Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 21

Eyes Filled with Interest

【Taiwan SolarView, registration of Patent for Innovative Core Technology in Semiconductor Inspection! Highly praised for surpassing the limitations of electrical inspection...】

【US Investment Firm FOURGMA Decides to Invest 50 Billion KRW in Taiwan's SolarView! Projected profits to be at least tenfold in the future...】

【Rizeburn Drug Case: Real Club Owner Mr. Min ○○ and 14 key members officially indicted today! For the 31 people detained on drug distribution and use charges, the prosecution's further investigation is expected...】

【Opposition lawmaker Jeong Hyun-seok urges son Jeong ○○, involved in the Rizeburn drug affair, to turn himself in! He apologizes for his wrong choice and promises thorough cooperation with the investigation... Other related parties also promise cooperation with the investigation...】

【Global Idol DDS found to have no involvement in the Rizeburn drug scandal... Whistleblower departed overseas immediately after press report...】

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The noisy incidents were quickly settled.

As In-hyuk was reading through such articles, his phone rang.

【Norman: The SolarView issue is finalized with FOURGMA, and I'll process my resignation soon and then head over to Korea.】

It was a message from Norman McGrath, who had gone back to Taiwan.

【Gordon: If you want to make money, you should move quickly.】

【Norman: Aren't you curious how much trouble I went through because the deal with Mirage Castle fell apart?】

He was referring to the company they originally planned to transfer SolarView to.

【Gordon: Not particularly. Also, I'm busy right now, so only contact me if it's urgent.】

After abruptly ending the conversation, In-hyuk checked that no further replies had come and shook his head.

Norman McGrath. In the original timeline, he had outstanding capabilities, and they had done business together quite often.

However, his extreme greed for money and habit of always weighing benefits when his profit was large made him dangerous.

For that reason, In-hyuk only dealt with Norman McGrath when it was something only he could handle; otherwise, it was rare for them to do business together.

'Unlike before, I've leashed him now, so he shouldn't act rashly.'

Mumbling that to himself, he checked the time and got up.

"I'll be off to the team leader meeting."

Everyone nodded slightly.

In-hyuk simply grabbed his tablet and went to the meeting room to take a seat.

Soon, the others entered as well.

Team 1 Leader Kim Seong-ho, team 2 Leader Go Jin-woo, and finally, the Division Leader Choo In-ho of the Equity Investment department.

"Let's start the Q3 management meeting."

From the start, team leaders collectively handled customer equity management rights and took responsibility. The division head merely received reports and was only shared information.

So, these meetings were more like discussions than sessions where major decisions were made.

However, the looks Kim Seong-ho and Go Jin-woo gave In-hyuk were not pleasant.

Both had become team leaders in their forties, having risen from manager posts; whereas In-hyuk, just for being a Taeshin family son-in-law, had clinched that position at age thirty-two.

In this strange atmosphere, each began their reports, and then it was In-hyuk's turn.

He distributed the prepared report materials to each team leader.

As the team leaders quickly read over the documents, their expressions stiffened.

"What exactly are you trying to do here?"

It was Team 1 Leader Kim Seong-ho who spoke up before In-hyuk even began presenting.

"Is something wrong?"

"These newly acquired clients here... aren't they customers currently entrusted with our Team 1?"

On the surface, the plan looked as though Team 3 was poaching clients.

But In-hyuk, his expression calm, looked at him and replied:

"The clients reached out to me first with a request. And we're talking about additional entrusted funds, not existing ones. Is it a problem to invest new money?"

Team 2's clients were included as well, so Go Jin-woo had also stiffened like Kim Seong-ho.

"In the end, are you saying Team 3 is just stealing customers from other teams?"

"Simply put, we're sharing. I explained this thoroughly during my consultations with the clients. And they all said there was no issue."

Equity Investment Team 3's rate of return soared sharply from the latter part of Q1 into Q2 this year.

Although the absolute amount of funds they managed was much less than other teams, the growth rate was so high that it was almost a pity larger funds hadn't flowed in.

Such news, naturally, spread quickly by word of mouth among clients.

Consequently, clients managed by Kim Seong-ho's and Go Jin-woo's teams made many inquiries as well.

But since neither could just sit by and watch their clients leave, they tried their utmost to soothe and persuade them.

However, they could not block enquiries eventually being made to Team 3.

"Even so, shouldn't this have been shared before it was decided?"

"Well, I'm sharing now, aren't I? And, of course, I also notified the clients that this could only proceed starting in Q3 after the higher up's approval."

In-hyuk had not broken any procedures.

Even if he'd proceeded as is, there would have been no issue.

After all, clients naturally go to the place producing the best return.

If the other teams lost out, it was only because they lacked ability.

Go Jin-woo, who wanted to press the point further, clamped his mouth shut, and Kim Seong-ho spoke up again.

"If we say no, will you drop it?"

"Yes, that's the intention. But... you'll have to bear the complaints from the clients."

The two looked displeased.

Then Division Leader Choo In-ho, who had quietly been listening, spoke up.

"Must we block clients' requests merely to prevent internal team disputes? In the end, if we can increase deposits and profit, isn't that good for the company?"

"....."

"....."

Kim Seong-ho and Go Jin-woo could not answer.

Regardless of performance, they did not want to bow their heads to the much younger, parachuted-in team leader, In-hyuk.

Choo In-ho let out a sigh.

"So, are the two of you opposed to Team 3 jointly acquiring existing clients?"

"....."

"....."

Still, silence.

If they said they opposed it, they would be admitting they cared more for pride than the company's profit.

"Why aren't you answering?"

In-hyuk, watching the situation, looked on with interest.

'Is Division Leader Choo trying to use this opportunity to rein in the team leaders?'

In the Equity Investment division, team leaders have significant authority but also take on great responsibility.

The division head mostly managed and found it hard to control such team leaders.

Choo In-ho had originally been headhunted from another firm.

Naturally, veterans Kim Seong-ho and Go Jin-woo, who had grown up within Taeshin Asset Management, did not follow him easily and, to this day, often bypassed him to speak directly with certain executives.

But both expected Choo In-ho to mediate and resolve the situation smoothly. Choo In-ho, of course, understood their intentions.

"So, will you accept for the good of the company?"

As he pressed them, the two leaders' faces twisted.

Their tightly sealed lips seemed about to push all responsibility onto the division head.

Choo In-ho was aware of this and sighed lightly through his nose.

"If you dislike this and that, then I'm seriously troubled. Or should we ask the clients managed by each team? Tell them to choose one side instead of overlapping management."

Suddenly, both turned pale.

The answer would be obvious.

Clients large enough for A-grade designation, with at least ten billion won in assets, would just go to wherever provided the best returns.

A mass exodus of such clients to Team 3 would mean Teams 1 and 2 would lose corresponding say and authority.

Executives who backed the two would also find that outcome unwelcome—a dilemma indeed.

"Well, that's..."

Kim Seong-ho trailed off, unable to retreat or advance against Choo In-ho's immovable question.

"If there's nothing more to say, I will begin meetings with the clients as acting under my division head authority. Of course, I will also fully explain the risks associated with Team 3's methods."

With that, nobody could add anything, and everyone stood up. In-hyuk watched the scene with growing interest.

As he was about to leave together, choo In-ho addressed him.

"There's more we need to discuss. Team Leader Kang, come to my office."

"... All right."

In-hyuk followed Choo In-ho out of the meeting room.

The other two team leaders, heading into the hallway, looked at the scene with evident displeasure but slyly exchanged glances with In-hyuk as he briefly glanced back.

'Things didn't go their way, so now it's a headache for them.'

Arriving at Choo In-ho's office, In-hyuk took a seat.

"I have coffee and tea—would you like some?"

"I'm fine."

Choo In-ho brought over a lukewarm glass of water and some documents.

"I read the project plan that came with your Q3 business plan. Besides personal asset management, it discusses corporate entrusted investment and M&A... When did you start thinking about this?"

At Taeshin Asset Management, they fundamentally dealt with personal assets and, for corporations, handled bonds and real estate only as alternative investments.

Corporate fund business was of a different scale and context, hard to tackle with the current structure.

"I designed the plan while improving results. Taeshin Asset Management can't keep growing just by maintaining and recruiting private clients. There's a limit."

Choo In-ho nodded; he couldn't disagree.

"The proposal is solid, but the scale for personal and corporate business is different. It's especially true in practice. Moreover, as far as I know, you only worked sales and support sections when you were at the trading arm."

No matter how capable one appears, real expertise and experience are necessary to perform skillfully.

Choo In-ho was questioning whether In-hyuk could bridge that gap.

"Also, by adding BPR (business process reengineering) and PEST (external environment analysis), we can achieve a competitive advantage."

"You're saying you want to do corporate management?"

"It's a step Taeshin Asset Management must go through to avoid becoming stagnant."

With that resolute statement, choo In-ho turned again to the project plan resting on the table.

He'd realized upon first reading that it contained material too detailed for someone who had just dabbled.

If he hadn't known the author was In-hyuk, he'd have thought it was written by an experienced fund professional.

"... Did Team Leader Kang really write this personally?"

"Yes."

"Have you discussed this with the CEO yet?"

He was asking because Taeshin Asset Management's CEO was In-hyuk's wife, Tae Ju-ha.

"No. I haven't shared it with her. Even if I have a private relationship with the CEO, it would violate company hierarchy if I did."

Choo In-ho smiled slowly at that.

"Someone considerate enough to think that still requested the CEO not put a brake on Team 3's work?"

This referenced a prior conversation where they had discussed mutual conditions.

"Each of us wanted something. But, division Head, have you been on the CEO's side from the beginning?"

The current division head had been brought in by the previous CEO, Jeon Joon-seok.

Naturally, most expected he'd be on that line, yet he acted at Tae Ju-ha's request, which was odd.

"I move according to company interests and needs."

"I don't think the executives see it that way."

Currently, there were four main factions within Taeshin Asset Management.

Head Office Chairman Tae Gun-seung, successors Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, and finally, Tae Ju-ha.

Though Tae Ju-ha held the CEO title, her practical power measured by shareholding was the weakest in the Taeshin Group.

"I don't make it obvious since it's a sensitive topic."

"I can see why."

"In any case, I'll discuss the plan properly with the CEO. But frankly, the odds are slim. The Upper Office won't like it."

As In-hyuk had said, the "stagnant water" referred to most of Taeshin Asset Management's executives.

Since they had held their spots for years, they were people who consistently favored caution over innovation.

Naturally, they resisted aggressive moves for the company.

"Still, I'm counting on you. Ah, as for the corporate client for entrusted investment, it's already been decided."

"Really? Which company is it?"

"They've requested confidentiality until it's approved, so I can't say yet."

Concluding the discussion, In-hyuk left Choo In-ho's office.

Chapter 22

This One, tailed

As the sun was setting,

In-hyuk entered the Korean table d'hôte restaurant called 'Hoam' in Cheongdam neighborhood and sat across from Jang Hyung-cheol, who had arrived first.

All kinds of food that had been ordered in advance were laid out on the table between the two.

"This time's profits were quite substantial. Both from Taeshin and AMK Partners."

Currently, Jang Hyung-cheol was growing his assets by depositing funds with both sides through In-hyuk.

And since he was getting unexpected returns every month, of course, he was in a good mood.

"It's thanks to you trusting and entrusting both sides to me."

"You said you also get investment information from AMK Partners, right?"

"That's right."

At In-hyuk's answer, Jang Hyung-cheol nodded.

"Really, who would have thought you'd get such profits from those places? The skill of hitting and running is so impressive... Anyone would think you know the future."

He was showing such a remarkable run in stocks.

At this, In-hyuk felt a little uneasy.

"The information from that side is amazing."

"How on earth did you know about such places?"

"It's just thanks to a small connection I had."

"Hahaha—! So Taeshin failed to recognize a person like you, and you're being wasted somewhere else."

It was a sarcastic remark about Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

"The place I'm working now isn't bad either. I'm not too busy, so I can even leave work on time."

"Despite your serious demeanor, you're capable of sounding like an idler."

"A person can't live too pent-up, after all."

Jang Hyung-cheol's expression soon grew serious.

"... So, what's the reason you wanted to meet today? It seems you arranged this because you have a favor to ask."

In-hyuk also hardened his expression and poured a drink for him.

"It's not a favor, but something I must earnestly ask of you."

"... A request? What is it?"

After a brief silence, In-hyuk slowly began to speak.

"Soon, a company called Chulsan Capital will be raided and searched by the Busan District Prosecutors' Office. The actual owner, you, will be included."

At those words, Jang Hyung-cheol immediately stiffened and poured himself another drink.

"... Did you know it was my company from the start?"

Officially, chulsan Capital's owner was someone else.

"Not from the beginning. I happened to discover it while picking up information from the prosecution and the tax office."

The Busan prosecutors' investigation of Chulsan Capital was something that had happened in the original future.

However, since Jang Hyung-cheol had started dealing with In-hyuk after severing ties with Taeshin Asset Management in the original timeline, In-hyuk thought this event might change along with the Rizeburn drug case that he had altered.

But from what happened with Tae Ju-ha's accident, it seemed that a major incident would still occur regardless.

So there was a high probability that Jang Hyung-cheol's situation wouldn't change either.

"Hm... I didn't expect you to have connections in the prosecution. But since I've contributed so much to that area, I'm not entirely out of the loop. What you just said... Are you sure?"

He used to be called Mr. Jang, the king of private loans in the southern region.

He'd moved so much money that it was difficult not to have contacts with the prosecution and police.

Of course, In-hyuk knew this well.

"The people who used to bring you the news have turned their backs. The Busan prosecutors, along with their informants, are determined to take you down."

"... Do you know who they are?"

"I don't. But I do know the reason."

"And what's that?"

In-hyuk sighed for a moment and continued.

"The charges are tax evasion and bribery. You once lent a hand to the Busan customs office for a transaction back in the day, right?"

"... Just for something like that?"

Honestly, In-hyuk didn't know the details either.

When he'd been a security guard for the Taeshin Group, it was just something rumored discreetly.

"They'll use that as an opening. Didn't the Central District Prosecutors' Office recently get turned upside down over the Rizeburn case, along with the police and the courts? That's led to an unexpected shake-up."

"So you're saying, the Busan prosecutors are using me as a springboard for a promotion to the metro area?"

Jang Hyung-cheol could easily grasp the situation.

"They'd see this as an opportunity. To move up in the Busan office, they'd have to go after you once."

"If that's really the case... then there's a high chance Chief Prosecutor Park Du-seok is leading it."

At the same time, In-hyuk also recalled that name.

Back then, chief Prosecutor Park Du-seok of the Busan office and several prosecutors who handled the case rode the investigation of Chulsan Capital for tax evasion, bribery, embezzlement, and so on, up to the Supreme Prosecutors' Office.

Jang Hyung-cheol continued, questioning.

"How much time do you think I have?"

If he really needed to pull out, the timing of the prosecution's move was crucial.

"You have to take care of it within two weeks at the latest."

"That's tough... Do you know a quick and smooth way to handle it?"

It was exactly the question In-hyuk had been waiting for.

"First, plugging the holes in the capital corporation's funds is your top priority. Since you just made a surplus from recent profits, put that in, and if you reschedule the maturity on large corporate bonds, you can shake some of the suspicion."

"... And then?"

"Next will be controlling the scope of the tax evasion charges. They'll likely find issues with the real estate and other assets the corporation received as payment instead of cash."

These were exactly the points where prosecutors had uncovered the charges against Jang Hyung-cheol and Chulsan Capital in the original timeline.

"Hm..."

Jang Hyung-cheol mulled it over for a moment, then called in his secretary from outside to relay instructions.

With the temporary crack of the private room door closed again, Jang Hyung-cheol resumed the conversation.

"Why are you staying at Taeshin?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"With your information network and skills, wouldn't it be possible for you to run your own company instead of just staying at Taeshin?"

In-hyuk smiled a little.

"What power do I have?"

This time, a laugh escaped from Jang Hyung-cheol's lips.

"To think the Taeshin Group folks are so blind. It's like having a treasure and just letting it rot."

"It's not that they can't see it—it's that I deliberately stayed out of sight."

"Are you saying you hid yourself on purpose?"

The original Kang In-hyuk had led a quiet life as someone sponsored by the Taeshin Educational Foundation.

Even if someone investigated his past, nothing strange would be found.

He used this to create intentions for his changed self.

"... Let's just say that's the reason."

"And why?"

"Up until now, I never found anything worth acting for."

"So, that means things have changed now?"

In-hyuk picked up his glass of water.

"I just got tired of sitting still."

"Hoho—! That's a ridiculous reason."

"In any case, I trust you'll take care of things with Chulsan Capital. As long as your safety isn't at risk, what I have to do in the future will go smoothly as well."

"I should be the one asking you for favors. But as I've seen before, do you just not drink at all?"

Since earlier, In-hyuk had only occasionally clinked his glass, never bringing it to his lips but setting it back on the table.

"When it comes to important matters, I prefer not to drink at all."

"Are you referring to the Chulsan Capital matter?"

"That, and many other things. I'll drink with you once it's all over."

This was the time when the real Kang In-hyuk was close to dying in the original timeline.

The cause was an unexplained traffic accident. It could easily be no different from what happened when he was with Tae Ju-ha.

If so, the cause was likely someone's intention, so caution was warranted.

Thus, In-hyuk ended the meeting with a polite reply.

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【Rizeburn drug route is via Busan Port; the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office, currently investigating solo, is tracking vessel movements suspected as part of the distribution route along with the Busan Port customs...】

【Busan District Prosecutors' Office raids C Capital! Charges include tax evasion, embezzlement, and bribery, with suspected collusion among high-ranking officials in the southern region...】

【Who is the real owner of Busan's well-known finance company C Capital? It's said that C Capital has over hundreds of billions of won in cash reserves from corporate lending, private loans, and bond management, and there are many suspicions about its opaque capital structure and management system...】

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The situation, which In-hyuk thought might change, played out just as he expected.

The Rizeburn incident grew into a massive wave shaking the world.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

Checking the news articles early in the morning, In-hyuk received a message from Jang Hyung-cheol.

【It will be dealt with without issue.】

The Busan prosecutors had indeed bit the tail, but because Jang Hyung-cheol knew about it in advance through In-hyuk, he could respond accordingly.

'At this rate, Mr. Jang of Haeundae will become an excellent investor.'

With that, In-hyuk put on his jacket, sent a reply, and headed out.

The house was quiet; Tae Ju-ha must have left early. He went down to the parking lot and got in his car.

'... I've been tailed.'

He'd felt eyes on him from the moment he arrived at the underground parking lot.

Checking the rear and side mirrors, he saw a sedan and a van quietly following.

Deliberately, he didn't even mutter to himself but just thought quietly.

'There are no signs that anyone has tampered with my car, but you never know...'

Someone might have installed a bug or a camera. At least, nothing turned up in places reachable while driving.

'Were those guys originally the ones who killed Kang In-hyuk?'

It was suspiciously perfect timing for their appearance.

Driving as usual, In-hyuk entered the underground parking lot of the Taeshin Asset Management building.

But the cars that had been following did not come inside—they passed by.

Getting out of the car, In-hyuk confirmed that things had quieted down. Then, standing for a moment, he called Go Mi-ah.

[Mmm... What's up?]

She sounded dazed, probably just woken by the call.

"There were guys following me all the way to the front of Taeshin Asset Management's parking lot. Can you check out who they are?"

Go Mi-ah's startled voice burst out.

[You mean you were tailed?! From where?]

"I don't know yet. Just look up the owner information for now."

[Hold on. Just now, right? Did you get the car make and license plates?]

He heard the computer booting up over the receiver.

"△△ Motors Lavante, black, 241Woo 8573; another △△ Motors Renault Maters, black, but I only saw 343Beo 22. The rest you'll see on nearby CCTV. How long will it take?"

[At this hour... On your way to work?]

"Underground parking lot."

[It'll take about 10 minutes. I'll message you.]

"Thanks."

After hanging up, In-hyuk exhaled through his nose and headed upstairs.

He didn't let his guard down at the office, either. Someone related to the tail might be inside the company.

'There haven't been any new faces recently, so maybe someone inside was turned.'

But at the office, there'd been nothing out of the ordinary. He didn't feel anyone watching, either.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

Just then, a message from Go Mi-ah arrived.

【Looks like both are burner cars. The registered owners haven't shown any activity for over three years. At minimum, they're probably vagrants—worse, maybe even missing persons.】

She attached a file with the owner profiles she'd dug up.

In-hyuk called as he entered the conference room.

"So, they're not exactly legal, huh?"

[No idea who they might be?]

The first to come to mind was Pyo Jun-woo, who'd been with the KQ Group's security team and had targeted Tae Ju-ha.

In-hyuk had dealt with him, Kim Seong-tae, and others from Taeshin's security at the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

As he was being tailed, In-hyuk thought of the organizations they belonged to.

But since they hadn't left any identifying clues, the likelihood was low.

"There are a few possibilities, but none that would start tailing me now."

[So what are you going to do? Aren't they dangerous?]

"You can't see their faces on CCTV, right?"

[The tint's way too dark—nothing shows.]

"Got it. I'll take it from here. You just track the vehicles as far as you can in reverse. If you catch their faces, please check their IDs."

[Haaa—my eyes are going to pop out from staring.]

"Please. I owe you."

Ending the call, In-hyuk returned to his office, sat in his chair, mulled it over, then sent an email from his phone.

【To: charybdis@seamail.com】

Chapter 23

Quite Detailed?

Taeshin Asset Management, CEO's office.

The CEO, Tae Ju-ha, was meeting with the head of the Equity Management Department, Chu In-ho.

"This... you're saying this was planned by Team 3 leader Kang In-hyuk?"

Right now, she was holding the business proposal that Kang In-hyuk had submitted to Chu In-ho not long ago, targeting corporate clients.

It wasn't something roughly put together.

In particular, the direction of the planning was detailed—something difficult to grasp without significant hands-on experience.

The risk assessments were meticulous, and the countermeasures were clear.

It was not work that someone new to the field could produce.

That's why it was hard for her to believe that Kang In-hyuk really wrote it.

"It's true. You really hadn't heard anything, CEO?"

"Not at all."

Though they lived in the same house every day, they had only met face-to-face a handful of times.

On top of that, for some reason, In-hyuk always got home later than she did, making it difficult for them to run into each other.

"Anyway, after reviewing it, I think the merits of the proposal aren't bad. For Taeshin Asset Management to grow further, expanding our field is necessary."

"But the issue is the clients. Corporations are entirely different from individuals in both field and scale."

"Everything, from basic SWOT analysis to operating profit and risk management, requires extremely professional capability. Not to mention, the capital required is substantial."

Tae Ju-ha nodded, evidently in agreement.

"And yet, you like the contents of the proposal, director?"

"To be honest, yes. However... It will be difficult for headquarters, upper office affiliates, and internal executives to approve."

Within Taeshin Asset Management, there were many who looked unfavorably on the newly appointed CEO Tae Ju-ha.

Plus, it wasn't as if only Tae Gun-seung and Tae Seok-hyun had supporters in the company.

Many people followed one of the successors, Tae Seok-ho, which left Tae Ju-ha maintaining her CEO spot all alone—a floating presence.

"What do you think should be done with this, director?"

"If possible, I think it's worth pursuing. Something I didn't mention earlier—apparently, according to Team Leader Kang, a corporate client is already lined up."

"Already a client? Who would that be?"

"I haven't heard yet. He said he would organize it and report once the proposal goes ahead. I think it's hard for them to discuss unless the business area expansion is decided."

Upon hearing the explanation, Tae Ju-ha's lips quirked up.

"This could end up being just empty hype. It could become a rumor or gossip."

"Right. It's a sensitive thing in this industry. If it turns out we're poaching another company's client, it could get noisy."

"So, director, are you saying you'd like to see this plan carried out?"

The most important conclusion remained.

Of course, the direction had largely been settled in their conversation.

If Taeshin Asset Management managed to expand its business scope based on Kang In-hyuk's proposal, their internal standing would become more solid.

However, ignoring the swirling winds inside the company wasn't easy, so the worry was great.

"I'm in favor. But..."

There was still concern about pushback from the other executives.

"There's no way we can resolve this just amongst ourselves. That leaves only one thing."

"No way..."

Chu In-ho trailed off, as if he'd already guessed.

* * *

It was time to get off work.

In-hyuk waited about 15 minutes in the parking lot, then drove onto the road.

After a short while, the same cars he'd seen that morning appeared from somewhere behind him, as if they had been waiting.

'Perfect timing. There must really be someone inside watching.'

He had deliberately taken his time, yet they had tagged on at just the right moment.

But what was strange was that he hadn't felt any suspicious eyes when leaving the office.

He'd used the stairs instead of the elevator, and hadn't run into anybody.

'If that's the case...'

He continued to think as he drove.

About 30 minutes later, he arrived—not at home, but at Chairman Tae Gun-seung's residence in Seongbuk-dong.

After parking by the roadside and getting out, he noticed that the tailing cars had disappeared.

Since it was a narrow alley, they seemed to have stopped following and turned away a couple of minutes ago.

"Are they just lurking for an opportunity?"

In-hyuk closed his car door and called Go Mi-ah.

[What is it this time?]

Her voice was energetic, unlike that morning.

"Can you access Taeshin Asset Management's building CCTV?"

[Why over there?]

"I think the guys who were tailing me have connections inside."

A low hum echoed from the other end.

[That'll be hard right now. You know why—your company is also part of Taeshin Group, so they use the in-house security processor. Especially the CCTV—it operates on an in-house offline network, so external access is impossible.]

Hearing her explanation, In-hyuk tilted his head.

"I just asked you, but that was pretty detailed. Don't tell me—you've already tried accessing it?"

Unless she'd already done the research, it would be hard to know that much.

Go Mi-ah's voice dropped to a low murmur.

[Ah, that's...]

"Don't tell me... you weren't trying to access it for the wrong reasons, were you?"

[Hmph! I was just checking to see how you work! What? Got a problem with that?]

Apparently realizing it was pointless to lie, she snapped back.

Of course, surveillance wasn't the whole truth.

Go Mi-ah still hadn't given In-hyuk her full trust yet.

So, she'd tried accessing the system to see if there was anything suspicious about him.

"Anyway, you're saying access is difficult even for you?"

[If you install a program on the HQ server, it may be possible. But can you even do that?]

Taeshin Group's headquarters structure and security system were as familiar to In-hyuk as the back of his hand.

As long as he had the plan and necessary equipment, direct hacking into their system wouldn't be hard at all.

"I'll think about that."

[Let me know anytime you decide. If you crack the server, that's a win for me.]

After hanging up, In-hyuk headed for the front gate of the mansion. He rang the bell, and a TSS security guard came out.

Saying nothing, In-hyuk walked through the garden and entrance, and went into the living room.

Sitting on the sofa, he locked eyes with Tae Seok-hyun.

"What are you doing here?"

"... The Chairman called for me."

"Father did?"

He looked genuinely surprised.

Then, the library door opened and Song Tae-ho, Tae Gun-seung's secretary, peeked out.

"The Chairman is waiting. Please come in."

It was clear he wasn't paying any attention to Tae Seok-hyun.

Nonchalantly, In-hyuk entered the study and took a seat.

Meanwhile, Tae Gun-seung, after checking something at his desk, came over to join him on the sofa.

"I hear your team's results have been good lately."

"... I'm just glad they've turned out not too badly."

At In-hyuk's answer, Tae Gun-seung gave a wry chuckle.

"Not exactly a humble answer."

"I don't see a reason to downplay what I've done. By the way, why did you call for me?"

When he got straight to the point, Tae Gun-seung's smile widened.

"Are you impatient? Or is it uncomfortable chatting casually with your prospective grandfather-in-law?"

What was his true intention in asking that?

In-hyuk knew why he'd been called, but didn't let it show on his face.

"I'd say it's both."

"Hoho—! Are you all right after what happened at Chairman Kang's house?"

It hadn't made big news, but various stories circulated via people who were there.

Of course, Tae Gun-seung was bound to have heard.

"I'm fine."

Tae Gun-seung's expression became subtly complex at this offhand answer.

"I noticed it at our last dinner as well, but you truly have changed. Did something significant happen in your mindset?"

"Nothing in particular. Will you keep talking in circles like this?"

When he pressed for the topic again, Tae Gun-seung snorted.

He gestured to Song Tae-ho, who brought over the documents Tae Gun-seung had just checked at his desk.

"I read this. The proposal from Taeshin Asset Management to expand into delegated corporate investments and M&A."

In-hyuk recognized it as the document he'd handed to Director Chu In-ho. Of course, he had expected this situation.

Chu In-ho would have reported it to the CEO, Tae Ju-ha, and since decisions were hard amid executive factions, they had reached out to Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

"I didn't expect it to get all the way to you, chairman."

"It was sent because current Ju-ha can't handle it right now. Didn't you submit the proposal knowing that?"

Tae Gun-seung seemed to have read In-hyuk's moves quite well.

"What strength do I have to make something like that happen?"

"And yet, you wrote this proposal? Even with a quick look, there are many details only someone with considerable practical experience could include. How do you know all of this so well?"

"I studied whenever I had the time."

"Studied? You call this studying?"

Reading the proposal, Tae Gun-seung felt exactly as Ju-ha and Chu In-ho had.

Hearing such an implausible excuse from In-hyuk left him exasperated.

"It wasn't easy."

"I had no idea my grandson-in-law could be this cheeky."

"I'm not too bad at it."

A brief silence followed.

Tae Gun-seung glanced through the proposal again before continuing.

"I hear a corporate client is interested in this proposal. Who is it?"

"Wasn't that explained when you received the proposal?"

"You can't tell me, either?"

"The client won't allow it unless the deal is certain."

When In-hyuk replied seriously, Tae Gun-seung rapped the papers against his knee.

"If I can give you assurance, would you tell me?"

"Whatever you have in mind, chairman, why are you so interested in a corporate client?"

"I'm curious who recognized your capabilities first."

"No matter how nicely you phrase it, it's difficult to say right now."

When In-hyuk flatly refused, Tae Gun-seung nodded.

"Fine. Then, if the client is secured, can you at least tell me the approximate size?"

In-hyuk hesitated this time, then answered.

"What the client wants is more M&A than investment. If we calculate the value to match their desired scale... at least in the hundred-billion won range."

"Did you fix incentive conditions too?"

The most important thing in investment or M&A brokerage was profit.

No matter how massive the deal closed, if the gain was small, it hadn't much value.

"We're negotiating a 2% fee. Depending on the case, payment could be in stock."

If a company with a value of 100 billion won was bought, the profit would be 2 billion won.

The process wouldn't be easy, but, considering average corporate market caps, it'd be hard for the value not to go higher.

"I have to say, this is very concrete for something that's only had a meeting and a proposal. It's like you expected it to pass."

"Well, it's natural for anyone to be optimistic. Of course, I'd like it to go through, but however it turns out, we'll have to follow the upper office's decision."

Perhaps because of In-hyuk's bantering answer, Tae Gun-seung again let out a soft laugh.

"For you to carry this out, you might need to be in a higher position than you are now. How about joining HQ and setting up a dedicated office there? Naturally, you would take the director's seat."

It was an incredibly generous offer.

Furthermore, not as a subsidiary under an affiliate like Taeshin Asset Management, but as a division director at the headquarters, Taeshin Trading—a position equivalent to Tae Yeo-jun, director of Taeshin Electronics' overseas business.

Once more, In-hyuk hesitated, then finally opened his mouth.

Chapter 24

Who is behind it?

Tae Seok-hyun recalled Kang In-hyuk passing through the living room and entering the study, and he felt a sense of foreboding.

But he grew even more anxious, as he couldn't very well eavesdrop at the door.

Just then, his wife, Lee Sun-hye, came down from the second floor.

"Did someone come?"

She had just finished her shower and heard Tae Seok-hyun's voice from downstairs.

"..... It's Team Leader Kang."

He didn't even use the word 'son-in-law'. Even so, Lee Sun-hye knew who he was talking about.

"Why is he here? Where is he now?"

Tae Seok-hyun pointed his head toward Chairman Tae Gun-seung's study.

"Father called him in."

"Your father? For what?"

For some time now, Tae Gun-seung had begun to show quite a bit of interest, not only in Tae Ju-ha but also in Kang In-hyuk.

"I don't know either. I didn't even know Team Leader Kang was coming to the house in the first place."

At that moment, the study door opened, and In-hyuk came out to the living room with Song Tae-ho.

Tae Seok-hyun and Lee Sun-hye were about to ask something, but they closed their mouths when they saw Tae Gun-seung following.

Tae Gun-seung spoke to In-hyuk, who was heading for the front door.

"Your proposal isn't bad, but do think carefully once more about the offer I made you."

"I don't think my position will change on that. I'll be excusing myself now."

In-hyuk gave a slight nod toward Tae Seok-hyun and Lee Sun-hye and left the house.

As soon as the front door shut, Tae Seok-hyun, watching carefully, followed Tae Gun-seung back into the study.

"Father. What was that about?"

Tae Gun-seung, sitting on the sofa, responded indifferently.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what did you call Team Lea... no, Kang over for?"

Tae Seok-hyun almost made a slip with the titles, and Tae Gun-seung's gaze grew a bit sharp.

After thinking for a moment, Tae Gun-seung answered.

"Kang came up with a pretty good plan this time. However, it seemed a waste to let him do it under Ju-ha, so I suggested arranging a separate division at headquarters."

Tae Seok-hyun was startled.

"Division? What kind of work is this... No, if it's a separate division, don't tell me you meant to make Kang division head...!"

"I suggested it, yes. That way, he can push what he wants to do."

"..... So, what did Kang say?"

In-hyuk's reaction earlier in front of the study door had seemed odd.

"He declined for now."

"Ah...."

"I mean only coming to headquarters. He said it'd be more appropriate to do that work at Taeshin Asset Management."

In-hyuk hadn't refused the position of division head itself. Tae Seok-hyun's brow twitched at that answer.

"From what I've heard, Kang's current department head rank was earned by marriage, so there's a lot of pushback internally. Even aside from him, if you appoint him division head just by the chairman's decision, it'll only further divide him from Ju-ha and the executives."

He was not wrong.

Tae Gun-seung had heard there had been a lot of talk since Tae Ju-ha was made CEO of Taeshin Asset Management.

"It sounds like you're more concerned about whether to make him division head, than what kind of project he's planning."

At that moment, Tae Seok-hyun seemed to realize his mistake and stopped talking.

Tae Gun-seung looked at him coldly.

"Whether there's pushback in the company or not, whether he's at odds with the executives or not—that's for the person involved to handle. If Kang proves himself with ability, he'll get through it. If not, then that'll be all there is to it."

It was a thoroughly meritocratic statement.

This had been evidenced clearly throughout the management of Taeshin Group.

Publicly, of course, the heir was Tae Seok-hyun.

But that was just a declaration Tae Gun-seung made for the stability of the group.

The true successor still hadn't been decided.

The fact that Tae Gun-seung, now well past ninety, had not let go of management until now was proof enough.

"..... Understood."

"Speaking of which, Taeshin Electronics' operations seem dull lately. Are you analyzing the cause?"

The topic suddenly shifting to himself, Tae Seok-hyun quickly lowered his head.

The growth of Taeshin Electronics' products had started to slow a little over two years ago, and the drop had recently become steeper.

The main reason was the innovative new release by their overseas competitor, OFL, in telecommunications devices, but other divisions were also faltering, making it a problem.

"The department in charge is supposed to submit a report this week."

"What about you?"

"..... Pardon?"

"I mean, what are you doing as the CEO of Taeshin Electronics?"

"......."

Silence ensued once more.

"Haaa. That's enough. You can go."

In the end, Tae Seok-hyun couldn't say any more and left the study.

* * *

The tailing had gone on for days—even now, on his way home from work.

In the meantime, he had checked with special detectors for any tampering with his car, bugs, or cameras, but whether it was luck or they were just being careful, he found nothing.

"Are they analyzing my behavioral patterns before making a move?"

The original Kang In-hyuk died in a car accident.

There may have been pressure from someone, but there was not even a hint of foul play.

If that was the result of careful calculation, it was highly likely even those who took care of the aftermath were co-opted.

"The real question is, when will those guys make their move...?"

He tried recalling his memory of the accident. Nothing struck like a revelation.

Until recently, he had remembered almost everything, but the details of the accident were still missing.

"Is it because the time hasn't come yet?"

The problem was, he'd never cared much about the incident, so he didn't know the exact date.

The only thing he could recall was that it happened sometime this June....

"If someone orchestrated it, the real question is, who's behind it...?"

A while later, he arrived and took the elevator up to his residence.

Tae Ju-ha hadn't come home yet—the house was quiet. He changed clothes in his room, but just then, his phone vibrated.

Bzzzz— bzzzz—

He'd received an email.

[Sender: charybdis@seamail.com]

[37.52672/127.0182/허4453]

It was from the person he'd contacted using the proxy server Go Mi-ah had set up for him.

After checking the content, In-hyuk changed into an all-black outfit rather than his comfortable loungewear and headed out.

A moment later, the elevator arrived, and the door opened.

"... Ah."

Inside stood Tae Ju-ha.

She met In-hyuk's gaze blankly, then carefully stepped out.

"... Are you going somewhere?"

"Ah... I'm feeling stiff, so I thought I'd go for a jog."

"At this hour?"

It was already past 9 p.m.

"It's cool at night. I'll go for a run, so you go in first."

In-hyuk pressed the elevator button again, which had gone down.

Heading toward home, Tae Ju-ha suddenly stopped.

"Did you get a call from grandfather?"

"He called about two days ago, so I met him that evening. He wanted to discuss a proposal I'd submitted."

"What did he say?"

Tae Ju-ha looked genuinely curious.

"He didn't say anything further yet, so I can't tell what decision the chairman will make. I don't think it's my place to talk first. If you're really curious, you should ask him directly."

"You could at least tell me what was discussed."

"Sorry, but I don't think I can. I'll be going."

Just then, the elevator arrived.

For a moment, Tae Ju-ha considered stopping In-hyuk but just stood there with a calm expression.

When In-hyuk reached the first floor, he pulled his cap low and went outside.

After walking for about 40 minutes, he arrived at a parking lot in Hangang Park.

The location matched the coordinates sent in the message.

"Is it that car?"

A rental car with the license plate number matching the one received was parked there.

As he approached, the driver's window rolled down, revealing a young Hispanic man.

"You're Kang Inhyeok?"

"Sí, y lo digo con calma. (Yes, and speak comfortably.)"

When In-hyuk replied in the man's native Spanish, his eyes widened in surprise.

"Me contactó sin ningún contacto. Y me conocía bien? (You contacted me out of nowhere, and you seemed to know a lot about me?)"

In response, In-hyuk continued in Spanish.

"That's right. Also, since I feel a prickling at the back of my head, why don't you have your colleague come out too?"

The man's expression stiffened slightly. After a moment of silence, he picked up his radio.

"We've been made. Come out."

[... Okay.]

The red dot that had been aiming at the back of In-hyuk's head disappeared.

Soon, a Korean man, dressed similarly to In-hyuk, exited another vehicle and approached.

"I don't know how someone who's a chaebol's son-in-law heard about us, mercenaries working far from here, and came to us for a job."

The approaching man introduced himself as Hong Yu-geon of the mercenary group Charybdis, and the Hispanic man in the car was his partner, Van Hester.

Naturally, they had checked In-hyuk's background as well.

"I'd just heard there was a good firm. So, did you find what I asked for?"

Meeting In-hyuk's gaze, Hong Yu-geon signaled with his chin to Van Hester, who handed over an envelope from inside the car.

Inside were the investigation results on the people who had tailed In-hyuk.

"... Daemyung Detective Agency?"

"They waited around your apartment and were even swapping with other guys. We followed them, and that's where they went."

The envelope was stuffed with photos of the tail and the detective office just mentioned.

"What about this place?"

"It's at the back."

[Daemyung Detective Agency]

Representative: Lee Daemyung

▷ Born: 19□□ year, □□ month, □□ day

▷ Daemyung Detective Agency/Business License Change

▷ Member of the Korea Association of Licensed Detectives

▷ Founded Daemyung Agency/Private Business

▷ 20□□ year: Chief Inspector, Gangnam Police Station Investigation Division

▷ Graduated from the Police University, class □□

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It was essentially an errand center rebranded as a detective agency.

Of course, despite the name, they probably only handled things like infidelity investigations and missing persons.

But considering what had happened to the original Kang In-hyuk, it was hard to believe that was all they did.

While In-hyuk was going through the evidence, Hong Yu-geon spoke up.

"There's supposed to be just the boss and two employees at the office, but judging from the photos, there are at least ten others. Clearly not just ordinary civilians."

Just as he said, the men in the photos looked like they had police, military, or possibly even gangster backgrounds.

"I see. Has the head, Lee Daemyung, met anyone unusual recently?"

"There's a photo."

He quickly thumbed through the stack of pictures.

In-hyuk's hand stopped at a familiar face.

"... Lee Jung-tae?"

He had known the man from before he'd ended up in this world, but he'd also seen him recently.

Lee Jung-tae was part of KQ Group's security office.

He'd also seen him standing beside Jeon Hae-in, Kang Cheon-gyu's wife, at Chairman Kang's recent autobiography launch.

"Someone you know?"

"I think I might know who'd have me tailed."

"Glad it was productive then. Well—!"

As Hong Yu-geon trailed off, he rubbed his fingers together.

In-hyuk transferred $100,000 to his overseas account using his phone.

About 140 million won—a large sum for reverse-tracing a tail and background checks, but he felt it was worth it for using their services.

"Oh? What a clean transaction."

With a mumble, Hong Yu-geon checked the deposit with Van Hester.

As he watched them, In-hyuk made an offer.

"How about working just for me from now on?"

"With you?"

Exchanging a glance with Van Hester, Hong Yu-geon continued the questioning.

"The work will be similar to now. Investigate people contacting me. There'll be some additional requests, but nothing too different from your usual work, and you'll be well paid, like just now."

"If it's exclusivity, we'll need 1.5 times the usual rate."

He made a counter-offer.

In-hyuk gave a slight smile.

"Five hundred thousand dollars each per year. Danger pay and expenses extra. What do you say?"

This new offer was worth about 800 million won.

The two men exchanged shocked glances, then Hong Yu-geon broke into a broad grin.

"Hahaha—! Sir, you're really generous!"

Chapter 25

Did You Cheat?

In-hyuk went to work and spent his day as usual.

However, his mind was tangled because of the information he had discovered through Charybdis.

'Why did Jeon Hae-in target me instead of Tae Ju-ha?'

That was because Daemyung Detective Agency had moved on the instructions of Lee Jung-tae, her security guard.

From the current circumstances, it was certain that the original Kang In-hyuk had been killed at their hands, disguised as an accident.

Yet, he still could not understand why he was her target.

Brrrr— Brrrr—

At that moment, Go Mi-ah called.

It seemed to be about the favor he had asked, to trace the movements with the information obtained from Charybdis last night.

"How did it go?"

In-hyuk stepped into the meeting room to answer the call.

[Recently, they've only been moving around central Seoul. Judging from the route, it looks like you've been tailed.]

"And?"

[Until a little while ago, they went out of town frequently. But there's something odd... Most destinations were orphanages.]

Since that behavior didn't make sense, In-hyuk tilted his head in confusion.

"Orphanages?"

He wanted to know the reason right away, but it was only possible if he caught Lee Daemyung or raided the office.

[Anyhow, that's how it was. Nothing else particularly suspicious. That Lee Daemyung from Daemyung Detective Agency also wasn't odd apart from the background info you gave me. Oh, and the reason he quit the police is because he got discharged for assault and leaking investigation info.]

"Just for that?"

Such things were all too common within the police.

If the man had graduated from the National Police University and had reached the rank of superintendent, which was near high-rank, he could easily have smoothed things over with connections.

[There are plenty of other things that got brushed under the rug— bribery, embezzlement of investigative funds, unauthorized hiding and destruction of evidence. And the last assault case, it even included involuntary manslaughter. The charges were dropped, though.]

"What a shady guy."

[Why is a private investigator run by a guy like that tailing you? Did you cheat on your wife or something? Was it someone from Taeshin Group who assigned them?]

At that moment, In-hyuk's brow furrowed deeply.

"Me—! Hoo... Don't say ridiculous things. Enough about Daemyung. And the phones—no news yet, right?"

He meant the phones recovered when he took care of Pyo Jun-woo and three others in the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

Go Mi-ah had been trying to decipher the dual patient code they'd found on the phone, but there hadn't been any results.

[I've been trying all sorts of codes, but it's not working.]

"You're only trying English inputs, right?"

[That's right.]

Since the code was for confidentiality, the sentence format was clear.

He had tried all the codes he'd learned or heard as a special forces member through the connection with UID, but nothing worked.

That meant the perpetrators probably had their own preferred code.

"Nothing received by that phone in the meantime?"

[I turned off outgoing connections and only opened the incoming code, but it's been quiet.]

They'd already messed with the corpse count found in the warehouse, so it was clear things had been covered up on that side too.

"Can you try running it with hiragana and katakana converted to romanized English?"

[Huh? Japanese?]

That was because he remembered the men speaking in Japanese in the warehouse.

"If you can, please try it."

[That'll take a really long time... the hardware might not last.]

Cracking codes is like letting a computer fit puzzle pieces rapidly.

Of course, the greater the number of calculations required, the more overloaded the machine could get.

"Buy whatever hardware you need. If the cost is a problem, use my funds."

[Got it.]

"But don't let the trace lead back to you, ever."

[Don't worry about that, tremble, tremble!]

After ending the call, In-hyuk let out a sigh and was about to return to his seat.

But the office atmosphere, which had seemed normal only moments ago, was suddenly restless.

People whispered to each other as In-hyuk came out of the meeting room.

At that moment, Jung Jong-hyun, the deputy team leader from Team 3, approached him.

"Team Leader, did you see the announcement?"

"No, what happened?"

"For now, I think you should go to your desk and check the announcement first."

Urged on, he walked to his seat. The murmuring among the staff grew louder.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk noticed an alert in the corner of his monitor and checked the notice.

【Notice of New Business Division Establishment and Assignment】

— Division: M&A／PEF (Private Equity Fund)

— Appointment: Kang In-hyuk, team leader (senior manager), Equity Investment Team 3

— Team Members: Additional personnel will be assigned, including 4 members from Equity Investment Team 3

— Location: Taeshin Asset Management HQ, 6th floor

— Date: Sometime in June 2025

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The proposal he had offered to Tae Ju-ha was decided by Chairman Tae Gun-seung's authority.

Jung Jong-hyun came up next to him and spoke.

"Did you know about this, Team Leader?"

"This information? I did make a proposal to Executive Director Chu last time. But approval came much faster than I expected."

"So is it true? Is our team really being promoted to the M&A／PEF division?"

He looked as if he still couldn't believe it even after reading it himself.

"Yes, that's correct. So let's prepare to relocate our office by the appointed date. You, deputy Jung, will be team leader of M&A Team 1; existing staff will be under you. If you don't like it, you can stay here as is."

The team members hurriedly looked for cues in each other's faces.

Of course, In-hyuk didn't think they would all follow him by default.

The new M&A／PEF division, for all its fancy name, offered no guaranteed prospects at the moment.

Especially, employees valued stability over an adventure that could be walking a tightrope.

However, In-hyuk had already planted a few seeds.

"... I'll do it."

When Jung Jong-hyun made up his mind, Ahn Woo-chan, visibly surprised, raised his voice a little.

"Deputy!"

"This wasn't to pressure you or anyone else; decide for yourselves."

"But..."

Jung Jong-hyun was able to make that decision because of In-hyuk's track record in the stock market.

While preparing investments for the third quarter, each team member had swung trades under In-hyuk's support.

They had also begun analyzing and collecting intel on the stocks they sold.

The aim was to find out why specific companies were growing and why their share prices increased.

But after days of exhausting research, they found nothing.

Meanwhile, the stocks In-hyuk had consulted on had been stagnant, then quietly began to climb.

"I'm at the tail end of my career, so if I don't move up now, changing jobs will only get harder. Or I'm stuck as deputy forever. But you all aren't in the same boat. Think it over carefully."

Equity Investment Team 3 had always lagged behind Teams 1 and 2 until In-hyuk started to stand out.

Just the grade of their clients made that clear.

If In-hyuk left as head of a new division, things would go back to how they used to be—possibly even worse.

So the other team members also thought hard and looked at each other.

* * *

Until recently, Jeon Joon-seok, who had been the president of Taeshin Asset Management, was promoted to executive director of Taeshin Life, a directly affiliated company of the group.

He was now sitting in his office with familiar colleagues.

Oh Kang-goo, executive director, and Yang Chan-woo, managing director, had come over suddenly and started pouring out everything that had just happened in the company.

"No matter whose approval it is, does it make sense? How can someone parachuted in become head of the newly established division?"

"Honestly, this is too much! What are executives for? Don't you think so too, director Jeon?"

Both of them were clearly aware of the true purpose of the M&A／PEF division.

Growth and expansion of Taeshin Asset Management.

If it worked out, it would provide strong nourishment for expanding Taeshin Group's foundation.

That made it even harder for Oh Kang-goo and Yang Chan-woo to accept.

Eventually, Jeon Joon-seok broke his silence.

"It's certainly an unexpected move. Plus, suddenly with M&A and PEF... I've heard Team Leader Kang's performance has been pretty good lately, but isn't this overestimating him?"

"So you think so too, director?"

Jeon Joon-seok nodded to Oh Kang-goo's agreement.

"Haven't there been rumors from before that higher-ups were backing Team Leader Kang, giving him strength to encourage him?"

Both men nodded, and then Oh Kang-goo continued.

"People are still talking about it. But since the chairman's the one who did it, no one can openly object."

"True. That's just how it is."

"Didn't Executive Director Tae Seok-ho have anything to say?"

Officially, Tae Ju-ha was the president of Taeshin Asset Management, but the real owner was group chairman Tae Gun-seung.

But now Tae Gun-seung was well into his nineties.

He might appear healthy for now, but at his age, it wouldn't be strange if he passed away at any time.

Naturally, the representatives and executives of the affiliated companies had already lined up behind the two main successors, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

Jeon Joon-seok had decided to side with Tae Seok-ho, and half of Taeshin Asset Management's six executives had done the same.

"I contacted him as soon as I heard about it."

"What did he say?"

Looking at their eager faces, Jeon Joon-seok replied.

"At first, he didn't know anything about this, then heard about it in a report."

"Even the Executive Director?"

If it had been the eldest son Tae Seok-hyun, president of Taeshin Electronics, it would be understandable.

But for Tae Seok-ho, executive director at the group headquarters, Taeshin Trading, to be unaware— it meant the chairman had pushed it through without any consultation with the executives.

"He was quite surprised, but he actually said it might be for the best."

"For the best? The chairman supporting Team Leader Kang means... he's thinking of something else, isn't he?"

Although Chairman Tae Gun-seung had named Tae Seok-hyun as the primary successor, everyone knew that decision could change at any time.

If Kang In-hyuk's position rose, it would also affect his wife, Tae Ju-ha, and in turn strengthen Tae Seok-hyun's influence within the group.

"I haven't heard anything since. You know how Executive Director Tae Seok-ho is— he doesn't reveal his inner thoughts to anyone, even those close to him."

Besides them, there were many people in the group companies who had lined up behind Tae Seok-ho.

Jeon Joon-seok wasn't in charge of a huge share. He was just an executive, not even president of Taeshin Life.

But he couldn't show any weakness to the two colleagues in front of him.

"Sorry, we were tactless to ask so directly."

"I understand your concern. But especially at times like this, keeping your cool and plotting your next move is best. For example... planting someone in the new division to bring back good news."

He was telling them to plant an informant or find a way to extract information.

Oh Kang-goo and Yang Chan-woo understood immediately.

"But if we get caught... Tae Ju-ha won't just stand by."

Even now, Tae Ju-ha was looking for ways to replace executives not on her side, to bolster her influence in the company.

And with her previously "puppet" husband now delivering results, she had no choice but to keep a close eye.

Jeon Joon-seok looked between Yang Chan-woo and Oh Kang-goo in turn.

"It's all or nothing. Besides, if we don't secure something here, we could fall from our positions in an instant."

"....."

As the two fell silent, Jeon Joon-seok continued.

"If things go well... how about I arrange a meeting with Executive Director Tae Seok-ho?"

"Really?"

"With Executive Director Tae Seok-ho?"

Jeon Joon-seok finally managed a thin smile.

"You don't have to bring back anything special. Even if the new division doesn't run properly, we still win. Of course, that's just a suggestion, so don't dwell on it."

He had tossed out a plan, in effect.

Oh Kang-goo and Yang Chan-woo understood all too well. But as Jeon Joon-seok had said, sitting on their hands wouldn't solve anything.

With their positions threatened by President Tae Ju-ha, they needed countermeasures—whatever they might be.

Slowly, both men nodded, seemingly having come to a decision.

Chapter 26

Why Is This Guy...

Within Taeshin Group, the response to the establishment of the M&A/PE Division under the subsidiary Taeshin Asset Management was quiet.

This was partly because it was processed solely on Chairman Tae Gun-seung's authority, and more importantly, because the newly appointed division head was In-hyuk, the CEO's husband and a so-called parachute appointee.

All along, In-hyuk had moved with the staff of Equity Investment Team 3 to the 6th floor of the company building and immediately began distributing the tasks at hand.

"Is this enough for now?"

Through the window of his independent office as division head, he could see the busy employees moving around.

Then, his cell phone rang.

【Norman: I've attached the earnings report on this week's stock investment. Please send the next part.】

While In-hyuk was setting up the M&A/PE Division, the AMK Partners Korea branch was also completed through Norman McGrath.

Of course, only the name had changed to Korea branch; all the investment and overall business matters Go Mi-ah used to handle would now fall under Norman.

Simultaneously, the branch could now handle AMK Partners' funds more aggressively than before.

【Gordon: Sent. Please make sure the timing is accurate.】

He attached a pre-prepared file and sent it. Not long after, Norman McGrath called.

[Many of the companies in the investment deals under the share acquisition terms seem to be startups or high financial risk firms. Are these confirmed? Objectively, there are quite a few with weak brand positioning or low investment value.]

As he said, on the surface, many companies on the investment list seemed quite risky.

Since tens of billion to billions of won was going to be invested, caution was essential.

Norman had thought maybe there was something special about these firms and did his own investigation.

But no matter how much he searched, he couldn't find any event likely to boost their value right away—so he pressed the call button.

"I suppose you're entrusting me with this because I can see what you can't?"

There was a silent pause over the receiving end.

Since the founding of the AMK Partners Korea branch, most of the stock trades had been made as short-term trades.

Norman McGrath reaped great profits simply by following the buy and sell timing In-hyuk provided.

At first, he was sure it must be insider info.

But while the stock sectors were all over the place, the profit rate was staggering.

"Is there a problem with proceeding with business?"

[It's not that, but I was wondering if we need some grounds to explain to employees. And if we keep going like this, the Financial Supervisory Service might investigate someday.]

"No need to worry yet. And there hasn't been anything illegal in how the information was obtained."

Norman McGrath found it hard to believe.

[... Can you really guarantee that?]

"If there was ever something problematic, wouldn't you have known first, branch manager?"

At In-hyuk's retort, Norman flinched. He had investigated Gordon Grimes before setting up the Korea branch.

But for some reason, there were only paper records, no photos, no family, no acquaintances.

Even those records were all ordinary, with nothing to dig up.

[You... knew?]

"I've dealt with people of your temperament before. Better save your stamina and focus on making money than wasting time worrying."

[..... I'll continue to count on you.]

And so, with Norman grasping his neck, the call ended.

With a slight mocking smile, In-hyuk shifted his gaze to the monitor on his desk.

"This shouldn't be happening..."

With the establishment of the M&A/PE Division, Equity Investment Team 3 was transferred and a recruitment announcement was posted.

As a result, several teams had sent a number of applicants.

【Applicants: 17】

It was odd, for a simple reason: because In-hyuk was in charge.

He was so widely known as a parachute in Taeshin Asset Management that he could hardly earn employees' trust.

Rumors even went around that his recent performance was only possible because of Group-level support.

Ding—

Just then, as the page refreshed, another applicant was added.

【Applicants: 18】

【Equity Investment Team 2 Manager Noh Dongjun】

In-hyuk tilted his head.

"Why is this guy...?"

Noh Dongjun's status in Equity Investment Team 2 wasn't bad.

His performance was decent, and with a few more years of solid work, he'd make deputy department head without being pushed out from promotion.

"It doesn't look like a good motive."

That included Noh Dongjun as well.

Even if the original Kang In-hyuk remembered nothing particularly bad about him, he couldn't trust everyone.

After all, he'd taken a huge blow from Baek Si-hwan, whom he'd trusted all his life.

"I figured something like this would happen, but I'll definitely need to keep an eye out."

Among the applicants, there could be those who had allied with people hostile to In-hyuk.

The transferred Team 3 staff could be in the same boat.

Ring ring— Ring ring—

As he was thinking, the internal phone rang.

"... This is Kang In-hyuk."

A woman's voice answered.

[This is the 1st floor desk. Someone named Park Mi-jung called and asked to be connected to Division Director Kang In-hyuk. Should I put her through?]

As soon as he heard that name, In-hyuk's brow furrowed and a headache swept over him.

He thought he'd recalled every memory, but this was something he'd forgotten.

"... The orphanage?"

Park Mi-jung was the head of the orphanage where Kang In-hyuk had stayed until he graduated middle school.

Of course, at that time, she wasn't the director but a teacher, but with time, she had become the head.

As the desk staff waited for his response, they asked again.

[What should I do?]

With a shallow sigh, In-hyuk allowed the call.

After the connection signal ended, a familiar voice was heard.

[... In-hyuk?]

The mood felt rather pitiful. The original Kang In-hyuk probably would have been emotional over that call.

But now, he felt completely different.

"Yes, it's me. What's the reason for your call?"

[It's been a while. How have you been?]

"I don't think we're in a relationship where you can ask things like that."

The fact she didn't even have his cell number spoke volumes.

[... Still as cold as ever.]

"With the money I sent two years ago, there's nothing left between us, is there?"

While Kang In-hyuk resided at the orphanage, Park Mi-jung had not been a good person.

She pretended to be warm and kind, but would discipline and use the children as she pleased behind the scenes.

Kang In-hyuk had been one of those children.

He'd tried to sever ties with the orphanage by attending high school and university in Seoul with support from the Taeshin Education Foundation.

'Back then, once she learned I was marrying Tae Ju-ha of Taeshin Group, she tried all sorts of pathetic threats.'

Even present-day In-hyuk didn't know exactly what the original was thinking.

The memories surfaced like a video, so he could only guess.

If he had to hazard a guess, the original didn't want to cause any harm to Taeshin Group.

[No, it's just... I thought it was something important for you.]

"What is?"

[It's about your parents.]

At that, In-hyuk's face further contorted.

"... My parents?"

Even the original Kang In-hyuk had had a time when he was curious about his birth parents and tried to search for them.

But he'd been in orphanages since he was a baby, before he'd learned to speak, and there weren't even proper records, so he gave up.

[Someone who knows you came to the orphanage. I thought it'd be good for you to meet, so I'm contacting you.]

"Then I'll give you my number, so please pass it to them."

Even now, In-hyuk didn't want to get further entangled with Park Mi-jung.

[Wouldn't you like to come down and catch up in person? You could meet that person as well.]

"I have no intention..."

He felt something suspicious.

And lately, people from Daemyung Detective Agency had been tailing In-hyuk every day.

'Don't tell me...'

A bad premonition struck like lightning.

The orphanage was in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province.

If the original Kang In-hyuk received a similar message and was attacked on his way to the orphanage...

[If you're going to react like this, I can't pass on any message. So if you won't come, forget it.]

Her pitiful voice suddenly took on a hard edge. When In-hyuk hesitated, she seemed ready to push further.

In-hyuk calmly asked,

"You said someone who knows my father? Are both of my parents alive?"

That question had a simple reason.

In-hyuk was an orphan even in his past life.

Both his parents had died in a car accident when he was seven, and he had entered an orphanage—his tragic life began then.

If what Park Mi-jung said was just a lure, but she really knew his biological father, he wanted to glean whatever he could.

[Your mother passed away giving birth to you. Your father is currently overseas. An acquaintance of your father, who lives in Korea, was looking for you and managed to find this orphanage.]

There was no solid proof—just Park Mi-jung's words.

If In-hyuk moved, he'd be giving the Daemyung people, who tailed him daily, an opening.

Of course, regardless of how, the current In-hyuk would have no major problems...

Since she clearly wasn't going to tell him more, if he wanted to learn anything, he'd have to visit the orphanage himself.

"How soon do I need to go?"

[The sooner the better.]

She ended with a slightly mocking tone.

"I should at least be able to contact that acquaintance of my father before setting a date, shouldn't I?"

[Ah, just tell me when you're coming, and I'll arrange it for then.]

"I'll go by tomorrow before lunch."

[Tomorrow? Aren't you working?]

"I'll use vacation days. So please confirm and contact me."

[Um...!]

Click—

In-hyuk hung up before Park Mi-jung could finish.

At the same time, he let out a long sigh, recalling the tangled memories of the original Kang In-hyuk.

"You really lived one hell of a life."

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At the same time.

Suite 516, 5th floor, Banpo Plaza General Arcade, Banpo neighborhood, Seocho district, Seoul.

'Salieri Snack Bar'—an old sign hung above a firmly closed door.

It looked like it had been out of business for a long time.

Inside, mercenaries Charybdis's Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester sat with heavy headphones on, monitoring the screens before them.

They were observing Suite 416 below, where Daemyung Detective Agency was.

They had hacked into the building's CCTV system and installed hidden cams everywhere for surveillance. They even rented the shop directly above to conduct cross-floor eavesdropping.

"Hear anything?"

Van Hester asked, noting the focused look on Hong Yu-geon's face.

Hong Yu-geon raised a palm as if to tell him to wait. He seemed completely focused on listening.

"They're making a move."

"Really?"

At that, Hong Yu-geon switched the display to the CCTV at Daemyung's office entrance. No one had come out yet.

So Van Hester connected the headphone jack to Hong Yu-geon's set. After a brief hiss, voices came through.

[... Execution next day. This is the out point. Team A: accident. Team B: execution. Afterward, Team A joins Team C for cover-up. Meanwhile, Team B takes care of Kang In-hyuk for good.]

It sounded like an operation briefing.

A male voice continued.

[If the plan goes off track, we switch to Plan B right away without communication. Teams A and B combine and use the car, then Team C pushes through. Then, turn yourselves in. Organization will handle any legal issues. And finally, plan C...]

Van Hester, who could only understand a little Korean, stared at Hong Yu-geon.

"Sounds heavy... What's going on exactly?"

"They're up to something dangerous. I'll report—"

Vrrr— Vrrr—

Just as he reached for his phone, it started vibrating first.

On the screen, it displayed the name of their employer: In-hyuk.

【Mr. Money】

Chapter 27

You'll Get into Trouble

Tae Ju-ha finished getting ready early in the morning and went out into the living room.

A peculiar silence filled the room.

"Did he already leave?"

In-hyuk's shoes were not by the front door.

When she went down to the parking lot and got in the car, Heo Yu-rim handed her a tablet from the passenger seat.

"There's a bond management headquarters meeting scheduled for today, as well as meetings with the division director of Management Headquarters and the Legal Team."

"No external appointments?"

Recently, there had been an overwhelming number of client management tasks at Taeshin Asset Management.

"Nothing is scheduled for now."

They talked about work until they arrived at the company.

Tae Ju-ha spent time in the CEO's office, handling urgent approvals first.

Then, a call came in from Song Tae-ho, chairman Tae Gun-seung's secretary.

"The Chairman wants to have a meal together with In-hyuk-nim?"

The unexpected request made Tae Ju-ha tilt her head in confusion.

[Just decide on a suitable date and time and let us know.]

"... May I ask why?"

[Even I don't know that.]

"Alright. I'll discuss it with In-hyuk-nim and get back to you."

After ending the call, Tae Ju-ha put down her cell phone and picked up the internal line.

Even as a married couple, it felt a bit too personal to call his mobile.

The line rang for quite a while before it was picked up.

[Equity management... No, this is Seo Jae-young from M&A Team 1.]

The confusion was because the department had recently changed.

"I'm calling for Division Director Kang In-hyuk... Is he not at his desk?"

The phone in the division director's office had kept ringing, so Seo Jae-young had answered it instead.

[Where are you calling from?]

On the other hand, Tae Ju-ha hadn't expected to be asked that and hesitated a little.

"Ah... the CEO's office."

[By CEO, do you mean... our CEO?]

Seo Jae-young paused, then asked again with a vague tone.

[... Are you referring to our CEO?]

"Yes. Where did the division director go?"

[Ah, CEO! Sorry! The division director took annual leave today. He didn't come in.]

"Annual leave? Do you know why?"

[I'm sorry, I don't know, either.]

"Okay. I'll contact him directly. Thank you."

After the call ended, Tae Ju-ha tapped Kang In-hyuk's name on her phone.

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In-hyuk had left home early in the morning and set off for Andong.

As expected, he noticed vehicles tailing him from the house all the way here.

"They really don't get tired of this..."

While he was driving, a call from Tae Ju-ha came through.

[I heard you're on annual leave today?]

"I'm on my way to Andong for personal reasons."

[Ah... Andong?]

"I'm headed to the orphanage where I grew up. As far as I know, there's nothing urgent at the office—did something happen?"

At In-hyuk's calm question, Tae Ju-ha hesitated, then spoke.

[Grandfather wants to have a meal together.]

"The chairman? I doubt he just wants to eat... Did he say why?"

[He didn't tell me either. He said we should decide on the date. When would be good for you?]

In-hyuk let out a short sigh through his nose.

"I'm driving right now. If it's not urgent, I'll check my schedule tomorrow when I come in and let you know."

[Okay.]

After ending the call, In-hyuk glanced at the familiar cars in the rearview mirror.

They were still following at a set distance.

After driving for about another hour, he arrived at Hanseung Orphanage in Jeongsang-dong, Andong.

The orphanage, built on around 6,000 square meters, had three two-story buildings—one in the center, one on each side—plus two single-story buildings used as a storeroom, laundry, and cafeteria in the back left.

At a glance, it appeared clean and peaceful.

But to the original Kang In-hyuk, the orphanage was a place filled only with narrow-minded disdain and discrimination.

"It's not even my memory, and yet, it pisses me off..."

Memories of the time the original Kang In-hyuk spent at Hanseung Orphanage—and the wounds he suffered—came flooding back.

They weren't even new memories, but they made his head pound.

After standing there briefly, clicking his tongue, he headed into the main building.

Children passing by noticed In-hyuk and glanced his way.

Soon, Park Mi-jung saw the car parked outside and came walking down from the upper floor.

"You're here."

Now over sixty, she wore her hair neatly in a bun and a floral two-piece outfit, smiling gently.

But In-hyuk knew well what kind of character lurked behind that face.

"Is that person here?"

"What's the rush—you just arrived! Let's go to the director's office and have some tea first. And since it's been a while, you should look around, too."

Disgust creased In-hyuk's brow.

"I'm busy with work, so I need to leave as soon as I finish here."

At that, Park Mi-jung's expression wavered subtly.

"Still... shouldn't you at least feel a little grateful to the place that fed and sheltered you as a child?"

"I seem to recall I already repaid enough in that regard."

"There are many mouths to feed here. Do you think that was enough?"

"Well, considering the conditions, a lot of the facilities seem pretty outdated for a place getting funding from Taeshin Education Foundation. To an outsider, it might look like someone's lining their own pockets."

Her expression turned icy.

"What are you implying..."

"It's a joke. A joke."

Thanks to the memories and unpleasant feelings from the original Kang In-hyuk, another thought that he hadn't intended surfaced.

He remembered the incident where Park Mi-jung, head of Hanseung Orphanage, was caught embezzling most of the donations from the Taeshin Education Foundation.

But that incident only broke out about three years from now.

Of course, if it were the current In-hyuk, he could bring that timeline forward as much as he liked.

"By the way, your father's acquaintance will be late."

"How late?"

"It'll probably have to be dinner at least."

Bzzzz— bzzzz—

Just then, his phone vibrated. After checking the message, In-hyuk's face hardened.

"Phew—! When did you find out it would be delayed?"

"I just heard. But... will you wait?"

"Why don't you give me their contact number? I'll contact them directly."

"Are you really going to be like this?"

"I have nothing more to say."

When he quietly waited for her reply, Park Mi-jung sighed.

"They say you should never take in a wild animal with black hair..."

Was that really something an orphanage director should say? In-hyuk felt irritation welling up.

"If you keep losing your sense of judgment, director, you'll get into trouble one day."

"What did you say?"

"Just give me the number."

Her gaze grew even sharper.

But as if she realized there was nothing more she could say, she took out her cellphone and handed it over.

"This is the number."

In-hyuk input the number into his phone and, completely ignoring her, pressed the call button.

Ring— ring—

The ringtone continued, but no one answered.

"They're not picking up. Anyway, I'll be leaving. I'll leave a message—whether they reply or not is up to them."

"You're leaving already?"

"As I said before—I will never come back to this place."

"Don't you feel sorry for the ones like your younger brother?"

Now that she was trying to use the orphanage kids as leverage, In-hyuk felt his insides boil.

"If you really care about the kids, you should start by letting go of your own greed."

In-hyuk immediately left the building and walked to his car.

But he didn't get in right away.

'So they've already tampered with my car during that brief window?'

The previous vibration was an alert from the program Go Mi-ah had installed in the car system.

At minimum, it meant someone had opened the car door.

Bzzzz—

Just then, Charybdis's Hong Yu-geon called.

[Boss. You're not seriously thinking of getting in that car after someone's probably messed with it, right?]

He must have been watching from somewhere.

"When did you get up there to keep an eye on me?"

In-hyuk was already aware of the eyes on him.

The right annex rooftop; up there, Hong Yu-geon was peeking just enough to spy through binoculars.

[Hm? How'd you know?]

He sounded shocked, as if he'd been sure no one would notice him.

"There are ways. Where's Van? Waiting in the car?"

[Keeping an eye on the guys who visited your car. But—are you really planning to drive it?]

Hong Yu-geon had watched uninvited guests do something to In-hyuk's car.

He didn't know the details, but it was obvious it wasn't ordinary car maintenance.

"If I don't get in, they'll notice."

[Why not make the first move? Normally we wouldn't go that far, but... as a service, we could.]

Charybdis was a team Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester put together last year after growing tired of indiscriminate assassination contracts.

But pure intelligence gathering and tailing weren't enough to establish a base in this line of work.

Their operating funds were still tight, so for the future, they'd accepted In-hyuk's proposal.

"Who knows who might be behind those guys?"

[Ah...]

"If we act rashly, I'll just become more suspicious."

[So we'd have to take care of the ones who gave orders to Daemyung as well, right?]

Through them, In-hyuk had also listened in on wiretapped conversations at Daemyung Detective Agency.

"If possible."

[So what's your plan?]

"Hold on."

In-hyuk got in the car, pulled out a detector, and swept it around inside.

Fortunately, nothing seemed to be triggering any bug or camera detection.

"Anyway, it would be best to find out why they're targeting me, but since that's difficult right now, I'll just handle today's business."

[Do you have a way?]

Click—click—

In-hyuk pressed the steering wheel and pedals, feeling a subtle difference.

"It looks like they tampered with the brake pushrod."

He meant the movement support attached to the brake pedal.

[Those guys from earlier?]

"They probably rigged it to snap under a certain amount of strain."

[Don't tell me you're really going to drive it...]

"If I want to draw them out, I'll have to stick my leg in as well."

With that, he started the engine and turned the car out onto the road.

All the while, Hong Yu-geon's voice came through the speakerphone.

[This is insane.]

"Do you know how many of them there are?"

[Each group has two guys, with three cars in total—just like Daemyung said.]

"Where's the point of attack?"

[We don't know that either.]

The exact location hadn't been mentioned even in the wiretaps.

"Then I'll have to lure them in."

[Are you sure about this?]

"Just keep following. And when it goes down—"

Based on everything he'd gathered, In-hyuk explained his plan to Hong Yu-geon.

* * *

A black sedan was trailing In-hyuk as he left the orphanage.

Inside were Kim Jun-hyung and Lee Chang-su from Daemyung Detective Agency.

The distance between them and Kang In-hyuk's car was about 15 meters.

At that time, a voice from another team came through the radio on the dashboard.

Static—

[5km till the target point. Commence the operation.]

They each checked their positions via the GPS system installed in their cars.

With that, Kim Jun-hyung, who was driving, stepped on the gas.

He soon overtook Kang In-hyuk's car and once ahead, stepped on the brakes.

Screeeeech—

At the same time, Kang In-hyuk braked as well, so his speed inevitably dropped.

From that point on, the two cars kept provoking each other—speeding up, then slowing down.

"Leave a bigger gap. If you get too impatient, it might snap before we reach the target point."

He meant the tampered brakes on Kang In-hyuk's car.

Kim Jun-hyung carefully adjusted his speed. The tense cat-and-mouse driving continued until they entered a tunnel.

Suddenly, Kang In-hyuk's car bumped into theirs from behind—without braking.

"Haha! Spot on—it must've just snapped."

Lee Chang-su, in the passenger seat, straightened up from being thrown forward and burst out laughing, then pressed the radio button.

"We're going in."

Meanwhile, Kim Jun-hyung accelerated, racing together with Kang In-hyuk's car as he tried to pass, and then slammed on the brakes just as they'd made a dangerous gap.

Crash—!

Chapter 28

The Lunchbox(?) Bag

All sorts of debris were scattered across the road, with cars toppled or overturned to the side...

Just a few dozen minutes ago, the tunnel had been quiet, but now it was chaos after a collision between two vehicles.

In this situation, In-hyuk held onto his senses inside the car that had flipped upside down.

'Doing this stuff again like I used to on missions... It really feels like death...'

It had been an assignment to intentionally overturn the opponent's vehicle to make it look like an accident.

He had just watched the car in front use the same technique he had employed himself.

Of course, an ordinary person wouldn't even be able to attempt such a thing.

However, In-hyuk possessed experience from UID and enhanced physical abilities that set him apart.

Thanks to that, he had been able to control things to avoid major injury even in the aftermath of an accident.

'More importantly, are they really connected to UID, after all...?'

He had suspected this ever since someone tampered with the brake pushrod.

But experiencing the exact same process firsthand was almost laughable.

'At this rate, the others should appear soon.'

Just as expected, a tow truck suddenly appeared from somewhere, and two men got out.

In-hyuk watched the scene through the crumpled car window.

To other people, they would just look like typical tow truck drivers, but In-hyuk sensed a chill from them.

'They're the guys Charybdis has had eyes on.'

Song Hyun-jun and Kwon Kyung-min. They'd been identified while monitoring the Daemyung Detective Agency.

Their next moves were obvious.

They'd check whether the target was dead, and if not, make it look like a fatal accident.

The two men guided the traffic jammed cars at the back to pass through the side.

Then, conversation began to drift over.

"I'll finish quickly, so keep guiding traffic."

"Hyung! Can I do it this time?"

At Kwon Kyung-min's question, Song Hyun-jun, about to start walking, furrowed his brow.

"You?"

"I'm curious what the last face looked like of the guy that Hyung Pyo couldn't deal with."

It was clear now that the man just mentioned was Pyo Jun-woo.

"Isn't this just self-satisfaction? Didn't you get bullied by Pyo Jun-woo back at the camp?"

"Hey! That was ages ago! Can't I do it this time then?"

"Then don't mess around and finish it so it looks natural, as planned. If there are strange marks, it'll only raise unnecessary suspicions."

"Nobody knows that better than me!"

With a shout, Kwon Kyung-min beamed and approached In-hyuk's car.

"Whew! I hope he isn't completely dead already."

Still strapped in and overturned like the car itself, In-hyuk gingerly undid his seatbelt, ready to respond to any attack.

'Not yet?'

Meanwhile, Kwon Kyung-min had reached the front of the car and bent down to take a look.

Just then, a siren blared from the tunnel entrance.

Wee-oo, wee-oo—

A fire truck, completely unexpected in their plan, entered the tunnel.

Startled, Kwon Kyung-min froze, while Song Hyun-jun, who was directing traffic, hastily grabbed his radio.

"This is Bravo. Bravo. Emergency. Emergency. The fire truck is here."

[Target status?]

"... Not yet."

From inside the car, In-hyuk caught fragments of their conversation as the siren wailed.

The fire truck was getting closer.

Kwon Kyung-min's radio went off again.

[This is Charlie. Switch to Plan C and stand by. Switch to Plan C and stand by.]

The arrival of the fire truck had forced a change in plans.

With a look full of regret, Kwon Kyung-min exchanged glances with Song Hyun-jun, then headed towards the car of their fallen colleague.

Watching them, In-hyuk felt a brief sense of relief.

'They arrived at the nick of time.'

The fire truck had been called in by Hong Yu-geon, who had been waiting outside the tunnel.

In this situation, avoiding their suspicion as much as possible, this was the only way to respond.

The fire crew quickly managed the scene.

In-hyuk, too, was rescued from the car and sent about 10 kilometers away to the emergency room at Andong Seongseo Hospital.

Before long, In-hyuk found himself lying on the ER bed, never having lost consciousness.

"I heard the car was seriously wrecked... With these minor injuries, it's a miracle. Same for those gentlemen."

This came from the doctor, who had finished treating In-hyuk's light contusions.

At the same time, the doctor's gaze shifted to two other men lying on other beds.

Kim Jun-hyung and Lee Chang-su.

They'd been victims overturned along with In-hyuk due to the car's brake malfunction.

Of course, In-hyuk knew they were colleagues of the men with the tow truck.

"... It really is a relief."

"Still, since there could be internal injuries, I recommend you get further tests after finishing the IV fluids."

"I'll do that."

When the doctor moved away, In-hyuk cast a discreet glance at the two on the other beds.

Since they'd missed his chance at the tunnel, he could still be targeted here in the hospital.

IV drip in hand, In-hyuk approached the two.

"I'm sorry, the brakes didn't work so I had no choice but to crash. I've already called the insurance company, so I'll cover all the costs. The cars are likely totaled... I'll make it up to you with a similar model at similar value."

The two, who'd been lying tensely, exchanged glances in surprise at In-hyuk's unexpected behavior.

The older one, Kim Jun-hyung, spoke up.

"... No need. It's my fault—I got angry and blocked the way."

It seemed they wanted to stage the situation as a case of road rage driving.

"Still, it's my responsibility. Oh, could I get your business card?"

Since their identities couldn't be exposed, In-hyuk purposely asked a question they'd want to avoid. Kim Jun-hyung made an awkward face.

"I don't have any business cards."

"Then may I have your number so I can get in touch later?"

"No, let's handle everything through the insurance company."

He was noticeably uncomfortable.

Just then, two men entered the ER, asked the nurses something, and approached In-hyuk.

"Are you Mr. Kang In-hyuk?"

"That's me."

"We're from Andong Police Station, Traffic Investigation Unit. It's regarding the accident at Geomam Tunnel. We'd like to hear your account... Are you able to talk now?"

"Sure, let's go."

In-hyuk accompanied the police out of the room.

Meanwhile, Lee Chang-su, sitting on the bed, turned to Kim Jun-hyung.

"Hyung. What do we do now?"

They were surprised that the target In-hyuk had only minor injuries, and they hadn't expected him to approach them first in the ER.

Kim Jun-hyung checked his phone. Despite the cracked screen corner from the crash, a message had arrived.

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Bravo team's Song Hyun-jun and Kwon Kyung-min waited in the parking lot near the emergency room.

Song Hyun-jun grumbled in the tow truck.

"So, it's on hold..."

Charlie team, who had just been in charge of operations, sent word to that effect.

"We just have to wait like this?"

"Judging by the situation, we might go with Plan C... Let's see for now."

The two had been seen by the firefighters at the tunnel, so they stayed outside to monitor the hospital rather than go in.

Kwon Kyung-min asked curiously,

"But we tampered with the radio repeater too, so how could the fire truck get there so quickly?"

Song Hyun-jun shook his head.

"Impossible. Someone definitely intervened."

"Don't tell me... our plan got leaked?"

"There's always that chance. That's why Charlie isn't making a move right now."

Plan C was for Alpha, who was taken to the ER with Kang In-hyuk, and the backup Charlie team to cooperate.

But they were hung up on who had called in the fire department.

"So, it might get canceled entirely?"

"Charlie's discussing it with the Organization; we'll have to see what they decide."

More than mission success, avoiding exposure was most important.

Then, instead of a radio message, a phone call came from Charlie.

[Target is in good condition, but today's mission is canceled. Alpha, handle the situation by the manual, Bravo team retreat as quickly as possible and return to HQ.]

It was as feared.

"Understood."

Song Hyun-jun replied without hesitation.

Since there was clear evidence of a leak, it was too risky to press ahead.

After finishing the call, he left the hospital parking lot, with Kwon Kyung-min showing open dissatisfaction in the passenger seat.

* * *

As the sun was setting, In-hyuk was transferred from Andong Seongseo Hospital to a single room in a general hospital in Gangnam.

The injuries were minor scrapes, but he took the opportunity to be tested for other conditions as well.

Just then, his phone rang—it was Hong Yu-geon.

Charybdis was currently tailing one of the people who'd targeted In-hyuk.

[I finally found out why they were after you so badly, boss!]

At the sudden good news, In-hyuk's eyes widened.

"Did you meet whoever hired them?"

This was because, even within the Daemyung Detective Agency, there had been absolute secrecy regarding the client.

'It makes sense they'd go meet if things weren't going as planned.'

He could easily deduce the situation. Hong Yu-geon continued.

[I was watching those guys return to the office, and Lee Daemyung moved himself. I decided to follow him, just in case, and he met with some woman.]

"What was the reason?"

[I just sent you a taping I got through long-distance eavesdropping. Listen for yourself.]

Along with the reply, a file attachment arrived by message. In-hyuk turned down his phone's volume and listened.

[... If you started the job, shouldn't you finish it by any means necessary? That guy, at least, should have been dealt with no matter what!]

A woman's sharp voice—it was Jeon Hae-in, the mistress of KQ Group. Then came Lee Daemyung of the Daemyung Detective Agency.

[We suspected there was a leak in the plan. If they know about our relationship with you... it could get dangerous.]

[So what do we do now?]

[It's not like the Chairman even knows about Kang In-hyuk yet. Why are you in such a hurry?]

With that sly retort, Jeon Hae-in's voice grew even sharper.

[Because it's only a matter of time?!]

[Has Chairman Kang made a move?]

At his suspicious question, Jeon Hae-in hesitated.

[This afternoon, attorney Kim, who's handling the will, visited the residence in Hanam.]

[Did he find something out? But the chairman knows nothing about the existence of an illegitimate child, right?]

[He might have found out while looking into that woman, trying to keep it from us.]

At that point, In-hyuk stopped the recording.

Now he understood why, in his previous life, the original Kang In-hyuk had been forced to die in a staged accident.

The illegitimate child of Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of distribution giant KQ Group.

His wife, Jeon Hae-in, who learned the truth, would never have left him be.

After all, she'd been willing to have him killed just because the heir, Kang Do-young, had feelings for Tae Ju-ha.

Lost in thought for a moment, In-hyuk said to Hong Yu-geon,

"Pull everyone from Daemyung and tail only that woman."

Hong Yu-geon was startled.

[Huh? We just got some major info! You're pulling out already? Shouldn't we watch a bit longer?]

As he said, there might still be more to uncover. Of course, In-hyuk knew this well.

"Now that we've moved ahead, they'll start sweeping their surroundings, too. Leave any gadgets that'd be hard to retrieve, and pack everything else up tonight."

[Got it. By the way, I didn't expect the boss to be a chaebol's bastard. Is this... good news?]

Hong Yu-geon easily accepted and teased him. But for In-hyuk, it was not welcome.

"Not really. Oh, someone's coming—call me when you're done."

Shortly after ending the call, someone's presence that had been lingering outside the hospital room opened the door.

The person who appeared was none other than Go Mi-ah.

Surprised by her unexpected arrival, In-hyuk's expression changed.

"What brings you all the way here?"

"Our employer almost crossed the Jordan thanks to a traffic accident."

"I didn't expect you to come without warning."

For some reason, all the surveillance put on him by Daemyung after the accident had disappeared.

Maybe it was because the people assigned to In-hyuk had shown their faces.

"A surprise is only a surprise if you do it suddenly!"

Go Mi-ah said this as she set down a basket of fruit and a lunchbox(?) bag nearby.

"... Why did you bring all this?"

"I heard you'll be here a few days. I thought hospital food would be bland, so I made something myself."

"You didn't have to go to such trouble..."

Before he could protest, Go Mi-ah popped open the lid of the lunchbox.

"I made Korean eggplant rice and squid soy stir-fry for a real homemade feel!"

The names sounded plausible enough.

But the rice was a purple hue, like blueberries, and the squid was black, as if stir-fried in ink.

"... Why is the rice that color?"

"Why? Because it's eggplant rice, obviously."

Called it...

Also, I feel like a woman that can't cook is a bit cliche...

Chapter 29

It's a Dangerous Object

In-hyuk sat in front of the dishes called "eggplant rice" and "squid soy stir-fry," hesitating.

'Why does the rice smell so tangy?'

As she said, it might be purple because it's eggplant rice, but rather than being a natural shade from the eggplant, it looked artificially colored.

Moreover, if he ate her food right now, it felt like he'd end up extending his hospital stay for reasons unrelated to Swordsmanship.

"I'm not really hungry right now... I'll eat it later."

"Hm. But it'll get cold if you don't eat right away, you know? I made it really delicious this time!"

He had to wonder whose taste she had tailored it for.

"I'm really okay."

Before she could scoop some rice with her spoon, In-hyuk hurriedly closed the lid and put it up on top of the locker.

"Aw..."

"By the way, is it really okay to leave your post like this?"

"I've already placed orders for the stocks you mentioned. And on the investment side, that guy—Norman or whatever—he's handling it anyway."

In-hyuk could only nod at this strangely cobbled-together answer.

"As long as you handled it well, that's fine. Ah, did you check all the data I sent you?"

"You mean that TN SOFT company's files? Yeah, I saw all of them. They're developing something called TCL Code... How did you know about a company working on that kind of tech?"

Trace Chain Log Code.

It was a security-focused source code that was a higher-rank compatible version than blockchain, based on distributed computing technology for data tampering prevention.

"That's thanks to my information network. So, what do you think?"

Go Mi-ah's brow furrowed deeply as she pondered the question.

"That investment portfolio was put together by that Norman or whatever guy, right?"

"That's right."

"Just looking at it as is, commercialization will take a long time. I can't say much about the commercial aspects, but on the technical side, I expect there are lots of security

loopholes or unnecessary parts in the source code. It'll be quite burdensome and heavy because of that."

In-hyuk nodded at her rather in-depth reply.

"What if you added your skills to the development?"

"Me? It's a pretty interesting technology, but... would they really let me? From what's been released so far, it looks more than 80% completed."

She wasn't wrong.

But In-hyuk had a reason for bringing up TCL Code with Go Mi-ah.

"What if we apply your code for source lightweighting to it?"

At that moment, Go Mi-ah blanked out for a second before speaking.

"I made something like that... Ah, right, I did. But how do you know about it? At least two years ago I made it just for fun."

"That's thanks to my info network, too. Anyway, what do you think about trying to apply it?"

Go Mi-ah's brow twitched at In-hyuk's follow-up question.

"Hmm... It's not a bad idea, but is there really a need? Feels like a big headache for me."

Currently, Go Mi-ah was perfectly content with the assets In-hyuk brought her just by doing a little work.

"How about this, then?"

He reached into his wallet on the small office shelf next to his hospital bed and pulled out a ticket.

Go Mi-ah's eyes widened as soon as she saw what it was.

"You, that's...!"

"DDS fall concert, royal A seat, center stage. You were really down about failing the ticketing this time, right?"

"So how on earth do you have that?!"

"One of my major clients gave it to me as a reward for their recent performance. Would this be enough to get a proper answer to my earlier question?"

Go Mi-ah looked genuinely torn, but her gaze remained glued to the concert ticket in In-hyuk's hand.

"Ummm! With my source code on TCL Code, commercializing would definitely be possible!"

"How about working directly with TN SOFT on it?"

"Eeh~ One concert ticket isn't enough for that!"

In response, In-hyuk playfully waved the ticket.

"But to you, this isn't just any ticket, is it?"

"You're not playing some trick and giving me a fake, right? At least let me see it!"

Go Mi-ah moved in to grab the ticket from In-hyuk, suspicious.

But with almost 30 cm of height difference between them, all she could do was hop in place, and her hands could only reach as far as his elbows.

"Ah come on! Just hand it over!"

Creak—

At that moment, the hospital room door opened and Tae Ju-ha entered with her secretary, Heo Yu-rim.

They saw In-hyuk and Go Mi-ah standing close and had the same reaction as before.

"No way... again...?"

In-hyuk looked at Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim, who had just entered and found Go Mi-ah right in front of him.

"Ah, this isn't what it looks like."

"And what is it supposed to be?"

"No, I mean, there's a reason..."

"What kind of reason?"

Tae Ju-ha already looked convinced that whatever In-hyuk said wouldn't matter.

Haaa

"I said last time, didn't I? This is a business relationship, and she came to visit for that."

He felt this should have been enough explanation, but their expressions remained ambiguous.

With a deep sigh, In-hyuk passed the ticket to Go Mi-ah.

"Wow, this is real! I can actually keep it, right?!"

"For now, just head back and think positively about what I said."

"Got it! See you next time, oppa."

With that, Go Mi-ah took her parting shot and left the room, only nodding politely to the other two as she exited.

Left behind, In-hyuk, whose head was starting to ache, turned his attention to Tae Ju-ha once more.

"There really isn't anything strange going on between us."

"... Did I say anything?"

"Your face says it all. Especially you, secretary Heo."

Heo Yu-rim, standing beside Tae Ju-ha, wore an expression full of disgust.

"Ahem! I'll just step outside."

Stung by In-hyuk's comment, Heo Yu-rim quickly left.

Only then did Tae Ju-ha slowly look In-hyuk up and down as he sat on the bed.

"Luckily, you weren't seriously hurt."

"I already told you that."

"Is this related to that accident that we were involved in last time?"

She was referring to the incident at Kang Cheon-gyu's mansion, where they almost died from someone tampering with the car systems.

As the accident had been so sudden, Tae Ju-ha couldn't help but suspect.

"It was just a car malfunction that led to a traffic accident."

But In-hyuk had no intention of explaining the full story.

After all, even if she knew, it would only invite unnecessary interference.

"Malfunction?"

"The cause hasn't been fully determined yet. For now, just an issue with my car's brakes is all I've been told."

In the accident, In-hyuk was technically at fault.

The brake applied by the car ahead was partially to blame, but there were complicated reasons he wouldn't bring up.

"A perfectly good car suddenly malfunctions?"

"That's what they say. In any case, the other party agreed to settle for compensation. Thankfully, their injuries weren't serious, so we drew up a mutual agreement immediately."

Daemyung also didn't want the incident to escalate, so things were settled quietly, as In-hyuk expected.

Tae Ju-ha's face filled with suspicion.

"You're sure... it was just a coincidence?"

"If it wasn't, there's no way things would have ended so quietly."

As In-hyuk spoke, Tae Ju-ha thought back to the scene where Pyo Jun-woo was apprehended in the hospital.

She still couldn't fathom why she and In-hyuk had almost been killed so absurdly.

"... If it wasn't, that's a relief."

"So... were you worried about me? Is that why you came?"

At that, Tae Ju-ha's face flushed slightly.

"Worried? There's no way! It's just that as a company, we can't afford for Director Kang In-hyuk to come to any harm! I just dropped by to check."

"If you say so, then I'll take your word for it."

"By the way... Is that girl from earlier really just a business acquaintance?"

"She is."

"Business partners who make lunch boxes for each other—is that a thing?"

In-hyuk's gaze followed hers to the lunch box on top of the locker.

"Ah... That's not a lunch box. It's a dangerous object."

"... What?"

Calling a very obvious lunch box something so suspicious, Tae Ju-ha tilted her head.

In-hyuk added,

"It's almost like a poison or something."

* * *

Several days later.

After completing a thorough physical at the hospital and being discharged safely, In-hyuk visited Go Mi-ah's officetel.

Of course, he timed his visit to avoid meal hours, aiming for the slot between lunch and dinner.

"The code's been cracked?"

They were talking about a two-person cipher found on a phone previously recovered.

"It turned out to be Japanese. But there was a word I couldn't figure out."

"What was it?"

"Koou (紅雨). The keyword was to enter it as it sounds, in English letters."

【KOOU】

Go Mi-ah typed in the keyword as she answered, and the smartphone displayed decrypted content on screen.

"If it means 'hongu(紅雨),' it's 'crimson rain'."

"Right. But the actual contents are even stranger. By the way, who did you get these phones from?"

Go Mi-ah herself didn't know the owners, so she looked puzzled as In-hyuk had only asked her to do the forensics and decode them.

"Did you check the contents?"

"I did. It's packed with what looks like surveillance on someone."

In-hyuk squeezed next to her and sat down.

【△△:△△ — KDC, secret talk with GF BTW. Intervened in bidding for construction work...】

【△△:△△ — LSK, assaulted a woman at Club Cyclops. Asked Gangnam police chief for a favor...】

【△△:△△ — IGR, secret meeting with CHN WD. Gave unlisted WDFA stock as bribe...】

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Just as Go Mi-ah said earlier, the contents were detailed records of someone's every move, all sent out.

"It really is surveillance."

And In-hyuk could already guess, based on the initials, who these people referred to.

'Chairman Go Dong-chan of Manseong Construction and Executive Director Bang Tae-won of GF Trading... and the case where Lee Seon-gu, heir of RE Capital, had his aggravated rape quietly covered up.'

These were incidents that had happened both in his previous life and in this past.

He could also infer which companies the other two men, handled together with Pyo Jun-woo and Kim Seong-tae at the warehouse on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province, belonged to.

'So the others were from Manseong Construction and GF Trading. And the use of Japanese... Is this all the work of a secret Japanese-based organization?'

Meanwhile, Go Mi-ah voiced her suspicion.

"Are these phones... used by someone like a National Intelligence Service agent?"

"Well, close enough."

Go Mi-ah had no idea what had happened to the phones' original owners.

She'd just helped In-hyuk with forensics and code cracking.

"What kind of people are you dealing with? Are you even safe?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing. And hand over the program to me. The newly decrypted data, too. I'll pay a separate fee. If you want more AMK Partners shares, I can pay that way."

He couldn't know what would come up as he kept gathering intelligence on these people.

"Is that really necessary?"

"It could get dangerous."

Go Mi-ah made a sour expression at In-hyuk's words.

"I don't need fees or shares, just use it."

"Why?"

"Think of it as payback for saving me when I nearly got caught by the National Intelligence Service."

"That works for me. Oh, and did you get anywhere with that symbol I asked about?"

He also asked her to check the small tattoo found between the knuckles of their fingers along with the phones.

"No, there's been nothing."

"Not even anything vaguely similar?"

"Only tons of cross-like ones."

Since the symbol wasn't that unique, it was hard to distinguish.

In-hyuk hadn't expected much.

"It can't be helped. You can quit looking into it."

"Alright. But you're doing fine health-wise, right?"

"I'm fine."

During the comprehensive check-up, he'd asked them to run the most precise tests for the pancreatic cancer that had afflicted him in his previous life.

Fortunately, nothing at all was detected, so he could relax for the time being.

"You really need to stop getting into trouble. It'd be a disaster if my moneymaker gets hurt."

"You think I can just wish that away?"

"You're the Taeshin Group's son-in-law! And you got promoted to division director, right? So you can use a good car and even get a driver now. Ask for some bodyguards, too."

Go Mi-ah still believed the two accidents In-hyuk had experienced were just pure coincidence.

"I'll take care of it, just focus on the tasks I asked. By the way, the payment's going smoothly to the new paper company, right?"

He meant the paper company set up to pay Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

Of course, he also prepared accounts under borrowed names for security.

"You mean the company called Charybdis? No problem, I'm sending the funds as 'investment capital'. We've inflated the company's own operating funds so there's nothing suspicious in the laundering process. But what's it for?"

"A kind of private detective agency under my command."

"You use things like that, too? With AMK Partners' Korea branch and all... Just how much are you involved in?"

"They're all necessary. Anyway, I have other business, so I'll get going."

"Already? Oh! By the way, how was the lunch box I gave you last time...?"

Before she could finish, In-hyuk hurriedly slipped out of the officetel.

Chapter 30

What It Means to Have No Choice

【Embezzlement of Large Donations at Andong H Orphanage! Director Park ○○ has been found to have misappropriated donations received from businesses and organizations for about 10 years...】

【20 Billion Won Embezzled at △△ Orphanage in Gyeongbuk! The prosecution and National Tax Service are investigating Mr. P of △△ Orphanage for embezzling operating funds... Evidence has also emerged of physical and psychological abuse inflicted on the orphans during the process...】

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Jeon Hae-in, the matron of KQ Group, grew anxious after reading the article that caused a stir from the morning.

The director of Hanseung Orphanage, Park Mi-jung, whom she had used as bait, had been taken down in one fell swoop.

Of course, since it had been commissioned through Daemyung Detective Agency, there would be no trace back to her, but since this happened after the commissioned job failed, she couldn't shake off her uneasiness.

To calm her complicated mind, Jeon Hae-in visited a nearby gallery.

The gallery was filled with paintings and sculptures whose meanings were hard to decipher, all set against the stark white walls and floors.

At that moment, a middle-aged woman approached her.

"Hello, CEO Jeon Hae-in. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

It was Lee Sun-hye, the wife of Taeshin Group's eldest son, Tae Seok-hyun, and also the director of Seoran Gallery, which Jeon Hae-in was browsing.

Additionally, because Jeon Hae-in was both the lady of KQ Group and the CEO of KQ Department Store, she was addressed in that way.

"Indeed, it has. How have you been, director Lee?"

"Oh, things are always about the same for me. What brings you here today?"

They smiled at each other, but the atmosphere was difficult to read, each hiding her true thoughts.

Then, Jeon Hae-in spoke, looking at the colorful paintings placed in front of her.

"I wondered if any good paintings had come in recently."

"Is there a particular genre or artist you want? If not, I could recommend something for your intended use."

This conversation was far from pure art appreciation.

On the surface, it was investment; behind the scenes, purchases for tax evasion or bribery.

"By the way, I heard your youngest son-in-law was recently appointed as division director of the newly established division at Taeshin Asset Management. That must make you very pleased."

For a moment, a slight frown appeared on Lee Sun-hye's brow only to quickly disappear, for she understood the intent behind Jeon Hae-in's words was not altogether friendly.

"It's thanks to my father-in-law recognizing Kang's abilities. That means his expectations are high as well."

"Truly, congratulations."

Jeon Hae-in also well knew that Tae Ju-ha was not Lee Sun-hye's biological daughter.

It was only natural that she didn't think highly of Tae Ju-ha's husband, Kang In-hyuk.

"Thank you. Still, when I think about it now, it does seem a bit of a loss regarding Executive Director Kang Do-young. Executive Director Kang was always so interested in our Ju-ha, wasn't he?"

This time, it was Lee Sun-hye's turn to strike back. Simultaneously, a faint bitter smile appeared on Jeon Hae-in's lips.

Neither of the two women had ever seriously considered marrying into each other's families in the past or now.

From Jeon Hae-in's perspective, she disliked Tae Ju-ha for being an illegitimate child; Lee Sun-hye, meanwhile, didn't want to give KQ Group's power to Tae Ju-ha.

"Do-young did have some unusually high standards. We struggled with that for quite some time, but... never imagined Taeshin would marry her off to another man so quickly."

She said it knowing well the motive behind marrying Tae Ju-ha to Kang In-hyuk.

Thus, Jeon Hae-in and Lee Sun-hye quietly sniped at each other while keeping their smiles.

"If their feelings are mutual, there's nothing we can do..."

Lee Sun-hye paused as she watched a man approaching from behind Jeon Hae-in.

Seeing this, Jeon Hae-in's expression also stiffened.

In-hyuk was walking toward the two women.

"Oh, my mother-in-law is here as well. Well, it makes sense since you're the director of this place."

It was an exceedingly nonchalant greeting, with an undertone that puzzled Lee Sun-hye.

"Kang... what brings you here, son-in-law?"

"I came to see CEO Jeon Hae-in."

Her gaze turned sideways.

Jeon Hae-in, too, was taken aback.

The same went for her security guard, Lee Jung-tae, who had been watching the situation from a short distance away.

"... Me? But, how did you know I was here?"

She hadn't informed anyone at the office about her plans to visit Seoran Gallery.

"First, I'd like to speak somewhere private. CEO, I believe you have a few things to tell me as well."

With a serious expression, Jeon Hae-in considered for a moment before speaking.

"... Alright. Let's move somewhere else. Director Lee, can I borrow a room?"

Soon, In-hyuk headed to a VIP guest room inside Seoran Gallery with her.

Sitting opposite Jeon Hae-in in the all-white room, In-hyuk waited.

Shortly after, director Lee Sun-hye had someone bring warm coffee for the two.

After a moment of silence, In-hyuk opened the conversation.

"I'd prefer if we spoke alone."

He glanced toward her security guard, Lee Jung-tae, who stood behind her.

"He's my private security guard. Isn't that fine?"

"It's just that the topic is rather important."

At this, Jeon Hae-in gestured to Lee Jung-tae, who stepped out.

"So, what brings you here to see me? And how did you know I was here?"

Ironically, she had ordered In-hyuk's killing only a few days prior.

Now, with In-hyuk coming to her directly, Jeon Hae-in's mind was bound to be tangled.

"Just as you did, I put someone on your trail."

Instantly, her expression hardened.

"... I don't understand."

"Haven't you had someone tailing me lately? They were more conspicuous than expected. Even when I went to Andong."

At In-hyuk's reply, Jeon Hae-in bit her lower lip slightly.

Seeing her reaction, In-hyuk spoke again.

"More important than who was following whom is my origin, I think. Oh, if you're going to act ignorant again... would you understand faster if I called you 'Stepmother'?"

To quell her greater agitation than before, Jeon Hae-in took a shaky sip of coffee.

"What are you even talking about...?"

In-hyuk mulled over how to stop Jeon Hae-in.

Now that she was fully aware of his existence, leaving things as they were would only put his life at risk.

A head-on confrontation was the only choice.

"Yoo Ji-young."

That was the real name of Kang In-hyuk's birth mother.

He hadn't learned it through wiretapping.

By tracking Daemyung Detective Agency's movements, he noticed their main destinations were orphanages, and when investigating his own origins, the name Yoo Ji-young kept coming up.

"... How did you find out? Did you know who your real father was from the beginning?"

Though he didn't say the name, it was obvious whom they meant.

In-hyuk saw that she fell into the trap he had set and gave a wry chuckle.

"Rather than when, don't you think why I've come all this way to tell you matters more?"

Even if he married the Taeshin Group heir's illegitimate daughter, at the top was still Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

Lately, In-hyuk had even proven himself enough to win a Division Director position at a new subsidiary.

If In-hyuk exposed his real identity to KQ Group, it was obvious it would disrupt the succession battle in some way.

"What do you want? Are you planning to step forward as his child?"

Jeon Hae-in's intent was clear, and In-hyuk's smile didn't fade.

"If I planned to announce it publicly, I'd go see Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu himself, not you."

There was no arguing with that, and Jeon Hae-in sank into thought.

"So, why have you come to me?"

"I have no intention of using my bloodline to meddle in KQ Group's sordid succession feud. Nor will I tell Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu about this."

"... Why should I believe that?"

Her face was full of suspicion.

"For the sake of Executive Director Kang Do-young, you really should believe me. And..."

In-hyuk trailed off as he pressed play on a recording on his phone.

[... You should have taken care of it by any means!]

[... If he finds out about our relationship with madam... couldn't it be dangerous?]

[... So what now?]

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Jeon Hae-in's face darkened in an instant. The voices in the recording were hers and Lee Daemyung's.

"How did you...?"

Actually, her meeting with Lee Daemyung had been coordinated by her security guard Lee Jung-tae.

But after the incident in Andong failed, Jeon Hae-in, in her growing anxiety, had gone to see him herself.

That lapse in caution had returned to haunt her.

"I only figured it out after hearing this, but it was you who orchestrated the incident in Andong. And I hope nothing like that ever happens again."

At In-hyuk's firm voice, Jeon Hae-in clenched her small fist tightly.

Glaring at her, In-hyuk continued with a heavy expression.

"For your information, if anything happens to me, this recording and all the surveillance records of your recent activities will be sent to all the major news outlets—and to Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu himself. So you should know well enough that you don't have a choice."

"... So you mean I should do nothing?"

"Whether publicly or privately, I hope we never meet again."

Silence fell once more.

Of course, business dealings would inevitably bring them face to face at some point, and In-hyuk knew this, but his words were meant as a warning.

After taking a sip of his cooling coffee, In-hyuk stood up first.

"I trust you'll understand sufficiently. I'll take my leave now. Oh, I'll be calling off your tails as of today, so it won't help to look for them."

Leaving the reception room, In-hyuk passed by the security guards and headed outside.

Meanwhile, his security guard, Lee Jung-tae, walked over to Jeon Hae-in, who was left alone.

"CEO, are you alright?"

Jeon Hae-in's mood and expression were extremely dark.

"Kang In-hyuk knows everything."

"... What do you mean?"

"He knows he's Chairman Kang's flesh and blood. On top of that, he says he has a recording of my order for the Andong incident and even my conversation with Lee Daemyung the other day!"

At the same time, Lee Jung-tae's face became grim and cold.

"How did..."

"He's been following us up to now, so of course he'd know! How do you people even handle things...!"

Lee Jung-tae immediately bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. I'll take action right away..."

"And what action would that be? Are you going to chase after him right now and kill... take care of him?"

Jeon Hae-in stopped herself short just as she was about to utter something violent.

"Is there a problem now?"

Her sharply raised voice and stern face suggested the gravity of the situation.

After a short pause, Jeon Hae-in relayed the exact threat In-hyuk had given her.

This made Lee Jung-tae, like her, deeply troubled.

"What do you think, CEO? Do you really think Kang In-hyuk won't make a move?"

"Right now, Kang In-hyuk has the upper hand. No matter what I decide, what could I do now?"

"... I apologize."

Ultimately, this had happened because Daemyung failed to handle things properly.

But it was too late to turn things back, and nothing could be done about it for now.

"Did you find out why Chairman Kang met with Attorney Kim? He didn't approach him suspiciously, did he?"

She was referring to Attorney Kim Hyun-wook, who handled the will, recently meeting Kang Cheon-gyu.

If suspicion was aroused, word could reach Kang Cheon-gyu, and she needed to be especially cautious of this.

"Actually, a contact from Daemyung is scheduled to meet Attorney Kim tomorrow."

"There won't be any problems?"

"If they're talking under the pretense of friendship, there shouldn't be any need for caution."

"Be careful, since things are bad right now. Also, remove all the tails we have on Kang In-hyuk."

"Are you planning to remove them because of the threat?"

He said this thinking of both her and Kang Do-young, the current sole heir to KQ Group.

"Do you have a plan?"

"For now, if we keep watching..."

"But Kang In-hyuk already found out Daemyung was tailing him. Then he found out I was behind it and even put someone on me. If we're caught again and things get ugly, what do we do then?"

Lee Jung-tae had no answer and fell silent once again.

Looking at him, Jeon Hae-in sighed deeply and spoke again.

"Stay quiet for a while. Once Attorney Kim's matter and the rest are handled, we'll think things over again and decide then."

"... Understood."

With that, the two of them left Seoran Gallery together with the other security guards.