Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 41

Two Rabbits

In-hyuk had not anticipated that Baek Ji-woong of WISE&WIRE Group would show up here.

At the same time, he recalled the publication party for KQ Group Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's autobiography.

In the original future, the woman Kang Do-young married was Baek Hae-na, the second daughter of W&W Group.

Furthermore, w&W Group had acquired several affiliates when In-hyuk, then the branch manager of Bluewall's Korea office, bankrupted the Taeshin Group.

Meanwhile, Go Mi-ah muttered in a quiet voice.

"W&W is a massive media conglomerate, right? Why would the chairman of such a company meet someone like Baek Si-hwan? Didn't you say he came as your secretary, oppa? Don't tell me... he's some kind of spy?"

Until now, Go Mi-ah had only looked into the information In-hyuk requested, so she still did not know the exact relationships among the people In-hyuk was investigating or their ultimate aims.

"It's similar. But I think I told you not to call me that?"

"What? Oppa? Then what should I call you?"

Reflecting, In-hyuk realized he had been calling Go Mi-ah by her name, while she had simply addressed him directly for business without using any specific title.

"That, I wouldn't know."

"It's kind of awkward to call you like those mercenary guys do. Or should I just call you president? After all, you're the actual owner of AMK Partners anyway."

It seemed she recalled how Hong Yu-geon used to address In-hyuk that way.

"That'd actually be better."

"Understood! President!"

"Haaa. Come to think of it, you finished transferring the TCL lightweight code to TN SOFT, right?"

"I took care of it ages ago. They've already replied that there shouldn't be any issues completing the rest of the development."

"And you only contacted them through Plusystems, right?"

Plusystems was a separate company In-hyuk had established to manage both core items for future technological development he was aware of and Go Mi-ah's independently patented programming technologies.

That included the lightweight source code he'd decided to lend TN SOFT.

"Of course. But do you really think a company like TN SOFT can succeed with the TCL Code?"

"Why? You don't believe it?"

"I know it's an outstanding blockchain technology, but since its security and management features are so advanced, I imagine a lot of people won't be happy about it. If it gets commercialized in the financial sector, we could see issues with personal data protection too."

In-hyuk was well aware of such concerns.

Indeed, as she'd said, a considerable number of people had raised such issues.

However, contrary to such worries, in the original future the blockchain technology utilizing TCL Code became commercialized even for the CBDCs (Central Bank Digital Currencies) of several governments.

'At first, China and the Eurozone were the most proactive. Ostensibly, it was for enhancing financial competitiveness or combating money laundering and fraud... but in reality, the true objectives were tight liquidity monitoring and the elimination of private payment firms.'

Thinking thus, In-hyuk let out a long sigh.

"It's what the people with decision-making power want."

"So you're saying it'll just play out in the most predictable way."

"Why? Do you feel sympathy for those who'll be negatively affected?"

"Not to that extent... it just feels a bit unsettling. Don't you feel the same, president?"

Go Mi-ah already wore an expression of discomfort. However, In-hyuk remained utterly unreactive.

"An individual alone can't completely stop the flow of a massive current. And if one somehow did, sooner or later it'd either burst or cause new problems."

"That's a rather cold answer. Are you saying all we can do is watch?"

"You can ride the flow, or depending on your methods, you can change the direction of the current."

"So what exactly are you planning to do, president?"

In response, In-hyuk offered a faint smile.

"It's difficult to explain right now, but if you watch, you'll figure it out."

His goal, both before and after returning to the past, was singular: to erase those bastards who had ruined his life from the world.

In the past, he thought he'd already succeeded in that mission to some extent.

But at the very end, he realized he'd been dancing in someone else's palm all along.

So this time, no matter who or how many they were, he intended to find and tear them all apart.

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[KQ Group launches a full-scale entry into the entertainment industry! They announce the acquisition and integration of 12 small management agencies to establish LifeStar Entertainment. KQ Distribution executive vice president Kang Do-young will concurrently serve as CEO while maintaining his current post...]

[A rebellion of small management agencies unified in showbiz? LifeStar Entertainment, founded as a KQ Group affiliate, aims to foster and launch new K-pop stars... First CEO

Kang Do-young announces that anyone with talent and effort will be given a chance to become a star...]

[Chulsan Capital sale confirmed! Companies jumping into the acquisition war are Omega Finance, Silverbell Capital, and AMK Partners... The minimum sale price is estimated at around 800 billion won...]

[Taeshin Asset Management brokers the Chulsan Capital acquisition bid! The acquisition will proceed through an open competitive bidding process... With domestic and foreign financial companies entering the bidding, it's uncertain what the outcome will be...]

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As evening approached, Taeshin Group's executive vice president, Tae Seok-ho, checked the news on his tablet in the car and set it aside with a satisfied expression.

A short while later, the car stopped in front of a quiet traditional Korean restaurant on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

Passing through the garden, he entered a secluded annex where WISE&WIRE Group Chairman Baek Ji-woong was already seated.

"You're here?"

"Hello, chairman. Ah, have you been waiting long?"

"No, I just arrived myself."

After shaking hands, they took their seats.

Soon, their pre-ordered dishes were served.

Tae Seok-ho poured a glass for Baek Ji-woong from a white, teapot-shaped bottle.

"Thanks to you, chairman, I was able to overcome a great ordeal. I'm truly grateful."

A smile appeared at the corner of Baek Ji-woong's lips as he accepted the appreciation.

"I merely made a connection."

"To be honest, I suffered a lot due to those sudden articles. Without your introduction to Omega Finance, do you think I could have resolved this?"

Currently, Tae Seok-ho was preparing to acquire Chulsan Capital through the H&T Fund, which he managed abroad.

However, not long ago, AMK Partners suddenly jumped into the fray, which sparked controversy in the media as a case of foreign corporate aggression.

The H&T Fund, too, was operated as a foreign entity.

Although Tae Seok-ho's actual ownership was unknown, if the fuss over Chulsan Capital's acquisition continued, his involvement might be revealed.

At that time, Baek Ji-woong — the chairman of W&W Group — had stepped in to introduce Omega Finance, a domestic financial firm that could act as a proxy.

"It's not like everything is done yet."

With that reply, Baek Ji-woong also filled Tae Seok-ho's glass.

"The funds are in perfect order. No matter how great the other companies are, they won't be able to outbid the amount I've set."

Nonetheless, seeing Tae Seok-ho's confident response, Baek Ji-woong took a sip of his drink and said,

"It's fine not to worry about the other firms, but shouldn't you be cautious with AMK Partners? The word going around about them is rather unsettling."

At this, Tae Seok-ho drank his shot as well.

"I've done some digging myself. They invest in everything — stocks, bonds, real estate, companies, you name it."

"They're famous for their impressive performance. In the Raisen Energy case, too, they made a profit like Taeshin Asset Management—only several times larger."

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho furrowed his brow, thinking of Kang In-hyuk, whom he had believed to be securely on his side.

"Ahem—! I've heard the same. Every area they touch is a success. But this time, the scale of capital required is different."

Although the media cited the minimum sale price for Chulsan Capital as 800 billion won, combining internal assets with other companies' stocks, real estate, and bonds pushed the total comfortably past one trillion.

Naturally, if a company did not hold that much cash, it would be difficult to bid.

"You mean it'll be hard for AMK Partners to raise the funds?"

"A moment ago I received a report analyzing the financial standings of the bidders: According to it, Silverbell has about 700 billion won in liquid cash, so with additional loans, it could reach a trillion. As for AMK, we could only verify their Korean branch data, so their cash stands at about 600 billion, which — even with more loans — barely comes to just under a trillion. Even then, both will have a hard time securing domestic loans."

Baek Ji-woong's gaze glittered at those words.

"So you've worked the banking sector."

"There's no sense playing your hand unless your victory is assured."

"I hope things turn out as you've planned. By the way, have things gone well with Moon Trading? I heard your relationship became strained due to that second son incident."

He was referring to the Rizeburn incident, when Moon Jae-min was convicted and imprisoned for involvement in both drug use and distribution.

At the time, Tae Seok-ho tried to leverage the situation by helping Moon Jae-min's mother, Baek Min-sook, matron of Moon Trading, in an attempt to acquire her shares in Taeshin Trading (2.44%), but failed.

Moreover, Baek Ji-woong was Baek Min-sook's younger brother, so he knew the incident well—after all, his own nephew had gone to jail.

The attempt to acquire Chulsan Capital was for similar reasons, as it held over a 2% stake in both Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics.

"Fortunately, besides Mrs. Baek, I spoke with Chairman Moon Dong-beom and secured a deal: in exchange for the stakes in KQ Distribution and Moon Trading held by Chulsan Capital."

"That certainly fits their needs. But KQ Distribution also owns shares in Taeshin Trading, doesn't it? If you hand that over to Moon Trading, won't problems arise—even if you're fronting Omega Finance instead of H&T Fund, it'll come out eventually."

KQ Distribution held a 2.89% stake in Taeshin Trading, which, although less than the combined stakes of Chulsan Capital (2.47%) and Moon Trading (2.44%), could not be ignored if things came down to a close fight.

"Since catching both rabbits at once is impossible, you have to aim for the bigger one first. Of course, trouble may come, but we'll handle it when it does."

"Well... that is sound logic."

"Anyway, it's thanks to you that I can finally breathe. Which brings me to—what is it you want, chairman?"

"What do you mean?"

Confused, Baek Ji-woong looked at him, but Tae Seok-ho cleared his throat and continued.

"You gave me the initial tip about Chulsan Capital and helped with this current issue—surely you didn't do all of this for no reason."

Tae Seok-ho didn't put his full trust in him.

In this cutthroat world, the laws of the jungle prevail—if you show even the slightest weakness, you'll be devoured at any time, anywhere, by anyone.

The man before him, Baek Ji-woong, started his career as a prosecutor at the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office, and by the age of thirty he had married W&W Group's only daughter and ascended to chairman.

Perhaps that made him even more guarded.

But Baek Ji-woong, upon hearing the question, remained calm and unmoved.

"Well... in this world, there's no such thing as a favor without expectation. Of course, there's something I want in return for my help."

"If you want Taeshin's shares in W&W Group subsidiaries, I can let you have them for less than the purchase price."

"That's not bad, but what I want is simply cash."

Tae Seok-ho tilted his head.

"Cash, chairman? Surely you don't rely on your wife for allowance... Do you need liquid funds?"

"You know the chairmanship is just a title for show."

"No matter how much your wife holds the real power at W&W, you have accomplished so much. Why do you say that?"

"No one knows how things will turn out later. So, just as a token of appreciation, I'd like you to provide it in the manner I requested."

The atmosphere grew markedly serious. Realizing he was not joking, Tae Seok-ho exhaled through his nose.

"I've heard troubling rumors lately. You don't mean... you're thinking of divorce, do you?"

"Haha. Of course not."

Still, Baek Ji-woong's answer did not seem all that reassuring.

Seeing this, Tae Seok-ho nodded, unable to shake off an uneasy feeling.

Chapter 42

A Call Has Come

There was noise over which company would acquire Chulsan Capital, a major financial firm in the southern region.

During this time, Oh Kang-goo, the executive vice president of Taeshin Asset Management, sat in his office together with Managing Director Yang Chan-woo.

"The atmosphere in the company has been a bit unsettled lately."

"It's all because of the MP division. They're brokering the Chulsan Capital bid, and the funds moving from the PEF side, without Organization's approval, are huge. The employees are worried, so there seem to be all kinds of rumors spreading."

MP was the abbreviation for M&A/PEF.

"Hmm... Come to think of it, has the audit team found anything on Division Director Kang?"

At that question, Yang Chan-woo fell silent for a moment before opening his mouth.

"... They say there's nothing to pick at for now."

"Nothing at all? When he's pushing things forward so recklessly, shouldn't something have come up?"

"The profits for the fund side are huge. According to sources, there's been a lot of requests from clients of other divisions, asking if they could be connected to Kang In-hyuk."

"Then why hasn't there been a report?"

Originally, it should have come up already.

"They say the audit team lead has been using annual leave due to personal reasons from two days ago until today."

"Taking time off at a time like this? Things really are turning crazy."

"I'll make sure to tell them to pay more attention once they're back tomorrow."

Oh Kang-goo's expression became severely distorted.

"Tell them not to hold back and dig by any means necessary. No matter how good someone's intel is, it's not easy to rise this fast. So if they're getting solid information from somewhere, it definitely can't be through legal means. That means something is bound to turn up."

He was convinced there had to have been insider trading that they didn't know about. But since there hadn't been any evidence so far, it was simply frustrating.

"Understood. And... yesterday, Director Bong Joo-hyung completed the delivery."

"I made sure it wouldn't be known that I gave the order, right?"

"I said it was a matter being handled at my level. But... who is the MP division data being delivered to?"

Yang Chan-woo was also acting on Oh Kang-goo's instruction, so he wasn't sure of the details.

"I'm just following orders from above too."

"By above, do you mean... is it definitely Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho?"

"Be careful what you say in other places."

Yang Chan-woo gave a worried look and voiced his doubts.

"... Are we really not in trouble? I'm not doubting Executive Vice President Tae, but if things go wrong, you and I could all get swept away, right?"

Currently, Taeshin Group was at the start of a whale fight, so he was afraid they might end up like the shrimp caught in the middle. Oh Kang-goo clicked his tongue and replied.

"Tsk! Will we really be safe anyway, once the eldest son sits in the chairman's seat? So, we can't just sit by. Besides, we can't expect to succeed without any risk."

"Come to think of it, haven't there been strange rumors lately? That the chairman is considering CEO Tae Ju-ha..."

"Do you think that makes sense? She is a child brought in from outside. If it were a son, maybe, but even the eldest granddaughter, Tae Su-jin, is only the executive vice president

of Taeshin Department Store. On the other hand, the eldest grandson, Tae Yeo-jun, is the electronics division director, and the second son's son is the construction CEO."

He meant that Chairman Tae Gun-seung was strictly enforcing a male-preference ideology.

Yang Chan-woo, who had heard similar stories during his time at Taeshin Asset Management, could only agree.

"At most, CEO Tae Ju-ha might be allowed to take over just Taeshin Asset Management as a subsidiary."

"That wouldn't last long, either. Most of the shares here are held by Holdings, so if the group ownership changes, that will be temporary, too..."

Riiing— riiing—

Just then, the internal call rang, cutting through their conversation. Losing his energy, Oh Kang-goo pressed the button roughly.

"What is it?"

[The CEO is calling. They want to see you in the office right away.]

"... Did they say what it's about?"

[No further details were given.]

"Alright. I'll go soon."

The unexpected summons was puzzling, filling him with questions.

Shortly after, he ended the conversation and headed towards Tae Ju-ha's office.

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As the door to the CEO's office opened, Oh Kang-goo stepped inside.

"Division Director Kang, you're here too. May I ask what this meeting is about?"

Sitting on the sofa beside Tae Ju-ha was In-hyuk.

Exuding a sense of discomfort, Oh Kang-goo took a seat across from him.

In-hyuk, meanwhile, handed out documents that were on the table to both of them.

"Please take a look at this."

The office fell silent for a moment. After reading the documents first, Tae Ju-ha formed a subtle expression.

"You're applying a new security system only to the MP division? Is that really necessary?"

From beside her, Oh Kang-goo echoed her question.

"The CEO is right. No matter how much you strengthen security, there's no problem with the current system, isn't this just a waste of money?"

Taeshin Asset Management, while a Taeshin Life subsidiary, used the same security system as Taeshin Group.

Of course, In-hyuk didn't expect the two of them to be pleased. But he hadn't submitted the proposal without reason.

"If there really is no problem, then yes, it's a waste. I didn't give an advance report, but ever since the new division was created, there've been people working with impure intentions."

"Did something happen?"

At Tae Ju-ha's question, In-hyuk nodded and answered.

"With the increased handling of company confidential info, I've been paying close attention to internal security since the division's creation. Recently, evidence came up that internal documents were leaked outside during that process."

Oh Kang-goo furrowed his brow and, before Tae Ju-ha could speak, asked,

"How exactly were the documents leaked?"

"Documents don't just walk out on their own, so obviously, someone intervened."

"Then, did you find out who it was?"

In-hyuk let out a long sigh.

"Hoo—! M&A Team 2 Leader Shim Kang-hyun, PEF Team 1 Manager Lee Sang-won, and PEF Team 2 Leader Oh Joon-myeong. These three."

At the mention of these names, Oh Kang-goo's expression did not soften.

"They all just got picked for the new division. Who did they leak the information to? And do you have proof?"

"The documents were leaked through those three to Director Bong Joo-hyung. Of course, Director Bong has no relation to our division's business. There were suspicious signs, so I put surveillance on him."

In-hyuk pulled photos from an envelope he had prepared.

The pictures showed Director Bong Joo-hyung handing something to a man in a dark place.

Upon seeing this, Oh Kang-goo's face hardened.

"Are you saying you tailed Director Bong Joo-hyung? More than that, you're saying Director Bong ordered the data leak. How are you sure of that?"

"Our division uses a program that embeds a special code into every digital file. If something is printed or copied without my approval, the security server is automatically sent the IP of the device where the last action happened."

Listening to the explanation, Oh Kang-goo raised his voice in protest.

"You're telling me you used a program at the company without the higher up's approval?!"

"We used it because it was approved. Isn't that right?"

At the same time, Oh Kang-goo's gaze shifted from In-hyuk to Tae Ju-ha.

Meeting both their eyes, Tae Ju-ha nodded.

"Yes. I approved it to sample the security. I never thought it would come in handy like this so soon."

"Can you really do that without the other executives' opinions?"

"Division Director Kang In-hyuk reports directly to me. It's not being shared with other divisions, just used there—do we really need an executive meeting for that?"

"I can't say you're wrong, but this is closely tied to company security. The CEO can't make such decisions alone."

"Isn't this problem more urgent now? So, to whom did Director Bong deliver the MP division materials?"

Tae Ju-ha's question smoothly redirected the flow to In-hyuk.

"The name is Lee Seung-jin. Turns out he's an employee at an errands agency. There's even evidence that the item Director Bong gave him was delivered to Kim Chan-hyung, the secretary to the CEO of Omega Finance."

"Omega... that's the firm bidding for Chulsan Capital, which the MP division is brokering, right?"

Tae Ju-ha recognized the name as soon as she heard it. At the same time, Oh Kang-goo looked caught off guard.

"I never thought Director Bong Joo-hyung would do something like this. To prevent this from happening again, we'll need to take firm action."

At that instant, In-hyuk nearly let out a bitter laugh.

'Are they cutting off the tail as soon as it's caught?'

It was obvious that Bong Joo-hyung couldn't have acted alone in what happened with Omega Finance.

But, hiding his inner thoughts, In-hyuk brought up the meeting's purpose once more.

"That's why I recommended the new security system. If implemented, material control will tighten, and even if there's a leak, the designated IP and GPS will make it impossible for anyone else to use."

But Oh Kang-goo didn't readily agree.

"Decisions about the system shouldn't be made here. Also, shouldn't there be action against the MP division employees who leaked information with Director Bong? Looks like Division Director Kang's staff management skills need to be called into question too."

He was now trying to rope in Division Director In-hyuk's responsibility, probably because he'd lost a pawn in the form of Bong Joo-hyung.

It was too obvious, so In-hyuk didn't back down.

"Of course. I'll share details with the audit team so this can be handled quickly and thoroughly. We don't know who else might be behind Director Bong, so it's worth a proper investigation."

With a meaningful look, he stared right at Oh Kang-goo.

Their eyes met, and Oh Kang-goo's eyelids twitched slightly.

"If this situation gets out, it'll seriously damage our image at Taeshin Asset Management. Especially since the new MP division hasn't built up much yet, it could be even riskier. Are you prepared, if the investigation reveals more and more people involved, to deal with that?"

This question, almost like a threat, was directed at Tae Ju-ha, not In-hyuk.

He thought, as CEO, she would hold the line for the company's sake.

But Tae Ju-ha looked completely unfazed, contrary to Oh Kang-goo's expectations.

"No. I find it strange too. If Director Bong Joo-hyung were really behind this, he wouldn't move directly—he'd have someone else do it. We need to get to the bottom of this matter."

"Group HQ isn't going to stay quiet anyway. Since an executive is involved, you, the CEO, won't be able to escape responsibility."

"That would apply to you as well, wouldn't it, Executive Vice President Oh? Director Bong Joo-hyung is one of your people, together with Managing Director Yang Chan-woo."

Oh Kang-goo's brow furrowed even deeper than before. In-hyuk, inwardly amused, interjected.

"If anyone truly cares about the company, they should be more worried about substance than saving face."

"So, are you saying we should overturn everything, regardless of the company's reputation?"

"It's better than covering it up and having it blow up even bigger later."

Bzzz— bzzz—

While the sharp conversation continued, Oh Kang-goo's cell phone vibrated in his pocket.

Pulling it out quickly, he saw it was a call from Managing Director Yang Chan-woo.

For him to call knowing he was in the CEO's office, it had to be important.

"Excuse me for a moment."

Stepping out for a moment, Oh Kang-goo walked to a remote corner in the hallway before pressing the call button.

"What's the reason for this call?"

[The audit team leader has contacted us. And...]

As he listened to Yang Chan-woo's words over the receiver, Oh Kang-goo's expression hardened further.

Chapter 43

Presence?

A few days later, at Taeshin Asset Management's conference room, a board meeting was underway concerning a single executive.

Executive Vice President Oh Kang-goo looked at the results of the just-completed vote and let out a sigh.

"....."

Fourteen directors, both inside and outside the company, including the company's CEO, sat around the table.

Everyone was waiting for Oh Kang-goo to announce the results of the board's agenda.

Since it was difficult to delay any longer, Oh Kang-goo slowly began to speak in the increasingly heavy atmosphere.

"..... Of the total 15 executives, 14 voted excluding the person concerned. All 14 votes in favor. Accordingly, Director Bong Joo-hyung's dismissal has been approved."

Bong Joo-hyung, whose name had been called, was not present.

Since his dismissal was as good as decided, he hadn't bothered to appear.

Naturally, the board meeting was held in name only.

Additionally, the employees who had directly leaked documents from the M&A/PEF Division were also disciplined and ended up being advised to resign.

Of course, Oh Kang-goo had tried to prevent things from getting to this point.

But the situation was thoroughly locked in—there was no way to overturn it.

The evidence against those involved in the document leak was simply irrefutable.

And in that moment, even the audit team leader whom he had drawn in advance suddenly turned against him.

[I will neither conduct nor accept requests for any more unreasonable, targeted audits.]

This was the message Oh Kang-goo had received while talking with Tae Ju-ha and Kang In-hyuk.

He still didn't know why Audit Team Leader Lee Dong-gyu had made this decision.

Of course, since they had exchanged favors before, Oh Kang-goo had attempted a bit of blackmail, but it was useless.

Judging from the circumstances, it just seemed like Lee was facing even greater threats from somewhere else.

"Damn it....."

Oh Kang-goo muttered quietly so no one could hear, his expression stiffening.

In the end, he had lost an ally within the executive faction. Meanwhile, the board meeting came to an end.

Sitting at the center, Tae Ju-ha felt a refreshing sense of relief.

She, along with her secretary Heo Yu-rim, who had been sitting by the door, exited the meeting room.

"CEO. You should try to keep a straight face."

"..... Was it that obvious?"

"The corners of your lips were twitching so much I thought you had a stroke."

The two spoke in low voices, only audible to each other.

As such, they greeted others before heading upstairs—not to the CEO's office, but to the floor where the M&A/PEF Division was located.

"Is Division Director Kang In-hyuk inside?"

With that question, Baek Si-hwan, the one guarding the desk outside, stood up.

"He is inside."

Soon after knocking, and receiving permission, they entered. In-hyuk, who had been working at his desk, slowly stood up.

"I saw the board's official memo just now. It looks like everything wrapped up well."

"Thanks to you. But honestly, I'm surprised Director Bong Joo-hyung didn't name higher-ups. I thought I'd backed him into a corner, but maybe it wasn't enough."

"At this point, what's scarier for him isn't you, but those people. Plus, he was promised support after his dismissal. However, now that the balance is broken, things should be easier than before."

"At best, though, it just means there are fewer people than those loyal to the Chairman."

In reality, even with her shares, Tae Ju-ha's power within Taeshin Asset Management was not significant.

Everyone treated her as CEO only because Chairman Tae Gun-seung was behind her, and even that support was considered to be in jeopardy.

So, losing just one person hardly seemed to make a difference.

"You seem to want to truly own Taeshin Asset Management, but won't CEO Tae Seok-hyun give you the promised shares soon?"

At that, Tae Ju-ha's face stiffened slightly.

It was the stake her father, Tae Seok-hyun, had promised on the condition of her marriage, and only half a year remained until then.

The same applied to In-hyuk's quiet married life.

"That's true..."

"If you add up all the shares held by the in-house directors, it's still less than 7%. On the other hand, with your shares and the separately gifted stake, you're close to 9%, so it shouldn't be a major problem."

The figure looked small since it was a single digit, but in terms of Taeshin Asset Management's value, it was at least several tens of billions won.

However, Tae Ju-ha's true goal was the company's full independence, and she was not satisfied with the situation.

"Even so, combining company-held and internal holdings only gets us a little past 30%. Even with the gifted shares, it's about 34%. That's still less than the 36% held by the group's headquarters. The governance structure won't change."

"I'll come up with the funds you need before our agreement ends."

At that, Tae Ju-ha's eyes widened.

"Don't tell me... Are you planning to buy shares with client investment funds coming into the fund division?"

"That money is already tied up in investments, so that's not possible. But there's another way. I can't go into detail just yet, though."

Hearing In-hyuk's calm reply, she let out a sigh.

"You never give me a straight answer. By the way, the security system you suggested—we've decided to apply it not just to the MP Division, but company-wide."

"Did you really get approval from headquarters?"

Since Taeshin Group had standardized systems, nothing could be implemented without their permission.

"That's right. To be precise, the Chairman himself gave the final confirmation."

"That's a relief."

"The Chairman seemed interested in Director Bong being ousted."

Tae Ju-ha studied In-hyuk's reaction. It felt like he might have heard something else, too.

"The group's got so much going on, I'm surprised at how focused he is on Taeshin Asset Management."

"To be accurate, it's because of you. I was honestly shocked—both at how decisively you got rid of Director Bong and how you used the situation to get approval for the new security system. Was the initial purpose behind your request for an independent file management system really just to set this up from the start?"

Until now, she had tried various ways to keep the opposing executive faction in check, but nothing had worked.

They were too cunning, and their entrenched influence within the company was too great.

But as soon as In-hyuk created the new M&A/PEF Division, he used it as bait to trigger action and oust one of them.

"That wasn't my original intent."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"Director Bong Joo-hyung simply stumbled and fell of his own accord."

"By the way, are you sure the information that went to Omega is really harmless? You said it was fine before, but since it's related to the Chulsan Capital bidding process, I can't afford not to be concerned."

In-hyuk gave her a slight smile.

"I knew from the beginning that there was a rat inside the MP Division. I even identified who it was. Of course, I ensured none of the critical documents got to them."

"So everything they got was fake...?"

"Only things like a company's liquid and retained assets ratio, income statements, changes in capital, etc. Omega will probably realize it soon enough."

Tae Ju-ha let out a sigh at the same time.

"Next time you do something like this, at least give me a heads-up."

"There's a saying—you have to fool your allies first before you can fool your enemies."

Suddenly, Tae Ju-ha's gaze grew ambiguous.

"..... Am I an ally?"

"For now, yes. As long as you don't turn me into your enemy."

"Ah....."

She closed her mouth silently, as if reflecting on the multiple implications.

"By the way, did you come just to ask how Director Bong was removed? Or do you have another reason?"

"That for now. Also, I wanted to report the outcome, since I'd put a lot of effort into it. Are you very busy?"

"I have an external meeting to get to shortly."

"These days you seem to be out of the office almost every afternoon. Do you really have that many external meetings?"

It wasn't just once or twice; the number of times seemed strange even compared to sales staff.

"You have to do the legwork yourself to make a profit in fund investments."

"What about the other staff?"

"They're busy with what I assigned them. I don't intend to move money around unless I've seen and heard things with my own eyes."

It was a firm answer.

The overlap with the cold impression she'd had of In-hyuk when they married made her even more curious.

"I didn't know you were so passionate about work."

"If I've decided to do something, I see it through. Anyway, unless you have more to discuss, I'll take my leave."

"..... Go ahead, then."

In-hyuk gathered his jacket and bag and left the office with Tae Ju-ha.

Following them were the security guards Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"Now that I think about it, manager Baek Si-hwan seems to always be at his desk. Doesn't he serve as your personal assistant?"

"He has a lot of documents to sort out right now like the rest. For outside business, the security guards are enough. Well, if you'll excuse us."

The elevator had already arrived. In-hyuk got in with the two security guards.

As the doors closed on both sides, Tae Ju-ha unconsciously sighed.

"Hmm....."

"What's wrong?"

Startled, Tae Ju-ha turned around.

There stood her secretary, Heo Yu-rim, who had been following since the start.

Seeing Tae Ju-ha gazing at the elevator with such a strange look, Yu-rim spoke up quietly.

"Why are you standing there with no presence?"

"..... Presence?"

It was only natural for her assistant secretary to stay by her side.

"No, it's nothing. Let's go back to my office."

. . .

At the same time.

Oh Kang-goo and Managing Director Yang Chan-woo were back in Oh's office.

"Damn it—! Why is everything turning out so twisted?!"

Yang Chan-woo, watching from his seat, was just as anxious.

Every staff member they had planted or recruited in the M&A/PEF Division had been ousted, and even Bong Joo-hyung, whom they had pushed to lead the effort, had just been dismissed.

"So what should our next plan be? At this rate, it might be difficult for us to continue supporting him."

"How many have turned their backs?"

"Confirmed so far—Audit Team Leader, risk Management Team Leader, head of Fixed Income, head of Marketing, and the Head of Alternative Investments Division 2."

All were individuals they had recruited within Taeshin Asset Management.

Given they had attached themselves to Oh Kang-goo for personal gain, this sudden turnaround was baffling.

"Did you find out how Kang In-hyuk was able to win them over?"

"They all said they won't get involved in further infighting and will now focus solely on their duties."

"Hah... infighting? If only they'd kept their mouths shut. Do they not realize what they themselves have been doing?"

"But considering what they're holding over us, it might not be easy to pressure them."

Oh Kang-goo, Yang Chan-woo, and Bong Joo-hyung had promised these people promotions in return for inside information, and had even used borderline illegal methods in order to restrain rival executives.

This wasn't just bad for the defectors—it actually placed the executives themselves at greater risk.

"We can't just get rid of them right now..."

"If we try, Executive Vice President Nam's people will simply replace them with their own."

They were truly at a stalemate.

"We have to fix this situation before the Chulsan Capital bidding."

"There's not much we can do, is there? Besides, if Kang In-hyuk got that kind of dirt on them, he may well have found out about us too."

"And it's impossible to keep extracting internal documents now."

The new security system proposed by Kang In-hyuk had received approval from the group, and would be used not just in the M&A/PEF Division but throughout Taeshin Asset Management.

That was how they'd managed to catch Director Bong.

For the company, it was an excellent measure, but it also made it impossible for them to figure out what else Kang In-hyuk was planning.

bzzz—bzzz—

At that moment, Oh Kang-goo's phone buzzed on the table.

It was a call from Jeon Joon-seok, executive vice president of Taeshin Life and former CEO of Taeshin Asset Management.

Chapter 44

Like an Old Man

Seunghwa's Set Menu in Donui Neighborhood, Jongno District.

Tae Seok-ho was sitting at a silver-plated table, pouring himself soju and drinking.

Not long after, there was a knock and the door opened.

Jeon Joon-seok, the executive vice president of Taeshin Life, entered, bowing at the waist.

"It's been a while...."

"Forget the greetings. Just sit down and have a drink."

With his lips drawn in, Jeon Joon-seok nervously approached and sat down on the opposite side of the table.

The two men's glasses were filled, and they immediately downed their drinks.

Soon, Tae Seok-ho stared at Jeon Joon-seok with a cold expression.

"You said things got overturned?"

"I'm sorry. I should have been more attentive...."

"No need for useless words. Is it true you got done in by Kang In-hyuk?"

Jeon Joon-seok bit his lip hard for a moment, then continued slowly.

"... According to Executive Vice President Oh, yes."

"What method did he use?"

"Blackmail. When I questioned a few people, they said he put pressure on them using embezzlement and illegal activities from previous projects."

"So, they got caught by their weaknesses. But how did Kang In-hyuk find out about that? Wasn't he keeping a low profile at Taeshin Asset Management?"

"That's what I'm curious about. Actually, it's not even certain that the one who did the blackmailing was Division Director Kang In-hyuk. Everyone received emails containing evidence of their unlawful acts and a warning to stay quiet. But circumstantially, the person who gained the most was Division Director Kang In-hyuk, so that's what people think."

At that, Tae Seok-ho let out a deep breath.

"As I thought... Are you saying there's someone behind Kang In-hyuk?"

It was one of the theories he'd considered for a while.

Between being suddenly rejected and seeing Kang In-hyuk—who hadn't made much noise in Taeshin Trading's sales department—pull huge funds and succeed with every investment, everything had started feeling unfamiliar.

"Do you mean there's someone else pulling the strings?"

"It's only speculation for now. So how does Taeshin Asset Management plan to handle this? If things stay this way, isn't it going to be difficult to intervene with the Chulsan Capital bid?"

The necessary funds and coordination with Omega Finance were already in place.

But Tae Seok-ho didn't feel reassured.

There were already so many variables in the preparation stage that he was determined to be thorough.

"There's no guarantee something like this won't happen again, so for now it seems difficult."

The atmosphere grew heavier.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho filled his glass again and downed the soju like he was throwing it into his throat.

"Ugh—! Aren't you saying you're useless to me a little too casually?"

At the same time, Jeon Joon-seok stood up abruptly and bowed once again.

"S-sorry!"

A moment of silence passed. Watching this, Tae Seok-ho again raised his refilled glass.

"It would have been better if I'd just gotten rid of the excuse for my nephew to return in the first place... Still, you seemed to have influence within Taeshin Asset Management, so I promoted you to Taeshin Life. And now this? What am I supposed to make of this situation?"

"Well, that's..."

"I don't want to hear any more, so just go back now. Oh, and lay low for a while. Don't draw attention."

Jeon Joon-seok quickly got up, bowed deeply, and left.

Tae Seok-ho, left alone at the table, mumbled as he drank.

"What should I do about it, Deputy Chief Lee?"

The question was directed at his security guard, Lee Jae-jun, who was standing by the entrance.

"If it's about the Chulsan Capital bid, there's no need to worry, is there?"

"You mean because we've already made some moves in the financial sector?"

"I hear things are going according to plan."

Tae Seok-ho nodded slowly.

He knew that recently Silver Bell Capital and AMK Partners had been looking into loans from the financial sector.

Of course, through his connections and strength, Tae Seok-ho had ensured that the loan process would take longer.

"That's true. Still... something feels off. Things are going so smoothly, it's almost ominous. And it was odd how one of Chulsan Capital's CEOs suddenly disappeared."

He'd found out that the real owner of Chulsan Capital was Jang Hyung-cheol.

With the help of Baek Ji-woong, chairman of W&W Group, he'd managed to influence the prosecution, and if H&T Fund, thanks to Han Jae-won's schemes, had just swallowed up Chulsan Capital, that would have been the end of it.

But every part of the plan had gotten tangled up, leading to the current situation.

"Let me know if there's anything else you need and I'll send people to investigate."

"Has Jang Hyung-cheol made any recent moves?"

"Other than meeting Director Kang In-hyuk about the Chulsan Capital bid at a restaurant called Hanul a few days ago, nothing noteworthy."

He'd had people keep tabs on Jang Hyung-cheol regarding the Chulsan Capital bid.

"I guess they've gotten closer since Taeshin Asset Management is handling the funds well."

"So, the bid could have happened within their own company. They probably let it go on purpose."

"Assign some more people to AMK and Silver Bell's field operatives. Report at once if you see any other movement."

"Understood."

Having finished their conversation, Tae Seok-ho left the restaurant with Lee Jae-jun.

* * *

In-hyuk was on a Ghost Link call in Go Mi-ah's workspace.

[As instructed, I made all the loan inquiries necessary with the financial sector. Everyone responded with a vague sense that it was possible, but told us to wait.]

The caller was Norman McGrath.

"Good work."

[Do you know who's behind this sort of move?]

Norman McGrath had a long career in the economic market and was very familiar with situations like this.

While following In-hyuk's orders, he'd also tried to look into who in the bidding companies had connections with the banks, but hadn't found any.

"It's probably Omega Finance."

[However... As I recall, they've already exhausted their facility and operating loans. Their capital adequacy ratio is also low. If you go by that alone, their conditions are worse than ours or Silver Bell's.]

"They probably have someplace else lined up to pull in capital, just like us."

[Do you... already know where that is?]

He asked, half in doubt, but it showed how highly Norman McGrath regarded In-hyuk's abilities as Gordon Grimes.

"It's H&T Fund. Ah, leave that one to me—don't try to approach them yourselves."

[Ah...]

For a moment, Norman McGrath's voice trembled over the receiver.

If In-hyuk hadn't said so first, he would have tried investigating himself for sure.

"I know you're in the habit of verifying things several times. But I'm handling this plan well, so trust me."

[I'm not worried about that. But... I still haven't heard why you want to acquire Chulsan Capital. Can you tell me now? Honestly, that company is only notable for its cash liquidity—its other assets are just bonds, real estate, and stocks... and AMK Partners doesn't plan to go into finance.]

In-hyuk let out a faint chuckle.

It was true.

Chulsan Capital's profits were based on loan interest.

AMK Partners was making several times more money through investments in a much shorter period, so acquiring it could easily seem pointless.

"Mr. Gold Eye, is your insight lacking today?"

He said it teasingly, and Norman McGrath coughed, raising his voice.

[Cough—! Why are you using that old name?]

Gold Eye was the nickname given to him in the Middle East before he joined FOURGMA—a name attached to both legal and illegal lobbying, not always with positive meaning.

"Wasn't it proof of all the great deals you pulled off? Anyway, you won't lose out on this one either, so don't worry."

[... Very well. I'll trust only you, CEO.]

The call ended there.

Meanwhile, Go Mi-ah, who had been typing on the computer, looked at In-hyuk with an incredulous expression.

"I've thought this before... But why do you talk like that, president?"

"What's wrong with the way I talk?"

"You're too much like an old man. Are you doing it on purpose?"

Just as In-hyuk was about to tilt his head, he realized the reason easily.

'Is it because of all the years I lived before?'

Of course, he'd only been 45 when he died.

But after dealing with so many difficult people, a sense of age had seeped into his manner of speaking, even without realizing it.

"I didn't even know."

"Maybe it's just because you are an old man?"

"Well... maybe so. If it's true, it's true. Anyway, what are you working on?"

Even as she conversed, Go Mi-ah's fingers never stopped on the keyboard.

"That phone we analyzed before. I found more records of messages sent in similar patterns. I cross-referenced those with cell tower and satellite comms logs nationwide and globally, then plotted them on the map using time and trilateration."

In-hyuk stared at the monitor in surprise.

Thin red lines, like threads, crisscrossed the map of the world busily.

"How did you filter the signals? Was there a specific code to identify them? Or... was it a cipher?"

"That's right."

"But with dual patient code ciphers, accurate filtering would be hard."

In-hyuk had considered that approach too.

But with jumbled alphabet-only messages, it was very hard to isolate the relevant encrypted messages.

"I entered a huge number of filtering keywords. That's why I've been up for three days straight—I'm dead tired."

Go Mi-ah's heavy dark circles proved her point.

"Good work. But were there really that many signals?"

The red lines marked on the map looked like multiple layers of spiderwebs.

Especially among Asia, Europe, South America, and North America—it was as if the regions were deliberately divided.

"Much more than I expected."

At one point, program execution slowed, as if overloaded—proof of just how much data was being processed.

"I never thought my new computer would be this overloaded in less than a year."

"Buy a new one with as much money as you need. If it's necessary, buy an entire building for a supercomputer setup."

Go Mi-ah's head whipped around in shock.

"Really?!"

"You deserve to be treated according to your skills. Now, zoom in on the points concentrated in the US and Korea."

"Okay!"

The screen changed instantly to reflect the new request.

"How many years' worth is this?"

"It's not years! Depending on usage, customer data is kept 5–10 years, but communication logs never last that long. At best, 12 months; at minimum, 6 months. This is all from that period. Ah—and satellite transmissions are similar. Private satellite logs last as little as 3 months."

The implication was that during just one year, coded messages had crisscrossed the world. In-hyuk couldn't help but be surprised.

"There are no new records, right?"

"Either the person making the cipher changed the code, or nothing is being caught by my filter."

Gazing at the screen, In-hyuk unconsciously clenched his fist.

Besides the cell phone he'd chanced upon, the only other things he'd discovered were the mysterious tattoo and the close connection between Baek Si-hwan and Baek Ji-woong, chairman of W&W Group.

And W&W Group itself was proving a formidable opponent.

Then, a particular area with concentrated signals in Korea caught his eye.

"Zoom in on the coordinates with the most concentrated signals."

"That's easy."

Go Mi-ah pressed a key, magnifying the map's scale.

Kwa-ji-jik—

At the same time, a loud sound rang out from the corner of the desk where In-hyuk had been leaning expectantly.

Chapter 45

I Was Offended

Go Mi-ah shifted her gaze from the monitor to the edge of the desk.

There, In-hyuk's hand was gripping the corner of the desk.

"What kind of strength... Are you even human? Or did you learn some kind of powerhouse act somewhere?"

Honestly, In-hyuk himself was surprised.

After returning to the past, he had noticed his body felt different from before, but he never thought he'd be able to snap off the edge of a thick wooden desk.

"I just got a little excited because I saw something unexpected."

"If you get excited again, you'll end up turning the desk into origami. No, wait... wood-folding, maybe? But seriously, how did you split this? Is this possible with human strength?"

Go Mi-ah snatched the piece of desk from In-hyuk's hand and examined it from every angle.

Her eyes were filled with suspicion, as if he'd performed some magic trick.

However, the broken edge showed only the pure signs of plywood having been torn apart.

"There are people who can rip phonebooks apart with their bare hands."

"Ugh... Phonebooks? Are you showing your age now?"

"I can't exactly say I'm not an old man."

"So, what made you so angry? Was it this coordinate?"

In-hyuk turned his gaze to the screen again.

In one area of the southern Gyeonggi region, a red line was tangled up in a complicated shape.

That was because, before returning to the past when he was part of the UID special forces, this place had been used as a safehouse.

'The fact they used TMT and even knew the location of the safehouse... So, as I suspected, they must have had a close connection with UID, too...'

Of course, it was hard to tell Go Mi-ah such things right now.

"Print it all out for me. And it would be best to find a new place to move to as soon as possible. Take this opportunity to renovate the equipment, too."

"We haven't even lived here for a year."

"Even if we routed our IP, there's still a risk of being tracked. We should take this chance to bolster security."

The unidentified organization was so meticulous that they even used cipher in their messages.

And Go Mi-ah was showing skills far beyond what he expected.

If she were to be counter-tracked while only picking up a trace or two, she could be lost, which worried him.

"Security? How?"

"I'll have to think about that, too."

He even considered assigning security guards with a mercenary background like Charybdis.

But, no matter how exceptional a mercenary might be, loyalty was usually determined by money.

Besides, In-hyuk was less inclined to trust people, having returned to the past after dying due to betrayal.

"Really? Hmm~!"

Go Mi-ah dragged out her interjection with an odd expression.

Seeing that, In-hyuk felt a sense of foreboding.

* * *

【Who will become the next owner determined by Chulsan Capital's public competitive bidding? The companies expected to participate are Omega Finance, Silver Bell Capital, and AMK Partners, with the minimum bid guessed to be at least 1 trillion won...】

【Financial company Chulsan Capital, actually a hidden gem! Chulsan Capital, holding bonds, real estate, and stocks as assets, has secured large shares and bonds in major domestic companies... Since the company is unlisted, the checks and balances between companies may change depending on management styles after the bid...】

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Employees of the M&A Team 1 at Taeshin Asset Management had traveled down to Busan, to the fourth-floor main conference room of the Chulsan Capital building, preparing busily for the public bidding.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk was sitting in the CEO's office with Chulsan Capital's true owner, Jang Hyung-cheol.

"What's so grand about selling a company that everyone's making such a racket...."

Jang Hyung-cheol had been keeping an eye on articles about the sale of Chulsan Capital on his phone for a while.

Already suffering from the recent prosecutorial and tax office investigations, it was a discomforting situation for him.

In-hyuk offered a slight smile.

"That way, the wrong people won't be able to pull any foolish stunts."

"... What? Don't tell me, you're the one who kept leaking the stories to the press?"

Every time attention died down, small bits of news related to Chulsan Capital continued to appear.

It would have been difficult for that to happen if no one was orchestrating it.

"That's right."

Jang Hyung-cheol was speechless at In-hyuk's matter-of-fact reply.

"Still, don't you think you're fanning the flames a bit too much?"

"If we hadn't played the media, any company trying to buy would have attempted to downplay the value of Chulsan Capital in some way."

Jang Hyung-cheol's eyes grew wide.

"Aren't we close enough to introduce me to AMK Partners? Taking that into account, you really didn't need to go this far. I would've let a bit of loss or your rightful gain slide, considering what you've done for me."

He was referring to the matter of helping him avoid the prosecution and tax office investigations.

But In-hyuk didn't respond positively.

"Money's just a means—it's not something that proves trust."

For a moment, Jang Hyung-cheol let out a laugh of admiration.

"Hoho! Didn't think I'd hear such words from someone your age. The more I talk to you, the more you feel like a peer, not a junior. You didn't lie about your age, did you?"

In-hyuk remembered what Go Mi-ah had said to him recently.

"I do hear I look younger than I am."

"So you can joke, too?"

"....."

As silence fell, Jang Hyung-cheol continued.

"Hmm! How high do you think the bidding will go?"

"Earlier, you sounded like you weren't all that greedy—now you're getting your hopes up?"

"I'm just curious, that's all."

The intent behind his answer was obvious.

"You saw the estimated minimum bid in the articles: at least 1 trillion won. Still, the flames have already spread, so it should go higher than that."

"Who hasn't seen that? Rumor has it the banks are being swayed, though."

"You mean the reports about pressure being applied to the lending departments?"

"So you heard too."

"It's impossible not to hear."

It was impossible for rumors spread through so many people to stay contained.

Of course, In-hyuk knew not just the rumors, but that it was Taeshin Group's second son, Tae Seok-ho, who had personally acted to apply pressure.

"And even so, you're not worried? While I've already resolved to let go of Chulsan Capital, don't you have more at stake? Or did you get no pressure from AMK Partners?"

"Not really. I'm only handling the intermediary work for the bid. They told me themselves they'd take care of things."

"Is that how confident AMK is in this bid? But if the pressure on the banks is true... even AMK will struggle with financing..."

Even if you win the bidding, if you can't raise funds, the acquisition falls through.

Given that the people aiming for Chulsan Capital before went so far as to use the prosecution and tax office, it was obvious they'd gotten involved with the current pressure on the banks as well.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. It's about time—I should head down."

"Thanks and good luck."

In-hyuk finished his farewell and stepped outside.

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The fourth-floor conference room set to hold Chulsan Capital's public competitive bid was packed with people.

In-hyuk entered, accompanied by Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

Immediately, the attention of the three participating companies' representatives and various observers assessing the outcome turned to him.

Everyone had tried to contact the company several times just to get a meeting with In-hyuk before the bid preparations began.

But since he hadn't met with anyone, rumors swirled anew.

"That's Kang In-hyuk, the Division Director of Taeshin Asset's MP division?"

"He wouldn't meet with anyone until now, but this is a big enough deal for him to show up himself."

"I heard Chairman Tae is backing him."

"If not for that, how could he be in charge of something this big?"

Whispers continued to ripple through the crowd.

Then someone approached In-hyuk and greeted him in English.

"Nice to meet you, director. I'm Norman McGrath from AMK Partners."

In-hyuk looked at him calmly.

Norman McGrath didn't know that In-hyuk was actually Gordon Grimes, the registered CEO of AMK Partners.

Because of that, In-hyuk changed his tone and accent as much as possible from what he used on the phone.

"Yes. Hello, I'm Kang In-hyuk. Thank you for participating in this bid."

"I understand you didn't study abroad, yet you speak Midwestern American English so fluently."

He meant the standard American English used in the Midwest.

Upon finding out In-hyuk had never studied overseas, Norman was surprised at how naturally he spoke.

"I just studied hard in university."

"Actually, I reached out recently to meet you... but you kept refusing, and I was a little offended."

Like others, Norman McGrath had tried to meet In-hyuk about the Chulsan Capital matter.

Of course, the recent successful investment stories of Taeshin Asset Management had also piqued his curiosity toward In-hyuk.

"I just need to be careful not to create any awkward situations."

As the conversation was going smoothly, Tae Seok-ho, the executive vice president of Taeshin Trading, walked over.

Instantly, everyone's attention shifted once more.

"Kang, you're here too."

"I didn't expect the Executive Vice President to come, sir."

On the surface, Tae Seok-ho had nothing to do with the current public competitive bidding.

The fact that he appeared in person was bound to intrigue observers.

"It's one of the biggest stories lately. Plus, with my nephew-in-law at the center of it, I ought to come and watch."

"It's not that big a deal."

"Just take it as a compliment. And more importantly—"

Tae Seok-ho's gaze rested on Norman McGrath, who was standing next to In-hyuk.

"Ah, Norman McGrath from AMK. This is Tae Seok-ho, Executive Vice President of Taeshin Trading."

"Oh... I think this is our first meeting. You know me, sir?"

"I work mostly in America, but I've heard many stories about your management exploits, Vice President Tae, even across the ocean."

The two men spoke fluently in English.

On hearing words full of respect, Tae Seok-ho gave a faint smile.

"Where were you based?"

"I was with FOURGMA. More recently, I was the branch director for the Singapore office before moving on to AMK."

"To leave that position and join AMK... That couldn't have been an easy decision. Did they headhunt you?"

Being a branch director at FOURGMA, a famous hedge fund in the US, was a significant position. Leaving that role for a new investment company would be a difficult decision for most.

Of course, Tae Seok-ho had already researched Norman McGrath when AMK Partners' name started spreading prior to the Chulsan Capital bid. But he showed no sign of it in person, keeping things affable.

"That's right. They offered me quite a large salary. The working environment's also excellent."

"I suppose AMK Partners, for such a young company, has quite some capital strength."

"It's not bad. If you, Vice President Tae, are ever looking for investment destinations, I'd be glad to give a recommendation. Oh, pardon me, I forgot you already have an investment company of your own."

The joke was aimed partially at In-hyuk, too.

"If the chance comes up someday, I'll keep it in mind."

Just then, the Team 1 leader of M&A, Jung Jong-hyun, carefully approached In-hyuk.

"Director, all bid submissions are closed. We'll begin the opening process now."

"Already? Executive Vice President, Branch Director, please excuse me."

"Go ahead, and good luck."

"See you again."

Leaving their farewells behind, In-hyuk walked to the front of the conference room. The other participants also checked the time and sat in their assigned seats.

Employees from Omega Finance were present as well. They looked confident, as though they had already won.

At that moment, the voice of Ahn Woo-chan, a manager from the M&A Team 1, came through the microphone from the podium.

"We'll now begin the bid opening."

Chapter 46

I Refuse

The people gathered in the Chulsan Capital main conference room turned their attention to the podium.

Only three companies were known to be participating in the open competitive bidding right now.

Since this was the acquisition of a giant financial enterprise like Chulsan Capital, it was difficult for more to join.

Team Leader Jung Jong-hyun, who had been standing with In-hyuk, stepped forward and placed the bid box on the podium.

He opened the lid, which had been sealed with a padlock, and took out the first envelope.

"Silver Bell Capital, bidding amount: 1 trillion 343 billion KRW."

An immediate stir spread through the crowd.

Despite rumors that Silver Bell was having trouble securing bank loans, their bid was substantially higher than expected.

The representatives of Silver Bell Capital appeared satisfied.

Meanwhile, the next bid was announced.

"Omega Finance, bidding amount: 1 trillion 529 billion KRW."

At that moment, the fortunes of the Silver Bell and Omega representatives diverged.

The minimum expected bid had been about 1 trillion KRW. It would be difficult for anyone to exceed the price Omega Finance had put forward.

Amidst the renewed buzz, the third bid envelope was opened.

Jung Jong-hyun's eyes widened as he checked the amount.

After a brief pause, he began to speak slowly.

"AMK Partners... bidding amount: 1 trillion... 1.7 trillion KRW. That's all. Based on the bid, the winner is AMK Partners."

This time, the buzz swelled into raised voices.

"They say they always succeed in their investments, but... did they really put up 1.7 trillion?"

"But does AMK even have that much funding?"

Publicly, AMK Partners was a company less than a year old.

No matter how skillful an investor, gathering that kind of capital was no easy feat.

Naturally, it was hard to believe that AMK Partners had actually made such a bid.

Suspicion was written all over everyone's faces.

Then, M&A Team 1 of Taeshin Asset Management opened the bidding documents for transparency and fairness.

People pushed forward to the front, and had no choice but to accept it.

In-hyuk, seated at the side of the stage, watched people's reactions.

'Did they really think they could overpower everything with money?'

At the end of his gaze was Tae Seok-ho's face, which until just now had been certain of victory.

Of course, now the smirk that had curled up at the corners of his mouth was completely gone, his face hard and stiff.

The Omega Finance employees in the front row were the same.

Having bid 1 trillion 529 billion and still lost, it was no wonder they were confused.

One of them was already making a call, as if reporting to the Organization.

Bzzz— bzzz—

At the same time, something arrived on In-hyuk's phone.

It was a message from Norman McGrath, also present in the conference room, sent through Ghost Link.

【Norman: We have succeeded in the Chulsan Capital bid.】

【Gordon: Good work. Please see the acquisition through to the end. Also...】

After replying, In-hyuk glanced slyly at Tae Seok-ho with satisfaction.

* * *

【AMK Partners is the winner of the Chulsan Capital competitive bid! The final price is an overwhelming 1.7 trillion KRW, roughly 200 billion more than Omega Finance's 1 trillion 529 billion...】

【AMK Partners secures Chulsan Capital for 1.7 trillion! After the payment is completed, AMK Partners will begin the acquisition process in earnest with Taeshin Asset Management's M&A team...】

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Crash—

In a hotel in Busan, the furnishings on a desk clattered loudly as they tumbled.

In front of it, Tae Seok-ho took a deep breath, having barely restrained his fury.

His plan, crafted by gathering 1 trillion 529 billion KRW, had crumbled. Of course, not all of that was his own money.

It consisted of investment funds managed through the H&T Fund and secretly siphoned reserves, using Chulsan Capital's bonds and stocks in other firms as provisional collateral.

With all that money now left dangling in limbo after missing its target, it was only natural to feel shocked.

To make matters worse, the tablet left on the desk continuously refreshed with articles covering the freshly decided Chulsan Capital bid, fueling his anger.

"How on earth did they... get their hands on that much capital?"

The source of AMK Partners' funds was a mystery. He had definitely ensured that no domestic banks would issue them loans.

Yet, they'd secured the bid, which meant they must have found a way around this.

"Has there been any reply from the banks?"

His security guard, Lee Jae-jun, who had been standing a little apart, picked up the fallen items and set them back on the desk as he replied.

"For now, the banks we inquired about said nothing is underway."

"That can't be!"

"However, Cheongnyu Savings and Haneuljae Finance said the Organization is aware of this case and is pushing for loan sales very persistently."

A 1.7 trillion KRW acquisition had just been won.

No company could pay that amount in cash, so some bank had to have issued a loan.

Moreover, the winner was AMK Partners, whose impressive investment returns had recently made headlines.

From a bank's perspective, providing a loan and profiting from the interest would be tempting.

"So?"

"We contacted AMK Partners' Korea branch directly, but they refused."

"... What? Both of them?"

"That is correct."

The two banks mentioned were well known for their corporate lending.

Even with Tae Seok-ho's connections, it had been impossible to completely block them.

But AMK Partners' decision was even more shocking.

"Then where are they sourcing their funds? Don't tell me they're using their major shares as collateral to raise funds from overseas?"

"No contact has been confirmed between AMK Partners' Korea branch and any foreign banks."

Tae Seok-ho quickly suppressed the anger boiling up inside and focused on reality.

"More likely, those above... or the people backing AMK Partners directly intervened. Set up a meeting with Norman McGrath as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir. I will reach out immediately."

Lee Jae-jun drew his phone and began making arrangements. It didn't take long to get a reply.

"The meeting will be at Gimhae International Airport lounge. He says he only has a short window, as his flight departs in two hours."

"Going abroad?"

"Yes. He also said he isn't sure when he'll return."

Norman McGrath had also been at the Chulsan Capital bid earlier.

Since they were unfamiliar with each other, Tae Seok-ho thought it would be difficult to meet again so soon, but Norman had accepted the meeting more easily than expected.

"Is he really flying overseas while the Chulsan Capital acquisition is underway?"

"That's what he says."

"Must be nice not to have any worries... Anyway, we're the ones in a tight spot right now, so tell him we'll go to the airport."

Finishing his words, Tae Seok-ho headed straight out of the hotel.

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About an hour later.

At the VIP lounge in Gimhae International Airport, Tae Seok-ho took a seat across from Norman McGrath.

"I was surprised to get a meeting request from someone I only saw a few hours ago."

"I apologize for taking your time. It's just that the situation is extremely urgent..."

Soon, coffee brought by Norman McGrath's secretary was placed in front of them.

"So, what brought you here with such urgency?"

Going straight to the point, Tae Seok-ho cleared his throat.

"Ahem—! Honestly, I'm sure you already know why I'm here, branch manager."

"As expected, it's because of Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics' shares."

"I'll buy them at five percent above the current market price."

"Five percent more? That would be... well over 800 billion KRW."

It meant around 800 billion. Even Norman McGrath's face showed surprise at such an offer.

"They hold that much value. Of course, AMK could sell the shares for much more than Chulsan Capital ever paid for them, so this would be a huge profit."

The real owner of Chulsan Capital, Jang Hyung-cheol, had acquired those shares of Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics more than ten years ago.

Compared to then, the price had more than tripled, making this offer to AMK Partners the best possible deal.

"Even so, five percent..."

"I need the shares, and AMK needs to refill its vault after spending it all on acquiring Chulsan... isn't this mutually beneficial?"

"I understand your point. But I'm very sorry, I must refuse to sell the Taeshin shares."

Even as he heard these words, Tae Seok-ho didn't look embarrassed.

Instead, he gave a faint smile and gently pressed the issue.

"Are you saying you need to discuss with your CEO?"

"No. Our company also needs Taeshin's shares."

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho's face froze.

"Don't tell me... does this mean AMK Partners intends to involve itself in Taeshin's future decisions?"

Chulsan Capital's holdings were 2.47% in Taeshin Trading and 2.1% in Taeshin Electronics.

Even that was enough to make someone a major shareholder, so it was difficult to dismiss AMK Partners.

"That, I do not know."

"Why not?"

"I am simply following directives from above."

Norman McGrath's expression was matter-of-fact.

That only made Tae Seok-ho's feelings more complicated.

"... Are you saying it's the will of AMK's CEO?"

"I don't know up to that point either. This entire bid went forward entirely on the CEO's decision. Was that your only reason for meeting?"

"..."

Tae Seok-ho felt even more frustrated than before. If Norman McGrath had any real power, he would have tried to read him further.

But since Norman was dumping all responsibility on higher authority, there was no point in continuing.

"If you have nothing else to say..."

"Is there any way I could meet your CEO?"

At this unexpected request, Norman McGrath's tone became rather displeased.

"That would be difficult."

"Can you at least ask?"

"The CEO has already given a response. After the bid ended, he said you would come see me, and instructed that if you requested the Taeshin shares, I was to refuse under any circumstances."

Tae Seok-ho's face hardened even further.

"Given your experience in this field, you know as well as I do that this is an unbeatable offer for AMK. But you won't even give me a little leeway... are you really refusing?"

A short sigh escaped Norman McGrath's lips.

"To be honest, I think it's a pity. But what can a man do who only takes orders from above? If I were to use a Korean expression... 'If you're told to do it, you do it.'"

Although he had been speaking English, the last sentence was in Korean. He'd picked up a phrase or two from working with Korean staff.

"Could it be..."

For a moment, Tae Seok-ho almost mentioned the names of his father, chairman Tae Gun-seung, or Tae Seok-hyun.

He wondered if the shrouded CEO of AMK might be connected to them.

But that would risk revealing his intent.

"If there's nothing else, I'll be going. My time is almost up."

"... Safe travels."

Norman McGrath departed, joining the other staff.

Left flustered, Tae Seok-ho let out a bitter chuckle.

Not only had he failed to secure the shares of Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics in the Chulsan Capital bid, his bold proposal hadn't even been seriously discussed.

"Deputy Chief Lee."

"Yes, sir."

"From now on, investigate AMK's CEO for anything beyond what's publicly known. If you can find their location, even better."

Tae Seok-ho had been investigating AMK Partners ever since they entered the Chulsan Capital bidding.

The registered business address was in the Cayman Islands, and all he could find about the listed representative, Gordon Grimes, was his name—making him assume it was just a shell company made for appearances like his own.

But given AMK Partners' explosive growth and ability to move over 1 trillion in funds, it was definitely no shell.

On top of that, they had clearly anticipated Tae Seok-ho's every move.

He had no choice but to recognize them as a formidable opponent.

Chapter 47

This Is Driving Me Crazy

After finishing up the Chulsan Capital bid, In-hyuk wrapped up the work with his employees and went down to the lobby on the first floor.

"Thank you all for your hard work today."

Team leader Jung Jong-hyun stood with the employees and spoke.

"We were only handling the proceedings. Honestly, division director, you took care of all the important parts."

It wasn't just a polite gesture. The majority of the profits generated within the M&A/PEF division, Chulsan Capital included, came from In-hyuk's project portfolio.

Of course, it wasn't that the employees didn't do any work, but compared to the profits In-hyuk had brought in so far, their contributions were a drop in the bucket.

"Still, you all worked hard. Take care on your way up."

"Division director, aren't you coming with us?"

The staff had planned to take a taxi to the airport and then fly, just as they did when they came to Busan.

Since In-hyuk had arrived separately, they didn't know how he planned to leave.

"I drove here."

"That'll take a while, won't it?"

"I have somewhere to stop by on the way. Well, I'll excuse myself then."

In-hyuk moved to the underground parking lot with Van Hester, who was standing beside him.

Hong Yu-geon had already gone ahead and stopped the car in front, ready to depart.

"Should we just head straight to Seoul?"

As Hong Yu-geon started the car and asked, In-hyuk from the back seat handed over a note.

"Go here."

"..... Mungyeong? Why there?"

"There's something I need to do. Drop me off there, and you guys can continue with what we discussed."

"Moving around alone? There wasn't anyone tailing us today but... you never know."

"It's important. I've made all the preparations at my destination. Just drop me off."

"What's going on? Need any help?"

It wasn't really worry; Hong Yu-geon just had too many questions for In-hyuk.

"Not really."

The car sped on toward its destination.

A little over three hours later, they arrived at a construction site near a rural road outside Mungyeong-eup, mungyeong City.

It was a site where a resort was to be built, but construction had been halted for a long time.

Hong Yu-geon stopped the car, his face full of suspicion.

"..... Is this the place?"

"Yeah. Now go do what we discussed earlier."

Thud—

In-hyuk got out right away, watched the car depart, and then headed inside.

Walking past the eerily gray buildings, he spotted a van and a sedan—someone had clearly made preparations.

He searched under the van's trunk for the key, as if it was second nature, and opened the door.

Inside were a black tactical suit, a full-face skull mask, and a knife.

He changed into the gear first, then transferred his original clothes and belongings to the sedan.

At that moment, In-hyuk paused and drew the knife he'd tucked into the back of his waistband.

"If you don't want to get stabbed for being reckless, it's best to come out quietly, don't you think?"

Though he murmured, his voice was clear enough to be heard.

From a building that was only at the frame stage, a man poked his head out cautiously.

It was Hong Yu-geon, who had just dropped him at the construction entrance.

"What the hell? President... did you know it was me?"

"If you really intended to tail me unnoticed, you wouldn't give off that much presence."

Hong Yu-geon sidled up with a sheepish grin.

"Still, I didn't think I'd get caught this fast."

"Never mind. Where's Van?"

"He's got work to do, so he left separately."

"Call him and tell him to come back."

"All dressed up like that, where are you headed? Going to take care of someone?"

His tone was almost teasing.

In-hyuk's face turned serious as he let out a long sigh through his nose.

"If necessary."

"Hey! Why say something so scary like it's nothing?"

"If you plan to follow me, forget it."

"What's really going on?"

"I'm not giving you an explanation—that's why I'm acting separately."

As In-hyuk climbed into the driver's seat of the van, Hong Yu-geon hurried around and got into the passenger side.

"Come on~! Why act so cold?"

"If you come with me, you might regret it."

"You're really not going to explain anything?"

"I'm giving you fair warning. Whatever happens after this, don't blame anyone else."

The van left the construction site. Over an hour of silence passed before Hong Yu-geon stretched and broke it.

"Ugh—! Where on earth are we going?"

Perhaps the tension was finally getting to him—he seemed genuinely worried.

Still, In-hyuk remained silent.

The van carrying the two crossed out of Chungcheong Province and entered Yeoju-si, Gyeonggi Province.

After driving along a forest road for a while, the van finally stopped.

"..... What are we doing here? You're not here to bury me or something, right?"

In-hyuk grabbed the mask that had been on the dashboard.

"From this point on, you really might find yourself regretting this. Whatever choice you make after, I won't stop you—but if you interfere, I won't just sit back."

"..... What are you saying? Can you at least explain properly?"

"I doubt it'll make any difference even if I do. Got anything to cover your face?"

Hong Yu-geon's eyes landed on the skull mask In-hyuk had just picked up.

"Are we robbing a place? Don't tell me... your hobby is robbing country houses?"

In-hyuk rummaged through the glovebox and a pocket behind the passenger seat, then found a black plastic bag.

"If nothing else, poke holes in this and use it."

"......."

"If you won't, just wait here."

"Jeez! Is this all you've got? Ugh... what used to be in here?"

The bag stank—who knew how long it had been left in the car?

"No idea. And there's nothing else."

At In-hyuk's blunt response, Hong Yu-geon grumbled but poked holes and pulled the bag over his head.

"I'm really losing my mind! Fine, satisfied? What are we really about to do?"

"Just quietly follow my lead. Whatever you see, don't interfere until everything's done."

In-hyuk got out of the van and put on his mask as well.

They went straight into the thick forest, ascending the mountain trail as if they'd done it before, not seeing a thing.

Rustle— rustle—

After about 30 minutes of bushing through the undergrowth, they stopped as the path turned downhill.

Around 400 meters below, there was an old house.

Hong Yu-geon quickly picked up on the oddity.

"What's with that place? It's got a seriously creepy vibe."

A two-story detached house without a wall, looking abandoned and uninhabited.

But in the yard out front, four black vehicles of various sizes were parked.

"What do you think it is?"

"It's not, like, a government safehouse, is it?"

"Exactly. More specifically, it was once used by special forces under military intelligence."

"How do you know this kind of place? And why past tense? From the looks, it's still in use."

UID, under military intelligence, was disbanded two years ago. Of course, In-hyuk, who left in 2020, shouldn't know this.

Yet, in his previous life he heard about it from an ex-UID member.

As Hong Yu-geon said, the safehouse shouldn't be in use now.

"I don't really know, either. Anyway, we're going to hit this place. I'd prefer if nobody's there, but with all those cars, that's unlikely."

"So what's the plan?"

"We're not killing anyone. If you encounter someone, just knock them out or disable them temporarily."

"President! Have you lost your mind? Why are you acting like this?"

Hong Yu-geon simply couldn't understand In-hyuk's actions.

"I'm not forcing you. So if you're not coming, just take the car and leave."

"What are you going to do by yourself?"

"There's something I need to find out."

"Haaa... I don't really get why a successful businessman just closed a huge deal is doing this."

"We don't have time. Make up your mind."

In-hyuk hadn't expected Hong Yu-geon to interfere, but he also couldn't just leave him, so he made him choose.

"Guess there's no choice."

"Then I'll go in front, you circle from the east and enter. Operation time is 30 minutes from now. We hit and run—no matter what. When the timer's up, instead of meeting at where we parked, go to point 37.132618, 127.676582 southeast."

Hong Yu-geon stared at In-hyuk in disbelief.

In-hyuk held out his watch. He meant for Hong Yu-geon to set the timer as he'd said.

"..... No. Move together. No matter what you're thinking, as a paid employee, I should protect my employer."

There was nothing for it but to sigh.

"Fine, then. Once inside, grab any storage devices you see. I'll search for something else."

"Haaa... This is driving me crazy! Shouldn't we at least wait until after dark?"

It was just after 3 p.m.

"If you're going to keep complaining——."

"Alright, alright!"

Finally, Hong Yu-geon set his watch timer like In-hyuk did, counted down, and pressed start.

Beep—

Simultaneously, the two ran toward the safehouse below.

As the distance closed, they slowed and hugged the house wall for stealth.

"I hoped nobody'd be here, but... three, maybe?"

"How can you tell?"

Even with his experience in combat zones, Hong Yu-geon found it hard to scan the numbers.

"Believe whatever you want."

They crept towards the entrance. Soon, they heard footsteps, and a man in casual clothes came out for a smoke.

Hong Yu-geon, almost resigned, moved first.

But In-hyuk was faster. From the right, he twisted the man's wrist inward and choked him from behind.

"Urk—!"

Struggling with his arm pinned, the man soon went limp.

Hong Yu-geon, watching from beside, was startled by the skill he saw—though he wanted to ask, the situation called for silence.

In-hyuk carefully laid the unconscious man down and gestured inside.

Then, in the entryway, he pointed in separate directions: signals to split up.

The living room was filled with a desk, computer gear, a whiteboard, and a stack of photos and documents that couldn't be deciphered at a glance.

He could sense people in the first-floor room and upstairs.

Just then, another man descended from the second floor. This time, Hong Yu-geon attacked first.

Crash—

"What the hell are you bastards?!"

Shouting, even the man from the room rushed out.

With the other two engaging, In-hyuk moved in, approaching from the side.

But the startled man, wary and tense, dodged In-hyuk's attack and countered, swinging for In-hyuk's head as if wrapping his arm around.

'Is he UID too?'

In a split second, In-hyuk feinted at the man's hand with his own extended arm—then grabbed and twisted it, locking the joint.

Crack— thud—

"What the—?!"

Shocked by a joint lock plus blows to his flank and solar plexus, the man was momentarily stunned.

In-hyuk took the opening, twisted his arm harder, lifted, and slammed him down.

Bang—

The heavy table collapsed with the man's body.

"Ugh....."

But the man was tough; he groaned and tried to get up through the pain.

In-hyuk didn't hesitate—he kicked the man in the jaw, knocking him out.

"Ugh!"

Crashwham—thud—

Meanwhile, by the stairs near the kitchen, Hong Yu-geon was brawling with the other guy.

"Am I just getting old? I'm not what I used to be."

In-hyuk glanced around, then walked to a cabinet in the corner of the living room.

Without hesitation, he grabbed the handle and ripped the entire door off.

Crunch—

Inside was an emergency stun gun. In-hyuk pulled one out and fired at the man fighting Hong Yu-geon.

Bzzzt—

"Aaaagh—!"

"Argh!"

But there were two screams, not one.

Right as Hong Yu-geon grabbed the man's neck to knee him, the stun gun fired.

"Ah....."

Chapter 48

Don't Hug Me

Hong Yu-geon, who had collapsed from electrocution, slowly got up and shook his head.

"Ugh, I thought I was going to die! Shouldn't you be careful when you shoot something like that?!"

His voice was accusatory.

At that, In-hyuk simply stared at the computer in the living room and answered flatly.

"That's why you should have been careful."

"Me? The president should be careful! Wait..... you didn't shoot at that timing on purpose, did you?"

"....."

As no answer came, Hong Yu-geon became even more indignant.

"What? Seriously? Just because I followed you on my own?"

"Enough noise. The 30 minutes I mentioned earlier are almost up, so hurry up. Go get the black box from the car outside, too."

"Tch—!"

Just then, Hong Yu-geon checked his watch. In the end, he bustled around the house, gathering belongings as In-hyuk instructed.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk watched the rapidly changing monitor screen along with the USB plugged into the computer.

All files stored on it were being encrypted and transmitted to the secure web server Go Mi-ah had prepared.

Bzzzt—

On top of that, he didn't forget to tase each of the men he had knocked out earlier one more time, just in case they woke up.

"Wow..... this is seriously brutal."

Hong Yu-geon muttered as he watched the scene, having finished searching the upstairs.

"They're tougher than they look, so be careful."

"You seem to know those guys pretty well?"

"I don't not know them."

Once most of the files had been uploaded, In-hyuk searched the pockets of the fallen men.

Of course, since he assumed they belonged to UID, there was nothing he could use to identify their real status.

Then, he carefully examined their left hands, especially the boundary between the ring finger and the palm.....

"Looking for wedding ring marks or something?"

"I told you to shut up......."

In-hyuk discovered a tattoo on each man's left palm: a cross combined with a circle.

'As expected..... is there a connection between them and UID?'

He had suspected this because the Pyo Jun-woo crew used TMT, a combat technique taught by UID.

Interrogating Pyo Jun-woo, he'd heard that they'd learned the technique at a camp near Naya in Mongolia.

However, the chances were high there'd be no trace left, so he hadn't bothered going.

"It's almost 30 minutes. Are we not leaving?"

"..... Yeah, let's go."

With that answer, In-hyuk took a photo of the man's face with his phone, then unplugged the USB from the computer.

Just as he'd told Hong Yu-geon, he left the safehouse and ran southeast.

"But why are we going this way? What about the car we left earlier?"

"That car's already been retrieved by someone else."

"Wait..... so even the ready car earlier, is this some kind of task broker thing?"

He was referring to a kind of underground fixer/intermediary.

Tasks were handed off through several people to leave no traces, and nothing about the clients was ever leaked.

Lobbyists, mercenaries, and agents involved in risky work used them.

"That's right."

Even as they spoke, their feet didn't stop—they kept running.

"..... President, what are you really?"

"Aren't you tired of that question by now?"

"I can't help it—it's impossible to tell!"

Until recently, he had seemed to be nothing more than a (relatively) ordinary salaryman who'd married into a chaebol family.

Every time something strange happened, Hong Yu-geon would think about it, checking for any inconsistencies.

Just now, In-hyuk had demonstrated unexpected combat skills and adaptability, too.

"It's not like I'm lying or anything. So just believe what you see."

"You're not, like, a Black or Shadow from some agency or... no! If you were, your resume would have gaps."

Listening to his groaning, In-hyuk simply shrugged.

The two ran southeast, over the mountain and downwards.

Before long, they came upon an abandoned farmhouse and headed toward a greenhouse, the plastic rotted and torn.

"Did you hide another vehicle here?"

"We have to get back somehow. But....."

"Don't tell me there's only one?"

Inside the greenhouse was a single motorcycle.

At that, In-hyuk spoke with a faintly annoyed air.

"Want to walk? There's a car I rode here earlier about 10 km away, so just make it that far."

"..... Can't I just drive?"

"Like there's anything about you I find cute—why would I want you behind me? So either walk, or shut up and get on."

"Tch......."

The two burly men took their seats on the motorcycle.

"Just—don't go hugging me, it's gross."

Before he knew it, Hong Yu-geon's hand was lightly wrapping around In-hyuk's waist.

* * *

WISE&WIRE Group Chairman's Office.

Baek Ji-woong was dealing with paperwork at the desk in the middle of his large office, when he heard a vibration sound.

A message had arrived.

"....."

【Will contact in 5 minutes.

—HANNYA—】

A name written in English as "Hannya".

His expression instantly became grave.

He went to the safe hidden deep behind a painting and pulled out a satellite phone stored there, turning it on.

After a while, a loud ringtone sounded and he pressed the call button. He spoke in fluent Japanese.

"I've answered. Hannya."

[It's been a while, chairman.]

The man called Hannya also spoke Japanese.

However, a chilling undertone could be heard in the deep voice over the line.

"Yes, it has. What brings you to contact me directly?"

A brief stillness, as though Hannya were catching his breath, then he spoke up.

[There's been a problem in Korea. I'd like you to move some people to look into it.]

The Hannya on the other end of the line was one of the top-level members of the Organization Baek Ji-woong belonged to.

He stood higher than Baek Ji-woong, chairman of W&W Group.

Baek Ji-woong's expression stiffened even more.

"I'm not sure what's happened, but wouldn't it be more efficient for Hannya's people to conduct the investigation?"

[A safehouse in Korea was hit. I rarely doubt my own men's abilities. However, only internal data was stolen, and there were no casualties. An initial report stated there was nothing left behind to suspect anyone in particular.]

At the same time, Baek Ji-woong swallowed.

"..... Are you referring to the safehouse used by WID?"

WID was spread across the world. Baek Ji-woong had used only Korean agents as his private soldiers.

But for something to happen in Korea, and for Hannya, who oversaw WID, to know before him was surprising.

[To be precise, it was a safehouse managed by UID. Is there anything that might be related to this situation?]

With that question, a bead of cold sweat formed on Baek Ji-woong's forehead and dropped onto his thigh.

He wondered just how much Hannya knew about the domestic situation.

Still, brushing it off seemed unwise, since Hannya had contacted him directly.

"Ahem—! I haven't had the chance to report it yet, but there's been a bit of a problem domestically."

[Why did you delay the report?]

Hannya's tone became heavier.

"I'd identified a suspect. But they're not an easy target, so there hasn't been any notable progress yet."

[What's the scale of the damage?]

"So far, there's a single Grade 3 member and three Grade 4 members who had infiltrated a company."

[I heard there was also damage to the front company. Why leave that part out of your report?]

He was referring to the quiet elimination of Daemyung Detective Agency, which had secretly employed WID agents.

"In that case..... the failure of the mission was the cause. Their faces were revealed, and the company's existence could have been exposed, so I disposed of the person in charge and all the members who participated in the operation."

[But you didn't report that either, did you?]

Hearing the pointed words, Baek Ji-woong clenched his fist without realizing it.

"That..... I was planning to report it soon."

[What was the cause?]

"..... Sorry?"

[I mean, the reason the operation failed. Even if Lee Daemyung got soft, he wasn't the kind of guy to leave a gap in an operation.]

Lee Daemyung, who had run the detective agency, was a WID member who had infiltrated the police and built up a base for over ten years.

He had maintained his cover for a long time; even after resigning from the police, he continued to operate as a detective.

For someone like that to fail so badly, and to be executed for it, would obviously raise suspicions for someone in Hannya's position.

"Do you mean to say you suspect I deliberately set him up to fail?"

[That's not what I meant. Anyway, please submit a report on the incident. Include a profile of this unidentified person you mentioned. And also investigate the safehouse as previously discussed.]

He was essentially saying he would get everything he wanted.

"I'm fine with the rest, but is there a reason we need to handle the safehouse investigation?"

He hadn't heard the reason when the order had come down earlier.

[There are communication records at the safehouse exchanged with other Asian operatives. The list may have been traced, so we can't use those people for now. And if the ones who hit the safehouse and the ones you're after are the same... then you'll be responsible.]

In the end, his attempt to defer responsibility had doubled back on him.

Baek Ji-woong breathed a small sigh, careful not to let it be heard over the phone.

"..... Understood. I'll proceed with the investigation."

[Thank you.]

The call ended.

Baek Ji-woong wanted to throw the satellite phone immediately, but held back and returned it to the safe.

For all he was chairman of WISE&WIRE Group, he was nothing but a puppet.

He knew he needed to acquire much more real power, which meant more patience.

He fell into thought for a while. Just as he was about to take out his cell phone, there was a knock at the door.

Knock knock—

"Come in."

The door opened and Do Jung-geol, Baek Ji-woong's secretary, poked in his head.

"Chairman. There's a situation."

"What for?"

With the question, he handed over a tablet.

A news article had just popped up on the screen. Seeing it, Baek Ji-woong's face subtly stiffened.

【8th-year five-member male idol group IGNES member, secret client in the Rizeburn drug case? The member implicated is Seo Eun-tae—who scored three consecutive hits as a lead in dramas and recently wrapped filming the 75 billion won WebFlix-style drama—and J-Gun, who found success as a producer..... IGNES is under KQ Group's management subsidiary LifeStar Entertainment, which recently acquired and merged 12 entertainment agencies... But it is rumored the agency knew of this yet remained silent.....】

【Will the airing of WebFlix-style 75 billion won drama 〈East Las Vegas〉 be postponed because of IGNES' Seo Eun-tae's drug scandal? The production company has announced they're currently confirming the facts... The drama reportedly received major investment from W&W Entertainment as well.....】

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"It seems things will blow up on the W&W Entertainment side."

"This will be quite a stir. I thought the Rizeburn case wrapped up recently—was there still something left lingering?"

Most people involved in the case had already been sentenced and imprisoned after trial.

Certainly, some from well-off families had tried to use their power to escape.

However, the prosecution had gathered so much evidence that almost nobody managed to get away.

"It seems some people slipped away due to timing. But during an investigation linked to the previous case, new names came up and that's what triggered this."

"Talk about a headache. Madam Kwon will be very stressed as well."

By "Madam Kwon," he meant his wife Kwon So-jeong, the real owner of WISE&WIRE Group.

Currently, W&W Entertainment was being run by her.

But now, after finishing production, a surefire hit was about to crash because of one incident—no small issue.

"That seems likely."

"Alright, you may go."

Baek Ji-woong pressed his temples and watched Do Jung-geol walk out, then picked up his phone and sent a message to Baek Si-hwan.

Chapter 49

Are you teasing me right now?

【IGNES's Seo Eun-tae and J-Gun habitual drug use? Is their 'divine' acting and composing not talent but a result of substance abuse? With the drug scandal involving its most anticipated artists, LifeStar Entertainment, a KQ Group subsidiary, is expected to suffer significant losses...】

【Release of the WebFlix drama 〈East Las Vegas〉, ambitiously invested in by WISE&WIRE Entertainment, on hold? The matter hinges on how they resolve the Seo Eun-tae drug incident... and it has been confirmed that W&W Entertainment also invested in the music competition show 〈Hell Hip Singer Season 3〉, in which J-Gun had been slated to appear as a mentor...】

. . .

In-hyuk sat in his office, reviewing the barrage of articles that had been the talk of the town for several days.

This, too, was unfolding as it had in the original future.

Of course, this wasn't the end.

Several other small- to mid-sized celebrities acquired by LifeStar Entertainment would soon have incidents break out—school violence, member bullying, abuse of power, and so on.

But in this version of the future, there were no celebrities to serve as a buffer for LifeStar Entertainment.

Currently, those celebrities had stayed with their original agencies due to In-hyuk's management, waiting for the ticking time bombs to explode under investments from Taeshin Asset Management.

"Considering the size of KQ Group as the parent company, the impact won't be catastrophic, but Kang Do-young, who is responsible for this crisis, won't get away unscathed."

This was because Kang Do-young, the successor of KQ Group, had led the LifeStar Entertainment project.

"As a bonus, W&W Group will take a hit as well."

That hadn't been part of the original calculation.

Of course, Baek Ji-woong himself would not be directly damaged.

His wife, Kwon So-jeong, the only daughter of former W&W Group chairman Kwon Sang-chun, was managing W&W Entertainment, after all.

Bzzz bzzz—

Just then, an internal call notification rang, followed by his secretary Baek Si-hwan's voice.

[Division director, it's time for the interview.]

"... I'll head out right away."

In-hyuk stood with a troubled expression, grabbing his jacket. Up until now, Baek Si-hwan had not shown any unusual movements.

Of course, he took no chances.

Even though Baek Si-hwan was his personal secretary, In-hyuk kept him busy processing documents so he couldn't leave the office.

As In-hyuk stepped out, Baek Si-hwan, who'd been sitting at the desk right outside, instinctively tried to stand.

"You don't need to follow me. I'll be fine."

Caught off guard, Baek Si-hwan had no choice but to sit back down.

In-hyuk took the elevator down to the 4th floor, where the interviews were being held.

Today's interviews were for the recently-created role of security processor and additional hiring for experienced professionals in the M&A/PEF division.

So, the second round was to be conducted by the actual heads for each area: division director Oh Min-jeong for management, team leader Jang Seo-won for system management, and division director In-hyuk himself for M&A/PEF.

They greeted In-hyuk with polite nods as he entered the interview room.

As there had been few chances to speak face-to-face with the one who stirred up a storm at Taeshin Asset Management this year, things felt a bit awkward.

"Let's begin."

In-hyuk stated calmly as he sat down.

"Alright. Tell the next batch of candidates to come in one at a time."

A male employee who had been waiting outside nodded at Oh Min-jeong's words and left.

The recruitment process involved a first round of document screening, a second round of interviews with relevant team leads, then interviews with executives and the CEO.

The interviewers would see two or three candidates at a time in the second round.

In-hyuk threw out various questions and filled out evaluation sheets based on their answers.

But as his hand flipped over to the spreadsheet of the fourth candidate, he stopped for a moment.

"This one...."

He was so startled the words slipped out.

Just then, three applicants entered as the door opened.

In-hyuk spotted Go Mi-ah among them, distinguished by her sharp black two-piece suit, white blouse, and striking red hair.

"What's wrong? Do you know this candidate?"

Beside him, division director Oh Min-jeong had picked up on his muttering.

"Oh, no. It's just that her hair color is quite unusual."

"It is, isn't it? But her self-introduction says it's natural."

"I see..."

In-hyuk exchanged a subtle glance with Go Mi-ah. Simultaneously, she met his eyes with a face that said, "So what do you expect me to do?"

'Is she out of her mind? I told her to find a different place, so why is she here?'

The interview started.

Surprisingly, division director Oh Min-jeong and team leader Jang Seo-won conducted the interview without prejudice.

Go Mi-ah, too, acted like any other applicant, giving unremarkable answers and not standing out.

Then it was In-hyuk's turn to ask her a question.

"I see here that you completed your third year at KAIST and are currently on leave. Why apply for a professional position without graduating?"

For the experienced hires, especially in security processor roles, applicants had to submit portfolios to prove their programming and coding capabilities.

In fact, Go Mi-ah had passed the first round because she demonstrated more than enough skills.

Still, In-hyuk pressed, since involving her directly in his current plans could be dangerous.

"A diploma would have been nice, but my personal situation made getting a job more important than schooling. I heard that if I could prove my abilities, they'd recognize me as an experienced hire, so that was even better."

Oh Min-jeong jumped in then.

"What kind of personal situation?"

"As it says on my résumé, both my parents passed away in a car accident. While scholarships can cover tuition, living expenses are a different story, and the field I'm in requires expensive equipment. So, I took a leave of absence."

"Oh..."

Oh Min-jeong and Jang Seo-won responded empathetically to her touching explanation.

In-hyuk also felt a slight twinge (just slightly) about the parents part.

But when it came to money, he felt annoyed.

'With several tens of billions already accumulated in offshore accounts, she talks about needing money? Is she actually this good an actress? Well, even back when we first met in the Philippines, she tried to pull a fast one by pretending to sell me information.'

The memory surfaced faintly. He couldn't figure out her intentions for showing up at this interview.

"Division Director Kang, do you have any more questions?"

"... No."

"Let's move on, then. Thank you for your time."

Go Mi-ah and the other candidates stood and headed for the exit.

But as Oh Min-jeong and Jang Seo-won turned their attention to the next résumé, Go Mi-ah snuck a playful scrunch of her face toward In-hyuk, as if teasing him.

'This woman, seriously...'

Bzzz bzzz——

As those thoughts circled in his mind, In-hyuk's phone buzzed inside his jacket.

A message had come via Ghost Link—from Go Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: I look forward to working with you, director Kang In-hyuk!】

Sighing, In-hyuk tucked his phone away and refocused on the interviews.

* * *

A bit past 9 p.m.

Taeshin Asset Management's CEO, Tae Ju-ha, was still at her desk, apparently not finished with her work.

Then came a knock at the door, and Heo Yu-rim entered, setting down a stack of documents on her desk.

"CEO, the list of candidates who passed today's professional hiring interviews is ready."

"So, only the final interview remains? When was it scheduled again?"

"In two days, at 10 am."

"Alright. I'll check the list inside."

Tae Ju-ha replied calmly as she turned her attention back to the paperwork she had been reviewing.

Sensing her hesitation, Heo Yu-rim reopened her mouth.

"Would you like to check it now?"

"Hmm? The list? Is something wrong?"

"Well..."

The atmosphere turned serious. Picking up on the tension, Tae Ju-ha began to go through the applicants' files.

It didn't take long before her hand paused on a résumé about halfway through.

"Director Heo... this woman...?"

It was the face of a woman she'd met twice already: once at home, and once at the hospital where In-hyuk was hospitalized after his car accident.

"It appears to be the same woman from before."

Tae Ju-ha checked the details on the résumé. Name, address, everything...

"Back then, director Kang said she was an informant for stock information, right?"

"That's how I remember it too."

Heo Yu-rim had also been present during the encounter at home and remembered.

"But she's a KAIST student on leave. Her portfolio received a high score—27 out of 30. And her hair isn't dyed?"

"She said it was due to a congenital lack of melanin."

"Her second-round interview scores... Oh Min-jeong and Jang Seo-won scored her generously, but Director Kang's mark is low."

"I heard he gave her some hard questions."

While discussing, Tae Ju-ha sensed something odd.

"How do you know so much, director Heo? Did you sit in on the interviews?"

Of course, she hadn't.

"After I saw Go Mi-ah on the list of passing résumés, I thought the CEO would be curious, so I looked into it."

"Why would I be curious?"

"But you kept asking about her."

"...."

Tae Ju-ha fell silent for a moment, then closed Go Mi-ah's résumé.

Seeing this, Heo Yu-rim quickly turned her head as if suppressing a laugh, but her expression suggested something almost "burst" out.

"Ahem! Should I find out more about Ms. Go Mi-ah?"

"No. That won't be necessary."

"... Really?"

"Really. I still have work left anyway—if you're done, you can head home."

"You're not coming with me?"

After she almost ran into harm at Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's residence before, a security guard had started accompanying her, thanks to Chairman Tae Gun-seung's attention to his granddaughter's safety.

Heo Yu-rim had been returning home with her each time.

"It's fine. Nothing dangerous has happened lately and the security guards are here."

"Still, you should be careful. I don't really have anything urgent, so I'll stay."

Tae Ju-ha sighed at her insistence, but also smiled.

"I'll just go home tonight."

"From you? The workaholic—is it really alright?"

Her words were half in jest, half in earnest.

"You've already had a tough time in New York, and I can't make you go through the same here. I should rest when I have the chance to postpone work."

"That's a good decision."

The two headed for the underground parking lot and got into the car.

A security guard from TSS took the wheel, driving toward Tae Ju-ha's officetel.

Enroute, Heo Yu-rim asked playfully,

"You're sure you don't want me to look into Go Mi-ah further?"

Tae Ju-ha was startled again.

"I said it's fine."

"What if she's here because of Director Kang?"

"What? I told you, director Kang and her only met because of work."

Heo Yu-rim fanned the flames mischievously.

"Even if it was just work for Director Kang, it might not be just that for the other side. People aren't so simple."

"So you're saying... this Go Mi-ah might have other feelings for Director Kang?"

"I'm just saying there's always a chance."

"Are you teasing me right now?"

"You're just now catching on?"

At her playful retort, Tae Ju-ha didn't get upset; she just burst out laughing.

Thanks to the previous year they'd spent slogging together in New York before returning to headquarters.

"... Huh?"

At that moment, a black van suddenly surged out from behind and cut directly in front of their car.

The security guard driving was forced to veer sharply toward the shoulder and stop.

Screeeeech!

Chapter 50

Are You Out Hunting?

Due to the sudden brake, Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim were thrown forward and caught by their seatbelts, leaving them disoriented.

At the same time, the security guard in the driver's seat turned to look at them.

"CEO! Secretary Heo! Are you alright?"

Still shaking off the shock, Tae Ju-ha asked in order to grasp the situation.

"What happened?"

"A car in front suddenly cut in, so I had to stop. I'll check the situation and handle it quickly."

By then, the doors of the car in front had opened, and a group of men poured out.

Among them, Tae Ju-ha spotted a neatly dressed man.

"Manager Ahn Min-gi..."

At that moment, Heo Yu-rim was startled to hear the name.

"The one who's CEO Kang Do-young's secretary, that Ahn Min-gi?"

"That's right. Now I see why that car blocked our way."

The man called Ahn Min-gi slowly approached with a sly smile, then gently knocked on the car's rear window and spoke politely.

Knock, knock, knock—

"CEO Tae Ju-ha. CEO Kang Do-young would like to see you. For reference, we hope you don't make a noisy scene."

Meanwhile, security guards from Tae Ju-ha's side also got out of the car following behind them.

Two groups of men, facing off and occupying a lane, radiated a tense atmosphere.

Watching the scene, Tae Ju-ha looked at Ahn Min-gi's face through the glass.

Even before her marriage, it had always been like this. He would orchestrate troublesome situations, cornering her into seeing Kang Do-young by making it impossible to refuse.

Just like now...

"CEO, you're not actually going to go with them, are you? You could end up in another scandal."

They were blocking the end section of a four-lane road.

Cars stacked up behind were blaring their horns and shouting curses as they drove past.

However, there was no way Ahn Min-gi would quietly step aside.

If anything, he would escalate the commotion and cause even more trouble.

In that case, Tae Ju-ha would have no choice but to accept needless reputational damage.

"But..."

Two years ago, her decision to marry, which had seemed nonsensical, wasn't just for the position of CEO at Taeshin Asset Management.

A large part was to escape Kang Do-young, KQ Group's only successor, who was obsessed with her.

She was worried even at Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's autobiography launch party in New York, as Do-young almost made a scene, but since then he had been quiet—until now.

Of course, Heo Yu-rim, who'd heard about that relationship in New York, was even more concerned.

"Let's call the police first."

"That's no good. We both know exactly how Kang Do-young will react."

Even if the police got involved, it would just become another corporate power struggle.

In such a case, KQ Group's legitimate heir Kang Do-young would have the upper hand over Tae Ju-ha, as Taeshin Group's illegitimate daughter.

"Then what will you do? Will you really go with them?"

"I'll step out and—"

Screech—

Before she could finish, another car squeezed in between her vehicle and Ahn Min-gi's, stopping abruptly.

The sudden braking forced the men in front to scatter to avoid being hit.

The tension grew as the men circled the new car.

Then, the rear door and both front doors opened, and In-hyuk, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester emerged.

"Trying to pick up a married woman in the middle of a Seoul street?"

In-hyuk murmured quietly.

Meanwhile, Ahn Min-gi instantly recognized him and, brow furrowed, moved away from Tae Ju-ha's car, approaching quickly.

"CEO Kang Do-young wishes to see Tae Ju-ha—"

"And who are you to take someone away like this?"

Cut off mid-sentence, Ahn Min-gi's expression became even colder.

"... I am KQ Group Executive Vice President Kang Do-young's secretary, Ahn Min-gi."

"Oh, a secretary? So this is KQ Group! I thought you were some kind of gangster—!"

He purposely raised his voice so everyone nearby could hear.

Passersby's attention focused even more on the commotion.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Can't you tell? I'm exposing KQ Group's use of gangsters to stir up trouble right here in the middle of the road."

"You really want to see how far this goes?"

Ahn Min-gi's brow knit tighter.

As the men stationed around prepared to move in on In-hyuk, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester blocked their approach.

In-hyuk, erasing the smirk from his face, stepped closer to Ahn Min-gi and spoke softly.

"Stop this here and go tell Kang Do-young: Instead of taking it out on innocent people over the LifeStar incident, he should focus on cleaning up the mess. If he keeps overreaching, he might lose even what he thinks is secure."

One of the men, perhaps prompted by his words, tried to grab In-hyuk's shoulder.

"I don't recall allowing you to touch me."

In an instant, In-hyuk snatched the man's wrist, twisted it, and slammed it down towards the ground.

"Aaagh—!"

Everyone was shocked.

The men from KQ Group were seasoned security—ex-military, police, mercenary backgrounds.

Normally, they would have no trouble taking down several civilians.

But In-hyuk had brought one to his knees in a flash.

No one nearby even registered what happened before the man hit the ground.

"Are you all not going back to your car? Or do you want to see this guy get his arms twisted behind his back for the crowd?"

At those words, the man's arm was forced even further back, drawing more screams.

"Aaagh—!"

The crowd's attention was drawn even tighter still.

Ahn Min-gi seemed to make a decision and signaled the security guards.

Understanding his signal, they swiftly returned to their vehicle.

In-hyuk, still gripping the man's arm, hoisted and pushed him towards the car.

"You all get in the car and go back. And don't forget a single word of the message I passed on."

Soon Ahn Min-gi, the man whose arm had been grabbed, and the other guards got in their car and drove off.

Hong Yu-geon clicked his tongue at In-hyuk's side.

"What the... are they just running away like that?"

"Why, were you hoping for a real fight?"

"I just... no, I wanted to see how much skill you still have hidden, Division Director."

Not long ago, Hong Yu-geon had helped In-hyuk raid UID's safehouse.

He'd had to pull out early in less than favorable circumstances, but his curiosity about In-hyuk only deepened.

"Save the nonsense, the situation's resolved—get in the car."

With that, In-hyuk headed for the back seat, while Hong Yu-geon tilted his head.

"Aren't you going to see your wife?"

"I'll see her at home anyway. Ah, you guys sort things out quickly. If this drags on, the police might show up."

He was speaking to the TSS security guards who had gotten out to protect Tae Ju-ha.

After that, In-hyuk, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester climbed into their car and drove off.

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About thirty minutes later.

Ahn Min-gi arrived at the outskirts of Itaewon, not far from where he'd met Tae Ju-ha.

On one side of the road, up a hill, were high-end shops and old houses lined up.

He passed through a white iron gate and entered. Inside, Kang Do-young, who'd given him the order, was sitting alone in a darkened living room with whiskey.

"Where's Ju-ha? Why'd you come back alone?"

"I'm sorry..."

Swoosh—Thud, crash!

The glass in Kang Do-young's hand flew at Ahn Min-gi, hit him in the chest, then shattered on the floor.

"Were you rusty from being away so long? Or did you get bold and start disobeying me?"

Indeed, Ahn Min-gi had just returned from a stint as head of KQ Distribution's German branch.

Normally, to succeed in overseas postings, non-locals from headquarters take the lead—but that wasn't true for Ahn Min-gi.

While he was Kang Do-young's secretary, he not only failed to stop his boss's dirty work but actively helped, prompting Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu to banish him.

"No, CEO."

"Then what? I brought you back, you should do even better than before!"

"I was fetching Tae Ju-ha when... Kang In-hyuk intervened."

"What? Kang In-hyuk?"

At that, Ahn Min-gi gave a rundown of the earlier events. Kang Do-young's face twisted with rage.

"... The commotion drew more attention than expected, so we had no choice but to back off. I believe Kang In-hyuk orchestrated that outcome."

"That bastard... He's been unloading worthless companies on me at high prices. There's nothing I like about him..."

Recently, the agency LifeStar had been rocked by a drug scandal involving IGNES, a boy group acquired during the buyout. He hadn't been unaware of the issue.

Even after acquiring the company, he kept it quiet while IGNES's fame skyrocketed.

But secrets never last forever, and eventually, the paparazzi reported on it.

"..."

While Ahn Min-gi fell silent, Kang Do-young poured a fresh drink, brow deeply furrowed.

"You said Kang In-hyuk made a scene so you had no choice? When did you ever handle things so delicately? No matter who's around, all you had to do was bring me Tae Ju-ha."

"My handling was lacking. I'm sorry."

"Does sorry fix it? Do you know why I brought you back? To work together again! Even before you went to Europe, you did well. Why are you like this? Do you want to make me go crazy!?"

Ahn Min-gi showed no response to the annoyed sarcasm.

He knew better than anyone that this was just how Kang Do-young was.

However, today's failure caught even Ahn Min-gi by surprise.

He knew Tae Ju-ha's temperament well—if he had made things just difficult enough, she would have come quietly, but the outcome was different.

He had also looked into her husband, Kang In-hyuk.

Lately, he was an up-and-coming star at Taeshin Asset Management, but there was much to doubt about whether it was all down to his own skills.

"... If I may ask, CEO, what do you think of Kang In-hyuk?"

"Kang In-hyuk? Why?"

"He had a message for you. He said you should focus on cleaning up after the incident at LifeStar. If you cause trouble needlessly, you might lose even what you think you're holding on to."

There were other details, but he only related the most essential part.

Kang Do-young looked even more annoyed as he replied.

"You think I need to give thought to the guy who stabbed me in the back?"

When the trouble broke out at LifeStar, Kang Do-young had wanted to grab Kang In-hyuk by the collar, but his mother, Jeon Hae-in, stopped him, insisting that he first contain the financial losses.

Ahn Min-gi knew all this well.

"From the surface, he tried to defuse the crisis with light-hearted behavior, but... he seemed out of the ordinary."

"Are you laying the groundwork for a compliment?"

"It's not praise. I'm advising you to be even more cautious. This LifeStar incident may not be just a coincidence."

Kang Do-young thought for a while, then knocked back his whiskey.

"If it's not a coincidence, then what? Are you saying Kang In-hyuk handed over people who'd cause problems, on purpose? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Before acquiring LifeStar, he had done thorough due diligence—yet the IGNES drug case had remained buried, only to surface as their popularity soared and the paparazzi followed.

Back then, he could have bought off the journalists, but popularity brought even more scrutiny, and with the obvious signs of drug use, the story became irresistible for the press.

"I know CEO is meticulous. But considering his message, it suggests he knows about something else in addition to this incident. That means he might know about another problem related to you."

"Another problem? What other problem?"

"I don't know the details yet. I'll investigate and report back."

Kang Do-young's mind was a tangle. The obsession with seeing Tae Ju-ha right away faded as he slumped on the sofa.

"Haaa—Do what you want. But be careful—if my father finds out, it could get troublesome."

"I'll keep that in mind."

With that answer, Ahn Min-gi left with a determined look on his face.