Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 81

You're Overpraising Me

The hour was late when In-hyuk received a message while driving.

【KQ4123: Executive Vice President Noh Geun-cheol has been acting on his own quite often. The place he recently visited is somewhere called Banpo Plaza General Arcade in Seoul. Upon investigation, it seems this was on the chairman's separate orders.】

【HERMIT: Yes. Where you always put your money. (돈은 언제나 놓는 곳.)】

At the same time, the message just sent disappeared from the chat window. It was an external management instant message from Ghost Link.

In-hyuk's face stiffened a bit.

Seeing this, the driver, Hong Yu-geon, glanced at In-hyuk through the rearview mirror and asked quietly,

"Did something bad happen?"

After hesitating for a moment, In-hyuk let out a sigh.

"I think Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu has found out about my existence. It seems like he's searching for me."

"Huh? To there? How?"

Jeon Hae-in, KQ's mistress, had moved far more meticulously than expected.

Behind her was Daemyung Detective Agency, which was connected to Kooou.

Naturally, unless she spoke to Kang Cheon-gyu directly first, it wouldn't have been easy to find out.

"I don't know exactly, but someone working for Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu visited the place where Daemyung Detective Agency was located. Based on that, I'm guessing... Jeon Hae-in probably let something slip."

"See? No matter how thoroughly you move, there are always openings. You be careful too, boss. Baek Si-hwan might dig up something."

"I'm always careful."

"You think they'll find you out like that?"

"Who knows? I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't caught Jeon Hae-in meeting Lee Daemyung and talking."

"That's precisely who we are!"

At Hong Yu-geon's playful exclamation, Van Hester also nodded from the front passenger seat.

"... You look really excited, don't you?"

"Well, not really, but it's just like a soap opera! What, is Jeon Hae-in going to come over with an envelope of cash and tell you to disappear? Or maybe, assassination?"

At that, In-hyuk let out a sigh without thinking.

"That woman has already almost gotten me killed several times, and I don't intend to die in the future, either."

"Judging by the party invitation, do you think she already knows and invited you on that premise? Didn't you say she insisted on your attendance?"

"Who knows. I still owe her from last time."

He was referring to the incident at Kang Cheon-gyu's residence.

But the timing was suspicious, and In-hyuk found himself thinking along similar lines as Hong Yu-geon.

"But where did you get that information from earlier? Did you manage to make a connection with someone in the KQ chairman's inner circle?"

"And if I did?"

"When did you have time for that?"

"Why do you think I'm always so busy?"

In-hyuk gave a deliberately vague reply.

A little later, the car pulled up in front of a luxury hotel in Gangnam, Seoul.

People alighted from the series of cars and entered the hotel.

Today was the day of KQ Group's 50th-anniversary party.

In-hyuk also stepped out of the car, better dressed in a neater suit than usual.

"Welcome, Division Director."

At that moment, Baek Si-hwan, smartly dressed, approached.

He'd been on an outside appointment until recently and had arrived at the venue separately.

Strictly speaking, In-hyuk didn't need to bring him to the KQ Group party, but he had him accompany him in order to fine-tune their relationship.

"I'm sorry for making you attend something that's rather personal."

"Not at all. And you're here on business more than personal matters, aren't you?"

"I suppose you're right."

Soon, the group moved into the second floor where the party was being held.

KQ Group's security team and an external security company were checking IDs and letting guests in.

"I'm Kang In-hyuk from Taeshin Asset Management. These are my secretary and my security guard."

When he presented the invitation, the man at the entrance checked it along with his identity on a tablet.

"Your secretary may go in, but your security guard will have to wait outside."

"... Understood."

When In-hyuk looked at them, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester nodded and stepped back.

Thus, with only Baek Si-hwan, In-hyuk entered the party hall.

Inside, people gathered in small circles, talking.

Just as at the publication party for Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's autobiography, it was less of a celebration and more like a business forum.

And In-hyuk could hear the whisperings of people as they noticed him.

"Isn't that Kang In-hyuk, division director of Taeshin Group? He's been on fire lately."

"I heard his investment returns are insane lately. Should I go talk to him?"

"There are rumors of insider trading. Honestly, it's not like he's clairvoyant—how can he get it right again and again like that?"

"I heard the chairman favors him a lot—he even set up a TF division to back him up, even though the group stock price has tanked."

"He must be nuts. No matter how many problems there are, how could anyone stick it out this far? Just cover it up and move on."

"He's not even a blood relative, just a son-in-law. Doesn't matter how much the chairman likes him, that's his limit."

All sorts of comments drifted around, but no one actually approached In-hyuk.

Their envy and jealousy for In-hyuk's abilities formed thick walls alongside their pride as chaebols (tycoons).

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

A voice came from behind.

He turned to see a silver-haired middle-aged man. Even without being acquainted, he couldn't help but recognize him.

"You're Chairman Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group."

"So you know me."

Baek Ji-woong was famous for rarely showing his face in public, despite being a corporate chairman.

He seemed slightly surprised that In-hyuk recognized him right away.

"You're famous, so I memorized your face from some old photographs."

"I'm honored that such a famous figure among businesspeople would recognize me first."

"I'm more surprised that you spoke to me first. I didn't even know you would be at this event."

Baek Ji-woong smiled faintly at In-hyuk's reaction.

"I usually don't like these gatherings. But this time, I heard Division Director Kang In-hyuk was coming."

"You came to see me?"

"You're extremely well known among businesspeople these days. So I was curious. I wanted to talk to you about investments as well."

His manner and speech were so cordial and gentle that one would trust him if one didn't know his true feelings.

"My investment knowledge is nothing compared to that of W&W Group's chairman."

"Even I can't do what you do, Division Director Kang. I started to pay attention to Taeshin Asset Management's movements because of that interest."

"Please feel free to speak informally if you'd like. I apologize if it was impolite that you approached me first."

At this, Baek Ji-woong smiled more warmly.

"Thank you. May we have a drink and chat for a bit?"

"Of course."

The two moved to a table and received glasses of champagne from a passing waiter.

"These days, there's been a lot of interest in Greenbyte Labs. What do you see there, director Kang? Of course, if it's sensitive business information, you don't need to say."

In-hyuk took a sip of champagne first.

"Low power, high efficiency is attracting major interest in every business these days. Since every sector uses devices, if they can hit their target performance, the profits will be huge. That's why I saw investment value in Greenbyte Labs' technology."

"I heard the core technology being developed at Accentia is key. But that situation's become complicated—has Greenbyte Labs found a way out?"

In-hyuk deliberately let out a sigh.

"Honestly, I'm quite worried. I thought partnership with Accentia would be problem-free thanks to AMK Partners' investment, but now... Even if Redboar Technology snatches it away, who's to say they'd work with Greenbyte Labs?"

"Like you said, they might join hands with a different company with similar technology. Maybe that's why they invested so heavily and pushed for the cancellation of investment in the first place."

"Exactly. That's why I'm looking into similar companies, but it's not easy."

When In-hyuk finished his champagne, Baek Ji-woong also finished his glass before speaking cautiously.

"I've become a bit interested in that business myself. But from what I found, there are so many similar technologies out there, it could be accused of being a copy at any moment."

"It's a difficult matter."

"Then, aren't there only two ways? Either make sure AMK Partners maintains its investment in Accentia, or proceed with Redboar Technology's investment as planned."

"You know my position. I'm partnered with AMK Partners. If I contact Redboar in this situation, it would only destroy business trust."

Anyone who had been paying attention to events in the business world these days was aware of the connection between Taeshin Asset Management and AMK Partners.

Naturally, this applied to the current Accentia situation as well.

If that partnership broke, the damage to In-hyuk and Taeshin Asset Management would be significant.

Baek Ji-woong grew even more cautious.

"Are most of your investments based on AMK Partners?"

"You've probably seen the scale of funds Taeshin Asset Management has been moving lately. The largest portion is with AMK Partners. Thanks to that, I've been able to manage large sums."

The conversation flowed naturally.

"AMK Partners... It's certainly worthy of being called this year's hottest new name in investment. Ever since they opened a Korean branch, domestic business leaders have been desperate for connections. How did you end up working with them?"

"When I first started getting active, they contacted me first. It was originally a scouting offer, but you know my situation."

"A scouting offer for the Taeshin family's son-in-law... That's not something I would have expected, to be honest. So in the end, you ended up entrusted with funds and M&A business—that must be how the MP Division was created."

In-hyuk smiled again.

"Exactly."

"It isn't a complicated story. Opportunity comes to everyone. But it all depends on whether you can grab it or not. If you can not only grasp it but wield it freely like you do, all the better."

"Hahaha—! You're overpraising me."

His laughter resounded throughout the hall.

At the same time, people's eyes were naturally drawn to In-hyuk and Baek Ji-woong standing together.

"W&W Group's Chairman Baek Ji-woong? The man next to him is Taeshin's Kang In-hyuk, isn't it?"

"How are those two together?"

"I think Kang In-hyuk just laughed. What are they talking about with Chairman Baek?"

Voices rippled through the crowd.

Sensing the attention, In-hyuk put on a slightly embarrassed expression.

"I think my voice was a bit too loud."

"It happens. If you don't mind, would you care to have a meal together sometime?"

"If you contact me, I'll check my schedule and make time."

In-hyuk took out his business card and handed it over.

Baek Ji-woong's rough-looking male secretary, standing by his side, accepted it instead.

"Thank you. I hope we can meet again. I wish you luck with the Greenbyte Labs matter."

"Thank you."

With that, they finished their conversation and slowly left the area.

Other businesspeople nearby greeted Baek Ji-woong and cautiously started conversations.

The standing of the W&W Group's chairman was on par with Tae Gun-seung or Kang Cheon-gyu.

-Meanwhile, In-hyuk sensed Baek Si-hwan discreetly approach from behind.

"Division Director. CEO Tae Seok-hyun and Executive Vice President Tae Seok-ho have arrived."

Chapter 82

Because It's Not Necessary

The venue for the KQ Group's 50th-anniversary party gradually filled with more people. Starting with famous entrepreneurs from both domestic and abroad, the guest list included members of the National Assembly, high-ranking government officials, and well-known celebrities.

Within the crowd, Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho, who had just entered the party, also met people with whom they had long-established relationships.

Observing them, In-hyuk simply nodded.

"That's right."

"Aren't you going to greet them?"

Baek Si-hwan asked in a concerned tone.

"Everyone seems busy, so I'll just stay put. Manager Baek, don't just stick by my side, go enjoy yourself. Events like these aren't exactly common, are they?"

"I'm fine, really."

At that, In-hyuk shrugged and picked up the dessert set on the table.

"You must be hungry."

"....."

No response came back.

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha, dressed in a deep green long dress, walked over together with her secretary, Heo Yu-rim.

"The man you were just talking to earlier, that was Chairman Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group, right?"

She must have seen from a distance the two parting after a conversation.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk calmly offered the dessert he'd just eaten.

"That's right. Oh, would you like some? It tastes better than I expected."

Tae Ju-ha shook her head.

"..... No, I'm fine. By the way, did you already know Chairman Baek Ji-woong?"

"No. Today was my first time meeting him. He approached me first."

"The first time? It looked like you two were quite friendly."

"We just briefly talked about business matters. Chairman Baek showed quite a bit of interest in the business I'm working on."

"I see?"

Even while Tae Ju-ha looked puzzled, In-hyuk kept eating his dessert.

Soon enough, Tae Ju-ha tapped In-hyuk's arm and spoke again.

"Did you go see your father and uncle?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I figured they wouldn't want to receive my greeting. Wouldn't you just feel embarrassed if you went for no reason, CEO?"

Because their faction in Taeshin Group had been shattered due to In-hyuk.

Of course, Tae Ju-ha knew the situation well, but, given her position, it was hard for her to act as In-hyuk did.

"But....."

"I won't stop you, so do as you wish."

At In-hyuk's indifferent answer, Heo Yu-rim spoke up carefully from beside Tae Ju-ha.

"The mood over there is not great right now. For now, let's do as Division Director Kang suggested."

"Alright, I will."

But the problem was with the people involved themselves.

"Oh, Ju-ha and Kang, are you two here?"

Tae Seok-hyun had spotted them and was approaching.

Of course, it wasn't as if he had only just noticed them.

He had been watching since the moment In-hyuk began talking with Chairman Baek Ji-woong.

It was indeed an intriguing sight.

"Good evening."

"..... Welcome."

Responding to the two, Tae Seok-hyun broke into a wide smile.

"Indeed. It feels quite different seeing you here at an event like this. It's wonderful."

In-hyuk could easily predict Tae Seok-hyun's intention.

'Is he trying to console and win over Tae Ju-ha, even now?'

A major storm had struck just before Taeshin Group's next decision. The one most affected was Tae Seok-ho, more than Tae Seok-hyun.

Of course, Tae Seok-hyun was not unscathed either.

With Chairman Tae Gun-seung now putting his strength behind In-hyuk, this move could become decisive.

"..... Thank you."

Tae Ju-ha's voice trailed off, clearly uncomfortable.

"Kang, you've worked hard all this time. I heard the TF division will be wrapped up soon. Once everything's settled, how about having a meal together? The whole child, of course."

"Ah....."

"I'll have to check my schedule since I'll be going to America for a while soon."

As In-hyuk interrupted, Tae Seok-hyun's brow twitched.

"America? For what?"

"For Greenbyte Labs. And I have to check in with the Accentia side too. You know how much investment fund was put in there."

A total investment of 10 million dollars. That meant a whopping 14 billion won.

Considering the scale of Taeshin Asset Management, it was no small sum, so Tae Seok-hyun found it hard to object.

"Is it impossible to even spare a day before you go?"

"I have a lot to prepare. It seems it'll only be possible after I return."

Hearing his firm answer, Tae Seok-hyun's expression hardened further.

But since he couldn't raise his voice in the middle of the KQ Group's anniversary party, he merely held back.

"Well, if that's the case."

"I'll contact you as soon as I come back from the trip. Let's all have a meal together then."

He deliberately emphasized "all."

He had no idea if his wife, Lee Sun-hye, and son, Tae Yeo-jun, would really show, but still...

"Alright. You two, enjoy the party."

Tae Seok-hyun withdrew.

Watching Tae Ju-ha fidgeting anxiously beside him, In-hyuk murmured quietly.

"You handle business so decisively, but when it comes to CEO Tae Seok-hyun, don't you think you lose your nerve a bit?"

"..... Pardon? What do you mean?"

"Just now, I mean."

Perhaps realizing what he meant, Tae Ju-ha pursed her lips tightly.

"....."

"Now that Taeshin Asset Management has become a subsidiary, you should be able to proceed with an IPO. And as long as you're not disposing of shares due to a management crisis, there should be no problems. So why do you keep acting this way?"

"I don't really know either....."

She had fought desperately to free herself from the Taeshin shadow and attain her current position.

After getting married and returning from America to become CEO, she thought she'd achieved enough.

Yet she was still under the palm of Taeshin.

While Taeshin Asset Management was being run steadily enough, its reality as a Taeshin Life subsidiary was hard to change.

"You have the strength you always wanted now. You should have more confidence."

"I never thought you'd be the one cheering me on."

"It's more advice than encouragement. Strength to protect your strength—if you waver even when you have it, it's meaningless."

"It's not a bad way to put it."

At that moment, Heo Yu-rim cautiously interjected from the side.

"CEO. CEO Moon from Hangang Heavy Industries, who attended the depository meeting last time, has arrived. Wouldn't it be good to say hello?"

"Alright. In-hyuk, I'll go for a bit."

"Go ahead."

As he watched her walk away, In-hyuk's eyes met Baek Si-hwan, who was standing quietly nearby.

"Don't you feel bored?"

"I'm fine."

"I'm a bit bored. I even feel like I shouldn't have come."

At his indifferent reply, Baek Si-hwan spoke up again.

"Division Director, aren't you going to greet anyone else?"

The majority of attendees were busy with business.

However, In-hyuk remained indifferent and simply stood, which undoubtedly seemed odd.

Looking around, he made eye contact with a few people.

Perhaps because he'd been speaking with Chairman Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group a short while ago, their curiosity only deepened.

"I just don't find it necessary right now."

"Then why did you come here?"

"Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu sent me a formal invitation, so I felt I should at least show up."

"..... I see."

Silence fell again.

The surroundings grew noisier, filled with music and voices.

Crowds gathered especially around the chairmen and executives of the large corporations.

At that moment, a middle-aged man and woman slowly walked toward In-hyuk.

They were Kang Cheon-gyu, the chairman and host of KQ Group's 50th-anniversary party, and his wife, Jeon Hae-in.

"It's been a while, Division Director Kang In-hyuk. Is this the first time since that incident?"

While the question hung in the air, Jeon Hae-in's demeanor sharpened like a knife by his side.

Her animosity was clearly directed at In-hyuk.

"Yes, it has. How have you been?"

"I've had nothing special happen. It's just that the company's been a bit noisy. You've had something to do with that, haven't you?"

He referred to the collapse of LifeStar Entertainment and how KQ Fabric was completely cut out from the military uniform business due to Kang Do-young's mistake.

It was hard to claim that In-hyuk's hand had nothing to do with the process, so Kang Cheon-gyu's tone carried a subtle hint of accusation.

"I suppose you're rebuking me."

"Haha—! Not at all. In business, things can't always go well. As long as the mistakes weren't intentional."

He was talking about Kang Do-young, heir to KQ Group.

Kang Do-young wasn't present at the party.

Because of his previous blunder, it seemed he was not permitted to attend at all.

"That's true. Ah, it's been a while since we last met, mrs. Jeon. Wasn't the last time at the gallery managed by my mother-in-law?"

On purpose, In-hyuk mentioned Jeon Hae-in, who had been keeping silent.

At that, Jeon Hae-in forced a slight smile under Kang Cheon-gyu's gaze.

"Was...it? It's been so long, I can't remember."

At that time, In-hyuk had revealed that he knew about being Kang Cheon-gyu's biological son.

For her, it was an unforgettable day, yet she blatantly dodged.

"That's understandable."

"The two of you met? For what reason?"

At Kang Cheon-gyu's question, Jeon Hae-in glanced at In-hyuk and trailed off.

"Well, it's just..."

"I happened to run into her when I visited the gallery to see my mother-in-law. I just gave a brief greeting."

"Ah, I see."

Jeon Hae-in, relieved, still looked at In-hyuk with a cold edge.

Kang Cheon-gyu's question continued.

"Were you okay after getting hurt in that incident? No lingering effects?"

"I'm fine."

"That's good to hear. And pardon my rudeness, but after all that happened, I heard a bit more about you... did you grow up in an orphanage?"

"It's not really a big deal. As you said, I'm an orphan. I don't know who my parents are, and I grew up in an orphanage in Andong, then graduated university with the support of the Taeshin Education Foundation."

With admiration, Kang Cheon-gyu nodded.

"I saw you graduated business administration at Korea University. Even with support, getting into Taeshin Trading is remarkable. And all the recent successes you've had."

"I was just lucky."

Suddenly, Jeon Hae-in cut in from the side.

"Why do you bring up things that make people uncomfortable?"

"Oh, is that so?"

"I'm alright."

In-hyuk fully understood her reason.

It was because Kang Cheon-gyu was suddenly showing unusual interest in him.

'Did he find out that I'm his son?'

But there was a point of doubt.

According to the informants he had in KQ Group through his connection/poaching, it would have been hard for him to find out.

'Did someone tell him on purpose?'

While lost in thought, In-hyuk met Kang Cheon-gyu's gaze, who had been closely observing his face.

"Aren't you curious about who your parents are? With what happened last time, and as a thanks for not making things noisy and handling it quietly, if you want, I could find them for you."

At that moment, Jeon Hae-in's eyes flashed frighteningly.

"My parents? I've lived more than thirty years without knowing and never felt inconvenienced. Is there really a need? Besides, my parents..."

"What about them?"

"Honestly, they might not be good people. And considering where I'm at now, it could negatively impact Taeshin Group."

He meant parents who appear only after their abandoned child becomes famous or wealthy.

Most cases ended poorly, so Kang Cheon-gyu could somewhat accept that reasoning.

"There could have been personal circumstances. Maybe they were too poor or unwell..."

"Maybe so, but I'm not thinking about it now. I have too much to do."

"Hmm...is that so? Just thought I'd ask. Still, if you ever change your mind, let me know anytime."

"Understood."

"Enjoy the party, and let's meet again next time."

Kang Cheon-gyu offered his hand and shook In-hyuk's.

As they headed off elsewhere, Jeon Hae-in turned to look back at In-hyuk, her eyes full of unease.

Chapter 83

We Should Eat First

Jeon Hae-in, who had been staying by Kang Cheon-gyu's side, strode out of the party hall with rough steps.

She then went up to the guest room floor and entered one of the luxurious rooms prepared for party guests.

Click—

Her secretary, Lee Jung-tae, who had followed behind, checked that the door was shut.

At the same moment, Jeon Hae-in's irritation burst forth.

"What exactly were you doing in there?!"

"... I'm not sure what you mean."

Lee Jung-tae had been standing behind her all along.

Naturally, he would have heard the conversation a moment ago, yet he looked as if he didn't understand.

"You're asking because you really don't know?! Didn't you hear earlier? Chairman Kang went on about finding Kang In-hyuk's parents!"

The sudden situation left Jeon Hae-in bewildered.

On top of that, she couldn't easily overlook Kang Cheon-gyu's behavior.

Instinctively, she sensed there was a deeper meaning behind his actions.

"Are you saying that the chairman discovered who Kang In-hyuk is?"

"If not, why would he bring up something like that?!"

"But... we've erased all traces that could lead to Kang In-hyuk. Even the agency we hired took care of it a long time ago."

"What if Kang In-hyuk was the one who said something?"

"If that were the case, I doubt the conversation just now would have gone like it did. The chairman wouldn't have asked like that."

Jeon Hae-in gave a heavy sigh.

"If he's making a move to push Do-young aside and put Kang In-hyuk in that seat instead?"

"Would there have been any need to do that in front of madam? If anything, it would only make her more hostile and cautious, like now."

"That's true... then what is it?"

As her worries deepened, Lee Jung-tae quietly broke the silence again.

"At this point, it's hard to guess, so I'll look into it."

"Are you able to?"

"I'll start by checking for any unusual movements in Attorney Kim Myung-jun and Executive Director Noh Geun-cheol's whereabouts."

The two of them were closest to Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu.

If he had really discovered that Kang In-hyuk was his son, there would definitely be some reaction from those two as well.

"For now, that's the best we can do..."

"Then I'll put people on it right away."

With those words, Lee Jung-tae stepped back, pulling out his phone to send a message.

【Code KAME: Jeon Hae-in is reacting to Kang Cheon-gyu's overreaction. Situation in doubt. Requesting prompt orders and measures.】

...

...

...

At the same time,

Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of KQ Group, was having conversations with guests in the party hall.

During this, his secretary, Noh Geun-cheol, briefly stepped away and then quietly returned to whisper in his ear.

"Chairman."

"Excuse me for a moment."

The other businesspeople nodded understandingly at his request.

With that, Kang Cheon-gyu headed to a secluded corner with Noh Geun-cheol.

"Did you secure it without any issues?"

"Yes. I inconspicuously collected the champagne glass used by Director Kang In-hyuk and sent it to the lab. We'll conduct another analysis as soon as additional samples are secured."

"Be absolutely sure not to let any information leak until we have a definitive result."

Kang Cheon-gyu had already made a deal with an unidentified party.

Through that, he had received documents which included not only the claim that Kang In-hyuk was his son but also supporting evidence.

But that alone wasn't enough to be certain.

So, he decided to seize the opportunity of the KQ Group anniversary party to collect the samples needed for a paternity test.

"I'll keep that in mind. But if madam is really involved in this..."

Of course, as Noh Geun-cheol suggested, there was another problem. Jeon Hae-in also knew that Kang In-hyuk was his son.

"It's almost certain. If not, there'd be no reason for her to connect with somewhere like Daemyung Detective Agency."

"Then the traffic accident that happened to Director Kang In-hyuk..."

"You're probably right in your suspicions. That's why we need to be extra careful."

If the DNA test confirmed it, a new successor would appear for KQ Group—someone whose management skills couldn't even be compared to Kang Do-young's.

"I'll exercise the utmost caution."

"And increase the people attached to former CEO Jeon. There may be some reckless moves because of my conversation with Director Kang In-hyuk today."

Noh Geun-cheol nodded in affirmation.

"Understood. But, chairman, aren't you going to track down those who sold that information to you? If Director Kang In-hyuk... really is your son, they're bound to want something as well."

"It was transferred with cryptocurrency, so even if we ask for police support, catching them would be difficult. Besides, thinking about it, it's highly likely it was Daemyung, who's gone off the grid for now. Maybe former CEO Jeon, after a falling out, decided to sell me this information."

"Then, for now, I'll just focus on security."

"Right."

Finishing his conversation, Kang Cheon-gyu returned to mingle among the guests.

* * *

The KQ Group 50th Anniversary Party wrapped up smoothly.

The next morning, In-hyuk visited Hoam, a Korean set menu restaurant in Cheongdam neighborhood.

"I hope it wasn't too early for you?"

Stepping into the innermost room of the restaurant, In-hyuk smiled softly as he took a seat.

There was Jang Hyung-cheol, who had arrived earlier and was waiting for him.

"It's fine. I had something draining happen yesterday, so I needed to fill my stomach from breakfast onward."

"You mean... did you perhaps attend the KQ Group party yesterday?"

As someone also running a company, it was impossible for him not to know about such events.

"Well, yes."

"Someone known in Taeshin Asset Management as a parachute department manager attending the KQ Group's 50th anniversary... that's quite something."

"It's because I married into the Taeshin family."

"Do you think I know nothing just because I've always lived in the shadows? This is KQ we're talking about—not somewhere that invites just anyone. No matter the ties to a chaebol family, you can't even enter without an invitation."

Of course, In-hyuk knew this, but he pretended otherwise.

"They sent me an invitation because they owe me a bit. More importantly, how are things at Bridge?"

He was referring to AMK Bridge, a specialized credit finance company Jang Hyung-cheol had become CEO of after selling Chulsan Capital.

In reality, the only things that had changed were the company's name and the fact that the real owner was now AMK Partners; otherwise, its operations and role were just as before.

"Thanks to you, everything was sorted out nicely and it's running well. Most of the original clients are still with us, and the clients referred by AMK Partners are quite nice too."

"That's good to hear."

In-hyuk took a sip of the warm tea in front of him, and Jang Hyung-cheol's face filled with curiosity at the sight.

"Would you consider joining us? With your track record, AMK would offer you a pretty high position. Or rather... haven't they already made you an offer? I'd say it's more than enough."

His tone was half a question and half a statement.

"They did, but for now I have too much to do at Taeshin, so I turned it down. And you know I'm not exactly in a position to move so easily."

"You mean because you're Taeshin Group's son-in-law? Even so, it's not easy to restrict where you end up. You may actually be better off at another company than working where your wife is the boss."

In-hyuk replied with another smile.

"Are you suggesting I join AMK Bridge?"

"Oh, was I too blunt? I just feel you'd be more than capable of taking over as CEO."

This time, he let out a sigh.

"You haven't been CEO for long—already thinking of escaping?"

"What can I do if I have no desire to work?"

"Then just retire. If you're still going to keep an eye on things but only set up a puppet, it's not fair to anyone. You know very well what almost happened not long ago."

He was alluding to Han Jae-won, who had tried to sell off Chulsan Capital to another company and had ended up imprisoned as an economic criminal on various charges.

Had things gone wrong, the CEO seat could have ended up not with Jang Hyung-cheol, but someone else.

"Ahem—! True."

"If you're not planning to retire for good, you should hold on properly. Also, from what I've heard, vice CEO Heo Min-gyu is taking care of most of the actual business, right?"

"... Huh? Word has gotten out that far?"

"You know my informants. Besides, sometimes the second-best is better than the best. Trust Vice CEO Heo Min-gyu's abilities and leave things to him."

"You really are something."

At this, Jang Hyung-cheol finished his now-cold tea with a gulp.

"Phew. So, why did you want to meet today? Don't tell me you called me here to discuss your escape plans?"

As if he'd hit the mark, Jang Hyung-cheol's gaze drifted into the air.

"A-hem! Of course not! There's something important I wanted to discuss!"

"Please, go ahead."

Pressed by In-hyuk, he scratched his cheek with a finger.

"A rather suspicious loan inquiry came in, so I contacted you for advice."

With his words, a stack of documents landed on the table. Looking it over, In-hyuk let out a deep sigh.

"You have plenty of people to handle document review there. And, just so you remember, I'm not your employee at Bridge, I'm technically an outsider."

"But you're also my advisor. Isn't it thanks to you that things worked out so well?"

"Shouldn't advisors at least be paid for their work?"

"How much do you want? If you come on exclusively, I'll easily pay five times your current annual salary."

Jang Hyung-cheol had no idea of In-hyuk's real background—let alone how much money In-hyuk could make in a single hour, let alone a day.

Even now, a portion of each company's profits was constantly being channeled into his overseas shadow accounts.

"I'll take a look so long as you don't demand exclusivity."

"Won't consider it, then?"

"What I'm making now is more than enough."

"Tsk—! So stubborn."

Ignoring his muttering, In-hyuk's expression hardened as he read over the documents.

"It's a loan application from a company called Hwain Techon for five billion won for a new business venture."

"That's right. Their sales, profits, and management all look fine. But something about it feels off."

"You have a hunch?"

"What hunch does an old man have? Just an excess of caution."

"Still, it's odd you'd even show it to me based just on that."

Even as they talked, In-hyuk continued flipping through the papers.

"So, what do you think? If there are no problems, I'll tell the loan department to proceed quickly..."

"No. It's a good thing you waited."

Jang Hyung-cheol's eyes widened at this response.

"There's a problem? There shouldn't be anything here that would catch the eye on paper."

"As you said, the balance sheet alone looks fine."

"Just the balance sheet? Was there something in the other details?"

Taking a long breath, In-hyuk spoke again.

"There's a hole in the income from shipping fees."

"In what way?"

"For starters, the ship rental fees, BAF, and EBS—the adjustment figures don't quite line up by season. The wharf usage and port security fees also seem to include inaccurate numbers. If you add it up across the stated periods, a substantial amount is missing."

Technically, he was referring to the fuel surcharges that fluctuate with oil prices.

The average fuel capacity of a container ship is 5,500 to 13,000 tons.

Assuming a daily fuel cost of $120,000, that's about 170 million won spent per day.

For a trip from the Middle East to Korea, it would take 20–30 days; so at the maximum, the cost per trip would be about five billion won just for fuel.

"What's the total right now?"

In-hyuk did a rough calculation of the company's balance sheet, sales, fixed, and operating costs.

"If you sum up just last year and this year's documents... about 120 billion won is missing."

"That much? Wait! If that's only for two years..."

"If the embezzlement started earlier, we're talking about a massive sum."

At that, Jang Hyung-cheol's expression turned icy.

"So, hwain Techon hid this and tried to get a five billion won loan from us."

"We'll only know for sure with a proper investigation. Start by looking into the details I just mentioned. And there must be financial companies they previously borrowed from—so check what made them want to switch to AMK Bridge specifically."

Frustrated, Jang Hyung-cheol picked up a bottle of cold water rather than tea and chugged it down.

"Whew—! If I hadn't shown this to you, we'd have been in big trouble."

"You're the one who caught it, sir."

"But I still wouldn't have known what I was looking at. Anyway, I'll tell the loan department to review everything."

"Good luck."

"No, first things first—we should eat."

With the important conversation over, the two men placed their orders for breakfast.

Chapter 84

Don't Leave Out a Single Thing!

After finishing his meal, In-hyuk parted ways with Jang Hyung-cheol in front of the restaurant.

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, who had eaten separately in another room, were also with him.

They all got into the car, and the first thing In-hyuk did was pull out his phone.

[What brings you at this hour?]

The call connected to Go Mi-ah.

"I need you to gather some data on a company called Hwain Techon right now."

[That's not difficult, but by when do you need it?]

"As soon as possible. Investigate the backgrounds of the CEO and the executives, the routes of chartered vessels used in both imports and exports, and every transfer record involving company funds."

[Why are you making so many requests? Is there some kind of incident?]

Go Mi-ah's voice showed some concern.

"I just have something to check. Please make sure to leave as few traces as possible."

[That's not a problem. Okay, leave it to me.]

As soon as the call ended, Hong Yu-geon, who was driving, cautiously asked.

"You look really serious... Did something happen? Weren't you just having breakfast with CEO Jang?"

"Something came up by chance."

The problem was the loan review documents for Hwain Techon that Jang Hyung-cheol had shown him.

In the original future, Hwain Techon had collapsed after massive corruption and mismanagement were revealed.

The real issue was that, in the wake of this collapse, banks and financial firms that held bonds and loans were hit hard, and even some companies connected through business ties couldn't avoid bankruptcy.

"If you're contacting Mi-ah in such a hurry, this doesn't sound like an ordinary matter..."

"It won't become a major problem now that I know about it. But there are things I need to take care of."

Back then, the financial institutions harmed were not Chulsan Capital.

At that time, Chulsan Capital had already disappeared, shattered as Jang Hyung-cheol was arrested.

But now, because of In-hyuk's interference, the course of the future had changed, and the new target had shifted from Chulsan Capital to its predecessor, AMK Bridge.

"Should I take you back to the office now?"

"Yes, please do."

The car set off right away.

In the meantime, In-hyuk began sorting through his increasingly complicated thoughts.

The future had already started to change. His own fate, as well as the destiny of several others, was now included as well.

Considering all the causal and correlational relationships, it was impossible to calculate every variable.

He didn't even know for sure how far the reach of Kooou, the organization behind Baek Si-hwan, extended.

Of course, the Hwain Techon incident could be considered a separate matter.

But now that AMK Bridge—a company that should have disappeared—was the new target, it stood to reason that AMK Partners could also be in the crosshairs.

'Back then, Hwain Techon inflicted massive damage and then vanished—like a corporate bomb... And the ones who got hit hardest then...'

bzzz—

Just then, a message from Go Mi-ah arrived.

Checking the contents, it looked like the preliminary financial records of Hwain Techon had been investigated.

"Bareum Finance..."

Hong Yu-geon met his gaze in the rearview mirror and asked.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'bareum'?"

"I was just mumbling. Focus on driving."

Currently, Hwain Techon's lender was Bareum Finance. The loan amount was about 1 trillion won.

For a mid-sized company, that was not bad, but in reality, this was just the tip of the iceberg.

As undisclosed corporate bonds and collateralized loans began collapsing one after another, Hwain Techon's headquarters, factories, and subsidiaries would become entangled, triggering a series of chain bankruptcies.

* * *

WISE&WIRE Group's chairman, Baek Ji-woong, checked the report that had just come in.

It wasn't an official document—it had been passed along internally through his secretary, Do Jung-geol.

"So, madam Kwon, who has been quiet for a while, is making her move again. But why the sudden shift from Bareum Finance to AMK Bridge? Is this really necessary?"

Madam Kwon referred to his wife, Kwon So-jeong, who was the only daughter of the late W&W Group's chairman, Kwon Sang-chun.

Currently, she was officially the CEO of W&W Entertainment, which combined celebrity management with production.

In reality, however, she was the largest shareholder in W&W DAYS, the holding company for the W&W Group, making her more powerful than even Baek Ji-woong.

Secretary Do Jung-geol, who brought the report, spoke gravely.

"They say they plan to expand the scale of the operation."

"Even more? Truly, she is ambitious..."

Baek Ji-woong shook his head.

"So, some of Hwain Techon's existing loans are being transferred to AMK Bridge and will go through there?"

"The loans are under review now... There shouldn't be any problem with approval."

"Madam appears to think the same."

The real owner of Hwain Techon was none other than former W&W Group chairman Kwon Sang-chun.

Of course, the company's true purpose wasn't in raw materials but was a front for slush funds, tax evasion, illegal transfer of currency, and so on.

Now it was under Kwon So-jeong's control.

"I just hope she doesn't escalate things for no reason, but that seems unlikely, doesn't it?"

"The originally planned capital is about 2 trillion won. Expanding further could be risky."

The figure was staggering, but Baek Ji-woong didn't flinch.

"Would she listen, even if I told her not to?"

"In that case, we'll just keep watch."

"Let's do that for now. What's going on with KQ? Is Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu on the move?"

At this, Do Jung-geol checked something on his tablet.

"The latest report from KAME says they're conducting genetic testing. Once the results are out, it looks like they'll move to approach Kang In-hyuk in earnest."

Baek Ji-woong slowly shook his head.

"Such caution—testing a stone bridge over and over, even at this stage... It's almost foolish."

"But don't you think we might have provoked Jeon Hae-in too hard? If she makes a move out of our control, your plans could get tangled."

If Kang Cheon-gyu confirmed that Kang In-hyuk was really his son, he would likely position him as another KQ Group successor.

Of course, Jeon Hae-in, KQ's matron, would not simply accept that.

"More than that, I'm curious to see what Kang In-hyuk will do. Aren't you?"

"To be honest, it's strange. If being a KQ Group successor is such an advantage for In-hyuk, why hasn't he used it? I can't help but wonder if he'll actually play the role you intended."

This time, Baek Ji-woong nodded.

"That's right. To the beginning until now, it's always been a question: Why hasn't Kang In-hyuk used that card?"

"Maybe he's been waiting for the right moment? Kang Do-young went down badly because of Kang In-hyuk. If In-hyuk reveals his existence in this situation, it would be much easier for him to be named as KQ Group's successor."

It was not a bad speculation.

But it deepened Baek Ji-woong's thinking.

"The whole Texcellence and RSK thing was orchestrated by AMK Partners from the start. Kang Do-young tried to use KQ Fabric and ended up tripping over his own feet."

"It's very complicated."

"Nothing is easy. And regardless of what plans Kang In-hyuk has, in the current situation, he'll have to go along with our setup."

KQ Group's chairman, Kang Cheon-gyu, was his biological father.

With Kang Do-young falling from grace, a new successor was needed.

Kang In-hyuk, the son-in-law of the Taeshin Group family and a man who had created huge profits for Taeshin Asset Management, was the perfect strategic move.

Of course, the Taeshin Group would feel the same.

"Understood."

"Just keep watching that side for now. The most important thing is Accentia. What do you think? Will we win the lawsuit?"

"It's working in our favor that Accentia pursued Redboar's investment. Even if the price tag increases a bit, it looks like we should be able to secure it without problems."

"If we lose after pouring all that money in, we might as well die."

What had started as a curious investment in Accentia, took an unexpected turn when AMK Partners stubbornly filed a lawsuit.

This only made Baek Ji-woong more determined.

"Make sure they don't let their guard down until the end."

"I'll see to it."

bzzz— bzzz—

Then Do Jung-geol's phone buzzed in his pocket.

"It's a call from Redboar. Would you like to take it now?"

"Put it through."

When the call connected, a middle-aged woman's voice in English came through.

[We won. We wrapped up the investment contract with Accentia without any issues.]

It was Amber Hart, the CEO of Redboar Technology. At her report, Baek Ji-woong cocked his head.

"I thought there were a few days left before the trial?"

It was an unexpected turn of events. Amber Hart continued in a slightly excited voice.

[AMK Partners requested a settlement. It might have been a stretch, but the terms were more favorable than if it had gone to court, so I concluded negotiations as quickly as possible.]

"How much?"

[The penalty is $15 million.]

About 20 billion won in Korean currency.

It was not a small amount, but given how serious Accentia's and Redboar Technology's liability had been, a lawsuit could have doubled that penalty.

"Do you know why they suggested a settlement?"

[I checked. It seems there was a clash in Africa over battery material production rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with Orbis Investment involved.]

"Tengyuenz Cobalt, huh. But I thought Orbis focused only on projects in the Middle East. So they've ventured into Africa."

[It appears they're expanding. Anyway, that's probably what caused this issue, but to us, it was an opportunity.]

In this situation, he should have felt relieved, but an inexplicable sense of unease crept up inside.

"Is there any chance of a problem with the Accentia investment contract? Any loophole for them to exploit..."

[We have a watertight contract. I even included toxic clauses so their CEO won't get any funny ideas.]

She sounded supremely confident.

Indeed, she was not someone to take lightly, given her extensive experience managing Redboar Technology and more.

Baek Ji-woong knew this well and trusted her.

"Hmm..."

Sensing his odd reaction, amber Hart asked in return.

[Is something wrong?]

"No, it's just..."

At that moment, voices filled with exclamations could be heard over the line.

It sounded like reactions from Redboar Technology's employees.

[Ah...]

Amber Hart's voice mixed in as well. Sensing something off, Baek Ji-woong quickly pressed.

"What's going on?"

[Well...]

Just before she could answer, Do Jung-geol, who was standing beside him, suddenly checked something that had come through on his tablet.

His expression hardened, and after a short hesitation, he slowly handed it to Baek Ji-woong.

Before Amber Hart could respond, Baek Ji-woong checked the contents, and his face crumpled as if his skin were wrinkled paper.

【AMK Partners Acquires IT Firm Velion! Based in Texas, Velion develops and researches programs essential for low-power battery systems. As part of the deal, CEO Rachel Baker will remain, and all employees are guaranteed continued employment...】

【AMK Partners Continues its Acquisition Spree! The Second Target is IT Firm Velion! AMK Partners' Korean branch manager, Norman McGrath, even announced a joint technology development agreement with Greenbyte Labs...】

.

.

Baek Ji-woong's hand, which held the tablet, began to tremble. Noticing this, Do Jung-geol asked with concern.

"... Are you all right?"

But Baek Ji-woong ignored him, continuing to speak into the still-connected phone.

"Amber Hart."

[Yes, chairman.]

"Conduct a full investigation into every single thing Accentia is developing right now. Find out exactly what AMK Partners was after—leave out nothing!"

[Y-yes, sir...]

The call ended before she could finish her reply. A deep sigh escaped Baek Ji-woong's lips.

Chapter 85

Not a Bad Offer

【Accentia investment contract lawsuit, ultimately shifted to Redboar Technology with a settlement proposal from AMK Partners... AMK Partners secured a 14 billion won penalty through the settlement, and simultaneously announced the acquisition of IT company Velion as well as the development of a low-power, high-efficiency power device...】

【America, contract signed between AMK Velion & Greenbyte Labs! Announcing joint development plans for next-generation low-power, high-spec batteries! What will become of displaced Accentia? Having looked forward to a collaboration with Greenbyte Labs, Accentia terminated their investment contract with AMK Partners and joined hands with Redboar Technology, but...】

...

As time passed, the world just kept growing noisier, giving people no time to catch their breath.

The biggest topic was how AMK Partners had truly stabbed Redboar Technology in the back.

On top of that, they had received a 100 million dollar–14 billion won–penalty, and acquired an IT company called Velion.

AMK Partners had managed to gain that much funding just through contract termination. Naturally, public interest skyrocketed.

During all this, In-hyuk spent about 18 hours traveling and arrived in Austin, Texas, America.

His destination was a company that had just changed its name by adding AMK before Velion.

"Division director!"

As soon as he entered the arrivals hall, a man shouted and came running. It was Mark Campbell, the founder and CEO of Greenbyte Labs.

"It's been a while. When did you get here?"

At In-hyuk's greeting, Mark Campbell burst into a big smile.

"I arrived yesterday. It must have been exhausting to get out here, right?"

"It wasn't too bad."

Following behind were Baek Si-hwan, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester.

As they moved on together, Mark Campbell talked without stopping.

"I can't tell you how anxious I felt when Redboar looked set to take Accentia off the table. But who could have guessed? That AMK Partners would go for a second option—no, even acquire a company better than Accentia!"

To Greenbyte Labs' standpoint, they had already secured a 100 million dollar investment from Taeshin Asset Management.

Meanwhile, development of their product continued to face difficulties, only adding to Mark Campbell's daily anxiety.

"Well, I'm glad things turned out well. Of course, the CEO still needs to make his final cut and decide today."

"I think we're okay for now. The Velion software I checked recently was very compatible."

The joint battery development between Velion and Greenbyte Labs progressed during Accentia's contract termination lawsuit.

Since then, Mark Campbell formed a special development team and began visiting Velion discreetly.

Chatting together, they got in the pre-arranged car.

Baek Si-hwan, who had remained silent until he sat down next to In-hyuk, cautiously asked,

"When did you know that AMK would give up on Accentia, division director?"

"The lawsuit was ongoing."

"Ah... I see."

Once the car left the airport, a landscape as open as a rural village spread outside.

Baek Si-hwan sighed and muttered quietly,

"AMK Partners must have prepared very meticulously."

"Probably so."

"Have you ever met AMK's CEO, division director?"

He seemed hesitant to ask.

Of course, In-hyuk understood the real intent: to check how much he knew about AMK Partners.

"No, I've never met the person. Why do you ask all of sudden?"

"AMK Partners is so famous, they're called the legend of the investment world. When I got curious and looked it up, nothing at all was known about the so-called CEO."

"True. I tried to find out, too, but it was the same for me. I figured if I pressed further, it might be rude to them, so I left it at that."

His answer made clear how important relations with AMK Partners were.

Baek Si-hwan seemed to understand and didn't ask further.

Soon, the car turned off the main road and arrived in front of a two-story building on a 450㎡ site.

At the top of the building, the newly changed name "AMK Velion" was posted.

Soon, a familiar man came out with other employees from inside, greeting them in English.

"It's been a while, division director Kang In-hyuk."

"Indeed. First time since San Jose, right?"

The man was Norman McGrath, AMK Partners Korea branch manager. Next to him was Rachel Baker, now CEO of AMK Velion.

"I'm Rachel Baker. It's a first meeting in person when we've only spoken by email and phone."

"Nice to meet you, too."

After the greetings, attention shifted back to Norman McGrath.

"I didn't expect you'd come in person, branch manager McGrath. Did you come to check since you were concerned?"

Norman McGrath hadn't participated in the Velion acquisition or Accentia investment contract cases.

He had directed subordinates and now showed up here without notice.

"I wanted to see firsthand the technology at Greenbyte Labs funded by Taeshin Asset Management. I was also curious how you've been doing, division director."

"Thank you for showing interest."

As they conversed and entered, employees in offices on both sides of the corridor worked busily in front of their computers.

They reached the reception desk, guarded by security.

Rachel Baker showed the badge hanging from her neck.

"Hand over your passports, and we'll issue you access badges. Of course, it'll only give you entry for a limited time."

"Your security system is well established."

"We followed the requirements from Greenbyte Labs."

In-hyuk nodded, then addressed the three following behind.

"Security is crucial here, so I'll go in alone on our side. The rest, please wait in the lounge or conference room."

"... Understood."

At Baek Si-hwan's answer, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester also nodded and stepped back.

Only after he received a temporary pass could In-hyuk enter inside.

Only the three and general employees remained in the corridor.

"Let's head to the conference room."

Staff led the way.

Baek Si-hwan glanced at the phone in his hand, but put it down. It would have stood out too much to contact anyone now.

...

...

...

The lab required badge, code, and fingerprint recognition at the entrance.

Inside, the room was enclosed by thick walls, and was subdivided into small rooms where employees huddled and ran experiments.

"That's the high-output power device test, right?"

"That's right. We're running equipment usually requiring more than 100kW of limiting power in a low-power, high-efficiency state. The current value is 72.45kW. Normally, you'd expect overheating and power control errors from overload, but with Greenbyte Labs' special-alloy wires and parts and our transistor control program, we're handling it."

In-hyuk checked the monitor outside the experiment space.

"You've reduced output by about 40%."

"That's right. The main question is whether the equipment remains stable under that condition. Of course, the power device must also avoid overload."

"And it should be usable just by adding the installation to existing products."

Rachel Baker and Mark Campbell looked surprised at his muttering.

"You know even that, division director."

"That's right. You make a good point."

There was a sense of admiration, too.

In-hyuk nodded and continued.

"Since it's a product under development at a company I'm investing in, I've thought about various aspects. If we can reduce power consumption, it'll be a real breakthrough."

"That's our goal as well. Plus, the current numbers aren't bad."

The technology already originated from Greenbyte Labs and Velion.

With In-hyuk providing capital, he enabled maximum utilization.

"So what's your target?"

"We're aiming for a maximum of 60% reduction."

"Sixty percent."

Both answered together in confident voices.

"Good."

He also checked other product tests.

Norman McGrath, apparently satisfied, nodded and commented.

"A bit of a shame, honestly."

At that odd tone, In-hyuk tilted his head.

"What do you mean?"

"If only Taeshin Asset Management hadn't taken Greenbyte Labs first, we might've gotten all this to ourselves."

He meant the synergy between the two companies would bring great profit.

"Isn't that a bit greedy?"

"Well, you can't help feeling regret. And I've heard about your skills, division director Kang, but I didn't expect you'd recognize Greenbyte Labs' value faster than our brain did. It was close, but still."

In-hyuk smiled.

"By 'brain,' are you referring to the CEO of AMK Partners, who's never made an official appearance? I've heard rumors that person's insight is remarkable."

"An amazing person indeed. It's as if they can see the future. Now that you mention it, I never got to ask—how did you end up working with us at AMK Partners?"

That question had long puzzled Norman McGrath.

For a simple reason: he handled most of AMK Partners' business.

Yet only Kang In-hyuk from Taeshin Asset Management was directly approached by headquarters for collaboration.

"I don't know the exact reason. I just received the proposal and, since the conditions weren't bad, started working together."

"I see."

Once the conversation wrapped up, In-hyuk got back to the main point.

"If everything's been checked, let's wrap up the contract."

"It's ready in the conference room. Please come up."

They left together and headed to the second-floor conference room.

There, Baek Si-hwan, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester approached In-hyuk.

"Did everything check out?"

"It looked good."

Once seated, rachel Baker, CEO of Velion, handed out the prepared contract papers.

The joint development contract was structured for four parties—two manufacturers, two investors. Each reviewed the documents.

"If there are no issues, let's all sign."

Finishing his review first, In-hyuk wrote his name.

The others followed. Of course, it didn't end there.

All four needed to sign every document, so the contracts were passed around.

"It's finally over."

Rachel Baker looked around with satisfaction.

The others nodded and stood, moving closer to each other.

"Let's work well together from now on!"

Mark Campbell called out loudly, and Norman McGrath followed.

"If things go as smoothly as now, getting to production shouldn't be a problem. But so much has been complicated along the way—meaning we've made more enemies, so please be careful."

In-hyuk agreed and added,

"At this rate, we should hit production before long. If possible, it'd be good to speed up preparations for the related process as well."

At the mention of production, Norman McGrath responded.

"As already discussed, we've acquired the factory on our side. Joint investment means there shouldn't be any issues."

"AMK Partners is always quick to act. We'll also get the funds and procedures ready on our end."

In the end, AMK Partners was within In-hyuk's grasp, and everything unfolded as he had planned.

Everyone savored the smoothly proceeding situation, unaware of the truth beneath it all.

Chapter 86

Time of Maturation

【America, Greenbyte Labs & AMK Velion announce 40% reduction in power consumption for products requiring over 100kW! Final goal announced as over 50%... Both companies, backed by investment from AMK Partners & Taeshin Asset Management, are simultaneously pursuing a four-party joint development and production contract...】

【Joint development by AMK Velion & Greenbyte Labs! 40% power consumption test completed! The goal is to develop a product that can also be used in existing electronic devices... The production plant is planned as a joint venture funded by AMK Partners and Taeshin Asset Management... Currently, total announced investment fund is 200 million dollars, capturing widespread attention...】

.

.

The chairman of the WISE&WIRE group, Baek Ji-woong, was reading the article on his tablet in his office.

In the midst of this, his secretary, Do Jung-geol, took a call and transferred it over.

"This is Amber Hart from Redboar."

"... Right. Did you look into Accentia?"

Amber Hart's voice came out of the cell phone, switched to speakerphone.

[I have completed the confirmation.]

"What happened?"

[Well... There was a problem with the industrial software under development at Accentia.]

"A problem?"

A chill seeped into his voice as he repeated the question.

Sensing that, amber Hart's voice grew quieter than before.

[... It seems the software being developed there was based on leaked source code from another company.]

"Does the software have value?"

After all, plagiarism itself was not the main problem. That could always be taken away by whatever means necessary.

[It is indeed a source that could supplement issues that Greenbyte Labs found difficult to solve. However...]

"There was another problem, then?"

After a moment of hesitation, amber Hart spoke cautiously.

[I found out about a developer Accentia was hiding. After investigating, I found a history of employment at Velion.]

In that instant, Baek Ji-woong's face hardened.

"Are you saying that the developer stole source developed at Velion and brought it into Accentia?"

[That is the situation. Moreover, Velion already completed the patent registration for the source, so even if Accentia develops it, using it will be difficult.]

"Why didn't we realize something so important sooner?"

[Ah, as I mentioned earlier, Accentia concealed it until the investment was finalized.]

Amidst the growing confusion, something felt odd.

"All this... Was AMK aware?"

[I thought it odd too, so I checked, but I was told Accentia didn't reveal it to them either.]

"Can that be trusted?"

[To what I can tell, it doesn't seem like a lie. Also, there were no suspicious traces in the developer's communication records. There was no separate contact either.]

It seemed she had made a thorough investigation.

But even so, once things had already happened, nothing would change.

"If AMK didn't know either, that means they found out just before talks of a settlement began."

He realized that was why the matter ended in a settlement, rather than dragging it into litigation.

[It was my failure. I have no excuse.]

"Haaa... Still, we can't just let Accentia's deceit slide. First, what was the name of the CEO over there?"

[Amir Holcomb.]

After a brief pause in thought, Baek Ji-woong continued.

"That Amir Holcomb guy can't have stolen only from Velion. If more companies emerge, we can move ahead with a lawsuit on that basis. Redboar should use that to reclaim the investment fund, or to receive equity proportional to the loss."

[... Understood. Then what about AMK?]

He deliberated over this question as well.

"Just leave them for now."

[Then, to the Organization...]

Since Redboar Technology was also a company subordinate to the Organization, with the failure at Accentia, they would be reprimanded one way or another.

"I'll make the report. But we won't be able to avoid responsibility."

"..."

The call ended there.

As the screen of his cell phone went dark, Baek Ji-woong let out a long sigh again.

Watching carefully from the side, Do Jung-geol cautiously spoke.

"It appears that AMK intentionally betrayed Redboar in this matter. I believe we need to take more definite action."

For a moment, Baek Ji-woong's gaze turned to him.

"What kind of action? Should I kill the head of AMK, whose identity we haven't even been able to confirm? Or should I make an example by putting a bullet in Norman McGrath's head?"

"At the very least, shouldn't we issue some sort of warning?"

It was an earnest suggestion.

"The Organization would be pleased by that. But responsibility would fall to me. Are you perhaps wishing for that?"

Do Jung-geol hurriedly bowed his head.

"... I apologize."

"Any contact from Baek Si-hwan?"

"Not yet..."

bzzz— bzzz—

The cell phone buzzed again. On the screen, the name KARAS appeared.

That was Baek Si-hwan's organization code name.

"I'll never be a gentleman."

"I'll connect the call now."

As the call button was pressed, Baek Si-hwan's voice came through.

[I apologize for the late report.]

"Alright. Shall we start with why you were this late?"

[Kang In-hyuk arrived at AMK Velion, checked the technology, completed the contract, and then spent a week meeting with eleven companies in the area.]

"Eleven companies? Was he looking for other investment avenues? Anyway, couldn't you have contacted me during that time?"

There had been no news for seven days.

No matter how busy he was, it was hard to believe Baek Si-hwan couldn't send even a short report unless he was being closely watched the whole time.

[To the moment of the AMK Velion visit, the mood among the security guards was tense. Moreover, Kang In-hyuk ordered a review and organization of materials for the companies he met, so there was no spare time.]

"Did you see anything significant during this visit?"

[Nothing noteworthy yet.]

In the end, it meant there were no results at all.

"You could have pushed yourself to alert me to any explosive news from AMK Velion in advance."

[I did try to ask discreetly, but I was told that Kang In-hyuk also found out about AMK Partners' acquisition of Velion only after the fact.]

"Can that be trusted?"

Baek Si-hwan paused before replying.

[There's no reason for Kang In-hyuk to lie to me about that.]

"Your cover hasn't been blown, right?"

[There's been no suspicious movement, so that is certain.]

"Well... If something had been revealed, you wouldn't have been left free anyway. Report immediately if anything major comes up."

After ending the call, Baek Ji-woong's mind was even more tangled.

The first problem was the $40 million investment fund in Accentia.

The investment contract hadn't been made for any specific technology.

If they were to take this into court, it would take time.

* * *

In-hyuk returned to Korea after his trip to America.

As before, reporters swarmed around him in the arrivals hall.

"Have the low-power technology developed by Velion and Greenbyte passed the tests?"

"How much profit do you think Taeshin Asset Management will earn from this development project?"

"How did Taeshin Asset Management recognize the potential of Greenbyte Labs' technology?"

Questions poured in from all directions.

Of course, bodyguards from TSS were present at the terminal, surrounding In-hyuk and helping him get to his vehicle.

"Thank you for your hard work."

Baek Si-hwan, already in the front passenger seat, turned and spoke.

"Shall we head to your residence?"

"No. Let's go to the company."

"What do you mean by company...?"

"Taeshin Asset Management."

The car set off, and everyone grew quiet.

After a week of dashing around Austin, Texas, they were all exhausted.

The car departing Incheon International Airport reached Taeshin Asset Management after about two hours.

As they entered the company, they heard whispers similar to those at the airport.

"Where did all the people go who said we'd lose a hundred million dollars last time?"

"If what the article says is true, this is massive! And if it's a joint venture, does that mean it's a subsidiary of Taeshin Asset Management? Maybe I'll get assigned to Texas someday?"

"Everyone whose job at the TF division ended got a performance bonus and a promotion, right? Maybe there'll be another opening next time?"

The staff seconded to the TF division back then thought this marked the end of their time at the company.

Moreover, on In-hyuk's orders, they had clashed with the audit division and even endured a second round of audits, completely destroying morale.

But even with a revolutionary change in personnel shaking the Taeshin Group, what those in the TF division received was not punishment, but reward.

To other employees, it was simply enviable.

Meanwhile, In-hyuk arrived at the floor where the M&A/PEF division was located.

"You're here, division director! How was your business trip?"

Once again, Noh Dongjun approached, greeting him warmly.

Now, unlike before, he had been promoted from just a PEF 2 Team member to team leader and deputy general manager because the new year had started.

Of course, the TF division at the head office had also been completely dismantled and everyone reassigned to their desired positions.

"It was so-so. Team leader Noh, you look quite refreshed."

"That's because you brought money from America, division director."

"Did you rack up some achievements, team leader Noh?"

Feeling slightly called out, Noh Dongjun responded with a playful smile.

"I'm still getting used to the job. There's plenty to hand over."

The previous PEF 2 team leader had been fired and investigated for leaking internal information.

Afterwards, with Noh Dongjun seconded to the TF division, the interim team leader role was filled by Manager Shim Kyung-jun, originally of M&A 2 Team.

"I imagine all the attention must be a bit uncomfortable."

"I'll bear it."

Everyone, including those from PEF 2 team, assumed Shim Kyung-jun would become team leader.

But when Noh Dongjun returned from the TF division and took the post, jealous glances abounded.

"If you'd worked as diligently as you do now, team leader, you wouldn't have this problem."

"That's just my style."

Noh Dongjun always seemed laid-back but got everything done.

However, people only saw his nonchalant attitude and strange rumors circulated as a result.

Shaking his head, In-hyuk entered his office.

"Manager Baek, you can go ahead and leave for the day. Since today is your return from a business trip, it'll be handled as paid leave."

"No, I still have some work to catch up on. So if you need me, please call."

"Alright."

As the unflappable Baek Si-hwan stepped out, In-hyuk retrieved a detector from the safe under his desk and tossed it to Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

The two of them swept the office to ensure nothing had been planted.

Although they had their own detector that would be triggered, they always took precautions against the unexpected.

With a glance, Hong Yu-geon signalled to In-hyuk that everything was clear.

Relaxing, he slumped onto the sofa.

"Man~ I'm dying! Why were we running around like fools over there anyway?"

The eleven company meetings held in Texas were not originally planned.

Though Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester had no idea at first, with Baek Si-hwan present, they'd held off on asking until now.

"Time of maturation."

"Huh? Maturation? What maturation? Did you make kimchi while we weren't watching?"

"I mean with the KQ side."

"Oh..."

"After Jeon Hae-in was provoked during the party, she must have guessed as much. So, she won't stay still and will likely be planning something."

Realizing right away, both Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester nodded up and down.

Chapter 87

Cuckoo Chick

As the sun was setting.

Jeon Hae-in, the matriarch of KQ Group, was standing in the middle of the living room of her residence in Pyeongchang neighborhood, gasping for breath.

The surroundings were a mess, littered with household items she had just knocked over or thrown.

At that moment, security guard Lee Jung-tae, who had just entered the house, approached her with a worried look.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

Smack—

The moment Lee Jung-tae came close, Jeon Hae-in's palm slapped his right cheek.

"Is that really what you want to say right now?"

"....."

Lee Jung-tae stood silently.

But that only made Jeon Hae-in even angrier.

"You knew, didn't you? That's why you've been gone the past few days, right?"

Just as she said, Lee Jung-tae had taken about a week off.

At the time, she was told it was for organizational matters, but thinking about the current situation, it was clear he had another motive.

"..... What do you mean by that?"

At his question, she threw a bundle of photos lying on a nearby table at him.

As a result, the corner of a photo lightly scraped his cheek as Lee Jung-tae turned his head.

The photos that fell to the floor like autumn leaves showed certain men being tailed and photographed.

Lee Jung-tae could recognize who those men were.

"So, you had people tailing those around Chairman Kang."

"Did you really think I'd just sit back and trust you completely?"

Lee Jung-tae picked up the photos and placed them back on the table.

"I was going to report this to you anyway."

The places the men in the photos had entered were hospitals and labs capable of genetic testing.

Jeon Hae-in couldn't not know what that meant.

"After everything had already happened?"

"I found out when it was already too late. That's why I wanted to prepare a countermeasure before bringing it up."

"You really think I'll believe that?!"

Jeon Hae-in judged that Lee Jung-tae had another agenda. Of course, she never trusted him completely, which is why she used someone else behind the scenes.

But she never imagined he would betray her regarding matters related to the heir's position.

At that moment, a chill appeared on Lee Jung-tae's face.

"Is there anything you can do right now, Ma'am?"

"... What?"

"As I mentioned earlier, they've already gone as far as a DNA test. That means the chairman must have already suspected that your son isn't his. At this point, he's probably gotten the results, too."

Until just now, Jeon Hae-in had been bubbling with irritation and anxiety.

It had been far too quiet on Kang Cheon-gyu's side, making her wonder what they were planning.

"So, what are you going to do now? Are you switching sides at this point?"

"I could do that."

"W-What...? You think I'll just stand by and let—!"

At that moment, Lee Jung-tae clamped her mouth shut with his palm.

Startled, Jeon Hae-in tried to pry his hand off, but he held too strongly for her to budge.

"What do you think you can really do to me? Oh, perhaps you can get some words in. But how do you think Chairman Kang will react when he finds out he's been raising a cuckoo chick for over thirty years?"

Jeon Hae-in turned pale as soon as she heard those words.

Lee Jung-tae then relaxed his grip and released her.

"H-How did you...?"

"Did you really think we approached you without knowing anything? You really are audacious. Just how bold do you have to be to try and make the son born from another man the heir of KQ Group?"

Jeon Hae-in's strength gave out, and she collapsed to the floor.

Pieces of the vase and glass, and splinters of wood she'd broken earlier, poked at her leg.

She was so shocked she couldn't even feel the pain.

"How... did you really find out?"

She had only met Kang Do-young's biological father by coincidence in the countryside and spent one night with him.

She learned she was pregnant only after marrying Kang Cheon-gyu.

At first, since there wasn't any issue with blood type, she naturally assumed it was Kang Cheon-gyu's child. But features that man had also appeared in Kang Do-young.

Specifically: a reddish birthmark, the size of two finger joints, on the inside of the left forearm.

At the time, the man had said that nearly all men in his family had inherited it.

Just to be sure, Jeon Hae-in got a genetic test, and when the result came out, it felt as if her world was collapsing.

"Is that really important now?"

"Do you know how hard I tried to hide that...?"

"There are no eternal secrets. Just like the truth about Kang In-hyuk actually being Kang Cheon-gyu's biological son will soon come to light."

Still collapsed on the floor, Jeon Hae-in bit her lip.

"And... are you going to throw me to Chairman Kang now?"

Lee Jung-tae showed a twisted smile.

"You still have plenty of uses, Ma'am. But now that you know your situation, you should refrain from unnecessary actions."

"So you're going to threaten me?"

"If you want to live out the rest of your life as the matriarch of KQ Group, you'd best listen to us."

To the very beginning, those behind Lee Jung-tae had his hands around Jeon Hae-in's throat.

Now that she realized this all too clearly, her fists, supporting her on the floor, trembled uncontrollably.

"What do you want from me, then? If you know the situation, there's nothing I can do!"

Because everything would be over once Kang Cheon-gyu found out about Kang In-hyuk being his real son.

"For now, hand over everything you have, Ma'am. Later, transfer your KQ Group shares with a power of attorney."

"... Don't tell me, you plan to offer all that to Kang In-hyuk?"

"If you think about KQ Group's future, isn't Kang In-hyuk better than your son? That would also make your shares worth several times more than they are now."

Even Jeon Hae-in could not deny Kang Do-young's shortcomings.

But the image of Kang In-hyuk and his biological mother Yoo Ji-young resurfaced in her mind.

Had Kang Cheon-gyu not broken up with her, he might have overturned the KQ Group and Songhwa Distribution merger.

That was more humiliating for Jeon Hae-in than anything else.

"For now, I'll do as you say..."

Murmuring, Jeon Hae-in walked over and sat down on the sofa. Her leg, pierced by glass and wood, was bleeding.

"I'll call someone to take care of the treatment and tidy things up."

"....."

Soon after, other security guards entered and cleaned up the living room.

In a little while, a doctor called from a nearby hospital examined Jeon Hae-in's wounds.

...

...

...

At the same time.

Baek Ji-woong, chairman of W&W Group, was sitting in his office when he received a message.

【Code KAME: Poaching of Jeon Hae-in complete. Kang Cheon-gyu's genetic test confirmed. Likely to approach Kang In-hyuk soon.】

After reading the contents, he nodded his head.

"So far, not bad."

At this mutter, Do Jung-geol spoke.

"It's strange how quiet things are on Kang Cheon-gyu's side even after learning that Kang In-hyuk is his son."

"That's because he isn't a fool. By now, he's probably trying to think of ways to hand the succession to Kang In-hyuk without causing problems."

"Makes sense, since even though it's clear Kang In-hyuk is Kang Cheon-gyu's son, he's still an illegitimate child, which could cause issues."

Baek Ji-woong let out a small sigh at his words.

"Plus, there's the relationship with Taeshin Group to consider. If things go wrong, the entire KQ distribution group could fall into Taeshin's hands."

In the end, the most important thing was what kind of thoughts Kang In-hyuk had about becoming KQ Group's successor.

"What do you expect will happen, chairman?"

"... Ideally, it'd be good if Tae Seok-ho took Taeshin, and Kang In-hyuk took KQ. But it's actually not such a bad move if Kang In-hyuk ends up taking both Taeshin and KQ. That could work to our advantage."

"But we still don't know what Kang In-hyuk is thinking, do we?"

Baek Ji-woong nodded up and down.

"That's why we'll have to check at the opportune moment whether he suits the organization."

At that, Do Jung-geol's face darkened.

"You're not saying... you'll recommend him to the organization, are you?"

"Hyottoko wasn't shy about butting in to recommend Tae Seok-ho for this game. Why shouldn't I?"

"But his disposition is unclear, so it's questionable whether the Organization would approve."

The highest priorities of the Organization were hypocrisy and egoism.

Their greed always put their own interests first in planning for the future.

"We'll see with time. So don't nag, just make sure there are no gaps in monitoring each movement."

"... Understood."

* * *

In-hyuk was sitting at his office desk as usual.

However, what he was checking on the computer wasn't Taeshin Asset Management business, but data on Hwain Techon that Go Mi-ah had sent him.

'As expected, they funneled funds by subcontracting to several shell companies. Faked all sorts of expenses as if actually spent. And these names...'

The shipping gap he had mentioned to Jang Hyung-cheol was only the tip of the iceberg.

The main axis was shell companies trading funds back and forth with real businesses.

【Brighton Solutions】

【Bluehaven Asset】

【Lexford Pacific】

【Silverwood Capital】

.

.

Several of these looked familiar even to In-hyuk.

"Come to think of it, this place was used here as well."

"What do you mean?"

As usual, Hong Yu-geon, who had been lounging on the sofa since morning, asked.

"I'm reviewing the documents I had Go Mi-ah put together last time. I think a major incident is about to break."

"Major? How major?"

"About two trillion won."

Hong Yu-geon jumped up at that, and Van Hester whipped his head around so fast it looked like his neck would break.

"What? Two trillion? That 'trillion' after billion?"

"Did you really have to count all the way up to that... Yes, that trillion. But why are you so shocked? The Chulsan Capital M&A case also broke the trillion mark before."

To be exact, it was 1.7 trillion won. Although this was a bigger 2 trillion won case, he didn't see why it was so surprising.

"That wasn't something that blew up. What's blowing up this time?"

"The company itself is going to blow. The amount that'll vanish is about two trillion."

"Who's going to swallow it up?"

"Exactly. But someone is trying to involve AMK Bridge in this."

In-hyuk stared daggers at his monitor, his gaze sharp.

Perhaps he was exuding a faint killing intent, because Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester looked at him, startled.

"W-Who dares mess with our boss's share?"

"WISE&WIRE Group."

Hong Yu-geon, sensing the mood, lowered his voice.

"Chairman Baek Ji-woong's side? Why would they?"

"For now, just circumstantial evidence."

In his previous life, In-hyuk had used shell companies to re-route funds while acquiring stakes after collapsing Taeshin Group.

And the person who had supplied those shell companies was Baek Si-hwan.

Among the shell company list connected to Hwain Techon, he had seen those names.

Which meant the current incident, and the WISE&WIRE Group backing Baek Si-hwan, were connected.

"What are you going to do with just circumstantial evidence? If AMK Bridge is wrapped up in this, it could be huge."

"It's not an issue just yet. I happened to catch it first and have put a stop to it for now."

"Then can't you just keep from getting involved?"

At first, In-hyuk had thought the same.

"But if W&W Group is involved, I can't just stand by."

As he answered, In-hyuk let out a sigh and broke into a faint smile.

To the sofa, Hong Yu-geon muttered quietly as he watched.

"What's with him... Is the boss crazy?"

Van Hester nodded.

Then In-hyuk said nonchalantly,

"I can hear you. And I can see you."

Bzzz— Bzzz—

Startled, as the two stiffened, In-hyuk's phone buzzed on his desk.

The display showed an unknown number.

Chapter 88

I Hope You Enjoy Your Meal

A few days later.

Before noon, Kang In-hyuk visited the mansion of KQ Group chairman Kang Cheon-gyu, located in Hanam, Gyeonggi Province.

The call he received a while ago had been from Kang Cheon-gyu's secretary, Noh Geun-cheol.

He had reached out to invite him for a meal, which was why In-hyuk visited today.

Upon entering the house, Kang Cheon-gyu, who had been in the living room, rose from his seat.

"Thank you for coming all the way here."

"I didn't expect the dinner you mentioned last time to be held at your house, chairman."

"You're quite popular in this field nowadays, aren't you? Most of the usual shops are frequented by those sorts, so I thought it might draw unnecessary attention and get more troublesome."

He had shown some consideration for In-hyuk.

"Thank you for looking out for me. But as I noticed last time as well, you keep a lot of plants."

Various plants that seemed to be cared for by him were arranged throughout the house.

"It's a hobby I picked up as I got older. Ah, since you said you were fine with home-cooked meals, I prepared spicy stir-fried pork and soybean paste stew. Do you like those?"

The two continued chatting as they headed to the dining room. Not seeing anyone else around, In-hyuk asked,

"I would never turn those down. But you didn't make them yourself, did you?"

"Why? Do I seem like someone who couldn't cook dishes like these?"

Kang Cheon-gyu entered the kitchen and brought out a stone pot filled with soybean paste stew that had been warming on the induction stove.

As he plated the stir-fried pork from the wok, he spoke.

"Could you take out some instant rice from the microwave?"

"You didn't cook the rice yourself?"

"My palate isn't that sophisticated, so I find this more convenient and even tastier."

In-hyuk fetched the instant rice and set it on the table.

The main dishes were simply the stir-fried pork and the soybean paste stew he just brought out.

"There's not much on the table, but I hope you enjoy your meal."

"You're more down-to-earth than I expected."

"It's probably because I was so rebellious. After struggling with various concerns, I went to the army, and in my early twenties I entered a university in America. I studied distribution there and went through a lot."

Listening to him, In-hyuk smiled faintly and asked slyly,

"Was that where you met my mother?"

"That's right. Anna was two years younger than I am, but actually a senior by one year... Hmm?"

Anna was the American name of In-hyuk's biological mother, Yoo Ji-young.

Kang Cheon-gyu was talking casually, but then suddenly sensed something odd.

"Why? Did you think I wouldn't have found out?"

At that, Kang Cheon-gyu was momentarily at a loss for words and put down the spoon he was bringing to the stew.

"... Since when have you known?"

"It hasn't been long. Honestly, I've come close to losing my life several times, so it was hard not to question things. I started considering the most likely people and had somebody follow madam. That's how I found out I was your son and that she tried to kill me."

Kang Cheon-gyu's hands resting on the table tensed up.

"So it's true, that woman tried to kill you?"

"Well, I put a stop to it on my end, so there's no need to worry."

In-hyuk held a transcript of a conversation between Jeon Hae-in and Lee Daemyung from the Daemyung Detective Agency.

He'd used it as leverage to keep things quiet until now.

"How exactly did you stop it?"

"In my own way. In any case, based on the situation, I started investigating who my real mother was and found out. Afterward, I also learned you'd met her while in university in America."

"... I see. Maybe it's for the best. I was at a loss as to where and how to explain everything to you."

Hearing this, In-hyuk let out a faint sigh.

"Did you go to the trouble of setting the table yourself just to create the right mood?"

"I can't say I didn't. But it's meaningful to me, too. Back in America, I used to share these meals often with your mother."

The atmosphere grew heavy.

Still, In-hyuk didn't feel much emotion.

If this body had been his from the start, maybe he would have, but most of the memories of the original owner, Kang In-hyuk, were already gone.

Having survived much longer than he should have, only new memories were piling up at this point.

"So, what is it you wanted to say to me by inviting me here?"

Kang Cheon-gyu hesitated for a moment, sipped his water, and then continued slowly.

"You must have some idea, don't you?"

"If you're thinking of discussing my succession of KQ Group, then I refuse."

At that, Kang Cheon-gyu's brow furrowed subtly.

"Did I hear you right? You're refusing?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

It was an utterly incomprehensible situation. In-hyuk sighed again as he accepted Cheon-gyu's question.

"If I accept, wouldn't you have certain demands of me as well, chairman?"

"That's..."

"To be a proper KQ Group successor, the thing I'd have to change most is my current status as son-in-law of the Taeshin family. To your perspective, that must be the main obstacle."

Perhaps hitting the mark, Kang Cheon-gyu's lips parted.

"You see right through me. You're nothing like Do-young. That makes me want to have you succeed KQ Group all the more."

One of the most important things in business, he believed, was having a sense of self—knowing exactly where you stand, where you need to go, and how you've gotten there, so you can make objective judgments.

"To be more exact, you need the investment performance I've achieved in the past year."

"I can't deny that. But this is a great opportunity for you, too. Not just anything, but a chance to inherit KQ Group."

"Is that why you ran a DNA test using the glass I drank from at the party?"

For a moment, Kang Cheon-gyu flinched and shut his mouth.

"... You knew?"

"It was impossible not to notice, considering how your people were moving around. Also, the way you signaled to your secretary was suspicious."

"Your senses are impressive."

He seemed to like In-hyuk even more.

"But I have no intention of succeeding KQ Group in place of Kang Do-young. I don't want to waste energy in a pointless power struggle with someone so lacking."

His expression showed genuine annoyance. Seeing that, Kang Cheon-gyu let out a helpless sigh.

"That really is your reason?"

"And besides, I already have a mountain of work I have to get through."

"You could wrap those things up and come over..."

"Even at the quickest, it would take several months. Some of the longer projects could go on for ten years, you know?"

Kang Cheon-gyu gave a bitter smile.

He was well aware of how many things In-hyuk was involved with through investments at Taeshin Asset Management.

Especially the recently signed joint development project between AMK Velion and Greenbyte Labs in Texas, America, had drawn major attention.

If the high-efficiency, low-power power supply being developed there achieved over 50% energy savings, as claimed, the two companies and their investors would monopolize the profits of countless electricity-based businesses.

"Well... It really is a business too good to miss. But if you ran KQ Group, you could achieve something even bigger, even if it took a bit of time, couldn't you?"

He tried to convince In-hyuk, thinking it was the only way to save KQ Group and improve it further.

"If I were to choose your offer, what would you do with madam? And the board of directors pushing for division director Kang Do-young?"

"I can handle those matters well enough. Besides, most of the board are my people, so it's not an issue."

Indeed, as he said, the chairman's sway in KQ Group was enormous, largely because of his substantial shareholding.

Most board members were KQ Group loyalists. In the past, nearly half were from Songhwa Distribution, but after Cheon-gyu became chairman, he slowly replaced them with his own picks.

Maybe that's why Jeon Hae-in was so set on making Kang Do-young chairman.

"Is the current board really of one mind?"

"... What do you mean?"

"Kang Do-young hasn't been competent for a long time, and yet the board never made a serious issue of it. Why do you think that is?"

At that question, Cheon-gyu's face hardened.

"Don't tell me... they plan to push Do-young out eventually? But even if the position changes hands, my shares won't."

"In the end, management control comes down to the shares. As long as you have them, the throne can't change hands easily."

"The problem comes after you step back from management. There's no guarantee the things I've experienced won't happen to you, chairman."

The fastest, safest way for Jeon Hae-in to transfer managerial control and shares to Kang Do-young would be to have him first receive the chairman position, and then, when Kang Cheon-gyu dies, acquire his shares through inheritance.

The atmosphere suddenly grew icy.

For the moment, Cheon-gyu doubted it could go that far, but the incident when In-hyuk had been targeted came back to him.

"You're saying they might try to kill me?"

"Who knows? By the way, are you sure you aren't ill? Please answer honestly."

In the original future, Cheon-gyu was officially said to have died from illness in about a year, but in reality, no one knew what the real cause was.

He had no chronic disease, and he always looked healthier than anyone else.

As the head of a large company, he would have regular checkups, so if anything had ever shown up, he would have known before anyone else.

"Other than some arthritis that comes with age, nothing in particular."

If so, it was more likely that he'd been hospitalized due to some other issue—one that his wife Jeon Hae-in had orchestrated.

'So it really was something that got him, huh?'

In his previous life, In-hyuk had been one of the dedicated security guards for Taeshin Group's CEO, Tae Seok-hyun, and behind the scenes had followed Tae Seok-ho's orders, passing on necessary information.

At that time, he had heard the news of Kang Cheon-gyu's death on the news.

"You never know what can happen, so please take care."

"Are you worried about me?"

Cheon-gyu looked oddly pleased. In-hyuk tilted his head and replied,

"Take it however you like. As I said earlier, I have no intention of getting involved in the succession battle for KQ Group management. Official procedures would be required anyway, and without them, even you couldn't do anything."

An extramarital child would only be recognized with legal proof via a DNA test and formal process.

Though a will could transfer inheritance to a third party, Cheon-gyu's character made it clear he'd never want to hand KQ Group down that way.

Moreover, Jeon Hae-in was even targeting the lawyer who would handle the will, which made it all the more worrisome.

"I looked into you a bit too. To what I hear, yours with CEO Tae Ju-ha is a marriage in name only. If you're only interested in management, wouldn't it be better to get divorced and come over to this side?"

In-hyuk sighed and met Cheon-gyu's gaze.

"That's for me to decide."

The mood grew heavy and a sense of pressure spread through the space.

Feeling it with his whole body, Cheon-gyu swallowed and spoke carefully.

"I spoke out of turn."

"And if you want to negotiate even the minimum terms with me, shouldn't you at least make sure the setting is clean?"

"Of course..."

Before Cheon-gyu could finish, In-hyuk stood up from his seat.

"... What are you doing?"

In-hyuk walked over to a group of tall green-leafed plants set up at the side of the dining room.

Casually, he reached inside and pulled something out.

"Surely, a place where something like this is installed isn't suitable, is it?"

What he held in his hand was a bugging device.

Chapter 89

Hesitation Only Breeds Regret

Kang Cheon-gyu's face grew even darker as he recognized the bugging device in In-hyuk's hand.

"Why is that...?"

"It's either a sansevieria or a stucky plant. They don't need frequent watering, so in the past, intelligence agencies often used them to plant bugging devices."

As In-hyuk spoke, he walked elsewhere and fumbled around.

Tik-tik— Tik— Tik-tik—

To under the sofa, at the outlet, in the wall clock, etc... about five more bugging devices were torn out and thrown onto the dining table.

"Heoh..."

"Instead of just being surprised, shouldn't you assemble all the security personnel in charge of this place?"

"Assemble?"

He still seemed not to understand.

"Doesn't the security team regularly inspect for bugging devices or cameras?"

"Th-that's true."

This was the residence of a major conglomerate's chairman.

No matter how thorough the security, no one knew what could happen while the house was unoccupied.

Especially because, apart from the domestic staff necessary for chores, no one could enter the residence, so it required extra caution.

"If something like this still turned up, doesn't it suggest that there's someone inside who doesn't belong to the chairman's group?"

Kang Cheon-gyu, regaining his composure, took out his phone and called Nam Hyo-chang, the chief of security.

"Excluding the security team, come in right now with Executive Director Noh and the security guards!"

The security and security teams stayed in an outbuilding.

As soon as the order was given, Noh Geun-cheol and Nam Hyo-chang led the waiting security guards into the living room.

"Is everyone here?"

"Except for five on the night shift or off-duty, everyone is present. But those are..."

Nam Hyo-chang, puzzled by the sudden summons, stiffened upon seeing the items on the table.

"Correct. Those are bugging devices. We just found them in the living room. So you can guess why I called you all."

The security guards also became serious.

The fact that bugs were found despite regular checks implied there was an infiltrator among them.

Thinking deeply, Nam Hyo-chang cautiously spoke.

"Where were they found?"

"In that flowerpot, the sofa, the outlet, the wall clock, and behind the TV."

Nam Hyo-chang looked around at the guards.

"Who was in charge of the recent inspection?"

One security guard, glancing around, looked toward Oh Won-ho, who stood at the very end.

He promptly explained.

"I did the check with Choi Young-in, who's off-duty today."

At the mention of the name, In-hyuk, who was standing further back, had his eyes flash for an instant.

"Do you have nothing to say after seeing that?"

"I-I don't know anything!"

Oh Won-ho stuttered with panic under Nam Hyo-chang's questioning.

"The domestic staff are inspected along with their luggage before entering. Among security guards, except for me, only the inspection team can enter on inspection days. So, is it me? Or is it you guys?"

Nam Hyo-chang emanated a chilling aura.

"I really don't know!"

Tension hit its peak.

As silence washed over them, In-hyuk interjected.

"By any chance, did you wear gloves during the bug inspection?"

"... No, we didn't."

"Then let's start with fingerprint analysis. And the bugging devices are GTE423 models, originally used by Russian intelligence agencies. The battery is small; it lasts at most a week, can't record but transmits using a repeater. Even with amplification, the maximum range is 120 meters. Since there are no other facilities within 100 meters of the house, there has to be a repeater somewhere."

Everyone listened to In-hyuk's explanation with dazed expressions.

"You really know a lot."

"I've been interested in this kind of thing before. Ah, these days, with technological improvements, people sometimes modify cell phones to use as repeaters."

Surveying the guards' expressions, In-hyuk went on.

"But the transmission range becomes extremely short, so it doesn't use the UHF bands often used in security, but home-used FRS instead. That means, if left running, it also shows up on a detector."

Kang Cheon-gyu, sitting on the sofa, understood what he was getting at.

"Just in case, why don't you go bring a detector yourself? Sorry, but leave your phone here before you go."

Without hesitation, Nam Hyo-chang placed his phone down and left.

Meanwhile, the assembled security guards waited in silence.

Shortly after, Nam Hyo-chang returned with a detector, his face filled with menace—as if daring someone to get caught.

"Everyone, come up one by one and put your phones on the table."

He wanted to be sure whose phone belonged to whom.

The security guards complied, albeit nervously.

Nam Hyo-chang checked his own phone first, showing it was clearly powered on and unresponsive, then moved to the next.

As each passed the test, their owners began to relax.

Pow—

At that moment, one security guard bolted for the front door. It was Oh Won-ho, who had been standing at the end.

Nam Hyo-chang and the other guards rushed after him in surprise.

In-hyuk darted out as if he'd been waiting for this.

"Damn—!"

Oh Won-ho, face twisted in panic, threw a punch at In-hyuk.

But In-hyuk easily dodged, struck Oh's chin from below, grabbed his elbow and twisted it, slamming him to the floor.

Kuung— Wooddeudeuk!

"Aaagh—!"

With the sound of his elbow twisting backward, oh Won-ho screamed.

On top of him, holding him down, In-hyuk let out a cold smile.

"As I suspected—you used your phone as a repeater."

"Kgh! M-move!"

"If you keep struggling, I'll twist your shoulder too..."

Woodeudeudeuk—

"Aaagh—!"

"Oops, did I use too much strength? Twisted it by mistake."

Stunned by this sudden turn, Nam Hyo-chang and the others quickly regained their senses.

"We'll restrain Oh Won-ho now."

At that, In-hyuk released his grip, checked something, and stood up.

"... I'll leave it to you."

The guards helped the writhing Oh Won-ho to his feet.

Watching, Kang Cheon-gyu picked up the detector Nam Hyo-chang had dropped and checked Oh Won-ho's phone.

Beeeeep— Beep—

Just as In-hyuk said, a bugging frequency was detected.

"So it was true. By the way, didn't you break Pyo Jun-woo's arm last time too? Is that your specialty?"

"I'm not that skilled, so I prefer to end things on the first try if I can."

"Can you really twist someone's arm like that so easily?"

The question was directed at both In-hyuk and Nam Hyo-chang.

Nam Hyo-chang shook his head—it was not possible for ordinary people.

Still, In-hyuk kept his shameless tone.

"The guy's arm muscles must be weak."

"Heoh... But this is troublesome. If we turn him over to the police, it'll cause unnecessary commotion, but any other action could cause problems too."

Last time, after transferring Pyo Jun-woo, he was snatched and later found dead.

Something seemed to occur to Kang Cheon-gyu, and he spoke again.

"... Don't tell me, was this the guy who leaked information last time?"

Very few people knew about Pyo Jun-woo's transfer, and now the puzzle clicked together—even Nam Hyo-chang nodded.

"I think so. We didn't even know we had someone like this inside... My apologies."

"These people deliberately infiltrated our side. I just don't know how much was leaked yet..."

"What should we do with him?"

The issue was how to deal with Oh Won-ho.

As everyone hesitated, In-hyuk offered matter-of-factly.

"Just hand him over to the police."

"You want to make this bigger?"

"It's better than handling it poorly and facing more trouble, like last time."

Kang Cheon-gyu didn't hesitate long.

"We'll do as you say. Department Manager Nam, file a report and turn the situation over to the police. The bugging devices and phone too, as evidence."

"Understood."

"Wait a moment, please."

In-hyuk approached Oh Won-ho, grabbed his shoulder, and stomped on his knee.

Crack—

"Aaaagh—!"

Startled, Kang Cheon-gyu shouted.

"What are you doing!"

"This way, even if someone tries to rescue him, it won't be easy."

"..."

"Just say those injuries happened in the struggle to stop him from escaping. I don't want unnecessary trouble."

"..."

Everyone was speechless at In-hyuk's brazen request.

Nam Hyo-chang bowed to Kang Cheon-gyu and, with the other guards, dragged Oh Won-ho out.

A brief silence passed. Then Noh Geun-cheol approached Kang Cheon-gyu, worried.

"Chairman, are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine. Really. More importantly, you owe me an explanation—starting from how you found those bugs."

It was also puzzling how In-hyuk subdued Oh Won-ho in an instant.

In-hyuk let out a shallow sigh.

"I happened to spot something sticking out between the plant leaves. When I checked, it turned out to be a bug, so I looked for more after identifying the model. The rest is just as I explained."

Actually, even In-hyuk was half-doubting himself.

The reason was that the bugging technology, though originating from Russian intelligence, had been slightly modified by UID.

This situation might make Oh Won-ho's backers suspect In-hyuk's true identity, so he gave detailed explanations, knowing anyone familiar with Russian bugging tech would follow his logic.

'For now, it seems there's no one else from Kooou other than Oh Won-ho.'

He had confirmed this while subduing Oh Won-ho; when the other guards lifted him, their palms were facing outward so he could check.

But it wasn't yet a safe situation. Even if not from Kooou, Jeon Hae-in might have separately poached other security guards.

While In-hyuk was pondering, Kang Cheon-gyu recalled the scene of Oh Won-ho's limbs being twisted without a hint of hesitation.

"... What a wild situation. Including what you just showed us. I'd heard about how you subdued Pyo Jun-woo in the hospital, but seeing it myself—it's terrifying."

In-hyuk shrugged.

"Hesitation only breeds regret."

"Bit of a brutal example for a proverb, don't you think?"

"It was an unavoidable situation. Anyway, things here seem wrapped up, so I'll be heading out first."

"Already?"

Perhaps because he still hadn't persuaded In-hyuk, Kang Cheon-gyu looked bitter.

"What you asked about earlier—I'm not interested. But if today's incident is resolved properly, I'll at least consider it."

"Really?"

At present, Kang Cheon-gyu hadn't even grasped so much as a sliver about Kooou.

Naturally, it was nearly impossible for such a thing to be sorted out.

"I promise. Also, if the police want a statement about Oh Won-ho's injuries, you can give them my contact."

"... I will."

Leaving the two behind, In-hyuk exited the house.

Meanwhile, Noh Geun-cheol cautiously asked Kang Cheon-gyu.

"Do you seriously intend to hand over KQ Group to Division Director Kang In-hyuk?"

"He was proven to be my son by a DNA test, and his abilities are outstanding. There's no better option."

"But..."

Kang Cheon-gyu's earlier chilling memory of In-hyuk's actions lingered in his mind.

"There was no other choice, was there? Plus, we have our hands full too. Someone intentionally infiltrated our security team—same for Pyo Jun-woo. We still haven't figured out their objective."

"I'm sorry about that."

They'd investigated everything from the late Pyo Jun-woo's birth to his recruitment to KQ Group's security team, and found nothing suspicious.

It seemed Oh Won-ho might be no different.

"We'll just have to hope the police come up with something. Also, arrange a discreet meeting with Attorney Kim somewhere private—make sure that woman doesn't find out."

He meant Kim Myung-jun, the attorney in charge of the will.

"I'll arrange it carefully."

Thus instructed, Noh Geun-cheol also left the living room.

Chapter 90

He Really Talks Well

In-hyuk let out a sigh and got into the car.

Inside, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester, waiting for him, looked at him with bewildered expressions.

"Did something happen in there?"

To where the car was parked, they couldn't see the situation inside the residence.

"Kooou was hiding even deeper. They were was wiretapping Chairman Kang's house."

"Wiretapping? So?"

"I broke one of his arms and legs each, then caught him and handed him over. The police will come get him."

At In-hyuk's very matter-of-fact explanation, Hong Yu-geon's face filled with disbelief.

"You did it yourself?"

"I was standing near the front door, but he happened to try to escape that way."

"... You stood there on purpose, didn't you?"

Van Hester, in the passenger seat, nodded as if he had the same thought.

"Let's just get going."

As Hong Yu-geon started the engine, he voiced a question.

"Did you say 'again' just now? There was someone before?"

He had hired the Charybdis duo after the Pyo Jun-woo incident.

"Oh, that must've been before you guys joined. Pyo Jun-woo was someone who, under Jeon Hae-in's orders, tried to kill me and CEO Tae Ju-ha."

"So? What happened?"

"Well... he was found dead."

At that moment, Hong Yu-geon's eyes flashed beyond the rearview mirror.

"Did you handle it yourself?"

"If I said it was self-defense, would you believe me?"

"You're saying he tried to kill you first?"

"To be precise, it was 'they', plural."

In-hyuk calmly explained the situation back then—how he tracked down the fugitive Pyo Jun-woo, and what happened.

At the same time, Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester pieced the puzzle together.

"The record of Baek Si-hwan's shoulder injury that Mi-ah found before, did that happen at that time?"

"Seems so."

"Right. It matched exactly the spot where he was hit by the knife I threw."

The two both let out sighs.

"Like I said before, they're pretty dangerous guys. And fortunately, they still don't know about my identity or my real intentions."

"So what are you getting at?"

"I'm saying, since something you'd rather never experience could happen down the line, if you want to back out, you can. I'll make sure to give you plenty of severance, so don't worry."

He was giving them another chance.

That was how difficult things could get ahead—even more so than anything In-hyuk had experienced before.

"You're still not going to tell us what your true identity is, huh?"

"Is there really much to tell? You know pretty much everything already."

Once again, Hong Yu-geon looked at him via the rearview mirror with a baffled expression.

"I really don't get you... It's so frustrating, so frustrating—!"

Soon, as the car they'd been driving trickled onto the road, Hong Yu-geon rolled down the window and shouted outside.

It was always the same pattern.

And if you thought about In-hyuk's past actions, there was nothing unusual about it.

Of course, this was also the foundation that made things most advantageous for In-hyuk.

When he returned to the past, he started living not as his original self but as a namesake.

It made it hard for anyone to truly suspect him.

"So, you're not planning to back out?"

"Just pay me a lot!"

"That's not something you need to worry about."

Even now, funds kept flowing through AMK Partners into the Charybdis shell company set up under the two's names.

"You sure do talk well."

Bzzz—Bzzz—

At that moment, vibrations rang out from In-hyuk's pocket. A message had arrived via Ghost Link.

When he opened the app, messages that had come in during his previous talk with Kang Cheon-gyu were listed.

【PPO23: Investigating T Electronics on special assignment. And...】

【Raven: The point has moved.】

【Dorian: Things have started moving at the location you mentioned.】

【KQ4123: There was an incident at Chairman Kang's residence today. Kang In-hyuk paid a visit...】

.

As he checked the content, the message from KQ4123 caught his eye.

The reason he was certain earlier that Oh Won-ho was Kooou or a spy was exactly because of this.

The person who sent this message was Choi Young-in, who'd worked on bug sweep detection with Oh Won-ho.

'He got caught by luck.'

If it hadn't been Choi Young-in, it could've been either of the two others or someone off duty who was Kooou.

That would have lowered the odds, making In-hyuk hesitate to bet everything.

He checked some other contents.

"This... just as expected, they're starting to move."

"Hm? What is?"

At Hong Yu-geon's question, In-hyuk shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. Just drive faster."

And so, the car continued barreling toward Seoul.

* * *

WISE&WIRE Group chairman's office.

Baek Ji-woong looked at Do Jung-geol, who was on the phone a bit of a distance away.

Not long after, Do Jung-geol set down the cellphone and approached carefully, his face dark.

"One of the agents we planted in KQ Group has been discovered."

"... What? Don't tell me, was it Lee Jung-tae?"

Lee Jung-tae, a close associate of Jeon Hae-in, was an important piece for applying pressure inside KQ Group.

"It was Oh Won-ho, a member of Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's security team. His true identity was discovered along with a bugging device, and he was caught while trying to flee."

This time, Baek Ji-woong's expression soured.

"Oh Won-ho?"

"He's Intelligence Division, level 4."

"Ah... But how did they catch the bug?"

The bugging technology was improved from Russian intelligence, and UID had verified its real-world use.

It didn't require an external repeater, and could be controlled directly by the user, making it extremely unlikely to be detected by an insider.

"They say it was discovered by chance in the situation... but it needs further checking."

Some of the security guards beside Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu had been specifically recruited by Jeon Hae-in.

Through them, Lee Jung-tae was able to check the situation and report it.

"It's a similar pattern as last time."

He meant during the Pyo Jun-woo incident.

Do Jung-geol took a short pause before continuing.

"The one who caught the bug and Oh Won-ho... was Kang In-hyuk. He has considerable knowledge about bugging devices, and that's how they tracked him."

"Kang In-hyuk? Come to think of it, he was the one who subdued Pyo Jun-woo at the hospital, right?"

"That's correct. And it was reported at the time that Pyo Jun-woo was careless, but that may not have been the whole story."

"Took down a level 4 agent in one go, huh..."

"To be precise, his right elbow, shoulder, and knee were all smashed, so moving will be extremely difficult."

"That much damage?"

"He deliberately made it that way because he hadn't managed to stop him last time with Pyo Jun-woo. So, it'll be hard to retrieve Oh Won-ho right away."

Since the target couldn't move, there would be logistical difficulties with personnel or movement routes.

"Just dispose of him."

"Understood."

Even with the change in plan, Do Jung-geol answered without a flicker of emotion.

Baek Ji-woong let out a sigh.

"Have you figured out what was discussed between Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu and him? The timing and situation suggest something important was brought up."

"I was about to report on that. Kang In-hyuk revealed the paternity first."

Finally, something interesting had come up, and Baek Ji-woong's eyes gleamed.

"... And?"

"Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu directly said he would hand KQ Group over to Kang In-hyuk. But Kang In-hyuk refused."

"What? Refused? Is he insane?"

KQ Group is a massive distribution company with a market cap of about 12 trillion won.

Yet Kang In-hyuk refused to be its successor.

"There was some argument and persuasion, but Kang In-hyuk ultimately declared his refusal. However..."

"There's more?"

"He said he'd consider it after things inside were settled, which likely meant Jeon Hae-in and Kang Do-young."

"So, despite being an illegitimate child, he's not moving directly, but plans to secure even the main room in the end?"

At that, Do Jung-geol offered his own view.

"There are board members who secretly support Kang Do-young, and Jeon Hae-in holds significant shares, so wouldn't that be impossible?"

In the KQ Group situation, Kang In-hyuk becoming the next chairman was key.

But security mechanisms were essential—namely Jeon Hae-in, Kang Do-young, and their shareholdings.

"He's probably decided to toss aside the legitimate son and put the illegitimate son in the chair for the sake of the company."

"You mean he'll try whatever it takes."

"He's a decisive guy. Of course, as you say, it won't be easy—but it's not impossible."

In the end, things were not flowing as planned.

His head pounding, Baek Ji-woong asked Do Jung-geol,

"How are things on Reina's side?"

"She's still securing shares and letters of proxy to gain management control from Tae Seok-ho."

"Tae Seok-hyun's side seems to be quiet, though."

"They're dealing with a 300 billion won shortfall at Taeshin Next."

At that answer, a sly grin appeared on Baek Ji-woong's face.

"There's no end to the foolish and greedy pigs. Chairman Tae Gun-seung really went wild raising his children."

"Reina's side will soon expose the Taeshin Next situation, and at that opportunity try to secure shares of Taeshin Electronics too."

"It's getting fairly complicated."

Taeshin Group's share price had already wobbled from the personnel reform at the TF division last time. If an issue arose at Taeshin Electronics' subsidiaries as well, they'd have to brace for considerable damage.

"Even if it's for shareholding, I think it's an overreach."

Tae Seok-ho wanted to keep the Taeshin Group intact. But if he attacked without hesitation for shares, it could fracture already fragile alliances.

"Hyottoko's feet are to the fire, too. After messing up last time, he can't afford to make another mistake."

"Are you just going to sit and watch? If something goes wrong, the chairman will..."

In practice, Baek Ji-woong was the one responsible for the Taeshin Group matter.

Even if an elder like Hyottoko erred, the blame might be shifted to Ji-woong.

"In any case, I'll have to take as much as they've taken from our side."

* * *

【Taeshin Electronics, last year's estimated loss about 400 billion won?! Despite decent sales of phone SpaceU25 and tablet T14, a huge loss is believed to have come from the failed subsidiary project where operation funds were injected...】

【Taeshin Electronics, only its shell remains? This year's shortfall estimated at 500 billion won. Subsidiary business failed despite operation funds, and ultimately couldn't recover...】

【Is Taeshin Electronics okay? Taeshin Electronics, a key affiliate of Taeshin Group, filled a loss of 500 billion won at its subsidiary with headquarters funds, but...】

.

Sudden news reports rocked not just Taeshin Electronics but the entire Taeshin Group.

At the same time, it had a huge impact on the share prices of Taeshin's main affiliates.

Meanwhile, W&W Group's Baek Ji-woong watched those developments with satisfaction from his office.

"I thought they'd hesitate, but they finally pulled the trigger. Hyottoko's share acquisition point was minus 8%, wasn't it?"

Do Jung-geol replied at his side.

"Since we really fanned the flames, we expect to see minus 12%. Our trading room will start buying at minus 7%, at the 68,000 won line."

"Even just setting the pace, we'll take half the profit."

【Taeshin Electronics – ▼72,100(KRW)】

.

.

【Taeshin Electronics – ▼71,500(KRW)】

.

【Taeshin Electronics – ▼69,100(KRW)】

.

.

The target number was getting close.

Baek Ji-woong, eager to stab Hyottoko in the back, felt his anticipation rise.

"Hm?"

But suddenly, a change appeared on the Taeshin Electronics stock chart he'd been watching.

The graph, which should have kept falling, began to rise with red marks.

"What's going on? Did they realize our plan and get ahead of us?"

【Taeshin Electronics – △70,100(KRW)】

.

【Taeshin Electronics – △71,500(KRW)】

.

【Taeshin Electronics – △71,800(KRW)】

.

.

"I'll check right away."

Do Jung-geol called the trading room.

As he did, Baek Ji-woong's eyes gleamed as he watched Taeshin Electronics' share price climb bit by bit.