Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 71

Did you really kill them?

【Shootout Somewhere in Southern Gyeonggi!? A real shootout broke out at the site of a townhouse construction project that had been stalled for a long time. The armed suspects were unidentified foreigners who used rifles and pistols. The guns were believed to have originated from the black market...】

【7 Dead in Southern Gyeonggi Shootout. The exact number is still unconfirmed, with the remaining armed suspects on the run... A local police official stated that checkpoints and searches are underway...】

【It has been confirmed that the shootout suspects entered the country with forged passports...】

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The clash between the mercenary groups Warborn and Redfall spread not only in Korea but also internationally.

The fact that foreigners entered the country with forged passports, procured firearms on the black market, and fought such a bloody battle inevitably caused a huge stir.

Of course, who exactly they were and where they were from had yet to be revealed.

That, too, would only be a matter of time...

While the world was abuzz with these events, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester sat in the Daegu Rasta Hotel suite, watching TV with serious expressions.

At this moment, In-hyuk was not with them in the suite. Around twelve hours earlier, he had gone out alone and had yet to return.

Thud—

Just then, a heavy sound echoed from the wardrobe in the master bedroom of the suite.

The two immediately walked over. Soon after, the inner wall of the wardrobe opened, and In-hyuk stepped out, wearing a light suit.

"Boss! What on earth happened? And what about the news on TV?"

To that question, In-hyuk walked into the living room and checked the news coverage.

"Ah. The guys clashed, that's all."

"The guys? Who do you mean, Warborn and who?"

"Redfall."

With that name mentioned, the two faces grew more tense.

"Last time you mentioned 'fight poison with poison,' did you call those bastards and make them go up against Warborn?"

In-hyuk took off his jacket and slumped onto the sofa.

"Rather than call them, I made them come."

"That's the same thing! Then what were you doing, and how did you even know about that elevator?"

He was referring to the hidden elevator that In-hyuk had just come up on.

They'd been quite surprised when using it to exit the suite before.

"This hotel was built by a gang that used to control this region. The suite was the spot the boss used."

"You sure know all sorts of things... So, what actually happened?"

They still hadn't gotten the most important answer.

In response, In-hyuk let out a long sigh.

"It's just as it seems. Both Warborn and Redfall took hits in this clash. The police arrived in the nick of time, so they left the dead behind and retreated with only the wounded."

"So. I can smell gunpowder on you, boss. You were there, weren't you?"

"I went to make sure Warborn's side was dealt with. But some unexpected people showed up."

With that, Hong Yu-geon tilted his head and sat on the sofa.

"Who do you mean?"

"Tae Seok-ho and Lee Jae-jun. For some reason I don't understand."

Hearing what happened, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester's faces darkened even further.

Not a single mention of anyone related to Taeshin Group had been in the earlier news report.

"So, what did you do? No way... Did you handle them there?"

"....."

In-hyuk said nothing in reply, and Hong Yu-geon grew frustrated.

"Did you really kill them?"

"If I did, so what? You know they tried to kill me first."

After all, they had hired mercenaries from abroad and ordered my assassination.

"Ha..."

"What is it now?"

"We're not talking about just anyone, but Warborn and Redfall. If they got into a fight, something could've happened to you. Why are you so determined to jump in yourself?"

Van Hester nodded in agreement with Hong Yu-geon's words.

In-hyuk found his head tilting in puzzlement.

"... Are you worried about me?"

He thought they were scolding him, but the conversation was oddly off.

"It's not you, it's our money source we're worried about. If something happened to you, what would happen to us?"

"Fine, if you put it that way."

A bit embarrassed, Hong Yu-geon quickly changed the subject.

"So, what happened? Did you deal with all of them?"

Recalling the moment, In-hyuk's expression shifted subtly.

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Beep— Beep—

The steady, shallow sound of a heart monitor.

Beside it lay a man with a face covered in scratches, wearing an oxygen mask—Tae Seok-ho.

It was past midnight.

Then Tae Seok-ho's eyes slowly opened, and he took a deep breath.

"Gasp— Guh—!"

At the sound of his coughing, the door opened and a doctor and nurses hurried in.

They checked Tae Seok-ho's condition, glanced over to one side, then left the room again.

In the heavy atmosphere, Tae Seok-ho was unable to ask anything at first, but eventually he looked where the doctor had glanced.

"Ahem! Did you... save me?"

To the shadowed sofa, a woman stood up.

"Well, for now."

"How did you... No, more importantly, what about the others who were there... what happened to them?"

He meant the others there, including his security guard Lee Jae-jun.

"They're all dead."

"Ah..."

Tae Seok-ho immediately checked his own condition. As the anesthetic wore off, a sharp pain flared in his left side.

"Nngh."

"It's a through-and-through gunshot wound. The bullet barely grazed your internal organs—if you'd been any later, you'd have died from blood loss."

As he listened to the explanation, Tae Seok-ho recalled the man in the skull mask.

He hadn't hesitated at all when he pulled the trigger.

It was terrifying, but infuriating as well.

"That bastard..."

"Aren't you curious about what's going on now?"

Of course, he couldn't help but wonder.

But Tae Seok-ho was also still figuring out who this woman was and how she had gotten there, so he carefully sized her up.

"Actually, I'm more curious why you saved me."

"Do you not believe in good deeds done without reason?"

When the woman smiled, Tae Seok-ho's expression grew more stern.

"I don't believe in good deeds without reason. So now tell me who you are and why you saved me... Tell me the rest as well."

At that, the woman smiled broadly, curving her lips upward.

"To start with the situation... There's a major investigation underway at the shootout scene. But they won't find any trace of you or your security guards there. Even if they do, the police won't be looking into it."

Tae Seok-ho's face hardened.

"So, you're saying you made sure there'd be no traces left?"

"That's right. Even if something's found, it'll be covered up."

"Just... who are you?"

The woman still kept her smile.

"I want to help you climb to the top of Taeshin. That's why I took this chance to save your life."

"Do you even know what that means?"

Everyone knew Taeshin Group was tightly controlled by chairman Tae Gun-seung.

Even the will was managed thoroughly, so even if he suddenly died, no one could predict who would inherit enough shares to become chairman.

In the end, using as much money as possible to secure shares in Mulsan before Tae Gun-seung died was top priority.

That's why Tae Seok-ho had pooled funds from Taeshin's spin-off companies and valuable subsidiaries to create the H&T Fund.

"You need money, right? We can provide it for you."

"Do you have any idea how much is needed?"

"Currently, you publicly hold about 2.5% of Taeshin Trading shares, don't you? Add in the borrowed-name and delegated shares—15.3%. In total, about 18%."

At that, Tae Seok-ho's face grew even more severe. She even knew about the shares he had quietly gathered under borrowed names.

"How long have you been watching me?"

"Not watching, just a bit of simple research. We need someone to work with, and you need someone to help you take Taeshin, it seems."

She spoke as if it were nothing, awaiting his questions.

"So, how much funding can you actually provide? Knowing how many shares I've managed to secure, it would take a pretty big sum."

He wasn't wrong. At the same time, Tae Seok-ho wanted to suppress her confidence.

She still didn't lose her smile at all.

"If we can act as your proxy to obtain an additional 13% of shares for control, on top of your current holdings?"

If what she said was true, Tae Seok-ho would have more than 31% in total.

But his expression only stayed grave.

"If you saved my life and are helping me secure shares, that means you want something in return. And it's not like you're the real decision-maker here, are you?"

"You're right. I'm only relaying a proposal from my superiors."

"Can't I speak directly to them?"

The woman stared at him with a strange look, then smiled again.

"They said you'll meet them once you're worthy enough. And we only want one thing in return. After you take over Taeshin, we want an exclusive partnership."

Now Tae Seok-ho's gaze grew strange.

"Exclusive partnership... To the way you put it, it sounds more like collusion than just cooperation."

Whether his guess was correct, the corners of her mouth rose slightly.

"We work for the stabilization of wealth and power. There are already those who have boarded this flow and are working with us."

"Are you saying I've been chosen to join them?"

"That's right."

Tae Seok-ho let out a laugh and stifled the pain in his chest.

"Is this like Songchon, that rumored secret department within the National Intelligence Service?"

It was an organization for which not a single piece of concrete evidence existed publicly.

But back during the days of the KCIA, a certain career incident sparked a fierce grudge against the Korean intelligence services in a specific individual.

That's when rumors started—about a faction called Songchon being created from within.

"Well... something like that. But unlike them, we really exist."

"So, I don't actually get chosen until I have full control of Taeshin?"

"Correct."

Tae Seok-ho had a question.

"What if, despite your help, I still fail? Are you planning to take back the life you saved?"

"Oh, come on~ Of course not. Ah, and there's one more condition to our help."

"What is it?"

"To now on, I'll be serving you directly. More specifically, I'll be your secretary, and my people will be your security guards."

The atmosphere turned cold in an instant.

"You mean you'll be monitoring me?"

"I can't say otherwise, but think of it as staying close for careful verification. And all your closest security guards are dead now—you should be thinking about your safety too."

The security unit that Lee Jae-jun led had been carefully chosen by TSS over the years.

And, as she said, Tae Seok-ho had nearly been killed by an unknown assailant, so safety could hardly be ignored.

"Do you know anything about the man who tried to kill me?"

"No. We're looking into it as well, so if we find anything, we'll let you know right away."

Tae Seok-ho didn't trust her answer one bit. He just kept probing to see if he could glean anything more.

But even if he didn't trust her—and the people behind her—it wasn't like he had any other choices.

Especially considering his current situation was dire.

"All right. But if you're coming in as my subordinate, don't expect to be treated as before."

"However you like."

"... Fine."

Tae Seok-ho's words to the woman were short.

"You're more reasonable than I thought."

"I don't know what kind of person you are, so I can't help it. By the way, I should've asked this sooner, but—what's your name?"

A glint appeared in the woman's eyes.

"Reina. Reina Blackwood. Just call me Reina, if you like."

Chapter 72

He's a Family Elder

【Han, Tae Seok-ho, executive vice president of Taeshin Trading, in car accident! Rear-ended at high speed by a fleeing car near Eumseong IC, Gyeonggi Province... Later transported to the hospital with moderate to serious injuries...】

【Tae Seok-ho, EVP of Taeshin Trading, critically injured in car crash? Hit-and-run by a speeding car at Eumseong IC... Police announced they are investigating the case...】

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In-hyuk checked the article's details on the tablet while riding in the car from Daegu back to Seoul.

"Tae Seok-ho has been hospitalized after a car accident."

At his quiet murmur, Hong Yu-geon, who was holding the steering wheel, was startled.

"What? A car accident? When I asked before if it had been handled, you answered vaguely. Were you planning to send him off in a car?"

"I just gave him a bullet to the gut. I felt some eyes on me back then, so I guess those guys picked him up and staged the situation that way."

"Why didn't you mention any of this?"

To the back seat, In-hyuk met his eyes in the rearview mirror and shrugged.

"I wasn't tailed. And it was a situation I fully anticipated."

He'd never really thought of actually killing Tae Seok-ho. Taking him out so easily just wasn't an option from the beginning.

In his previous life, Tae Seok-ho had lost the Taeshin Group after suffering revenge at In-hyuk's hands and ended up committing suicide.

Back then, In-hyuk had felt emptier than anyone. So this time, he planned to drag him all the way down and make him suffer.

"So you're saying you deliberately made those guys move against Tae Seok-ho? But wouldn't they find that suspicious?"

"The fact that they went out of their way to take him and set up the situation means Tae Seok-ho was worth that much to them."

He had used Tae Seok-ho as bait.

Of course, there was also a chance he could've died. That's why, if he hadn't sensed any watchful eyes, he'd planned to have someone else come in.

That's how thoroughly he had orchestrated this clash between Warborn and Redfall.

"Seriously, how many moves ahead did you see...?"

"Anyway, since he's hospitalized, let's go see him."

"Huh? Where? Wait, you mean the hospital where Tae Seok-ho is? Do you even know which one?"

"I'll just ask someone who should know."

Taking out his phone, In-hyuk made a call. It didn't take long before the call went through, and a slightly surprised voice answered.

[Yes, division director.]

The other person was Baek Si-hwan, In-hyuk's secretary currently stationed at Taeshin Trading.

"I need you to check something. Are you available now?"

[Please go ahead.]

Through the receiver, there was the sound of someone preparing to jot something down.

"I sent over the research documents needed for the RSK acquisition; crosscheck them with the existing finance data."

[I'll do that.]

After giving a few additional instructions, In-hyuk asked in an even tone,

"Oh, by the way, did you see the article about EVP Tae Seok-ho's hospitalization?"

[I just checked it as well.]

"I should probably pay him a visit, but the hospital isn't mentioned. I can't really find out through the chairman's side, either. Could you look into it?"

[The hospital... you mean?]

Baek Si-hwan's words trailed off suddenly, as if he momentarily stalled.

"Yes. Until just recently you were with TSS, so I thought you might be able to find out through that network."

At In-hyuk's request, Baek Si-hwan seemed to hesitate for a moment before speaking.

[The location of a TSS security protectee is classified, first of all.]

"Is that a problem?"

Perhaps hearing his resolute tone, Baek Si-hwan quickly replied.

[No, I'll look into it as fast as I can and contact you. Also, when will you be back in Seoul?]

"I'm on my way now. Should be there in about an hour."

[Understood.]

As the call ended, Hong Yu-geon spoke up from his silence.

"Is Baek Si-hwan really going to tell you?"

"He's dying to be in my good graces, so he'll try something."

"And if he can't figure it out?"

He was asking whether Baek Si-hwan might not be connected with the people who saved Tae Seok-ho.

"Either the ones who saved Tae Seok-ho and Baek Si-hwan are closely tied, or their internal lines are so divided he can't get that information."

This was because he'd checked Lee Jae-jun's finger tattoo on site.

The owner of those watchful eyes was likely waiting or watching over Tae Seok-ho.

But until In-hyuk handled Lee Jae-jun, there had been no movement from their side.

That signaled they were bystanders, and saving Tae Seok-ho meant he still had value for them.

"This is complicated... Did you get what's going on?"

Feeling a headache coming on, Hong Yu-geon frowned and shot a glance at Van Hester.

But Van Hester, apparently without a care, was still munching on the potato chips bought at the rest stop earlier.

Crunch, crunch—

"... Why?"

"Never mind. Anyway, the boss thinks Baek Si-hwan will get the hospital info, right?"

"For now."

Bzzz—

Not long after, a message arrived.

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VIP room, △△ Hospital on the outskirts of Gangnam District, Seoul.

On the bed there lay Tae Seok-ho. Soon after, his wife Choi Tae-eun, who'd received the news late, rushed in.

"A sudden accident! What happened? Are you alright?"

"... Something came up. Anyway, I said you didn't need to come."

"How could I not come? Are you really okay? You even had surgery, didn't you?"

"It wasn't anything serious."

Maintaining a stern expression, Tae Seok-ho shifted his gaze to his tablet.

Choi Tae-eun, glancing at the entrance, quietly asked,

"By the way... where did Deputy Chief Lee and the others go? There are people here I've never seen before."

There wasn't a single familiar face present.

While exchanging nods with a young woman on the sofa, Choi Tae-eun hid her anxiety.

Prompted, Tae Seok-ho sighed after some hesitation.

"They had to leave for certain reasons. Those are newly recruited."

"What? Deputy General Manager Lee Jae-jun? He was someone you treasured."

"He insisted on quitting. What was I supposed to do? Let's not talk about that—why don't you go handle your own work?"

But the unease didn't fade.

This was because Reina Blackwood had assured him there'd be no issue handling Lee Jae-jun and the security guards.

"Still, how can I leave you like this?"

"It's not like there's no one to watch over me."

"Seung-hyun will be here soon."

She meant their son, Tae Seung-hyun, director of planning at Taeshin Construction.

Tae Seok-ho's head throbbed slightly. Just then, a knock came at the door.

Thinking it was his son, Tae Seok-ho turned his head—his face instantly hardened.

"How did you get here...?"

Standing at the door was In-hyuk.

"I heard you were admitted after a car accident. Still, you're a family elder, so it seemed right to come pay my respects."

With a bow, In-hyuk also nodded slightly to Choi Tae-eun, then glanced at the young woman by the sofa before letting his gaze settle on Baek Si-hwan.

Baek Si-hwan had been the one to notify him when he found out which hospital Tae Seok-ho was in.

'So they did know each other? Or at least had some kind of recognition between them.'

For a split second, a chill crossed his face.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho, radiating unease, addressed In-hyuk.

"Didn't expect you to visit, right after my wife."

"As you know, the TF division is prepping for a major personnel reshuffle. It's going to get busier; if not now, I might not get another chance to visit."

That reshuffle involved many executives and staff linked to Tae Seok-ho.

Warborn had even been hired as mercenaries to stop it, but since everything had gone off the rails, he was burning with frustration inside.

Of course, he couldn't let that show now.

"I never thought you cared so much about the company. Really, thank you..."

"Of course I do. Although, I don't see Deputy General Manager Lee Jae-jun? The article said you were injured alone... where were you heading for you to be driving yourself?"

"It was a personal affair. And frustratingly, Deputy Chief Lee quit, so let's just leave it at that."

"Ah, is that so?"

Playing innocent, In-hyuk could feel the young woman's gaze from in front of the sofa.

'Pretty blatant. Is she gauging my reaction?'

He continued,

"I wish you a speedy recovery."

"Thank you. But how did you know what hospital I was admitted to?"

He'd only informed his wife Choi Tae-eun of the location, so he was pretty surprised at In-hyuk's unexpected appearance.

"I heard through the grapevine. Honestly, you're not just anyone—news of the EVP being hospitalized by accident isn't exactly going to stay quiet."

"I prefer to keep things quiet and was planning to get discharged quietly. Looks like I've created a bit of fuss after all."

"Not at all. You're a family elder who's been hurt—of course I should come."

"You must be busy; why don't you go on. I need to rest."

"Take care, EVP."

After saying his farewells, In-hyuk left with Baek Si-hwan, glancing at the name etched on the VIP ward's glass door.

【Shinhyeon General Hospital】

In fact, before Baek Si-hwan told him the hospital, he'd debated whether to visit Tae Seok-ho.

But when he realized it was the same place he'd found while tailing Baek Si-hwan, he decided to check it out in person.

"You didn't look too happy just now. Is something wrong?"

"Sorry? Oh, no, it's just that I wasn't expecting to come along on a hospital visit, so it must've startled me a bit."

"I called you out because I have work to assign you at Taeshin Asset Management."

"... Understood."

With that, In-hyuk headed toward the underground parking lot where Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester were waiting.

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Meanwhile, still in the VIP ward, Tae Seok-ho's face was set in stone from the shock of In-hyuk's visit.

"You should go, too. Tell Seung-hyun not to come."

"Why?"

"Just do as I say!"

Normally, Tae Seok-ho barely raised his voice. Suddenly shouting now, he startled Choi Tae-eun.

"... Did something happen?"

"Nothing did, so please just do what I say!"

"But you can't even move comfortably right now."

"I'm fine; there are others here."

"..."

Flustered by his rising voice, Choi Tae-eun was stunned once more.

A long sigh escaped Tae Seok-ho's lips.

"Hoo... I'm really fine, so go home. And don't go telling everyone about my condition."

After casting a strange look at him, Choi Tae-eun collected her coat and stepped out.

In the meantime, Reina Blackwood, now his secretary, smiled from where she was seated on the sofa.

"Everyone came because they're worried. Aren't you being a bit too harsh?"

"Do you think you can talk to me like that now?"

"It was Skull who killed the others. We were only trying to help."

Skull was what they called the unidentified enemy who attacked Tae Seok-ho.

"Can you really make sure Lee Jae-jun and the other security guards get treated as missing without a hitch?"

"You don't need to worry about that. Sure, the missing people might seem suspicious, but their bodies will never be found."

Tae Seok-ho's eyes turned all the more significant.

"... You mean you got rid of them completely?"

"Take it in a positive sense. Anyway, we also need clues to find Skull. Did you see or hear anything before you lost consciousness?"

A few days ago, Tae Seok-ho hadn't been fully conscious when he first woke, so she hadn't asked.

"Hmm... Now that I think of it, Skull asked Lee Jae-jun if he was 'Kooou'."

"Kooou?"

"Why? Sound familiar? To what I heard, it sounded Japanese."

That was a word that had just popped into Tae Seok-ho's head.

"I see. But it's my first time hearing it, too. I'll look into it, but at least we have something."

Without delay, Reina opened her tablet and sent off a message.

【Code USAGI: Skull knows about Kooou. Suspected code cracking of the missing device. Identity cannot be confirmed.】

Chapter 73

Like Slicing a Frozen Fish

【Defense Contractor RSK Defaults? RSK, the sole player in the military uniform sector for five years, is under prosecution and Defense Acquisition Program Administration, as well as Board of Audit and Inspection investigations for President Lee Hyun-geon's breach of trust, embezzlement, and bribery...】

【RSK covers up a deficit of about 60 billion won! Amid investigations into various charges against President Lee Hyun-geon, the prosecution announced they had discovered a financial hole of at least 50 billion won. They stated this money was slush funds and that the relevant accounts had been found...】

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While the world was shaken for several days, In-hyuk was summoned to the chairman's office at Taeshin Trading.

Tae Gun-seung, reading something on his tablet, sighed and muttered.

"I saw the draft for the personnel overhaul. The company's going to be diced up like a frozen fish. Are you really planning to go through with it as is?"

That was because there were no less than 92 names listed in the proposal.

Their fates fell into three categories: executives would be dismissed, staff would either be fired as a disciplinary measure or transferred to provincial posts and have their pay cut.

The sheer number and the severity of penalties left Tae Gun-seung unable to hide his shock.

Yet In-hyuk kept a calm expression.

"If the company was going to be divided so easily, don't you think it would've happened already? Frankly, after conducting the TF audit, it's surprising it has stayed afloat until now."

Of course, he had actually known for some time. Both when he handed Taeshin over to Tae Seok-ho and when he took it back...

"Any kind of water that's left standing for too long is bound to rot."

In-hyuk let out a dry chuckle before he realized it.

"I'd prefer if you didn't dress up admitting you stood by and watched the problems as something dignified."

"Was I that obvious?"

"Very much so. And I've already thought of successors for those being dismissed or fired. Even if existing executives and staff are gone, there won't be any issues with the work itself. Here's the draft."

Tae Gun-seung's eyes widened as he checked the updated tablet screen.

"You've planned every replacement as well? Are you sure of their competence?"

"There was actually a lot of surplus personnel among the previous seniors. The fact that the work still got done means there were working-level staff handling things all along."

"And you figured all that out, one by one?"

Up to recently, both the TF division and the audit division had been analyzing personnel records and actual job duties.

Everyone assumed it was just part of a re-audit.

However, In-hyuk compared staff to be excluded with those who, according to his knowledge of the future, had succeeded on various projects, and slotted those individuals in.

"I can't be certain how it'll turn out down the line, but for now, they'll do at least as well as the previous people in charge. Of course, the audit division will need to conduct regular checks in the meantime."

Again, Tae Gun-seung couldn't help but exclaim in surprise.

"Is it really possible to pull all that off in the time you had?"

It had only been just under a month.

Yet, in that time, not just one company, but Taeshin Group's headquarters, all its subsidiaries, and affiliates had been checked.

Tae Gun-seung, unable to believe it, waited for In-hyuk's answer.

"That's why I've been rushing all over the place."

"That's not exactly a convincing explanation."

"Think what you want."

"Then what about Taeshin Spintech? Why did you start by suspending the president and executives there? What did they do?"

In-hyuk let out a slight sigh.

"It feels like I saved someone from drowning, only to have them ask for the bundle they were carrying."

"Well, I'm not the only one to hand you a bundle. So you shouldn't hold back either, Kang."

If he succeeded this time, he'd receive a share in Taeshin Asset Management.

Should that deal go through, Taeshin Asset Management's management rights could be separated entirely from its parent company Taeshin Life as well as Taeshin Trading.

"I'll hand over what you want to know after the investigation is finished. More importantly, Texcellence, which has been developing new materials, will be entering the military uniform procurement bid. Taeshin Spintech has decided to provide part of its production process for them."

"Texcellence is bidding? But I heard they had issues there."

As the chairman of Taeshin Group, he was familiar with the companies in the same field, especially after his directives for Taeshin Spintech.

"There was a technology leak issue, but it's since been resolved. Originally, RSK was supposed to handle the production line, but because of what happened there, Texcellence is stepping in directly."

"That's right, there's been a lot of talk about that lately. A place that was quiet for five years suddenly being rocked by corruption."

RSK's president Lee Hyun-geon, as well as several military officials involved, had been arrested.

The relationship had lasted for years, making it unlikely the matter would be settled quietly.

Then Tae Gun-seung voiced another question.

"So what's your plan for RSK? In its current state, the hole in their finances is so big I hear they might have to enter workout procedures."

Meaning, restructuring due to its financial problems.

"Texcellence plans to acquire them."

"Texcellence? No matter how close RSK is to default, the size of their plant and equipment means it won't be cheap... Wouldn't it be better for us to back Taeshin Spintech and buy them out? We could transfer them to an affiliate by changing the stake using the Taeshin Department Store bonds we held at Trading."

At this, In-hyuk shook his head.

"Texcellence's new material is essential for the tender. But if Taeshin Spintech were to nab most of the production line by acquiring RSK, they would push for a higher profit percentage."

"So we'd just get bigger with nothing to gain. But couldn't we force things in our favor by putting pressure on our side?"

It wasn't impossible. But that wasn't In-hyuk's plan.

"Behind Texcellence is AMK Partners, and I have transaction information about Lumen Holdings, which holds stakes and bonds in RSK."

"AMK? So that's why Texcellence is acquiring. Did they always predict Texcellence's rise?"

"That seems likely. Also, Taeshin Asset Management's M&A team is handling Texcellence's RSK acquisition."

Upon hearing this, Tae Gun-seung let out a short, hollow laugh.

"Some might think you're getting kickbacks from AMK."

"Since the deal is so big, Taeshin Asset Management will get plenty of M&A incentives."

Of course, it wasn't a kickback but actual profits they'd earn.

"So, as you see it, Texcellence's acquisition of RSK is inevitable."

"Lumen Holdings' stake and bonds in RSK have passed to AMK Partners. Plus, they've picked up the remaining stakes to such an extent that they can push ahead over the opposition of President Lee Hyun-geon and the board—they've effectively secured management rights."

Again, an exclamation slipped out from Tae Gun-seung.

"But if President Lee Hyun-geon tries to defend by using slush funds to buy more of the stake, then what?"

He was predicting a messy fight.

Moreover, since that was the only way to save RSK from bankruptcy, existing directors and shareholders would welcome it.

"That's probably going to be impossible."

"You're saying President Lee Hyun-geon will just swallow the slush funds and let RSK default?"

"I've heard the prosecution found and froze the slush fund accounts."

Tae Gun-seung's eyes grew wide.

"You have contacts in the prosecution too?"

"Just bits of news floating around. At any rate, all Taeshin Spintech needs to do is watch for Texcellence's successful acquisition of RSK and bid win. Once that's done and production runs under the prearranged contracts, they'll record at least triple previous revenue."

That summed up the revival plan for Taeshin Spintech that In-hyuk had prepared.

Still, as he listened, Tae Gun-seung wore a subtle expression.

"That's not bad. But I doubt things with Taeshin Spintech will end there."

"Is there something else?"

At In-hyuk's deliberately cheeky reply, Tae Gun-seung's brow furrowed.

"Are you doing this on purpose? Or do you want me to bring it up myself?"

In-hyuk relaxed deeply into the sofa and answered,

"Since you handed this off to me as if you didn't know, I can't just let it slide."

"Isn't it about my son?"

"He's my wife's uncle, after all—and the executive vice president of Taeshin Trading."

Tae Gun-seung seemed a bit embarrassed and cleared his throat.

"Hrm—! Anyway, what happened?"

"Material about Taeshin Spintech sending funds to an overseas shell company has been found. But I don't know if President Lee Chang-hwan will talk easily."

Currently, Lee Chang-hwan had been dismissed as president and was undergoing prosecution investigation for embezzlement and breach of trust.

"So it'll be hard to find evidence? Then you can't be sure if Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho siphoned off the funds or not—how come you're so sure it was that guy?"

Tae Gun-seung had picked up on the nuance In-hyuk had deliberately dropped.

After a brief pause, In-hyuk brought out a bundle of photos from inside his jacket and handed them over.

Tae Gun-seung began leafing through them, his brow twitching again.

"That's Lee Jae-jun meeting President Lee Chang-hwan separately. Is it recent?"

"I discovered it while following up on President Lee Chang-hwan before going to the U. S. This was before my official activities with the TF division, so Deputy General Manager Lee Jae-jun must have met him for some undisclosed reason."

"Heuh..."

With a sigh, In-hyuk continued his explanation.

"Anyway, after that point, the shell companies through which Taeshin Spintech was moving funds began to be closed. To there, it would be faster if the chairman directly looks into it."

"... So you're saying I should tie up the loose ends myself."

"It's not good to always rely on others, sir."

"You make it sound as if I'm loafing around."

"Frankly, haven't you left a little too much to me this time?"

At that, Tae Gun-seung relaxed his brow and smiled faintly.

"Kang, you have a bit of cheek after all. They say you even went to see my son at the hospital. Were you trying to provoke him?"

"I just stopped by after hearing the news. He's family, after all."

"It doesn't sound like it's meant in a good way. Anyway, you've finished your work, so I should keep my promise and pay you."

With that, Tae Gun-seung looked over his shoulder.

Song Tae-ho, the chairman's secretary and security guard who had been standing by the desk, brought something over and handed it to him.

"Twenty-five percent of the shares in Taeshin Asset Management held by Taeshin Life. With that, you and Ju-ha can manage the company independently."

Currently, Tae Ju-ha held 5.34% of the shares, now with 25% added for a total of 31.34%. That would ensure complete management control, just as In-hyuk had requested.

"With that, the amount is just over the 200 billion won you first mentioned. No discount?"

"Kang, you know how to joke too?"

"I wasn't joking."

"... But do you have the operating funds at Taeshin Asset Management to buy them? If you overextend, it'll hurt company management."

Tae Gun-seung ignored In-hyuk's words. After all, he wasn't giving them away for free.

In-hyuk, of course, had been aware of that condition from the start.

"The MP division has built up some funds. Once the RSK acquisition is wrapped up, we'll be able to build a cushion of extra capital."

"You have that much? But is it okay to use that without the approval of CEO Ju-ha?"

"I control those funds. That was the condition when I took on the division director's role at MP Division."

"I see. A husband securing shares for his wife... quite considerate of each other."

"....."

This time, In-hyuk noisily drank his tea, as if ignoring the remark.

Tae Gun-seung, unfazed, spoke calmly.

"Don't tell me this is some kind of alimony or settlement?"

"Cough—!"

Startled, In-hyuk coughed and glanced at him.

"Why... would you think so?"

"It wasn't a good marriage for you from the beginning, was it? I always hoped you and Ju-ha would be happy together, though."

"Frankly, I can't say you're wrong."

"You can't rethink things?"

"I'll keep your words in mind, sir."

"Please do."

Their conversation ended there.

Getting up, In-hyuk turned to look at Baek Si-hwan, who had followed behind him.

He had been accompanying him ever since the recent hospital visit to Tae Seok-ho.

"Manager Baek."

"Yes, division director."

"I'm looking for a certain person. Can you find them?"

Baek Si-hwan tilted his head slightly.

"Background check, sir?"

"For now, yes."

"Tell me, and I'll look into it."

As he walked toward the elevator, In-hyuk paused.

"When we went to see Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho, do you remember the woman who was with him?"

"I do."

"Find out her name, background, and why she was there."

Baek Si-hwan hesitated a moment, then replied promptly.

"I'll look into it."

Chapter 74

Let's Change Direction

【RSK's hidden deficit of 200 billion won! Baeksan Accounting Firm has ruled for workout proceedings. Currently, president Lee Hyun-geon has been indicted by the prosecution for embezzlement, breach of trust, and bribery...】

【A rebellion from small textile company Texcellence? With AMK Partners at their back, Texcellence is carrying out a hostile takeover of RSK! The funds needed to secure shares are estimated at a minimum of 400 billion won...】

【Taeshin Group's massive shake-up causes stock price turbulence!? Recently, Taeshin Trading established the TF division, launching a large-scale re-audit of the head office, affiliates, and subsidiaries, uncovering company regulation violations and illegal acts by around 100 executives and employees. Disciplinary actions have been meted out according to objective severity...】

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Taeshin Trading's executive vice president, Tae Seok-ho, was preparing for discharge with a distinctly displeased expression.

Reina, who had become his new secretary, approached with an unbroken smile.

"Executive vice president. The phone keeps ringing. What should I do?"

"Don't answer any of them."

Even while hospitalized, the calls continued.

The CEOs and executives caught in Taeshin Group's reshuffle were trying to cling to Tae Seok-ho for a lifeline.

"They must be useless people, I suppose."

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho paused while putting on his jacket.

"Are you planning to speak like that at the company?"

He felt a chill at her tone.

Of course, it wasn't something a secretary to Taeshin Group's executive vice president should say.

Meanwhile, Reina's smile deepened.

"Of course not."

"Even if you're in front of me, try to be careful."

"Understood."

As Tae Seok-ho finished putting on his jacket, he asked again.

"Have you grasped all your duties? Deputy Chief Lee had a lot on his plate, so it can't be easy."

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

"Can I really trust you?"

"Are you referring to work? Or to the person behind me?"

Tae Seok-ho let out a sigh, staring intently at her.

"Both, obviously. I'm already cornered here, so how can I trust something blindly when I don't know what you'll do?"

"But you have no other options, executive vice president. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be here to talk about checkmate."

Suddenly, Reina's eyes flashed coldly, aimed at his throat.

"Are you saying I'm a pawn on a chessboard?"

"Everyone is. It's just a matter of whether you realize it—and if you do, different moves become possible."

"So, does the one who decided to use me as a piece on the board have a way to resolve this situation?"

The initial draft of the personnel reshuffle had already been approved in the chairman's hands.

All that was left was for it to go before the head office's board of directors for a final decision.

Because of this, various people who had stirred up trouble at the company were trying to reach out to Tae Seok-ho on the verge of survival or ruin.

Of course, many of Seok-ho's own people were among them—most notably, Taeshin Spintech's president Lee Chang-hwan and his executives.

However, the TF division had secured evidence on most of their illegal actions.

Anyone who tried to lend a helping hand could easily get caught up themselves.

"The major items are being cleaned up right now. It may get a bit noisy, but that's the best we can do at the moment."

"... Cleaned up?"

bzzz— bzzz—

Just then, Tae Seok-ho's phone vibrated again.

Reina, holding the device, showed him the screen.

【Jang Soo-yeon】

She had worked as one of Tae Seok-ho's executive secretaries alongside Lee Jae-jun.

Recently, Reina had taken over entirely and arranged for her transfer to the HR department under the Gyeongwon Support Division.

Jang Soo-yeon had also been informing Tae Seok-ho of the situation inside while he was hospitalized.

As the call connected, her voice came out.

[Executive vice president. Did you hear the news?]

"What news?"

sensing her serious demeanor, Tae Seok-ho grew tense.

[An employee of Taeshin Energy... was found dead in the company parking lot this morning.]

"... Dead? How?"

[The police are investigating. According to contacts, it's a suicide. There also seems to be a will. But...]

"There's more?"

[News of the personnel plan has leaked to Taeshin Energy.]

"How did...!"

Startled, Tae Seok-ho glanced at Reina standing in front of him. Her expression had taken on a subtle ambiguity.

"... Keep monitoring that side and share anything you find. Also let me know if anywhere else gets wind of the personnel plan."

The call ended with his instructions.

Afterwards, Tae Seok-ho looked back at Reina.

"Don't tell me...the thing I just heard... Was it your side's doing?"

"What are you referring to?"

It was a blatantly evasive return question.

And the previous call had been loud enough that she couldn't possibly not have heard.

"Are you going to keep doing this?"

"I'm just trying not to let you take things too seriously."

"You call that an excuse?"

"Things like this will probably keep happening. If you react every time, we'll both be exhausted."

Tae Seok-ho glared at her with a grim face.

"So, this kind of handling is normal where you come from?"

"I just want you to get used to it quickly."

"You mean... more people will die?"

"You're not worried about human life itself. You're concerned you might get singed by our methods, right?"

An awkward silence followed. It was undeniable.

"Hm..."

"And in this situation, it was unavoidable. If the personnel plan goes through, your position is in danger, executive vice president. That's why we have to delay it, and this was the only way. The police, prosecutors, and media will all be in motion, so trust and wait."

A quiet sigh escaped Tae Seok-ho's lips.

"Haven't you considered the potential drop in Taeshin Group's stock price?"

"That's actually good for us. It creates a chance for you to secure the shares you need."

Tae Seok-ho immediately figured out what she meant.

"So, on the surface, you pressure Kang In-hyuk, who pushed through the reshuffle, and father who approved it—while in the background, you secure shares and win shareholder support?"

"You're quick with calculations."

At the same time, concern crept across Tae Seok-ho's face.

"If your side secures the needed shares, doesn't that mean you'll step in later?"

"We'll make sure you have a chance to purchase them before control is finalized, so don't worry."

"How can I believe that? Didn't you just do everything earlier without consulting me?"

"That was just a taste. And we don't want to be exposed on the surface. That's why we want to ally ourselves with people like you who have big goals and skills."

While in the hospital, Tae Seok-ho had tried to deduce whom Reina was working for.

Police who manipulated evidence with ease, reporters typing what they pleased, hospitals turning gunshots into traffic accident injuries—and now, the ability to take care of people without batting an eye...

At first, he'd thought of the National Intelligence Service, but he couldn't find a reason for them to act independently from the government.

And Reina's bearing and methods were definitely not theirs.

"How many more do you plan to 'take care of'?"

"Two more? If we take out too many, people will get suspicious. And even for us, it's not possible to control the police and the media 100%."

Reina tossed off talk of killing people as if it were nothing.

Tae Seok-ho could only sigh in response.

"If you know that, how can you go through with this?"

"As I said, things won't settle down otherwise. Anyway, just take appropriate action while we move."

Tae Seok-ho shook his head in dismay.

"Wouldn't it be better to take care of Kang In-hyuk instead?"

"Are you asking for our help since you couldn't do it yourself?"

It was another needling remark.

"You really have a way with words..."

"No ill intent. But we can't take care of Division Director Kang In-hyuk right away."

"Why not? If you can dispose of people so easily, why not him?"

"That's a different issue. We haven't figured out who's behind him yet."

At first, Reina, too, had thought as Tae Seok-ho did, given how much of an obstacle Kang In-hyuk was in this mission.

But as soon as she suggested it to the Organization, her proposal had been immediately rejected for exactly that reason.

"So, your side had the same suspicions."

"Since we're helping you, I looked into this and found that Kang In-hyuk's behavior has been odd since the beginning of the year."

"So basically, you acknowledge something's there but haven't figured out what. Maybe your capabilities aren't as great as I thought?"

"If we were perfect, we wouldn't need to reach out to you in the first place."

It was the same for Tae Seok-ho.

At the same time, he could sense just how significant Kang In-hyuk was to both himself and Reina's backers.

With that, the two left the hospital room.

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Same time.

In-hyuk was sitting in the Taeshin Asset Management division director's office, speaking on the phone with Norman McGrath.

[The RSK project is progressing successfully. At this rate, Texcellence should be able to acquire RSK without any issues.]

This was a progress report on the project so far.

"There aren't any shareholding problems right now, but President Lee Hyun-geon might play dirty, so keep an eye out."

[Will do.]

At that moment, something came to In-hyuk's mind.

"Is there any problem handling things on the Accentia side?"

[I was just about to mention it—they seem to be having trouble developing the system. It looks like there are others contacting them, too. Perhaps we should arrange a meeting under the guise of due diligence.]

Norman McGrath placed total trust in In-hyuk's decisions as Gordon Grimes.

But because the circumstances looked suspicious, he broached the subject with caution.

"So, they're starting to have second thoughts."

[It's not that I doubt your judgment, CEO, but I thought it might be an issue.]

"No, it makes sense given the situation."

[Then should I proceed with the due diligence meeting?]

In-hyuk answered without hesitation.

"No. Just leave it."

A startled voice came over the line.

[Pardon?! But among the companies Accentia is in talks with, there are some that are hostile to our business. It could complicate the Greenbyte Labs collaboration you were preparing.]

"You said it was Redboar Technology that was contacting them, right?"

[Correct.]

That company was where Chulsan Capital's funds had been embezzled.

Moreover, it was one of the firms that had taken aim at TN SOFT, which In-hyuk had worked on.

"We are going to change direction."

[... Change in what way?]

"I'll send you the related data separately. If Accentia insists on terminating the contract and paying damages, have our partner law firm extract as much as possible from them. Until then, make sure you have all the necessary evidence for the settlement ready."

Norman McGrath instantly grasped In-hyuk's intent.

[Don't tell me you anticipated this from the very beginning?]

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't?"

[Haaa... Do you mean you even predicted Redboar Technology would approach Accentia?]

"Not that far."

He had honestly expected them to act through a different company.

But seeing Redboar Technology step forward directly, it meant the AMK Partners' adversaries were getting desperate.

[Understood. Send the data, and I'll act after reviewing it. Ah, I have one more question.]

"Go ahead."

[When did you make arrangements with Hong Kong's SGA and the UK's Lumen Holdings? We were able to smoothly take over all of Texcellence and RSK's shares and bonds from them, and things progressed so seamlessly that it made me a bit uneasy.]

Each firm could have conducted the transactions directly.

But without major noise, all their shares and bonds had been sold to AMK Partners at fair prices.

"I'm just well-prepared. We'll likely have many dealings with those firms going forward, so maintain good relations."

[You never fully disclose things. In any case, understood.]

The call ended there.

In-hyuk, meanwhile, set down his phone on the desk, letting out a wry chuckle.

In fact, In-hyuk was the real owner of both SGA in Hong Kong and Lumen Holdings in the UK.

Of course, just as with his Gordon Grimes identity within AMK Partners, he held them all under different names.

Chapter 75

It's Getting Intense

【Mid-sized textile company Texcellence announces new material Polyrax patent and RSK acquisition! This latest patent, a new material that enables soft armor with a maximum Level III bulletproof rating, is expected to greatly impact the upcoming military uniform bid, and it has been announced that Texcellence will also push forward with the acquisition of RSK to expand production capacity...】

【Employee suicide due to unfair company discipline? One of the employees listed for disciplinary action at T Company following the recent personnel restructuring has

committed suicide with charcoal fumes in the company parking lot... With no clear evidence yet regarding the disciplinary decision, it is difficult to consider the TF division's punitive action justified... The company has yet to respond on how it will handle Division Director K, who oversees the TF division...】

【T Company affiliate employee jumps from roof! Expected to be a case similar to the employee who recently died from charcoal fumes... Bereaved families allege the deaths are related to T Company's restructuring...】

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The situation was in turmoil due to the collapse of RSK, once a major defense textile company.

Now, several employees from affiliates under Taeshin Group had started committing suicide, and the media was churning out article after article, each story leading to another.

In-hyuk checked the situation on his phone as soon as he woke up.

"This... it looks like things are about to go off track, just as expected."

He had known about the suicides even before the media reported them.

Even so, at first, the matter wasn't treated as significant, but as more employees died, it suddenly exploded into a much bigger issue.

Despite the gravity of the situation, In-hyuk calmly showered, got ready for work, and finished his morning preparations.

Knock knock—

Just then, there was a knock and Tae Ju-ha's voice called out.

"May I come in?"

"Go ahead."

The door opened, and Tae Ju-ha entered, dressed in a neat black and white two-piece suit.

"By any chance... have you seen the news?"

"Just now. Is that why you came?"

In-hyuk had been so busy working with Taeshin Asset Management and Taeshin Trading that he had hardly seen her at all.

Even though they lived in the same house, this was the first time they'd seen each other in days—the sudden visit felt awkward.

"I just got called in by the chairman. He wants to discuss the situation at headquarters today."

The media's impact was bigger than expected, making it impossible for the head office to sit still.

"So, should I go straight to headquarters?"

"You can go with me."

"Understood, let's head out right away."

In-hyuk finished tying his necktie and grabbed his briefcase.

They went together down to the underground parking lot.

"I'll take my own car."

"You still don't like riding in cars driven by someone else?"

"Having had two car accidents, I'd prefer it that way. The security guards will be coming with us anyway."

"Alright, suit yourself."

After ending the conversation and getting into the driver's seat, Hong Yu-geon, eyeing a car that had just pulled out, asked cautiously, "What's going on, coming down with Mrs. Tae for once? Something happen?"

"Hoo—! Haven't you read the news? It's all chaos because of the employee suicides. That's why we're being called into headquarters this morning."

"Ah—!"

This time, Van Hester spoke up.

"Doesn't look good. Are you okay? Looks like you're about to come under some serious pressure."

Unlike Yu-geon, he had read the news.

"It's a situation I was worried about, but it's not bad."

"Got something prepared this time too?"

So far, In-hyuk had always managed to come up with a solution for any issue.

"Not really. Since I didn't intend for this to happen, it's a bit vexing."

"If the summons is from headquarters... don't tell me... Are they going to pin this on you? Is it a firing?"

At Yu-geon's concern, In-hyuk chuckled.

"Even if I get fired, your livelihoods won't be affected."

"We know that, but it's just that we worry your plans might get derailed."

"Well, I'll see once I get inside. Given the situation, it's obvious who orchestrated all this."

"Tae Seok-ho?"

"Most likely."

Van Hester agreed with Hong Yu-geon, and In-hyuk let out a sigh. Just then, his phone rang—it was Go Mi-ah calling through Ghost Link.

"What's up, calling this early?"

[Did you see the news? Things are crazy right now.]

Her voice was already full of worry.

"I've just been summoned to headquarters over this, together with CEO Tae Ju-ha."

[So you're finally getting fired? Are you going to be working at AMK Partners with that senile old man now?]

She always referred to Norman McGrath that way.

"Why do you assume I'm getting fired?"

[It's serious! Anyone can see this was set up to push you out as president.]

Go Mi-ah clearly understood the gravity of the situation.

"I'll handle what's my responsibility; you just take care of your job. How's the tracking of Redboar Technology's funds going?"

[Tsk—! I'm still working on it. Like I said, there are so many transactions from there that it'll take a while.]

"Be careful not to get traced. I'll contact you once things are resolved."

After the call, Hong Yu-geon caught In-hyuk's eye in the rearview mirror and asked, "What did she say?"

"Just nagging, like you."

And so, the car sped towards Taeshin Trading.

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Taeshin Trading Executive Vice President's office.

Tae Seok-ho sat at his desk, looking slightly anxious.

"The people you handled—there's no way anything will leak out, right?"

He was speaking to Reina Blackwood, who was sitting on one of the sofas.

"Do you think we would have handled things sloppily?"

"You have any idea how many times people I was certain of stabbed me in the back?"

Kang In-hyuk's every move was completely unpredictable.

At first, Tae Seok-ho thought he just wanted to avoid getting involved in the dispute.

But after the unexpected success of his stock investments, he flatly refused Seok-ho's offer in the Chulsan Capital acquisition bid, then formed a close relationship with AMK Partners.

Anything In-hyuk got involved with since then moved in his favor, no matter the outcome.

"So that's why you distributed the shares data of Taeshin Asset Management, which were handed over from Taeshin Life to the chairman, to the executives. Today's meeting is only being held because the media uproar grew after that."

No matter how much Tae Gun-seung ruled Taeshin Group like an emperor, it was difficult to keep ignoring other shareholders and executives.

In situations like this, moving shares of Taeshin Asset Management, a subsidiary of Taeshin Life, could serve as grounds for losing their trust.

"Forget about Kang In-hyuk—you'd better not underestimate my father. There's a reason he's managed to keep that seat until now."

"This time, our target isn't the chairman, but Kang In-hyuk. He got in so deep that, for once, we actually have a chance."

"I sure hope so."

Tae Seok-ho didn't fully trust her words. Reina glanced at her wristwatch.

"It's time to go to the conference room."

"Let's go."

The two left the office and headed to the floor where the conference room was located.

Soon after, several executives and presidents greeted him as he entered the conference room.

"Good to see you, Executive Vice President."

"Are you feeling better now?"

These were all people working to support Tae Seok-ho as the next chairman.

Then, a middle-aged man with graying hair approached from one side.

"I'm glad you look well."

It was Executive Director Jung Min-seop, who held the next most power within Taeshin Trading after Tae Seok-ho.

"Thanks to you. How have you been, Executive Director?"

"As you know, it's been chaotic."

Jung Min-seop was the son of one of the founding members of Taeshin Trading; he had started as a low-level employee and worked his way up to where he was today.

He was also the de facto leader of those who followed Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

Seok-ho had tried various times to recruit him, but was continually rebuffed—to the point that they had become outright adversaries.

"I'm sorry for all the chaos my family caused."

"I didn't know you cared so much about the family, Executive Vice President. But there were plenty of real problems with the recent personnel reforms. Wasn't it just about getting rid of those harming the group from within?"

Since the reforms were spearheaded by Tae Gun-seung, using Kang In-hyuk as his front man, Jung Min-seop also supported and observed their implementation.

Seok-ho knew all this, so he could feel the pointedness in Jung's comments.

"If you cull the rotten apples too indiscriminately, you end up with not enough left for everyone else. I just think things were taken a bit too far."

"That only results in more apples going bad."

The exchange between the two chilled the conference room.

At that moment, In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha entered through the back door.

Feeling all eyes on him, Tae Seok-ho's brow furrowed.

In-hyuk could overhear the surrounding murmurings—all full of dissatisfaction about the current events.

Normally, such conversations would be hard to catch, but In-hyuk could understand perfectly, either by reading lips or picking them up with his sharpened hearing.

"Well, we've become the unwelcome guests."

"You're only just realizing that now?"

Tae Ju-ha's sharp retort made In-hyuk shrug.

"Let's just take our seats."

"Shouldn't you say your greetings first?"

"Judging by the mood, I doubt they want them."

He'd just met Tae Seok-ho's eyes—and it was a look that wanted to tear In-hyuk apart the first chance he got.

'This is intense...'

In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha took their seats at the far end of the conference room.

Even then, glances from various executives and presidents kept stabbing at them.

Eventually, after a while, chairman Tae Gun-seung entered through the front doors—accompanied by his eldest son, Tae Seok-hyun, the president of Taeshin Electronics.

Everyone stood as if on cue.

"What, do you think you deserve a warm welcome? No need for that—just sit down and let's get straight to the point."

After his heavy voice, silence fell.

Tae Gun-seung glared around the packed conference room with an icy gaze; anyone who met his eyes quickly looked away or shifted their gaze.

Only In-hyuk looked back calmly, and when Tae Gun-seung's eyes met his, the chairman began.

"As you all know, something serious has thrown the group into turmoil. The TF division was responsible for the restructuring."

Everyone remained silent.

Even if they were dissatisfied, no one would dare interrupt Chairman Tae Gun-seung.

He kept glancing around as he continued.

"So I want to use this occasion to proceed with board approval of the personnel reform."

There was a surge of murmuring as the expectation that the TF division's misdeeds would get turned over by the media was utterly crushed.

President Lim Sang-min of Taeshin Life spoke up.

"Chairman, if I may, I don't think it's right to simply approve this restructuring."

"..... Why not?"

"There are many problems. The media uproar is one, but frankly, this so-called restructuring is no different from a mass layoff, is it?"

His willingness to take the initiative seemed to encourage others.

"That's right. There's significant unrest among the staff over this."

"Our employees' concerns are already affecting our operations."

A few executives voiced agreement from the sidelines. Tae Gun-seung exhaled heavily through his nose.

"Are you all aware of how much the group lost because of the executives and employees named in this personnel restructuring?"

"....."

That information hadn't been shared with the restructuring notice.

As people murmured in low voices, Tae Gun-seung pressed on.

"Just from simple embezzlement and breach of trust, the identified sum is about 120 billion won. Business failures by those subject to discipline cost us another 890 billion won. On top of that, about 360 billion won was transferred through untraceable overseas contracts from each affiliate's foreign business department!"

As his explanation ended, a large screen at the front of the conference room switched on. The figures he cited were displayed as graphs, showing in detail which affiliates suffered which funding losses. Faces darkened further among the executives and company presidents implicated.

Chapter 76

Of Course!

The atmosphere inside Taeshin Trading's conference room grew even heavier as Tae Gun-seung continued his explanation.

And his explanation did not stop.

"Just ballparking the amount, it's 1 trillion won! What, is that somebody's dog's name? You think it just falls from the sky? Isn't this about what Mulsan's annual wage expenses are? And as I said before, do you even know what the money funneled into those shell companies is?"

Tae Gun-seung's gaze swept over several executives before returning to Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

The moment their eyes met, Tae Seok-ho immediately sensed that something was seriously wrong.

That was because the affiliate company he had embezzled funds from wasn't just Taeshin Spintech.

Of course, he wasn't involved in the full amount mentioned, but his hands had touched a portion of it.

Unbeknownst to him, other places had also been investigated all this time.

Once again, everyone fell silent.

No one had dreamed that Chairman Tae Gun-seung and the TF division had investigated matters as deeply as this.

"Worried about the employees? Restructuring? If you all have mouths, why not speak up like before?! And show this information to those employees while you're at it, and ask them! Should the company turn a blind eye and keep people around who are doing things like this?!"

The mood became even more hostile.

At the same time, nobody dared to speak. Everyone was too preoccupied with protecting themselves.

With no choice, Tae Seok-ho, who had been quietly gauging the mood, finally stepped forward.

"Chairman, I believe the crux of the situation is the lack of evidence to support disciplinary action for the employees who recently passed away. If their wrongdoing had been clear, things wouldn't have gone that far, would they?"

A few nodded, as if to say that's what they had wanted to say all along...

Observing this, In-hyuk unconsciously shook his head.

"Division Director Kang In-hyuk, do you have something to say here?"

Tae Gun-seung, who had spotted In-hyuk's gesture from the center, asked.

In-hyuk sighed and turned on the microphone in front of him.

"Who says so? Who says there isn't enough evidence of those employees' violations of company policy and the law?"

Naturally, it was Tae Seok-ho who had to answer.

Of course, since Reina Blackwood had handled the issue, he had also thoroughly investigated the related matters.

"The grounds and measures for disciplinary action identified during the personnel restructuring for those two were, respectively, dismissal for receiving kickbacks and for embezzlement. If we look at Taeshin Energy's side only, the wrongdoing was committed by a team member directly under the person in question. However, not long after, through our own audit, it was confirmed that money had entered that employee's account, and that employee was immediately fired as a disciplinary measure."

He was referring to the employee who had died by suicide in Taeshin Energy's underground parking lot.

"Then was the money that the fired employee pocketed recovered?"

"No. Checking the records belatedly, it was revealed that the employee had already laundered and siphoned the funds overseas. After that, the employee was imprisoned."

"To be exact, not long after, he hanged himself in prison."

Unaware of that fact, people began to whisper again.

At that, Tae Gun-seung tapped the microphone with his hand.

Thunk—Thunk—

The heavy sound echoed and quieted the room again.

Meanwhile, Tae Seok-ho calmly looked at In-hyuk.

He too knew that the person mentioned before had killed himself.

He also understood that, even if the case were reopened, there was no way to uncover more now.

It was also for this reason that Reina had targeted the higher-up manager, who was the real recipient of the kickbacks.

"Division Director Kang In-hyuk, are you saying you interpret that as him being unjustly treated?"

"No. It wouldn't be a feeling of injustice, but rather resentment. The department manager he worked with got off scot-free, while he had to take all the blame alone."

"You don't know that. Those people aren't here, are they? In the end, the TF division drove a Taeshin Group employee to death based only on circumstantial evidence."

At this, In-hyuk's gaze cooled even further.

"Who says there was no evidence?"

"At the time, the police reported that they couldn't find any evidence that the late Manager Go Min-seok had received kickbacks. The same result came from Taeshin Energy and the head office audit division."

"It's not that they couldn't find it—it's that they didn't look."

Back then, the head of the audit division was Director Han Gi-seok, who was also on a leash held by In-hyuk.

Naturally, it was because there had been under-the-table dealings with someone in the Organization that the investigation had ended like that.

"I don't know what you mean. Has the TF division always investigated by twisting the facts like this?"

"I'm not talking about Manager Go Min-seok, but about evidence left behind by Manager Lee Min-jun, who killed himself in prison. It didn't come out until after the personnel restructuring had already been shared, so I didn't have a chance to show you before. But it turns out to come in handy now."

In-hyuk pulled a USB stick from his pocket and held it up.

Song Tae-ho, CEO Tae Gun-seung's secretary, approached, took it, and plugged it into the conference room screen.

Soon, the display changed to something else, showing account records with familiar company names making payments to a particular company.

In-hyuk continued.

"As you can see, the company that transferred the funds was a subcontractor doing business with Taeshin Energy. The account owner was a shell company."

"If that came from Manager Lee Min-jun, doesn't it make things even clearer?"

"If Manager Lee Min-jun was also the owner of the shell company, then yes. But the funds transferred from the shell company were then withdrawn by another shell company in Oklahoma, went through a money laundering organization, and a portion ended up with a certain individual residing in Korea."

As this alarming explanation continued, everyone fell silent.

Then, Song Tae-ho flipped to the next screen, and In-hyuk began the most important part of the explanation.

"It was the father-in-law of Manager Go Min-seok's wife. Incidentally, the money laundering organization I just mentioned was recently busted and is under investigation by the authorities and the prosecution. I obtained these materials through their cooperation. Oh, and of course, I handed them over to the prosecution yesterday. By now, both the wife and her father are probably being questioned together."

Currently, Go Min-seok's wife had been giving tearful interviews to the press, claiming her husband took his life unjustly.

Since the TF division's restructuring seemed unfair on the surface, public opinion had sympathized with her tears.

However, if the evidence In-hyuk just cited came to light, it was clear where the arrows aimed at Taeshin Group and the TF division would be redirected.

In the midst of the continued silence, In-hyuk looked at Tae Seok-ho and spoke.

"Honestly, looking at evidence and the circumstances like this, it's hard to find a reason for Manager Go Min-seok to commit suicide. Could it be—it wasn't a suicide? That's the kind of thought that comes up. Don't you agree, Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho?"

The fists inside Tae Seok-ho's hands, stacked on the desk, clenched tightly.

He almost turned to glare at Reina sitting behind him, but realized it was a problem with what had happened before she took action.

"I must have misunderstood greatly. However..."

"Oh, and the same goes for Taeshin Heavy Industries' embezzlement case. You've been lining your pockets for years by inflating supply prices through companies registered under acquaintances overseas. The money was withdrawn via an overseas account, and that will be investigated by the prosecutors, the Financial Supervisory Service, and the IRS for violations of foreign exchange law and tax evasion."

Everyone was struck speechless.

The situation that seemed to have In-hyuk cornered had been completely overturned.

At this rate, it was obvious that catching In-hyuk would prove difficult.

After a while, as the silence broke and the room began to buzz, no one could easily speak up, unable to predict how the conversation would shift.

At that moment, Tae Seok-hyun, president of Taeshin Electronics and In-hyuk's father-in-law—who had kept silent so far—spoke.

"Let's set aside the topic of personnel restructuring for now. There's something I want to ask Division Director Kang In-hyuk. Is it true that you're planning to purchase a portion of Taeshin Life's shares in Taeshin Asset Management for your division's operational funds?"

This caught even In-hyuk slightly by surprise.

He had thought Chairman Tae Gun-seung had managed this matter thoroughly, but it had come out of none other than Tae Seok-hyun's mouth.

At the same time, another thought struck him.

'Did someone deliberately leak information to Tae Seok-hyun?'

Right now, most of the forces he could lean on were Tae Gun-seung's.

Naturally, the information he received was determined within the boundaries Tae Gun-seung allowed.

So the details about Taeshin Asset Management's shares were something Tae Gun-seung oversaw personally and wouldn't have provided to Tae Seok-hyun.

Naturally, all eyes turned to Tae Gun-seung.

In-hyuk was about to gauge whether he would step forward himself, but Tae Gun-seung merely met his gaze with an unexpectedly nonchalant expression.

'He gave me the share purchase agreement, so is he telling me to handle it myself?'

He was about to sigh again when he felt someone staring at him from the side.

It was Tae Ju-ha, staring at In-hyuk intently. She had had no idea about the deal In-hyuk and Tae Gun-seung were making.

"It's true. We plan to sign a contract to purchase 25% of Taeshin Asset Management's shares using profits from the MP Division."

The reason nobody else knew was simply that the purchase agreement hadn't been executed yet.

Unless it was made public, there was no way for anyone outside the parties involved to know.

"Considering the private market value of Taeshin Asset Management's unlisted stock, that should be at least 200 billion won. Are you saying the MP Division can cover that? Even if they can, that's a massive 200 billion! Wouldn't it be better for the group if those funds were used for operations instead? Wouldn't you agree?"

Tae Seok-hyun asked, as if inviting others' agreement.

Hearing the amount, people instinctively nodded their heads.

All the while, Tae Gun-seung remained silent, merely observing.

At this, In-hyuk felt a flicker of indignation and spoke up.

"This is the same argument as last time. In the end, you're dissatisfied that Taeshin Asset Management's surplus funds are going toward independence rather than the group, right?"

"It's not so much dissatisfaction, but as the head of the TF division, you know better than anyone the situation the group is in, right? There's also that one trillion won loss from the restructuring targets that the Chairman mentioned earlier. If you're part of Taeshin, it's only natural to focus on covering those losses."

"So then, CEO Tae Seok-hyun, are you saying that if Taeshin Electronics had surplus funds, you'd use them for the group?"

For only a fraction of a second, Tae Seok-hyun gauged the room before answering quickly.

"Of course!"

At that moment, In-hyuk responded as if he had been waiting for it.

"That's fortunate. To what I know, you've poured a significant amount of money into Taeshin Next, one of Taeshin Electronics' subsidiaries. In some areas, you've already allocated and paid out three years' worth of budget in advance. Altogether, that totals about 300 billion won."

Tae Seok-hyun's expression stiffened instantly. In-hyuk continued, not stopping there.

"Of course, I understand that Taeshin Next's funds are intended for future technology development. But if you don't even know the immediate crisis, is there really a need to allocate three years' worth in advance? I'll forgo the share purchase and divert 200 billion won toward the group's loss recovery fund, so why don't you join me, CEO?"

Other people's eyes turned to Tae Seok-hyun, waiting for his answer. But Tae Seok-hyun stiffened and bit his lip.

"That... That money is for developing upgraded AI technology and parts for next year's new products. This isn't something that can be done in a year or two, so the prepayment is necessary. Touching those funds means jeopardizing the future of Taeshin Electronics."

It wasn't an unreasonable explanation—if, of course, it was true.

Before re-auditing through the TF division, In-hyuk had already known about issues at Taeshin Next.

He was aware that Tae Seok-hyun was cycling internal funds to patch up losses at Taeshin Electronics...

In the original timeline, Tae Seok-ho succeeded in manipulating Taeshin Electronics in precisely that way—with In-hyuk's help.

"There isn't an immediate problem, right? In fact, spending the budget heavily at the outset can raise tax issues. Taeshin Electronics may face cash flow problems as a result. Isn't it better to divert the money to the group now? If a problem arises, we'll support you with profits from our side as an investment."

He pressed the point with various reasons, leaving no room for escape.

The differences that had arisen to ensnare In-hyuk during the meeting began to unravel.

The enormous financial clout that Taeshin Asset Management—once just a Taeshin Life subsidiary—now possessed had changed everything.

Another silence settled over the room.

Then, Tae Gun-seung twitched his wrinkled lips and switched on the microphone.

"We can discuss the group's loss funds again later. Since the situation is more or less settled, let's proceed with the vote on the personnel restructuring."

The executives threw sour looks at Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

Once personnel restructuring commenced, not only would their cronies be gone, but it would be difficult for them to keep their own seats.

Of course, this was tantamount to destroying the ambitions of those who had hoped to serve as the kingmakers to Taeshin Group's next chairman.

Chapter 77

About the Divorce

【Taeshin Energy deceased department manager A – kickback charges are certain! Amid confirmation that a portion of the company funds siphoned overseas was deposited under the account of his wife's father, prosecutors announced they had uncovered traces of money laundering while tracking the account... In addition, for another deceased person, the Taeshin Heavy Industries fall victim, evidence emerged that embezzlement was definite...】

【Taeshin Group personnel restructuring – reform or purge list! This Taeshin Group personnel overhaul proceeds with the prosecution and disciplinary action of those breaking the law. Some say the internal fearful atmosphere disrupts work, but it was announced that since clear evidence of wrongdoing was discovered, the distinction is clear...】

【Taeshin Asset Management exclusively handling Texcellence's RSK M&A! The M&A division of Taeshin Asset Management, which participated in the recent acquisition of Chulsan Capital, took charge of this new deal as well, drawing significant attention... but unlike before, as the current president A is under arrest and investigation, it was revealed that there will be a hostile M&A battle over shares...】

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The media's focus, which had targeted Taeshin Trading, began to shift.

Of course, many outlets were still taking aim, but it was a trend that would soon be forced to change.

Meanwhile, Reina Blackwood arrived at an abandoned fishing site on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province.

It was past midnight. As she walked further in, a middle-aged man was waiting for her in the darkness.

Reina gave a slight bow of her head.

"Sorry I'm late. Some whiny human needed comforting, so I got held up."

She was referring to Tae Seok-ho.

Because she hadn't been able to delay the personnel shakeup, she had to listen to all sorts of complaints.

The middle-aged man started walking toward her.

"Seems things have gotten pretty tangled."

This man was Hyottoko, one of the elders holding the organization's highest rank, who had ordered Reina to work under Tae Seok-ho.

"That's right. Kang In-hyuk is much tougher than what was in the previous reports. I mentioned earlier that we should take care of him just in case, but the deputy general manager put it on hold."

At the same time, he was also Im Deok-chang, current third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service.

Of course, Reina was well aware of his identity.

"It wasn't just my decision."

"So, do I have to stay by Tae Seok-ho's side from now on? Looking at how things are, even if we collect the shares and delegate the authority... Honestly, it doesn't seem hopeful. If we get rid of Kang In-hyuk now, there might be a chance, though."

Im Deok-chang shook his head at her grumbling.

"Don't you want to take care of Baek Si-hwan rather than Kang In-hyuk?"

"Why would I want to deal with that guy?"

"You said you didn't like him. Besides, you know better than anyone that he's always using tricks."

"It's more that I don't like the people Baek Si-hwan follows."

"You mean chairman Baek Ji-woong? True, you've always said you didn't care for that man."

Reina shuddered a little and rubbed her forearms with both hands.

"You never know what he's thinking."

"You have to be that capable to have Kitsune behind you and run W&W. Anyway, you'll have to stick by Tae Seok-ho for now."

Kitsune was also an elder like Hyottoko.

His position was Fourth Elder. But judging from the tone, their relationship wasn't exactly friendly.

At his warning, Reina's eyes widened slightly.

"Continuously? Wouldn't it be better to try seducing Kang In-hyuk instead? If we're not going to get rid of him, he's much better than the Tae brothers."

After seeing Kang In-hyuk's intelligence at the recent Taeshin Trading executive meeting, Reina had been frankly astonished.

She had thought this plan was something that simply couldn't be overturned.

Yet Kang In-hyuk's investigation had not only caught up to them, but had completely flipped the tables.

Furthermore, the issue of Taeshin Asset Management shares, which she'd deliberately leaked toward Tae Seok-hyun, had been used to obliquely address and block internal issues at Taeshin Electronics.

That was something she hadn't caught, and even while hearing about it, she found herself anticipating the outcome.

"Was he really that impressive?"

"He's even more unreadable than chairman Baek Ji-woong. But at least he's not creepy, so I don't mind."

"But there's no place for Kang In-hyuk's talents in Taeshin."

"He's the Taeshin family's son-in-law. Are you planning to have him divorce and marry one of W&W's daughters?"

W&W Group itself was one of the main funding sources for their organization.

Over many years, they'd kept the family line alive and always placed the most capable in the chairman's seat.

Baek Ji-woong was one of those people.

At this, Im Deok-chang smiled faintly.

"That's not a bad idea, actually."

"I was joking, but you're taking this so seriously?"

Even as she said it, she thought it sounded ridiculous.

But Im Deok-chang's expression was earnest.

"No. It's entirely possible."

"What?"

"Kang In-hyuk is chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's biological son. If he ever considers leaving Taeshin to take over KQ Group, we can push away that idiot Kang Do-young and put In-hyuk in his place. As for the planned wedding to Baek Hae-na..."

He meant W&W Group's second daughter, Baek Hae-na.

That marriage had been another project their organization had orchestrated.

Reina stared at Im Deok-chang in shock.

"Really? Ah, so that's why you put off dealing with him."

"That's right. Now that he's proven more useful than expected, it's actually a decent hand for the organization. It might even be a chance to change the manager at W&W."

"So now what? Is someone upstairs going to contact Kang In-hyuk?"

Im Deok-chang's expression grew serious at that.

"That's the problem. It's impossible to clearly gauge his intentions or agenda. And to make matters more interesting, he seems to have close ties to AMK Partners as well."

"The National Intelligence Service did a background check, right? Did anything turn up on AMK Partners?"

AMK Partners was a new player in investment, hailed as the Midas touch.

Yet instead of economic hubs like Hong Kong, dubai, or New York, they had set up a Korea office.

Of course, there was no way the Korean government would let that be, and the affiliated National Intelligence Service rigorously investigated AMK Partners.

"Actually, it's the Korean branch that's active. There, Norman McGrath, a Wall Street veteran, runs everything. As for the real CEO, Gordon Grimes—aside from records, there's no other info available."

"So he could even be a fictional person?"

"Very likely. But due to being based in the Cayman Islands, a British territory, it's hard to investigate closely. The actual operating accounts are likely in a third country."

Reina nodded.

"How deep Kang In-hyuk's connection goes is the real issue."

"All of the M&A assignments AMK Partners has made so far could have been handled directly without any problem. The fact that they went out of their way to use Kang In-hyuk at Taeshin Asset Management... either they needed a proxy, or there's a high chance Kang In-hyuk is someone they need."

"Complicated, isn't it?"

Maybe feeling a bit stifled himself, Im Deok-chang took out a cigarette and lit up.

"Hoo—! Anyway, for that reason, you need to keep a close eye on Baek Si-hwan in Taeshin if anything happens. He should also be aware of Kang In-hyuk's real identity because of the Daemyung incident. So is Baek Ji-woong."

He was referring to what happened via Daemyung Detective Agency. Reina also knew this, having read Baek Si-hwan's report.

At the same time, she immediately understood why Jeon Hae-in had tried to kill Kang In-hyuk.

"Ah... Acting on Jeon Hae-in's orders, Daemyung moved to eliminate Kang In-hyuk and failed, right?"

"During that, Baek Ji-woong also discovered who Kang In-hyuk is, and is now sizing him up to decide how to use him. So make sure to watch things in the middle. Particularly, keep your eyes on Baek Si-hwan, so he doesn't try anything reckless..."

Faced with the directive, Reina paused to think.

"If Kang In-hyuk sides with Baek Ji-woong? Not to mention the hypothetical close relationship with AMK Partners. Even now, his value as Kang Cheon-gyu's child is significant—if you add all that up, wouldn't he become too tough to handle later?"

"That's not a prediction to be dismissed."

No immediate conclusion was reached.

Then Reina remembered something.

"What about Skull? The National Intelligence Service didn't find anything?"

This time, Im Deok-chang shook his head again.

"No. There's no CCTV footage of their movements. There were hardly any cameras in that area to begin with. Same for other locations."

"Don't tell me... could it be Aoshika?"

"Who knows? Since Norman disappeared three years ago, there's been no trace. Of course, we can't rule out the possibility completely."

Norman was the head of Aoshika.

Previously, he had been responsible for the organization before it split into two, for its own reasons.

Even now, they were still searching for Norman.

"Do you and the other elders really not know Norman's identity?"

It was a question sparkling with unfeigned curiosity.

"What, are you that curious?"

"It's just fascinating. Even if he's a former chairman, he must have ties with the other elders. But to not find him at all until now—do you really know nothing?"

Im Deok-chang just heaved a sigh.

"Just let it go. Whatever you do, don't talk to anyone else about this."

Reina shrugged.

"I'm not that loose-tongued."

"Anyway, make sure you keep a tight leash on Tae Seok-ho. Don't let things get derailed for no reason."

With those words, Im Deok-chang vanished into the darkness, and before long, there was no trace of his presence at all.

* * *

The Taeshin Group personnel shakeup passed the board of directors.

As a result, a storm of blood swept through the head office, subsidiaries, and affiliate companies—total chaos.

In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha were sitting face-to-face in the Taeshin Asset Management CEO's office.

"This is the stock purchase contract for the 25% stake in Taeshin Asset Management that Taeshin Life was holding. The funds were drawn, as discussed at the last meeting, from the profits held by the MP Division."

"... With this, the company's holdings reach 43%; if you add what I and the executives own, it goes over 55%."

At Tae Ju-ha's answer, In-hyuk nodded.

"We're no longer a subsidiary."

"Indeed."

With a soft reply, Tae Ju-ha's gaze remained fixed on the contract that In-hyuk had passed over.

But it wasn't because she was reading the short text over and over.

It was because the promise she'd made with In-hyuk after his return from America was finally being kept.

"Taeshin Life still owns about 26%, but the dividend payout rate will be noticeably reduced. And in the event we go for an IPO, the chairman said he'd take care to protect the shareholding for initial management rights defense."

At this, Tae Ju-ha was again surprised.

"He told you that as well?"

"Taeshin Group will only benefit from listing Taeshin Asset Management, after all."

In-hyuk was matter-of-fact.

At his attitude, Tae Ju-ha let out a shallow sigh.

"So now all I have to do is fulfill my end of the bargain?"

"What do you mean?"

He genuinely didn't know what she meant.

After a moment's hesitation, Tae Ju-ha spoke slowly.

"... The divorce. I mean."

"... Ah."

It was the conversation they'd agreed to at the start of the year.

They were to remain married for a year from that point.

In exchange for Tae Ju-ha handing over the H&T Fund account records she'd obtained, he would gather Taeshin Life shares, the parent company's stake.

And soon, their agreed period would be up.

"If you let me know when you wish, I'll start preparing for a consensual divorce."

As In-hyuk listened, he drummed his fingers on the table where the contract lay.

Tok— toouk—

"Let me think on that a bit more. I have a lot to take care of at the moment."

Between AMK Partners, Hong Kong's SGA, and Lumen Holdings, there was too much going on tied up with Taeshin Asset Management.

Especially since Greenbyte Labs, which Taeshin Asset Management was investing in, was approaching a crucial phase.

He couldn't afford to jeopardize his involvement in business because of a divorce.

"Understood. Then, just let me know whenever you're ready."

"Will do. I'll be going, then."

Having finished the conversation, In-hyuk got up from his seat.

Chapter 78

We Need to Redraw the Board

In-hyuk, who had returned to his office, looked at Baek Si-hwan, who followed him in.

"Is there something you need?"

"I looked into the woman you mentioned last time."

"That was faster than I thought."

The file Baek Si-hwan was holding was handed over to In-hyuk.

【Personal Information】

▷ Reina Blackwood

▷ Born △△, 1993 (32 years old)

▷ American national

▷ Works in the secretary office of Taeshin Trading

▷ Resigned from the planning team at Texas Redboar Technology

▷ Resigned from the sales team at New York YL International

▷ Graduated from New York University, business administration

▷ Born in Japan, adopted to Philadelphia, America

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As he reviewed the contents, In-hyuk asked Baek Si-hwan with a subtle expression.

"Are her educational background and the companies she worked for verified?"

"I checked, and there were no issues. May I ask why you wanted her looked into?"

"You're only curious about that now?"

"When you gave the order, I thought there must be a reason. But after reading the contents, nothing particularly stood out, so I became curious."

If Baek Si-hwan had really known nothing, it was a convincing answer.

However, In-hyuk was certain that there was something between him and Reina Blackwood.

Of course, after Lee Jae-jun went missing, she had taken his place, so it was inevitable she was related.

"With this TF division personnel reshuffle, a fair number of employees within executive vice president Tae Seok-ho's sphere of influence were let go. Naturally, executive vice president Tae will keep me in check, so I need to prepare as well."

"Ah... I see."

Soon after, In-hyuk took an envelope from his desk drawer and handed it over.

"This is the investment portfolio for the first half of next year. Let's plan next year's schedule based on this."

Baek Si-hwan noticed the 'confidential' stamp on the envelope.

"Isn't this... a document managed personally by you, division director?"

"That's right. You need to know my schedule so your own work won't suffer, so please verify it together."

"I will do that."

As Baek Si-hwan, having received instructions, left the director's office, Hong Yu-geon, who had been waiting on the sofa, asked quietly,

"Is it okay to hand over something like that?"

"It's data for companies we plan to invest in at Level B, so it's fine. Also, if I don't show some openings on my side, Baek Si-hwan will stay on guard."

"It's not a trap like last time?"

He was referring to the incriminating data on the suicides In-hyuk had prepared for the last meeting.

Even though it was described as unexpected, every detail had been perfectly prepared.

"A trap? Far from it. Those guys never thought I'd use what I had prepared."

"So they basically dug their own graves."

"Pretty much."

"So, are you really going to keep such a dangerous guy at your side?"

Hong Yu-geon recalled the image of Baek Si-hwan packing up the Daemyung Detective Agency's belongings.

Judging from the circumstances, Baek Si-hwan had clearly taken care of them.

He was someone who could kill off even the last traces of any mercy or cruelty before stepping into the company, acting with complete composure in front of In-hyuk. Anyone would be chilled by such a demeanor.

"I have my reasons for wanting him around."

"He's not a pushover. What if your true position gets exposed by mistake?"

"That won't happen."

Baek Si-hwan was even more cautious now than when he and In-hyuk knew each other in his previous life.

Back then, they had both come from UID and belonged to TSS, so there was trust from the start.

But now, their relationship had begun with mutual hostility. Approaching too closely would definitely make it look suspicious.

He enforced instructions with just the right amount of tension so that Baek Si-hwan would move slowly.

"Then why have him investigate Reina Blackwood? If he's on the same side as her, it couldn't have been a proper investigation."

"I wanted to see his reaction."

"Reaction? What kind of reaction?"

After a short pause, In-hyuk replied.

"There's something to it. Just don't act out of character from usual."

"... Kind of boring."

In-hyuk recalled Baek Si-hwan's reaction when he handed over Reina Blackwood's information earlier.

The atmosphere was similar yet different from when he first saw her in Tae Seok-ho's hospital room.

'At first, there was surprise. Then tension. He deliberately avoided her gaze. I think I've felt this kind of atmosphere before... Ah, there was that time in San Jose when he suddenly seemed unwell.'

In the past, he wouldn't have noticed. But since returning to the past with the memories of a different life, such details became increasingly clearer.

He could even hear a person's breathing and heartbeat vividly when focusing nearby.

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As night deepened.

Baek Si-hwan arrived at a villa building in the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province at Baek Ji-woong's summons, which he hadn't had in a while.

"I thought the next chairman of Taeshin would be Tae Seok-ho without a hitch, but I didn't expect him to be cornered like this."

The details of the board resolution for the personnel reshuffle at Taeshin Trading some time ago hadn't been fully revealed.

Baek Ji-woong was speaking while recalling a recent report submitted by Baek Si-hwan.

"I didn't think Tae Seok-ho would end up like that either."

A faint suspicion flickered in Baek Ji-woong's eyes for an instant.

"Weren't you watching from nearby? Are you saying you really knew nothing?"

"As you know, Kang In-hyuk doesn't trust me. He's clearly aware that Tae Seok-ho placed me by his side. Would he share plans to attack Tae Seok-ho with someone like me?"

It wasn't an implausible explanation.

"Hmm... So it'll be hard to earn Kang In-hyuk's trust in the future?"

"I can't say for sure. But just a few days ago, he entrusted the investment portfolio for the first half of next year to me. I think our relationship has improved a bit compared to before."

A twitch formed at Baek Ji-woong's lips.

"How far do you think Kang In-hyuk will go?"

"How far... do you mean?"

The vague question prompted a returned question.

"Do you really think Kang In-hyuk will be satisfied with his current position? With the capability to generate hundreds of billions in profit from just managing the MP Division of Taeshin Asset Management?"

"But as lacking as the Tae brothers, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, may be, they're still Chairman Tae Gun-seung's sons. They each have major roles at Taeshin Electronics and Trading, so where is there room for Kang In-hyuk to step in?"

"Just looking at how Chairman Tae is supporting Kang In-hyuk as he is now, it's the same thing as creating that opening. Besides, we need to prepare our own moves as well."

Baek Si-hwan immediately understood what he meant.

"It's because Kuroki stuck with Tae Seok-ho, isn't it? Have we confirmed who sent that woman? And the reason for Lee Jae-jun's disappearance as well."

He meant the Japanese-style surname of Reina Blackwood. Baek Si-hwan had genuinely been shocked when he saw her in Tae Seok-ho's hospital room not long ago.

But since Kang In-hyuk was present, he kept his composure and looked elsewhere.

He had then immediately reported to Baek Ji-woong, but hadn't found out who had stationed her there.

"It was Hyottoko. And as for Lee Jae-jun, it seems he was taken out by Skull. I'm guessing the body was handled using Areum Cleaning."

"You mean the third elder? And Skull is..."

"That's what we decided to call the guy who interfered with our operation. The organization agreed to use that codename for now."

"Haaa... So what happened with Hyottoko? Wasn't he supposed to stay out of things on this side?"

Baek Ji-woong let out a short sigh.

"Do you know who Hyottoko really is?"

"We shouldn't pay too much attention to those above us, should we?"

"Do you really not know?"

Faced with the heavy question, Baek Si-hwan hesitated and answered cautiously.

"I know he's with the National Intelligence Service."

He was actually aiming for the top, so he couldn't just ignore it.

Baek Ji-woong nodded.

"To be precise, it's third deputy director Im Deok-chang. And apparently, he made the move first with something they were preparing elsewhere. That's why he pushed Reina Blackwood into the current Taeshin operation as well."

Baek Si-hwan was surprised to learn that Hyottoko—one of the organization elders—was Im Deok-chang.

At the same time, his explanation connected a situation that had previously made no sense.

"So that call from Hannya the other day..."

Not long ago, following a failed operation, the unsanctioned handling of Daemyung Detective Agency, and the UID stronghold attack, there had been an order to submit a report.

Baek Ji-woong stalled as much as possible, but with Reina appearing in America and putting further pressure on Baek Si-hwan, he had no choice but to submit the humiliating report.

He'd thought the issue was closed with that.

But suddenly, with Reina taking the spot next to Tae Seok-ho, Baek Ji-woong's plans were interfered with.

"That was probably to gauge the situation on this side. If his own operation failed, he should've just laid low quietly..."

"So Hyottoko intends to support Tae Seok-ho directly through Reina."

"It's his way of eating our plan up for free."

It was a situation that prompted another sigh.

"So then, are you saying you'll put forth Kang In-hyuk instead of Tae Seok-ho, chairman?"

This would mean overturning the organization's established plans.

Startled by Baek Si-hwan's words, Baek Ji-woong simply smiled.

"No. That would be impossible. But we'll have to redraw the board for ourselves."

Bzzz— bzzz—

Just then, Baek Ji-woong's phone rang.

"Excuse me for a moment."

The call connected, and a voice came through the receiver.

As Baek Ji-woong listened quietly, his expression darkened. As the call finished, Baek Si-hwan cautiously approached and asked,

"... What's wrong?"

"It's a call from Redboar. The Accentia matter, which we expected to wrap up quietly, is starting to get complicated."

"There... you mean it was the place we canceled AMK Partners' investment for and planned to proceed with directly, right? The penalty was going to be fully paid, wasn't it?"

The plan was to create a partnership with Greenbyte Labs—already invested in by Taeshin Asset Management—starting from that point. Judging from the circumstances, it was clear that Accentia was that important.

But from his expression, Baek Ji-woong was telling him that something had gone wrong.

"AMK Partners filed a lawsuit to cancel the termination. And they went as far as hiring a famous law firm in New York for this."

Baek Si-hwan's expression grew serious as well.

"Won't this cause too much delay?"

"That's the problem."

"Publicly, the system being developed there doesn't seem likely to be that profitable. What did Redboar's due diligence on Accentia reveal?"

Of course, they had also appraised Accentia's value.

"Nothing in particular. But if AMK went so far as to file a lawsuit, they must have a reason they can't let go."

"Just as you said, it's going to get complicated."

"We can't let AMK beat us again, so we'll have to secure it somehow. It seems Redboar has been waiting for this opportunity as well."

The mood between the two grew even heavier.

Then Baek Ji-woong spoke again.

"It's crucial for you to curry more favor with Kang In-hyuk. Through that, you need to find out what technology they're trying to integrate with Accentia using Greenbyte Labs."

"I'm still looking into it, but I don't have access to that information yet."

"Keep knocking, even if it takes more time. In the meantime, I'll try to ride along with Hyottoko's plans."

Baek Si-hwan nodded quietly.

At the same time, he began pondering how to win more of Kang In-hyuk's trust.

Chapter 79

Why Don't You Take Charge of It

【Taeshin Asset Management, Taeshin Life changes status from a subsidiary to an affiliate of Taeshin Group! With the change in equity structure and significant recent profit creation, an expansion of strategy from the M&A/PEF division is anticipated.....】

【Battle for RSK shares! Texcellence is believed to be using Taeshin Asset Management as a broker to acquire massive stakes. Meanwhile, RSK's losses from continuous embezzlement, breach of trust, and reckless management are dragging its stock price down day after day.....】

【In the U. S., Accentia demanded AMK Partners terminate the investment contract. AMK Partners filed not for damages but for a cancellation reversal lawsuit..... Legal representation is handled by Morgan & Finch, one of the top five law firms in New York, attracting public attention.....】

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There was never a quiet day in the world, always buzzing with news.

Of course, all those situations had been caused by In-hyuk.

In-hyuk checked such updates on his tablet while heading somewhere, as usual.

That morning, his destination was Taeshin Trading.

He got out in the underground parking lot and ascended, attracting the gazes of passing employees.

"With this personnel reshuffle, isn't he going all the way up to a head office executive?"

"But is it really a reshuffle? Isn't it just restructuring?"

"I heard some of the presidents are included too. Of course, people like us just follow orders, but it doesn't feel good just watching the higher-ups do as they please. That's why they cleared out all the problematic execs."

Various opinions buzzed among the people.

Meanwhile, the elevator they'd been waiting for arrived, and In-hyuk took it up to the floor where the TF division was located.

The employees who had arrived earlier were busy greeting In-hyuk as soon as he appeared.

Then, from one side, Noh Dongjun approached and spoke up.

"Hello! Division director!"

Amused by the playful greeting, In-hyuk just shook his head.

"Pick one stance to stick with."

"The other employees are watching, you know."

"Let's go to the office and talk."

It seemed like he had something to say to Noh Dongjun.

So, In-hyuk led Noh Dongjun, along with Hong Yu-geon, Van Hester, and Baek Si-hwan—who were following behind—into the office.

"Now that the reshuffle is finished, is the TF division going to be wound up soon?"

As soon as the door closed, Noh Dongjun asked again, now using informal language.

In-hyuk didn't ponder long.

Even now, with the personnel reshuffle over, the TF division staff were merely wrapping up remaining documents, their work essentially done.

"Soon, the work here will be completed."

"So, has it been decided where the staff will go?"

"Why? Did the others ask you to check for them?"

At that, Noh Dongjun gave a guilty start.

"Well... Everyone's worried about what'll happen to them."

"It's because with the reshuffle audit, if they go back to their original departments, their positions will be unclear, right?"

In-hyuk had experienced a similar thing himself back during the TSS days.

After working undercover under Tae Seok-hyun and then switching over to Tae Seok-ho's side... he thinned the ranks of factions using long-prepared background info.

After that, people in the company treated In-hyuk as if they'd seen the grim reaper.

He remembered perfectly the chilly atmosphere from then.

"How did you know about all that?"

"When I moved from Trading to Asset Management, it felt exactly like this."

"Ah..."

Back then, In-hyuk had married Tae Ju-ha and, thanks to two promotions from deputy to department manager, became a parachuted department manager of the stock management Team 3.

Though it wasn't exactly like now, it felt pretty similar.

"Anyway, that's why I came to the head office. As Taeshin Asset Management is being reorganized, they'll be staffing up some departments, so if any TF division staff want to transfer, it'll be possible. If not, they can stay at the head office or move to another affiliate, even if they were part of Taeshin Asset Management."

"Me too?"

"Why? Want to stay at the head office?"

Noh Dongjun waved both hands vigorously.

"No way! With my status, what head office? Having worked here, I know now... this place doesn't suit me."

"Doesn't suit you? For someone saying that, you chased down audit materials pretty ruthlessly. If I'd known you'd do this well, I'd have assigned you to the Audit Team from the start."

At that, Noh Dongjun stared at In-hyuk in surprise.

"I like what I'm used to! Even joking, don't say things like that."

"I'm not joking."

He was being perfectly sincere.

After a pause, In-hyuk spoke first.

"The TF division will be wound up at the end of this month. Starting today, HR from the Management Support Division will be surveying head office stay and transfers, so decide by then."

"What... You didn't secretly delete my job, did you?"

"How should I know?"

"Come on, seriously! You didn't, right?"

When In-hyuk shrugged, Noh Dongjun's eyes went wide.

"Come on, really?!"

"I'm kidding. Once you return to Taeshin Asset Management, you'll lead PEF Team 2."

"Huh? That's my old team."

"....."

The nuance hadn't quite landed.

Then, with another jolt, Noh Dongjun asked,

"You mean, take charge...?"

"That's right. You'll be promoted to deputy general manager and become team leader of PEF Team 2."

"Oooh, mmph!"

Noh Dongjun, about to cheer aloud, hurriedly clapped his hand over his mouth—just realizing where he was.

"Okay, calm down. And for other TF division employees, steps will be taken based on performance. Of course, the official notice will be..."

Right in the middle, the internal phone rang.

Beeeep—beeeeep—

The caller ID displayed the chairman Tae Gun-seung's secretary's office.

"Yes, In-hyuk speaking."

[The chairman asks to see you now.]

"All right."

Responding, In-hyuk looked around at those present.

"The chairman's sure been coming in a lot lately."

"Good luck."

"Oh, and as I was saying, don't mention any of this to the others until the notice comes out."

"Got it~!"

Noh Dongjun skipped off lightly like a dancer.

Shaking his head, In-hyuk left as well, taking only Baek Si-hwan up to the chairman's office.

Soon, upon arrival, they found Tae Gun-seung seated, his face looking lighter than before.

"I've reviewed the TF division's final cut report."

"..... Did you call me in just to tell me that?"

Reports were standard procedure. Even though In-hyuk had sent many, not once had he been summoned like this.

That made In-hyuk a bit sharp, suspecting the matter wasn't all that important.

"Ho ho, hardly. I wanted to hear what Kang is planning next. Things seem to be getting noisy around that Greenbyte Labs investment you've been pursuing."

In America, Accentia was about to terminate its investment contract with AMK Partners, and now a lawsuit was in the works.

It was all over the media, so there was no way Tae Gun-seung didn't know.

"There's some noise with a company called Redboar Technology getting involved. With what I'm hearing through the grapevine, I don't think it'll be resolved quietly."

"So... does that mean you'll be delayed in the Accentia partnership? Do you have a backup plan?"

"I have something in mind. But, sir, aren't there more pressing matters that concern you than ours?"

With the small talk going nowhere, In-hyuk deliberately probed at the core.

"You mean my sons?"

"It may sound like I'm butting in, but don't you think it's time to act?"

The personnel reshuffle hadn't brought Taeshin Group direct benefit. Rather, it had been a purging of rotten parts.

At the same time, this process inevitably planted anxiety among Taeshin's partner firms and shareholders.

Of course, shares in Taeshin Trading and other affiliates were on a steady downward trend.

"I'll be stepping down soon anyway. My part was to clean house for the next person to fill the seat."

"Are you doing this on purpose?"

"What do you mean, exactly?"

It didn't sound like genuine confusion—more like he was simply echoing something he already knew.

Noticing this, In-hyuk answered, sighing quietly and cautiously.

"You used my hand to wreck the group, and now you're just watching to see how everyone reacts?"

"When did you catch on?"

"To the moment you assigned the TF division. If you know what I've done up to now, you'd be fully aware what Taeshin Group would look like as a result. Still, not only were you content to just watch, but you even empowered me to push through with it."

The TF division itself hadn't existed in the original timeline.

Once In-hyuk began to make waves at Taeshin Asset Management, Tae Gun-seung took an interest and orchestrated events for a hidden goal—creating everything as it now stood.

"To someone listening, it might sound like I used Kang for free. But you knew that wasn't the case, right?"

"I was curious how far your permission extended. But you went further than I anticipated. Looking at things now, it seems you're leaning toward CEO Tae Seok-hyun rather than Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho."

The restructuring had greatly shrunk both men's internal clout—but if anything, Tae Seok-ho suffered slightly more.

Besides, Tae Seok-hyun was the CEO of Taeshin Electronics, the group's flagship subsidiary.

Even if Tae Seok-ho boasted better management skills, in terms of core business, shareholders and the board would prefer his succession.

"Why don't you take charge?"

"... Pardon?"

"I mean Taeshin Group. Wouldn't you run it better than my sons?"

In-hyuk stared at Tae Gun-seung.

The words were thrown out lightly, but their implications were profound—he had to confirm whether Tae Gun-seung was serious.

But seeing his eyes, In-hyuk sensed he was not joking.

"I'd be glad to be given that chance. But I can't guarantee it would work out."

At this, Tae Gun-seung burst out laughing.

"Hahaha—!"

"What's so funny, sir?"

"I thought Kang would at least hesitate or wave it off, but you're so quick to say yes, it's amusing."

"If the chairman is handing me the company, why would I refuse?"

At In-hyuk's shameless reply, Tae Gun-seung chuckled again.

"Not feeling any pressure?"

"Not really. It wouldn't matter to me if you didn't, either."

"Such refreshing honesty."

This time, In-hyuk allowed a slight smile to cross his face. Leaning forward, he spoke to Tae Gun-seung.

"In any case, as you probably realize, you should be careful, sir. With things as they are, someone's toes are bound to get burned."

It was a transparent reference to Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

Tae Gun-seung seemed to understand, the corners of his mouth drooping ever so slightly.

"For some reason... Kang, you look at the world from outside."

"Outside?"

"Cool judgment, objective perspectives, rational thinking... more than that, you even treat things involving yourself as if they're someone else's problem."

Perhaps it was because In-hyuk had lived through a lifetime more complicated and turbulent than anyone.

Looking at him, Tae Gun-seung seemed to be seeing something beyond the man before him.

"It doesn't sound much like a compliment."

"I simply mean, it's not a bad thing. Anyway, thanks for wrapping things up so well. You did a lot of heavy lifting. I tried to reward you, but if there's anything more you need, just say so. I'll help as much as I can."

In reply, In-hyuk nodded slightly.

"I'll give it some thought. Then, is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"Seems I've bothered someone busy without reason. Next time, let's have a meal together with Ju-ha."

"... I'll check my schedule."

Replying, In-hyuk stepped outside and drew out the phone from his pocket.

He launched the Ghost Link app, where a string of unchecked notifications was waiting.

【PPO54 : .....】

【Norman : .....】

【Luke Harrison : .....】

【Red Witch : .....】

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Chapter 80

Are You Looking for Your Son?

In-hyuk finished his private meeting with Chairman Tae Gun-seung and exited the room.

Baek Si-hwan, who had been waiting, approached and spoke.

"Division director. The report on the TF measures for the Life, energy, and Heavy Industries divisions has just been uploaded to the cloud."

"They sent it faster than I expected. Let's head down and check it."

"And I was informed that invitations were sent for the 50th anniversary party of KQ Group."

"A party?"

"Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu of KQ Group apparently requested that both you and CEO Tae Ju-ha attend the event."

For a moment, the face of his son, Kang Do-young, flashed through his mind with a feeling of distaste.

"Did he say it's a must?"

"Yes. That's right."

At this, In-hyuk made a face full of annoyance.

"I suppose it's because of what happened last time."

"... Which incident are you referring to, sir?"

He was referring to the assassination attempt disguised as a car accident at Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's autobiography release party.

Of course, Baek Si-hwan must have known about the incident, but it seemed he was deliberately pretending not to.

"Let's check the schedule first, then respond."

Ignoring Baek Si-hwan's question, In-hyuk got on the elevator.

As they were descending, the elevator stopped temporarily at the executive office floor.

When the door opened, Tae Seok-ho and his secretary, Reina Blackwood, were standing there. An awkward silence filled the brief moment.

"Aren't you getting on?"

When In-hyuk posed the question, Tae Seok-ho sighed through his nose and boarded the elevator.

"Did you just come from seeing the chairman?"

If he was coming from the upper floors, there was no other destination.

"He asked to see me briefly as soon as I arrived at work."

"Perhaps he called you up to praise you for being such a reliable division director."

"Well, something like that."

With that curt reply, silence reigned. Then Tae Seok-ho spoke first.

"So when the TF division is dissolved, will you return to Taeshin Asset Management?"

"That will be the case once the final arrangements are complete."

"A shame. If you stayed a little longer at head office, you'd be a huge help in many ways."

Hearing that, In-hyuk slightly turned his head.

"Do you really mean that?"

"... What do you mean?"

Ding—

Meanwhile, the elevator arrived at the floor where the TF division was located.

"I didn't think anyone would want to work with someone who turned down the EVP's offer. Still, I'm honored you think of me that way."

With that response, In-hyuk stepped out with Baek Si-hwan.

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As the elevator doors closed, Tae Seok-ho let out a long sigh.

"He drives me crazy till the end. Are there really no issues with the share acquisition work on that side?"

The next question was directed at Reina, who was standing behind him.

"Thanks to the recent personnel changes in the TF division, the stock price is trending downward. We've been quietly accumulating shares, so there's nothing to worry about. We're also handling the proxy designation as discretely as possible."

This was about Tae Seok-ho securing a controlling stake in the Taeshin Group.

That needed to be fully prepared to avoid getting caught off guard in future developments.

"There's no movement with father's shares, right?"

"Judging by how steadfast he's been, I don't think he's preparing to pass the baton to anyone."

"That's strange. If personnel changes caused the stock to shake, you'd expect preparations for succession to stabilize things."

One of the main reasons for the current stock drop was Chairman Tae Gun-seung's age.

Despite being well over ninety, he still hadn't designated a clear successor, so shareholders and the board were naturally growing increasingly anxious.

After reaching the basement parking garage, the two got into a car surrounded by security guards.

Seated in the back, Tae Seok-ho still wore a troubled expression.

"Is dealing with Kang In-hyuk... still out of the question?"

"For now."

"Are you weighing me against him?"

Tae Seok-ho had also done his own research into Reina Blackwood.

Yet, aside from official records, she had no obvious flaws, and it was impossible to know who was backing her.

He could foresee a situation where he and the Taeshin Group would be at risk.

Reina, sitting beside him, smiled.

"Of course not."

"Isn't that pretty much telling me to trust you blindly? I'm not really in a position to demand more, but since we agreed to cooperate, shouldn't we show each other a few cards?"

It was a precautionary measure. In response, Reina hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"I'll ask about it."

"... Please do."

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KQ Group Chairman's office.

There, Jeon Hae-in, CEO of KQ Department Store and the mistress of the group, burst in.

"What exactly are you trying to do?!"

Kang Cheon-gyu, who was looking over some documents, didn't react to her shouting.

He simply removed the glasses perched on his nose and set them down quietly.

"If this is about Do-young, I'm sure I told you not to take things too far."

"Huh! Do-young is not some stranger, is he? He's your one and only son! Yet you keep sending him off to KQ Fabric, which isn't even a main subsidiary!"

A long sigh escaped Kang Cheon-gyu's lips.

"I sent him there to quietly work on a new business. Are you sure you know what he's been up to over there?"

Jeon Hae-in flinched slightly and then replied,

"I heard he diverted some funds for business purposes! But that happens when you're running things, doesn't it? Besides, you blocked some of his funds yourself!"

"Do you realize that money was KQ Fabric's budget for next year? Do you think a manufacturing business gets built overnight? If we start the new year with a budget hole, how are the employees supposed to make goods?"

Kang Cheon-gyu tried to hold back, but her shameless attitude was making him angry.

Still, Jeon Hae-in's excuses to protect Kang Do-young didn't stop there.

"It's just a subsidiary! I get that you care about the employees, but surely not more than your own son! Do you know what rumors are circulating inside head office right now?"

"That the position of the next group CEO will go to an executive or a professional manager rather than Do-young?"

Jeon Hae-in's expression grew cold.

"Don't tell me... you don't actually mean that, do you?"

"For someone who knows Do-young's capabilities better than anyone, do you really believe I'll hand the group to him blindly?"

"He's our only son!"

"Yes, the only one. But child is child, and work is work. You know full well what would happen if Do-young inherited this group."

They were going in circles. Even so, Jeon Hae-in would not back down.

"I didn't want to say this, but—KQ isn't just your company! My shares are in here! My father's Songhwa Distribution is in here too! So why do you keep talking as if you alone get to decide what happens to the KQ our son should inherit?"

35 years ago, KQ Distribution had absorbed Songhwa Distribution, which her father ran, in a merger that led to KQ's expansion.

During that process, Jeon Hae-in married Kang Cheon-gyu, gaining a share of KQ Distribution for herself.

"I'm sorry to say this, but I can't let KQ Distribution collapse. And neither will the other shareholders or board members accept Do-young."

"Do you really think I'll let things end up that way?"

"This isn't something you can change."

"I don't approve! So don't even think about doing anything rash!"

With her face twisted in anger, Jeon Hae-in stormed out of the chairman's office, slamming the door behind her.

Alone again, Kang Cheon-gyu let out another long sigh.

After sitting for a moment, he called his secretary, Noh Geun-cheol, on the intercom.

"There's still no news about that child... is there?"

Though only the two of them were present, he lowered his voice out of habit.

"The agency madam hired suddenly disappeared, so it's not easy to track any leads."

"So we may never find him?"

"We're still looking into it."

Kang Cheon-gyu fell silent.

The conversation a moment ago had been about searching for another son, born from Yoo Ji-young, with whom he once had feelings.

He had grown suspicious when Jeon Hae-in's behavior started to become abnormal.

At first, he thought Kang Do-young had gotten into trouble again and she was moving to cover it up, so he tried to investigate her activities, and in the process discovered the name Yoo Ji-young and a birth record.

It was a relationship cut off more than thirty years ago, but it happened to coincide with the time he and Yoo Ji-young had been seeing each other, so he couldn't ignore it.

"Surely, my wife hasn't already made a move...?"

"That, I'm not sure of..."

The detective agency that had linked Jeon Hae-in's movements and funds was Daemyung Detective Agency.

But as Noh Geun-cheol said, one day it suddenly closed its operations and every associated person vanished.

"Nothing else came up?"

At that query, Noh Geun-cheol hesitated before speaking.

"There's actually something I wanted to confirm before reporting..."

"What is it?"

"Some time ago, there was a break-in at Attorney Kim Myung-jun's residence and office."

Attorney Kim was Kang Cheon-gyu's personal legal advisor and will administrator.

Hearing this, only one possibility came to his mind.

"A break-in? Don't tell me... but why am I only hearing about this now?"

"It happened some time ago, apparently. But Attorney Kim was handling so many cases that he didn't immediately connect it to you. Only after seeking legal advice for something recently did it come to mind."

"Haah...!"

"I wasn't certain, so I wanted to double-check before reporting."

Given how things were escalating between Kang Cheon-gyu and Jeon Hae-in lately, it made sense to be cautious now as well.

"So you're saying it's not entirely impossible."

"At this point, yes. I'll keep checking and report if anything else comes up."

Kang Cheon-gyu let out another long sigh.

"Hoo... Let's do that. Oh, and what about the Pyo Jun-woo security guard incident? Still no suspects?"

"We're checking in with the police regularly, but there are no further developments so far. At this rate, it's likely to become an unsolved case."

That case was suspicious in many ways, but the truth remained elusive.

"Too many complicated matters at once."

"For now, I think your wife's situation should be your focus."

"Better reach out to the shareholders and set up a meeting with the directors too."

It was to ensure no shares changed hands. Noh Geun-cheol gave a slight nod and left.

Alone again, Kang Cheon-gyu, looking burned out, walked over to a table in the corner of his office and poured himself some whisky.

It wasn't for drinking during work hours—he just liked the aroma and kept it around to refresh himself sometimes.

But now, his glass trembled in his hands.

Bzzz—bzzz—

Just then, his phone, left on the desk, vibrated.

"... Hmmm?"

Kang Cheon-gyu's face hardened as he checked the message.

【Are you looking for Yoo Ji-young's son?】

It came from a caller with a hidden number. Kang Cheon-gyu stared intently, then quickly checked the next message.

【If you want to know who it is, let's meet. The price is one million dollars in USD. You must transfer it to the specified exchange and account.】

Attached was a photo of a document—Yoo Ji-young's birth record, which even Kang Cheon-gyu had found.

"How could they have this...?"

It was a paper that only those involved could have known about.

Yet with a hidden caller ID, he couldn't reply—he could only wait for the next instructions.

Soon after, the name of the exchange and an account number arrived.

【... Three days from now. If payment is not received by midnight on △△, you will not hear from us again.】

The price was a little over 1.3 billion won in Korean currency.

It wasn't an enormous sum for Kang Cheon-gyu, but whether the sender really knew about his son was anyone's guess.

Kang Cheon-gyu pressed the intercom again.

"Executive Director Noh. Come back in here, please."