Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 31

Your Capillaries Will Burst

Evening had come.

In-hyuk did not go into the office but handled only external business, then visited a restaurant called "Seunghwa's Set Menu" located in Donui Neighborhood, Jongno District.

It was the restaurant where he had met Tae Seok-ho last time.

This time, too, he had come because Tae Seok-ho, who had been quiet while hospitalized, had reached out to him.

Ting-a-ling—

With the sound of a bell, the door opened.

Tae Seok-ho, who had arrived first, was sitting in the middle.

"You're here? Long time no see. Come and have a seat."

As In-hyuk quietly approached and sat down, Tae Seok-ho handed him a glass.

"I have another appointment, so I'll pass."

"Really?"

Tae Seok-ho withdrew his hand, emptied his own glass, and spoke.

"How's your body? I heard it was bad enough to total the car."

"Fortunately, I wasn't hurt badly, so I was able to be discharged quickly."

"You must be sturdier than you look. So, what business did you have in Andong? I thought you had broken ties with the orphanage you once depended on."

He seemed to know a fair bit about In-hyuk.

"The director there told me that an acquaintance of my biological father had turned up. That's why I urgently took leave and went to visit."

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho's eyes widened as he stared at In-hyuk.

"... Your biological father? So, did you meet this acquaintance?"

"I didn't. I received the contact information and sent calls and messages, but got no reply."

Originally, it had been a trap orchestrated by Jeon Hae-in of KQ Group through Daemyung Detective Agency.

Moreover, In-hyuk's biological father, chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, was unaware of this fact, so there was no way a reply would come.

"That's rather odd."

"They might have mistaken me for their son."

"If that's the case... that's unfortunate."

With that, Tae Seok-ho took another drink.

"It's not as if I ever really wanted to find anyone until now."

"Were you that cold-hearted?"

"If someone is looking for me after more than 30 years, their reason can't be a good one. By the way, why did you want to meet me today? Perhaps..."

When In-hyuk skipped over the personal conversation, Tae Seok-ho let out a shallow breath.

"It's not about Ju-ha. It's because of the M&A/PEF division you've come to oversee. First off, congratulations. To think you caught the chairman's eye and went as far as division director."

"... Thank you."

Tae Seok-ho looked In-hyuk over as if to read his mood.

"As you might have heard before, I run a small fund. Of course, Taeshin Asset Management doesn't know about this."

This was about the H&T Fund, whose records Tae Ju-ha had secretly tried to uncover.

"Yes. Please, go on."

"To be direct... how about you and I join hands? Looking at your recent record, it's quite impressive. If we work together, there's nothing more I could want."

At this suggestion, In-hyuk scratched his nose with his folded knuckle.

"I've looked into your H&T Fund a little. The recent yield is 14.8%. It's below the industry average but not bad. But, is there any reason you need to team up with Taeshin Asset Management?"

Of course, Tae Seok-ho would not have been satisfied with that level of return.

Naturally, they had generated huge profits through internal stock price manipulation and diverting company patents and business items from companies involved in M&A to illegal lines.

Plus, the records Tae Ju-ha had wanted to steal originally were tied to those very accounts.

"I'm not trying to team up with Taeshin Asset Management, but with you. Of course, I'm offering something in return. If H&T Fund reaches its target profit, I'll help you with your divorce, along with a special incentive."

In-hyuk tilted his head.

"My divorce?"

"Frankly, wasn't it a forced marriage by your father-in-law, my older brother Tae Seok-hyun, and my sister-in-law? That's been a shackle, making it hard to do what you really want."

He simply listened quietly for now.

"That's not all. When this is over, you'll have a hard time staying in Korea for a while, so I can make you an executive at the New York headquarters of H&T Fund after. What do you think?"

What would the original Kang In-hyuk have chosen? If he were not who he was now, it was such a dramatic offer that he might have considered it.

"Sorry, but... that's not possible. I have plans at the new division."

"At best, it'll just be several billion won? Even at its best, a few tens of billions, right? If you help me, you'll see much bigger opportunities than you have now."

Tae Seok-ho assessed In-hyuk's limits to be just that.

He must have thought that if he offered any more, In-hyuk would definitely accept.

But In-hyuk was not tempted at all.

"That's all you have with your fund...? I guess I completely misjudged you, executive director."

"... What?"

"No matter what may come, there won't be a day when we join hands. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me out like this again."

With that, In-hyuk rose and headed toward the entrance.

Bang—

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho slammed his glass down on the table.

At the same time, his security guard, Lee Jae-jun, who had been standing at the entrance, stepped in front of him.

"The executive director hasn't finished speaking. Please return to your seat."

"I'm done talking. It's you who should step aside, Deputy Chief Lee."

Lee Jae-jun reached to force In-hyuk to sit.

At that, In-hyuk grabbed Lee Jae-jun's wrist.

"So you want to try me?"

"Isn't it you who wants to take this further, Deputy Chief Lee?"

The two held each other's wrists and hands, trembling with tension.

Then, as In-hyuk used his strength, Lee Jae-jun's wrist was pushed back down to its original position.

Even though Lee Jae-jun was in his forties, as a security guard, he had never lost in a contest of strength to a younger man thanks to his extensive training.

He tried to resist, but it was useless; his arm just trembled as In-hyuk returned it gently to where it started.

"Kgh...!"

"Deputy Chief Lee. At this rate, the capillaries in your forehead will burst. And, as for you, executive director, I trust you understand my words, so I'll be on my way."

In-hyuk patted Lee Jae-jun's shoulder once and left the restaurant.

Tae Seok-ho, who had sat at the table watching the recent scene alongside Lee Jae-jun, was bewildered.

* * *

Threatening Jeon Hae-in and rejecting Tae Seok-ho's offer—

Once the two most important matters had been settled, In-hyuk's day started peacefully.

Of course, the constant tailing he had endured every day was also gone.

Amid all this, In-hyuk was taking a call in his office.

[We finished the investment meeting with TN SOFT. However, though we offered 20 million dollars to CEO Luke Harrison, despite poor management conditions, he refused to negotiate any equity.]

It was a call from Norman McGrath, the head of AMK Partners' Korea branch.

Currently, he was temporarily in the USA, following In-hyuk's orders while posing as Gordon Grimes.

"Did they contact any other parties or were there any unusual occurrences?"

[There was someone who wanted to buy the company. But as it was a private buyer, they don't know which company it is.]

In-hyuk recalled his memories from his previous life.

TN SOFT's TCL Code technology, after commercialization, would start being widely used across banking, government agencies, networks, and security—right alongside Bitcoin.

But the owner of TN SOFT then was not the current company CEO.

"Did you find out which company it was?"

[If it was a big corporation buying a big firm, maybe. But for a small company like TN SOFT that can't commercialize its product right away, the deal money isn't that large... so it's hard to trace via related companies' fund flows.]

As expected of the veteran investment manager, Norman McGrath knew the right way to go about it.

"I'll look into it myself."

[But is TN SOFT really worth that level of investment? They're barely surviving on minor software; all they do is keep developing with nothing else. You might just toss 20 million dollars into thin air.]

"Has any of my directed investments failed so far?"

At In-hyuk's question, he let out a sigh.

[... You've always succeeded. But on close inspection, it was at companies where a clear path to success could be seen, at just the right timing for business items. But TN SOFT has a lot of problems. Their development, management, and operation costs will just keep piling up. It's going to be a black hole.]

He wasn't wrong.

The reason TN SOFT changed owners in his past life was for that very reason:

They couldn't handle the excessive development costs outstripping profit, so they had to sell off all equity.

In-hyuk let out a small laugh over the line.

"A black hole is a thing of unknown terror. But if there's a way to use it, isn't there another way to interpret that?"

Norman McGrath asked, full of doubts.

[Are you saying you have a way to make it useful, CEO?]

"Of course I do. That's why I'm pushing it. But for now, it's too soon to talk about it. Just focus on getting equity in TN SOFT on investment terms."

[But CEO Luke Harrison is so firm about the issue... Wouldn't it be more effective to play the card you have, that you mentioned?]

It was a method In-hyuk had considered, too.

But if he approached rashly with only that card, other companies interested in TN SOFT would catch on as well.

"It's too risky for now. Are you having trouble persuading CEO Luke Harrison?"

[No, that's not it...]

"Maybe I overestimated your abilities, Mr. McGrath."

Perhaps his business pride was pricked, as Norman McGrath cleared his throat.

[Khm—! Of course not!]

"Instead, I'll look into the company that offered to buy TN SOFT."

[If you start digging around, they'll learn of your existence. Weren't you intending not to reveal yourself publicly?]

"There's no chance I'll show myself, so don't worry."

Even now, the call was running through Go Mi-ah's security process. Even his voice was altered.

As long as no one saw it in person, tracking would be impossible.

[You might get careless and something bad could happen.]

"Like how you keep trying to find out more about me, Mr. McGrath?"

Momentarily, Norman McGrath fell silent, as though caught off guard.

[... You knew?]

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions about me. Besides, you didn't join AMK Partners out of goodwill, did you?"

It had begun with In-hyuk, in disguise as Gordon Grimes, sending a threatening message.

Given Norman McGrath's prideful nature, he would never stand by quietly despite joining the same side.

[So, I was in the palm of your hand all along.]

"So then, did you manage to figure something out?"

There was a sound of frustration from the other end.

[From the start, and even now, I'm completely in the dark. Where are you and what are you doing that nothing comes up?]

Under the name Gordon Grimes, he was only registered as CEO of AMK Partners.

With no other trace of activity, Norman McGrath could only feel frustrated.

"When the time is right, I'll let you know. Until then, I suggest you refrain from unnecessary moves."

[I understand perfectly. Then I look forward to the day we meet properly, and in the meantime, I'll do my best to follow your instructions.]

With that, In-hyuk ended the call.

There was a meeting scheduled with the CEO, executives, and department head, so he grabbed the tablet with the presentation materials and stood up.

Chapter 32

Why? Are you scared?

It was past 3 a.m.

Lee Daemyung of the Daemyung Detective Agency stared grimly at the surveillance cameras and bugging devices on his desk.

These were not their own equipment.

They had just found them by searching around the office entrance and the surrounding hallways.

"Is this everything, or is there more?"

He was asking Lee Young-seok, who had first discovered the camera.

This was also the man who had recently led the Kang In-hyuk assignment on-site.

"For now, that's all. And since they're wireless devices, I looked for the transmission point, but these are high-range receivers, so I haven't found the source yet."

Lee Daemyung's expression darkened further.

The reason he had searched for devices like this was because he believed information had leaked out during the Kang In-hyuk operation in Andong.

Moreover, just a few days ago, Kang In-hyuk had visited Jeon Hae-in in person and used the fact that he knew her real identity to threaten her.

From Daemyung's perspective, there were simply too many suspicious circumstances, so he had no choice but to search the surroundings.

"You have no idea when these were installed?"

"They're not the self-storage type, but transmitting models. And as you know, security in this building is lax, making it difficult to check who has been in and out. I think they expected that and boldly installed them."

The Banpo Plaza General Arcade, where the office was located, was scheduled for redevelopment along with nearby apartment construction.

For that reason, the facilities inside were severely outdated.

"This is driving me crazy... Judging by the devices, it'll be hard to trace their origin, won't it?"

"They're pretty easily available on the market, so it seems that way."

Annoyed, Lee Daemyung scratched his head furiously.

Not only had vital plans leaked, but now even their hideout had hidden cameras set up around it.

That meant some unknown enemy had specifically targeted the Daemyung Detective Agency.

A heavy silence followed before Lee Young-seok spoke again.

"In any case... shouldn't we move the hideout first? If we're completely exposed, they might even be watching right now."

They had double-checked, but it was possible there was even more.

Lee Daemyung nodded.

"I've reported it to the Organization, so we wait—"

Ddiririririri—

As he was speaking, the intercom rang.

Behind Lee Young-seok were others who had been involved in this operation.

One of them checked the intercom screen.

Someone was standing there with their palm outstretched. Seeing this, the man seemed satisfied and opened the door.

The person who entered was a sharply dressed young man with piercing eyes...

It was Baek Si-hwan.

"Are you CEO Lee Daemyung?"

Meeting Baek Si-hwan's gaze, Lee Daemyung looked at him with a slightly arrogant expression.

He guessed the man was much younger than him.

"Yes. I'm Lee Daemyung. You're from upstairs, right? Name and department?"

Baek Si-hwan's expression turned even colder.

"Intelligence Division, level 2. I'm currently on assignment with a domestic corporation, and today I'm here as a messenger."

Upon hearing this, Lee Daemyung's face hardened—he had reached over fifty but had never risen beyond Level 3 in the Organization.

"Hmph! You don't even look that old... already Level 2?"

"If you have the skills in the Organization, it doesn't matter. More importantly, is everyone here present who participated in the Andong operation?"

Baek Si-hwan's gaze swept across them.

A little uncomfortable now, Lee Daemyung let out a sigh.

"I told everyone to gather, didn't I? Besides, this is everyone who works out of this office anyway."

"Is all the equipment gathered as well?"

"Naturally. Orders from above—I was thorough. So, where are we relocating the office? Seems like we'll need new IDs, too."

At this, his gaze shifted toward the office storeroom.

When Baek Si-hwan moved in that direction, Lee Daemyung opened the door for him.

Inside, various intelligence devices, as well as pistols and magazines, were on display.

"You've gathered everything well. I'll call in the standby team to move them out immediately."

"We're moving out tonight?"

"There's no reason to delay."

Baek Si-hwan made a phone call somewhere.

Soon after, the intercom rang again, and men wearing uniforms labeled 'Areum Cleaning' entered and began moving out equipment and firearms.

"Anything we can do to help?"

"... Yes."

"What is it?"

"Just stay put."

At the same time, Baek Si-hwan pulled a silenced pistol from inside his jacket.

Pshk— Psh-p-shk—

The trigger was pulled, and holes appeared in the heads of Lee Daemyung and those beside him.

When the others tried to react, the men in the Areum Cleaning uniforms pulled out knives and stabbed their chests and throats.

Thus, the seven men, including Lee Daemyung from the Daemyung Detective Agency, met their end.

"Make sure no traces are left. Clean it up thoroughly."

At Baek Si-hwan's quiet command, the Areum Cleaning workers gave a slight bow and moved even more busily.

And in no time at all, nothing was left inside the Daemyung Detective Agency.

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A few hours later.

In-hyuk was called out from his residence after receiving an urgent call from Hong Yu-geon of Charybdis.

The place he arrived was the same Hangang Park parking lot where they'd met previously.

Thunk—

Hong Yu-geon got out of a large van parked to the side and immediately seized In-hyuk by the collar, pushing him against a nearby car.

"You! What the hell are you doing with us?!"

The atmosphere was intense.

Despite being pushed by Hong Yu-geon's strength, In-hyuk calmly replied.

"What's wrong?"

"That guy you had us investigate! What the hell kind of bastard is he?!"

"... You mean Baek Si-hwan?"

Charybdis had attached themselves to Baek Si-hwan under In-hyuk's direction after finishing the investigation at Daemyung Detective Agency.

"He went into that office and killed everyone in there!"

"... Killed? How do you know that? You didn't clash with them, did you?"

All the office windows were deliberately blocked from view.

Whatever happened inside would be impossible to know from the outside.

"The crew from Areum Cleaning went in and hauled out everything. But the people who had arrived first—Lee Daemyung and those planning to kill you—vanished as if into thin air. What do you think that means?"

As someone who specialized in tracking and intelligence gathering, Hong Yu-geon had figured out what had happened.

"Couldn't you have lost track of their movements?"

"Even after seeing this?"

A phone was thrust in front of him, with footage in red and blue tones. It was from an infrared camera.

Among the items being carried out by several people, there were multiple long objects lit up in red.

Even a glance showed that those shapes looked far more like people than ordinary objects.

"You carried around equipment like this too?"

"These guys tried to stage accidents out in the open to kill people. But that's not what matters now."

In-hyuk kept his eyes on the footage as he spoke.

"Looks like they're cleaners. But if you're not planning to hurt me, can you let go?"

"... Tch."

Reluctantly, Hong Yu-geon released his grip and stepped back.

"I'll have to look into Areum Cleaning, too."

"What about Baek Si-hwan? Not going to tell me who he really is?"

"You think I know?"

"If you didn't, you wouldn't have told us not to plant anything on his house or car! And you didn't warn us to keep a certain distance for no reason. You clearly had an idea!"

Charybdis had sensed just how thorough Baek Si-hwan was when tailing him.

He wasn't the kind of person one could dismiss as a typical security guard.

Moreover, when Baek Si-hwan visited the Daemyung Detective Agency they had been watching, they'd been even more shocked.

And after tonight, things had only gotten stranger.

"Hmm... At least we know he's dangerous. And that even more dangerous people are behind him."

Even In-hyuk himself had not fully identified Baek Si-hwan or the organization behind him.

All he had learned was that they'd infiltrated major domestic corporations, and that they all seemed to have a strange tattoo along the inside of their left ring finger...

"You knew from the start that people like that were targeting you?"

"No. As I started organizing what had happened to me one by one, I realized they all originated from the same place."

It all began with the accident at the KQ Group's Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's autobiography launch party, and the attempt on his life by the security guard Pyo Jun-woo.

Chasing and taking care of that had revealed yet another hidden enemy.

He had let him go after stabbing him with a knife, but...

While In-hyuk was mulling things over, Hong Yu-geon finally spoke up.

"So in the end, are you saying they used KQ Group's Jeon Hae-in's failed request as an excuse to clean house?"

"That's probably it. Honestly, I didn't expect them to move so quickly and decisively, either. But if you came alone... is Van Hester tracking them?"

There was no sign of anyone else in the car from which he'd just exited.

"He followed them until just now. But because hardly any cars are moving at this hour, it might have been risky, so he's heading back here. This is the last checkpoint."

Hong Yu-geon showed him his phone screen with a map and coordinates.

"Near Paldang Bridge, huh? Maybe there's a spot over there to dump bodies?"

"So, what are you actually trying to do against such dangerous people? Don't tell me... you want revenge or something?"

"Why? Are you scared? If so, you can back out now. You've already helped, so your outstanding salary and danger pay will be delivered without a hitch."

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon sighed deeply and wrinkled his brow.

"Don't you understand how serious this is? This is a whole different level. If they're using cleaners, you could be eliminated without a trace!"

In-hyuk let out a faint, bitter laugh.

"If I hadn't considered that, I'd already be dead."

"Don't you think you've just been lucky so far? There might not be a next time."

For whatever reason, Hong Yu-geon's voice was full of agitation.

In response, In-hyuk stared back with cold eyes.

"Like I said before, if you want to back out, go ahead."

"Haa... So you're really going to go to war with them?"

"You know full well that if I don't make a move, they'll kill me first. To survive, I have to try something, don't I?"

Hong Yu-geon thought about what had happened in Andong, and how In-hyuk had even gone so far as to threaten Jeon Hae-in directly.

But by now, just as In-hyuk had said, he had crossed a point of no return.

If nothing else, Jeon Hae-in's side could be held back for the time being by In-hyuk's real status, but who could say for how long?

"You even threatened them, so they'll retaliate harder than before. Do you have a plan?"

"If I didn't, why would I have set you and Van Hester on Baek Si-hwan?"

"Seriously, what is that guy?"

"He's the gateway to those targeting me. So decide. I need to know whether to keep planning as I have or change course."

From the start, he hadn't expected to see things through to the end with Charybdis, whom he'd hired for intelligence gathering.

They had worked together in a previous life, so he was well aware of their tendencies and limits.

Hong Yu-geon let out another sigh and stared In-hyuk down.

At that moment, Van Hester rode a motorcycle into the parking lot where the two of them stood.

Chapter 33

How Many Are Left?

Vrrrr—

Van Hester, who entered the parking lot, walked up to stand next to In-hyuk and Hong Yu-geon, who were facing off as if glaring at each other.

"Have you relayed the situation?"

"For the most part."

Hong Yu-geon responded and relayed what In-hyuk had said, while In-hyuk silently observed the two as they discussed.

Soon, Van Hester slowly nodded and asked again.

"So now, do we just have to decide what we'll do?"

"For now, yeah. What do you want to do?"

"Double hazard pay. And once the job is done, all equipment used in the operation gets handed over to us."

When Van Hester blandly stated his conditions, Hong Yu-geon was shocked.

"You want to call it even and keep going for that? We could get ourselves into serious danger! Actually, we'll be the first ones in danger!"

Charybdis was in charge of tracking and gathering intelligence.

Naturally, if discovered by the enemy, they'd be the first to get exposed and would have to risk their lives.

"It's not like we didn't know that from the start. Besides, it'd be good for us to prepare any gear we need during this opportunity."

Hong Yu-geon's expression turned wry.

"And what you're worried about isn't us, but the boss, isn't it?"

"N-no! That's not...!"

"You can be honest at times like these. You're worried something'll happen because you like the boss."

As those words flew, In-hyuk let out a small, involuntary snort.

"I didn't know you thought so much of me."

"No, that's not it?!"

"So, what do you want to do? Based on Van's conditions earlier, I can accept them. And if there's anything else you need, I can include that too."

Funds continued to increase with In-hyuk's experience and through the operation of AMK Partners.

It wouldn't be a burden, no matter how much he invested in Charybdis.

Of course, Van Hester didn't know this, so he fell silent with Hong Yu-geon for a moment, then spoke first.

"I'm in."

In-hyuk cast his gaze at Hong Yu-geon.

"... Tch. What do you expect me to say in this situation?"

"I'll take that as your acceptance. And from now on, our jobs are going to get a bit more difficult and risky. So, under any circumstance, don't get greedy. Make sure you absolutely don't get your identities exposed—that needs to be your top priority."

At In-hyuk's explanation, Van Hester cocked his head.

"If they're that dangerous, shouldn't we approach more aggressively?"

"We haven't figured out how big their group is yet. Once we know, we'll move to the next phase."

"Can you handle that alone?"

This time, it was Hong Yu-geon who asked.

"There are plenty of people who'll move as I intend. No need to worry about that."

Both men's eyes widened.

The In-hyuk they knew was Taeshin Group's son-in-law, but someone with little standing within the group.

To be honest, it was already strange that he was backing them with these much funds now.

So, it was hard to believe what In-hyuk just said.

"... There are really people like that?"

"You'll learn soon enough. For now, take the rest of the day off and do something else for me."

"Not continuing to watch Baek Si-hwan?"

In-hyuk shook his head with a calm sigh.

"Even if we turned aside during the tail, if they went so far as to use cleaners, they must have moved carefully. Which means there's a high chance they've already noticed."

"Even when we worked with merc squads, Van's tails were never caught."

"I didn't even know they existed until I found their traces. If they're that thorough, they would have anticipated being pursued."

At that, Hong Yu-geon met Van Hester's gaze and nodded.

"So... who do you want us to trail now?"

"I'll give you a list. Just follow them for the set period and record photos and videos."

"How many?"

"Around twenty for now."

Both men's faces stiffened.

"That many? Who are these people?"

"They're who I need for what's coming."

...

...

At the same time.

A dusty, pitch-dark warehouse.

Baek Si-hwan was staring with intensity at the brazier where flames were rising.

Just then, a man cautiously approached him.

"We've lost track of the guy who was tailing us. The license plate was fake, so we think tracking will be difficult."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

Baek Si-hwan's expression grew even more serious at the reply.

"How many are left?"

"Two left. It will be finished in about two and a half hours."

What was burning in the brazier were the bodies of Lee Daemyung and his subordinates, disposed of by Daemyung Detective Agency.

Watching the scene, Baek Si-hwan made a call.

[Is the cleanup done?]

The voice on the other end belonged to WISE&WIRE Group Chairman, Baek Ji-woong.

"There's a bit left. But I have something to report. After cleaning up Daemyung Detective Agency, we had a tail."

Baek Ji-woong's voice grew heavy.

[... Who was it? That same guy from last time?]

He was referring to the uninvited guest Baek Si-hwan had failed to handle at the outskirt warehouse in Gyeonggi Province.

Moreover, they had lost Pyo Jun-woo of KQ Group and other assets because of that.

"We noticed we were being tailed and tried to lure him in, but it seems they also judged it was too risky and withdrew. We kept up the pursuit until just now...but didn't find any more traces."

A quiet sigh came from the other end.

[... So that's why the Andong job failed? ... We missed a golden opportunity.]

"I apologize."

[But you're certain Daemyung was tailed?]

Baek Ji-woong doubted the overall situation as he listened.

"There were suspicious circumstances, and Daemyung was the only one whose tail could be discovered. However, since the one tailing could have seen me or the operators at the scene, caution is needed."

It was a rather cold judgment.

After another brief sigh, Baek Ji-woong spoke again.

[So you're saying if you stay at Taeshin, your tail will just get thicker. If I'd known, I would have sent someone else, even if it took longer.]

"... I apologize."

[No. It's my fault for moving people without foreseeing this. Still, the Organization will be annoyed if they find out, so tidy up as quickly as you can.]

"Then after cleaning up, I'll try to reverse-track the license plate until the next mission location is given."

Unless it was made directly, the plate would have a distribution trail.

By using that, it might be possible to trace the person who tailed them.

[No need. They might be waiting for just that, so stop here.]

Baek Si-hwan agreed easily and nodded.

[By the way, how's Taeshin lately? Has there been anything unusual with CEO Tae Seok-hyun?]

With a shift to questions, Baek Si-hwan stopped pursuing the previous thread.

"He's still struggling for power with Executive Director Tae Seok-ho. But three days ago, executive director Hwang Won-jun met Tae Seok-ho in secret."

Hwang Won-jun was an executive director at Taeshin Electronics and an executive under Tae Seok-hyun.

The fact he partnered with Tae Seok-ho, not Seok-hyun, could become a major variable.

[If it's Hwang Won-jun, he's one of Chairman Tae Gun-seung's people... What did they talk about?]

"It was about panel material for Taeshin Electronics. In the RG Display Philippines plant deal, executive director Hwang seems to be receiving a kickback on materials, which Executive Director Tae is helping to arrange."

[How much?]

"About 30 billion won, he said. But considering Hwang Won-jun's tendencies, I suspect it's even more."

Baek Ji-woong's quiet, knowing chuckle was heard.

It was quite a sum for a personal kickback.

[Haha. They're planning to use this as ammunition to secure shares.]

"I suspect Hwang Won-jun will be contacting H&T Fund in New York, seeing that he's scheduled a business trip soon."

[If that's true... they're planning to shake up Taeshin Group soon enough.]

Baek Ji-woong was aware that Tae Seok-ho's ultimate goal was Taeshin Group.

But the current chairman, Tae Gun-seung, refused to step down even after getting older, so Seok-ho was about to make a bold move.

Of course, Baek Si-hwan, who had gotten these details from inside Taeshin, couldn't know every part of the process.

"I apologize for dropping out of this case. But there are enough people left, so I'll pass on instructions to be alert."

[No helping it. Oh, and there's something I need you to do separately. As it happens, the timing is good.]

"Please instruct me."

[I can't discuss it over the phone, so finish up and come here.]

"Understood."

As the two finished their call, the last two corpses were dropped into the raging brazier.

Baek Si-hwan lowered his phone and stared straight at the burning scene.

* * *

In-hyuk was, as usual, in his office when a call came from Norman McGrath.

[TN SOFT accepted the investment under the equity conditions!]

"Is that so? That's great news. How were the terms adjusted?"

[Investment amount stayed at twenty million dollars. We got 20% equity.]

Normally, a company wouldn't give up that much equity for around 2.8 billion won.

However, tN SOFT's CEO, Luke Harrison, was so stretched developing the TCL Code that he was forced to raise such capital.

"But wasn't it supposed to be around 15% originally?"

They'd secured 5% more than the terms In-hyuk initially offered. It was a great result, but the unexpected change was puzzling.

[I put in a little more elbow grease. While auditing for the investment, I found a major hole in their fund management.]

"Did you use that as blackmail?"

Laughter rang through the receiver.

[Haha! I wouldn't call it blackmail—a bit of advice, rather. Still, up until recently they kept saying it was impossible, so I'm not sure what made them suddenly change their mind. Don't tell me... did the CEO pressure them behind my back?]

A very meaningful tone.

"If I had that much pull, I wouldn't have bothered you, sir."

[I figured I'd joke, since what I was worried about got sorted.]

"... In any case, it looks like they judged there aren't many other gaps for getting funding. I'll leave the rest to you, then."

[Understood. If you need anything else, contact me anytime.]

After finishing the call, In-hyuk stared at his phone's screen.

【Ghost Link】

An app with a very suspicious-sounding name had a badge showing the number '1'.

It was a threatening messenger app Go Mi-ah had made for him before.

Entering the icon and entering his password, a single message awaited, written in English.

【Luke Harrison: I've accepted your deal as you said. Now tell me the code that can optimize the TCL Code for lighter weight.】

It was a message from TN SOFT's CEO, Luke Harrison, whom In-hyuk and Norman McGrath had just discussed.

【HERMIT: The company holding the rights to that code exists—you can contract with them for usage.】

In-hyuk sent the message, using the nickname 'HERMIT'. Shortly after, a reply came.

Bzzz—

【Luke Harrison: You want us to pay to use it, after we just signed an investment deal that loses us money?】

【HERMIT: I'm not the one with a fire under my feet—it's you. Even if your funding is settled, without the optimized code you'll just be pouring water into a bottomless pot, right?】

This time, there was a pause before the next bzzz.

【Luke Harrison: Terms?】

At least he wanted to hear them out.

【HERMIT: 12% of total monthly sales after commercial release.】

【Luke Harrison: That's absurd. Impossible.】

If TCL Code reaches commercialization, its impact would be massive.

If it sold 100 million dollars, 12%, or 13 million dollars, would go straight to In-hyuk without any intermediary cuts—178 million won at current exchange rates.

Of course, in his previous life, he had earned tens of times that amount.

Luke Harrison too would have realized this, so he was stunned by the terms.

But In-hyuk wasn't in the least bothered.

【HERMIT: Then the deal's off. But I'll give you five seconds to decide. After that, no deal, ever.】

Another message was sent.

This time, there was a time limit, so if the other party missed the chance to reply, the link would break. At around three seconds, a simple answer arrived.

【Luke Harrison: Okay.】

A small smile came to In-hyuk's lips. He wrote and sent the necessary terms for Luke Harrison.

After that, the screen reverted to the message list.

In there were countless names, including TN SOFT's Luke Harrison, with whom he'd just spoken.

These were the people In-hyuk would need for his tasks going forward.

At the same time, they were the culprits behind low and dirty deeds, whom In-hyuk had identified before he became Bluewall's top dog in his previous life.

Chapter 34

We'll Handle It Ourselves

After work, In-hyuk was driving himself and Tae Ju-ha somewhere. Even though they were married, there was an awkward air between them.

In-hyuk silently organized the plans he had completed so far.

It had already been well over six months since he started living as another Kang In-hyuk at the same time as coming to the past.

In that time, he had prevented the deaths of Tae Ju-ha and himself, recruited Go Mi-ah and Charybdis, and blackmailed key individuals through Ghost Link.

In addition, he had recently secured shares of TN SOFT through Norman McGrath and even found traces of the existence that had driven him to death...

He had made considerable progress.

"Um..."

While he was lost in thought, Tae Ju-ha cautiously spoke up.

"What's wrong?"

"You looked so serious while driving. Are there any issues at work?"

He had been so focused that he hadn't even noticed her watching from beside him.

On the other hand, Tae Ju-ha seemed to sense the uncomfortable atmosphere and appeared concerned.

"Ah, it's nothing. I was just lost in thought."

"It's nothing in particular?"

Whether in the past or now, work always overflowed. He didn't feel there was much worth explaining further.

"Not really."

In-hyuk turned the wheel and stopped in front of the All Seasons Hotel near Gwanghwamun Station.

He handed the car over for valet parking and entered with Tae Ju-ha.

When they arrived at the restaurant on the top floor, Taeshin Group security guards were standing in the corridor.

In-hyuk instinctively stopped walking.

'... Baek Si-hwan?'

He hadn't seen him since the autobiography launch party for Chairman Kang Chan-kyu of KQ Group.

'Did he get called in because Chairman Tae Gun-seung is out like last time?'

Originally, Baek Si-hwan wouldn't join the chairman's direct security team for several more years.

Just then, Song Tae-ho, Tae Gun-seung's secretary and security guard, showed them to the door.

"They're waiting for you inside."

In-hyuk hurriedly suppressed the rising killing intent as he entered with Tae Ju-ha.

At the same time, Tae Gun-seung welcomed them.

This meeting was an appointment In-hyuk had scheduled while on his way to the Andong orphanage.

"You're here."

"Sorry, we were a little late because we came after work. But why did you want to meet outside when we could've eaten at home?"

As Tae Ju-ha sat down with In-hyuk, she asked the question. Tae Gun-seung looked at the two with a curious expression.

"At home, you can't eat properly because you're wary of your father. Not like you come often, either."

"Ah..."

It was hard to deny, so Tae Ju-ha couldn't answer. Then Tae Gun-seung's gaze shifted to In-hyuk.

"How have you been lately, Kang? Any aftereffects from the car accident?"

He was referring to the injuries In-hyuk had sustained in Andong.

"I'm fine."

"That's good. And work? I've heard your performance in the equity management team is spreading by word of mouth, so things are going well?"

"At this rate, it should be enough to contribute substantially to Taeshin Asset Management's second half revenue."

In-hyuk's clients had seen significant profits so far.

Naturally, with the new PEF division relocated to headquarters, they had to come along.

"I only called you for a meal today, so let's skip the business talk for now."

The unexpected answer left In-hyuk a little puzzled. Soon after, they called the waiter, ordered, and the food was served.

"... Let's eat first. We can talk after."

The three sliced the meat and ate.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk grew suspicious of Tae Gun-seung's attitude, which was so different from what he had expected.

'What's his intention? He's not someone who'd display kindness just because you're his child or grandson.'

Chairman Tae Gun-seung always measured everything on a scale, even with blood relatives.

If he determined something had no value, he would sever it without hesitation.

After a while, the meal ended and the plates were replaced with coffee and tea.

Tae Gun-seung carefully sipped the steaming tea and spoke.

"How long do you plan to stay at home? For the future, isn't it about time you move?"

The sudden question made In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha tilt their heads in confusion.

Tae Ju-ha glanced at In-hyuk and asked back.

"Why are you bringing up moving all of a sudden?"

There was nothing inconvenient; they even had separate rooms if needed and the place wasn't cramped.

"Wouldn't the current house be small if you plan to have and raise a child?"

"Cough—!"

Caught off guard, In-hyuk, who had been sipping his coffee beside Tae Ju-ha, was startled.

This time, Tae Gun-seung cocked his head and looked at him.

"Why? Are you not thinking of having kids yet? It wouldn't matter for you, but next year Ju-ha will be thirty-two."

Tae Ju-ha looked extremely awkward for a moment.

Seeing this, In-hyuk cleared his throat before he could spit out his drink.

"Hm! Chairman. We'll handle that matter ourselves."

"Is it because you're busy with work?"

"That's part of it... but we don't have any plans yet."

At In-hyuk's reply, Tae Gun-seung looked at the two with a heavier gaze.

"To be honest, I know your marriage was your mother's scheme. I know it's complicated."

Anyone who wasn't a fool would know.

In-hyuk coughed and continued to listen.

"But I think you two actually get along quite well. If you live together like this, maybe you'll grow feelings for each other over time."

He sounded as if he was giving advice. At that moment, Tae Ju-ha, who had been quiet, opened her mouth.

"Chairman. That's..."

But she couldn't explain properly and only trailed off. In-hyuk cut in and replied briefly.

"We'll handle it ourselves."

Perhaps because of his firm reply, Tae Gun-seung stared intently at In-hyuk.

After a brief silence, a sigh slipped from his lips.

"I hope you mean that in a good way."

"....."

In-hyuk didn't bother to answer.

"If you've finished eating, let's head out."

Just as he said, they barely talked business apart from the greetings at the start.

The three went downstairs.

Tae Gun-seung boarded a car waiting out front without saying anything more.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk just watched as Baek Si-hwan, in a different car, drove off into the distance.

"Aren't you going?"

As In-hyuk's car, which he'd left with valet, arrived, Tae Ju-ha asked.

"Yeah, let's go."

The two of them headed home together.

* * *

【Taeshin Asset Management M&A·PEF Division Newly Established, surpasses 300 Billion Won Investment in Two Weeks!】

【Taeshin Group's subsidiary Taeshin Asset Management attracts 300 billion won investment into its private equity fund! The future direction of its PEF investments is drawing widespread interest...】

...

...

A few days later, in the office of Oh Kang-goo, executive director of Taeshin Asset Management.

"Are you really okay leaving things like this?"

Yang Chan-woo, a fellow executive, asked as he looked at the article on his tablet.

Oh Kang-goo, having read it too, swallowed hard.

"They've already surpassed 300 billion... Was Kang In-hyuk that capable?"

"It seemed strange to me, so I did some digging."

"Did you find anything?"

At the question, voiced with suspicion, Yang Chan-woo sighed and explained.

"One of the A2 clients handled by Kang In-hyuk in the equity management team turned out to have a much larger asset scale than their official rating suggested."

The tablet display shifted to customer information. Oh Kang-goo's eyes widened as he checked it.

"Jang Hyung-cheol? An S1, not an A2... Is that certain?"

"The amount invested by this one client alone exceeds 50 billion won. If that's individual, not corporate money, the actual assets must be at least 200 billion won."

S1 rating means a client has to invest at least 5 billion won.

Even in the largest equity management team, only a few clients are of that scale.

And until now, there wasn't even a single one above 10 billion won. And now, such a client had fallen into Kang In-hyuk's hands.

"Was this client originally managed by Kang In-hyuk?"

"That's..."

When Yang Chan-woo trailed off, Oh Kang-goo's gaze sharpened.

"Is there an issue?"

"Originally, this was a black client managed by Team 1. Team Leader threw them to Team 3, who took it over."

"Team 1, meaning Team Leader Chu In-ho? Didn't they know the client's asset size?"

Team 1, like the rest of the equity management headquarters, was on Chairman Tae Gun-seung's side, but Oh Kang-goo's line had absorbed them as they brought in the biggest sales.

In this arrangement, an extremely lucrative client had been snatched away by the representative's line—her husband, Kang In-hyuk.

It was understandable that this would be upsetting for them.

"The client kept complaining, but after seeing results with Team 3, they switched over."

For now, it was all conjecture. Oh Kang-goo frowned and tapped the tablet screen.

To make matters worse, under Chairman Tae Gun-seung's orders, CEO Tae Ju-ha's share had increased from 3% to 5.34%, boosting her influence.

They knew all too well that Tae Ju-ha didn't look on them favorably.

If her power kept growing, it was inevitable that all-out war would break out.

And with that, one side would definitely be finished.

"We need a definite strategy."

"Realistically, the only way is if there's a problem with the funds in the PEF, or Kang In-hyuk fails in his investments."

The worry deepened. Then Oh Kang-goo suddenly remembered something.

"Is it difficult to find out where the investments are being made? Come to think of it, director Bong Joo-hyung said he'd try to bring over some staff from their side."

Bong Joo-hyung was also one of Oh Kang-goo's people, like Yang Chan-woo.

"He's been picking up information since the division was set up and keeps me updated. But apparently, Kang In-hyuk is being discreet—even internally, no one knows the exact PEF investment destinations."

"So he intends to handle it all by himself?"

"Unlike in M&A, you don't need a big team, so that seems likely."

"... This is troublesome. Is there anyone close to Kang In-hyuk we can recruit?"

That meant they had no immediate options.

"From what I can tell, he basically works alone... I'll have Director Bong keep contacting the staff. If we uncover anything, we'll have a move to make."

"Do whatever it takes—find something out..."

Bzzzz—

At that moment, Oh Kang-goo's phone vibrated with a message. When he read the contents, his expression hardened.

Noticing the strange tension, Yang Chan-woo cautiously asked,

"... Is something wrong?"

"Director Yang, have you heard of AMK Partners?"

Yang Chan-woo thought for a moment before replying.

"I have heard of them. I know they set up a branch in Korea recently and are investing in various areas. But why do you ask?"

"Executive Vice President Jeon Joon-seok wants a full report on them. I've heard about them, but only up to what you just said."

Jeon Joon-seok, who had been the former CEO of Taeshin Asset Management and was now an executive at Taeshin Life, was still influential over them.

"They're a foreign investment firm, so getting detailed information will take some time."

"You've got two days. If the report's done by then, pass it on to me and I'll deliver it."

"... I'll get it done."

After answering, Yang Chan-woo bowed and left the office.

Chapter 35

This Guy Was That Guy

After work, In-hyuk visited the studio at Go Mi-ah's summons.

"Why do you look so tired? Did you stay up all night?"

The dark circles beneath her eyes were deep enough to notice, even as she sat in front of her computer.

Ever since Norman McGrath handled things by separating into the Korean branch of AMK Partners, things should have become easier for her, so the situation was odd.

"It's because of the work to lighten up the TCL Code for TN SOFT!"

"Ah!"

"What? Ah—? You made me do such a damned annoying and complicated task, and you completely forgot about it?!"

"I thought you would use what you'd made before."

"That was unfinished code, wasn't it? Ugh~!"

Go Mi-ah, as if her irritation was rising, scratched at her long red hair roughly.

Seeing something white flake down around her, In-hyuk stepped back a little and spoke.

"... By the way, you said there's evidence that someone was looking up AMK Partners online. Did you find that through Under Investing?"

"You know about it? Well, for someone who knows that much about stocks, it'd be stranger if you didn't know."

It was a stock information site a level above rumor mills, operated on high membership fees and a subscription-based model.

While not quite insider trading, company insiders sold nearly factual information there for a high price.

Of course, In-hyuk also frequented the site in his previous life.

A few years later, the operator would be arrested and the site shut down after a prosecutorial investigation into insider trading.

"Did you find out where it originated from?"

All transactions on Under Investing were conducted anonymously.

To track someone's identity from there required Go Mi-ah's abilities.

"I just finished it. The location is Taeshin Asset Management, and the last extension on the IP trace is... 4885?"

"That's Managing Director Yang Chan-woo's number. So, did you discover what information they got?"

"As you know, the only transaction where AMK Partners really stood out was Raisen Energy. Besides that, most were traded for short-term gains, so unless you do a targeted investigation, nothing will stand out."

"So at least this time, we'll know the recent profits they've made."

"Probably, yes."

In-hyuk fell into thought.

AMK Partners was a means to find and topple Baek Si-hwan's backer.

Even now, he was steadily growing the funds with his experience and future knowledge.

But he still couldn't gauge the opponent's scale.

After all, if they've planted people in numerous corporate security teams and can meddle with police investigations, that's not a trivial opponent.

'I've purposely kept as low a profile as possible... but for none other than Managing Director Yang Chan-woo to catch on, that's odd.'

At present, Yang Chan-woo was struggling to expand his influence within Taeshin Asset Management by fronting Oh Kang-goo, the leader of the executive faction.

Of course, they claimed to be moving quietly in their own way, but In-hyuk knew very well how the company would end up later.

'Originally, after Tae Ju-ha's death, Executive Vice President Oh Kang-goo became CEO, and Tae Seok-ho used him to take over Taeshin Asset Management and shell companies to get shares of Trading as well.'

That proposal Tae Seok-ho had tossed to In-hyuk previously was part of the plan to swallow up Taeshin Group.

After finishing his thoughts, In-hyuk looked at Go Mi-ah.

"More or less, I get what's happening."

"Do you have any guesses as to what?"

"There are signs of a war breaking out inside Taeshin Group. It's the timing I was waiting for, too."

"You were waiting for it? And by war, do you mean a succession war is about to break out?"

"It should have started a long time ago."

Thanks to Chairman Tae Gun-seung's lengthy reign, the dissatisfaction of brothers Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho had already reached its peak.

"Don't tell me, we were gathering up shares for that? Do you intend to join the Taeshin Group's management rights dispute?"

"I'm still considering. Whether I'll seize the top seat myself after the vacancy, or... put someone else there."

"Is that possible? We did manage to gather quite a bit... but it's still just over 3.5%."

Based on Trading's current share price, that amounted to about 680 billion won in shares.

While In-hyuk had gathered it each time the price dropped based on his memory, considerable capital had gone in.

"I'll take care of that, so don't worry about it. More importantly... it's about time they arrived."

When In-hyuk looked at his watch, Go Mi-ah tilted her head in confusion.

"Huh? Arrived? Who's coming here?"

Dding-ding-ding-ding

As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

Heading for the entrance, In-hyuk checked the intercom, saw who it was, and opened the door.

"Hey~ Boss!"

Charybdis's Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester were standing there.

"Come in."

They glanced around at Go Mi-ah, who was sitting in the computer chair behind In-hyuk.

"... Who's that?"

"She's a programmer I work with. Her name's Go Mi-ah. She's twenty-four. These two are Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester. They're former mercenaries who handle information gathering for me from the outside."

Hearing the introduction, the two were startled, and Hong Yu-geon exclaimed urgently.

"This little squirt is twenty-four?! She's not a middle school student?"

It was because her face looked so young.

At that, Go Mi-ah scrunched up her face and shouted.

"What?! Little squirt? Are you crazy, old man?!"

"Old man? Who are you calling old man!"

Hong Yu-geon became inflamed and tried to approach her, but In-hyuk blocked his way.

"Whoa, whoa. She only looks young, she really is an adult. These guys just look older because they've had a tough life. Anyway! I called everyone today so we could all get acquainted. I think there's going to be a lot of collaboration from now on."

"So how do these old guys gather information?"

"Tail jobs, wiretaps, things like that."

"Oh, a private detective?"

Hong Yu-geon's brow twitched.

On the other hand, since the conversation was all in Korean, Van Hester just stood quietly with a blank expression.

In the midst of this, In-hyuk let out a brief sigh.

"You're all making money and getting paid thanks to me, right? So don't pick fights for no reason."

"Che."

"Tch..."

Once they quieted down, In-hyuk continued.

"There's going to be a lot we'll need to share going forward. Security will be even more important. So you two, just send your findings to Mi-ah here."

"Well, that's not hard."

"Mi-ah, set up a program on their devices."

"Ok—! Hands up your phones, old men."

While handing over their phones, Hong Yu-geon seemed to remember something and spoke up.

"There's a file I haven't passed on yet."

"What file?"

"Photos from tailing Baek Si-hwan. I forgot because of stuff on the Daemyung side. It's only a few days, but look if you have to."

On In-hyuk's orders, they had followed Baek Si-hwan after the Andong incident.

"Was there anything noteworthy?"

"How would I know? Oh, he did go to a hospital."

"Hospital? Go Mi-ah. Can you pull up those photos?"

With the sound of keystrokes, the computer screen changed.

Just as Hong Yu-geon said, there was a photo showing Baek Si-hwan entering a hospital.

"... Shinhyeon Hospital? Did you check what he did inside?"

"Of course. If you go forward, there should be a video. It was hard to take pictures in the hospital."

As he said, when the video appeared, Go Mi-ah played it right away.

It showed Baek Si-hwan entering an exam room.

"Can you find the medical records for this time slot?"

"Hold on."

With that reply, Go Mi-ah's fingers moved quickly.

The screen rapidly changed as she bypassed Shinhyeon Hospital's security system and found what In-hyuk had requested.

"I have no idea what it means... but is this it?"

It was a medical chart.

In-hyuk approached the monitor to check the details.

"Sutured stab wound about 3cm long..."

"So this is treatment for a knife wound."

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester were able to understand the contents.

In-hyuk's gaze stayed glued to the monitor.

'This guy was that guy.'

The wound and its location exactly matched one In-hyuk had inflicted on the uninvited guest when he dealt with Pyo Jun-woo's gang on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

Considering the connection between the organization Pyo Jun-woo belonged to and Baek Si-hwan, the chances they were the same person were high.

At the same time, a smile spread across In-hyuk's face.

"Thanks to you, I figured out something important."

"I'm glad if it helped you, boss."

At that moment, Go Mi-ah noticed something else and spoke up.

"He also went into a place called Pasiz Hotel?"

"Oh, the security there was tight even from the lobby, so I couldn't follow."

With Hong Yu-geon's explanation, Go Mi-ah fluidly accessed the hotel server and searched for footage corresponding to the filmed date and time.

"Can you see what he did inside?"

When In-hyuk asked as he checked the monitor, Go Mi-ah frowned.

"The security system here is weird. As soon as he gets in the elevator and presses a floor button, the CCTV cuts out. Same with the server."

In-hyuk knew what that was about.

"Security floor. It's a separate suite room that's nearly impossible to access except for approved users."

"There's something like that in a hotel?"

"It's a top-level service, even among VIPs. Who uses it is kept top secret. Even if you dig through the server, there probably aren't any records."

The security floor at Pasiz Hotel would later be investigated for tax evasion and embezzlement, once it was revealed they'd been taking enormous fees via shell company accounts for over a decade.

"Geez... thorough to a pointless degree. So now what? We're curious what Baek Si-hwan did there, right?"

"I'm more interested in who he met than what he did. Still, thanks to you two, I can figure out the next step."

At that, Hong Yu-geon and Go Mi-ah tilted their heads in curiosity.

"Check through the other files, too."

"Hold on, once the programs are fully installed on the phones."

In-hyuk turned his head slightly and saw Van Hester picking up a chocolate-colored (?) cookie from the plate on the dining table and putting it in his mouth.

"Ah, don—!"

But before he could finish, Van Hester bit into the cookie.

Crunch—

The results were all too easy to predict.

Yet Van Hester chewed it up as if nothing was wrong and even gave a little interjection.

"Um~ Sabe bien. (This tastes pretty good.)"

It was his native Spanish.

At the same time, In-hyuk couldn't help tilting his head in confusion.

"... Seriously?"

"What? I skipped dinner to come here, so I'm hungry! Why is he the only one eating?"

Hong Yu-geon grinned and popped a cookie in his mouth.

Not long after, his face wrinkled up and he tried to spit something out.

In-hyuk, anticipating this, clamped a hand over Hong Yu-geon's mouth.

"Mmmpf—! Mmmpf! Mmpf? Mmpf? (Let me go?)"

In-hyuk wrapped an arm around his mouth and body to keep him from spitting out the cookie.

However much Hong Yu-geon struggled, In-hyuk's arm didn't budge in the slightest.

With the cookie still unchewed in his mouth, Hong Yu-geon had no choice but to swallow it.

Gulp—

Once he saw the Adam's apple bob, In-hyuk quietly whispered to him,

"Don't you dare say it tastes bad. If you understand, nod."

Once Hong Yu-geon slowly nodded, In-hyuk finally let him go.

Go Mi-ah, focused on her computer, was entirely oblivious to what had just happened.

"Ugh! What the hell is this?"

"Shh! Mi-ah made it herself. If you say what you're thinking now, she might chase you to the ends of the earth."

"Seriously! What did she put in this?"

"I tried to stop you... But hey, why is Van fine?"

But Van Hester, perhaps enjoying the taste, was already reaching for his third cookie.

Poor Hong Yu-geon...

But at least Mi-ah now has someone with similar taste...

Chapter 36

Is That Even Possible?

In-hyuk carefully approached Van Hester, who was still eating cookies.

"... Are you really okay?"

"They're delicious."

Seeing the sincerity on his face, In-hyuk couldn't find anything else to say.

"..."

In the meantime, Go Mi-ah finished her work and turned around.

"The program is all set. Now, you don't have to worry about wiretapping or tracking. If you happen to lose your phone, let me know immediately. I'll wipe the system remotely, so... hm?"

As she continued her explanation, her eyes met Van Hester's, who was still munching on cookies.

"Ah... Sorry. I'm a little hungry. (미안. 조금 출출해서.)"

"Does it suit your taste?"

"Good."

"This is the first time I've made white chocolate fruit cookies, and they turned out to be a huge success."

At that moment, both In-hyuk and Hong Yu-geon were taken aback.

The cookies were pitch black with no sign of white at all.

'What was she thinking, putting fruit in chocolate...? And that guy, eating those and saying they're delicious... Unbelievable.'

In-hyuk quietly asked Hong Yu-geon,

"About Van... is his tongue a little strange or something?"

"He can eat things that taste terrible without any reaction, but... I didn't know it was this bad."

Originally, In-hyuk was acquainted with these two in the future.

However, they had only met in professional settings and never shared a meal together, so he had no idea.

Go Mi-ah was now offering another cookie to Van Hester, who was eating well.

Its name was the Rainbow Cookie.

The red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple were obvious. He couldn't imagine what was in it...

"Oh, by the way, old man Norman is gathering up entertainment shares as investment conditions these days. Do you know why?"

She was referring to Norman McGrath.

Go Mi-ah looked genuinely puzzled, since In-hyuk would normally only move through AMK Partners to pursue high profits.

But this time, the investment was in the entertainment sector, where significant returns could not be expected any time soon.

Moreover, the bulk of the companies involved had yet-to-be-famous entertainers, making it hard to expect big success.

"Literally, investment."

"Even so, there are too many small entertainment companies in there—the range is too wide. You're not just going for quantity, hoping that even one will make it big, are you?"

"Why? Can't I?"

When In-hyuk replied shamelessly, Go Mi-ah sighed.

"Haa! You might be experienced in dealing with ordinary companies, oppa, but entertainment is different. Wouldn't it be better to just invest in Blue Wing Entertainment, where our DDS is? The company's on the verge of going public."

"Don't try to drag me into your obsession. And haven't you already invested there? I heard there's been an anonymous flood of gifts for DDS's recent activities."

At that, Go Mi-ah averted her gaze as if feeling guilty about something.

"Um... Was it? But that won't cause any problems, right?"

"If I were you... instead of the company, wouldn't it be better to invest in dramas or films starring Ha Eun-ho, who you're so obsessed with?"

"Movie? Our Eun-ho? He's busy enough as a singer—what movie?"

"You never know."

He answered deliberately vaguely.

"Oh, come on! That's nonsense."

Then In-hyuk turned to Hong Yu-geon.

"From now on, if you only communicate through that, things will go more smoothly. Like I emphasized before, make sure never to reveal your identity. And if it gets dangerous, back off, no matter what."

"You don't have to worry about that."

With that, their conversation drew to a temporary close.

* * *

Late at night, in the suite located on the security floor of the Fasiz Hotel.

Baek Ji-woong, chairman of the WISE&WIRE Group, was sitting on a sofa, checking something with a grave expression.

A few moments later, the door opened, and Baek Si-hwan walked silently to stand before him.

"Chairman. As you urgently instructed, I have postponed resigning from the Taeshin Group Security Team."

"Were there any problems?"

Originally, Baek Si-hwan was supposed to go to the US after resigning from the Taeshin Group's security team.

He had already submitted his resignation according to plan, prepared a place to stay, and even lined up a cover job.

However, the sudden order to halt, which wasn't in the schedule, surprised him a little.

"There was still time until the final decision, so it was possible. But... may I ask why?"

Baek Ji-woong hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"The project we had underway in Redboar, USA, has collapsed."

"Redboar... Do you mean the TN SOFT acquisition project? Wasn't that supposed to go smoothly?"

Since Baek Si-hwan had been briefed on it, he could easily recall the details.

"Twenty million dollars of investment funds and a 20% stake went to another company."

"Twenty percent? How...?"

At present, tN SOFT's value was not considered high. Even so, paying about 28 billion won for a 20% share was seen as far too generous.

"It was AMK Partners."

"Wasn't that the firm that, along with Taeshin Asset Management, benefited from the surge in Raisen Energy stock recently?"

Anyone keeping an eye on Raisen Energy would know that name.

"For now, the Organization has decided to place the TN SOFT acquisition on hold. We'll need to look deeper into AMK Partners as well. So you should return to Taeshin Group."

"Should I keep handling Executive Vice President Hwang Won-jun as before? Or will I be joining Team 1 and be assigned to Chairman Tae Gun-seung?"

Baek Si-hwan's original destination was Chairman Tae Gun-seung's personal security team.

But because this team handled the group's supreme leader, they background-checked new members thoroughly.

The minimum requirement was six years of security team service. For Baek Si-hwan, this would be fulfilled only at the end of this year.

It also happened that Kim Seong-tae, who was originally scheduled to join Team 1, had been handled by Baek Si-hwan himself due to his failure during the KQ Group Pyo Jun-woo abduction incident.

Given the timing, if Baek stayed with Taeshin Group, it would have to be in Team 1.

"No, where you'll be going is..."

Baek Si-hwan's expression grew even grimmer as he listened.

* * *

A few days later, at lunchtime.

In-hyuk visited a restaurant in Cheongdam neighborhood called Hoam.

"You always ask to meet here. Do you have a share of this place, by any chance?"

He had never met anywhere else the whole time.

"Didn't I tell you? I invested in this place and run it. I needed a discreet venue in Seoul for business meetings."

"Ah... I see."

"So, what brings you here today?"

At his question, In-hyuk took a breath before answering.

"It's about the Chulsan Capital issue."

Until just before, Jang Hyung-cheol's expression was quite relaxed, but it now turned stern.

"That place... wasn't it only recently that the prosecution and the tax bureau stormed in and caused a mess, before things finally calmed down? Thanks to you tipping us off in advance, we got through it. But is there another problem?"

"It's not new—it's ongoing. To be honest, do you think the raids by those two agencies happened only because of the prosecutors?"

Immediately, Jang Hyung-cheol eyed In-hyuk with an even more serious look.

"Are you saying there was someone else behind the prosecutions?"

"I don't know the mastermind, but I do know who gave them the excuse. If not for that, then there's no way warrants would have come out so quickly."

Jang Hyung-cheol could more or less guess what In-hyuk was saying.

"Don't tell me... there's a traitor among my people?"

"Otherwise, how could Chulsan Capital's internal information have reached the prosecution? You must have considered that possibility, too."

The timing of the prosecution's raid on Chulsan Capital was triggered by the incident involving Rizeburn.

But the gap between the two events wasn't long.

Unless the prosecution had been preparing in advance, things wouldn't have moved so fast.

"Hm... You're right. But from my side, I can't just blindly suspect anyone... but it seems like you already know who it is."

"You must have someone in mind as well, don't you?"

Of course, Jang Hyung-cheol was only human, so he would have put those closest to him on the list of suspects and conducted his own investigation.

"Is it... CEO Han Jae-won?"

"You suspected him, but couldn't find definitive proof?"

"Hmm..."

In the original timeline, Jang Hyung-cheol, the actual owner of Chulsan Capital, was arrested after a raid by the prosecution and tax authorities.

In the aftermath and controversies, most of Chulsan's internal funds vanished thanks to someone's schemes.

With that, In-hyuk took a tablet out of his bag and handed it over.

"This is data on the companies Chulsan Capital financed through investments and loans over the past three years. The money flowed out to a shell company in Myanmar, was laundered, then went through a company called Rush Enterprises, and finally entered a company called Redboar Technology as an investment fund."

Jang Hyung-cheol's hand holding the tablet began to tremble.

"Ha... 164 billion won? How could this much go missing without anyone knowing?"

"I suspect false contracts and cooking the books. Since real profits and interest were understated on the returns, it would have been hard for Chulsan Capital to know."

"You think my eyes are just for decoration? We conduct regular audits of the loan and investment arms—"

He couldn't finish.

"All the internal audit teams and the accounting firm involved in this were Han Jae-won's people. He put them all in place, so it was impossible for you to know."

"This is just unbelievable... Han Jae-won, how could that guy do this to me!"

He looked as though he might flip the huge table in front of him at any moment.

After all, Han Jae-won was Jang Hyung-cheol's right-hand man, someone he had trusted enough to make CEO of Chulsan Capital in his stead.

He would never have expected a betrayal like this, so it was only natural for him to be furious.

"Now that you know who's at fault, it's time to act. What do you want to do?"

This time, Jang Hyung-cheol furrowed his brow even more.

"You almost make it sound like you're offering to deliver the blow yourself."

"I could, if needed. With this evidence alone, prosecution is possible for embezzlement, breach of trust, forgery, and more."

Jang Hyung-cheol's face became stony.

"But if we do that... Chulsan Capital won't get out unscathed."

The prosecution would definitely investigate the source of the funds that flowed into Han Jae-won's shell companies.

If links to the underworld emerged, even Jang Hyung-cheol could get implicated.

"Han Jae-won must have known that, too. The prosecution probably agreed to overlook the money he hid, in return for pinning Chulsan Capital and you."

"You mean there was an actual backroom deal?"

Smash!

Agitated, Jang Hyung-cheol slammed the table with his fist, causing the dishes above to rattle violently.

In response, In-hyuk raised both hands.

"This is just my guess for now, so let's stay calm. But if we consider the most likely scenario..."

"It's certainly the likeliest. So what's your plan? How do you intend to handle Han Jae-won?"

Jang Hyung-cheol's fingers still trembled.

In truth, he wanted nothing more than to drag Han Jae-won out right now and throw him into the sea off Busan as fish food.

"Like I said, your best move is to hand Han Jae-won over to the prosecution in your place."

"You mean... I should give up Chulsan Capital?"

"Sell off the company before things blow up. To somewhere the prosecution—or whoever's behind them—can't target."

"Is that even possible?"

The move to seize the company using the prosecution and Han Jae-won meant their enemies were well prepared and methodical.

Jang Hyung-cheol found it very hard to believe this would work.

Chapter 37

This Goddamned Thing

In-hyuk stared intently at Jang Hyung-cheol, who looked doubtful.

In-hyuk had just told him to give up the company, so his reaction was only natural.

But to In-hyuk, the outcome that would follow was obvious.

He also knew exactly what choice Jang Hyung-cheol had to make if he wanted to survive.

In-hyuk let out a small sigh before answering.

"Anyone else might not, but I can do it. Of course, that is, if you trust me, sir."

"Are you, by any chance, trying to buy my company on the cheap...?"

"Of course, I'll make sure it gets sold at a fair price."

"So I heard you're in charge of M&A now. Are you making this offer with that in mind?"

In-hyuk gave a slight smile.

"I produce results, and you, sir, make money while also solving a troublesome problem. Isn't this a win-win for us both?"

"Haha... I worry whether I should trust you so easily."

"I'll go along with whatever you decide, sir."

A wrinkle formed on Jang Hyung-cheol's brow.

If In-hyuk's words were true, then Chulsan Capital didn't have much time left.

However, it felt wasteful to sell a company built up from scratch since his start as a moneylender in Busan, eventually being known as Mr. Jang of Haeundae.

Just then, an alarm rang on In-hyuk's phone—an unexpected employee appointment notification from the Taeshin Asset Management corporate app, despite it not being personnel season.

As In-hyuk checked the contents, his face hardened.

"This goddamn thing..."

At In-hyuk's sudden vulgar outburst, Jang Hyung-cheol looked puzzled.

"... Did something happen?"

"Sir, something urgent just came up, so I need to get going. And regarding what I just discussed with you, it would be best to make a quick decision."

"Y-yes, of course..."

Jang Hyung-cheol seemed completely bewildered by the sudden shift in In-hyuk's usually calm demeanor.

In-hyuk, in the meantime, went outside and got into his car. His destination was Taeshin Asset Management.

* * *

Tae Ju-ha was sitting in the CEO's office, handling some work.

At that moment, the intercom alarm went off and Heo Yu-rim, her secretary, spoke up.

Beep—

[CEO. Division Director Kang In-hyuk is here to see you.]

Since the visit wasn't scheduled, Tae Ju-ha tilted her head in curiosity.

"Ah... Please let him in."

A moment later, the door opened and In-hyuk came in and sat down.

"I just saw the appointment notice that was published earlier."

"Notice? Ah, did you come here because of the Division Director's secretary appointment?"

From the beginning, In-hyuk had no real need for someone to doggedly watch over him, as he had plenty of tasks outside his regular work.

However, he, who had refused from the start, was now suddenly issued a secretary assignment.

"That's right. I never agreed to that appointment."

"I know. But it was a directive from the higher ups. I wanted to speak with you in advance, but since it was handed down directly, I couldn't delay it."

A twitch crossed In-hyuk's brow.

"From Taeshin Trading? Did the chairman get involved?"

There were few who could issue direct orders within the group.

The first person In-hyuk thought of was Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

"No, it was Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho of Taeshin Trading. Honestly, it's hard to see this as a gesture of goodwill, but given the group's controlling structure, I had no choice but to comply."

Most of Taeshin Asset Management's shares were held by Taeshin Trading and Tae Gun-seung.

"So you're saying you can't overturn this decision even as CEO."

"I'm sorry."

"Alright. I'll take my leave, then."

As soon as he left the CEO's office, In-hyuk pulled out his phone and checked the appointment notice again.

[Taeshin Asset Management Appointment Notice]

– Appointee: Deputy Baek Si-hwan, Taeshin Security Team 3

– Placement: Secretary to Taeshin Asset Management M&A/PEF Division Director (Manager)

– Effective Date: Sometime, 2025, mm, dd

* * *

The next day.

In-hyuk had arrived at his office and was standing before a person.

With a tidy appearance and tall height, he was the kind of person to leave a favorable impression at first sight. It was Baek Si-hwan, who had come due to the sudden appointment notice the day before.

"I'm Baek Si-hwan, assigned to assist the Division Director. I look forward to working with you."

In-hyuk glanced at him briefly, along with his résumé.

"Discharged as staff sergeant from the military logistics division of the Defense Intelligence Command, now five years with Taeshin Security. Promotion from deputy to manager with this posting. Specialities: boxing and karate."

"..."

Baek Si-hwan met In-hyuk's eyes in silence.

"Even though this is technically a promotion, you're moving from Team 3, which handled security for the main executives, to assisting a Division Director at a subsidiary that's not even a direct affiliate... Are you okay with that?"

"If I don't intend to resign, I believe I should follow the company's instructions."

His voice was emotionless and flat. Watching Baek Si-hwan, In-hyuk pictured breaking his neck hundreds of times in his mind.

Of course, as he couldn't display such feelings here, he suppressed the murderous intention threatening to burst forth.

"It seems you're quite loyal to the company."

"They pay my wages, after all."

It brought up a memory of the first time In-hyuk had met him in his previous life.

In the original timeline, Baek Si-hwan was his junior in the UID unit under the Defense Intelligence Command, later creating a connection at Taeshin Security as well.

Even then, Baek Si-hwan rarely expressed much about his disposition or opinions.

In fact, when In-hyuk was ousted after handing the Taeshin Group over to Tae Seok-ho, he'd doubted Baek Si-hwan's offer to help him.

Yet, with Baek's cooperation, he'd been able to bring down Taeshin Group and even rise as the head of Bluewall, eventually relying on him as a right-hand man.

He'd never dreamed he'd learn Baek's true intentions just before drawing his last breath...

"That's a good mindset. However, I don't take a secretary along for outside business. So, manager Baek, you'll only need to handle my schedule management here at the office."

Baek listened quietly, before expressing his first opinion.

"... But my role here is both as your assistant and your bodyguard. And not long ago, you were in an accident as well, were you not?"

The traffic accident in Andong.

And after that, standing before him now was Baek Si-hwan.

Staring at this brazen man, the corners of In-hyuk's eyes twitched very slightly.

'If Taeshin Trading sent him, then the most likely person behind this is Tae Seok-ho. That would also mean Tae Seok-ho has been involved with those guys from the beginning...'

At the same time, it was clear what his purpose was.

Having rejected Tae Seok-ho's recent proposal, it was natural that closer monitoring was deemed necessary.

"I don't need a bodyguard."

"I'm afraid it's unavoidable. Furthermore, it signifies that the Organization considers your position important..."

"I've already arranged my own security."

"... Excuse me?"

Knock, knock—

As a knock sounded at the door, In-hyuk spoke, looking that way.

"Come in."

The door opened and two stocky men entered.

They were Charybdis mercenaries Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

Their imposing, brawny presence made Baek Si-hwan's expression stiffen a little.

"You're here just in time. These two will be handling my personal security from now on. So, like I said, please focus solely on your office secretarial duties."

"But...!"

"This was also approved by the CEO. It's a directive from the company you belong to, so you have to follow it."

With In-hyuk's resolute answer, Baek could only close his mouth.

"Well, now that the introductions are done, go ahead and get started. In the shared folder, you'll find materials and manuals for all the tasks I've assigned, so check those first."

"... Understood."

Baek Si-hwan, still with no discernible expression, bowed silently and then left.

Once the door closed, Hong Yu-geon approached In-hyuk.

"Why did that guy get assigned to you, boss?"

"Why else? To keep watch on me."

"Was it that guy behind Daemyung who gave the order?"

Having experienced war zones themselves, they didn't believe Baek Si-hwan was the mastermind behind the Daemyung incident.

At that, Van Hester, who had been silent, spoke up.

"If he came here to spy on the boss, is it okay for us to talk like this in here?"

He was worried about bugs or hidden cameras that could have been planted.

Of course, In-hyuk hadn't ignored that possibility.

"I already checked. Even installed bug detectors."

Hong Yu-geon looked at him, impressed.

"Knew you'd be thorough. So, do we just pretend to be your bodyguards from now on?"

"Right. And when you're with me outside, make sure you never let your identities be exposed."

At first, In-hyuk had considered hiring another security team, not Charybdis.

However, with Baek Si-hwan on the scene, there was no telling how he'd try to make contact.

Rather than keep someone liable to waver nearby, it was better to have people he could trust absolutely, even if caution was needed.

"No worries there. But that guy's going to dig up our backgrounds, too... Is that alright?"

"What, are you wanted by Interpol or something?"

"Hey! Of course not. But if you look at the Daemyung job, those guys behind it aren't exactly the polite type, are they?"

"If there's trouble, just leave it to me. I'll handle it, one way or another."

At that, Hong Yu-geon frowned.

"Just what are you, boss? Even when you grabbed me last time."

He was referring to the time at Go Mi-ah's house when he'd been forced to swallow food by In-hyuk after eating some of Go Mi-ah's cookies the wrong way.

"I keep in good shape because I want to live a long life, that's all."

"Exercise does all that? Am I really supposed to believe that?"

At that, Van Hester, who'd been silent, tilted his head.

"That time... you didn't let go on purpose, did you?"

"On purpose? No way—! It was stuck like it was in a vise. I even tightened my elbow joint so you couldn't yank out my other arm."

"... It was that bad?"

Both were mercenaries, with strength and reflexes far beyond those of the average person.

Especially when caught by someone, they always had ways to escape.

Of course, Van Hester had assumed Hong Yu-geon's inability to break free from In-hyuk was just play-acting.

"You know everything about me. Orphan raised alone, Taeshin Group's son-in-law. That's all there is."

"So you, who's got Go Mi-ah and even us at your command, can also hatch all sorts of schemes behind the scenes?"

"Nothing's impossible. By the way, you're getting the stuff you dug up over to Go Mi-ah, right?"

Because, per In-hyuk's orders, Charybdis was tailing the people who'd be important in the future.

"I sent her the files on everyone we watched through yesterday... Now that I think about it, how did you know those targets would be up to shady stuff?"

The targets under surveillance were anything but ordinary.

At the timing In-hyuk indicated, strange stories and suspicious items were exchanged.

In most cases, it involved cases of boxes full of cash being loaded into car trunks.

Unless someone received such info regularly from elsewhere, there was no way of knowing.

"Just my own sources. Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

"Seriously, what are you, boss..."

"For now, just get going..."

Beep—

Just as he was getting up, the intercom sounded and Baek Si-hwan's voice came through.

[Executive Vice President Kang Do-young of KQ Group is here. He wants to see Division Director Kang In-hyuk.]

There had been no prior appointment or contact.

On top of that, it wasn't Tae Ju-ha, but himself Kang Do-young wanted to meet.

In-hyuk thought for a moment, then replied:

"Show him in."

Chapter 38

What Are You Thinking?

As soon as In-hyuk hung up the internal call, Hong Yu-geon stepped forward with a surprised expression.

"If it's Kang Do-young from KQ... he's the son of that woman who tried to kill the president last time, right?"

They were the two who had wiretapped the conversation between Jeon Hae-in and Lee Daemyung back then.

Naturally, they also knew well about the relationship between her and In-hyuk.

"That's right."

"So this is like watching half-brothers fight each other?"

"Shut up and just wait outside. I'll come out as soon as I'm done."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Just judging from the circumstances so far, Kang Do-young doesn't know who I am. And if, for any reason, he intended to do something to me, he would've come after me outside the company, not here."

"True."

With a bored expression, Hong Yu-geon left with Van Hester.

After a while, guided by Baek Si-hwan who had gone downstairs, Kang Do-young came in and sat across from In-hyuk.

"It's been a while. I guess you've racked up some accomplishments in the meantime? Last time you were a team leader, but now you're a division director, I see."

There was a significant sneer in his voice.

"I did work hard. But what brings you here? I doubt you came to exchange pleasantries."

"... What?"

"Why? Oh, is it because I'm speaking informally? You started that at the party, remember? Even now. Wasn't that an invitation to drop formalities?"

At In-hyuk's calmly thrown line, veins appeared on Kang Do-young's brow.

However, unlike last time, he didn't get agitated; instead, he just clenched his fist tightly and tried to remain as composed as possible.

"That's not important. Let's get to the point. I heard the PEF division has been investing in quite a few entertainment companies in exchange for equity. Why? Is Taeshin Asset Management planning to acquire a celebrity agency?"

"We invest to make a profit. But why do you care?"

As In-hyuk continued to use informal speech, Kang Do-young let out a deep sigh.

He was annoyed, but it also meant he needed something from In-hyuk.

"I need the shares and rights to those entertainment companies you invested in. I'll pay you much more than what you gave for them, so hand them over to me."

He was acting as if he was asking for something trivial. Listening to such a proposal, In-hyuk answered without a flicker of emotion.

"No."

"... Did you not understand what I just said?"

"I'm not deaf; I understood perfectly. Whatever your reason, we have no intention of selling the shares of the companies we invested in, no matter what terms you offer."

In truth, In-hyuk knew exactly why Kang Do-young was doing this.

Currently, Kang Do-young planned to scoop up small entertainment companies that had recently produced popular celebrities, using massive capital, and consolidate them as a separate subsidiary under KQ Group.

Its name would be LifeStar Entertainment.

Something like this did indeed happen in the future; a large celebrity agency was formed under KQ Group and succeeded greatly.

So as soon as In-hyuk learned he was Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's illegitimate son, he'd taken action.

The current division had been newly established for that purpose, and investment opportunities had been transferred out.

He'd also predicted Kang Do-young would try to contact him somehow, but didn't expect him to show up this abruptly, as if he were in a panic.

"Either way, don't you just care about profit? Instead of holding on and worrying, wouldn't it make more sense to pass them on at a high margin?"

"Which means, KQ is targeting them because they're likely to be valuable, right? No matter how much you offer, it's more profitable to keep those shares. Isn't that so?"

"Didn't it occur to you that something could go wrong while you're holding them?"

KQ Group was well-known for its distribution and entertainment businesses.

With its deep networks in advertising and sponsorship, it wielded considerable influence in broadcasting.

However, it hadn't operated an entertainment agency in its own right until now.

This time, Kang Do-young hoped to establish one, relying on funding.

"Are you implying you'll exert some pressure?"

"I couldn't if I wanted to."

In-hyuk paused, pretending to consider, then answered.

"Then, how about handing over just 30% of the entertainment companies we invested in?"

"Only 30%? Do you really think a major KQ Group business can be built on just that? All you're going to do is let them languish here. Working with us will be a better opportunity for those companies, too."

Along with that answer, Kang Do-young gave a smile, as if his simple intimidation was starting to work.

So In-hyuk looked at him with purposely feigned concern.

"We've already shared the PEF's first report with investors, so I can't completely reverse and hand over everything now. So I'll be generous—up to 50%."

"90%. I'll pay ample interest on the shares."

"60%."

"...80%."

They each made small concessions in their proposals.

"Let's settle at 75%. If you want more, forget it. Do whatever you want—apply pressure or not."

Kang Do-young's brow twitched as he shot In-hyuk a sharp look.

"... Fine. 75% it is. I'd like to decide now which companies you'll transfer."

"Sure."

With that, In-hyuk called Baek Si-hwan on the internal line.

Beep—

"Please compile a list right now of the recently acquired entertainment company shares from the transfer documents and bring it to me."

[... Understood.]

"My secretary is starting work today, so it might take a while."

A few moments later, Baek Si-hwan handed over the documents.

Taeshin Asset Management owned shares in a total of 13 entertainment companies.

Just as he'd said, In-hyuk checked off ten and showed the list to Kang Do-young.

"I'm prepared to transfer these. Is that acceptable?"

Kang Do-young's face turned ambiguous as he checked the contents.

"This seems more generous than expected... 45 billion won? That much invested in dinky little entertainment companies?"

"As I said, it's an investment. Take it or leave it."

As In-hyuk tried to take the documents back, Kang Do-young quickly reached out.

"Alright. Let's do it."

He seemed desperate.

The truth was, Kang Do-young had only managed to get this project approved by his father, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, after much effort.

But the shares in the entertainment companies he'd earmarked had already been acquired in advance by Taeshin Asset Management's PEF, as investment conditions.

In order to acquire those companies smoothly, he had to get those shares—hence, he'd come directly.

Of course, In-hyuk roughly understood the situation. Thus, with an even calmer expression, he spoke the next condition.

"And you'll need to add another 10% to the share price."

"Another 10%?"

"I need something to show the fund investors. If that's too much for you, let's call it off."

Kang Do-young furrowed his brow, pondered something, and then spoke again.

"Then here's my condition. You need to transfer the shares as quickly as possible."

"The companies affected will need an explanation, no?"

"I've already had preliminary talks with the companies on this list. If Taeshin Asset Management agrees, they're ready to proceed."

"Still, we'll need to confirm things on our end first, then hand them over. We don't want to be sloppy and cause unnecessary gossip—our own image matters, too."

"Image? You're not planning any funny business after all this talk, are you?"

He looked with open suspicion.

It was only natural—there'd never been any trust between In-hyuk and Kang Do-young.

"If you can't trust me, I can write up a contract if you'd like?"

When In-hyuk offered that, pretending to be generous, Kang Do-young's face hardened with pride.

Still, perhaps thinking prudently, his expression relaxed soon after.

"Honestly, it's hard to trust you, so let's do that. You could just as easily dangle better terms elsewhere after this conversation."

Recently, entertainment companies hadn't been doing well.

Some companies did grow rapidly when their stars became famous, but it was common for celebrities to switch agencies or be absorbed by bigger competitors.

So Kang Do-young had prepared this project under KQ Group.

If the acquisition and integration went smoothly, he'd have a chance to compete with the big entertainment companies.

In-hyuk glanced at his waiting face, smiled, and answered.

"I'll prepare it right away."

He instructed Baek Si-hwan, who'd just left the office, to bring the contract.

Soon afterward, after a quick review, both sides signed the documents.

Kang Do-young, satisfied after checking the contents and signatures, left with a pleased look.

Not long after, with a knock at the door, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester came back into In-hyuk's office.

"What was that about? I saw Baek Si-hwan bringing stacks of documents earlier."

In-hyuk chuckled and explained what had happened.

He spoke in English so even Van Hester, whose Korean was lacking, could follow—but he didn't seem particularly interested.

On the other hand, Hong Yu-geon was amazed after hearing everything.

"Those companies... aren't those the ones we talked about at Go Mi-ah's place last time? You went through such trouble to secure those shares, is it alright to just hand them over like this?"

"I'm getting an extra 10% above what we paid to acquire them, so it's not a loss."

"But... aren't you planning to make more than that?"

"Well, the situation now is even better."

As In-hyuk gave a meaningful smile, Hong Yu-geon tilted his head in confusion.

"What exactly is the boss thinking?"

* * *

A few days later, Taeshin Asset Management's CEO, Tae Ju-ha, was sitting on the sofa with Executive Vice President Oh Kang-goo, who had paid her an unexpected visit.

"A staggering 53 billion won in funds was moved by the PEF division without any executive consultation. And invested in high-risk entertainment companies at that? Do you think this makes any sense?"

The deal between KQ Group Executive Director Kang Do-young and Kang In-hyuk had reached his ears.

Of course, Tae Ju-ha was already aware.

"I'm concerned as well, but thanks to Executive Director Kang from KQ Group, we're transferring around 75% of the shares for 45 billion won, plus an extra 10% as profit, so we'll receive an additional 4.5 billion won. Isn't that satisfactory?"

"Division Director Kang raised as much as 300 billion won in investment funds. We've had no disclosure about where the rest of the funds are going outside of this entertainment investment. If a problem comes up, can you handle it?"

Essentially, he was expressing displeasure at Kang In-hyuk moving capital on his own authority.

"From the beginning, M&A/PEF division operations were decided to proceed at Division Director Kang In-hyuk's sole discretion. There hasn't even been a loss yet."

"As I said earlier, we're concerned because he's investing in a risky industry. Surely you're not unaware there's already a sense of unrest among our clients?"

"Is that so?"

"Reports have already come up from different divisions. Are you going to keep ignoring these circumstances?"

As he said, status reports had come in—but they were entirely from departments led by Executive Vice President Oh Kang-goo and factions aligned with Taeshin Trading's Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho: Managing Director Yang Chan-woo, Director Bong Joo-hyung, and others.

It was obvious—even from mere suspicion—who had stirred up the atmosphere.

"So, are you saying Division Director Kang In-hyuk should get executive approval every time he manages investment funds going forward?"

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way. I only mean there needs to be at least a basic safeguard. That way, our clients can feel secure entrusting us with their money."

What's there not to take the wrong way? Tae Ju-ha clicked her tongue at his blatant motive and stared at him.

"Sorry, but that won't be possible."

"... Why not? Are you saying you'll just stand by and let this continue?"

Oh Kang-goo smiled inwardly, satisfied.

The atmosphere he wanted had been fully formed.

Furthermore, even executives from rival factions were voicing complaints about Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk's monopoly.

If CEO Tae Ju-ha didn't side with the executives now, she'd be putting her position in jeopardy.

But at her next answer, his face stiffened.

"Division Director Kang In-hyuk just brought in a new M&A sale. The deal size is around 800 billion won. Negotiations are ongoing for a 1.3% M&A fee."

Chapter 39

Until Not Even Bones Remain

Oh Kang-goo's brow furrowed as he listened to the sudden news of the M&A.

Once again, it was a matter he hadn't heard about at all, so he couldn't help but be surprised.

An M&A deal worth a whopping 800 billion won.

Honestly, since this wasn't even an existing department, he hadn't thought Kang In-hyuk would bring in something of this scale.

"What company are we supposed to acquire?"

At his question, Tae Ju-ha paused for a moment, then answered cautiously.

"... Chulsan Capital."

"If it's there... wasn't that in the news recently..."

There had been so many loudly reported articles that Oh Kang-goo easily recalled it.

"That's right."

"But I thought the company had already received a not-guilty verdict and its management had normalized... Are they the ones who suggested the sale first?"

"So it seems. For reference, this is still strictly confidential. Since there was news coverage for unsavory charges, they plan to keep it as quiet as possible."

"So, have they already picked a company to acquire Chulsan Capital? It's not being put up for auction?"

Chulsan Capital was a financial company that influenced not only southern regions but also the capital area.

The stakes and real estate of companies funded there could be valued immensely, depending on the need.

Naturally, the more entities wanted Chulsan Capital, the higher its sale price—and the higher the commission Taeshin Asset Management would collect.

Even at just the currently estimated company value of 800 billion won, the commission would be around 10 billion won.

"So it seems for now."

"Has everything with Chulsan Capital been clearly agreed upon? As far as I know, due diligence and valuation alone require considerable time. Plus, Chulsan Capital will surely want to sell at a higher price."

Oh Kang-goo pointed out the flaws in Kang In-hyuk's handling of the matter, step by step, in order to call out any issues.

Of course, he said nothing untrue.

Tae Ju-ha was well aware of this. At the same time, she was surprised inside.

She reacted this way because In-hyuk had told her about Chulsan Capital's sale beforehand.

'I know Executive Vice President Oh doesn't like In-hyuk, but is he really going to nitpick this much?'

After collecting her thoughts, she answered him.

"Chulsan Capital wanted the sale to be handled as quietly as possible. Fortunately, we found a buyer that matched those conditions. Since there's no loss for us, there shouldn't be a problem."

Then, Oh Kang-goo asked the question he was most curious about.

"Who is acquiring Chulsan Capital?"

"AMK Partners. I'd heard they'd been expanding into a lot of areas lately, but I didn't expect them to buy Chulsan Capital."

Oh Kang-goo's face stiffened before he realized it.

He'd also heard a lot of things about AMK Partners lately and had taken an interest.

But he hadn't thought they had the financial muscle to acquire Chulsan Capital.

"I see... But Director Kang's way of handling things is still riddled with issues. If this continues, there's bound to be an incident sooner or later."

"I can't say I'm without worries either, but this is something the chairman is backing. So, Executive Vice President Oh, I hope you'll continue to observe for now."

"... Alright, I understand."

Finishing his answer with a sense of displeasure, Oh Kang-goo stood and left her office.

* * *

In-hyuk was sitting across from Jang Hyung-cheol at Hoam in Cheongdam neighborhood.

However, since mealtime had long passed, there was only coffee and tea before them.

"As you said, CEO Han Jae-won has been taken care of."

"You made the decision quicker than I expected."

"You can't be shackled by affection forever. That's why I immediately called for an emergency board meeting, and the results came out this morning. My phone's about to catch fire from all the calls."

On the table, Jang Hyung-cheol's phone showed a string of missed calls from a contact labeled "Han Jae-won".

Han had been blindsided by his sudden dismissal through the emergency board meeting.

"Well done."

"It's going to be hard to reclaim the funds that guy siphoned off, but I should just be glad I've finally cut him loose. Otherwise, I'd be putting myself at risk."

Han Jae-won had created more than 150 billion won in slush funds via a shell company in Myanmar.

But the money had already been transferred to other accounts—barely traceable, but almost impossible to recover.

"Does that mean there's no problem on Chulsan Capital's side with the company's sale?"

"Anyway, the succession of executives and employees will go ahead as planned. And since the sale is just on the surface, the CEO position will fall right back into my hands, so there's no issue."

This had been a plan to mislead those targeting Chulsan Capital during the Rizeburn incident.

Of course, he had never expected things would go so smoothly.

"News about Chulsan Capital's situation must have made its way to those who operated through Han Jae-won. Well, even if not, word will spread soon enough."

"Something happened on their side, as well..."

Bzzz— Bzzz—

This time, In-hyuk's phone buzzed with an alert from an online news outlet.

"It's out, as expected."

In-hyuk held out his phone.

Jang Hyung-cheol's eyes widened slightly as he read it.

[Chulsan Capital sale decided? Secret talks with foreign investment company AMK Partners? The M&A is being handled by Taeshin Asset Management, with Chulsan Capital currently valued at approximately 800 billion won...]

[AMK Partners, a foreign investment company, to acquire Chulsan Capital? The unlisted Chulsan Capital had been under investigation for tax evasion, embezzlement, and bribery involving its actual owner... but the prosecution concluded with a not-guilty verdict...]

"Doesn't seem like a positive article. Did you anticipate this as well?"

Anyone could see it looked as if a foreign company was devouring a domestic financial company.

"Anyone interested in Chulsan Capital is bound to make a move in some way. And for 'them,' this takeover battle may actually be an opportunity."

"So you intentionally created this situation. That means you have countermeasures, right?"

"There's no need for concern. But there are matters I'd like you to handle, sir. Of course, you don't have to—I'll follow your wishes."

Jang Hyung-cheol stared at In-hyuk with deepening eyes.

He had kept tabs on In-hyuk ever since the Raisen Energy investment.

A son-in-law of the Taeshin Group whose business competence was ambiguous.

He'd heard that when In-hyuk was at Taeshin Trading, he'd shown decent work ability, but had zero performance when it came to investment.

After the Raisen Energy investment succeeded, he'd written it off as an inexperienced kid getting lucky.

But the more they spoke, the harder it was to read In-hyuk's intentions.

Moreover, his habit of always staying several steps ahead was enough to leave anyone speechless.

"So you're telling me I have a choice? That somehow sounds even more intimidating."

"I don't intend to use any method you'd be unwilling to, sir."

"So what exactly is your method?"

"That is..."

In-hyuk continued in an even quieter voice.

After his explanation, Jang Hyung-cheol's face grew even more rigid; his eyes were wider than before.

"... Is that really possible?"

"I don't speak of things that can't be done..."

The moment he was about to finish, a man's voice, raised as loud as possible, came from outside.

"Hyung! Hyung—! I was wrong!"

Recognizing the owner of that voice, Jang Hyung-cheol frowned.

"We have an uninvited guest."

"It must be CEO Han Jae-won. Did someone tip him off that you were here?"

"Of course not. He probably found out by searching the places he thought I'd be. Sorry to make our meeting uncomfortable."

"I'm fine."

"I'll deal with this quickly and return."

Jang Hyung-cheol opened the door with leisurely steps.

A middle-aged man, his black hair tinged with white and looking well into his sixties, brushed off the security guard's arm and fell to his knees.

"H-hyung!"

The man shouting had been Chulsan Capital's CEO, Han Jae-won, until this very morning.

Jang Hyung-cheol, standing at the entrance, gazed down at him with a noticeably uncomfortable expression.

"I thought my response at this morning's board meeting would be enough."

"Embezzlement? That's a misunderstanding, hyung!"

"A misunderstanding? What's misconstrued here? Is it a misunderstanding that you're the actual owner of the Myanmar shell company? Or that you tried to put your wrongdoing on me and submitted evidence to the Busan District Prosecutors' Office as if I did those things?"

As he explained, Han Jae-won's face turned ashen.

At the board meeting, he had been dismissed by majority vote based solely on circumstantial evidence of embezzlement.

The other facets—thoroughly covered up using others—had been meticulously arranged, but he was shocked that Jang Hyung-cheol knew about them in such detail.

"T-that's... you're mistaken! Why would I ever betray you, hyung? Nobody knows me better than you do! It's me! I'm Han Jae-won, the one you raised all this time!"

Jang Hyung-cheol had thought the same until recently.

Because he'd considered Han his right-hand man for life, he'd entrusted Chulsan Capital to him.

But betrayal stung far more for the depth of trust that preceded it.

"Do you really think I'm acting out of total ignorance? Well, you must have thought I was a toothless tiger, so you did what you did."

Han Jae-won could say nothing more.

Jang Hyung-cheol shook his head, clicking his tongue.

"tsk—! I never thought I'd learn the wisdom about never taking in a 'dark-haired beast' at this age. And the evidence of what you did will have gone to the prosecutors, so you'd better steel yourself."

"Hyung...!"

"I hope we don't have to see each other again."

At Jang Hyung-cheol's eye signal, the security guard dragged Han Jae-won away with more force than before.

Though Han's pleas echoed down the restaurant corridor, Jang Hyung-cheol, without a hint of regret, returned and sat back down.

"Sorry for causing such a ruckus."

"No worries. If anything, it just makes me think Han Jae-won really underestimated you, sir."

Jang Hyung-cheol, hearing In-hyuk's subtle comment, wondered why he thought that.

"Did it really look that way?"

"I think Han Jae-won believes that, even now, appealing to sentiment might get him released. He's probably still racking his brains."

Jang Hyung-cheol let out a heavy sigh.

"Hmmm... So you think I was too complacent."

"It's not always necessary to make a spectacle, but wishy-washy handling could lead to lingering problems."

"What would you have done?"

"I would have had the prosecutors waiting for him the moment he left the company. The Busan District Prosecutors' Office is looking for bait after the last incident, aren't they? Throw him to them at the right timing and he'll get chewed up until not even bones remain."

It was an icily cold voice.

Jang Hyung-cheol found himself unconsciously swallowing his saliva at this.

"You... you're more ruthless than I expected. But from what I learned of your background, that wasn't in there... Have you been hiding this all along?"

Originally, In-hyuk was nothing like this. Naturally, whatever face he wore now felt unfamiliar.

"There wasn't any need to show it before."

"But now, that's changed?"

"I suppose so."

After a short reply, In-hyuk sipped his coffee and continued.

"... In any case, Han Jae-won has probably been abandoned even by them, too. He's not left with much at all."

"Even after making off with more than 150 billion won? For all his foolish moves, I doubt those behind him would fall for that so easily."

"Up to now, he probably managed things under false names so as not to get caught by you, sir. But if the real owner of those fake names exists, then it's easy for the funds inside to be taken from him. Of course, several more steps are required."

"Oh-ho..."

It was a simple principle, but required extensive groundwork—a typical shell game.

It also showed how shrewd those using Han Jae-won had been.

At the same time, this method was something In-hyuk himself had used in his original life, after taking control of China's Cheong Geumbang organization and swallowing up surrounding groups along the way.

'The bastard who first suggested it was that damn kid.'

At that thought, In-hyuk pictured Baek Si-hwan's face, who would be sitting right now in the office next to his.

Chapter 40

I Know Very Well

As dusk settled in, Baek Si-hwan, who had recently started working as Kang In-hyuk's secretary, climbed up a sloping road on the outskirts of the northern Gyeonggi region after work.

Except for the road he had just climbed and a long building erected on the left, the place was surrounded by forest.

Baek Si-hwan approached when he saw the headlights of a parked car flicker and got into the passenger seat.

At that, the man sitting in the driver's seat stepped outside and stood as if to keep watch.

After a moment, Baek Si-hwan leaned his head back slightly and spoke.

"I heard about the situation with the Fasiz Hotel. An unexpected National Tax Service investigation... It was a place you frequented... That's unfortunate."

His response mixed concern with a greeting.

Baek Ji-woong, sitting in the back seat, replied with a worried expression.

"Isn't the timing rather strange? The place gets exposed just when things on our end start unraveling."

"Are you suggesting that the guys took aim at the chairman and orchestrated that exposure?"

Previously, the Fasiz Hotel, where Baek Ji-woong and he had met, became the target of an investigation into its high-priced security floor.

Enormous usage fees had been paid for years through borrowed-name accounts, avoiding the National Tax Service's scrutiny, so it was bound to be a problem.

"Of course, maybe I'm overthinking it, but it's just too peculiar. Han Jae-won being suddenly fired from Chulsan Capital, for instance... Jang Hyung-cheol, that old man, even deciding to sell the company... There are just too many things to worry about."

"For now, we're shaking things up through public opinion, aren't we?"

"But we ourselves eliminated even the pretext for Tae Seok-ho to get involved."

Baek Ji-woong had originally planned, during the Rizeburn situation, to unsettle Jang Hyung-cheol, the actual owner of Chulsan Capital, and help Tae Seok-ho's H&T Fund swallow it up through that window of opportunity.

Moreover, Han Jae-won, the CEO of Chulsan Capital and Jang Hyung-cheol's right-hand man, had already been recruited and the groundwork well set.

But Jang Hyung-cheol, as if anticipating a prosecution investigation, had been cleared of all charges.

Han Jae-won had been fired from Chulsan Capital after backlash, and even the company's sale had proceeded.

In the rush to block this, a climate was created against foreign companies taking over Chulsan Capital.

As a result, even a foreign company like Tae Seok-ho's H&T Fund, along with AMK Partners, was put on the same footing.

"If so, we need to move elsewhere... is that possible?"

"We'll have to reroute the company and funds. No matter what, we need to make sure Tae Seok-ho gets Chulsan Capital for us to get what we want too."

"More importantly, AMK Partners is a problem, isn't it? Same as with TN SOFT... Their moves aren't ordinary."

They had already collided twice.

"That point was also discussed with the higher ups, but we determined there are too few points of contact to say AMK Partners is targeting us. And as things stand, we might have to consider recruiting them."

"... Did you find the CEO of AMK Partners?"

Baek Si-hwan had been curious and tried to investigate behind the scenes, but there were so many suspicious points just from the Ícompany being based in the Cayman Islands.

Furthermore, as for the listed CEO, Gordon Grimes, it was near impossible to trace his current whereabouts or any tracks.

"No. Not at all. There's probably a real owner behind the scenes, and a figurehead set up. Since you looked into it as well, I'm sure you know as much."

Baek Ji-woong was fully aware of Baek Si-hwan's activities.

"It does seem certain that it's not an easy person to find."

"I agree. Still, it's a relief we have a middleman, so we should try to approach through him."

"You mean Norman McGrath, the head of AMK Partners' Korea branch? I've confirmed he's currently in San Francisco."

"I've already sent someone, so they should bring something back. In the meantime, we need to sort out the Chulsan Capital acquisition issue. By the way, has Taeshin Asset Management made any other moves? Especially regarding this M&A?"

At that, Baek Si-hwan showed a subtle expression in the dark car.

"As I reported earlier, I've been strictly excluded from both security and aide work, so it has been difficult to track Kang In-hyuk's movements."

"You mean, even tailing him?"

"There were too many suspicious factors with the newly brought-in security guard, so I didn't put anyone on his tail."

Baek Ji-woong's eyes widened a little.

"Was there something unusual?"

"They're Korean and Hispanic... but since no identity information surfaced in Korea, I believe they're using forged identities or have entered on a forged passport. Judging from their behavior, they don't seem to be drifters, either."

"You mean, they're professionals?"

The atmosphere became even heavier. Baek Si-hwan carefully continued with his anticipated conclusion.

"At the very least, I think we need to consider military, mercenary, or intelligence agency backgrounds. Of course, we're continuing to investigate for more details."

"They're keeping you in check that much? Don't tell me, did you give off any suspicious clues?"

"I've only met Kang In-hyuk at the wedding and recently at Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's book launch party. Even those weren't close relations, so there's no trace that would arouse suspicion."

Baek Ji-woong nodded in apparent understanding.

"So he's always been a suspicious type?"

"As you know, Kang In-hyuk had no notable achievements at all until he became the Taeshin Group's son-in-law. Even after thoroughly combing through his past, there was nothing to suggest he could have had this level of success."

"Are you saying all his previous behavior... was a cover?"

Baek Si-hwan, after a brief deep breath, continued.

"For now, that seems the most likely. And if our hypothesis is correct, Kang In-hyuk may be planning to swallow at least Taeshin Asset Management, fronting Tae Ju-ha. Maybe his ultimate target is the Taeshin Group."

They also knew that Kang In-hyuk had ascended to division director under Chairman Tae Gun-seung's protection.

In this situation, Kang In-hyuk had been put in charge of the Chulsan Capital sale from the outset.

"No matter how talented, without the foundation of experience and networks, it's useless..."

"Isn't it possible Chairman Tae Gun-seung is backing him?"

"Huh! That old man who would take Taeshin Group to the grave? Well, he hasn't even properly handed over positions to Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho yet, so it does look suspicious."

"I'm beginning to think perhaps he's considering Tae Ju-ha as a successor."

This time, Baek Ji-woong let out a long sigh.

"Anyway, let's focus on the Chulsan Capital acquisition for now. Since Taeshin Asset Management is supervising the M&A, we're bound to get useful information. You try to pull out as much as you can from the inside."

"Understood."

With that reply, Baek Si-hwan got out from the passenger seat and walked to his own car.

Baek Ji-woong's driver got back in, and soon the car drove away.

...

...

At the same time.

In-hyuk visited Go Mi-ah's workshop. As the door opened, Go Mi-ah, waiting inside, greeted him with a bright smile.

"You're here? Hurry, come in."

Sensing an odd atmosphere, In-hyuk hesitated slightly before walking in cautiously.

"... What is it? Why are you like this all of a sudden? Don't tell me, you cooked something? I ate dinner at work."

He checked the empty dining table as he passed the kitchen and finally felt relieved.

Go Mi-ah asked loudly, looking at In-hyuk.

"How did you know Eun-ho was doing a movie?!"

"Eun-ho? Oh... Ha Eun-ho from DDS."

A few days ago, he'd said it off-handedly to get rid of her bothersome questioning.

"Today, news broke that Ha Eun-ho is considering a movie! He must've been preparing for acting! They say his casting is pretty much confirmed, too?"

"There was no article last I checked... Where did you see it?"

In-hyuk, knowing the future, had said so because he knew how successful that movie would be.

In the original timeline, Ha Eun-ho would have been involved in the Rizeburn incident and missed that film, but otherwise, he'd have been cast.

His acting would be recognized next year through another film, so there wouldn't be much difference.

"Huh? Um... well, you see..."

Go Mi-ah's eyes darted around.

"Hey, you're not hacking their agency, are you? Seriously, if you are, that's not just fan... it's stalking."

"It's not stalking! I just took a quick look at how things were going, that's all."

"So you did hack them."

"Tsk—!"

"Don't waste your strength in useless places. Didn't you say you finished comparing Fasiz Hotel visitors?"

That was the reason In-hyuk had come to see Go Mi-ah today.

"These are the people in the folder who haven't visited the hotel since the security floor came under investigation. But is a photo enough? If you check hotel check-in records, you can trace card transactions, too."

"But then you'd have to pierce the card company's security. For now, this will do."

In-hyuk flipped through the photos in the folder one by one.

There weren't many regular visitors, but there were plenty of photos classified as individuals.

As he quickly turned the mouse wheel, he suddenly noticed something.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, his phone rang.

【Charybdis — H】

It was saved under Hong Yu-geon's name. Staring intently at the photos, In-hyuk hit the call button.

[Boss! I tailed Baek Si-hwan just now and caught something huge!]

"What? I told you to leave that guy alone for now—it could be dangerous to approach."

[I kept a safe distance. He didn't notice a thing. Anyway, I'll send you the photos first, so check them out.]

Bzzz— bzzz— bzzz—

The photos came via Ghost Link, all shot in night mode. As In-hyuk checked them one by one, his finger stopped at one particular image.

"This... are you sure this is the person Baek Si-hwan met?"

[I couldn't confirm the meeting itself because of security guards all around, but he was in a car that Baek Si-hwan got out of. After the car left, the security guards moved too. Do you know him?]

"... I know him very well."

The man in the back seat of the car, captured in the photo.

He was Baek Ji-woong, chairman of leading media group WISE&WIRE, which grew from a major news company.

At the same time, he was the man In-hyuk had found in the hotel's CCTV photos.

The dates on the CCTV matched the day Baek Si-hwan had visited, making coincidence unlikely.

[Anyway, I sent it because the security guards' actions seemed unusual—it must be someone important.]

"Good call. But make this the last time you tail someone without notice."

[I was planning to do that anyway—you have no idea how close it was! If we hadn't spotted the hidden security guards first, it could've been really dangerous.]

"By the way, the inside of their left hand... Never mind."

He paused mid-sentence, thinking.

[The inside of their hand? Why?]

"It's nothing. You made it out safely, right?"

[I got away a while ago. But what were you about to say? You know it feels worse when you leave me hanging like that?]

"I'll tell you later if it becomes important. From now on, just stick to the planned moves."

[Tsk! Fine, got it.]

After the call, In-hyuk zoomed in on Baek Ji-woong's photo. Go Mi-ah, peeking at the photo beside him, tilted her head.

"Is that the person you were looking for?"

"I'm not sure, but given the circumstances, I think so."

"Do you know who he is?"

Within the WISE&WIRE group, aside from the current chairman and son-in-law Baek Ji-woong, most of the group's external activities were handled by his wife (and only daughter of the previous chairman), Kwon So-jeong, and her daughters, Baek Ye-ju and Baek Hana.

So Baek Ji-woong's face was not even on the internet.

Unless you had business dealings, most people didn't know what he looked like.

"Baek Ji-woong. Chairman of WISE&WIRE Group."

At that, Go Mi-ah was visibly startled.