Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 61

What a Dangerous Business

The vibration sound from In-hyuk's phone kept ringing.

From the driver's seat, Baek Si-hwan curiously asked, "Aren't you going to answer?"

"I should answer."

With a slightly bothered look, In-hyuk pressed the call and speakerphone buttons.

"Yes, this is Kang In-hyuk."

The caller was Mark Campbell, the CEO of Greenbyte Labs.

[Is this a good time to talk?]

"Yes, go ahead. By the way, weren't you meeting with AMK Partners?"

It had just barely been over ten minutes since he left there.

[The meeting just finished.]

"So what's the reason for your call? Has something changed with our arrangement?"

At In-hyuk's dispassionate words, Mark Campbell fell briefly silent before responding.

[I'm calling about the conversation I had with AMK Partners. They offered both investment and an MOU with Accentia, as your division director mentioned.]

At that, In-hyuk glanced at the rearview mirror.

For a split second, Baek Si-hwan's gaze met his in the mirror before turning back to the front.

It was a topic that would naturally grab both ears and eyes.

"This seems like a crucial business matter. Is it alright to discuss it with me?"

AMK Partners had grown into a company incomparable to Taeshin Asset Management in a very short time.

No matter what offer they made, Greenbyte Labs had no choice but to pay attention.

[It doesn't matter. I already declined their offer. The branch manager, Norman McGrath, just left.]

"You declined? Weren't their terms better than ours?"

[They definitely were. Of course, maybe out of desperation I acted on stubbornness, but I couldn't ignore the loyalty I owed you for making the initial investment offer.]

At that moment, In-hyuk felt a twinge inside.

Honestly, from the start, he had orchestrated this himself.

He had moved Norman McGrath of AMK Partners to gauge what kind of person Mark Campbell was.

If the results hadn't met his expectations, he'd even considered replacing him if necessary.

He'd encountered too many people in his previous life who betrayed out of greed and self-interest.

But Mark Campbell's reaction was different from what he expected.

"So you're saying... you want to continue partnering with us?"

[That's right.]

"Are you really alright with that?"

In-hyuk had instructed Norman McGrath to make a significant offer, citing Gordon Grimes's directions.

It was a very tempting proposal, one anyone would seriously consider.

He'd even set the amount high enough to make it easy for Mark Campbell to turn his back.

[It would be a lie to say it doesn't sting to turn down their offer. But it was my greed that put Greenbyte in this position. My staff suffered as well. But having already received more investment than we deserve, would it be right to get greedy for more?]

This time, In-hyuk fell silent for a moment before speaking again.

"Thank you for making a good decision. Let's talk further about this over dinner."

[Understood. I'll treat you to a proper meal.]

The speakerphone call ended.

Watching this through the rearview mirror, Baek Si-hwan asked cautiously, "So AMK Partners was targeting Greenbyte Labs... is that really okay?"

"What if it's not?"

Maybe sensing the aggressive tone, his eyes widened slightly.

"... Sorry?"

"There are always variables with any choice. The same goes for CEO Mark Campbell's decision. So, before asking if it's okay, shouldn't we analyze the situation and discuss countermeasures?"

"I'll be more careful next time."

Silence fell again.

A moment later, a message arrived on In-hyuk's phone.

【Norman: The investment negotiations with Greenbyte Labs have fallen through. And from the situation, it seems they've decided to take investment from Taeshin Asset Management. Should we try reaching out again?】

It was a report from Norman McGrath, whom he'd met earlier.

【Gordon: No. For now, just focus on Accentia. I'll look to partner that side with another business I've selected.】

【Norman: Greenbyte looked like a good fit for Accentia's technology synergy. Maybe we could raise the investment amount?】

【Gordon: It could actually turn out better this way, so please follow my decision.】

This time, the notification arrived a bit later than before.

【Norman: I'll do as you say.】

Meanwhile, the car arrived at the hotel. In-hyuk entered the room with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"You did that on speakerphone on purpose, didn't you?"

At Hong Yu-geon's question, In-hyuk smiled slightly.

"Was it that obvious?"

"Well, anyone who knows your relationship with AMK Partners would know what that meant."

Both of them knew that In-hyuk was Gordon Grimes.

So they would also naturally know that it was In-hyuk who had caused Norman McGrath to approach Greenbyte Labs.

"We needed to see how the guy would move."

"By now, Baek Si-hwan is probably agonizing in his room."

There was a hint of admiration in his response.

As he said, the goal of this plan was to cause confusion among Baek Si-hwan, the Organization behind him including Baek Ji-woong, and the rest.

At the same time, it was to use the low-profile company Greenbyte Labs to expose AMK Partners' movements and draw attention to Accentia as well.

"If that happens, it'll be a lot easier to read their moves."

"But if Accentia is that important to Greenbyte Labs, why did they approach through AMK Partners first? Wouldn't Norman McGrath think something was off if the steps got tangled?"

You never know what will happen once they learn that In-hyuk and Gordon Grimes are the same person.

"No need to worry. I'll make sure they're too busy with other things to get suspicious."

"... Just how far ahead are you planning? Oh, by the way, did you happen to visit the safehouse we told you about yesterday?"

Hong Yu-geon brought up something he hadn't managed to ask due to the morning rush.

"Yeah, I stopped by there and took care of some other business."

"Did you catch them?"

"They were already gone. But you said at first there were only four, right?"

"That's right. We didn't expect a fifth one to show up and kill the others either."

The four killed on the road had nothing with them to prove their identities.

The police would of course check entry records, but In-hyuk guessed they most likely used fake passports.

Even if they tried facial recognition, finding their true identities would be tough.

"I went to see if there were any traces left, but they cleaned up thoroughly and vanished. I had Mi-ah hack the nearby CCTV, but they got away very cleanly."

"For someone to disappear after sniping from a building by the road... well, that says it all. Judging by their skills, they're definitely professionals. There's a fair chance they're ex-military, or maybe like us, from the mercenary side."

Hong Yu-geon, uncharacteristically, looked serious.

Van Hester, beside them, added his opinion.

"Their skills were a little off for an attempt on the CEO's life. If that was the best they could do, their odds of escape should have been near zero. Honestly, it felt like they were intentionally sent to be eliminated."

In-hyuk nodded.

"I think so too. They said I was wounded by rubber bullets, but I was still able to move. Compared to the guys we fought in the safehouse, there was a big difference in quality."

At least their armed attack was possible because the mysterious men had firearms.

"It seems unlikely they'll keep chasing us."

In-hyuk agreed with Hong Yu-geon's assessment.

"If I'm their target, they'll try again somehow. All the more reason for us to be careful."

"We're bodyguards, but even we can't cover every possible sniper shot."

"I'll take care of that myself."

In-hyuk recalled the attack on the road.

It was only for a moment, but through the play of light, everything entering his field of vision, and the feel of the wind, he could sense something flying toward him.

"Seriously... being your bodyguard is hazardous business."

With a sigh, Hong Yu-geon collapsed into the sofa.

Watching him, In-hyuk smiled again.

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At the same time, in the room across the hall.

After much deliberation, Baek Si-hwan called Baek Ji-woong, chairman of the W&W Group.

[So. How did things go?]

He hadn't reported the events from yesterday yet, so the other man was unaware.

"... I'm sorry. Things went wrong and I failed."

There was a moment's silence.

[Why?]

"The security guards who were away happened to return. And..."

[What else happened?]

"The reinforcements sent by the Organization were useless. Not only did the scenario not run as planned, but a first-class operative on their side eliminated all of them."

Remembering what had happened yesterday made Baek Si-hwan's stomach clench.

[First-class? Who was it?]

"Do you remember Kuroki Reina...?"

Baek Ji-woong, recalling something, answered.

[Wasn't she in the same class as you? I remember she was remarkably ruthless for a woman.]

"Yes. That Kuroki Reina brought in the guys who were to be discarded as failures after falling behind at camp."

Baek Si-hwan's explanation only deepened the mystery, but the answer was easy enough to deduce.

[If Kuroki is first-class... And sending her on this job isn't likely meant well. Am I wrong?]

He got right to the heart of the situation.

"She said it was a warning. And told me to submit a report about the Daemyung incident and the safehouse attack."

Baek Si-hwan's tone became even more cautious.

He soon heard Baek Ji-woong murmuring over the phone.

[A pointless way to get the message across.]

"What should we do?"

[What else? Do as they want. There's nothing to gain by getting on the wrong side of them now. If anything, I only ended up making things harder for you by dragging this out.]

"It's alright. I'm fine."

[Is that everything you have to report? Nothing about Kang In-hyuk?]

"I was just about to explain. Taeshin Asset Management approved a $100 million investment in Greenbyte Labs, with the first $50 million to be transferred soon."

This was an unexpectedly big development.

[$100 million? I didn't think that company was worth that much.]

Baek Ji-woong had investigated Greenbyte Labs as soon as he heard Kang In-hyuk was conducting due diligence.

"There have been a lot of internal issues. The problem is, AMK Partners was targeting them too. To summarize, Norman McGrath made a personal visit, but Greenbyte turned down his $120 million investment offer and decided to go with Taeshin Asset Management. There's also a company called Accentia involved — it's worth investigating."

A heavy sigh came through the line.

[Hmm... If you're just looking at profit, that's probably not the reason. Is it loyalty, the so-called matter of principle?]

"I'm not completely sure, but CEO Mark Campbell seemed to find Kang In-hyuk more trustworthy."

[Same thing. There aren't as many people as you'd think who run their companies that way. I didn't expect Kang In-hyuk to outplay AMK Partners like that.]

"But if AMK Partners wants Greenbyte Labs that badly, I expect they'll try to approach again."

[That's possible. So, when are you returning?]

At this last question, Baek Si-hwan exhaled lightly.

"We're still under police investigation because of the assault on Kang In-hyuk, so it'll take a few more days."

[No movement from Kang In-hyuk related to the Taeshin Trading TF division?]

"He might have done something while in his room, but from what I could see directly, there's nothing yet. Plus, the due diligence at Greenbyte Labs was handled just between the two of us."

[I see. Report in periodically for now.]

"Understood."

After ending the call, Baek Si-hwan tossed his phone onto the bed and collapsed back. His mind grew tangled.

He'd initially had reservations when the Organization assigned him as Kang In-hyuk's secretary.

But after spending days sorting paperwork at a desk, and then going on this business trip to the U. S. with Kang In-hyuk, he began feeling something different.

"What does Greenbyte Labs have that led to all these decisions? And what exactly is Accentia?"

Too many things remained unseen.

With a sigh, Baek Si-hwan sat at his desk and opened his laptop.

Chapter 62

Why Do You Know So Much?

【Taeshin Asset Management, decides to Invest $50 Million in US Greenbyte Labs! The company specializes in low-power, eco-friendly systems and, after suffering from poor management until recently, has agreed to take on investment... Meanwhile, some are expressing concerns, stating that the chances for this investment do not look high...】

【US IT company Accentia, attracts investment from AMK Partners! The investment fund is said to be about $20 million... It is known that negotiations are underway, with details being arranged...】

【Kang In-hyuk, MP Division Director of Taeshin Asset Management and the son-in-law of the Taeshin Group family, caught in a gun attack in Silicon Valley? Five days ago, while traveling by car in Silicon Valley, San Jose, California, he was attacked by multiple gunmen...】

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The headlines were dominated by various articles.

However, most were about In-hyuk, who had gone to the US.

Even though neither the investment nor the incident at the time had been leaked externally, the news kept spreading.

In the meantime, In-hyuk had returned from the US and entered the arrivals gate with Baek Si-hwan, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester.

Chal-kal— chal-kak—

As soon as the door opened, flashes burst out furiously.

In-hyuk frowned at the barrage of lights, but the two security guards blocked the way ahead, allowing him to walk quickly.

"The news articles were bigger than expected, so that's probably why. Let's get in the company car for now."

Baek Si-hwan took the lead as he spoke.

At that moment, the shouting of the surrounding reporters could be heard.

"Director Kang In-hyuk! Is it true there was an armed attack in San Jose? According to local witnesses, the attackers had machine guns—was this grudge related to the Greenbyte Labs investment?"

"We heard there was an inexplicable traffic accident here in Korea as well. Could that be connected to this shooting?"

"What convinced you to invest nearly 70 billion won in Greenbyte Labs? What made you see potential?"

The reporters' voices were noisy.

Of course, interview requests had poured in even before he returned to Korea.

But In-hyuk had refused them all, which explained the mob at the airport.

Pushing forward through the crowd, In-hyuk kept moving.

Then, a familiar man approached with a group in black suits, quickly forming a circle around In-hyuk.

"... Noh Dongjun?"

It was Noh Dongjun, In-hyuk's peer from Taeshin Group.

"It's been a while, director. I've been instructed to escort you to HQ, so please come to the car."

The others were TSS security guards, like Baek Si-hwan had been. Pushing the reporters aside, they safely led In-hyuk to the car.

"Whew—! There really are a ton of people."

"It was a pretty big deal, after all."

Once they got in, Noh Dongjun, in the seat next to him, spoke in a slightly reproachful tone.

After everyone else had boarded, the car slowly set off.

"How are you even here? Shouldn't you be working at HQ right now?"

"I was working hard, thanks to you. But when your return schedule was announced, someone from above ordered me to come get you personally."

Noh Dongjun originally worked in Stock Operations Team 2, but had moved to the newly established M&A/PEF division when In-hyuk set it up.

Since then, he'd worked in PEF Team 2 and was included as a member of the Mulsan HQ TF division team for the current project.

"Was it the chairman's order?"

"No, Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho's."

"And the reason?"

"Why would anyone explain something like that to a low-level manager like me?"

His tone had been a bit prickly from a while ago.

"Is this because the rest of the TF team is already at HQ, and I'm the only one behind?"

"How could I, a mere manager, dare say anything to our exalted division director?"

"Forget it, just tell me about what's been going on so far."

"What do you mean?"

"The thing I told you to do before I left for the States. And let's drop the formality."

Finally, Noh Dongjun let out a deep sigh.

"I know. You mean the things about Taeshin Spintech's finances and related projects. There's a lot, so it'll take another two days. Do you want me to send you what's summarized so far?"

"Do that. Now that I'm back, I need to at least check up to the middle."

"Got it. I'll compile it and email it to you as soon as I get back to the office."

After another hour, during which In-hyuk was briefed on the HQ situation, they arrived at Taeshin Trading.

Everyone went to their respective places.

In-hyuk separated from Baek Si-hwan and headed alone to the executive office floor.

There, Lee Jae-jun, Tae Seok-ho's security guard, personally guided him to the office.

"Please, sit down."

Tae Seok-ho stood up from his desk as soon as he saw In-hyuk and sat in the center seat.

"I was a bit surprised you called me, not the chairman."

"After hearing you had such a huge incident in the States, I was worried. Are you all right?"

But his expression was not only calm, it even held a hint of regret.

"I'm fine."

"Were you able to find out who was behind it?"

"It was difficult to get that far. The local police are searching, but it won't be easy."

"I see..."

"I did share the incident with the embassy, but I doubt that will change anything significantly."

"It must be a heavy burden."

Listening to him, In-hyuk quickly got to the point.

"So, what's the real reason you called me?"

Tae Seok-ho let out a slight sigh.

"I'm the company EVP, after all. I need to check whether the TF division, on which Taeshin's fate depends, is running properly."

"You could have heard plenty about it from the employees who arrived first."

"Still, isn't it best to hear directly from the TF division's head?"

In the end, he was fishing for something to nitpick.

In-hyuk leaned back on the sofa.

"I was in the US, you know. Or are you planning to blame me for prioritizing the trip over my work in the TF division?"

Hit where it hurt, Tae Seok-ho's gaze sharpened, but soon settled down.

Normally, the real Tae Seok-ho wouldn't reveal his inner thoughts so easily.

At that moment, In-hyuk caught on that there was something pressing on his mind.

"I wouldn't blame someone who just closed a huge investment deal in America."

"Thank you for the kind words."

He didn't mean it at all. He was just throwing out casual words to twist Tae Seok-ho inside a little more.

"I hear the total investment is $100 million. What kind of amazing results do you expect by supporting a company like Greenbyte Labs? I looked into it myself... but I don't see how they're worth that much investment."

In-hyuk stared at Tae Seok-ho for a moment before speaking.

"You've always seemed especially interested in Taeshin Asset Management's business. But as far as I know, we're not required to report on our managed funds to HQ—not the kind of funds I handle in the MP Division, especially."

"Don't you think your attitude toward me's gotten a bit sharper? No matter what, I'm your wife's uncle and a company superior."

"Should the 'superior' be trying to use the company run by his nephew-in-law for his personal gain?"

He was referring to the incident with Chulsan Capital last time.

Back then, Tae Seok-ho tried to use In-hyuk's MP Division and the H&T Fund to speed up the acquisition of Chulsan Capital.

But because In-hyuk cut ties, Chulsan Capital ended up going to AMK Partners.

"... What?"

The explanation didn't end there.

"I also know you're currently actively working to secure shares in Taeshin Trading. But instead of thinking about how to lay your spoon on that right now, shouldn't you make sure you keep Taeshin Spintech in line first?"

Tae Seok-ho's face stiffened the moment that name came up.

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"If you say you really don't know, I won't bother trying to make you understand. But if you're thinking of the future, you might want to check whether you haven't left any crumbs behind while you were chasing after those Taeshin Trading shares."

"..."

An uneasy silence followed.

After watching for a moment, In-hyuk quietly stood up.

"I have a lot to catch up on, so I'll be going now. And I'll do my best in the TF division to help solve the Taeshin Group's problems."

After In-hyuk left, silence filled the office.

Soon after, Lee Jae-jun, who had been standing a bit back, cautiously approached.

"EVP. By any chance, is what Kang In-hyuk implied..."

"Kang In-hyuk must know that funds from Taeshin Spintech were funneled into the H&T Fund."

This embezzlement happened at least five years ago, before Kang In-hyuk had even joined Taeshin Group.

Even though he was interested in group affairs, if he didn't know from the beginning, it wouldn't have been easy for him to investigate it.

"That must mean the chairman tipped him off."

Because otherwise, Lee Jae-jun thought, there was no way Kang In-hyuk could have found out.

But Tae Seok-ho shook his head.

"Father wouldn't have. If he knew, he wouldn't have let me be."

"Perhaps he wanted to find an external justification and evidence."

Tae Seok-ho considered Lee Jae-jun's suggestion for a moment.

"... But then why would he borrow the hands of his grandson-in-law? If it were father, he'd have kicked me out right away, evidence or none."

"That's true. Frankly, things would have been easier if he'd just died while he was at it."

At the same time, Tae Seok-ho groaned. He had no idea what or how much Kang In-hyuk had found out.

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Far into the evening,

Baek Si-hwan, having left the Taeshin Trading HQ building, found his way to a place in Donui-dong called 'Seunghwa's Set Menu.'

Inside sat Tae Seok-ho, who had arrived earlier.

"You're here, EVP."

Baek Si-hwan approached and greeted him, and Tae Seok-ho gave a deep smile.

"Sit down, don't just stand there."

Tae Seok-ho filled Baek Si-hwan's glass first with alcohol.

"Working at my nephew-in-law's side must be tough, hm?"

"... Not at all."

"So, how was the trip to America?"

Baek Si-hwan tilted his head slightly at his question.

"Didn't you meet Director Kang In-hyuk yourself?"

"Ah, I didn't get the full story. I wanted to hear it from a more objective perspective. With your position, I haven't exactly been getting in-depth reports, and this might finally be my chance, no?"

The reason Baek Si-hwan became Kang In-hyuk's secretary was on Tae Seok-ho's recommendation.

And when he was reassigned, he gave Tae Seok-ho regular reports.

But since Kang In-hyuk didn't trust him and left him at the office, he lost his usefulness.

"If there's anything worth mentioning, after the investment contract with Greenbyte Labs, AMK Partners' branch manager Norman McGrath visited. They offered $120 million..."

Baek Si-hwan recounted what he had seen and heard at the time.

At this, Tae Seok-ho's eyes widened.

"Greenbyte rejected AMK and chose Kang In-hyuk?"

"That's right."

"That's unexpected. Did you find out why Kang In-hyuk chose Greenbyte Labs?"

"I haven't heard anything. Honestly, I don't understand why Director Kang In-hyuk made that choice myself."

Tae Seok-ho agreed.

That's why he was so frustrated, and why he insisted on meeting Baek Si-hwan in person rather than just relying on remote briefings.

"Anything else? Did he do any background digging, meet anyone, or anything like that?"

"Director Kang In-hyuk has never shared such things with me. I haven't seen or heard anything."

"I see? Still, given that he brought you along on this business trip, it means your standing has improved compared to before. Can I expect more thorough reports from now on?"

Tae Seok-ho was determined to keep tabs on Kang In-hyuk's movements.

But Baek Si-hwan made a subtle face.

"This trip was an exception, so I can't promise. But if I get the chance, I'll report."

"If you force things, you'll just create pointless hostility, so I can't blame you. All right, I understand."

With that, the conversation ended.

Baek Si-hwan stood up and headed to the exit.

As he passed, he exchanged a subtle glance with Lee Jae-jun, Tae Seok-ho's security guard, who was holding the door open.

Is Tae Seok-ho working with the 'Organization'???

But with Lee Jae-jun exchanging glances with Baek Si-hwan, I doubt it...

maybe it's something similar to what Baek Si-hwan did to Kang In-hyuk in the past life?

Chapter 63

Let's Move Quickly

Kang Do-young, the heir to KQ Group, sat in an old-looking office, his face full of dissatisfaction.

This place was neither the KQ Distribution head office he normally used nor the LifeStar Entertainment office he ran until recently.

Instead, it was the division director's office at the KQ Fabric subsidiary, where he had been assigned just a few days earlier.

"What on earth am I supposed to do in a place like this?"

His muttering was filled with annoyance.

Ahn Min-gi, the secretary, watched him from the sofa and spoke up cautiously.

"As you heard at the time of your reassignment, starting next month, there will be a military uniform supply bid in the defense business for the first half of next year. Our KQ Fabric will move forward with contracts by forming a joint venture with companies likely to win those bids."

But Kang Do-young only adopted an even more uninterested expression.

"How much could supplying a bunch of uniforms be worth...?"

"The annual budget allocated for clothing production is about 2.5 trillion won. Split between the first and second half of the year, that's 1.25 trillion won each period. The raw fabric supply scale is about 0.5 to 0.8%. If we sign the contract, KQ Fabric's sales will be in the range of around 600 million to 1 billion won."

It was a fairly detailed explanation, but it only worsened Kang Do-young's mood.

"Only 600 million to 1 billion? Is that the kind of thing my father asked me to do?"

"The percentage can change partially depending on the material, technology, and purpose of the fabric. There can be an increase up to as much as 2 to 5%."

"When does that happen?"

"For special clothing. Kevlar, aramid, dyneema, carbon, ceramic, silica, and so on—they're used in special environments and have high raw material prices. In those cases, sales could reach at least several billion."

At that, Kang Do-young stared intently at Ahn Min-gi.

"How do you know all this so well?"

"I read the relevant materials after hearing I'd be coming here. That way, I can assist you with certainty, division director."

"Manager Ahn! Turns out you're more of a hard worker than I thought."

"... I just did what was expected of me."

But then a question occurred to him.

"You mentioned likely bidders, right? So is there already a company favored to win?"

"Since the bid scale is substantial, it won't go to just one or two companies. But considering mass supply and production capabilities, a company called RSK has the best chance."

"RSK? Then there must be a company that used to supply their raw fabric?"

Kang Do-young was no fool.

He had graduated from a reputable four-year university and had even run KQ Mulsan as executive vice president as well as a company called LifeEnter.

Naturally, with just a brief outline, he could deduce the context of the situation.

"Texcellence, located in Cheongju, Chungbuk, has the largest share of deliveries. They've been trading for about six years. Unless we deal with them, it will be difficult for us to get in."

"Really? Then we'll have to come up with a plan. Send me the related documents."

Kang Do-young had no intention of staying at KQ Fabric for long.

He quickly collected himself and began to slowly review the materials Ahn Min-gi handed over.

* * *

In-hyuk was at work at the TF division of Taeshin Trading.

The internal staff numbered about 20 people, with employees brought in from both the head office and Taeshin Asset Management in a 60:40 ratio, moving according to In-hyuk's orders.

Just then, Noh Dongjun entered In-hyuk's office.

"I've sorted the Taeshin Spintech research, production, and supply contracts and uploaded them to the cloud. Also, these are the materials you requested from the group's audit division, now organized."

"That got processed faster than I thought. And could you decide between formal and informal speech?"

"We are at work, after all. It's not like our old company. How would it look if we talked informally in the main office?"

He was mindful of how others saw them.

"You didn't seem to mind at the airport."

In-hyuk checked the documents from the audit division.

They outlined various issues—at least superficially—among group affiliates and subsidiaries, including Taeshin Group's predecessor, Mulsan.

"... This is pretty serious."

"I skimmed through it, but it didn't seem that bad. Even the subsidiaries' balance sheets don't have high error rates."

Now that informal speech had been allowed, Noh Dongjun relaxed immediately.

In-hyuk sighed.

"There's a big difference from what I figured out."

"You mean the companies forged their balance sheets?"

"That's part of it. And the audit division deliberately didn't check some things."

Noh Dongjun's expression hardened.

"You're saying the audit division itself is the problem?"

In-hyuk knew the cause well. In his past life, he even knew who led all this.

"There's no need to request any more data from the audit division."

"Then what do we do? Don't we need them to assess the condition of affiliates and subsidiaries?"

"We need to verify everything ourselves."

"... What? All of it?"

Taeshin Group had nine major affiliates including Mulsan and about 20 subsidiaries under them.

"I have full authority from the chairman, so there shouldn't be any issues."

In that moment, Noh Dongjun was so shocked he almost shouted, but quickly lowered his voice.

"Do you know how many people are in the TF division now?"

"Twenty-three, not including me?"

"Who asked you to guess? Full authority or not, the problem is manpower! How are we supposed to reassess every affiliate and subsidiary with just that staff?"

In-hyuk nodded as if understanding.

"If there aren't enough, we'll get more."

"Get more? Don't tell me you're thinking of hiring part-timers?"

This wasn't just any task, it was a full group re-audit.

Such an important matter couldn't be entrusted to regular employees, so Noh Dongjun was even more frustrated.

"We have the audit division, don't we?"

"What do you mean?"

"No need to worry—just start with what you can manage with the current staff. I'll get you people from the audit division as soon as possible. Oh, manager Baek, please come in for a moment."

In-hyuk pressed the internal call button.

Baek Si-hwan, who'd been working at an outside desk, immediately came in, wondering what was needed.

"You called for me?"

"There are a lot of issues with the data we received from the audit division. Looks like we'll need to do a full re-audit, so please support that task, manager Baek."

"... A re-audit?"

"We're short-handed right now."

Baek Si-hwan's expression became subtle.

"Leaving aside manpower, did the head office approve a full re-audit?"

"No, I'm proceeding with the authority I was given. If there's any pushback, I'll handle it. Just follow Manager Noh's instructions."

Noh Dongjun, who had been listening quietly, suddenly asked in alarm.

"You mean I'm supposed to head up the re-audit? Then what about you?"

"The chairman has assigned me another task. I'll get you more people as fast as I can."

"How?"

"I have my ways, so don't worry."

With that, In-hyuk, who had turned his attention to documents, looked up at the two men standing dumbstruck.

"If you've said everything you need to, shouldn't you get back to work? Manager Noh, manager Baek."

The two exchanged looks, then slowly walked out.

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A few hours later.

A middle-aged man burst into the TF division, and threw open the division director's door without even knocking.

In-hyuk, who was focused on work, turned his attention to the man.

"What brings Director Han Gi-seok of the audit division here?"

The man, his face full of agitation, seemed startled.

"You know me?"

He had never met In-hyuk face to face before.

"You're Director Han Gi-seok from the audit division, aren't you?"

He was of course referring to the "audit division" they had just discussed in the office.

Han Gi-seok's expression soured even further.

"You know me, and you pull these tricks?"

"Tricks? I'm just doing my job."

"If you're the TF division, just do TF division work! I handed over the requested documents with no grumbling because you said it was the chairman's order... and now you're doing a re-audit?"

The matter and their preparations in the TF division had spread even there.

In essence, the TF division was encroaching on the audit division's territory.

Even if he did have full authority, it was an act that could disrupt group discipline and stir up controversy.

Still, In-hyuk maintained a calm demeanor.

"There were problems in the materials from your division, so I'm conducting a re-audit."

"Problems? What kind of problems?!"

Han Gi-seok's raised voice drew attention as TF division staff outside began to stand up and watch.

With the door left wide open, everything happening was visible to all.

"I was tasked by the chairman to lead the TF division, and any required due diligence is within my authority."

"I doubt that means tearing apart departments that are running just fine?"

In-hyuk stared piercingly at the shouting Han Gi-seok.

"Departments that are running fine? Can you put your job as division director on the line for what you just said?"

"... What?"

In-hyuk walked closer and lowered his voice.

"Director Han Gi-seok, who has been loyal to the chairman all his life, looking after affiliates and taking backdoor money? How did it come to this?"

"W-what?!"

Han Gi-seok, startled, tried to step back, but In-hyuk immediately gripped his shoulder.

"Taiwan HSBC Bank under a borrowed name. If you don't want to testify to the prosecutor about who was greasing that account and how much, you might want to stay quiet. If not the prosecutor, the tax office could be next."

At In-hyuk's quiet muttering, Han's face went pale.

"H-how did you..."

"Don't ask how I know. I hear it so often these days it makes my ears ache. Anyway, you do understand what I mean, right?"

"..."

As Han fell silent, In-hyuk pressed his lips into a thin smile.

"If you've understood, start by nodding your head."

"...!"

Han's head moved slowly up and down.

"I was hoping to borrow some audit division staff anyway. You came at just the right time. Since we need to do a re-audit, select and send me some appropriate personnel. Just remember if you try anything funny, expect a call from the prosecutor about that account

the next day. Oh, and don't move the funds to the Julius Bank account in Switzerland under your wife's cousin's name, either."

With this, Han's face went from white to blue.

"How—how do you know even that?"

The account In-hyuk mentioned had nothing to do with company affairs, and unless it was connected to an Interpol investigation, only Han himself could know of its existence.

He couldn't figure out how anyone else—especially In-hyuk—could know.

"That's not important right now, so let's move quickly."

Troubled, Han Gi-seok remained frozen in place.

"...."

Smack—!

In-hyuk clapped his hands together, snapping Han out of his thoughts.

"Aren't you moving?"

"R-right."

Deflated, Han Gi-seok shuffled outside.

In-hyuk then exchanged glances with staff outside his office.

"All right, everyone—don't pay attention to anything unnecessary. Focus on your work!"

People glanced at each other before returning to their desks and resuming their work.

At that moment, Noh Dongjun came up to In-hyuk.

"What on earth did you say that made the group HQ audit division director tuck his tail and walk away like that?"

"I just gave him a little advice."

Han's slush funds, like other chronic issues in Taeshin, were something In-hyuk had uncovered.

Of course, his reason for investigating was to help put Tae Seok-ho, the former number two in the succession line, in the chairman's seat.

"Give him advice one more time and he might faint."

"Enough. You get back to work too. I have to head out soon."

"Where to? Another external meeting?"

It was well-known from In-hyuk's days at Taeshin Asset Management that he left the office most afternoons.

Naturally, Noh Dongjun was aware.

"Why? Do I look like I go out to play?"

"You never know."

"Whatever. Just manage the re-audit. The audit division will be sending more people, too."

At the same time, Noh Dongjun was clearly surprised.

"They really agreed to send more people?"

Leaving Noh's noisy question behind, In-hyuk exited the office accompanied by Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

Once in the elevator and seeing no one else around, Hong Yu-geon asked a question.

"How did you know Han Gi-seok from the audit division was hiding slush funds?"

Han hadn't been among those In-hyuk had asked about in previous background checks.

"You don't think you're my only source, do you?"

"That's exactly why I'm asking. You're with us almost all day."

"Don't be nosy. You might get hurt."

"Tch—! So, are you off for personal business today too?"

He was asking about In-hyuk's schedule.

"No. Today let's go to Cheonan."

"Cheonan?"

"We have to check on the place we're in charge of."

Hong Yu-geon nodded as if he understood instantly.

"Aha~!"

Chapter 64

As Soon As He Learned to Walk

About two hours later.

In-hyuk arrived at the head office and factory of Taeshin Spintech, located on the outskirts of Cheonan, Chungcheongnam Province.

There were large and small factories nearby, and further away, countless rice fields and farmlands.

He parked in front of the barrier at the entrance, and a person came out from one of the security booths.

"Where are you from?"

Hong Yu-geon glanced sideways and made eye contact with In-hyuk.

"I'm Kang In-hyuk, division director from the Taeshin Trading TF division."

"Taeshin Trading... do you mean from the head office? P-please wait a moment!"

The startled man hurried back into the security booth.

And before long, the barrier lifted. As soon as they entered the parking lot, another middle-aged man came out of an inner building and hurried toward them.

"Oh my! Hello! I'm Lee Chang-hwan, the person responsible for Taeshin Spintech here."

He was the president of Taeshin Spintech, Lee Chang-hwan.

"I'm Kang In-hyuk."

Introducing himself, In-hyuk handed over a newly printed business card.

Lee Chang-hwan's eyes widened as he saw the contents.

It stated a position responsible for the TF division at the group head office, Taeshin Asset Management's MP Division, and he also knew that In-hyuk was the son-in-law of the Taeshin Group family.

"But... what brings you here without notice?"

In-hyuk observed his expression closely.

His gaze wandered aimlessly in the air, the corners of his mouth forced into a fake smile as his lips trembled subtly, and fingertips quivered nervously. The atmosphere clearly hinted that something fishy was going on.

"As the division director of the TF Division at the head office, I dropped by for an inspection."

"Excuse me? An inspection... you say? What sort of inspection...?"

"Shouldn't you, president, know the reason better than I do?"

With those loaded words, In-hyuk headed toward the factory. Lee Chang-hwan, looking troubled, had no choice but to follow.

Employees passing by Taeshin Spintech gazed at them curiously.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk, with Lee Chang-hwan in tow, looked around the noisy areas filled with whirring machinery.

"From three years ago until now, the issues of declining sales and managerial problems have grown. Are you making any preparations for that?"

"Of course. Because of this, our sales and production teams are running themselves into the ground."

"Then, what orders have you received recently?"

Cold sweat beaded up on Lee Chang-hwan's broad forehead at this question.

"Recently? Well... as you know, although we're a subsidiary of a large corporation, we're not that different from a small, struggling company, so—"

"I'm not asking about that, I'm asking what orders have been received."

As his words trailed off, another middle-aged man who had been following urgently spoke up.

"We have nine contracts for fashion apparel and two for special uniforms."

It was Oh Hyun-nam, department manager of the sales department.

"It seems so,"

Lee Chang-hwan carefully echoed.

In-hyuk nodded slightly at his reply.

"Please bring all current supply contracts and sales-related documents from the past five years."

"... Excuse me?"

"Did you not hear me?"

"N-no! I'll get them!"

With a bitter smile, Lee Chang-hwan signaled another employee to move.

During this time, In-hyuk checked other parts of the factory before stepping outside, once again glancing at Lee Chang-hwan.

"Are you hot?"

He asked, noting how the man continued sweating even in winter.

"Hahaha! I must be a bit nervous."

"I'm only here to solve the problems of underperforming divisions in Taeshin. If the causes aren't intentional, you've got nothing to worry about."

"Of course, that's only natural."

With the conversation, they entered a meeting room in the office building.

Before long, the documents In-hyuk requested were placed before him.

Seeing how quickly they had been prepared, In-hyuk couldn't help but smile a little.

'As expected, they were ready for this.'

Otherwise, there was no way the documents would have come out this fast.

Seated behind the documents, In-hyuk received an additional envelope from Hong Yu-geon and handed it to Lee Chang-hwan.

"Would you read this first?"

"... What is this?"

"It's material I collected about Taeshin Spintech. I'd like to hear your explanation."

Perplexed, Lee Chang-hwan took the documents from the envelope. As he checked the contents, his expression stiffened rapidly.

"What is this...?"

"Don't you recognize it even after seeing it? It's data about the companies Taeshin Spintech has done business with for the past five years, isn't it?"

Lee Chang-hwan's brow furrowed instantly.

"Ah, now that you mention it, I do recall. It's just that some were previous deals and—"

"Weren't there two companies you still traded with just a few months ago?"

In-hyuk cut in as he was responding.

Lee Chang-hwan's expression grew even more subtle.

"... That's correct. But why...?"

"Upon investigation, all those companies turned out to be shell companies that are not properly operating. Yet, Taeshin Spintech conducted business with them. Isn't this something you should explain?"

This was something In-hyuk had asked Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester to investigate before he left the country.

"I didn't know they were shell companies. If you looked into it, you'd know we conducted business normally. There were no issues in the process at all."

Just as he claimed, aside from the fact that they were shell companies, there weren't any defects in the transaction records themselves.

Of course, In-hyuk was well aware of this.

"If there's really no problem."

"... What are you implying?"

"Reducing the amounts recorded with other companies, then connecting the leftover volumes to shell company transactions to manipulate sales. Are you still going to claim you don't know anything?"

As he explained, another envelope was opened. It contained the comparison of records just mentioned.

A chill swept over Lee Chang-hwan's face.

"...."

"You seemed pretty relieved just because you cleaned up the balance sheets and transaction records nicely. However, the TF Division will be conducting due diligence, and until exact results are out, your authority within Taeshin Spintech will be suspended."

"No! This really isn't—!"

"Ah, and the same applies to all executives involved. An official notice will follow soon, so please refrain from needless actions that could draw suspicion."

Finishing what he had to say, In-hyuk stood up. Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester gathered the documents prepared by the staff.

Lee Chang-hwan and the other employees left in the conference room could only stare blankly as they left.

* * *

Taeshin Trading head office.

Tae Seok-ho, sitting on the sofa in his office, saw the door open.

The man who entered was Han Gi-seok, the division director of the audit division.

Bowing quietly, he stepped forward and stood.

"... Did you call me?"

A brief silence hung in the air.

Then Tae Seok-ho looked Han Gi-seok up and down and spoke.

"Did the audit division provide additional personnel to the TF Division?"

It was only decided a few hours ago, but news of it had already reached Tae Seok-ho, leading him to summon Han Gi-seok.

"There were problems with the previous audit. But because the TF Division acts on the chairman's orders, I had no choice but to go along."

Tae Seok-ho's lips twitched as he began to speak.

"I thought you had quite a bit of professional pride, director Han."

"... Sir?"

"A rolling stone suddenly pushed out a stone that was set in place. Well, I could see why you would want to break into the TF Division like that. But to have your attitude change this much all of a sudden?"

Han Gi-seok clamped his mouth shut.

"...."

Watching that, Tae Seok-ho clicked his tongue.

"Did Director Kang In-hyuk threaten you?"

"No, nothing like that happened."

"Did Kang In-hyuk, by any chance, know about the money you took on the side?"

At that, Han Gi-seok fell to his knees on the floor.

"Executive vice president!"

Tae Seok-ho could not help but sigh.

"Haa... Do you at least know where your trail got caught?"

"I'm not sure either."

"Have you taken money recently?"

"No. Not since you warned me early last year."

The atmosphere grew more severe.

"Does Kang In-hyuk know everything you've done?"

"From what I can tell... it seems that way."

"How much does he know?"

"He specifically mentioned the numbered account in Taiwan's HSBC Bank that you set up for me."

Now Tae Seok-ho's expression turned to one of shock.

"You didn't go around blabbing about that, did you?"

"Not at all! Who could I possibly tell!"

The numbered account mentioned was one that Tae Seok-ho had arranged for him.

Naturally, no one else should know unless they were directly involved.

"Just how did he find out about that..."

Bzzz— bzzz—

At that moment, a vibration sounded from Lee Jae-jun's pocket as he stood to the side.

Checking the screen, he slipped cautiously over to Tae Seok-ho's side.

"It's a call from Spintech's president."

"Return to your place for now. Stay quiet for a while."

Han Gi-seok exited, and Lee Jae-jun pressed the call and speakerphone buttons.

"Go ahead."

["Deputy Chief Lee! Kang In-hyuk just visited."]

Tae Seok-ho almost responded directly but instead signaled to Lee Jae-jun with his eyes.

"What was the reason for his visit?"

["He said he was here for due diligence, and he mentioned the shell company issue. He also knew the way funds were being handled."]

From the desperation in his voice, it was clear how dire the situation was.

"And the result?"

["He suspended both me and the executives involved from our duties and left."]

Tae Seok-ho let out a long breath. Then he signaled Lee Jae-jun to continue listening while he remained silent.

"We'll look into it as well. For now, if there are any matters left related to the shell companies, clean them up completely."

["Understood."]

After the call ended, Tae Seok-ho spoke up again.

"Weren't the Spintech companies already dealt with?"

"There shouldn't have been any traceable evidence."

"Then how did Kang In-hyuk find out?"

It was like with Director Han Gi-seok's numbered account in Taiwan. He never imagined that Kang In-hyuk would find out.

"I honestly have no answer to give right now."

Tae Seok-ho's scowl deepened.

"Things are going to hell."

"What should we do?"

He'd been confident there would be no problem.

But Kang In-hyuk had already put the knife to their throats.

"We can't just let this go. Even if it gets noisy, we'll have to clean this up."

"Are you saying...?"

There was a sense that something was being understood.

Soon, Tae Seok-ho spoke again, his expression resolute.

"Can you find some truly capable guys? The best would be if it can be made to look like an accident."

Lee Jae-jun hesitated for a moment before offering his opinion cautiously.

"If we look back at what's happened around Division Director Kang In-hyuk, I'd say his instincts are quite sharp."

"His instincts... are sharp? Is that your analysis as well?"

He had always given objective answers.

"Among security guards, soldiers, and some mercenary backgrounds, there are occasionally people with that kind of strong intuition. They sense danger more acutely and can avoid it."

"Even knowing Kang In-hyuk's background, do you still say that?"

Unless his background suggested otherwise, that might make sense, but Kang In-hyuk only had records of an ordinary military service.

"I know, but... otherwise, it's hard to explain. Or he's just an extremely lucky man..."

"... Or?"

When Tae Seok-ho pressed him for an answer, Lee Jae-jun thought for a moment and added,

"Everything about his current identity could be fake."

"Do you realize what you're saying? By your logic, Kang In-hyuk purposely became an orphan from birth and then, as soon as he learned to walk, received special training in secret?"

In truth, Kang In-hyuk had lived in a orphanage, and at sixteen was selected as a talent by the Taeshin Education Foundation and received support.

Of course, the foundation regularly checked his lifestyle, and no suspicious points had been found.

Except for his calm and quiet personality and his outstanding academic performance, his life was completely ordinary.

"I can't answer beyond that either..."

"It's far more plausible that there's someone manipulating him from behind. Anyway, find the necessary people as quickly as possible."

"Understood."

Lee Jae-jun picked up his phone from the table and left the office.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho, now alone, tried to force his tangled thoughts into order.

The air in the room grew oppressively heavy.

Chapter 65

Not the Keycap, but the Keyboard

It had already been over two weeks since the TF division at Taeshin Trading began their aggressive actions.

After returning from America, In-hyuk entered the Taeshin Asset Management building for the first time.

Every employee he passed in the underground parking lot and elevator looked shocked.

In-hyuk, once called a parachute department manager at Taeshin Asset Management due to being the Taeshin Group's son-in-law, had now become the head of the head office TF division.

"They say he's being used as a disposable knife at the head office because he went too far and will get thrown away when they're done."

"Is this because of the investment deal in Silicon Valley? Still, look at how much money he made here."

"But it's a hundred million dollars. That's 140 billion won thrown into a company no one's ever heard of... Maybe they're trying to at least save the remaining fifty million dollars?"

Rumors spread everywhere at once.

It was bad enough that In-hyuk overheard them while passing by the break room after getting off on the seventh floor, where the system management team was located.

"Ah."

In-hyuk made eye contact with one of the employees leading those rumors.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Even the employees with their backs turned to In-hyuk quickly bowed.

In-hyuk watched them with an expression full of annoyance, nodded slightly, and left.

Soon after, he arrived at the system management team's office.

"What brings you here, division director?"

Team leader Jang Seo-won stood up and approached. It was the first time they'd met since the last recruitment interview.

"I wanted to check how the new security processor project is coming along."

"That's proceeding smoothly, nearly complete in fact."

In-hyuk nodded and looked around. In a corner, under a monitor, he spotted an employee with red hair buried in her work.

"How is the new hire doing?"

At this, Jang Seo-won answered with a slightly awkward expression.

"She's very capable and has been a real help. She's outgoing too, so she's getting along well with the team."

"That's good to hear. But that..."

As he slowly glanced around, In-hyuk noticed something near the break room.

【♡Handmade cookies／Please take as many as you like.♡】

A colorful, neatly handwritten note done with a name pen and a highlighter.

Beneath it, familiar-looking cookies were neatly packaged and displayed.

At that moment, Jang Seo-won quickly spoke.

"Oh, please don't worry about that!"

"Someone must've made and brought them?"

"... That was Go Mi-ah. But honestly, despite her enthusiasm, the taste is... well, a bit terrifying."

While he was in America, there had been a casualty after all.

Next to him, Hong Yu-geon shook his head with heartfelt sympathy.

"Did something happen to whoever ate those?"

"Manager Hong Jae-yoon from server management..."

"Ah... But the office seems quieter than I expected."

If someone had gotten sick from the food Go Mi-ah made, the atmosphere probably wouldn't be this calm right now.

"Thankfully, he just ran to the restroom and threw up. It wasn't intentional, and Manager Hong handled it well."

A moment ago, Seo-won had lowered his voice, perhaps out of concern that Go Mi-ah would overhear.

"That's a relief."

"Anyway, it hasn't affected our work."

"Please make sure it all wraps up smoothly."

As In-hyuk stepped out, he heard Hong Yu-geon mutter,

"See! I told you something like this would happen...!"

Paak—

Then, suddenly, something flew by, and Hong Yu-geon clutched the back of his head, staggering forward.

"Ugh—!"

When someone's in that much pain, not even a scream comes out. That was exactly how Hong Yu-geon looked now.

In-hyuk found a keyboard keycap on the floor. But it wasn't a typical plastic piece; it was made of metal, a special one Go Mi-ah had bought for use at the office.

She had reached out past her partition and fired a slingshot—wherever she'd gotten it—from which the projectile had hit Hong Yu-geon.

"What happened?"

As team leader Jang Seo-won was returning to his seat, he rushed over again.

"It's nothing. He just gets sudden, severe headaches sometimes."

In-hyuk and Van Hester dragged him into the elevator.

As the pain subsided a little, Hong Yu-geon's rough voice came out.

"She's really crazy...!"

"You brought this on yourself. Why couldn't you just let it go instead of making such a fuss?"

"The food is just unbelievably bad!"

"Then just... don't eat it."

Bzzz—

At that moment, a message arrived on Ghost Link from Go Mi-ah.

【Red Witch: Tell Mr. Hong to shut up.】

【Red Witch: And if he complains about my cooking one more time, let him know—next time, it won't be just the keycap, but the whole keyboard getting yanked from his head.】

A long sigh escaped In-hyuk's lips.

Just then, Van Hester pulled out a familiar-looking cookie from his pocket.

Rustle, rustle.

"When did you grab that?"

"... Earlier?"

In response, In-hyuk shook his head and headed for the floor below, where the M&A/PEF division was located.

* * *

Late at night.

Tae Seok-ho entered the study, surprised by a sudden visit from Lee Jae-jun.

"AMK Partners' recent moves are unsettling?"

He was getting the briefing now, urgently, instead of waiting for the next day.

"The investment in Accentia, which had been rumored, is now confirmed. From their information, up to the fifth round is planned."

"That much?"

If they do all of them, it's a hundred million dollars—about 140 billion won.

Tae Seok-ho had also checked and found it hard to confirm such value.

"At first, it was just until the second round. The fact that it increased suggests Division Director Kang In-hyuk's investment in Greenbyte Labs is a target for a joint deal."

With his explanation, Tae Seok-ho reviewed the prepared investigation documents.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

Amid the brief silence, the phone vibrated.

As Tae Seok-ho took the call, his expression hardened further.

"... Is everything all right?"

After ending the call, Tae Seok-ho slowly began to speak.

"Noah Gardner has disappeared."

That name belonged to the CEO who currently ran the H&T Fund in New York in place of Tae Seok-ho.

"You mean he's missing?"

"No. He's vanished completely from both work and his residence. That suggests it was voluntary, not forced."

The mood grew heavier.

"Don't tell me... He betrayed you? Did he even siphon off the funds he managed at H&T?"

"So I hear. Judging from his actions, he's been preparing for this a long time."

Tae Seok-ho had never established any official ties with H&T Fund for this very reason.

He also thought he'd kept Noah Gardner, a man with many vulnerabilities, firmly leashed, but now things had turned out this way.

"With so much involved, should we tie it to embezzlement and request Interpol to track him down?"

"And if Noah Gardner gets caught? You really think he'll quietly come back?"

"... That was short-sighted of me."

Noah Gardner was the only link between Tae Seok-ho and H&T Fund.

If Noah took this even further and betrayed him, Tae Seok-ho wouldn't escape unscathed either.

Of course, he had kept some leverage just in case, but never thought Noah would disappear with all the slush funds he'd managed.

"It's just too clean a disappearance. That means someone probably helped him."

"You're saying he teamed up with a third party. Should I send someone to investigate?"

Tae Seok-ho shook his head.

"No. I'll use someone else to investigate that. You focus on the Spintech situation."

For Tae Seok-ho, the relationship between H&T Fund and Taeshin Spintech was a potential disaster.

Now that things had blown up in both places at once, there was plenty to worry about.

"Understood. Also, I've secured the operative you mentioned. He's a member of a mercenary corps called Warborn, currently active in the Middle East."

"... How many?"

He was referring to the personnel sent to deal with Kang In-hyuk.

"I sent six. They'll arrive this morning."

"Are they reliable?"

"They're assassins specializing in handling primary targets in war zones."

Hearing that, Tae Seok-ho frowned.

"I'd prefer it looked like an accident, if possible. Is that doable?"

"They said they'd have to give an estimate. However..."

"However?"

"There are also security guards by Kang In-hyuk's side, believed to be ex-mercenaries. If we consider them, making it look like an accident might be difficult."

It was a very serious assessment.

Attempts to tail and track In-hyuk had been thwarted so often that they'd completely given up.

While listening quietly, Tae Seok-ho drummed on the sofa's armrest with his fingers.

"So, whatever method, the key is taking care of him as quickly as possible?"

"That is my recommendation."

He thought again for a moment.

"... If that's the plan, how soon can they do it?"

"They haven't revealed the target yet, but based on the average estimate, even if delayed, it should be possible within a month."

"That's longer than I hoped."

Even just In-hyuk's disappearance would solve many problems.

But since he was hiring professionals, thorough planning from their side was also expected.

"What should we do?"

Only the final cut remained.

Tae Seok-ho took a deep breath and gave his order.

"Proceed. Make it as fast and as thorough as possible."

"I'll relay the order right away. Rest easy."

Finishing the conversation, Lee Jae-jun left, got in his car, sent out an email, checked the time, and then pulled out another phone from under the dashboard to make a call.

[Go ahead.]

On the other end was Baek Si-hwan.

"Tae Seok-ho's approval came through. Warborn will handle Kang In-hyuk. Send me the itinerary and patterns as soon as you can."

The two, despite being part of the same Organization, had not even known what each other looked like until very recently.

They had only gotten to know each other through work related to Kang In-hyuk.

[Was approval from the Organization up the chain really obtained?]

At Baek Si-hwan's question, Lee Jae-jun replied with an even colder voice.

"Do you really think I'd move without official approval?"

It was a warning as well.

Baek Si-hwan, flustered, quickly continued.

[No, of course not. But there's more to check than expected. We reported to the Organization because he possesses information that could be useful to us.]

"You mean to Kitsune?"

That name referred to Baek Si-hwan's direct superior, who held a higher position than Chairman Baek Ji-woong himself.

[... Yes, that's right.]

"The Organization's goal right now is Taeshin. Kang In-hyuk is identified as an obstacle in that process, so the decision won't be reversed. Just share what I requested as soon as possible."

In short, no exceptions.

Baek Si-hwan could no longer protest.

[I'll do as you say.]

"When the execution date and plan are set, make sure nothing interferes."

He reiterated the warning, his sensitivity showing at even the slightest dissent.

With that, Lee Jae-jun quickly drove out of Tae Seok-ho's neighborhood.

Chapter 66

It Just Got Really Twisted

A few days later.

In-hyuk was once again heading to Taeshin Spintech, located in Cheonan.

While driving, Hong Yu-geon mumbled as he looked away from the rearview mirror.

"The guys tailing us this time are pretty thorough, aren't they?"

"You mean the ones switching between three vehicles?"

Hong Yu-geon, slightly surprised since he'd never seen In-hyuk turn his head, asked,

"You saw them?"

At a glance, they were just two ordinary black sedans and a van.

But they kept their distance, sometimes pulling far away, then drawing closer, repeating the pattern as they pleased.

"More or less. Let's stop by a walnut pastry shop nearby."

"Why?"

"Wouldn't it be good to figure out who they are?"

He turned the steering wheel toward Cheonan city, drove for about another ten minutes, and pulled into a walnut pastry shop by the side of the road.

Maybe because of the sudden turn, the trailing cars drove straight past.

Then, one car circled around the area and stopped nearby.

Waiting for a while, the car's window rolled down, making it possible to check the face inside.

Meanwhile, Van Hester came back with no less than five boxes of thirty walnut pastries each.

"Did you check?"

He put four boxes in the trunk and held one as he got into the passenger seat, asking.

In-hyuk looked at him and, with a sigh, explained.

"They're from Warborn."

At that, Hong Yu-geon was shocked again.

"Really, those guys? But how did the president know? No, more than that, how did you recognize them?"

Of course, the original Kang In-hyuk wouldn't know that kind of information.

But he used to live as a former special forces operative, Tae Seok-ho's hunting dog, a man obsessed with revenge.

He'd worked with mercenaries many times, so he knew them well.

"There was a familiar face. Seeing them tailing us, looks like we've been marked as the target."

"Technically, it's not us but you that they're after."

No need to emphasize what was obvious.

"Thanks for the correction."

"Don't mention it. So, what's next? If you know they're Warborn, then you know what they're like, right? They're seriously insane about contract killing."

Even in the original future, In-hyuk had once hired them and they razed a whole building.

"Right now, what matters is how much they've been paid. Warborn's assassination plans scale with the contract fee."

"... You know even that? Have you ever hired Warborn to kill someone?"

"Enough with the pointless talk and let's just go. I have a few things to check."

In-hyuk immediately opened Ghost Link on his phone and sent a message to Go Mi-ah.

[Gordon: Swiss Zurich Bank 530389-△△△-△△△△△. Can you check the account details?]

The reply wasn't long in coming.

[Red Witch: Are you telling me to hack into a private bank server?]

[Gordon: Not hack exactly, I just want to see recent deposit records. Even better if you can track them.]

[Red Witch: Whose account is this anyway?]

[Gordon: The contract killer currently on my tail.]

There was a moment of silence, then she called.

[... You're joking, right?]

"I wish I was. They showed up sooner than I expected, honestly."

He'd already been nearly killed by others several times. Yet that crisis had come again. He heard a sigh from the other end of the line.

[What the hell are you getting into all the time?]

"My life's just gotten really twisted."

Not that he could exactly say it wasn't intentional, but Baek Si-hwan's backers were bigger than expected.

To draw them out into the open, subtle methods alone weren't enough. But he never expected them to send a group like Warborn, contract killers specializing strictly in assassination rather than mere contact.

[Haaa—! What are you going to do, seriously, boss?]

"Are you accessing the account now?"

[Don't rush me, just wait a bit.]

He could hear her typing.

"You've completely taken over the company server, right?"

[That was done ages ago. Ah, it's up! The recent deposit record to that account... I'll send it by message.]

bzzz—

A message arrived, vibrating, with an attached file.

【500,000(CHF) — SELVA Holdings】

【300,000(CHF) — Mirage International】

【400,000(CHF) — Azul & Oro S. A】

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In-hyuk quietly muttered, having discovered something.

"Tae Seok-ho sent this."

[You mean the executive vice president from the head office, boss's wife's uncle? Why him?]

Go Mi-ah only handled what In-hyuk asked, without knowing all the details.

"There are reasons. Anyway, you must be busy, so thanks for checking this."

[My work isn't the problem here. Are contract killers really after you?]

She still sounded like she could hardly believe it.

"If you're curious, look up those Warborn guys on the dark web. And don't try to contact me or go to the lab for a while, because their target range might get wider."

[And you do have a way to solve this?]

"Don't worry about that."

After hanging up, In-hyuk faced forward again.

Hong Yu-geon, catching his eye in the rearview mirror, continued as if piecing together the previous conversation.

"You really have a plan?"

"Because of the way they operate, until they have a surefire plan, they'll just keep tailing. I'm going to deliberately give them an opening to make a move."

"So, you mean you'll make yourself the bait again, like at the Andong tunnel? By the way, why do you know so much about these guys?"

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had only ever heard of Warborn on the mercenary market grapevine. Yet In-hyuk talked as if he had met them face-to-face, which was odd.

"Bait? Well, kind of. But this time, it won't be that dangerous."

Hong Yu-geon checked the rearview mirror, glancing at the cars still following from afar, and tilted his head.

"How can it not be dangerous? This is on a different level from back in Andong. We're totally being targeted."

"There's almost nothing we need to do."

"Do you really understand what I'm saying? Are we even talking about the same thing?"

"You know the phrase 'fight poison with poison'?"

"It means combating poison with more poison. Why?"

"Because I plan to use exactly that kind of method."

Hong Yu-geon still couldn't understand what In-hyuk was saying.

In response, In-hyuk just shrugged while looking at Hong Yu-geon's gleaming eyes through the rearview.

* * *

Kang Do-young, now division director of new business at KQ Fabric, was sitting in a luxurious Korean set menu restaurant on the outskirts of Daegu, Gyeongsangbuk Province.

He wore an expression full of annoyance. Watching him gloomily from the side, Ahn Min-gi said cautiously,

"Let's hang in there just a little longer."

"How much longer? Anyone can see he's late on purpose!"

The reason they were at the restaurant was to meet Lee Hyun-geon, CEO of RSK, a strong military supplies contractor.

But the hard-won appointment had already gone 30 minutes over the set time.

"It's probably because of how we set the appointment. But as long as they don't want to break ties with KQ completely, they'll have to show up, no matter how late."

"So, just how long do we wait?"

"We have a few tricks up our sleeve, don't we? So..."

Knock knock—

A knock sounded, the door opened, and CEO Lee Hyun-geon of RSK stood in the doorway with a grave expression.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. A supply issue came up, so I had to make sure it was handled before I could come."

Kang Do-young forced his unpleasant expression into a smile and greeted him politely.

"Not at all, we should be the ones apologizing for the sudden meeting."

When Ahn Min-gi started to order food, Lee Hyun-geon hurriedly intervened.

"No need for a meal. Honestly, with things the way they are, I doubt we'd enjoy dining together. Let me just give you my answer."

At this, Kang Do-young frowned.

"What answer do you mean?"

They hadn't even gotten to the main point yet.

But it was clear that Lee Hyun-geon already knew what the meeting would be about.

"You want to supply fabric for RSK's military uniform bid, don't you? But we have a preexisting supplier, so I'll have to decline. And since I get a ton of calls around this time every year, please don't misinterpret my knowing what this is about."

It was both polite and resolute.

"Haaa. Even so, isn't this a bit discourteous?"

"Better than being ambiguous and causing unnecessary misunderstandings."

"Are you aware there's a serious issue with Texcellence, your current partner?"

With that question, Lee Hyun-geon's expression hardened.

"... A problem with Texcellence?"

RSK and Texcellence had been doing business for five years already.

There had never been any problems, and Texcellence's newly developed material was their big play for the new military uniform contract.

Kang Do-young smiled as he watched Lee Hyun-geon's shocked face.

"So you weren't aware. It's a serious issue."

"Please explain."

"You'll learn about it eventually, so let me tell you. Someone inside Texcellence has tried to leak the formula for their new material. That person went on an overseas trip and hasn't been heard from since."

Lee Hyun-geon's face became even grimmer.

"... Is that true?"

"Why would I lie? And the circumstances at Texcellence will surface eventually."

A technology leak can be fatal for a business—especially a small one.

If what he'd just heard was true, it meant an emergency even for RSK, who planned to join the coming bid for military uniform supply.

"Do you know who did it?"

"If I told you, would that give KQ Fabric a chance? Anyway, with Texcellence's current predicament, you'll have to look at alternative suppliers."

With the balance shifting his way, Kang Do-young grew more confident.

Still, Lee Hyun-geon maintained his composure despite the confusion in his mind.

"Regardless of Texcellence's issue, RSK values technical ability, reliability, and productivity. That's nonnegotiable—our credibility with the Ministry of Defense is everything. Can KQ Fabric fulfill that?"

This wasn't the first time RSK had been approached by KQ Fabric. They'd considered a deal years ago, but KQ hadn't been up to standard then.

Lee Hyun-geon still didn't feel convinced, and the deliberate lateness to today's meeting reflected that.

"What if we acquire Texcellence's new material technology?"

"... Wait, do you mean KQ Fabric is behind the leak?"

Kang Do-young immediately raised both hands as if to calm him.

"No. The company involved is overseas."

Hearing this, Lee Hyun-geon replied right away.

"Would it be Refiber Works?"

"So you do have a suspect in mind."

"That's the company that previously tried to steal technology from Texcellence. They even offered a buyout, but CEO Park Sung-hoon at Texcellence firmly refused."

Since this part of the story was sensitive, his voice dropped even lower. Kang Do-young grinned even more broadly.

"So there's that backstory."

"So, who is Refiber using to steal the tech? How can KQ Fabric get it?"

"Vice president Choi Jung-mook."

"That guy, finally..."

Clearly, he was already aware of some background.

"In any case, we'll figure out the means on our end... So? With things as they are, it's hard to see you sticking with Texcellence."

Lee Hyun-geon's mind raced.

"I'll have to look into it myself before making a decision."

"Well, nothing's going to change anyway."

In the end, Lee Hyun-geon left the room without even eating.

Kang Do-young rinsed out his mouth with water as if he tasted something bitter, then spat it out.

"Wasn't it said that Choi Jung-mook disappeared after Silicon Valley?"

"The local investigator is still looking for him."

"Isn't there a chance he already handed the technology to Refiber and vanished?"

"I don't think so, considering there's no movement on their side."

"What if we never find him?"

The current plan was to redirect Choi Jung-mook to KQ Fabric.

But if they couldn't track down the main individual, it could all fall apart.

"We've found more people linked to Choi Jung-mook, so it might actually be better if we can't find him at all."

"Oh ho..."

With an admiring tone, Kang Do-young looked at Ahn Min-gi as if complimenting him.

Chapter 67

A Company Left with Only Its Shell

Taeshin Trading chairman's office.

Chairman Tae Gun-seung was sitting with his sons, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

"I called you because I figured some of you have complaints, some have questions. It seems like both of you have a lot you want to take up with me."

Recently, there were plenty of rumors circulating within Taeshin Group because of the TF division.

Responding right away, Tae Seok-ho jumped in.

"To the sudden re-audit to disciplinary suspensions and personnel transfers—there's talk in the various affiliates and subsidiaries about overstepping one's bounds."

It wasn't a false statement. The presidents of each company were also submitting civil complaints to the head office, so there was no way Tae Gun-seung didn't know this.

"Did Division Director Kang In-hyuk raise an issue over something that was nothing at all?"

"That's... not the case. But from a management perspective, it's impossible to be completely transparent. Fa—no, chairman, you understand that better than anyone, don't you?"

Tae Gun-seung nodded slightly with a stern expression.

"You're not wrong. But there's a limit to what I can turn a blind eye to."

This time, Tae Seok-hyun spoke up.

"Chairman. A re-audit is underway in Electronics as well. It's not as if there were no issues internally, but because they're poking into such minute details, complaints from shareholders and executives are mounting."

"So, are you saying we should just let all existing issues be? Do you even know where and how those problems originated?"

This question wasn't directed only at Tae Seok-hyun. The two fell silent like mute fish.

Watching them quietly, Tae Gun-seung continued.

"You both serve as the CEO of Taeshin Electronics and the executive vice president of Trading, and yet, at the sight of this situation, your first reaction is to talk about overreach and punishment?"

Within Taeshin Group, chairman Tae Gun-seung held vast shares and controlled the major shareholders, reigning as the owner, but in practice, the actual management had been left to Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

In a sense, it was also his way of clarifying the heir apparent.

But the two brothers had run the group, pursuing only their own factions, safety, and immediate interests, rather than making progress.

"Then, chairman, do you believe Division Director Kang In-hyuk's abuses are helping the Group? Even though the Group's performance has been declining due to the actions taken by the TF division?"

Tae Seok-ho's voice rose, showing his agitation.

However, Tae Gun-seung didn't waver—if anything, he calmly extended his hand to the side.

Song Tae-ho, the security guard and secretary, who was standing by, brought a stack of documents from the desk and handed them over.

"Do you know what this is?"

"... It's from the TF division, isn't it?"

The first page had the name written right on it, so it couldn't be missed.

"It's a record of internal corruption committed by the presidents and executives of each affiliate and subsidiary. Embezzlement, accounting fraud, false claims, illegal hiring, and so on."

At that moment, the faces of the two sons hardened.

Tae Seok-ho pulled the documents toward him and began to confirm the details.

Just as Tae Gun-seung said, detailed accounts of situations at each company were recorded.

"You're saying... the TF division investigated all of this?"

What was even more surprising was that, while the TF division had discovered all this, Tae Seok-ho himself had not known a thing.

So he asked Tae Gun-seung and waited for his response.

"Why? Do you think the TF division fabricated the contents?"

"Isn't that too much, considering the period they've been active?"

"I wouldn't know about that. Also, I'm not planning to overlook this situation."

At this, Tae Seok-hyun also carefully joined the conversation.

"If you do that, Taeshin's standing may be at risk. Is that what you want, chairman?"

"Isn't it your positions you're worried about losing?"

"I feel the same way as my brother. Of course, we need to resolve issues within Taeshin, but the impact is too great. The stock price is already declining, and if word of this leaks, the shareholders and board won't stand for it. The Chairman's position could also be in jeopardy."

Though they spoke this way, the reality was that they were concerned about their own comfort.

Knowing this, Tae Gun-seung allowed a wry smile to show at his wrinkled lips.

"I understand full well what your concerns are. But we can't cover everything up. Once the full investigation is concluded, I'll have to weigh things out, so neither of you should even think about poking at the TF division."

At the same time, Tae Seok-ho's lips twitched.

In the end, it was a meeting to issue a warning: touching the TF division would bring consequences.

However, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho bit at the bait Tae Gun-seung had presented.

If the two tried to spit out that bait later, Tae Gun-seung could use the materials prepared by the TF division to overturn all of Taeshin Group.

At the same time, this would mean that the two brothers would lose their place in Taeshin Group altogether. And the next chairman's seat might not be theirs, either.

"Hoo—! Understood."

It was Tae Seok-hyun who sighed and answered first.

Tae Gun-seung then turned his gaze to Tae Seok-ho.

"What about you, Executive Vice President Tae?"

There was really only one choice.

"I'll do as you say."

With that answer, the conversation between the two ended, and they left the chairman's office.

"Why is Father suddenly so eager to back Kang In-hyuk, that guy?"

"....."

Even at Tae Seok-hyun's complaints, Tae Seok-ho kept his lips sealed.

Tae Seok-hyun frowned even more.

"What's got you so edgy lately? Did Kang In-hyuk catch you out on something?"

Was he just trying to provoke him?

Apparently, this time it worked, as Tae Seok-ho's brow furrowed as well.

"Unlike you, I just have more things to worry about."

"What...?"

"Instead of doing this here, shouldn't we deal with the problems in Electronics—the ones the TF division found?"

"So you want to give it a go?"

"Forget it. I'm heading off first."

His security guard, Lee Jae-jun, followed after him.

After heading straight to his office, Tae Seok-ho immediately gave instructions.

"There seems to be a separate TF division outside."

"What... exactly happened?"

Seated on the sofa, he let out a long sigh.

"The TF division already has a pretty good understanding of the issues in both the head office and the affiliates."

"... Excuse me? But we haven't gotten wind of that from the people we placed inside."

"That's what I'm saying—it looks like there are people moving from another area. Either that or someone has been plotting since before the TF division was even established. Otherwise, there's no way all that investigation could have been completed so quickly."

Lee Jae-jun grew serious too.

"Still, there was no sign of any such moves in Kang In-hyuk's activity. And from the outside, it would be very hard to mobilize that much internal personnel."

"Nothing's going as planned. What about Warborn? When are they starting?"

Tae Seok-ho's anxious tone was obvious as he asked, prompting Lee Jae-jun to lower his head slightly.

"They're in the process of estimating. For now, the target's movements are inconsistent, so they're trying to pin down a specific point."

"Hoo—! Take care of it as aggressively as you want. Just get it done as quickly as possible."

"That might make things unnecessarily noisy... are you sure that's okay?"

It was a question that required some thought.

But Tae Seok-ho didn't hesitate.

"Control is already out of my hands. If this keeps up, any number of things could happen."

"Understood. I'll inform Warborn as you said."

"Ah, and no matter what, make sure it gets handled. Even if there are unavoidable casualties, I guarantee nothing will happen to you."

There wasn't time to worry about shifting situations or the aftermath.

Kang In-hyuk's actions and the surrounding atmosphere were turning more and more disadvantageous for him.

After receiving those orders from Tae Seok-ho, Lee Jae-jun left quietly.

* * *

Cheongju, north Chungcheong Province. At the Texcellence head office and factory, several cars arrived.

Getting out of the vehicles were Kang Do-young, Ahn Min-gi, and several employees of KQ Fabric.

Meanwhile, in front of the company's front gate, a middle-aged man and several men and women stood with dark expressions.

It was Park Sung-hoon, the president of Texcellence, and his staff.

"Hello, Division Director Kang Do-young."

At Park Sung-hoon's greeting, Kang Do-young gave a thin smile.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet first."

"... Let's go inside for now."

In this strange mood, they took seats in a conference room inside the building.

The air having grown heavier, Park Sung-hoon spoke up first.

"I looked over everything you sent. You want KQ Fabric to acquire our company?"

"That's right. And we're considering 5 billion won as the acquisition price."

Generally, the market capitalization of fabric companies related to defense contracts runs from at least 1 trillion won up to several tens of trillions.

But Texcellence was still a small to midsize business.

However, they'd been trying to grow by leveraging a newly developed material.

The material under development this time was valuable.

But with internal problems, everything had gone awry.

Of course, even without those issues, given Texcellence's technology and productivity, the company's worth was several times above 5 billion won. Kang Do-young was plainly lowballing them.

Park Sung-hoon bit his lip.

"Division Director, I know better than anyone that we aren't in a good situation, but isn't that a bit much?"

"Surely you're not saying the price is too high? I actually valued the company generously, for you, president."

It was a question with obviously malicious intent.

Even so, it was hard for Park Sung-hoon to push back.

"That's a little too much."

"For a shell of a company, are you saying there's more to use beyond this?"

Today's meeting was created by KQ Fabric, sharing material that was tantamount to blackmail with Texcellence.

That material concerned the possible leak of new-material technology—and the possible involvement of Vice President Choi Jung-mook's disappearance in that leak.

To Texcellence's perspective, not a single one of these issues was insignificant.

Above all, the most serious problem, the technological leak, was something that KQ Fabric had discovered, possibly involving insider Choi Jung-mook.

"The issue of a technology leak hasn't been confirmed."

"But Vice President Choi Jung-mook disappeared with those development materials, didn't he? And you still haven't tracked him down."

"The technology wasn't complete yet."

"And Vice President Choi Jung-mook had contact with Refiber Works in the U. S. With that capital and technology, wouldn't it be easier to solve things there than here?"

A chain of answers and counter-questions.

Since Kang Do-young's comments weren't wrong, Park Sung-hoon fell silent.

"Then why is KQ Fabric trying to buy such a company for so little? If you know where Vice President Choi Jung-mook is, couldn't KQ Fabric be involved in the leak, too?"

As Kang Do-young said earlier, to KQ Fabric, texcellence was nothing but a shell if it had no new-material technology.

Naturally, it was suspicious for them to be making such a blackmail-like proposal in this situation.

"If I knew that, I'd have just handed Vice President Choi Jung-mook tens of billions and bought the technology off him. Why would I need to bother acquiring Texcellence?"

Truthfully, Park Sung-hoon didn't strongly suspect any connection between KQ Fabric and Choi Jung-mook.

After all, rumor had it that Kang Do-young, as heir to the KQ Group, had made a huge blunder and was demoted to KQ Fabric as a result.

It was a hard series of events to believe had been planned in advance, which only deepened Park Sung-hoon's dilemma.

"Hmmm...."

"Of course, I know how hard you've worked and how much you regret the situation.

But think about what will happen if this leaks outside.

Think about your staff, too. Even RSK, your long-term partner, has done nothing to help, has it?"

That was true, too.

Not long ago, Lee Hyun-geon, president of RSK, visited to ask about Vice President Choi Jung-mook.

It was obvious where he'd heard about the situation they'd been trying so hard to hide.

But since it wasn't a lie, Lee Hyun-geon went back without committing to any scheduled business.

"Still..."

While muttering this, there was a knock and a man entered.

It was the company's finance director, who'd been waiting outside for the meeting to end.

"President. You have a guest outside."

"... Guest?"

The only expected guests today were Kang Do-young and the staff from KQ Fabric.

"He says he's Division Director Kang In-hyuk from Taeshin Group. He'd like to discuss business related to new material development."

"... Taeshin's Kang In-hyuk?"

In that instant, Kang Do-young's expression crumpled like a sheet of paper.

Chapter 68

A Joke? By Who?

While the employee went inside, In-hyuk stood in front of the entrance.

Next to him, Hong Yu-geon cast his eyes beyond the wall and spoke.

"Son unos tipos muy pacientes." ("They're surprisingly patient guys.")

He purposely spoke in Spanish so that the passersby wouldn't understand. In-hyuk casually nodded in response.

"Lo harán hasta que encuentren el punto perfecto." ("They'll keep at it until they find the perfect spot.")

He was talking about the Warborn mercenary unit that had been tailing them for some time now.

Then Van Hester joined the conversation.

"For now, they're moving at random to cause confusion, but I'm sure they have a set deadline—they can't keep this up forever."

"That's right. If we happen to step into one of those points they've secured as our escape route, bullets will be flying immediately, won't they?"

It wasn't just a worry, but a completely plausible expectation. Naturally, In-hyuk knew this better than anyone.

"I'm almost finished preparing too."

"By the way, you mentioned 'fight poison with poison' last time, didn't you? What exactly is that method?"

Ever since then, In-hyuk hadn't shown any notable movement, though they had been moving together this whole time.

"It's not a 100% guaranteed method, so let's wait and see how it turns out. For now, we should handle things here first."

In-hyuk pointed at the Texcellence sign hung next to the entrance.

Since the two still hadn't heard the exact reason for coming here, they simply shrugged.

Just then, a man emerged from the building, striding toward them harshly.

"Kang In-hyuk—!"

A familiar voice.

It was Kang Do-young from KQ Group, whom Kang In-hyuk had clashed with several times before.

With his appearance, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester stepped slightly to the side.

In-hyuk looked at him approaching and spoke with a calm expression.

"I didn't think Executive Vice President Kang would be here. What's going on?"

"I should ask you the same—why are you here?"

"I'm here on company business. Oh, by the way, I heard rumors you were demoted from KQ Distribution to a subsidiary called Fabric... Don't tell me it's true?"

Kang Do-young's face contorted in displeasure. Soon, a middle-aged man who seemed to be following him greeted them.

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

"That's right. President Park Sung-hoon, correct? I'd like to discuss the new material fiber being developed here. Do you have some time?"

At the direct mention of business, Kang Do-young burst in.

"That's something we were already discussing first!"

In-hyuk cocked his head.

"So, has Texcellence signed a contract with KQ Fabric for the use of new materials?"

Park Sung-hoon hesitated briefly, then replied.

"... No. There hasn't been any contract signed yet."

The meeting they had just finished in the conference room had been about an acquisition, but given the circumstances, Park didn't mention that and glossed over it.

"The reason I'm here is that the investment Hong Kong SGA made in Texcellence—handled as a bond—was acquired by AMK Partners, and I've been assigned due diligence."

"You mean the investment we received has been transferred to your side?"

"I believe they sent the relevant documents over... have you not checked?"

Park Sung-hoon glanced at another employee who had come out with him.

A female employee cautiously spoke up.

"There was an email from SGA about a week ago, and I forwarded it to the president."

"Oh, did you? Now that you mention it, I think I saw an email in English... but I've been so busy lately..."

The disappearance of Executive Vice President Choi Jung-mook and the technology leak, plus KQ Fabric's threatening acquisition proposal—all these complications were overwhelming.

"Just in case, I brought the original and translated documents regarding the transfer of the investment bond as well as copies of the contracts. If you're still uncertain, you can call SGA's head office right now to verify."

"Forgive me, but since this is important, could you wait inside for a bit?"

"Of course."

In-hyuk, together with Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, started heading inside.

Meanwhile, Kang Do-young, quietly observing the situation, tried to grab In-hyuk's arm, only to swipe at empty air instead.

"... Huh?"

"I don't like unnecessary touching. So, why did you come here from KQ Fabric?"

"That's what I should be asking you! Investment bond acquisition? What is that supposed to mean?"

"You heard President Park and me talking about it earlier, didn't you? You still don't get it?"

"So! SGA transferred Texcellence's investment to AMK Partners as a bond, and you're the one in charge now?"

"You've summed it up well. Should I give you a 'Good Job' stamp?"

Kang Do-young's brow furrowed severely.

"Do you really think that makes sense?! Why would they hand it to you?"

Kang Do-young was aware that Texcellence had once received investment from a Hong Kong private equity called SGA.

About six months ago, around 3 billion won had been invested, mostly used for new material development.

Although SGA had collateralized unlisted shares, this had not been a significant hurdle for KQ Fabric to acquire Texcellence—the KQ Group could easily handle SGA if necessary.

But the situation had changed now that the rights had transferred to AMK Partners.

Their former plan was essentially scrapped.

"I don't see any reason I need to explain. Besides, it looks like your business here is finished, so why not head back? No need to make others uncomfortable by loitering here."

"What? You little...!"

At that moment, Ahn Min-gi grabbed Kang Do-young's arm.

"Division Director, there are a lot of eyes around."

"So we're just going to leave this guy alone?"

"Let's go back and check the situation first. If President Park values his position, he won't make any rash moves."

He said this in a very low voice. Kang Do-young exhaled sharply, sending In-hyuk a piercing glare.

"I mean it—if you play dirty this time, I won't let it slide."

In response, In-hyuk put on an expression of complete innocence.

"Play dirty? Who?"

"I'm talking about those entertainment companies you sold last time! Do you know what kind of trouble I went through because of that?"

"Ah—You mean the idol group drug scandals, school violence, member bullying, power abuse, and all that? But why is that my fault? All I did was transfer the deals—I didn't do anything else."

"It was the companies you selected! None of those things ever happened at the companies you kept!"

On the contrary, the artists and albums from those retained companies had gone on to huge success, generating massive profits to this day.

"I'm no prophet. How could I have known things would turn out that way?"

"That's..."

Lost for words, Kang Do-young clenched his fists tightly, his face twisted up.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk's security guards approached on either side radiating an intimidating aura.

"That's enough nonsense. Like your secretary said, you should go—unless you want to embarrass yourself by picking a pointless fight."

Kang Do-young glanced at the KQ Fabric employees standing behind Ahn Min-gi.

Today, he had intended to overwhelm Texcellence's President Park Sung-hoon, force an acquisition, and seize a chance to return to the head office.

But everything unraveled as soon as In-hyuk showed up.

"Khh..."

In the end, he headed for the parking lot with Secretary Ahn Min-gi.

The other employees followed, surrounded by a tense atmosphere.

Their goal was to return and get a clear grasp on Texcellence's situation.

Watching them go, In-hyuk followed an employee into the conference room.

Before long, Park Sung-hoon returned as well.

"I checked with Hong Kong SGA, and the documents you showed were accurate."

"I'm glad there are no issues."

"Still, may I ask what business brought you here today without an appointment?"

There was anxiety in his eyes.

He worried that because of Choi Jung-mook's disappearance and the technology leak, AMK Partners might request return of their investment fund.

"You don't need to worry."

"... Sorry?"

"We're aware of the allegations regarding an internal technology leak."

"Ah, that..."

"Now that an important conversation is about to take place, wouldn't it be better if the others left?"

In the conference room were Park Sung-hoon, several key executives, and a few staff members from Texcellence.

Everyone was on edge, not knowing what would become of the company overnight.

"Do you mean we should talk one-on-one?"

When In-hyuk nodded, Park Sung-hoon dismissed the others. Then In-hyuk spoke slowly.

"Executive Vice President Choi Jung-mook... was found dead on the outskirts of Silicon Valley."

"What? Vice President Choi is dead? Is that true?!"

"In their time zone, it was yesterday at around 3:20 in the afternoon. He was found dead below a cliff near the observatory east of San Jose. He appears to have been shot and then fallen to his death."

"Who would do such a thing to Vice President Choi... No, more importantly, how do you know about this, Division Director Kang?"

"I heard from AMK Partners. I'm just passing the message along. And you can rest assured—the new material technology files that Choi Jung-mook leaked don't seem to have made it to Refiber Works."

Park Sung-hoon's eyes widened further.

"You knew everything...?"

"That's why I'm here to propose a deal."

As he answered, In-hyuk pulled out a document and handed it over.

"What is this?"

"I want to initiate a merger and acquisition."

Instantly, Park's expression darkened. He had just heard the same pitch from Kang Do-young.

Since the situation was no different, he couldn't help but feel disheartened.

"Are you saying Taeshin wants to acquire us?"

In-hyuk gave a slight smile.

"No. I'm proposing that Texcellence acquire RSK. Naturally, AMK Partners would provide the necessary funds as an investment."

Park Sung-hoon tilted his head in surprise.

"You mean, us acquiring RSK? Do you really think that's possible?"

RSK, which had essentially monopolized the defense uniform business for years, was an unlisted company valued at over 1 trillion won.

Given Texcellence's experience dealing with RSK, they knew more than anyone what that meant.

It would make sense if RSK were acquiring Texcellence—not the other way around.

"AMK Partners will make it possible. What do you say? If you refuse, we'll withdraw here and now."

"So you mean..."

He was asking whether they would recall the investment fund he had been so worried about.

"The investment fund given to Texcellence won't be touched for now. But if things continue as they are, you can guess where that will lead."

That was, being acquired by KQ Fabric.

"Could I have time to think about this?"

It was too difficult a matter to decide immediately. But In-hyuk firmly shook his head.

"No. This is too important—this decision must be made right now."

"But... it's too much to decide so quickly."

"Timing is everything. If we don't decide here, we'll miss the time window for the things I have prepared. Naturally, my offer would then become meaningless."

Feeling the pressure, Park Sung-hoon swallowed hard.

He honestly thought it was still impossible, but remembering the moves AMK Partners and Taeshin Asset Management had made like knights in news articles, he had to concede it wasn't entirely impossible.

"Well then..."

Once again, Park Sung-hoon swallowed hard and slowly opened his mouth.

Chapter 69

Without Any Warning

The next day.

Kang Do-young, who had withdrawn from Texcellence, was summoned to the KQ Distribution head office.

There, he had to answer the questions of Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, whose mood was severely twisted.

"I told you to try pushing forward a new business at KQ Fabric, and what? You're acquiring a company for 5 billion won?"

Not long ago, the incident he was involved in at Texcellence had reached the chairman's ears.

Kang Do-young stood silently in front of the chairman's desk, unable to lift his head as he replied.

"There was information that Texcellence had developed a groundbreaking new material. Both figures involved in the defense bidding process and RTK, a supplier likely to get the military uniform contract, held high expectations as well. However, through our own Vice President Choi Jung-mook, there was a risk of a technology leak, and I simply seized the opportunity."

It had been an action carried out according to his own thorough(?) plan.

But Kang Cheon-gyu's expression did not improve.

"So, you value that company at 5 billion won? And what about Vice President Choi Jung-mook?"

"He went missing after attending a technology expo near Silicon Valley, and he still hasn't been found."

"Haa—! Are you saying you brought down the price just because of that?"

His usual catchphrase was *fair and square*.

As the second-generation leader of the KQ distribution group, he always emphasized that compensation or rewards should be fair.

"The company's value had plummeted due to the technology leak anyway. I even overpaid at 5 billion won."

"Is that so? Then, what's the status of that company you said you'd acquire? Where is the money for it coming from?"

At that moment, Kang In-hyuk's face flashed through his mind.

Because just before Texcellence's CEO Park Sung-hoon made his decision, the appearance of Kang In-hyuk had ruined everything.

"That is..."

"Don't tell me, you're talking about KQ Fabric's production reserve budget and the additional equipment funds for next year's factory?"

Pierced to the core, Kang Do-young lowered his head even further.

"....."

Bang—!

Unable to contain himself, Kang Cheon-gyu slammed the desk with his fist.

"Are you calling that how a division director should operate?!"

Kang Do-young had nothing to say.

"I sent you there to clear your head when you loafed around even as executive vice president! What are you trying to do? If you've got a mouth, at least give me an explanation! Don't just stand there like a mute!"

Kang Do-young's brow twitched.

"Do you think I did this just for my own gain? I had my reasons! I also completed deals with RSK. And if my plan had worked, the next year's budget would have been taken care of as well!"

At this, Kang Cheon-gyu raised his voice even more.

"Do you call that an excuse?!"

"Father! Then what exactly do you want me to do? I barely managed to get the information and create this opportunity! But Kang In-hyuk, that bastard, showed up again and ruined it all... There was nothing I could do!"

"Kang In-hyuk? Why are you bringing up that name?"

It was a name tainted by debt—the result of an assassination staged as a car accident at the recent autobiography release party.

There had been no contact since, so to hear that name again through Kang Do-young was shocking.

"Haa...! That guy pulled some trick and brought in AMK Partners! I don't know what was discussed, but Texcellence rejected my offer because of it."

"Anything else unusual? No, something like that wouldn't come from your head. Call in Manager Ahn Min-gi."

"That is... haa..."

With another drawn-out sigh, Ahn Min-gi, who had been waiting outside, entered cautiously.

"Manager Ahn, tell me. What exactly is going on?"

Ahn Min-gi looked at Kang Do-young with wide eyes.

As he hadn't grasped the situation, he pleaded for at least a brief explanation.

"About Texcellence and AMK Partners."

"Ah, originally, it was a Hong Kong private equity fund called SGA that was investing in Texcellence. But recently, AMK Partners acquired SGA's investment rights in the form of bonds. That transferred the ownership of unlisted shares, and with the technology leak incident, they became able to intervene directly."

Kang Cheon-gyu listened, understanding piece by piece.

"So Kang In-hyuk was delegated authority from AMK Partners?"

"Yes, that's correct. Afterwards, I checked through their line and found there was nothing wrong with the contract. And on another channel, I learned that Division Director Kang In-hyuk is now heading the TF division directly under Taeshin Group's head office. While reorganizing the Taeshin Spintech business, he ousted most of the executives including the president, and he is conducting a major overhaul of the business sector as well."

After this rather lengthy explanation, Kang Cheon-gyu's gaze grew even sharper.

"You know, I felt it before, but your ears are sharper than you let on."

"... That's too generous."

"Especially for someone who was with the Germany office until recently. Have you been making connections everywhere while waiting to return to Korea?"

It wasn't praise, but rebuke.

Realizing this belatedly, Ahn Min-gi fell silent, waiting for the chairman to speak again.

"So, to sum it up... Kang In-hyuk reorganized Taeshin Spintech and used his network at AMK Partners to snatch away Division Director Kang Do-young's rice bowl?"

"That's the situation for now."

"Hm... I get it. You can go now. And as for Division Director Kang Do-young, stay away from the KQ Fabric business and wait for my next orders."

"Father!"

Despite Do-young's desperate protest, Kang Cheon-gyu glared at him with a stern expression.

"If you lack ability, put in some effort! If you recklessly stir things up with company money again, you're done. Unless you want me to strike your name from my will."

"...."

"...."

As the two finished their goodbyes and prepared to leave, secretary Noh Geun-cheol burst in urgently after a knock.

"Chairman! You need to see this!"

"What is it?"

On the tablet Noh Geun-cheol handed over was an article posted just minutes ago.

As Kang Cheon-gyu began to read, a shadow fell over his face.

[Military, suspects RSK of Bribery in Military Supply Contracts. RSK, which had been the top contender for military uniform bids since 2021, was found to have paid bribes to officials during the bidding process for years...]

[RSK CEO A identified as having embezzled and committed breach of trust totaling about 50 billion won, forming slush funds in the process. It's suspected that there are military officials as accomplices, and defective uniforms below standards were supplied to units with lax oversight...]

[Republic of Korea military beset by another defense scandal? An investigation has found that RSK's eligibility evaluations in military uniform supplier selection were manipulated, and it has been revealed that for about five years, the embezzlement and bribery continued. Key defense officials were even found to have landed second careers at RSK and similar defense firms through solicitations...]

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"These articles burst out all of a sudden, without any warning?"

"I found out that the Board of Audit and Inspection, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration, and the prosecution were each secretly investigating, and the media caught a whiff, breaking the story."

"How did the media find out?"

"There were tips submitted quite a while ago. But from what I hear, even they couldn't identify the anonymous informant. It seems someone coordinated everything behind the scenes."

Otherwise, as Kang Cheon-gyu had just wondered, such an explosive situation erupting simultaneously in several directions wouldn't have been possible.

"It seems like someone is out to completely cripple the military and RSK. I doubt the government will just watch."

"Given the extent of the investigation, each agency probably wasn't aware they were all probing the same thing until now."

Even if it had exploded from just one agency, it would have been chaos—but now three agencies had rocked the same company, and with military officials also implicated, the situation grew exponentially.

"These are agencies that never share such information. And if we're talking about a defense scandal, the magnitude would have kept them investigating as quietly as possible."

"At this rate, it seems that not only RSK but all companies supplying defense products will have trouble avoiding scrutiny. There's talk that the bidding will be delayed as well."

At that moment, Kang Do-young urgently turned to Kang Cheon-gyu.

"It must be that guy's doing!"

"Who do you mean? Don't tell me—you mean Kang In-hyuk?"

"This all started when he interfered with Texcellence's affairs! And if the technology leak issue at Texcellence is resolved in this situation, whether it's collaboration or merger with Taeshin Spintech, we won't have to worry about RSK anymore."

"Didn't you say Vice President Choi Jung-mook had disappeared?"

"That's..."

As they exchanged words, Noh Geun-cheol, who had stepped slightly aside, carefully interjected.

"Excuse me... Is it Vice President Choi Jung-mook of Texcellence you're referring to?"

"Why do you ask?"

In response to the chairman, Noh Geun-cheol showed him another news article on the tablet.

"It appeared in a local article this morning. It says a Korean national was found shot to death in the mountains east of San Jose, California. The identity is listed as Vice President Choi, an executive from a Korean textiles firm."

"Whoa—! Executive Director Noh, look into this as well."

Suddenly, the circumstances seemed to be turning in Texcellence's favor.

"See? It's just too suspicious! I'm sure this was Kang In-hyuk's doing too!"

"Are you suggesting Kang In-hyuk killed Choi Jung-mook?"

"I also heard he visited there recently. You saw the article saying he almost died there too, didn't you, father?"

It was, ironically, exactly as Kang Do-young put it.

But before one could jump to such conclusions, there was a major stumbling block.

"If what you're saying is true... everything: our plan to enter the defense business via RSK, Texcellence's Vice President Choi leaking technology and heading to Silicon Valley, the RSK defense scandal investigation and exposure—all would have been orchestrated by Kang In-hyuk? Do you really think that's possible?"

"That's..."

The Board of Audit and Inspection, the DAPA, and the prosecution would have begun their investigation no later than a month ago.

Which meant that, at the very least, they would have known about the situations at KQ Group, Texcellence, and RSK since then.

If someone really had that kind of control, they wouldn't have needed to stir things up like this in the first place.

"Even you see that it doesn't add up, don't you? So stop making useless guesses and just wait until you're called for!"

With nothing more to say, Kang Do-young had no choice but to leave with Ahn Min-gi.

Once the door closed, Kang Cheon-gyu began to give more detailed instructions to Noh Geun-cheol.

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At that very moment.

In-hyuk was in the Taeshin Trading TF division office, looking at his phone.

Hong Yu-geon, who had been reviewing the flood of news reports, turned to In-hyuk.

"This is your doing too, isn't it, boss?"

He was referring to the RSK defense scandal article.

But In-hyuk cocked his head in puzzlement.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about all the commotion about RSK."

"I don't know what you're getting at."

"When did the Board of Audit and Inspection and DAPA start moving? Same with the prosecution. And anyway, why did SGA in Hong Kong transfer Texcellence's investment to AMK Partners?"

"Because they didn't need it anymore. And AMK Partners just happened to hold the bond rights."

"Isn't that a bit too much of a coincidence?"

In response, In-hyuk shrugged and smiled faintly.

"It's good if things work out to our advantage."

"Tsk—! So you mean we still can't trust you completely?"

"Think of it as meaning, knowing too much could get you hurt. Anyway... looks like those guys will start moving soon too."

Although he murmured it quietly, Hong Yu-geon understood immediately.

"You mean Warborn?"

Ever since their visit to Texcellence, warborn had gone off the radar.

"They must have come to a decision, so I need to be ready too."

"You mean that 'fight poison with poison' plan? What exactly are you up to?"

It frustrated him that In-hyuk hadn't explained it yesterday either.

"It's just as the phrase says. Things will get noisy soon enough because of it."

"Here you go again, being cryptic..."

It was still something beyond his comprehension.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk checked Ghost Link on his phone.

[PPO23: RSK CEO Lee Hyun-geon's slush fund accounts have been frozen and arrest is complete.]

[BAI12: Could not locate Refiber Works concerning Texcellence technology leak.]

[DAPA03: Military officials connected to RSK have been arrested.]

[BG894: Unknown foreigner. Purchased 1 PSG1, 6 Glock 17s. Video attached.]

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A flood of messages from users with untraceable nicknames had arrived. After reading them, a calm smile crossed In-hyuk's lips.

At that moment, another message arrived.

[REDFALL: Target point confirmed.]

Chapter 70

For a Guy Like This

The collapse of RSK, which had led the defense business through supplying military uniforms, proceeded at a rapid pace.

As evidence surfaced concerning slush funds, embezzlement routes, and military officials who had accepted bribes, no one could get away easily.

In the meantime, within Taeshin Group, a draft of an official notice was circulated targeting problematic individuals.

【Taeshin Trading and Affiliates, Subsidiary Personnel Changes】

– Taeshin Trading △△△ Executive Director → Kickback from Partner Companies / Disciplinary Dismissal

– Taeshin Trading △△△ Division Director → Embezzlement and Bribery / Disciplinary Dismissal

– Taeshin Electronics, Hwang Won-jun, Executive Vice President → Kickback from Partner Companies / Disciplinary Dismissal

– Taeshin Construction △△△ Division Director → Embezzlement / Disciplinary Dismissal

– Taeshin Spintech, Lee Chang-hwan, president → Embezzlement and Breach of Duty / Disciplinary Dismissal

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The second son of Taeshin Group, Tae Seok-ho, let out a long sigh after checking the official document on his tablet.

As he had worried, Kang In-hyuk was preparing a major move.

"He's really sharpened his knife. And the timing is impeccable too."

Due to RSK's massive defense industry scandal, any issue within Taeshin Group was bound to get buried.

With those muttered words, Tae Seok-ho turned his gaze outside.

A little past noon. He wasn't in the company, but inside a car.

Not only that—the car had left Seoul completely and had been heading toward the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province for over an hour.

"How much further do we have to go?"

"We should arrive in about fifteen more minutes."

The road was already a quiet country lane.

Going even farther in, they reached an area where construction seemed to have been halted a while ago.

"We've arrived. Just a little walk from here."

"This is quite a hassle."

Tae Seok-ho and his companion got out of the car and, together with security guards belonging to TSS, headed to a place where only concrete frames remained desolate.

After a moment, a foreign man emerged from an abandoned building. Without a word, just with a gesture, he guided Tae Seok-ho and Lee Jae-jun inside.

Shuffle—shuffle—

They went up to the third floor, where a large open space appeared.

There, five foreign men sat on battered sofas and wooden crates.

"Are you Wade?"

The question, in English, pointed at a middle-aged man sitting on the sofa.

"That's me. But why did you bring so many people?"

He glanced at the group of six security guards including Lee Jae-jun.

All exuded a menacing air, surrounding Tae Seok-ho and matching the tense stares of Warborn's mercenaries.

"..... That's none of your concern. Did it really have to be this way? Honestly, it's a bit uncomfortable."

"Are you afraid we'll give up our client if we get caught? Or maybe betray you?"

Since he had requested a 'job' involving a person, it was difficult to deny it.

In fact, Tae Seok-ho had considered not coming at all.

But the draft for personnel changes in the TF division he'd just seen would not let him sit still.

"That's enough. But why hasn't the job been done yet? I believe I've given you plenty of time."

Wade stared straight at Tae Seok-ho.

"You do know there are mercenaries around the target as well?"

At those words, Tae Seok-ho immediately recalled Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

"We agreed I'd pay you handsomely—is that a problem?"

"There may be a force similar in scale to ours. Do you really think we can settle this for just one million francs?"

"A force? What do you mean by that?"

He sensed something strange in the conversation.

"..... Do you really not know there's a mercenary unit around the target? There are even more of them than us. Of course, the amount you first proposed isn't enough for this."

"Who, exactly, has been brought in?"

It was still a confusing explanation.

"Haaa! You really didn't know. Those guys are Redfall. Well, it's hard to explain in detail... but let's just say we don't get along. If they were likewise hired, they must already know we're the opposition."

It meant that Kang In-hyuk had noticed Tae Seok-ho's plan and hired them.

"Isn't this because you guys acted so carelessly? You've been dragging this out quite a bit."

"We were being thorough with the handling. If you'd said to go all in from the start, things would have been different."

As the conversation kept going in circles, Tae Seok-ho grew even more frustrated.

"So how much will it cost?"

After a moment of thought, wade held up three fingers.

"We'll need at least this much."

Realizing the meaning, Tae Seok-ho couldn't help furrowing his brow.

"You mean, three million francs?"

"That's the minimum."

"How does it jump three times from one million? Is Warborn in the habit of doubling back on its word?"

Perhaps his pride was touched because Wade's face contorted in displeasure.

"Even if we make a living as contract killers, we're ultimately businessmen. There's no point in taking a loss."

"So you're saying you can't move unless it's for the amount you just mentioned?"

"We have to cover risk premiums, after all."

Tae Seok-ho found himself in a bind. Sure, until recently, raising that amount wouldn't have been difficult.

But now, what with Noah Gardner of H&T Fund missing, his other funds were frozen too.

"I can't put together that money right away. But if you complete the job, I'll give you four million francs including the upfront fee."

Wade and the other mercenaries' eyes sparkled at that moment.

"But we'll take another five hundred thousand francs as an upfront fee. We'll need to be better prepared to face opponents like this."

"Can you really get it done? Without any blowback?"

"We'll take care of it completely. But as for suspicions from the target's relationship with you, that's not on us. Be sure to keep that in mind if things get rough."

Tae Seok-ho nodded.

"That's my business..."

Thud—Thud-thud—

Just then, something flew in from outside and several men collapsed to the floor.

"It's an attack! Everybody prepare!"

It was from the building across.

At Wade's shout, they ducked down urgently and moved frantically.

Meanwhile, a shocked Tae Seok-ho, pulled down by Lee Jae-jun, clutched his pounding chest.

"Wh-What's going on?"

"Looks like they've been tracked. Everyone, protect the executive vice president!"

Some of the security guards had already fallen from gunshots.

The rest, following Lee Jae-jun's orders, formed a protective barrier around Tae Seok-ho.

"What? So the ones you just mentioned are attacking us?"

"We need to get out of here as quickly as possible."

Bang-bang—Bang—

As the gunfight began, debris from the concrete building burst in all directions.

"How are we going to get out of here?"

"Follow me!"

Lee Jae-jun and the security guards picked up the pistols dropped nearby—those of the fallen Warborn mercenaries.

Then, keeping themselves low, they made for the back to try and circle around.

"It's dangerous to get back to the car now, so we'll head into the woods and call for a vehicle. It'll probably take at least twenty minutes on foot."

"How did those guys attack us here? Did they spot our tail?"

"That's what it seems like."

"But why are we going so far out?"

That would be about a four-kilometer distance.

"I haven't detected a cell tower signal for a while. Those attackers must have used a signal-jammer during the assault."

It was obvious they'd come fully prepared.

"Goddamn..."

"For now, let's move."

There were four security guards left, including Lee Jae-jun.

The other two had been shot in the legs or body by the initial bullets and couldn't be brought along.

So the five of them hurried toward the woods, away from the deafening gunfire.

Rustle—

Then, there was a noise from one side.

Lee Jae-jun and the guards, on edge, shifted their gaze that way.

Wham, thud—

But the three guards standing in the opposite direction staggered and dropped to their knees.

"Ugh—!"

"Ugh!"

With groans, palm-sized stones skittered across the ground. They'd been thrown and had hit the guards.

They seemed to have been hit in vital spots and couldn't pull themselves together.

Alarmed, Lee Jae-jun swiftly aimed his loaded pistol in the direction of the presumed attack point.

Swoosh—Wham!

But before he could fire, a stone struck his pistol, knocking it from his grip.

"Urgh..."

Lee Jae-jun moved to grab his pistol again, but then a black figure dropped down onto him from above and knocked him to the ground.

Wham—Whoosh—

Of course, Lee Jae-jun didn't just take it lying down. He moved swiftly to stab at the figure's torso or twist its arm.

But the opponent dodged right in front of him as if anticipating the moves, or easily slipped out and retreated.

After some distance was gained, Lee Jae-jun could finally see the enemy.

"... A skull mask?"

At that muttering, a mechanical, altered, rough voice came from inside the black skull mask.

"Were you Kooou too?"

The skull mask's identity was Kang In-hyuk. Of course, he had also mobilized the mercenary unit, Redfall.

The reason he mentioned 'Kooou' was that Lee Jae-jun had just used the UID combat technique TMT, just like Pyo Jun-woo.

Simultaneously, Lee Jae-jun's expression hardened further.

"So you're not Redfall?"

"You knew right away, so why ask?"

In-hyuk confirmed that Lee Jae-jun's gaze kept darting at the guns of the other men.

A moment of silence.

Then, Lee Jae-jun abruptly lunged—not at the guns, but straight at In-hyuk.

'Going for hand-to-hand combat?'

A knife appeared in Lee Jae-jun's hand, drawn hurriedly from inside his jacket, and the distance between them vanished in an instant.

In-hyuk saw that Lee Jae-jun was aiming for the left lung. He twisted his body slightly to dodge, then grabbed Lee Jae-jun's elbow.

Crack—Wham, snap!

He twisted the elbow into a joint lock while stabbing toward the liver with his right knee.

"Guh—!"

"Did you think you broke my ribs and pierced my lung with that?"

Collapsing onto the ground, Lee Jae-jun could only let out pained gasps, unable even to breathe properly.

Inside the skull mask, In-hyuk threw him a cold look, checking the left hands of Lee Jae-jun and the other security guards.

Only Lee Jae-jun had a peculiar tattoo.

In that moment, his gaze met Tae Seok-ho, who was slumped against a tree in a disheveled state.

The eyes of the mask were painted black like sunglasses, but Tae Seok-ho could tell he was being watched when the mask turned toward him.

'..... Should I kill him?'

He hesitated briefly.

Honestly, today's situation was unexpected.

He'd never imagined Tae Seok-ho would come meet Warborn, whom he'd hired for murder, in person.

"How much are you getting for this? I'll give you tw—two times! No, five times as much, if you team up with me!"

It was natural that Tae Seok-ho couldn't recognize In-hyuk with the mask on.

Thinking he could be bought instead, he kept shouting higher offers.

At the same time, In-hyuk felt bitter inside.

'Did I once work for a guy like this?'

He had seen Tae Seok-ho's true colors during the period when Taeshin Group collapsed, even after bringing revenge on them after being betrayed in his previous life.

In-hyuk picked up the pistol Lee Jae-jun had dropped earlier.

Click, click—

He checked the chamber and magazine.

Not bad.

Tae Seok-ho, swallowing hard, tried to withdraw himself as much as possible, back against the tree.

"Think carefully! It's just business, right? However much that Kang In-hyuk offered, I can add more!"

In-hyuk stared coldly at his pathetic retreat, as if Tae Seok-ho were digging through the earth all the way to the underworld in his desperation.

And slowly, he aimed the pistol at him.

Bang—