mind telling me what HERMIT's goal is?]

In-hyuk's skills, confirmed both at Hanggye-ryeong and at the safehouse: tactics that seemed to predict events before they happened.

That alone showed he was many times more capable than any current National Intelligence Service agent.

On top of that, the group's organizational capabilities were beyond comprehension.

At least for now, he didn't want to make an enemy of them, and hoped to discern their direction through their goals.

"As of now, what I can tell you is: our target is the organization behind Im Deok-chang. What comes after that, I don't know."

[And if a state itself is behind it?]

That was the broadest scope possible, considering the code names among Im Deok-chang and the other elders.

"It doesn't matter to me where it is."

His reply was flat and emotionless.

On the other end, Jin Jong-man felt a palpable chill.

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Chapter 165 ·I Agree, Too

Baek Ji-woong and Kwon So-jeong of the WISE&WIRE Group arrived at a safehouse located on the outskirts of Suwon. The reason was that another summons for the Organization had been called, just as it had been not long ago. The difference this time, though, was that Hyottoko, Im Deok-chang, and Shojo, Jung Yoon-ju, had both met their deaths and their seats were now vacant.

When they entered the living room, a video conference setup had already been prepared. As the two sat on the sofa, the screen split into three, revealing three masked figures.

Hakushikijou, Tengu, and Hannya. None of their expressions could be seen due to their masks, but an air of seriousness was palpable.

Then Hakushikijou's voice came out first.

[As you all know, Notex's funds were robbed, and the plan to acquire Taeshin Group has fallen apart.]

No one dared interrupt and listened quietly.

[Moreover, the situation with two seats becoming vacant in such a short time is quite grave. I believe we need to take decisive measures.]

Tengu spoke up on the screen.

[Perhaps we overestimated Hyottoko and Shojo's abilities. In that case, I think it's best for us to focus on reorganizing the Organization.]

Each of their factions had lost a member. Although the sides were balanced, Tengu continued without regard for this balance.

[And the key issue right now is that evidence was found indicating Hyottoko had been tortured on site.]

When Jung Yoon-ju, the Shojo, died, there was no sign she had leaked information. This time, however, things were completely different. Im Deok-chang had been kidnapped from the heart of the National Intelligence Service together with his closest subordinate, Choi Dong-hoon, and judging by the estimated time of death, it was presumed he had been tortured for at least five hours. The likelihood that the Organization's information had not been leaked seemed slim, which prompted the current summons.

Hakushikijou addressed these concerns.

[I was worried about that, too, so I already instructed that all lines Hyottoko knew of be severed. Of course, traces can't be erased completely, but it shouldn't reach us.]

[However, isn't there a possibility that, outside of ourselves, the connection between Kitsune and Chairman Baek Ji-woong has been exposed? In fact, since the Hwain Techon case is surfacing, it would be fair to say that the information has already leaked.]

Tengu's outrage was simple in its cause—Hyottoko had been part of Hakushikijou's line. If he pinned the management failure and mistake on Hakushikijou, he could find just cause to push him out, even slightly.

[I acknowledge that point. As we're gathered here to discuss this, let us proceed with the matters that require confirmation.]

Suddenly, the topic shifted and the atmosphere fell. Noticing the strangeness, Tengu quieted down, and Hakushikijou continued.

[First, I'd like to hear about the progress in connecting with the law firm Yulmyung, which Tengu is overseeing.]

Yulmyung was the next target for connection after Jung Yoon-ju, the legal strategist, had died. Since it was last mentioned, no new updates had been shared.

[We're preparing to work on it both inside and out. However, since its structure is unlike regular companies, there are many tricky aspects.]

Hakushikijou nodded in response.

[I hope you resolve it well.]

The answer was given more smoothly than the expected attack. But Tengu, perhaps feeling something odd about it as well, cast a chilly gaze from behind his mask on the screen. Meanwhile, Hakushikijou continued.

[As you said at the start, Tengu, reorganizing the Organization is imperative. If Shojo's seat is to be filled by Yulmyung, we must decide who should fill Hyottoko's seat... I'd like to hear everyone's opinions.]

Everyone had expected this agenda item as soon as the summons came. They must have each brought at least one candidate to suggest—but no one spoke up easily. Then, Hannya, who had been silent until now, opened with a menacing air.

[Given the situation, it seems like the National Intelligence Service is off-limits unless we aim for the next regime. On the other hand, we lack the strength to poach someone from the police. Wouldn't it be better to secure another funding line?]

Baek Ji-woong and Kwon So-jeong's faces twitched at this opinion. After all, it was the WISE&WIRE Group that was currently in charge of the funding line.

Expanding it now was tantamount to splitting the profits they gained from the Organization. In other words, if another funding line was established, the W&W Group's influence in the Organization would be weakened.

No sooner had Hannya finished than Kwon So-jeong responded immediately.

"The Notex case was indeed our mistake, but it doesn't amount to a major problem. So do we really need a move that would cause future confusion right now?"

She couldn't allow their interests to be taken away. But Hannya did not back down.

[Funding is the Organization's lifeblood and the source of our power. In circumstances like these—without assurance such an incident won't happen again—do we need to keep taking such risks?] This chapter is updated first at novelping(.)com.

"I fully understand your concern, Hannya. But please consider our position as well. It isn't as if we have supported the Organization's funds without hardship."

Slight resentment was evident in her reply, and Hannya's gaze shifted to one side of the monitor.

[Hakushikijou, what do you think?]

[Isn't Tengu's opinion more important than mine? He has managed the funding line together with Kitsune up until now.]

Once again, the turn to speak was passed on. Tengu now realized why Hakushikijou had delayed his opinion on Im Deok-chang's possible leak of information. Clearly, this was a move to weaken Tengu by splitting the funding line concentrated with the W&W Group. But fully aware of the situation, Tengu found it difficult to protest further, as just cause had already been established.

[... I don't think it's a bad idea.]

At that moment, Kitsune—Kwon So-jeong's—face twisted. Despite being of the same faction with Tengu, he had not sided with her. Still, Tengu continued.

[However, the issue is whether there's a company worthy of allying with us. The W&W Group has long shared the same path with us, and there have been no issues of trust. Shouldn't any new candidate meet that standard?]

Tengu had no intent to give in so easily; he put forth a key condition—one that would allow them to reject any less-than-excellent candidate under the guise of stability.

Hannya let out a sigh that could be heard through the speaker.

[What about AMK Partners? They secured the TN SOFT shares that Hyottoko couldn't, and recently they've been building a next-generation futuristic business called Bellbyte Technology. I'd say they're the most suitable.]

The atmosphere in the room instantly cooled at that name. Especially Baek Ji-woong, who had remained silent until now, seemed particularly uncomfortable.

That was because AMK Partners was under investigation as Skull's backer, together with Im Deok-chang. But with Im Deok-chang dead, the investigation had gone cold, making it difficult to argue the case here.

Tengu picked up Hannya's suggestion.

[I don't particularly object, but the problem is that we've made no contact, right? We don't even have any detailed information on Gordon Grimes, the CEO of AMK Partners, let alone his whereabouts.]

At this, Hakushikijou immediately spoke up.

[Tengu, why don't you try meeting Norman McGrath yourself?]

[Me?]

[He's currently in Korea to relocate his branch office, I've confirmed. You could meet him and use that to request a meeting with Gordon Grimes.]

Once again, the air was suspicious. If Tengu succeeded in making contact, the credit would go to them. Still, there were reasons to find this difficult to accept.

[I'm currently working on Yulmyung. Reaching out to Norman McGrath as well... To be frank, it seems rather difficult. How about giving Chairman Baek Ji-woong a chance with this one? Considering all he's done up to now.]

The arrow's direction shifted to Baek Ji-woong, but he couldn't simply take Tengu's suggestion at face value.

'Is this some scheme of Hakushikijou, or are they testing me?'

If things worked out, Tengu would take the credit; if not, the blame would be shifted to Baek Ji-woong. Still, since he was already under disciplinary measures for failing to report on TMT, and seeking to shake off restrictions within the Organization, he had no choice but to accept.

"I've already been keeping an eye on AMK Partners. A few days ago, I also confirmed that Norman McGrath met separately with Kang In-hyuk."

On hearing this report, the atmosphere around Tengu visibly lightened.

[As expected of Chairman Baek Ji-woong. Hakushikijou, what do you think? Wouldn't Chairman Baek Ji-woong be more qualified than I am for this task?]

Hakushikijou gazed at Baek Ji-woong through the screen. Even with only video, it felt as if their eyes met.

[I think it's a good idea. What do the rest of you say?]

He was calling for a majority vote as the final cut among the elders. Tengu spoke first.

[I agree.]

[I agree as well.] This chapter was copied from novelping.com without permission.

With that, Hannya lifted his hand. Of the four elders present, three had already consented. Although Baek Ji-woong's spouse, Kitsune (Kwon So-jeong), had yet to vote, it no longer mattered.

"I agree, too."

It was simply for unanimity's sake.

* * *

After staff had left for the day, In-hyuk finished packing his personal belongings in boxes in his office and got up. It was finally his last day at Taeshin Asset Management.

"What are you doing? Not coming in?"

The question was directed at Hong Yu-geon, who had been sitting on the sofa all this time.

"Me?"

"Or should I carry them?"

Van Hester was already holding one of the boxes. Seeing this, Hong Yu-geon clicked his tongue and followed suit.

"It's not even that heavy."

"There are security guards—wouldn't it be odd if I carried it myself?"

"Tch—!"

After making sure nothing was left behind, and logging out of his computer, In-hyuk stepped outside.

The office was quiet and empty. Even so, having worked there for about a year and a half, he felt a strange sadness.

Watching him, Hong Yu-geon said quietly,

"Regretting telling Deputy General Manager Noh not to throw you a farewell party?"

"... Not really."

The three of them headed straight for the elevator. There, in the lounge by the elevator, sat Noh Dongjun.

"Are you leaving now?"

"I had to finish the handover paperwork. But what are you still doing here?"

Noh Dongjun laughed at the question.

"There's no way I could just stand by while my fellow rookie quits. How about that drink I mentioned last time, tonight?"

As for "rookies," there were not only Noh Dongjun but also several at Taeshin Trading and other parts of the Taeshin Group. Yet, previously, In-hyuk hadn't gotten close with anyone.

Adding the fact that he'd become an in-law to the Taeshin family, most people had only gossiped about him behind his back.

"I didn't expect you to care this much."

"If things go well for you at your new place, promise to take me with you."

"I'll think about it."

Smiling slightly, In-hyuk got on the elevator with Noh Dongjun. Hong Yu-geon, following after, shot him a look.

'What about us?'

In-hyuk, for now, simply ignored it.

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