Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 3

Stand Your Ground, or Endure

As the evening approached, Kang In-hyuk, after gathering documents at the office in the afternoon and taking care of some additional errands, headed over to Donui Neighborhood, Jongno District.

There, he opened the door of a place deep in the alley called 'Seunghwa's Set Menu'.

Inside, Tae Seokho was sitting at a round stainless steel table, drinking soju with kimchi stew.

Seeing people associated with his past memories kept triggering something within him.

As In-hyuk, his brow twitching, entered, Lee Jae-jun, who had been standing by the door, locked the entrance.

"Excuse me."

Lee Jae-jun naturally rummaged through In-hyuk's coat and took out his wallet, phone, and car keys, placing them into a steel case on a side table.

His search didn't end there; he thoroughly scanned In-hyuk's body with a handheld metal detector before finally letting him pass.

This process made it clear that the situation was in no way casual.

"If you're done, come here and sit."

Tae Seokho tapped out his used soju shot on the ground before offering it to In-hyuk.

As for In-hyuk, considering the years since he'd last seen him—after sending him off in his previous life—it truly had been a long time.

He looked at him briefly, approached, and accepted the glass.

Once the soju was poured, he turned his head, drank, and sat across from him.

"... Why did you call for me?"

The last time Kang In-hyuk recalled meeting him was about six months ago.

It hadn't been anything important—just checking on how things were at Taeshin Asset Management, and whether anything was inconvenient.

Of course, In-hyuk had known that hadn't been the real reason for the meeting.

"Ju-ha will be returning to Korea next week."

He was referring to his niece and In-hyuk's wife, Tae Ju-ha.

"Is that so?"

"She's going to be the new CEO of Taeshin Asset Management—the same place you're working. That was the deal hyung made from the start—she'd marry you on the condition she'd become CEO. Ah, did you not know that part?"

This was not information present in Kang In-hyuk's old memories. He really hadn't known.

However, thanks to his present memories, he was aware that something like that had happened in his previous life.

Naturally, he kept his expression neutral.

"Yes. This is the first I'm hearing of it."

"Her father is really something. He married off the child he brought in from outside, just in case she'd snatch the position of his other children—all so she could be handed a subsidiary company and be out of the way."

Listening to those words, In-hyuk almost swore involuntarily but contained himself.

In his previous life, Tae Seokho had been every bit as bad—if not worse—than Tae Seok-hyun.

"....."

"You've had it rough, haven't you?"

"Well... I suppose so."

At this response, a sly smile crept across Tae Seokho's face.

"Then you must know exactly what you need to do from here on, right?"

That was a statement of the reason he'd sought out Kang In-hyuk all along.

"You want me to report to you once Tae Ju-ha takes over as CEO, and watch her movements?"

"And also collect the info she's gathered in New York."

"Did she find something?"

This was another detail unknown even in his previous life.

At that, Tae Seokho stared hard at him before speaking.

"I haven't decided if I'll say it all right now. ... Can I trust and rely on you?"

The implication was that he did not fully trust Kang In-hyuk yet.

From the start, Tae Seokho had never trusted anyone.

He weighed everyone on his scales and discarded them as soon as their usefulness faded—and always replaced the empty spot with a new piece.

"If it's hard for you to trust me, you can always give this job to someone else."

"... What?"

Even the original Kang In-hyuk had never kowtowed to him.

He regarded him purely as a tool, strictly for business

Still, Tae Seokho had presumed In-hyuk would naturally take this job without hesitation.

Now, faced with an unexpectedly defiant attitude, he couldn't help but look surprised.

"Didn't you say this is something only I can do? But if you can't trust me, then when things go wrong, I'll be the only one at a loss."

"Heh...!"

"If you only want a result that matches your expectation, you'll need to find someone more suitable to deliver that."

After saying this, In-hyuk picked up the soju bottle and poured himself another shot.

Clack—

Tae Seokho gave a hollow chuckle and stared piercingly at him.

"Didn't realize before since you were always quietly keeping your mouth shut... you've got quite a backbone."

"I just didn't think being ambiguous right now would be courteous."

Tae Seokho seemed pleased with that answer and slowly opened his mouth again.

"These are materials from a place called the H&T Fund. Once obtained, just pass them to Deputy Chief Lee."

He glanced over at Lee Jae-jun guarding the door, before his gaze settled back again.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk's expression involuntarily stiffened.

That was because, earlier at the office, the SD card he'd found contained an account record from that very place.

'Was that connected to Tae Seokho all along?'

It was a place he hadn't known of while following him before.

Judging by the timing, it was likely a business cleaned up before he became Tae Seokho's right-hand.

"Just hearing the name, it doesn't seem ordinary... If it's truly that important, wouldn't it be faster for you to have someone else find it? Wouldn't it be easier before Ju-ha returns?"

In Korea, the influence of her father Tae Seok-hyun and of Taeshin Group's chairman, Tae Gun-seung, could only be a concern.

"You think I don't already know that?"

"Something's holding you back from doing it yourself."

"You'll find out once Ju-ha arrives, but recently the Chairman assigned the TSS team to watch over her."

Commonly called TAESHIN Security—TSS for short—it was the special security team under Taeshin Group which In-hyuk had once belonged to.

However, the TSS team reporting directly to Chairman Tae Gun-seung was a different level from those under his eldest or second son.

Besides, it fell under the TSS umbrella in name only and really worked independently, making it immune to infiltration.

"So you mean, Ju-ha found something the Chairman can't find out about."

Tae Seokho's expression grew grave.

"Exactly. But I don't know if the Chairman already suspects something, or if he's tailing her because of her own request. Either way, you must absolutely track it down. Understand?"

"Are you certain Tae Ju-ha herself has that? I'll do my best, but if you're asking me to retrieve something that's not there, there's only so much I can do."

At that, at Tae Seokho's signal, Lee Jae-jun approached and produced a photo.

The background looked like a parking tower.

A blond Caucasian woman appeared to be handing an envelope to Tae Ju-ha as she sat in a car.

"That's the secretary of an H&T Fund executive. Who knows how Ju-ha found and sweet-talked her, but that woman passed internal information to Ju-ha right there."

"Do you know exactly what was inside?"

"When the other side caught her and pressed, it was paperwork. But there's no guarantee Ju-ha still has it. So check for any USB or other device as well."

Tae Seokho explained, not letting his guard down.

"Understood. I'll look into it. Is that all you needed?"

"For now, that's it."

"I'll excuse myself, then."

With that, In-hyuk retrieved his belongings from the case Lee Jae-jun had unlocked and left.

Watching the door close, Tae Seokho wore a complex expression.

"Deputy Lee. Doesn't that friend... seem somewhat changed?"

Lee Jae-jun had just relocked the door and approached.

"He doesn't seem exactly the same as before," he answered, showing not a hint of speculation.

Tae Seokho took another shot of soju, a low grunt escaping his lips.

"Hmph... He used to just sit quietly and watch, but today, nothing was readable. Instead, he acted as though he was seeking some confirmation from me. What do you think?"

"... My insight is shallow, sir. I don't think I can judge that far."

Again, no opinion offered.

"That's why I trust you—because you never invite misunderstandings."

"Thank you."

"... Maybe he's made up his mind about something. When he just suggested it'd be easier to clean up Ju-ha in the States... that was telling."

From the start, her marriage was meant to suppress Tae Ju-ha's abilities.

In such an arrangement, Kang In-hyuk was nothing more than a sacrifice welcome to neither side.

True, the one who forced the marriage was her own father, Tae Seok-hyun, but as it had been a temporary, disposable move, he had never really trusted In-hyuk.

"If things keep going like this, a day will come when I can use him perfectly. Ah, just to confirm—that thing's set up, right?"

"It's been cloned without issue."

Hearing that, Tae Seokho took one more gulp of soju.

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After leaving the restaurant, In-hyuk swung by Yongsan to buy a phone, laptop, and bug detector before heading home.

He checked that there were no bugs or cameras in outlets, lights, or the air conditioner.

"So Tae Seokho hasn't reached the point of going that far, yet?"

Muttering quietly, he powered on the newly-bought laptop and the phone he'd kept switched off since leaving the restaurant.

On the laptop, he browsed to a magic-tool shopping site called 'Wizard's Shop.'

Outwardly, there was nothing strange about the site.

He searched for a product called 'Red Witch'—and up popped a wig in a vivid blood-red shade.

Entering the product page, he scrolled down and clicked the blank margin to the right of a typo in "Please wear it when using."

Click—

Immediately, the page changed, revealing a site with an atmosphere completely different from the first: an old darknet site in operation for years.

【The Red Witch's Store】

Of course, that wasn't all. An input field appeared, and In-hyuk instinctively began typing.

Tatatak— Tatatak—

After entering the password and passing through, the main page was revealed.

"Just as I thought... This is still here."

He first downloaded the necessary programs from the darknet site and ran a check on his original phone.

【Warning】

【Warning】

【Warning】

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Moments later, warning messages popped up. A closer look showed the device had been cloned.

'Of course... They don't trust me at all.'

Lee Jae-jun must have rigged the bag that held In-hyuk's phone.

So, In-hyuk downloaded a virus from the site and installed it.

Immediately, the malware clashed with the clone program, causing the phone to shut off and refuse to boot.

"This should raise a little suspicion, but they might think it's a software issue."

He then clicked the message option for the admin deep in a corner of the darknet site.

【Guest5436 : HELLO. KO MIA.】

He hit send. Not long after, a reply arrived.

【Red Witch : Who the hell are you? Do you want to die?】

In-hyuk smiled.

The Red Witch's Store, this darknet site, was run by a woman named Go Mi-ah.

Naturally, her identity was kept absolutely secret, even from users there.

So, someone suddenly dropping her name in a message was bound to draw curses.

【Guest5436 : Want to work with me?】

【Red Witch : Who are you? Or, wait—do you think I can't figure out who you are? I can wipe out your whole computer in five minutes!】

Go Mi-ah was a computer genius attending KAIST.

He knew just as well as she did that, with her skills, two minutes would be enough—not five.

And for what he planned to do next, In-hyuk would need exactly that kind of skill.

【Guest5436 : Do as you wish. If you want to earn more money than you do now, come find me. Also, the National Intelligence Service is already tracking your darknet, so you'd better shut it down soon.】

There was a pause.

【Red Witch : Liar. How would the NIS find me?】

【Guest5436 : There's bait hidden among the info uploaded to your darknet. Unless you prepare, your whole life will end right there.】

In the original timeline, Go Mi-ah had become a slave to the NIS because of this.

Naturally, the NIS hadn't planned to keep her forever; they'd promised to release her after five years.

But right before her term ended, the deal was broken thanks to her alleged involvement in a security leak.

After fleeing from a safehouse, she'd entered the Philippines illegally, living by running illegal gambling sites and peddling information, until she later met In-hyuk.

【Red Witch : Really?】

【Guest5436 : If you don't believe me, keep enduring and see. The NIS will be at KAIST personally.】

With that final response, In-hyuk closed the chat window completely.