Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 51

Don't Even Think About Bringing It

After settling the situation that had unfolded on the road, In-hyuk arrived at Go Mi-ah's studio.

Of course, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester were also with him.

"Why did you go for the interview?"

No matter how much he thought about it at the company, he couldn't understand, so he asked that first.

"You told me to set up equipment somewhere safe."

"I did. But that doesn't mean it had to be at our company."

"Where else could be as safe as there? And if I'm getting a new security processor, I'll need some top-notch equipment too."

In response to her explanation, In-hyuk was dumbfounded.

"That's not what I'm talking about. Are you really planning to work at the company? You'd have to come in every day."

Go Mi-ah was a hardcore night owl.

That hadn't changed at all in the original timeline either.

So whenever In-hyuk needed something, he'd always request it with her active hours in mind.

"Lately my health's been getting really bad, so I want to try becoming more of a morning person! But it's hard to get healthy just staying at home. I thought, this is my chance! So I went for the interview."

"... Health? Why do you suddenly want to get healthy?"

"Umm... So I can live a long, easygoing life spending money?"

For some reason, the end of her sentence rose like a question.

"Wouldn't it be better to work out if you want to get healthy? Just get a PT at a health club."

"Eh! I need to fix my lifestyle first! But why don't you want me at the company? Afraid your wife will say something? Are we even some sort of thing to each other?"

"....."

Without realizing it, In-hyuk clenched his fist.

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon circled his arm around In-hyuk to restrain him.

"Whoa~ whoa~ Boss. Calm down. She's just a kid playing around."

"... That's even more annoying, so back off."

The memory of recently riding a motorcycle together surfaced in his mind.

"Ah, sorry."

Hong Yu-geon quickly stepped away again.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk let out another sigh.

"So, in the end, you want to use Taeshin Asset Management's server room?"

"That's right. Honestly, if we tried to set up a place like that anywhere else, it would stand out no matter what. But if you cover things on the equipment side, and I just have to get hired? It's killing two birds with one stone."

"Who uses old sayings like that anymore?"

It wasn't the kind of analogy you'd expect from someone barely in their early twenties.

"How about 'pulling up the stream and catching a crayfish'? Seeing the person and picking the mulberry, too..."

"Pick what? Anyway, your plan is fine, but it's not exactly risk-free, you know."

"Why~!"

"Once you're working at the company, your skills will show one way or another."

"I'll just hide them."

"You wouldn't be a new hire, though. They'd only bring you in based on your skills as an experienced worker. Never showing your results at all would also be a problem."

"I'll just do enough to get by. Don't you trust me?"

He knew better than anyone how smooth and shameless she could be.

But at the moment, In-hyuk had not yet figured out if anyone besides Baek Si-hwan within Taeshin Asset Management was a dangerous person.

"Hah..."

"Boss! You don't even know if she's passed yet, so why not just wait and see? If Mi-ah doesn't make the final cut, there's no way for her to get in anyway. It's not like you'd parachute her in to make her even more conspicuous."

It wasn't wrong.

In-hyuk couldn't say anything more.

"Alright, fine. And just in case, if you get hired, let me know how you plan to move once you're inside."

"You really think I'll pass? Honestly, I thought the chances were low."

Go Mi-ah was currently on a leave of absence from KAIST, still a college student.

No matter how skilled she was, it was difficult for a company to hire someone with little work experience, who hadn't even graduated yet.

She herself knew the reality, so she hadn't expected much.

But In-hyuk's thinking was different.

"Actually, that's why your chances are higher."

"... Why?"

"The security processor overhaul is my plan, and CEO Tae Ju-ha got head office's approval to push it. So, what would the people who don't want it to succeed think?"

Go Mi-ah didn't take long to consider.

"They'd probably hope for an accident?"

"Then, what kind of person do you think they'll want us to hire this time?"

"... Someone who's not good? Wait, are you saying they'll see me that way?"

"Even if they look at your portfolio, it'd be hard to believe that's really your skill. And being a student on leave, lacking work experience..."

It was an interpretation that flipped her previous worries around.

At the same time, she let out a sigh—and a hint of suspicion.

"Come on... Would they really be that dumb?"

"There aren't many options. And... oh, there's something important I nearly forgot."

Just as he was about to continue, something occurred to him.

"What is it?"

"If you do start coming to work, absolutely don't! bring your own lunch. That alone could make you stand out even more."

"Why? You think people will gather around because the food looks too delicious?"

For a moment, In-hyuk wondered if she truly knew nothing about her own cooking.

But he couldn't flat-out say it tasted like hell.

Yet, letting it go unchecked, he could already picture someone trying it out of curiosity and what would happen next.

"Just—don't even think about bringing it in."

In the end, he pleaded sincerely, not giving her the real reason.

* * *

The next day.

From the morning, In-hyuk reviewed and approved the pending AMK Partners' Chulsan Capital acquisition case completed by M&A Team 1, along with other investment portfolios.

Some submissions were rejected. Still, those decisions were based on his knowledge and experience of the future.

Of course, he couldn't write the true reason, so he compared current intel and materials the staff had investigated to compose the justification.

Just then, his gaze met Hong Yu-geon's, who was sitting on the sofa in front of his desk.

"Why are you staring at me like that? First time seeing someone work?"

"I just wonder what, uh, the division director actually does around here."

It was a question similar to before.

"You already know. I'm this company's division director and your employer."

Van Hester was also sitting on the sofa, so he addressed them together.

At this, Hong Yu-geon shook his head in disbelief.

"Geez! Who doesn't know that? Ah, did you go home and talk with the missus yesterday?"

"Talk? About what?"

"You didn't say a word after all that happened yesterday? Are you even really married?"

This time, In-hyuk let out a little laugh.

"You already know we're just married in name, but you're still asking that... are you messing with me?"

"No, but still—you're a couple! If you saved her in a situation like that, things could change, right? Yesterday, the division director even told me to make a U-turn after seeing it from the other lane! 'Hey! Turn the car now'! That's exactly what you said, right?"

He was mimicking exactly what In-hyuk had done the previous day.

Even Van Hester was amused, his body shaking with suppressed laughter as he ducked his head.

"That was just because it was urgent."

"Sure, easy for you to say. But are you really going to leave that guy like that? Not getting rid of him?"

Hong Yu-geon jerked his head toward the cloudy glass. On the other side, Baek Si-hwan was working all day at his desk.

Having already witnessed his brutal side during the destruction of Daemyung Detective Agency, there were worries about what else he might pull.

"We don't even know what he's planning. If we do anything first, it could expose us."

"True... I guess you have a point."

While this trivial (?) conversation continued, the internal call rang.

Dirririri— dirririri—

The display showed it was the CEO's secretary's office, not Baek Si-hwan.

"Yes, this is Kang In-hyuk speaking."

[Hello, division director. The CEO is asking for you. If you're not busy, she'd like you to come now.]

There was no clear reason she'd summon him, so he was curious.

"Understood. I'll head over right away."

In-hyuk tilted his head in puzzlement as he hung up and got up from his seat.

"The missus wants you?"

Hong Yu-geon asked.

"So it seems. I'll be out for a bit, so get ready to head out for outside appointments."

"Okay."

Donning his jacket, In-hyuk soon arrived at the CEO's office.

Tae Ju-ha rose from her desk to come over and sit facing him.

"Sorry you had to see that scene yesterday. And... thank you."

She brought up something he hadn't expected to be mentioned.

"I only stepped in because it seemed like you were in a difficult situation while I was passing by."

"If you hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have avoided trouble. But where were you yesterday? I heard you didn't come home until after midnight."

"I had to meet a client for work. They were only available at that hour."

The truth was, he'd stopped by Go Mi-ah's studio before returning home, but he couldn't say that, so he covered with an excuse.

But as she listened, Tae Ju-ha's face grew even more quizzical.

"Only at that hour? Was it a business dinner, by any chance?"

She seemed to be misunderstanding.

"It wasn't that kind of meeting."

"What kind of meeting would that be?"

"..."

With one question leading to another, In-hyuk lost his words for a moment.

Seeing this, Tae Ju-ha gave a faint, bemused laugh.

"Sorry. It's rare to see you at a loss for words, Kang In-hyuk."

"I didn't know you enjoyed this kind of thing."

"It's not that I particularly enjoy it."

From a young age, after her biological mother passed away, Tae Ju-ha became part of the Taeshin Group family and had to walk on thin ice.

She'd become materially wealthy, of course, but living labeled an illegitimate child among those who never truly welcomed her was like enduring hell.

Only thanks to her grandfather Tae Gun-seung, who recognized her talent and gradually lent his support, did she begin to breathe a little easier.

Still, to protect what she'd managed to gain in such hardship, she never had the luxury of showing a smile to strangers.

"... I see. Then, did you call me because of what happened yesterday?"

"Oh, no, that's not it. You saw the candidate at the interview yesterday, right? Go Mi-ah."

Saying this, she placed Go Mi-ah's resume, which she'd been holding from the start, onto the table.

"If you're asking if I knew about her applying... I didn't. I was surprised when I saw her at the interview."

"You said Go Mi-ah was an informant for stock investments, but she also has considerable skills on the IT side? Aren't you still working with her?"

In-hyuk had no idea what she was getting at.

"We just had her help out briefly, more like a part-time thing."

"I see."

"Are you curious about Go Mi-ah?"

"She's talented. As long as there's no problem, I think she could be fine."

Her face looked like she'd made up her mind.

"But she's still a student who hasn't even graduated. No matter how well she works, if an issue comes up, people higher up could seize on it."

"Are you... against Go Mi-ah joining?"

"I can't quite say I'm in favor."

Tae Ju-ha sighed briefly.

"Now that I think about it, you gave a pretty cold score at the second interview. Was it because you'd worked with her before?"

"Believe it or not, that's irrelevant. Now that we're overhauling the company's security processes, I'm just being careful."

"I'll take your points into consideration. Ah, any unusual matters in the MP division?"

Most things proceeded at In-hyuk's discretion.

Tae Ju-ha, as CEO, received reports, but she couldn't know everything about ongoing issues.

"Nothing particular. Ah, I plan to go on a business trip abroad in two weeks."

"A business trip?"

"I need to do due diligence on an investment for the fund; it'll take about four days. Depending on circumstances, it could be longer. I'll submit the documents on the fixed matters within the week."

"I... see."

"I also have outside appointments this afternoon. If you have nothing else, I'll take my leave."

In-hyuk stood up calmly, greeted her, and left the office.

Left alone, Tae Ju-ha pursed her lips, dwelling on the subtle feeling she'd been somehow brushed off.

Chapter 52

The Bait Will Bite Soon

It was the day of the 3rd round of experienced employee interviews for Taeshin Asset Management's M&A/PEF Division and Systems Management Team.

Eight candidates had passed the 1st and 2nd rounds.

Thus, for the 3rd round—the executive and CEO interview—CEO Tae Ju-ha, Executive Vice President Oh Kang-goo, and Executive Vice President Nam Kyu-min were in attendance.

In the interview room, a young woman sat in the center with middle-aged men on either side.

The candidates entered one by one, facing the panel in this curious atmosphere and receiving various questions.

After about four people had passed through, they took a ten-minute break, at which point Oh Kang-goo spoke first.

"There seem to be more decent candidates than I expected. Don't you think so, CEO?"

Tae Ju-ha's brow furrowed slightly.

As he said, the previous four interviewees weren't bad.

However, there had been far too many answers that focused only on their resumes and social connections rather than on their actual abilities.

Of course, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but what Taeshin Asset Management currently needed were people who weren't just polished on the outside, but those who actually excelled at their work.

Still, expressing such an opinion outright would only draw the attention of Oh Kang-goo and Nam Kyu-min.

"That's true. They're articulate, and it's clear they have plenty of experience at other companies."

"To be honest, what's the use if they're only good at their work? There's so much talk about the MZ generation and whatnot, but in the end, if you overwork to make a living, you might lose your personal time, and you could always end up working with someone you don't like, right?"

Tae Ju-ha shook her head imperceptibly.

The break ended, and the next candidate entered.

Oh Kang-goo, who had been looking down at the papers, looked up and was startled.

"Go Mi-ah?"

"Ah, yes."

At her name, Go Mi-ah paused for a moment.

"What happened to your hair? I can understand the resume photo being what it is, but you should have tried to look your best on interview day, shouldn't you?"

"Isn't this neat enough?"

Go Mi-ah brought her tied-up hair forward as she spoke.

But that wasn't what Oh Kang-goo was pointing out.

"I'm talking about the color. Even if companies have become more relaxed these days, this is a place with clear ranks and rules, you know."

"This is my natural hair color. I thought you might misunderstand, so I even noted it on my resume."

Clearly, as a 3rd-round interviewer, he hadn't reviewed the resume thoroughly.

Oh Kang-goo's brow creased a bit, and just as he was about to say something, Tae Ju-ha intervened.

"There's nothing wrong with her appearance, so let's stop here. And Executive Vice President Oh, I hope you'll look over the resumes a bit more carefully."

"....."

Oh Kang-goo didn't answer.

After a short silence, the interview for the fifth candidate, Go Mi-ah, began.

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At the same time, in In-hyuk's office.

In-hyuk was checking the materials sorted for this week, with Baek Si-hwan standing across from his desk.

"There doesn't seem to be a problem. Please pay attention to the keywords and upload them to the server."

"Understood. And....."

At that suddenly hesitant tone, In-hyuk, who was looking at the monitor, stopped.

"Is there something else?"

"If you don't mind me saying... how long do you intend to go without a secretary? Of course, I have to follow instructions from above, but if you really don't need me, I'd appreciate it if you told head office."

It had been almost two months since Baek Si-hwan had come to In-hyuk as his secretary.

With a serious expression, In-hyuk replied.

"As you know, I have no power at head office. Naturally, even if I say what I want, there's no reason for them to listen. Especially the person who sent you to me—he would be least inclined to heed such a request."

At this, Baek Si-hwan's face stiffened slightly as well.

"I'm just here according to the instructions from above."

"That's the official reason. As it happened, my secretary position was also vacant at the time. But I still have no intention of taking you with me for important work. If that feels unfair, you can request a department transfer or appeal directly to the person you mentioned just now."

At In-hyuk's very firm tone, Baek Si-hwan bit his lower lip.

"... Can I at least ask what the reason is? If it's due to a lack of ability on my part, I'll try to make up for it."

In-hyuk looked Baek Si-hwan straight in the eye as he asked seriously.

Even now, he couldn't erase from his mind the smile Baek Si-hwan had when, as In-hyuk lay in a hospital bed, he tried to use even his death for his own ends.

No, he'd never intended to erase it.

He'd planned to use that as a driving force to root him out entirely, down to the core.

"It's not a matter of ability."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't trust you. I don't have even the slightest bit of trust in Baek Si-hwan. Why would I take someone I can't trust with me for important work?"

"What do I need to do for you to trust me?"

"That's not something you should ask me—it's something you must show in your actions, isn't it? Also, I have to leave for an external meeting soon, so please finish up the rest of the documents and return to your desk."

As he realized that pushing head-on wouldn't work, Baek Si-hwan's lips pressed together tightly.

Once the door closed, In-hyuk let out a sigh.

"Is he really so desperate that he's ramming into me like this? Someone with his personality wouldn't normally act this way."

The timing and situation of Baek Si-hwan being posted as In-hyuk's secretary had been far from ideal.

Anyone in his position would be suspicious.

From the start, even Baek Si-hwan's attempt to approach In-hyuk was a reckless move.

"Is he in a position with no real decision-making power now?"

At the same time, In-hyuk could infer several possibilities.

At that moment, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

It was a call from Norman McGrath through Ghost Link.

"Please speak."

A voice distorted by the program came through the receiver, and a reply immediately followed.

[We've completed the overall acquisition of Chulsan Capital and have changed the company name to AMK Bridge. Also, we verified that 70% of the acquisition funds sent to CEO Jang Hyung-cheol have been deposited as client investment funds.]

The acquisition funds invested amounted to 1.7 trillion won. Of that, about 1 trillion won had returned to AMK Partners' hands.

"That's faster than I expected. I'll send you a corporate list—buy up as much equity and as many bonds as you can. There are some tickets in there that you can make good use of, so keep that in mind."

As he replied, he sent a file to Norman McGrath by phone.

Norman checked it quietly for a while, then spoke again.

[... Are you telling me to resort to threats to make the purchases?]

"Only within the bounds of what's legal."

[But even threats aren't legal, are they?]

"If you put it nicely, it's negotiating and bargaining conditional on certain terms. It's not a bad deal for them either."

Norman McGrath then asked with some doubt.

[Construction, rare metals, heavy metal processing, finance, IT services, consulting... The types are all over the place again. What's the intersection you actually want, CEO?]

It was a completely random request. Of course, there had been similar investments before.

Norman had never lost money following In-hyuk's instructions.

He was simply getting sick of not knowing the outcome and being surprised later every time.

He was curious what kind of vision Gordon Grimes—In-hyuk in disguise—had and how he saw and analyzed things.

"It's simple. There are companies I need."

[You're saying every company you've bought shares or bonds in so far? Why?]

It was more than just one or two.

Moreover, there was no apparent connection, so Norman McGrath simply found it all very frustrating.

"You're asking for something that you couldn't learn even if you paid money for it, and you're doing it so casually, don't you think?"

[Well, we're in this boat together. And considering all I've done for you until now, can't you treat this like a little commission fee?]

After thinking for a moment, In-hyuk answered quietly.

"Shell company."

[Why... Oh, don't tell me! You're after the shell companies those firms operate? But shell companies are just channels for moving money—there shouldn't be any benefit for us.]

"That's precisely where the difference between you and me, branch manager, comes in."

Hearing that vague answer, Norman McGrath sighed.

[So... you're telling me to find out for myself, aren't you?]

"A hint should be enough."

Norman McGrath groaned, his doubts deepening.

[Ah, do you want something about the shell companies themselves?]

"Something like that."

[Then... does it have to do with the capital flows through those shell companies...?]

As the answer was spoken almost like hitting the nail on the head, In-hyuk smiled slightly.

"You got it."

[So, you're going to use their illegal funding routes as leverage to go after even bigger prey, right?]

As if the mists obscuring his vision had cleared, Norman McGrath could now fully see In-hyuk's aim.

"That leverage will be the stranglehold on the companies listed. And with it, I'll be able to target their parent firms, too."

[Whew... But that also means you'll be making enemies of those firms.]

By pushing for shares and bonds first, it became easier to expose these firms' weaknesses.

Of course, it wasn't an easy method.

A company, whose main priority was investment returns, wouldn't risk a fortune just to use someone's weaknesses against them.

Yet In-hyuk—currently acting as Gordon Grimes—was setting out to do exactly that without a second thought.

"Aren't you afraid you might get shot walking down the street?"

At that, Norman McGrath laughed.

[This isn't the US—you'd hardly get shot in Korea. Well, if it were a knife instead of a gun, that might be different.]

"So you're not without concerns."

[It's because you run your operations so dramatically, CEO. But, as big as the risks are, the rewards are pretty sweet, so it's hard to resist.]

His current annual salary was over 1 billion won. On top of that, a 3% incentive on profits.

So far, AMK Partners had made over 1 trillion won operating on In-hyuk's orders.

Three percent of that, converted to dollars, was about 20 million dollars. In won, about 3 billion.

"From what I hear, you've made plenty off me so far. Isn't it enough yet?"

[As much as I earn, I spend just as much. So even if you call me greedy, there's nothing I can do about it.]

Listening to Norman McGrath, In-hyuk smiled.

A man who judged his own position and situation more coldly than anyone.

Someone who would never cut open the goose that lays golden eggs.

As long as his life wasn't directly threatened, he wouldn't betray him...

In-hyuk had sized up and recruited him precisely for that reason.

"I'm not blaming you. In any case, I'll leave the rest in your hands. If any problems arise, report them to me right away."

[Of course.]

After finishing the call, In-hyuk glanced toward the door through which Baek Si-hwan had just exited, recalling his earlier plea for trust.

If this were before he'd come back to life by dying, maybe things would be different.

Or if he were Kang In-hyuk, the original owner of this life.

'You are just bait now. The bait to lure out the guy hiding behind you...'

It wasn't only Baek Si-hwan who had been hooked as bait. The rapidly growing AMK Partners was the same.

In his previous life, Baek Si-hwan had helped In-hyuk destroy Taeshin Group and even swallow Bluewall.

There was no better bait than that.

"They'll start biting soon on that end too..."

He murmured as he got ready to head out. Just then, his phone vibrated.

Checking the screen, In-hyuk tilted his head.

"... Chairman Tae Gun-seung?"

Chapter 53

It's My First Time

A shooting range in Hwaseong, Gyeonggi Province.

In-hyuk left the office and arrived there after about two hours of travel.

As he went inside, the security guards of Taeshin Group were stationed all around.

"You two wait here."

He addressed Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, who were in the front passenger seat.

With a nonchalant expression, Hong Yu-geon glanced at the security guards.

"Okay."

Getting out of the car, In-hyuk headed inside.

The security guards, as if it was prearranged, checked In-hyuk and let him in without hesitation.

He arrived at a shooting range with a wide-open front.

Chairman Tae Gun-seung of Taeshin Group was firing his shotgun, hitting the flying clay pigeons one by one in the air.

Bang— Crack, Bang— Smash!

'Come to think of it... Chairman Tae Gun-seung's hobby was clay shooting, wasn't it?'

After several shots, Tae Gun-seung broke the shotgun open and removed the shells from the chamber.

He took off the headphones covering his ears and placed them on the table along with the shotgun, then noticed In-hyuk.

"I was so focused on shooting that I didn't realize you'd arrived. Have you been waiting long?"

"I just arrived."

"Kang, would you like to try as well?"

The shotgun, back in his hand, was promptly offered to In-hyuk.

"Sure."

Without hesitation, In-hyuk accepted it, checked the chamber and the trigger.

Click— Click—

"Have you done clay shooting before?"

"No, I haven't."

But he'd done plenty of other shooting. And not at targets—but at people...

Once his inspection of the shotgun was complete, the chamber was loaded with shells from the front.

"When you're ready, shout 'Ah'! A pigeon will fly up—just shoot it and hit it."

"... Understood. Ah—!"

With his shout, two pigeons flew up from their waiting position.

Bang— Crack—

As soon as they came into sight, two shots rang out, shattering both of them.

"Is this how it's done?"

Watching the scene, Tae Gun-seung's brow hardened.

"... Didn't you just say it was your first time?"

"It's my first time."

"Care to try again?"

Upon his request, In-hyuk smoothly broke the chamber, ejected the shells, and loaded new ammunition.

Click—

Ready again, he shouted the signal, and another pigeon flew up.

This time, his finger moved even faster, and the pigeon shattered with the sound of a gunshot.

Crack—

"It's not that difficult."

"Heh! And you didn't even use the earplugs... are you alright?"

"No problem."

Tae Gun-seung's gaze followed the direction where the fragments of the shattered pigeon scattered.

He was 92 years old this year.

Clay shooting wasn't an easy sport for someone his age, but he could still handle the impact and enjoyed it from time to time.

At the same time, he knew very well that someone new to the sport would not perform like that just now.

"I didn't know Kang was such a good shot."

"Looks like I'm not bad," he replied.

Click, crack, click, click!

After ejecting the spent shells and checking the barrel, muzzle, and trigger, In-hyuk set the shotgun down.

"You can shoot some more if you'd like."

"No, I think this is enough."

With that answer, one of the security guards standing at the back came and collected the shotgun, shells, and other gear.

Tae Gun-seung watched for a moment, then turned his gaze back to In-hyuk.

"The mediation for the acquisition of Chulsan Capital went well?"

"There were no problems."

"You must've worked hard."

"All I did was the mediation itself, so there wasn't much difficulty. The ones who must be busy now are AMK Partners, who acquired it."

As their conversation went on, the same security guard brought out hot tea and set it in front of the two men, along with a tablet that he was carrying under his arm.

As Tae Gun-seung sipped the tea, the smile deepened the wrinkles on his face.

"I've heard the report on the MP division's performance. Excluding the principal, 251% return in such a short time... The clients must be very pleased."

"They're quite satisfied. So, may I ask what brings you to meet me today?"

Since the atmosphere was a bit ambiguous, In-hyuk tried to get to the point quickly.

"Do I need a special reason to meet my granddaughter's husband?"

"It's just that you asked to meet in a place like this. And, chairman, I don't think you'd ask to see me without a particular reason."

Perhaps because of his serious expression, Tae Gun-seung also toned down the mood.

"I was going to start off lightly, but... well, here, take a look at this first."

He handed In-hyuk the tablet he'd been holding.

On the screen were a company's financial statements, recent profits, and itemized products.

"Taeshin Spintech... isn't that the textile company under the department store division? But looking at these details, its competitiveness has dropped sharply. It's in a red ocean already, yet cumulative profits and productivity are continuously falling... the brand positioning itself has major issues as well."

Tae Gun-seung nodded.

"Did you figure all that out from this? Or did you already know about Spintech?"

"Taeshin Asset Management is in charge of investments there, right? Internally, we have a lot of data on the head office, affiliates, and subsidiaries. Besides, I heard they recently failed at new material development and suffered large losses."

"Do you understand why I'm bringing this up...?"

In-hyuk did not have to think long on that question.

"Surely, you're not asking me to fix Spintech's management troubles?"

"Would you prefer I wasn't?"

"If I'm being honest, I'm hoping it's not that, as I already have a lot on my plate."

Tae Gun-seung let out a small laugh.

"Even if I ask as a favor?"

Since his youth, Tae Gun-seung had been called a bulldozer at Taeshin Group.

He never bent in his choices and stubbornness in any matter.

Naturally, his words were always orders, never requests.

That was the case in the past, and it held true even now.

Yet now, the word "favor" had come from his mouth.

"If it's just a favor, does that mean I can refuse?"

"You're making it sound as if I never give you a choice."

"I just sensed that from the atmosphere. Am I wrong?"

A subtle tension hung between the two of them.

The one who spoke first after some hesitation was Tae Gun-seung.

"I suppose. I called you here instead of my office to have this conversation, so you might think that way. It's because you have so many eyes and ears watching you that I was being careful."

In-hyuk let out a sigh.

"So you did know."

"There aren't many people who would welcome the way you handle things. Especially my sons, even more so."

It was an answer that suggested Tae Gun-seung had a good grasp of how far In-hyuk's influence reached.

"So, if you've been watching until now, you must know the situation fairly well... Have you been deliberately turning a blind eye?"

"Let's call it letting them roam free. I can't spoon-feed grown men forever, after all."

In-hyuk instantly understood the implication.

"You want them to earn your position with their own ability."

Tae Gun-seung sipped his cooling tea again.

"If not, it'll be hard to keep the Taeshin name alive. Now, have you made your decision? Or do you need more time to think?"

"I don't see any reason why I have to take on this job. Honestly, with my current performance, I've more than fulfilled my quota, haven't I?"

In-hyuk had produced significant results and profits at Taeshin Asset Management.

That wasn't the original plan, but he decided to utilize it, since he needed a foundation for the future.

However, he felt no need to overstep and go beyond his area externally.

"Quota? I didn't know someone like you had a quota."

In-hyuk leaned back and crossed his legs.

"I'm just a son-in-law, not Taeshin blood. No matter who inherits Taeshin, my position will never be welcomed. So what could I possibly gain by working myself to the bone here?"

It might have sounded arrogant, but Tae Gun-seung didn't show any discomfort.

"You're saying you'll only work as much as you're rewarded, since there's nothing to lose."

"Isn't that fair? And as for Taeshin Spintech, as you showed me, it's not the only problematic part within Taeshin, as far as I know."

With curiosity written all over his face, Tae Gun-seung looked at In-hyuk.

"Which other ones do you know about?"

"For a start, Taeshin Electronics is in real trouble. On the surface, the SpaceU25 smartphone launched earlier this year looks successful, but I heard the display defect rate has increased. Plus, it's lagging behind OFL in many areas."

"... And?"

"The subsidiary Taeshin Bio too. Even though it tried to grow together with the SpaceU project—healthcare wearables, AI, deep learning imaging—they haven't achieved much."

"Hm... Anything besides the electronics side?"

Faced with the follow-up question, In-hyuk breathed out a long sigh through his nose.

"Phew—! Do you really need to ask about something you already know? The real problem isn't the poor management of affiliates, but something else entirely. Because of that nonintervention you called 'letting them roam free'."

He was referring to Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, his sons.

To be honest, In-hyuk hadn't planned to be this direct.

Of course, he didn't think Tae Gun-seung was unaware of this.

But if he played coy here, their relationship was sure to become even more awkward than before.

"I thought you were unruffled, but apparently you know how to speak plainly too."

"I've never been good at holding things in. Not that I hold back anymore these days."

"I can see that. So, does that mean you're refusing my request?"

"I'll take on Taeshin Spintech. But if I fix it, there's something I want in return."

"Of course. Any work deserves its due compensation. What do you want, Kang?"

In-hyuk didn't hesitate.

"I want the holding shares of Taeshin Asset Management."

He meant the shareholding ratio the holding company had in the subsidiary.

The stake needed was more than 33.4% of the total.

By demanding this, he was also saying he wanted to break free from Taeshin's control and become independent.

"Do you even know how much that is?"

"Based on the current value of unlisted shares, it's a little over 200 billion won."

"And you want that just for fixing Taeshin Spintech?"

"I'll make sure it's worth that much. If you don't like the deal, you can withdraw the offer."

Unlike In-hyuk, Tae Gun-seung didn't answer right away and fell into thought for a moment.

"All right. I'll do as you said. But the deadline is before the first half of next year."

"That's more than enough. I have an appointment this afternoon, so I'll excuse myself."

With that, In-hyuk got up and left first.

A little later, Song Tae-ho, secretary and security guard, quietly approached Tae Gun-seung.

"Isn't it risky to entrust the Spintech matter to Division Director Kang In-hyuk?"

"Do you think I was careless?"

Song Tae-ho bowed his head.

"That's not what I meant, sir. It's just that there are too many suspicious aspects to his actions. I'm concerned he might be up to something else."

Tae Gun-seung didn't completely dismiss those doubts either.

He harbored enough suspicion regarding In-hyuk's character and change in movement—especially how he had changed in less than a year.

Even his sons did not trust him enough to monitor his actions themselves, so it was only natural.

"Up to something... That might be true. But even that is a skill in itself. Other guys think they're hiding their intentions well, but it's better than their moves being obvious."

Song Tae-ho soon realized what he meant.

"You're talking about Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho."

"At first, I thought he was using Kang as his pawn and getting his way. Turns out, he got stabbed in the back instead. Do you know why that happened?"

"I suppose it's because he trusted Division Director Kang In-hyuk too much."

"Trust? That guy? He doesn't trust anyone. When he realized his hyung was a fool, he started getting arrogant. He may have figured that out himself by now, but it's far, far too late."

Tae Gun-seung already knew about the relationship between his second son, Tae Seok-ho, and In-hyuk.

Earlier this year, when he was wondering how the relationship between his son and grandson-in-law would develop, he was surprised by the unexpected turn of events.

"Actually, it worries me that Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho is being so quiet."

"He missed out on Chulsan Capital, so he's probably planning another strategy. I'm curious to see what that'll be myself..."

Trailing off, Tae Gun-seung rose quietly from his seat.

He gazed at the spot where In-hyuk had just obliterated the clay pigeons.

He recalled how In-hyuk, even while hiding his true feelings, made it so the other side had no choice but to reach out a hand.

Meanwhile, a chilly autumn wind swept across the range.

Chapter 54

We're Late

As soon as In-hyuk got into the car that was waiting in the shooting range parking lot, it departed at once.

"Where to? Seoul?"

"No. Take a detour and get as close as you can to the western mountain of the shooting range."

While answering, In-hyuk turned his gaze to one side of the mountain surrounding the shooting range.

Watching this through the rearview mirror, Hong Yu-geon tilted his head in puzzlement.

"What's there?"

"A surveillance team, or... maybe a sniper team."

"Are you saying someone was watching us? How did the president know that? Now that I think of it, you also found where we were hiding at the orphanage right away, didn't you?"

One question led to another.

Besides, Hong Yu-geon had seen a different side of In-hyuk just a few days prior when they raided the UID safehouse.

Yet he still could not figure out In-hyuk's true nature.

"I'm just a bit sensitive."

"Huh? You're making an excuse with something that doesn't even make sense?"

"Just hurry up and go."

"Are you going yourself?"

"Why? Were you going to go instead?"

Although In-hyuk was gradually sharing more confidential matters with them, there were still many important things left undisclosed.

For this reason, unless it was a separate issue, it was difficult to give detailed instructions.

"The president never uses his employees and insists on acting himself."

Of course, that was because, as of now, there was no one else he could trust in terms of ability aside from himself.

Hong Yu-geon steered the car in the direction In-hyuk had indicated.

Not long after, they drove a bit farther along an unpaved mountain road and stopped.

"Will you be alright?"

Despite saying he would handle it himself, In-hyuk felt worried.

Rustle—rustle—

"What should I do when I find them? Should I just collect their communication devices or storage gadgets like last time at the safehouse?"

Rustle—rustle—

"No. Don't make any contact, just take photos and bring them back. If you can identify them, even better."

Rustle—rustle—

"That's easy, like a walk in the park. But what have you been munching on by yourself for a while now?"

The sound of a paper bag coming from the passenger seat had been noisy for some time.

The owner of the bag was Van Hester, who was sitting there.

Hong Yu-geon glanced sharply at the bag in his hand.

Van Hester kept putting chocolate-colored popcorn into his mouth from the bag and then silently offered it toward Hong Yu-geon.

"¿Quieres?" ("Want some?")

"Isn't it super sweet?"

"Not really."

"You should've offered sooner!"

Perhaps feeling left out eating alone, Hong Yu-geon grabbed a handful of popcorn and stepped outside.

Feeling uneasy for some reason, In-hyuk carefully asked,

"Van... where did you get that?"

"Mia gave it to me."

"... Ah."

In-hyuk hastily turned his head out the window.

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon also realized who had made the popcorn and, as he put a piece of the chocolate(?) colored popcorn in his mouth, immediately spat it out.

"We're late."

Hong Yu-geon glared sharply at Van Hester, having realized who made the popcorn.

He had tasted something similar not long ago. However, instead of returning to the car, he kept walking down the road.

While the two watched, Van Hester continued munching on popcorn and spoke up.

"I heard you grabbed something at the safehouse. What are you trying to find out?"

He had heard about what happened from Hong Yu-geon. Of course, In-hyuk had no intention of hiding that from him.

"The ones behind this. But I didn't get any results."

Just like he said, nothing significant was found in the information devices and communication gadgets retrieved from the safehouse.

As with the phones collected from Pyo Jun-woo's gang earlier, there were only records of surveillance on certain individuals.

It indicated how thoroughly the opponent was hiding their own presence.

Baek Ji-woong, who was guessed to be Baek Si-hwan's backer, was no different.

After all, who knew why WISE&WIRE Group, with all its resources, would resort to such desperate measures, even employing those who wouldn't balk at murder?

"Whoever they are, they're meticulous."

"I think so too."

"You could lose your life... are you alright with that?"

"Both sides have already drawn their guns. In the end, it's about who kills first."

"That bad, huh?"

Silence fell again.

During the growing awkwardness, Van Hester quietly offered the popcorn bag.

It was an invitation to try some.

In-hyuk, however, shook his head firmly.

Soon after, a photo arrived on In-hyuk's phone, and Hong Yu-geon returned right after.

As he got into the passenger seat, he turned his head toward the back.

"Did you see? There are two of them. Do you know who they are?"

In-hyuk's eyes were fixed on the photo displayed on his phone.

"They're security guards under Lee Jae-jun, who assists Tae Seok-ho."

"Aren't they from TSS? Then they should be obeying Chairman Tae Gun-seung's orders. Don't tell me... are there already factions forming over there too?"

Hong Yu-geon was fairly aware of the current state of Taeshin Group.

"That split happened a while ago. No matter how much authority Chairman Tae Gun-seung has, it's hard to stop his sons from making moves. Those below him must also choose sides for their own futures."

"Wow, it really is intense. Anyway, they were eavesdropping using a VFS9300 model parabolic antenna with a collector mic. I bet they overheard all of the president's conversation with the chairman at the shooting range."

They weren't using ordinary bugging devices, but special long-range outdoor listening equipment.

"They're using some pretty advanced equipment. Anything else?"

"Nothing evident within what I could check."

"Alright. Let's head back to Seoul. Handle the rest of the schedule as planned."

Having wrapped up their business, they headed back to Seoul.

* * *

Kang Cheon-gyu's residence in Hanam, Gyeonggi Province.

A luxury sports car pulled into the gravel parking lot. From it stepped Kang Do-young, the only child of Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu and heir of KQ Group.

However, his face was filled with discontent. He stalked past the security guards and went inside.

In the living room, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu of KQ Group sat on the sofa.

"You're here."

"... Father."

Kang Do-young stood awkwardly between the living room and entrance.

With a very displeased look, Kang Cheon-gyu slowly opened his mouth.

"You insisted on pushing into the entertainment business with great ambition. Now what is this mess?"

He had been summoned because of the incident at LifeStar Entertainment.

Of course, Kang Do-young knew exactly why. However, convinced he could talk his way out, he did his best not to seem intimidated.

"It was unavoidable. How could I have known what they had been hiding even before the IGNES kids came over to us?"

At the same time, Kang Cheon-gyu's brow twitched.

"You didn't know?"

"I swear! Don't tell me you trust reporters over your own son?"

Even now, the media was desperately attacking LifeStar Entertainment, a KQ Group subsidiary.

Especially, they were focusing on the fact that CEO Kang Do-young had allegedly covered up illegal drug use by IGNES's male idol group.

"People say there's no smoke without fire, but this is different, isn't it? And I have eyes and ears too!"

"Ah, father!"

At that moment, the front door opened and Jeon Hae-in, Kang Cheon-gyu's wife and Kang Do-young's biological mother, hurried in.

"Honey! Do-young!"

She had rushed in after hearing the yelling from outside. Seeing this, Kang Cheon-gyu's brow furrowed even more.

"You, stay out of this."

"Why are you acting like this? Mistakes can happen at work! Why are you coming down so hard on our child for it!?"

"What? A mistake? Do you even know how much money that brat blew on this?!"

Over twelve entertainment companies had been acquired or merged and more than 50 billion won had been poured into establishing LifeStar.

IGNES and several other signed celebrities had shown signs of a sudden popularity boost, but the scandal of illegal drug abuse had caused a sudden collapse.

"It's just money! It's not like we're going to die without it!"

Jeon Hae-in desperately tried to defend her son, Kang Do-young.

Kang Cheon-gyu let out a deep sigh and spoke to Kang Do-young, who was hiding behind her.

"Enough. From tomorrow, resign from all your positions at headquarters and LifeStar, and report to KQ Fabric."

KQ Fabric was a subsidiary of KQ Department Store, itself a division of KQ Distribution.

"Ah, father...!"

"Handle the current project at KQ Fabric. If you succeed, I'll promote you again. But if you fail, don't even think about coming up again!"

About to turn his gaze back to Jeon Hae-in, Kang Do-young urgently came up with an excuse.

"Ah, this wasn't just my fault! There's also that guy from Taeshin Asset Management, Kang In—"

"You, keep quiet."

Jeon Hae-in, anticipating whose name would come up, hurriedly cut him off.

Naturally, she couldn't let her only son be exiled to a subsidiary, so she stepped in again.

Making sure he had fallen silent, she continued.

"Are you really going to do this? What do you expect Do-young to do there?"

"I already told you—succeed at the project."

"But what could possibly be so important at a subsidiary? If anything, send him to retail or shopping, or... no, if he's at the department store with me..."

"To what? Let him sit and do nothing when something explodes below him, like at headquarters or LifeStar?"

"But..."

"Shut your mouth! If Do-young won't do as I say, he can quit everything!"

Jeon Hae-in bit her lip at Kang Cheon-gyu's unyielding shout.

Unless LifeStar's crisis was resolved, Kang Do-young's demotion couldn't be reversed.

But resolving the situation, where nearly 50 billion won was about to go up in smoke, was impossible now.

"For now, calm down."

"What good does that do? Nothing's going to change."

"You have to consider Do-young's position. If he goes down to a subsidiary, not even an affiliate, how do you think those under him will see it? What about the executives and shareholders?"

She was concerned about Kang Do-young's position when he eventually inherited KQ Group.

"He shouldn't have started out at the top in the first place. Go learn the basics from the bottom up."

The arrogant expression that was always on Kang Do-young's face was long gone.

Now, genuinely worried about being sent down to a subsidiary, he couldn't say anything.

Carefully watching the increasingly tense atmosphere, he came to a decision.

"If I really do well at KQ Fabric, will you truly promote me again?"

No matter what he did, he believed his father wouldn't change the decision.

"Yes."

"... Understood. I'll go to Fabric. But please let Secretary Ahn accompany me."

Kang Cheon-gyu's brow, which had almost relaxed, furrowed even more.

"Didn't I bring that guy back just for this entertainment business?! Now that it's failed, shouldn't he go back? What—you want to take him with you too?"

"I don't know the situation there, and I need support to grasp Fabric's tasks. Isn't it reasonable to have at least one person helping me?"

"And if you take him? Can you handle it properly?"

The mood grew heavier. Kang Do-young kept his head bowed, thoughts racing.

"I'm going to Fabric as you instructed, father. Please try to understand my position too."

"Huh... Fine, I'll think about it, so go. Executive Director Noh will brief you on everything about Fabric as you leave."

"..."

Kang Do-young headed out.

Watching from the side, Jeon Hae-in raised her voice with a deeply displeased expression.

"Are you really going to do this to Do-young? He's your only son!"

"... It's because of you that brat turned out this way!"

"Wh-what?"

"If you don't want to ruin KQ, stay out of this. If you try to 'help,' it'll only make things worse for Do-young!"

Finishing his words, Kang Cheon-gyu got up and headed out to the garden.

By now, the sun was setting, and only the light of the street lamps spilling from around the wall illuminated the mansion.

Watching Jeon Hae-in head to her car without a word and with a strange expression, he looked on in silence.

Chapter 55

Don't Bring It In

Morning arrived, and as usual, In-hyuk waited for the elevator in the company's B3 basement parking lot.

At that moment, someone approached him and greeted him.

"Hello! Division director! Good morning!"

The owner of the booming voice was Go Mi-ah, her red hair neatly tied back, dressed in a navy two-piece suit.

"... Yes."

"What's with you? I finally passed and it's my first day, shouldn't you be congratulating me at least?"

Fortunately, because it was early and they were in the B3 parking lot, no other employees were around.

"I wonder if you'll really be able to handle office life."

"What if I do a good job? Ah, uncles, hello~!"

Go Mi-ah belatedly greeted Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

However, Hong Yu-geon still looked openly displeased about the popcorn he had tasted the other day.

"Oh, right."

"I ate the popcorn you gave me last time."

"It was okay? That's a relief."

As they spoke, In-hyuk noticed a suspicious-looking pink paper bag in her left hand.

"... What's that?"

"Huh? This? Ah, it's just stuff I need for the office."

"Don't tell me, it's not food, is it?"

Go Mi-ah quickly averted her gaze.

"Huh? Of course not."

"Really? Hong Yu-geon, bring that here."

"Okay."

"Uh, huh? Why are you taking that!"

Hong Yu-geon snatched the paper bag from her right away.

As he checked its contents, he found something hidden under the keyboard.

"This was inside."

It was a lump of palm-sized purple(?) cookies in a clear wrapper.

There weren't just a few, but easily over twenty.

"I told you not to bring food to the office."

"But it's my first day! I thought I could hand them out to the team as a kind of greeting, so I made some."

How many people was she planning to send to the hospital... In-hyuk barely held back those words and let out a long sigh.

"Your taste is so unique, it doesn't suit anyone else."

"It's just a bit unusual."

"A bit too much. Anyway, this is confiscated until the end of the day."

"Ah! No~!"

Go Mi-ah stretched out her arms to snatch back the bag.

Hong Yu-geon dodged her hands and stepped back, tangling with where In-hyuk was standing.

Ding—

At that moment, thanks to Go Mi-ah's arrival, an uncalled elevator arrived at B3 and opened its doors.

Inside were Tae Ju-ha and her secretary, Heo Yu-rim.

In-hyuk made eye contact with them in turn.

After a brief silence, Tae Ju-ha, who got off with Heo Yu-rim, spoke first.

"... What are you doing right now?"

"Ah... Someone I know was carrying a heavy load, so I was helping."

"A load?"

The pink paper bag in Hong Yu-geon's hand stood out.

"By the way, CEO, what brings you here at this hour?"

It was just past 8 a.m.—a bit early for most employees to arrive.

Of course, In-hyuk knew she had gone out early.

But she had no real reason to come down to B3 herself.

"I had a breakfast meeting. I dropped by to pick something up, and my usual car is in for maintenance, so I came to take a different one."

"Ah..."

"More than that... To me, it looks less like you're helping with luggage and more like a bunch of grown men bullying a young female staff member."

At that moment, Go Mi-ah seized the opportunity and slipped beside Tae Ju-ha.

"That's right! They took away the strawberry cheese cookies I made myself!"

In-hyuk felt a chill.

She said there was strawberry and cheese in them, so why did the cookies look purple, as if made with blueberries?

On the other hand, Tae Ju-ha smiled subtly as if she'd caught something.

"Aha."

Feeling awkward, In-hyuk quickly explained.

"It's really not like that. It's a misunderstanding."

"Seeing the security guard holding it, it doesn't seem like a misunderstanding to me."

Hong Yu-geon glanced between In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha, then ended up returning the paper bag to Go Mi-ah.

"I had no idea Director Kang had this kind of hobby. But please show some restraint since this is the office."

"No, it's not like that..."

Meanwhile, Go Mi-ah quickly handed cookies to Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim.

"Thank you! Please have these when you get hungry! Well, see you!"

She then darted into the still-open elevator and took off upward.

In-hyuk had no choice but to let her go.

"Ah..."

"What's wrong with you?"

"There's a reason. And as for those cookies... I strongly advise you not to eat them."

He meant it with all sincerity.

But Tae Ju-ha smiled more broadly than ever, seemingly happy to find fault.

"Why not? Did Ms. Go Mi-ah put poison in them or something?"

He would have preferred a quick, clean death by poison.

"To be honest, ms. Go Mi-ah is terrible at cooking. They're bound to taste awful."

"People can be bad at cooking, but you could at least appreciate the effort she put into making them."

But thinking about that effort could send you straight to the hospital.

In his previous life, In-hyuk had accidentally eaten Go Mi-ah's cooking and actually ended up in the emergency room.

"I'm clearly warning you. Later... no, soon, even if you regret it, don't blame me."

"I didn't know you were so cold-hearted. Well, all right."

Hearing her reply, In-hyuk boarded the next arriving elevator.

Tae Ju-ha, who had been standing quietly, furrowed her brow a little.

Heo Yu-rim looked worriedly at the purple cookies, then slid them into her bag between the zipper.

"CEO. Let's go now."

"Huh? Oh, right."

They'd wasted too much time in front of the elevator.

The two soon walked towards the spare car parked in the B3 lot.

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Meanwhile, upon arriving at the office, In-hyuk sat down as Hong Yu-geon spoke.

"Should I go back to Go Mi-ah and bring it?"

"If you do, you'll get a reputation as the division director who bullies young female staff."

"Then what do we do? If someone eats that, the whole system management team will end up in the hospital."

Crumple— Crinkle—

Van Hester, who had settled on the sofa, took out a purple cookie and started eating it.

"When did you get that?"

"Right before Mia got in the elevator."

The palm-sized cookie disappeared half in one bite.

Watching this, Hong Yu-geon looked deeply concerned.

"How's your stomach... Are you really okay?"

"I'm fine."

"..."

Hong Yu-geon shook his head.

In-hyuk then took an envelope out of his bag and handed it over.

"It's a list of people to investigate from now on."

"That's a lot. Which area are we looking at this time?"

"Taeshin Spintech. And TSS."

With that answer, the two stared intently at In-hyuk.

"You told us not to investigate TSS last time. Is it all right now?"

Baek Si-hwan and his own past self had both worked at Taeshin Security.

When they'd dealt with Pyo Jun-woo's crowd, Kim Seong-tae, who was part of TSS, was there.

Because of that, he'd stopped them before, thinking about the risk, since they didn't know how many more people inside TSS were connected with Baek Si-hwan.

"Don't go too deep, just check the movements of the people I specify. If you can get storage devices or communication equipment without getting exposed, that's best."

"You're telling us to steal now? Soon, Charybdis will be more famous for being thieves than mercenaries."

"Either way."

Despite grumbling, Hong Yu-geon carefully flipped through the documents.

"By the way, why are we investigating Spintech employees? The name Taeshin is attached, so is it an affiliate?"

"It's a subsidiary under Taeshin Department Store. Soon the head office will create a TF Division and I'll serve as division director as well."

"Huh? You're moving to head office? Then what about here?"

In-hyuk shook his head at his question.

"I said I'll do both."

"Ah, ah! Sorry. I'm just out of it because I wasn't able to confiscate Mia's cookies. But is that the reason Chairman Tae Gun-seung called you to the shooting range?"

"It's a headache, but it won't drag on for long. So you two run the investigation as quickly as you can."

In-hyuk knew well both Taeshin Spintech's current situation and its future.

Besides, In-hyuk now was different from before. It was almost like taking a test knowing all the answers in advance.

"Okay. By the way, you said you're traveling abroad soon? When?"

"That's something I can't delay, so soon."

"Our boss is busy as always. Then handle the morning work. I'll be back in a bit."

As he sat, In-hyuk tilted his head.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to retrieve the bomb before there's a disaster in this company."

"Bomb? Ah..."

He meant Go Mi-ah's homemade purple strawberry cheese cookies.

"Wish me luck."

"... Good luck."

"Okay."

With a thumbs up, Hong Yu-geon slipped out of the office as carefully as he could.

* * *

Taeshin Trading's executive vice president Tae Seok-ho was reviewing documents he had just received from Lee Jae-jun.

Inside were records of the conversation between Chairman Tae Gun-seung and Kang In-hyuk that had taken place at a shooting range outside Gyeonggi Province.

"Father is making a bigger move than I thought."

His secretary, Lee Jae-jun, stood by with a serious expression.

"I've checked, and it looks like the head office's management support division has already started preparations."

"That quickly? He must be more anxious than he seems."

"This could get complicated quickly. How should we respond?"

Tae Seok-ho sighed briefly.

"If he's targeting Taeshin Spintech, that means he suspects something. Or maybe he already knew and waited for the right hand to play."

In fact, Taeshin Spintech was one of the Taeshin Group companies he used to raise initial funds for setting up the H&T Fund.

Naturally, it was not above board.

As a textile company, he had protected the company president, moved funds under the table for production, development, and operations, accumulated money, and siphoned it off through a shell company.

"If the chairman is targeting us, it won't end quietly."

"And by putting Kang In-hyuk—the group's top 'hound'—in charge, it's a tacit warning."

It wasn't just anyone; the chairman's grandson-in-law was becoming the TF division director under his direct command.

"Should I take measures with that company's president?"

"How? Are you planning to get rid of him? By the way, you've been getting a bit wordy these days."

Lee Jae-jun bowed his head.

"Sorry. I was worried about your safety, executive vice president, so I overstepped."

At that, Tae Seok-ho looked at him quietly for a moment before speaking.

"No, I was sensitive too. When things don't go as planned, there's just too much that gets on my nerves."

"It's all right."

Silence fell again.

Since Chairman Tae Gun-seung was moving in earnest, caution was needed.

"How much funding does that side lack?"

"Roughly 50 billion won."

"That much? Now it's too late to move H&T Fund's money in."

After failing to acquire Chulsan Capital recently, there was some money floating in limbo.

But in business, money always left some trail, and it was difficult to move funds cleanly.

Moreover, if a hole in the capital got quickly plugged at this time, it would only look more suspicious.

"Sorry that I can't be of more help."

"There are not many options for now. Just have someone warn that company president. I'll think about the rest."

"I'll do that."

Lee Jae-jun finished his answer and went outside.

Tae Seok-ho, now alone, tapped his fingers on the armrest, recalling Kang In-hyuk's face.

He began to have the sense that things were going wrong.

Chapter 56

Still Not Here?

【Taeshin Trading — Dual Appointment Notice with Taeshin Asset Management】

— Name: Division Director Kang In-hyuk

— Affiliation: Taeshin Asset Management M&A/PEF Division

— Dual Department: Taeshin Trading Group TF Division

— Dual Position: Division Director

— Dual Period: △△, △△, 2025 ~ Undetermined

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Past noon.

As she read the urgent notice from the head office, Tae Ju-ha's expression grew grave.

"What is this... Did this really come from the head office?"

Heo Yu-rim looked at her with a worried face.

"CEO. More than that, shouldn't you be focusing on your own health right now?"

"....."

The two of them were currently at the emergency room of a hospital near where their breakfast meeting had been scheduled.

"I told you not to eat anything you felt uneasy about."

"Go Mi-ah said she made it herself. It didn't even taste bad when I ate it."

"It didn't taste bad?"

The reason for Tae Ju-ha's hospitalization was Go Mi-ah's strawberry cheese cookie, which she had eaten in the car while on the move.

Of course, just as Tae Ju-ha said, there hadn't been any big issue immediately after eating it.

However, as they arrived at the breakfast meeting venue, a sudden abdominal pain hit her, and she had to move to the emergency room and even undergo gastric lavage.

"I really felt fine though..."

"Didn't you dislike Go Mi-ah?"

"Well, not that much."

"Then why did you accept the cookie?"

A bitter look appeared on Tae Ju-ha's face.

Ever since her biological mother died from illness, the concept of family was filled with nothing but hostility for her.

Naturally, no one got close to Tae Ju-ha, and Heo Yu-rim was the only one who stayed with her.

Because of that life, the idea of someone giving her homemade cookies without a hint of malice felt completely foreign.

"Just because."

"Heesh—! Anyway, be more careful next time."

"Alright. And it wasn't even that serious..."

At that muttered comment, Heo Yu-rim protested loudly.

"Didn't you hear what the doctor said? He said it was at the level of a toxic reaction!"

"It wasn't that bad... It was just a stomach spasm. He said the problem was I had a bit too much stimulating(?) food."

"That's the same thing! What on earth did she put in those 'homemade' cookies? Oh, and didn't she say she'd share them with the team too? Isn't that a big problem for everyone?"

"Ah..."

Heo Yu-rim immediately called the system management team. Soon, after finishing the call, she looked at Tae Ju-ha.

"They said they never got any cookies."

"Really? Did Go Mi-ah show up for work as usual?"

"She seemed really cheerful when she greeted everyone, but suddenly became depressed afterward."

"...?"

After hearing the situation, even more things didn't add up.

Tae Ju-ha soon shifted her gaze back to her tablet.

"I should check this, too."

"That's an appointment notice from the head office. Will anything change even if you check it?"

Maybe she was still in shock and hadn't considered that.

"True... That's right."

"To be honest, it is strange. Of all places, they appointed Division Director Kang In-hyuk as the division director of the TF division at the head office... The chairman must've gotten involved, right?"

"Probably."

Above her were the brothers Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, who did not think highly of Tae Ju-ha.

Their families were the same, so it was obvious they would not be happy to see Tae Ju-ha's husband, Kang In-hyuk, absorbed into the head office.

Naturally, they would never let Kang In-hyuk sit as the head of the head office TF division.

"There'll be a lot of interference."

"What I don't understand is what the chairman is thinking. It's like he's indifferent, and then suddenly he makes these unexpected decisions."

"The TF division is a problem, too. I heard from the head office that the chairman plans to completely revamp all affiliate and subsidiary companies. That would mean Director Kang In-hyuk takes on that burden."

"Not an easy situation. Anyway, let me get up. I need to figure out what's going on."

Heo Yu-rim tried to stop her with an even more worried look.

"At least wait until you finish your IV. Gastric lavage is already a problem, and you've built up a lot of fatigue, so you should rest a bit."

At that, Tae Ju-ha lay back down and nodded.

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At the same time.

In-hyuk was in his office when a computer notification alerted him to the appointment notice.

"The chairman is moving faster than I thought."

It was remarkable that something decided only a few days earlier was already happening.

At the same time, one thing became clear to In-hyuk.

"Don't tell me... He's been planning this from the start?"

"What's up? Aren't you heading out?"

Hong Yu-geon, who was sitting on the sofa, asked.

He was just about to leave after finishing his morning work, but In-hyuk's sudden stop made him wait.

"Looks like things are going to get complicated. But when you came to Korea, was there any problem with the passports you used?"

The two had always worked as mercenaries, using fake passports whenever they crossed borders.

That was true for In-hyuk, both during his time at UID and after being betrayed by Tae Seok-ho.

Since their passport identities couldn't be compromised, it was something he needed to check.

"Hmm... We bought our passports from the black market, so we don't really know. Still, they shouldn't be on any Interpol watch list."

"Well, that much is obvious."

It wasn't like the black market would sell a fake passport with a known criminal record anyway.

"So what's the problem?"

"You two are registered with the company as my personally hired security guards. You never submitted resumes or documents to prove your identity. So if Tae Seok-ho or Baek Si-hwan check which passports you used, wouldn't they notice?"

"Ah... I hadn't thought about that."

"Of course not. Take a picture of your passport right now and send it to Mi-ah. Ask her to check if there are any problems with your identities."

Hong Yu-geon flinched at the order.

"Will Mi-ah really check for us?"

On one side of the office was the purple cookie bag he had stolen from Go Mi-ah's luggage earlier that morning.

"That's that, work is work. Hurry up and ask her."

"Can't you, as CEO, call her instead?"

He sounded genuinely hopeful.

In-hyuk stared at Hong Yu-geon with the most serious expression possible.

"There's no time. Just do it now."

"Tch...!"

By then, In-hyuk had called for Baek Si-hwan, who was sitting outside the office.

"You called for me?"

Since In-hyuk had never called him for anything other than sorting documents, Baek Si-hwan looked bewildered.

"I'll be going on a business trip to the US, so let's get ready. Book tickets for departure within this week. Red-eye flights are fine. Four first-class seats. If there aren't enough, business or even economy will do."

"Suddenly, sir? But just now..."

Baek Si-hwan had also seen the dual appointment notice from the head office assigning In-hyuk as the TF division director.

With the appointment date coming up, the business trip didn't make sense to him.

"That's why we're going. You'll need to come along for document control."

"Understood."

"I'll share the itinerary by email."

Baek Si-hwan left the office with a subtle expression.

Watching him, In-hyuk shifted his attention to Hong Yu-geon, fidgeting on the sofa.

He was waiting for a reply from Go Mi-ah.

"Did she read it?"

"Yeah. But there's no reply... Oh, here it is. Ah..."

The mood wasn't good.

"What's wrong? The results aren't bad, are they?"

"She said there was a background check request from the Minsk region recently."

That was a part of Belarus.

"Is that where your identity is from?"

"I had no idea, but Mi-ah says it matches."

In-hyuk's face grew serious.

"It's the same for Van?"

"Hold on... Yeah, he's the same."

"Someone deliberately requested the background check. And there's no way that's a good intention."

"Would it be Baek Si-hwan?"

Ban and Hong Yu-geon seemed to grasp the situation, and the mood turned heavy.

"For now, it's highly likely. But there are other possibilities too."

Candidates included not only Tae Seok-ho at group headquarters but also Jeon Hae-in, the mistress of KQ Group.

Possibly trying to shake up In-hyuk's bodyguards out of vexation.

"What should we do?"

"For now, leave the country with me. After we split at the designated point, revise your identities and regroup."

"Both of us? What about the president? You'll be with Baek Si-hwan?"

"For now, there's no choice."

"But this is America. If something happens, and those guys make a move, then what?"

In-hyuk was also somewhat concerned.

Unknown organizational members, including Baek Si-hwan, had used firearms even in Korea.

With guns legal in the US, even more drastic measures might be taken.

"Worry about making sure your identities don't become a problem. It's better than getting caught later. I'll connect you with a broker."

"You know someone like that?"

"Not 100% trustworthy in all things, but when a deal is made, he doesn't stab you in the back. Plus, there's something I need to pick up anyway."

This referred to Jacob Greer, who had set up AMK Partners' Cayman Islands entity.

"That's what you were after in the first place, right?"

"Just killing two birds with one stone. Anyway, don't act rashly and make sure you're not being tailed."

"Got it. I'll keep it in mind."

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A few days later, Taeshin Trading's executive vice president, Tae Seok-ho, sat on his office sofa with a subtle expression.

He had tried contacting Kang In-hyuk, who was appointed as division director of the head office TF division, but hadn't been able to reach him.

He'd even tried Taeshin Asset Management, but only got the answer that In-hyuk was out on external business all morning.

Now, he was waiting for In-hyuk's first day in his new position at the head office.

Knock, knock—

Just then, deputy chief Lee Jae-jun entered.

"Is he here?"

He knew what news Tae Seok-ho was waiting for, so he too wore an odd expression.

"Not yet."

"A guy scheduled to report to the head office still isn't here?"

"Should I try contacting Asset Management?"

After a moment of thought, Tae Seok-ho spoke.

"Do it. Just in case."

Previously, he had used a burner phone to avoid direct contact with Kang In-hyuk in order to use H&T Fund to siphon funds from Taeshin Asset Management.

But after the acquisition of Chulsan Capital derailed those plans, there was no need for secretive contact anymore.

Meanwhile, Lee Jae-jun finished his call and approached.

"Executive vice president."

"Did you get through?"

"Well... they said he's left the country for an overseas business trip."

"Business trip? Suddenly? Where did he go?"

After a pause, Lee Jae-jun answered carefully.

"They said California, San Jose."

"Silicon Valley? Why would he go there?"

"They said there's a critical investment due diligence for the MP Division. Once that work is finished, he'll conduct TF Division–related business from there."

Hearing this, Tae Seok-ho was dumbfounded.

"That's really selfish. He postponed a special order from the chairman just to go to the US?"

"They say the necessary staff for the TF division have already been handpicked and are reporting in."

"Didn't some TF employees get transferred from the head office?"

"I thought so too, but... apparently not."

Nothing was going as expected.

Tae Seok-ho's brow furrowed deeply.

"Nothing is working out properly."

"At least we may have bought some time for Spintech. President Han Byung-hun might be able to take more actions in the meantime."

About 50 billion won had gone into laying the groundwork for H&T Fund—slush funds that Tae Seok-ho and President Han Byung-hun embezzled together.

Of course, a significant amount fell to Han as well.

So unless they wanted to go down together, as Lee Jae-jun suggested, the best they could do was erase as many traces from the books as possible.

"Even if Kang In-hyuk comes back, can you hide it all?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Hoo—!"

A worried Tae Seok-ho waved him away with a sigh. The situation just wasn't going his way.

Chapter 57

Manager Baek

About 20 hours later.

Kang In-hyuk had arrived at San Jose Airport in California, USA.

However, unlike before, only Baek Si-hwan was accompanying him, dragging his luggage instead of Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

The two had received separate instructions from In-hyuk and had headed elsewhere from the layover point at Los Angeles Airport.

Of course, no explanation was given as to why they had to move separately.

"Division director, the group head office keeps contacting us."

"I've already given instructions to the other staff, so just ignore them."

"But..."

"That matter has been entirely delegated to me by the chairman. It's not our concern what anyone else says, so let it be."

As secretary and security guard, Baek Si-hwan's expression turned awkward.

Soon, as they entered the airport's arrivals area, people holding placards came into view.

【TAESHIN, Division Director, Mr. KANG】

It was a sign looking for In-hyuk.

When he walked towards it, a blond middle-aged man who looked to be in his 50s greeted In-hyuk in English.

"Are you Division Director Kang In-hyuk from Taeshin?"

"Nice to meet you, CEO Mark Campbell."

As In-hyuk replied fluently in English, the man's face relaxed.

He had been worried about what would happen if they couldn't communicate smoothly.

"I'm sincerely pleased to meet you as well! This way, please. We have a vehicle prepared. Will you be heading straight to your accommodation?"

Mark Campbell was currently running a company called Greenbyte Labs.

However, the company's management was not in good shape, and In-hyuk had come to conduct due diligence as part of considering an investment, so he maintained a low profile.

"No, let's go straight to the company and start the due diligence. How long will it take?"

"Right now? But we're not ready yet..."

Caught off guard by In-hyuk's sudden decision, mark briefly floundered.

"Do you need to prepare for due diligence, or am I only supposed to see what you've arranged?"

"N-no, that's not it! Please come to the vehicle."

"No, we'll rent a car ourselves. Manager Baek."

Baek Si-hwan, who had been momentarily confused, quickly regained his senses.

"... Excuse me? You want me to go rent a car?"

"Is there anyone else here but you who can do it, manager Baek?"

From some point, they'd switched to Korean, so neither Mark Campbell nor the people around him could understand the conversation.

Only an Asian-looking woman, here as an interpreter, seemed to understand a bit and wore a troubled look.

"Ah... Understood. Please wait at the entrance, I'll bring a car right away. It won't take long since it's just in front."

With those words, Baek Si-hwan nodded slightly and hurried off.

In-hyuk then headed toward the airport exit with the others.

When the interpreter relayed the situation to Mark Campbell, his expression also grew troubled.

"You could use our vehicle... Did I make you uncomfortable somehow?"

"No, I was recently in a serious car accident. Since it was related to something a little dangerous, I avoid using pre-arranged vehicles."

"A car accident? Don't tell me...!"

"Someone tried to kill me. Oh, I'm not suspecting you. I'm just being a bit more careful."

Before long, Baek Si-hwan arrived out front, driving the rented car.

In-hyuk got in, and they set off.

Greenbyte Labs was only about 10 minutes away by car.

The majority of the grounds were occupied by a wide, factory-like, three-story building.

As soon as they arrived, CEO Mark Campbell approached In-hyuk.

"Would you like to check the facilities and our products in production first?"

"Sure, let's take a look right away."

As he replied, they entered the building, and a passionate explanation followed.

Baek Si-hwan followed along, taking photos where permitted and making notes as necessary.

After about two hours of touring, they finally entered the conference room.

"How did you find it?"

The question came from Mark Campbell.

From his face, it was clear he had high hopes for an investment.

"My impression isn't bad. However, since I've only seen things today, I'll need about three more days to check."

"Three days?"

Baek Si-hwan, who hadn't known about this schedule, also looked surprised. He quietly approached In-hyuk and whispered,

"Division director, there's the head office TF schedule too. Staying here another three days is a stretch."

"I told you, I've left instructions for that matter."

"But..."

"If you're that worried, you're free to go back alone."

To an observer, it might have looked like Baek Si-hwan genuinely cared about the company.

But In-hyuk knew his real motives better than anyone.

Even now, he was pretending to be concerned for In-hyuk for his own benefit.

Mark Campbell, too, opened his mouth with a worried expression.

"If you want to check for three days... Was what we showed you today not enough to earn your trust?"

They had done their best to prepare for due diligence.

Of course, In-hyuk understood everything and had listened carefully. But there was another reason for his actions.

"I understand Greenbyte Labs' main business is developing eco-friendly technology and low-power systems. So you primarily handle power converters for smart devices, lighting, and HVAC equipment."

The explanation was precise, and Mark Campbell nodded.

"That's right. You know quite a lot. As long as electronic devices don't disappear, this is a valuable business."

"I agree completely. However, CEO Mark Campbell, you have poured your funds into further increasing the existing energy savings limits through converter R&D, leading to your current management crisis."

He had pinpointed the real issue at Greenbyte Labs.

This information hadn't yet spread externally and hadn't come up in Mark's own explanations, so he was understandably shocked.

"... You knew about that?"

"There's no such thing as airtight information. I was just a little disappointed you tried to blame Greenbyte's management problems on the rise in defective rate for low-power memory and transistor production equipment."

Sweat beaded on Mark Campbell's brow.

"I'm sorry about that. With new technologies, it's so hard to nail down a development timeline..."

"If you cover up those facts and still get the investment, were you just going to pour those funds in without any countermeasures?"

"No, absolutely not! My first priority would be to use the capital to fix the problems and revamp our production lines! New R&D would have come afterward."

It was a flustered, rambling explanation.

In response, In-hyuk glanced at him and the other staff.

"The amount I'm considering for investment is $50 million, as a first round. Do you think what you've shown me so far is worth that?"

Mark Campbell exclaimed in shock.

"Fifty million dollars?! Is that real? But I thought your initial proposal was for ten million..."

Even that was a huge sum for Greenbyte Labs, and it was why Mark had been doing his utmost to impress In-hyuk.

"That's the value I placed on Greenbyte after personally seeing it. But if this is how it's going to be from the start..."

Mark's face hardened instantly.

He was reminded of past investors who promised verbally and then played games with the actual numbers.

Some had even tried to use investment talks as a way to steal Greenbyte's critical technology.

So to Mark, In-hyuk's talk felt like poison rather than honey.

"If we'd explained everything properly, would you really have invested $50 million?"

"Why? Do you not think Greenbyte is worth that much?"

"Absolutely not. But we're sick and tired of empty promises called investments. And I know it's our fault for not being clear from the beginning. But isn't it also wrong for you to test us like this, director Kang?"

It was a volley of questions rather than answers.

In-hyuk hadn't expected Mark Campbell to be completely subservient regarding the investment, either.

Of course, he also understood why Mark was reacting this way.

"I'm very interested in Greenbyte's new low-power, high-efficiency transformer project, which aims for a 90% reduction in power consumption. I'm thinking of $50 million as the first investment, and another $50 million in a second round—a total of $100 million."

That was roughly 140 billion won. Mark Campbell and his staff were dumbfounded.

And not just because of the amount.

They were equally astonished by how In-hyuk knew exactly what kind of new technology they were developing.

"How, and from where, did you find out about that?"

"My information network is pretty good. In any case, I'm highly interested in that technology. So, in the next two days, I'll check if there are any other problems before making my final investment decision. Any objections?"

Mark Campbell, brow furrowed, glanced at the executives in charge of finance, management, and technology.

Their eyes said, "Let's trust him this one time."

"What you saw today is most of what we have at Greenbyte Labs. What more do you want to see? You're not... wanting to check our technical blueprints or such, are you?"

But In-hyuk cut him off.

"I'll need the last three years' expenditure reports, financial statements, audit reports, tax return documents, debt and bond records, proof of R&D activities, defect audit reports for in-house and outsourced parts, purchase orders and approval documents for sales, import-export certificates, and all personnel evaluation documents for staff. I'll give you a separate list for other materials."

The expressions of the CEO and staff were even more shocked than when they had heard the investment figure.

"... All of that?"

"These are basic documents required for investment due diligence. I'll check thoroughly starting tomorrow, so please prepare them. And I'm not testing you here. I believe in this company's value and want a solid reason to invest."

Mark Campbell hesitated for a moment, then steeled himself.

"Understood. We'll prepare as much as possible so you can start checking tomorrow morning. Three years is a lot, so we can't get everything ready immediately."

"I'll review them in sequence. But there can't be any hidden information, like today."

"I'll keep that in mind."

With the conversation finished, In-hyuk left with Baek Si-hwan.

There was nothing more to check at Greenbyte Labs for now, so they headed straight to their accommodation.

Baek Si-hwan cautiously approached In-hyuk.

"This company has a lot of problems... You really intend to waste three days here?"

"Why? Do you think it's reckless for me to invest in this company?"

"To be honest, I don't understand. And $100 million for investment... The company will use profitability and other excuses to try and block you."

In-hyuk well understood what he was worried about.

But he was even more aware of what would unfold from here.

"I didn't bring you for your opinions, so just keep a good record of everything that happens here. Ah, and bring the car, too."

As soon as In-hyuk cut him off, Baek Si-hwan fell silent and headed to the car.

Soon, they arrived at a five-star hotel about 15 minutes away.

"I'm going to rest. You won't be needed, so do as you like."

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'll take care of myself."

Once in his room, In-hyuk shut the door promptly.

Baek Si-hwan sighed, then entered his own room across the hall.

After thoroughly checking the room and window for anything suspicious, he pulled out a phone hidden under the sofa by the window.

Someone had hidden it there in advance.

He turned it on naturally and called somewhere.

Chapter 58

Perfect Timing

Baek Si-hwan's caller was Baek Ji-woong of the W&W Group.

[Did you arrive safely in Silicon Valley?]

"Sorry to call so early. I've just finished the first round of due diligence and arrived at the accommodations."

It was now just past 4 p.m. in San Jose. Meanwhile, it was around 8 a.m. in South Korea, so Baek Ji-woong had not yet gone to work.

[First round? Didn't you go there for Taeshin Asset Management's business? If he had been appointed to lead the TF division at Mulsan, he should have moved over as soon as possible.]

"You're correct. That's why both the group head office and asset management division have been constantly contacting me, but Kang In-hyuk instructed me not to respond to any communications."

Weariness emanated from his voice. Baek Ji-woong reacted with curiosity.

[He cut off contact with the head office to finish his own business? So, how does the place seem to you?]

His voice was full of interest.

"I checked before leaving, but the place has all kinds of issues. Even today, during the first due diligence, they tried to conceal chronic problems in hopes of receiving investment."

[So you think it's not worth investing in?]

"To be frank, yes."

Baek Ji-woong's sigh came through the receiver.

[Hmm... Is that Kang In-hyuk really about to pour as much as a hundred million dollars into a place with no value?]

"Are you suggesting there's something else? But judging from its condition and technical value..."

[Kang In-hyuk might see something you don't. That's how he could rise so quickly at Taeshin Asset Management, don't you think?]

He still regarded that point highly.

Of course, Baek Si-hwan also wondered—ever since before the trip, what exactly did Kang In-hyuk see to want to throw such a huge sum as a hundred million dollars?

"Then are you saying we should leave Kang In-hyuk be and just observe for now?"

In fact, due to the issue with Chulsan Capital and Daemyung Detective Agency's actions, Kang In-hyuk had become prominent.

Then, after the domestic UID safehouse was hit, Hannya from the Organization ordered an investigation and report.

Kang In-hyuk was involved in the immediate incident, so when Baek Ji-woong heard from Baek Si-hwan that he was going on a business trip abroad, a handling plan surfaced.

Naturally, Baek Si-hwan had already prepared some operations with the related team.

[How many have you deployed?]

"Myself excluded, five in total."

[A single team leader with two units, is it? Still, how do you expect that plan to succeed? Kang In-hyuk apparently has security guards at his side.]

Baek Si-hwan brought up something he hadn't yet reported.

"On Kang In-hyuk's orders, the security guards split off at the transit stop in LA airport. I don't know when they'll rejoin, but until then, it's just the two of us. We plan to stay here for at least three more days."

[So you're saying the opportunity is right now?]

"Here, yes."

Baek Ji-woong grew silent, as if thinking deeply, before speaking again.

[Have you tracked the whereabouts of the security guards?]

"I tried to check the movement routes, but after leaving the airport, they vanished into a CCTV blind spot."

[So we have no idea what's really happening.]

"... I apologize. There were too many constraints on my movements."

Frankly, with the sudden business trip and with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester unexpectedly splitting up, Baek Si-hwan never anticipated such developments.

With so many unforeseeable events, he was barely keeping up.

[I'm not blaming you. I'm just worried the dinner table is set a little too conveniently.]

"Are you saying Kang In-hyuk set himself up intentionally as a target?"

[It's not impossible. He has a more combative nature than we realized.]

"Even if he pulled the security guards and kept others on standby, it'd only be two people. Who could he possibly face with that?"

The questions multiplied endlessly.

[Weren't his security guards suspected of being mercenaries? He could have brought in additional people we don't know about.]

"But... would Kang In-hyuk really have that much money?"

Professional or ex-mercenary security comes at a price commensurate with their skills.

Hiring several for a long period is not easy.

[I doubt he has such funds. If your suspicions are right, it would prove there's a hidden backer we're unaware of.]

There were no immediate conclusions. Baek Si-hwan tentatively offered a suggestion.

"Should I probe him a bit?"

[Are you saying you'd attempt an attack? What will you do if the tail is traced back to us?]

Just as Baek Ji-woong said, everything felt just a bit too neatly arranged.

However, Baek Si-hwan wanted to put this opportunity to good use.

"What if I use this as a setup to earn Kang In-hyuk's trust?"

[Do you have a method in mind?]

"I've thought of a good move."

A brief silence followed. Then Baek Ji-woong's response came.

[Let's hear it, then.]

* * *

Before he knew it, two days had passed.

In-hyuk was sitting in Greenbyte Labs' meeting room with Baek Si-hwan.

The two of them had spent nearly ten hours each day going through prepared documents.

As evening arrived, Baek Si-hwan asked carefully:

"Will you be reviewing more today?"

"Since we're wrapping up tomorrow, I'll try to get through as much as possible today."

Greenbyte Labs' three years' worth of records were no small amount.

Still, In-hyuk maintained an incredible pace and had gone through over 70% of the documents.

Watching this, Baek Si-hwan couldn't help feeling skeptical.

"Did you really check each one?"

"Why? Does it look like I'm skimming?"

"It just looks like you're moving through them awfully fast."

He spent less than five seconds per page.

"I'm only checking the necessary contents. Still, it's not as serious as I thought."

"The balance sheet shows a debt ratio of 186.32%. Most debts were incurred to offset research losses, and judging by circumstances, proving any research results will be difficult. For that reason, repayment capacity also seems low."

That was a decidedly negative review. Objectively, In-hyuk would have agreed with that analysis.

"You seem to know business well for someone whose main job is security."

"I graduated in business administration from a cyber university while in the military."

"I saw that in your resume. But you seem to have a lot of practical experience as well."

For someone with only a security background, In-hyuk's observational skills were impressive.

"My post in the military was in the logistics division. That's probably why."

"I see."

Sarak— sarak—

In-hyuk resumed flipping through the documents swiftly. When he finished the last page, he did not pick up another.

"That's all for today."

"Understood."

As if accustomed to this, Baek Si-hwan didn't ask anything else and stood up.

When they went outside, Mark Campbell approached quickly from the direction of the CEO's office.

"Did you find everything in order?"

"It wasn't bad. But I believe I said you don't need to come out every time."

"Since you're here for investment, I have to be attentive. By the way... do you have time for dinner tonight? I feel bad that the division director has worked so hard, and we haven't properly treated you yet."

On the first day, Mark Campbell had been too busy to mention it.

The day before and yesterday, though he'd suggested it, In-hyuk declined.

"We plan for the final due diligence tomorrow, so let's dine together tonight."

"Are you sure? Then let's go by car. It's about fifteen minutes away."

"We'll go in our own car."

Baek Si-hwan moved forward confidently and started following Mark Campbell's car along with several others.

Sitting in the back seat, In-hyuk glanced at Baek Si-hwan, who was driving as if nothing was wrong.

But In-hyuk noticed something different.

'He keeps glancing left and right while keeping his eyes ahead. He's maintaining distance from the car in front yet purposely slowing down at lights.'

Though he didn't look back, there was certainly a car tailing them already.

'By now... it's just the right timing to make a move.'

Once more, the car stopped at a crosswalk, barely catching the traffic light.

At that moment, two motorcycles from the right-hand road at the intersection stopped, and men all in black—from helmets to outfits—pulled Uzis from inside their jackets.

"Division director! Get down!"

Right before the bullets fired, upon Baek Si-hwan's shout, In-hyuk ducked his head.

Just then, bullets flew toward In-hyuk's car.

Tatata-tatang— tatata-tatang—

The sharp, light crack of gunfire filled the road.

"Don't try to get up, no matter what."

Baek Si-hwan, while crouched in the passenger seat, popped open the glove box and took out a handgun.

Seeing this, In-hyuk's eyes widened, but Baek Si-hwan offered a faint smile.

"Since we're in the U. S., I prepared this separately on the first day."

"Do you have a firearm license?"

"I got one back when I worked at TSS. Still, if anything happens, I'll be relying on your help."

He had obtained a gun license, anticipating dangerous situations when going abroad for Taeshin Security business trips.

Then, Baek Si-hwan stuck the gun out through the shattered windshield and fired.

Tatata— tatang—

As he fired warning shots, the gunfire coming from the front faltered, and the motorcycles' sound was heard changing direction.

Then engine sounds started up from the back as well, and gunfire began from In-hyuk's side.

It became clear who their target was—it was In-hyuk.

Baek Si-hwan hastily swung his gun toward them and squeezed the trigger.

Tatang— tatatang— tatang—

The bikers swerved quickly, weaving through the cars and trying to escape the area via the intersection.

"Fortunately, they seem shocked that we have a gun and are trying to run. But it isn't safe yet, so keep your head down."

Despite Baek Si-hwan's warning, In-hyuk raised his head and asked,

"Aren't you going to chase them?"

"Didn't you see? They're armed with submachine guns. First, we call the police and—"

"Sorry, but I can't just leave it at that."

Boom, boom— kakakakang—

At that moment, a strange explosive sound and a scraping noise rumbled from the road.

Startled, Baek Si-hwan quickly looked up.

Someone at the side of the road had fired an M79 grenade launcher at the bikers, hitting them and knocking them down.

"Those are—"

"They were supposed to return today. What perfect timing."

Standing at diagonally opposite corners of the intersection were Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

The men on motorcycles, fixated on escaping and In-hyuk's car, failed to react to their sudden attack.

Soon, struck by the heavy rubber bullets in the head, torso, and legs, they collapsed and writhed under their fallen bikes.

"How did those people get here...?"

"I asked them to join us at the restaurant since they'd just arrived. I didn't expect to be ambushed here, though."

In-hyuk brushed glass shards off his head and shoulders, stood up, then opened the back seat door and approached one of the men down on the ground.

Chapter 59

Looks Like He's a Little Crazy

The intersection was thrown into chaos by people who suddenly appeared and began firing their guns wildly.

Soon after, the sound of sirens was heard in the distance.

Meanwhile, Kang In-hyuk crouched in front of the man collapsed on the ground and started by taking off his helmet.

He was a young Asian man with short hair.

"Who sent you?"

When Kang In-hyuk asked in Korean, the man's gaze, which had been groaning, suddenly changed.

At the same time, the knife in his left hand—produced out of nowhere—stabbed toward Kang In-hyuk's neck.

Paak—

But Kang In-hyuk was faster; he grabbed the man's wrist first.

"Do you understand English? (영어는 알아듣나?), 还是中文? (Or Chinese?), 日本語? (Japanese?)"

Despite being questioned in several languages, the man simply furrowed his brow and didn't say a word.

Instead, he desperately struggled to break free of Kang In-hyuk's grip.

'He doesn't seem properly trained....'

By then, Hong Yu-geon, with a grenade launcher slung over his shoulder, had come over.

"Is our division director alright?"

"I'm fine."

"So who are those guys who showed up out of nowhere?"

"I have no idea. Even when asked, they don't say... look out!"

Kang In-hyuk urgently shouted, pushing Hong Yu-geon aside as he fell with him.

Papak— papapak—

Bullets whizzed in from somewhere, striking the young Asian's body and head.

At the same time, Kang In-hyuk and Hong Yu-geon rolled behind a nearby car for cover.

Van Hester, who had been subduing other men, did the same.

The gunfire didn't stop, sweeping over the bodies of the remaining men.

"Was there another one hiding?"

The shots had come from the rooftop of the building to the east.

"You noticed quickly."

"I've always had a good sense for these things."

"Maybe I shouldn't have asked. But that guy over there was waving a pistol around—why's he staying put now?"

Hong Yu-geon pointed at Baek Si-hwan, who was still in the car.

Papak— papapak—

"He probably messed up trying to show off in front of me."

"But it looks like all those guys are dead? And the one upstairs must have run off too."

At some point, the gunfire stopped.

Kang In-hyuk scanned the sidelined mirrors of the surrounding cars, searching for one that showed that direction.

"Looks that way. I guess eliminating those guys was more urgent for him than us."

"It wasn't about us, but them."

At that moment, the sirens got closer and soon police cars entered the intersection.

Three hastily dispatched patrol cars surrounded the area, and the officers drew their pistols as they got out.

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About four hours later, past midnight.

Kang In-hyuk came out of a nearby police station after being questioned, along with Baek Si-hwan, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester.

With them were Mark Campbell, CEO of Greenbyte Labs, and a lawyer.

It was proven by both witnesses and CCTV that one suspect had killed another, so it didn't become a major issue.

In addition, Mark Campbell brought along a lawyer, who vouched for why Kang In-hyuk was in San Jose and verified his identity, so the questioning wrapped up smoothly.

"Thank you for your trouble."

"No, it's my fault this happened, so I'm the one who should apologize."

"The situation has been explained, but you might be required to stay here a few days for further statements."

"I'll accept that."

"Let's have a meal next time, but for today, get some rest at the hotel. I'll take my leave."

Mark Campbell said goodbye and walked away with the lawyer to their car.

Meanwhile, Kang In-hyuk stared intently at Baek Si-hwan.

As for Baek Si-hwan's pistol, as well as the grenade launchers set up with rubber bullets for Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester—once their foreign firearm permits were checked and self-defense was confirmed, there was no further issue.

"What are you doing?"

"... Pardon?"

"If you want to get back to the hotel, you need to flag down a taxi."

"Oh, right."

Baek Si-hwan walked toward the street in front of the police station, waving at a passing taxi.

"I noticed earlier that you fired without even aiming at those guys. Isn't that a bit clumsy?"

"I figured we didn't know their plan."

Just like Hong Yu-geon said, Kang In-hyuk knew exactly what Baek Si-hwan had done.

It wasn't complicated.

Kang In-hyuk had observed Baek Si-hwan's movements and watched the prearranged hotel, making it look like Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had left their post.

Because of it, he found out that someone had secretly entered Baek Si-hwan's room even before checking in.

He even located the hidden phone and installed a wiretap application ahead of time.

"That's impressive in its own way. Oh, and those guys had the same tattoo on their hands as before. But the design was a little different this time."

It was the tattoo they'd found during the UID safehouse raid: two crossed horizontal lines, like a cross lying on its side, and two overlapping circles—one big, one small—in the center.

Hong Yu-geon knew about it from Kang In-hyuk's explanation.

"How?"

"There were just two fallen crosses. No overlapping circles in the center."

"Maybe in Kooou, variations in the design mean different things?"

They called the unidentified group by the keyword they'd uncovered during the code cracking.

Kang In-hyuk remembered how the men's defenses had been sloppy when grabbed by the wrist or overwhelmed.

And Hong Yu-geon watched Baek Si-hwan's back as he caught a taxi.

"Looks like staging a show in the middle of the road wasn't enough—they went and cleaned up right after they failed. He must really be on someone's list."

"They probably want something from me."

"Oh, Jacob told me to pass this on."

Hong Yu-geon handed over a black USB, about the size of two fingertip segments.

"Sounds like their investigation wrapped up quick."

Kang In-hyuk pocketed it and split into two taxis with Baek Si-hwan.

Soon after, they arrived at their hotel and stood in the hallway where their rooms were.

"The due diligence will go ahead as scheduled, without delay."

"Are you sure you don't need to visit a hospital?"

Baek Si-hwan had kept asking with a concerned face ever since they got into the taxi.

"Thanks to you, I'm not really hurt. And for safety, the two guys who returned will take turns standing security."

Baek Si-hwan fell silent.

Kang In-hyuk, after exchanging goodbyes, entered his room with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"We're tired too—what else are you planning?"

"I have something important, so I need to head out for a bit."

"Then just go and come back."

"I have to do it without Baek Si-hwan finding out."

At that, Hong Yu-geon tilted his head, giving Kang In-hyuk a curious look.

Kang In-hyuk entered his room briefly and came out dressed head-to-toe in black.

He was holding a skull mask that Hong Yu-geon had seen before.

"Don't tell me, you're not leaving by the door? Boss... You do know what floor this is, right?"

"14th."

About 45 meters above ground.

"Who doesn't know that? It's just that climbing down the wall is dangerous, even for a pro."

Hong Yu-geon had carefully checked such details while coming into the hotel.

"It's fine at this time of night. I've never been caught."

"... Wait, this isn't your first time?"

Deureureuk—

Kang In-hyuk casually opened the window.

"It was tough at first, but once I'd done it a few times, it got easier."

"Are you trying to get out via the rooftop?"

"I'd have to mess with the CCTV for that, but that leaves traces. I'll just go down."

"How?"

"Like this. Oh, no matter who comes knocking, don't open the door for anyone."

After giving this advice, Kang In-hyuk immediately jumped out the open window.

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, who had been silently watching, rushed to the window and looked down.

Kang In-hyuk grabbed the rails in his gloves, repeatedly letting go and catching himself as he rapidly descended.

"... He's not Spider-Man."

"Looks like he's a little crazy."

He took the descent by skipping not just one, but several floors at a time.

Before long, Kang In-hyuk had gone down all 14 floors and looked up.

He gestured to the two faces poking out of the window above.

"Whew—!"

Once they'd pulled their heads back inside, he quietly let out a sigh and slipped away into the deeper darkness.

* * *

Returning to his room, Baek Si-hwan was still reeling from the incident earlier in the street.

He sat on the sofa in the dark, but then he froze. Quietly, he reached between the sofa cushions for a hidden pistol.

At that moment, there was a presence in the darkness and a woman's voice spoke:

"教育の時、銃は発見しやすい場所に隠すなと教わらなかった? (Didn't they teach you in training not to hide a gun somewhere easy to find?)"

Cheolkak—

A cold metallic click accompanied her words...

Baek Si-hwan checked the sofa gap and realized his hand was empty.

"作戦が終わったらすぐに復帰するんじゃなかったっけ？ 黒木. (Weren't you supposed to report back right after the mission? Kuroki.)"

The back-and-forth was in Japanese.

The woman's silhouette was visible, and when her name was brought up, she furrowed her brow.

"I told you not to call me that, didn't I? The name Reina is so much friendlier and easier to say."

"That's a little too friendly for comfort. Or maybe I should call you Blackwood?"

Kuroki (黒木) was her surname in Japanese: literally meaning "black wood", which in English is "Blackwood".

The woman, who had called herself Reina, gave a brief laugh.

"Why so cold between old classmates? What's with you since earlier?"

"If there's any warmth, do you send throwaway rookies to a mission you told me was critical?"

"Oh my! You figured it out?"

She was referring to the four young men who'd died earlier on the street.

"I know it was a setup, but shouldn't you at least have brought guys who could properly make a getaway?"

Reina let out a slight snort.

"I figured that much would be enough. But Kang In-hyuk's security guards are pretty talented. I am a little disappointed I couldn't track when those guys would come back, though."

In effect, she was blaming Baek Si-hwan for the leak of internal information.

"Didn't you realize the whole thing was staged, factoring all that in?"

"Of course I did. Perfectly, in fact. That's why, using the Daemyung case as a precedent, we limited the reinforcements."

When the loss of manpower in Korea was cited as an unavoidable excuse, Baek Si-hwan fell briefly silent.

Reina went on, still smiling.

"If you want to earn the Organization's trust, you need results first. If all you do is run small setups to gain a tiny bit of trust, do you really think Head Office will like that?"

"That's none of your business, is it? And why did you bring those rejects with you? Camp rejects aren't even supposed to leave."

His face twisted with disgust, while Reina's smile just deepened.

She tossed the pistol she'd been holding onto Baek Si-hwan's bed.

"Why do you think? Because I've proven myself enough to get away with it."

"What? Wait... When did you get promoted?"

"Only a few days ago. Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

Baek Si-hwan's frown deepened.

"So, did you come here to warn me or something?"

"The warning was what happened earlier. The Organization wants a report on Kang In-hyuk. The order was given to Chairman Baek, but you're handling it, so they want you to submit it directly."

Her voice was casual, but Baek Si-hwan's mouth curled in a scowl.

"... That means they want to skip the chairman and get it straight from me."

"It's a direct order from the Organization, so does it matter? We just follow orders, like today. Of course, next time the one lying on the floor could be me—or you. Anyway, send it as soon as possible. Bye~!"

Tak—

At that moment, the lights in the room went out, turning everything pitch black.

At the same time, the window opened, and Reina leapt out and disappeared upward.

Chapter 60

Accentia

Ding dong— Ding dong—

Morning arrived, and the doorbell to In-hyuk's room rang.

It was Baek Si-hwan, who had finished preparing to go to Greenbyte Labs.

Hong Yu-geon, who had been sleeping on the sofa, woke up with a start.

He became flustered when he made eye contact with Van Hester, who had been taking turns guarding the front door.

"Damn... what should we do?"

Van Hester just shrugged in response.

"He hasn't come back yet, has he?"

"I'm back."

Both of them turned their heads toward the room.

At that moment, the door opened and In-hyuk, freshly showered and wearing a bathrobe, walked out.

"Just waking up now?"

"What? When did you get back?"

"About an hour ago? You were fast asleep and didn't even notice I'd come back."

"I was tired from rushing here yesterday. But what did you go out for that made you so late? And how did you even get up here?"

"I ran. And as for what I was doing, I'll explain it later. Let me get changed first. Tell Baek Si-hwan we'll be leaving soon."

Embarrassed, Hong Yu-geon moved toward the entrance as In-hyuk went back into his room.

A short while later, In-hyuk finished changing and left with the other two.

The rental car they'd used until the day before had been completely ruined by a submachine gun and was now at a repair shop, with them needing to pay damages.

Because of that, Baek Si-hwan had found a different car and was waiting with it.

The four of them took about 15 minutes to get to Greenbyte Labs.

There, Mark Campbell—who had arrived early—came out to greet them with the executives, as usual.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Today, once I finish checking the remaining documents, I'll make my decision. It should be possible by noon at the latest."

"Really?"

Mark Campbell felt a bit anxious.

He had handed over all the requested documents, but he worried that this might make company problems stand out more and lead to a negative outcome.

"So far, it's not bad. As long as there's nothing in the remaining materials that might overturn that."

"I understand."

In-hyuk entered the conference room with the others and spent time quickly reviewing the remaining documents.

'Since I last saw you in the hallway yesterday, what happened?'

Baek Si-hwan's mood, as he looked over the documents beside In-hyuk, had shifted in a curious way.

'Don't tell me the safe house being empty... is because he went to meet that guy?'

Actually, one of the reasons In-hyuk had gone out the previous night was to find the sniper who had killed the Kooou gang.

Of course, he'd been able to locate the position through the tail Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had caught on Baek Si-hwan.

But when he'd arrived at the safe house, it was already empty.

So In-hyuk had no choice but to move on to other business.

"Division director. I've finished checking all these documents."

At that, Baek Si-hwan closed the file in front of him.

"Did you check every problematic part?"

"I'll send you the organized file."

After about another hour, In-hyuk finished reviewing the remaining documents.

He checked Baek Si-hwan's organized file as well and then called Mark Campbell.

He was about two hours ahead of the originally promised time.

When they arrived at the conference room, everyone seemed tense, wondering what the investment decision would be.

"Don't just stand there—please, have a seat."

Everyone took their seats, cautiously gauging the mood.

In-hyuk casually flipped through the last document he'd looked at, then closed it and started to speak.

"As I mentioned, we'll proceed with the $100 million investment."

In an instant, everyone's faces brightened. Baek Si-hwan was also startled.

But that wasn't the end of the explanation.

"However, I do have a few conditions."

"What kind of conditions?"

"First, as a condition of the investment, I'd like Greenbyte Labs to conditionally transfer 25% of its company shares."

"Conditionally...?"

"If your net sales this year reach 300% of last year's. Of course, if the full investment fund is recovered, the transfer rights are released. And..."

It wasn't a bad condition for Greenbyte Labs, either.

"Is there more?"

"According to some technical information I acquired, it seems your current low-power system development won't be easy to complete. So I'd like you to use part of the investment fund to acquire a company that can support that."

Mark Campbell's expression tightened a bit.

But with a promise of a $100 million investment on the table, he couldn't unconditionally reject the idea.

"What kind of company are you referring to?"

"There's a system development company called Accentia in the Malta region of New York State. If you acquire them, Greenbyte Labs will be able to fill any technical gaps."

"Accentia? I can't say I've heard of it... Will you give me time to think it over?"

In-hyuk smiled.

"Of course. But let's not have anything about the acquisition get out together with the investment news. I'd appreciate it if everyone here kept quiet. If their price inflates too much, it will be troublesome."

This was a huge $100 million investment.

If talk of another company's acquisition spread, that company would clearly use their importance to raise their value.

"That's only natural, isn't it?"

"If there's no issue, let's draft the first investment agreement today. Within three days of signing, $50 million will be deposited. Use that to solve any urgent problems—and then decide about the Accentia acquisition. Of course, with an investment fund of this size, there will be a short-term audit for financial management."

"T-thank you! Really, thank you!"

About four days since In-hyuk's arrival, the due diligence was finally finished.

As news of the investment decision spread, cheers of over a hundred employees could be heard throughout Greenbyte Labs.

In-hyuk tidied up his things and stood up slowly.

"If you're free for dinner tonight, how about joining me for the meal we missed yesterday?"

"... I'd like that."

"Then I'll send you the location."

Shortly after, Baek Si-hwan came over with the completed investment and secrecy agreements, which he had just printed out.

Without hesitation, In-hyuk signed them and handed them to Mark Campbell.

"Once you sign, the first investment can proceed smoothly."

Mark Campbell quickly pulled out a pen and signed as if he'd been waiting for this moment.

"Whew—!"

Only then did he let out a long sigh of relief.

After finishing the handshake to seal the investment, everyone could finally step outside.

Screech—

At that moment, a luxury sedan and two minivans pulled up to the front gate of Greenbyte Labs.

Mark Campbell tilted his head, wondering who the unexpected visitors were.

Among those who exited the vehicles, there was a familiar face.

"Isn't that Division Director Kang In-hyuk?"

It was Norman McGrath, Korean branch manager of AMK Partners.

Having recognized In-hyuk first, he approached with a delighted expression.

"It's the first time since the Chulsan Capital bid. How have you been?"

"Busy as always. But I didn't expect to meet you in America. What brings you here?"

"Business, of course. I was hoping to discover some promising investments in Silicon Valley."

"I see. Well, I'm here for a similar reason."

Norman McGrath chuckled as he met Mark Campbell's eyes, who was standing beside In-hyuk.

"Ah, let me introduce myself properly. I'm Norman McGrath with AMK Partners. You must be CEO Mark Campbell?"

Mark Campbell, eyes wide with surprise, snapped to attention.

"Hello! Nice to meet you. But what brings you here...?"

He knew the name AMK Partners. Unlike Taeshin Asset Management, which was only famous within Korea, it was a globally renowned company with a string of international investment successes.

"I came to discuss a proposal. I was hoping we could arrange a meeting."

"... So suddenly?"

Norman McGrath answered with a smile.

"My apologies for not making prior contact. It's such an important matter that I came without an appointment. Could you spare me a moment?"

Mark Campbell glanced at In-hyuk.

He had just signed the investment agreement with Taeshin Asset Management, so this could potentially lead to awkward misunderstandings.

Meeting his eyes, In-hyuk spoke quietly.

"I'll get going for now. Let's meet again at dinner."

"Huh? Oh, all right."

"Branch Manager McGrath, I hope we meet again soon."

"I'll see what I can do to arrange that."

With the farewells complete, In-hyuk immediately got into the car Baek Si-hwan brought.

Meanwhile, Norman McGrath and Mark Campbell headed inside.

Since the conference room was still messy from the earlier internal document review, they went to the CEO's office instead.

Once seated, Mark Campbell gathered his thoughts and got straight to the point.

"What brings the branch manager of AMK Partners all the way here?"

Sitting opposite, Norman McGrath smiled at him.

"As I mentioned, a proposal. AMK Partners is currently working with a company that would create great synergy here, and I'm considering moving forward with an investment and an MOU."

Mark Campbell replied, trying to keep his composure.

"May I ask which company it is?"

Norman McGrath produced a prepared PPT document and handed it over.

"Please take a look."

"I'll just excuse myself for a moment."

As he looked through the pages, Mark Campbell's eyes widened.

"Accent... tia, is it?"

"That's right. A small system development company in Malta, New York. I thought their patents and software under development might be a great fit for Greenbyte Labs."

He turned to the next page. As Norman McGrath said, the technical specs looked excellent.

At the same time, Mark Campbell was floored by In-hyuk. It was as if he had foreseen this scenario and brought it up first.

"How much are you considering investing? And if you're suggesting an MOU, does that mean you want to discuss technical cooperation? What would the sharing scope and percentage of ownership after commercialization be?"

Norman McGrath's smile deepened.

Mark Campbell's interest meant they had crossed a key threshold for successful negotiations.

"The initial investment would be $40 million, with a total of $120 million over three stages. And the side holding the core technology would take 65%."

Roughly 170 billion won in Korean currency.

It was an excellent offer.

Moreover, the total investment was $20 million higher than what Taeshin Asset Management had proposed.

Mark Campbell bit his lower lip.

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Meanwhile, In-hyuk was on his way back to his lodging after leaving Greenbyte Labs.

There was a moment of silence before Baek Si-hwan, driving, quietly spoke up.

"Division director."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any idea why AMK Partners visited?"

Baek Si-hwan hadn't expected Norman McGrath's sudden appearance either.

Especially as he'd shown up right after the investment agreement with Greenbyte Labs was completed.

"I'm not certain, but I have a guess."

"Really? Could you share it?"

In-hyuk hesitated for a moment before replying.

"I heard that AMK Partners has recently shown interest in low-power systems. They were reportedly starting their search from the U. S. East Coast... so they may have contacted Accentia before us."

When that name came up, Baek Si-hwan's eyes widened in the rearview mirror.

"You mean that Accentia you mentioned earlier? Then the reason CEO Mark Campbell was approached was..."

"Probably to propose an investment or mediate cooperation with Accentia—maybe both."

Baek Si-hwan had a rough idea of the investment scale Taeshin Asset Management could mobilize.

It wasn't bad, but it was nowhere near what AMK Partners could do.

And with Norman McGrath, the up-and-coming Korean branch manager, taking action personally, the investment agreement just completed might now be at risk.

"Isn't that a problem? Did you leave on purpose, expecting this situation?"

Since Greenbyte Labs could break the agreement and defect to the other side, even if it meant paying a penalty.

"We've already finished the agreement. What CEO Mark Campbell does next is entirely up to him."

"But..."

Then, In-hyuk's phone, tucked in his pocket, began to ring.