Former Mastermind To Chaebol Son-in-Law

Chapter 91

What are you so proud of?

Taeshin Electronics was swept away by a wave of plunging stock prices after the sudden news article reported a loss of approximately 500 billion won.

Taeshin Electronics tried to respond immediately, but actual proof for fact-checking could not be provided right away.

As a result, the articles just kept coming, each one following the last.

However, the stock chart did not just freefall. Instead, it moved in strange patterns as decline and rebound repeated themselves.

Still, it was no time to be relieved, so Taeshin Electronics gathered only the executives for a countermeasure meeting.

"How is it possible that we still haven't found where the information about Taeshin Next leaked?"

"....."

The executives remained silent at the outcry that sought the cause, not emergency countermeasures.

Of course, they hadn't just been doing nothing, either.

But the Taeshin Next incident was already a well-known loss among anyone involved with the company's finance and accounting staff.

"And the inquiry disclosure—has that come out yet?"

At the question, Tae Seok-hyun's female secretary, standing in the back, pushed up her glasses and stepped forward.

"I submitted it right away this morning, so it should come out soon."

"Just where are these articles coming from...?"

Tae Seok-hyun was no fool.

Article bombardment and plunging stock prices—such a combination meant someone was targeting Taeshin Electronics' shares from somewhere.

Not long after, someone entered from outside. The awaited result of the disclosure inquiry had arrived.

"What's the change?"

"I'll display it right away."

Jang In-sook, Tae Seok-hyun's secretary, displayed the result on the conference room screen.

【Orbis Investment — 63,500,000 shares (1.27%)】

【Lumen Holdings — 81,500,000 shares (1.63%)】

【Redboar Technology — 6,000,000 shares (0.12%)】

【Mirage International — 4,000,000 shares (0.08%)】

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Everyone's expression hardened as they saw the numbers.

In just a day since the stock fell, over 1.1 trillion shares' worth had moved to various companies.

"Incredible players have jumped in..."

In particular, orbis Investment and Lumen Holdings were investment firms that had started to make their name in the Middle East and Europe, respectively.

Such companies had not missed the window as Taeshin Electronics' price dove and jumped right in.

About 1 trillion won worth of shares had changed hands that way.

As the intentions didn't seem good, the atmosphere inevitably turned grim.

Bang—

Suddenly, the front door of the conference room burst open.

While everyone was startled, the chairman of Taeshin Group, Tae Gun-seung, entered along with In-hyuk.

"Ch-chairman! How did you...?"

The executives, sitting dazed, leapt to their feet.

Tae Gun-seung, glaring as if to say how pathetic, finally spoke.

"Tsk! Is this somewhere I shouldn't be?"

No one dared raise their heads, only glancing around for a read on the mood.

Tae Seok-hyun then cautiously approached Tae Gun-seung.

"I didn't expect you to come."

"Why? Am I supposed to report when I visit my own company?"

"It's not that..."

Tae Gun-seung's gaze shifted to the conference room screen displaying the changed shareholder register.

"The trading volume shot up—I suppose over three percent must have changed hands."

"....."

Silence followed.

With the mood already heavy, Tae Gun-seung sat in the chair Tae Seok-hyun had occupied.

As Tae Seok-hyun had nowhere to sit, his secretary brought another chair from the side, causing a mild commotion as people shuffled around.

"Why do you think this happened?"

Tae Gun-seung's sharply-voiced question silenced everyone.

"Is that what matters right now? Is shares the real problem?"

As he asked again, Tae Gun-seung extended his hand toward Tae Seok-hyun.

"... Pardon?"

"Hand it over."

"I'm not sure I follow...?"

"The report on the loss amount, I mean!"

After hesitating a moment, Tae Seok-hyun looked at his secretary, Jang In-sook.

After nervously glancing around, she slowly handed over the file she was holding.

Tae Gun-seung took it and handed it to In-hyuk, standing behind him.

"Kang, take a look. Figure out where the problems are and what can be done to solve this fiasco."

The executives were even more flustered now than when Tae Gun-seung had entered with In-hyuk.

And at hearing him addressed as "Kang" (implying a familial closeness), they were shocked again.

Tae Gun-seung had never addressed anyone so warmly in such an official setting before.

Furthermore, due to a massive recent personnel shakeup, Kang In-hyuk, director of Taeshin Asset Management, had earned the nickname "the Grim Reaper" internally.

With the report now in In-hyuk's hands, even those uninvolved looked terrified of where blame might fall.

"Some articles say it's 400 billion, others 500 billion... but from what I see, it's even more than that."

People felt as though their hearts had dropped to their stomachs.

Tae Gun-seung shot a sharp look at In-hyuk.

"Didn't you spot this from the TF division?"

The sudden shift in blame didn't seem to faze In-hyuk, who simply gave a faint smile.

"How could I not? I was aware you were covering it up by feigning capital movement through Taeshin Next, chairman. The only reason I didn't catch the loss size in time was that, during the TF division's personnel reform, the figures were just so immense. I was conducting a separate investigation."

Unlike Tae Gun-seung, In-hyuk called him in a familiar manner, though with a completely different intent.

Tae Gun-seung's eyes widened.

"How much, precisely?"

"As far as I've investigated: about 825 billion won. Thirty percent of that comes from mistakes in selecting suppliers for the U25 and T14 parts manufacturing, the rest are investment losses."

"Investment? With Taeshin Next?"

Publicly, it was believed that about 300 billion won spent on Taeshin Next was the issue.

"No. That entity just acted as a channel from the start. According to documents, Taeshin Next purchased high-end test equipment and materials, but the real prices were inflated by about 230%."

In-hyuk paused and looked around. Several executives' faces turned pale.

"About 300 billion won of kickbacks were generated from the price difference. I confirmed that those funds were routed through a shell company and then invested in a cryptocurrency called Aegon. By the way, that crypto has now crashed, so recovering the money is impossible."

When he finished, Tae Gun-seung suppressed his trembling body and glared at Tae Seok-hyun.

"What about the supplier selection mishap?"

Fixing his gaze on Tae Seok-hyun, Tae Gun-seung returned the question to In-hyuk.

"With increased production, instead of raising orders from existing partners, an additional contract was made with a firm in China called Swentech. Their contract terms were about 30% cheaper than usual, but once the deposit was paid, the company disappeared."

"You mean Taeshin Electronics was scammed by a subcontractor?"

At that moment, Tae Seok-hyun intervened.

"We've already found and dealt with the person responsible for that...!"

"The money?"

"... Pardon?"

"Did you report it to the authorities?"

"Not yet... I was investigating discreetly, so as not to further impact the stock price."

Bang—

Tae Gun-seung slammed his wrinkled fist down on the desk.

The sound startled almost everyone, making their shoulders jolt.

"Is Taeshin Electronics still standing?! Why is nobody answering me? I asked if the company is still afloat!"

His angry voice echoed throughout the conference room.

"....."

And yet, no one dared to answer, sitting completely still.

"Is this company full of fools? CEO Tae Seok-hyun."

"Y-yes... yes, chairman."

"Didn't I gather you all to discuss solutions?"

"Th-that's correct."

"Then, has anything come up yet?"

"That's..."

As his frustration grew, the wrinkles on Tae Gun-seung's brow deepened.

"So, in the end, you dithered until things were this far gone?"

"....."

Tae Gun-seung let out a long sigh, then looked at In-hyuk again.

"Kang, what's your opinion? If you've investigated until recently, surely you've considered countermeasures."

In-hyuk coolly surveyed the executives.

"At the moment, defending ourselves is more important than finding a solution."

"Defend? Is there more?"

"I'm talking about what I just reported. The source of the information spread to the press is still unknown. If this was intentional, there will be more articles."

The room murmured, Tae Gun-seung's brow furrowing deeper.

"You mean the Swentech scandal will also break?"

"It began with only vague articles about 'losses.' Since it was tricky to deny, Taeshin Electronics' response was delayed."

"So, you're saying the next article will have all the concrete details."

"Exactly. The moment Taeshin Electronics is painted as a victim of corporate fraud, the situation will be even worse than now."

The mood grew even heavier.

In that weighty silence, Tae Gun-seung could only sigh.

"So, you're saying it's going to break anyway... is there a way to stop it?"

"The best defense here is to contain things. If we address the losses and make a clear announcement about future plans, even the shareholders can be persuaded."

"That's the problem, isn't it?"

The losses totaled over 800 billion won. With the media in a frenzy, using bank channels to resolve it was obviously out of the question.

In the end, it meant they'd have to cover it with internal funds—but Taeshin Electronics simply didn't have the liquidity.

"Apparently, the Swentech associates who absconded were apprehended by Interpol in Thailand about two weeks ago."

The statement surprised everyone.

Even Tae Gun-seung, who'd been unaware, was shocked.

"Is that true?"

"Yes, though they were caught on other charges. Until recently, they were hiding in Laos, which hadn't signed an extradition treaty."

"So why wasn't that made known?"

"They committed the same crime against Chinese firms before Taeshin Electronics. So Interpol was already on the case. In fact, there was an article through the authorities' official media channels."

Tae Gun-seung's gaze at Tae Seok-hyun and the executives grew even sharper, as if rebuking them for neglecting even this basic check.

But now, he had to keep listening to In-hyuk's explanation.

"So, what's the status?"

"They also used coins to move the funds and evade tracking. They got caught when they returned to Thailand to retrieve the money, so the funds should be safe. Though it will take some time to recover them."

Even if it was criminal profit, they would need the help of the exchange in order to recover the funds.

"Well, that's some relief. But making the incident public is inevitable if we want the money back."

"If we keep quiet, the backlash could be even worse."

Even if their image would not be fully restored, this at least offset the damage somewhat.

To one side came the sound of Tae Seok-hyun sighing.

"What are you so proud of that you're relieved?!"

"S-sorry."

Tae Seok-hyun bowed his head even lower.

Watching him, Tae Gun-seung's exasperated sighs wouldn't end.

"It's good we can at least contain things a bit even if it gets noisy. The remaining issue is the loss involving Taeshin Next, right? Who's involved? Do you have anything from the TF division?"

After a moment's thought, In-hyuk came closer and quietly switched off the microphone to ask:

"Are you sure about this?"

"I didn't know you were someone who could worry, Kang."

"It's more concern for balance than worry."

"I never thought you'd consider things like that. But whatever needs to be done, must be done. I can't watch maggots crawl all over my company anymore."

Tae Gun-seung's determination was firm.

Soon, In-hyuk produced a USB from inside his jacket.

"This is the list you asked for. If this becomes public, Taeshin Electronics will shake again."

"Shares will be targeted again, but my decision won't change. If the company can't withstand that, then no matter how big it is, I should pull out quickly."

The list was handed to Song Tae-ho, the secretary standing beside Baek Si-hwan.

It was connected to the conference room computer, and several names appeared on the screen.

At the same time, the faces of those present turned as pale as the screen's background.

Chapter 92

The Proper Spoon

【Taeshin Electronics, total losses amount to 825 billion won! Of these, about 300 billion won are due to a scam by the Chinese Swentech company, and the rest are losses from kickbacks involving executives at the head office and affiliate employees, as well as failed coin investments...】

【Suspects in Swentech company scam arrested by Interpol in Thailand! The damages are in coin and, while it will take some time, recovery is possible...】

【Is Taeshin Electronics collapsing? Despite decent results last year with SpaceU25 and T14, major losses occurred due to internal problems... The company will make a detailed announcement after the media reports on the losses...】

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Taeshin Electronics had become noisy once again.

In the midst of this, W&W Group chairman Baek Ji-woong, together with the knight, stared intently at a stock graph on the screen beside them.

Just a moment ago, they had moved to secure more shares in Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics after having lost their lead last time.

After the market closed, it was harder than ever for him to hide his displeasure.

"How could this happen?"

The other party, who acted first, had scooped up nearly all the shares that hit the market.

At this, Do Jung-geol simply stated the obvious.

"It seems the other side had far more capital than expected."

"Still, even so, attacking this hard? Don't tell me... is it Orbis and Lumen again, like last time?"

In the previous session as well, those two companies had bought up a significant amount of shares.

As a result, up to now, Baek Ji-woong had only secured 0.94% in Taeshin Trading and 0.13% in Taeshin Electronics.

Of course, even that meant more than 500 billion won had been invested already, not a small amount.

However, the party who got ahead of him started buying before the price dropped further, so much so that they spent extra money they otherwise wouldn't have needed to, which left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Bzzz— Bzzz—

At that moment, his desk drawer began to vibrate.

A message had arrived on a separate phone used for Organization business.

【Code Hyottoko : Shouldn't we meet?】

The sender was Hyottoko, the very person Baek Ji-woong had been wary of in this plan. He was a bit surprised Hyottoko would message first.

【Code 007 : Let's.】

The reason for the meeting was obvious.

【Code Hyottoko : 17:00 37.3449/127.0103】

The message included both a time and place.

"Hyottoko wants to meet."

"Will you go?"

"How could I not, in this situation?"

Soon after, Baek Ji-woong left the office together with Do Jung-geol.

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The place the two arrived at, about an hour and a half later, was a rural road on the outskirts of Suwon, Gyeonggi Province.

Entering a dirt path surrounded by trees, they came upon an estate that appeared to be reasonably well kept.

There, two black sedans were already parked.

When Baek Ji-woong and Do Jung-geol got out with their security guards, the people from those cars also slowly stepped out.

The first to speak was Im Deok-chang, known as Hyottoko in the Organization and the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service.

"It's been a year since we've seen each other, hasn't it?"

Baek Ji-woong frowned at Im Deok-chang's sly grin.

"Indeed. I don't need to ask how you've been, do I?"

"No need for that."

Im Deok-chang gestured toward the estate.

"First time seeing this place... is this a safehouse used by the National Intelligence Service?"

"Well, yes. More importantly, didn't you come on a little too strong this time?"

Im Deok-chang, brow furrowed, questioned him.

"... Came on too strong?"

"What are you doing throwing your spoon onto the Taeshin shares we've been handling our way?"

He meant Baek Ji-woong had started the purchase before him.

"Was it just me? Orbis and Lumen both started first. I only rushed in to lose as little as possible."

"Can you even say that with a straight face?"

"What else would you call it? Besides, in that urgent situation, wasn't it your own side's fault for being late?"

Because of the market limit down, whoever bid first at the highest price would get the shares.

"Even if that's so important, can you afford to waste Organization funds?"

"Funny coming from someone who aimed for minus 8%."

Baek Ji-woong's original plan was for minus 10%. This time, Im Deok-chang had tried to beat him at minus 8%.

Im Deok-chang's expression hardened even more at that.

"Of course you had planted someone in my ranks."

"Not just you. And instead of fighting among ourselves, isn't the real issue Orbis Investment and Lumen Holdings? They're the ones who made a scene in today's session again."

There hadn't been a disclosure notice yet, so it was hard to confirm, but it certainly felt like a similar atmosphere to before.

"Still, is there any reason for them to dump that much money into Taeshin right now?"

The shares those two companies purchased were worth close to 10 trillion won.

Together, that meant 4.08% of Taeshin Trading and 2.9% of Taeshin Electronics.

If the two joined forces, they could become a crucial pivot point threatening Taeshin's management rights in the future.

"There could be a fund operating to profit off Taeshin's crisis."

At Baek Ji-woong's mutter, Im Deok-chang's face twisted.

"Isn't this whole affair your responsibility? Shouldn't W&W have caught on to the companies' moves ahead of time?"

"Responsibility? You suddenly butted in, so do you even have the right to discuss this with me?"

Im Deok-chang shrugged and sighed.

"I just do what I'm told from above."

"To above, huh..."

"If our Chairman Baek had handled things better, I wouldn't have needed to get involved."

That wasn't entirely untrue, and the corners of Baek Ji-woong's mouth twitched.

"Deputy director Im, you talk like you did well. I hear you just had to smoothly acquire some small firm called TN SOFT. And you failed at that?"

Im Deok-chang's face contorted.

"... Just how many people have you planted?"

"It's not so much people planted as having sharp ears. Besides, your side was making so much noise about it."

The brief ease between the two evaporated into tension again.

Im Deok-chang glared at Baek Ji-woong, then slowly spoke.

"I didn't expect your ears to reach this close to me."

"The ability to see and hear far is a virtue, isn't it? But did you really call me just to argue? To wallow in how we both failed the Organization's assignments?"

Silence lingered before Im Deok-chang sighed once again.

"How about you just hand over the Taeshin job entirely to me?"

"Now, after all this, you want me to back out?"

"You know better than anyone how many things you've bungled lately. Starting with dumping Daemyung on your own, you crossed the line to begin with."

The Daemyung Detective Agency, in concert with Areum Cleaning, had acted as backup and cleanup for agents operating within Korea.

Baek Ji-woong had disposed of it to clean up his own mistakes.

"I only dealt with agents who failed their missions. That's our rule."

"Then shouldn't that include you as well?"

"Same goes for you."

The air between them grew taut again.

"So, you're saying you won't hand it over? Even if you finish this one successfully, you know you can't fully join our fold. But now things have come this far..."

In other words, it was impossible now.

"Even so, I can't just hand it over to you. So why doesn't the deputy director hand over the shares he's secured and focus on National Intelligence Service business? There's only a year and six months left in the president's term, and things are getting noisy."

Organizations like the National Intelligence Service and other government entities are reshuffled when the president changes.

The two men's argument grew so entangled, it was hard to see a conclusion.

"In the end, you're never backing down—no matter what happens."

"You know it."

"Then, what about the KQ Group?"

Baek Ji-woong felt a sudden sense of foreboding at the abrupt change in topic.

"... KQ?"

A sly smile appeared on Im Deok-chang's lips.

"Why act clueless? You found and presented Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's other son as the successor, didn't you? If he's being mentioned as the next heir instead of Kang Do-young,

the game's already decided. Well, there's still some cleaning up to do. We'll make that the condition for bringing over our shares at 50% of their price."

It was impossible not to instantly get what he meant.

Baek Ji-woong's face turned rigid.

"This is really driving me crazy..."

"This field is the same everywhere. No matter how you struggle, you can't break free, and besides, it's not like I'm asking for it for free; this could be good for you as well."

Baek Ji-woong had set up the board for KQ Group's heir.

As soon as Kang In-hyuk was recruited and the decision was made, it would be finished.

Afterward, as long as Tae Seok-ho took over Taeshin Group, the troubles would morph into multiple-fold profits solving everything.

Now, Im Deok-chang was trying to put in a proper "spoon" instead of just tagging along.

"I'll have to think about it."

"I can't wait too long—they're watching upstairs."

"..."

After the conversation, the two left the estate and got into their respective cars.

Im Deok-chang's cars left first, and Baek Ji-woong glared at them, clenching his fist.

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【H Chemical company on the verge of bankruptcy due to poor management! Where will its 7,000 employees go? Even B Financial, which used to guarantee its loans, has decided further loans are impossible...】

【Is a government-led workout for H Chemical even possible? The company's stock and bonds are too unstable and its going-concern value is judged to be extremely low...】

【AMK Bridge rejects a loan to chemical company Hwain Techon! With no clear explanation for the decision, 7,000 employees can only watch the situation unfold...】

【Taeshin Electronics fires CEO Tae Seok-hyun and related executives over losses of about 800 billion won! Chairman Tae Gun-seung announced executive vice president Hwang Won-jun would share the CEO position...】

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There was never a quiet day in the media.

Meanwhile, within Taeshin Group, chairman Tae Gun-seung's bold and decisive action was gradually stabilizing the share price.

While there was still a downtrend with shareholders fleeing, it wasn't as bad as the worst-case scenarios that had been speculated.

"So this is what it means to be a real chairman?"

In-hyuk marveled at the situation from the division director's office at Taeshin Asset Management.

Frankly, like those around him, he had expected matters to get far worse with the publicizing of the list.

At that moment, a message arrived on his Ghost Link app.

【Norman: As you asked, I turned over the paper company documents related to Hwain Techon to prosecutors as a whistleblower. The media will probably start reporting soon.】

This was a message from Norman McGrath, the branch manager of AMK Partners in Korea.

【Gordon: Thank you for your hard work. Also, there could be unexpected pressure from both sides, so please remain vigilant.】

【Norman: I've already tipped off the desk and the executives at the press, and even informed department managers and deputy general managers at the prosecutors' office. By the way, regarding AMK Bridge's case, are you not handling it directly?】

He was referring to Jang Hyung-cheol.

At the moment, In-hyuk only communicated with that side via Norman McGrath.

【Gordon: I don't think it's necessary just yet. If there's an opportunity, I'll reach out.】

【Norman: Understood. And thank you for this incentive—staff who dealt with the AMK Velion case were delighted. I think everyone will work even harder now.】

The incentives averaged 50,000 dollars; about 7 million won per person for a single project.

【Gordon: I'm glad to hear it. Please take care of the remaining projects as well.】

With that, the conversation via messaging ended.

Afterward, In-hyuk checked his other messages and began replying.

Chapter 93

Has It Been Three Years?

【Hwain Techon Insolvency: Cause is Not Investment Failure or Poor Management, but Embezzlement and Breach of Trust? Are South Korean Companies Really Okay? As problems continue erupting from major conglomerates to medium-sized companies that serve as market links... If Hwain Techon goes into final cut insolvency, countless related companies and financial institutions are expected to be affected...】

【Prosecution and National Tax Service Announce Reinvestigation into Hwain Techon Insolvency! The estimated damage over several years is at least 1 trillion won, with incidents of embezzlement and breach of trust, as well as false documentation, duplicate payments, account theft, and fund outflow through the operation of shell companies...】

【Hwain Techon's CEO Yang Do-sik Missing?! Prosecution has not yet located CEO Yang Do-sik...】

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In-hyuk checked the news articles on his phone while riding in a car.

Then, out of the blue, he casually asked Baek Si-hwan, who was sitting next to him.

"This situation looks pretty serious. What do you think, manager Baek?"

Baek Si-hwan, who had been quietly looking at his tablet, turned his gaze to the phone screen that In-hyuk slyly held out.

"Oh, you're looking at the Hwain Techon incident. I also thought the problem was significant."

"Do you think it can be resolved?"

After pausing to think, Baek Si-hwan spoke slowly.

"The CEO is missing, and a shell company was being operated—if that's the case, he planned it out deliberately. If so, I think even tracking the funds will be difficult."

In-hyuk slowly nodded at this.

"You have a good grasp of the situation."

"I'm doing my best so that I won't become a burden to anyone."

Baek Si-hwan seemed to look proud, as if feeling that he was finally being recognized by In-hyuk now.

Of course, In-hyuk was not someone who could be trusted so easily.

"That's good."

"By the way, are you interested in Hwain Techon?"

The intent to fish for information was obvious.

"If things continue like this, it's a company that will be sold off for peanuts. If I can find some value there that others haven't noticed, it could become a profit."

"You're talking about things like patents or technology."

"That's right. But it'll get complicated if CEO Yang Do-sik, the main culprit in the embezzlement, isn't caught."

"Should I look into Hwain Techon for you?"

In-hyuk looked at him with a slightly puzzled expression.

"You want to look into it yourself?"

"If it's something you need, director, I'd like to try."

"Then I'll leave it to you. Considering Hwain Techon's current situation, you'll have about a week."

"Thank you."

A little later, the place they arrived at was Seoran Gallery, located in Hannam-dong under Taeshin Group.

Today, a charity auction was being held at Seoran Gallery for VIPs, and they had been invited.

"Let's go in."

Leaving Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester waiting in the car, In-hyuk followed Baek Si-hwan's lead and walked to the gallery.

The atmosphere was not so different from the last KQ Group founding party. Company CEOs and executives, politicians, senior government officials—all attended with their husbands or wives.

Of course, Taeshin Group's current situation was far from ideal.

Still, the name Tae Gun-seung of Taeshin remained formidable to the attendees.

So, as of yet, people could not easily ignore an invitation bearing the Taeshin name.

"As expected..."

"Why do you say that?"

At Baek Si-hwan's question, In-hyuk shook his head.

"It's nothing. Let's take a look around first."

There was still a little time before the auction started.

As they looked over the gallery's paintings, In-hyuk could feel people's gazes.

He was the one who had upended Taeshin Group twice now, so it was only natural.

'Now that CEO Tae Seok-hyun has stepped down, they're desperate to win back the chairman's favor no matter what.'

The reason was that Seoran Gallery's director was Lee Sun-hye, Tae Seok-hyun's wife.

Originally, the charity auction schedule did not exist for an art gallery like Seoran.

It was obvious that Lee Sun-hye had hastily planned this for image reform.

'But if she even invited me and CEO Tae Ju-ha, it must mean she wants to just grit her teeth and get through this time, no matter what.'

Given her situation, In-hyuk, who had contributed to ousting Tae Seok-hyun, was her mortal enemy.

So receiving the initial invitation had been a surprise.

"You arrived early."

Just then, Tae Ju-ha, wearing a light beige two-piece pantsuit, approached and greeted them.

"I just got here myself."

"I see."

At the same time, Baek Si-hwan subtly stepped aside from In-hyuk.

He was trying to avoid interfering with their conversation.

Meanwhile, Tae Ju-ha examined the paintings displayed on the wall.

"Do you know how to appreciate art? I heard you visited before."

Word had spread, through several channels, that In-hyuk had once visited to meet Jeon Hae-in from KQ Group.

"I just had some business to attend to."

"What kind of business? Ah... Is it too much to ask?"

"It's difficult to explain the reason."

She made a faintly disappointed face.

"Well, can't be helped then."

"More than that, I didn't expect you to come here today."

"Why? Oh, because of that person?"

She was referring to Lee Sun-hye, Tae Seok-hyun's wife and her stepmother.

Of course, Tae Ju-ha also attended because she received the invitation from Lee Sun-hye, but it wasn't as though the two would be pleased to see one another's faces.

"I guess you don't mind."

"I think I've become more indifferent than I used to be. Are you worried about me?"

A mildly surprised look appeared on her face.

"I just don't want you to go through any more trouble when things are already complicated."

"Tsk. For her to go so far as to hold an event like this, she must really feel cornered. Honestly, I never thought Grandpa would go this far, either."

The replacement of Taeshin Electronics' CEO had naturally caused the stock to plummet.

At the same time, it revealed that one of the successors in line at Taeshin Group was now out of the race.

As In-hyuk predicted, the balance of power was finally breaking.

But that didn't mean the votes were simply flocking to Tae Seok-ho's side.

Chairman Tae Gun-seung's unexpected actions were slowing people's choices.

"Maybe you had no big expectations, but you probably didn't know it would go this far."

Tae Ju-ha shifted her gaze from the painting to In-hyuk.

"How far ahead did you see, In-hyuk?"

"About what?"

"You prepared all this at the TF division, expecting it would come to this, right? Of course, I didn't think it would be this bad, either."

The revelations of corruption and issues within Taeshin Group shocked everyone.

Through the personnel reform at the TF division, most positions were reshuffled, and necessary people were placed with minimal issues, but it also knocked down the staff's morale.

After all, now everyone knew it could happen to them, too.

"The longer anything stagnates, the more it rots."

"But it's not that easy to decide or solve things."

Business and water may be similar in concept, but they're not solved in the same way.

But with Chairman Tae Gun-seung's approval, In-hyuk had bulldozed his way forward.

"It all depends on how determined you are."

"... What's your goal, In-hyuk?"

"My goal? Well... For now, just to live a life where no one bothers me."

At this, Tae Ju-ha tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Is someone bothering you?"

Right now, In-hyuk was known within Taeshin Group as the Grim Reaper, carrying the authority of Chairman Tae Gun-seung on his back.

With even Taeshin Electronics CEO Tae Seok-hyun dismissed, there wasn't really anyone left in the group who could touch him.

"There are more than you think."

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

"Hello...?"

At that moment, someone interrupted the two.

Both In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha turned their heads to see a woman in a black, fitted two-piece suit.

At that moment, Tae Ju-ha's face tensed ever so slightly.

But the woman, acting unconcerned, spoke again.

"It's been a while, Ju-ha. Has it been three years already?"

"... It's really been that long?"

"I heard you got married while I was in LA. Is this your husband? I'm Baek Ye-ju."

She was Baek Ye-ju, eldest daughter of WISE&WIRE Group's Baek Ji-woong.

Of course, In-hyuk knew who she was at a glance.

"I'm Kang In-hyuk."

"I know. You're the most famous person in this field these days. I heard your investment skills are impressive."

Baek Ye-ju looked In-hyuk up and down before making eye contact.

"I didn't think you were so famous that even people in America would hear about you."

"Gossip in this field travels everywhere, no matter where you are. By the way, you're quite impressive in person. Ju-ha really did well to marry you."

Her congratulations had a peculiar tension.

"... Thanks."

"By the way, I heard Do-young oppa hit rock bottom? How did that even happen... Ah, should I not bring that up here? He used to chase after you since forever, remember?"

Galleries are usually places where people keep their voices down. Yet Baek Ye-ju's voice rang so loudly, it echoed inside.

On top of the attention already focused on In-hyuk, the murmurs grew even louder.

Anyone could tell she was doing this on purpose.

"Yeah, he did. It was pretty annoying... Still, with my husband by my side now, he doesn't bother me anymore."

As Tae Ju-ha said this, she slipped her hand into the crook of In-hyuk's arm.

Startled by her sudden touch, In-hyuk glanced at her from above.

Though he didn't know why, the tension emanating from her could be felt through his arm.

Sensing something was up, In-hyuk decided to stand quietly for now.

Meanwhile, Baek Ye-ju's eyes twitched ever so slightly as she watched them.

"I heard even in America people were saying you two were a 'show window couple,' but I guess not? That's a relief."

"For someone who talks so carelessly like that, I'm guessing you two weren't really friends?"

In-hyuk cut in, exuding a cold aura.

"... Excuse me?"

"Besides, I'm disappointed to see that Chairman Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group, whom I respect, could only raise his daughter like this. We'll be taking our leave now."

With those words, In-hyuk escorted Tae Ju-ha past Baek Ye-ju, still arm-in-arm.

The murmuring of onlookers did not stop.

The two made their way to the gallery's front gate and slipped into a quiet employee corridor.

"Could the two of you keep anyone else from coming in?"

With this, Baek Si-hwan and Heo Yu-rim stopped walking.

The two had been quietly observing and following In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha.

As expected, most staff were out at the charity auction, so the corridor was silent.

"Are you alright now?"

At In-hyuk's question, Tae Ju-ha hurriedly let go of his arm, which she had been clutching.

"Ah... Sorry."

"You didn't have a good relationship even back in school, did you?"

The truth was, In-hyuk didn't just know Baek Ye-ju from the original timeline.

Kang In-hyuk, the current timeline's protagonist, also had experience with Baek Ye-ju.

He attended business administration at Korea University.

After just seeing Baek Ye-ju, memories he hadn't wanted to recall surged through his mind.

'She really was a lunatic.'

To the moment Tae Ju-ha entered as Tae Seok-hyun's illegitimate child at Taeshin Group, her school years had been rough.

In university, meeting Baek Ye-ju made things even worse.

They were adults, so things never got physically violent, but every single day she was subjected to harsh disregard and ridicule that crossed the line.

Like In-hyuk, who attended university under the sponsorship of Taeshin Education Foundation, Tae Ju-ha also struggled through her school years, trying to draw as little attention as possible.

"Well... That's right. But I'm okay now."

"That's good to hear."

As In-hyuk answered, he leaned against the wall.

There was a moment of silence before Tae Ju-ha spoke softly.

"Sorry about earlier."

She was referring to having suddenly linked arms with him.

"It's alright. I mean, calling it a 'show window' marriage isn't exactly wrong, but I didn't want to hear it outright in front of everyone."

"... Thank you."

"No problem. When you calm down, let's head back in."

Her hands, which she clasped in front of her, were trembling faintly.

Tae Ju-ha nodded, then leaned against the wall like In-hyuk, waiting for the shaking to stop.

Chapter 94

The Existence of Another Faction or Force

The night was growing late.

Baek Ye-ju, the eldest daughter of the W&W Group, was slightly tipsy.

She arrived at her home, located deep inside Pyeongchang neighborhood, riding in a car driven by a knight.

As she entered, her father, Baek Ji-woong, who was seated in the living room, greeted her.

"You only got back to Korea yesterday, so why are you running around so busily?"

Baek Ye-ju ignored his words and was about to go upstairs, but then she stopped in her tracks.

"Dad."

"What?"

"Do you know Kang In-hyuk?"

Baek Ji-woong paused and set down the newspaper he had been flipping through.

"Why are you asking about Kang In-hyuk?"

"I'm asking if you know him."

"Is there anyone in this field who wouldn't know him these days?"

Baek Ye-ju's brow twisted with frustration.

"I'm asking if you know him *personally*!"

"We aren't particularly close. We've exchanged greetings, but that's all. More importantly, why are you asking about Kang In-hyuk?"

"I just met him at the Seoran Gallery."

This time, Baek Ji-woong's face contorted.

"Were you the one who took that invitation? Why did you go there?"

"I heard bits and pieces about Taeshin Group even in LA, and when I saw the invitation yesterday I decided to check it out. But when I went to greet Tae Ju-ha, her husband started saying that I was being rude, or whatever."

Baek Ji-woong looked at her with an even heavier atmosphere.

"What kind of trouble did you cause there?"

"What trouble? They were the ones who caused trouble, not me."

"Haa..."

With a sigh, Baek Ji-woong pulled out his phone and called Do Jung-geol, who was waiting in the annex.

The door opened and he entered, quietly coming to stand at the front.

"To now on, assign a secretary and a security guard to Ye-ju as well."

"Dad—!"

Baek Ji-woong ignored her protests and continued.

"Make it a woman. Considering shifts, at least four people. We don't want to create troublesome situations unnecessarily."

"Understood. I'll look into it right away."

"Are you really doing this?!"

"If you hadn't wandered around however you pleased like today, I wouldn't have to. And since you're back in Korea, you should be more careful."

Baek Ji-woong was curious about what had happened between Kang In-hyuk and his daughter.

However, he doubted whether Baek Ye-ju would tell him the truth even if he asked.

He thought it'd be more accurate to hear about the situation from someone who had witnessed the events among the attendees at the Seoran Gallery's charity auction.

Both Baek Ye-ju and the second daughter, Baek Hae-na, were difficult to control.

"Why do I have to live while watching everyone else's reactions?"

"If you didn't want to deal with people's attention, you shouldn't have caused someone a ruptured ligament in LA just because you hated the scent of the perfume on some woman passing by in a club!"

This was why Baek Ye-ju had returned to Korea.

Of course, she hadn't directly done it herself. The security guard she'd hired abroad had acted on her behalf.

But the problem was what happened after. The victim's father turned out to be a famous real estate developer in LA.

Fortunately, he was someone who understood business, so the matter was settled through a negotiation.

However, the local media picked up on it, so they had no choice but to call Baek Ye-ju back.

"I just didn't like the scent and told her to change it, but she answered me rudely. I just told them to scare her...!"

"Haa... Anyway, keep a low profile here. Don't cause unnecessary trouble at the company, either."

"More importantly, what about Kang Do-young?"

Suddenly changing the subject made Baek Ji-woong frown.

"What about him?"

"He's Hae-na's fiancé. Judging by the circumstances, hasn't the chairman completely ousted him?"

Baek Ye-ju had no idea about the things Baek Ji-woong was plotting.

"Still, he's the successor of KQ Group. Appearances need to be kept, so there won't be any talk. They'll probably call him back when the time is right."

"Do you really think so? I hear things over there are a mess these days."

"If you have time to worry about that, why don't you focus on our company's affairs first? You have plenty you need to check since you'll be starting as the division director at Holdings next week."

Since today was Friday, it would be right after the weekend.

"I'll handle it, so stop interfering too much. By the way, what about Mom? She didn't come home yesterday either."

"She's just been busy lately."

"At the entertainment company?"

"Just go upstairs already."

Baek Ye-ju grumbled as she walked up to the second floor.

Meanwhile, Baek Ji-woong opened his newspaper again and thought of his wife, Kwon So-jeong.

In truth, she was busy due to the recent incident with Hwain Techon.

The original plan was to quietly and swiftly wrap things up there.

However, a sudden investigation from the prosecutors and the tax authorities had begun, turning things noisy.

Although the media was being managed as best as possible, there were limits.

In fact, trying too hard to suppress the press could draw even more unwanted attention, so they had to let go at an appropriate line.

'Of all the places, AMK Partners were the ones who reported Hwain Techon to the prosecution...'

Hwain Techon had intended to seek another loan from the headquarters of AMK Bridge.

Since a giant investment firm with a registered Korean branch was the whistleblower, the prosecution could not just sit still.

Of course, AMK Partners had faced their own challenges because of public criticism over rejecting Hwain Techon's loan, spurred by the scandal.

Still, it was unexpected that through the loan process, they'd be able to uncover the shell company behind it all.

As the tables turned, Kwon So-jeong was now completely focused on taking care of the shell company side of things.

"Director Do."

He called out to Do Jung-geol, who was still standing and had not returned to the annex.

"Yes, sir?"

"Hae-na will be coming back soon, so prepare a security guard for her as well."

"I'll prepare accordingly."

Baek Hae-na was currently at the Hong Kong branch of WISE&WIRE Holdings.

The reason for her return was to push up her wedding date before Kang Do-young hit rock bottom.

* * *

A few days later.

In-hyuk was at the office when Baek Si-hwan handed him an envelope.

"What's this?"

"It's the material you requested last time about Hwain Techon."

It had been about four days since the request.

"Already? That's faster than expected."

"We managed to find one of Hwain Techon's shell companies. We traced a corporate entity operating shipping vessels between Portugal and Korea, and fortunately, I had some contacts there so we found it easily."

As he said, inside the envelope were documents regarding a company called Notex, incorporated near the port of Porto in Portugal.

"So this is where Hwain Techon funneled its funds."

"As you'll see, most of the capital flow occurring in the shipping process appears to be false entries."

"So you're saying money was siphoned off there. That would make Notex, at minimum, a front for Hwain Techon."

"That's correct."

While flipping through the documents, In-hyuk observed Baek Si-hwan's reactions.

Hwain Techon had W&W Group as its backer.

And yet, Baek Si-hwan, who was closely connected to Baek Ji-woong, the chairman of W&W Group, had brought him materials tracking Hwain Techon's embezzled funds.

That meant there were two possibilities...

'Either these are just flashy fakes, or... there really is another faction within W&W Group related to Hwain Techon.'

There had been things that had seemed suspicious for a while.

One was the encrypted message on Kooou's agent's phone.

It contained incidents of certain businesspeople, politicians, and high-ranking officials being "handled" in various ways.

At the same time, the message could be used to infer exactly where and how someone profited from those incidents.

But in those contents, there were also deaths that had nothing to do with W&W Group.

The situation was more complicated than expected.

'This means that, in Kooou, there must be at least one more faction in addition to Chairman Baek Ji-woong.'

That's why he decided not to act hastily, and instead kept Baek Si-hwan nearby to observe.

"... Division director?"

Baek Si-hwan's cautious voice called out.

"I've reviewed it. To what I've heard, Hwain Techon's patents or exclusive technologies were already pledged as collateral before the story broke, so it would be difficult to secure them now. And if the funds have already been moved overseas through a shell company, there's no way to revive it."

"That seems to be the case."

"Thank you for the documents. Thanks to you, I was able to make a decision quickly."

"It's my duty. Please let me know if you need me for anything else."

"I'll let you know."

Baek Si-hwan bowed his head and left.

Watching him go, In-hyuk set the envelope on his desk. In fact, the documents he had just seen might as well be a trap.

If he were to use them, it could be a trail for W&W Group to trace him back.

"They really aren't easy to deal with... Still, thanks to their moves, I was able to secure a bit more stake in Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics."

Muttering to himself, In-hyuk accessed Ghost Link on his phone.

【Dorian: Taeshin Trading 3,977,200 shares. Taeshin Electronics 127,500,000 shares. Secured.】

【Kael: KR_T Trading 5,590,800 shares. KR_T Electronics 104,500,000 shares. Secured.】

It was a report on the shares bought up during the rapid plunge in Taeshin Trading's stock price not long ago.

Of course, the shares had not been purchased in In-hyuk's own name.

"If I combine these with the shares I'd amassed earlier, even if Tae Seok-ho starts causing trouble, I'll be able to manage it."

'Dorian' indicated Dorian Dusk, CEO of Lumen Holdings in the UK. 'Kael' referred to Kael Morburn, CEO of Orbis Investment in the UAE.

Including AMK Partners, that meant he was steering four companies from behind the scenes.

It hadn't been easy.

Initially, after succeeding in getting investment from AMK Partners, he pooled the capital and, via Ghost Link, connected with the other three foreign company CEOs, feeding them failproof investment information.

To then on, to those companies, In-hyuk's information was more valuable than anything—and more addictive than any drug.

It didn't take long for him to gain control over those companies via information.

Deep in thought, In-hyuk sent out a message through Ghost Link.

【To. Delta Scourge】

【14M/12D/-1.04624, -6.04438】

* * *

Chairman's office at W&W Group headquarters.

A middle-aged woman strode in without being stopped.

Bang—

As the door opened, Baek Ji-woong's eyes widened a little when he saw her.

After confirming that the door had closed behind her, he asked cautiously,

"Didn't you say you wouldn't be back from the Hwain business until next week?"

She was Baek Ji-woong's wife and the true owner of WISE&WIRE Group, Kwon So-jeong.

"I finished up the urgent matters in Korea given the situation here."

"... I see."

Baek Ji-woong responded routinely and shifted his gaze back to the documents he'd been reviewing.

As Kwon So-jeong sat on the sofa, she asked,

"Aren't you curious how it all got sorted out?"

"You mean Hwain?"

Without taking his eyes off the documents, he replied with a question.

"I mean how much loss there was after everything went off track."

"Why should I care about money that isn't even mine?"

"Is that why you're doing nothing even though things are like this?"

As if picking a fight, Kwon So-jeong's tone made Baek Ji-woong finally look at her.

"Hwain was your responsibility from the beginning to the end. The media, the bankruptcy procedure, the shell company clean-up... I believe those were all your domains, not mine."

Kwon So-jeong's expression turned even colder than before.

"Doesn't it all depend on the circumstances?"

Baek Ji-woong let out a shallow sigh.

"Seems like it's too late for me to help now."

"That's right. Everything's almost done. I just need to launder the funds and hand them over."

"The pre-estimated sum will take a while, then."

"About two months..."

Knock, knock—

As their conversation continued indifferently, a knock sounded.

"Come in."

As the door opened, a woman entered—bobbed black hair, a black sprite pantsuit.

It was Kwon So-jeong's secretary, Na Eun-seo.

"What is it?"

"Well..."

As the secretary explained, new lines of worry etched themselves into Kwon So-jeong's frosty face.

Chapter 95

I Just Saw It

【Pirates in the Gulf of Guinea seize a Portuguese-flagged vessel; 5 Korean employees confirmed on board... The ship belongs to a company called Notex, and the pirates are known as the notorious 'Delta Scourge' in the Gulf, who released a Korean vessel last year...】

【Large vessel seized by pirates in the Gulf of Guinea; identified as armed robbers, with 5 Koreans on board as hostages... The government has yet to make an official announcement...】

【Texcellence military uniforms contract awarded! Having succeeded in the bid using the new material Polyrax, the company plans to produce everything from standard combat uniforms for soldiers to special suits that implement up to Level III ballistic protection as soft armor... The U. S. Department of Defense has also shown interest in this new material...】

【U. S.: Greenbyte Labs & AMK Velion succeed in power usage reduction tests, decreasing up to 55%. The product is designated as PowerForge X1 and will retain this name in future production...】

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Various articles were pouring out across portals and news agencies.

In particular, the case of pirates seizing a vessel in the Gulf of Guinea received huge attention since even Korean employees were among those taken hostage.

In-hyuk was reviewing those articles while waiting in front of the Taeshin Trading chairman's office.

He was called for a meeting by Chairman Tae Gun-seung, but there was another guest who had arrived before him.

Just then, the door opened, and executive vice president Jung Min-seop appeared.

In-hyuk rose from his seat and gave a slight bow.

"We've never been properly introduced. I'm Jung Min-seop."

"I'm Kang In-hyuk."

"I hope we get a chance to meet separately and have a good conversation sometime."

Jung Min-seop was best known as one of Tae Gun-seung's staunchest insiders—and for his dislike of the brothers Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho.

It might seem contradictory, but it was because, more than anyone, he had Taeshin Group's interests at heart.

That's why he supported appointing a professional manager as the next chairman rather than handing it down through family succession.

"I'll be sure to stop by your office when I have time."

"I'd appreciate that."

The personnel restructuring In-hyuk carried out in the TF division was unpopular with most executives.

So Jung Min-seop's suggestion set him apart from others.

Once Jung Min-seop left, Song Tae-ho opened the door, allowing In-hyuk to enter.

"It seems you exchanged greetings with Director Jung outside."

"Yes, today was the first time we met privately."

Tae Gun-seung smiled lightly.

"He's a stubbornly upright fellow—one of the few who truly cares about Taeshin."

"I've heard as much. But what was the reason for calling me today?"

After all, he had received the contact suddenly this afternoon, without any set appointment.

"I want you to handle a job for me."

The tone was fairly polite.

In-hyuk let out a shallow sigh in response.

"Is it similar to the work I did for the TF division?"

"This is something different. I just need you to tidy up a company."

There was a strange nuance to the request.

"Tidying up? Isn't that something anyone could do, not necessarily me?"

"It's important, that's why."

Tae Gun-seung's expression carried a seriousness heavier than ever before.

In-hyuk didn't take this lightly. The word "company" brought something linked to his previous life to mind.

"If you're referring to the companies set aside for succession purposes, I must decline this time."

Both Tae Gun-seung and Song Tae-ho, standing a little behind him, now wore stony expressions.

"You knew? But how...?"

No one was supposed to know. Besides themselves and the lawyers and tax accountants involved, it was a hidden operation.

Of course, if not for his previous life, In-hyuk would have been no different from anyone else.

Back then, chairman Tae Gun-seung had already passed away.

Through his will, the authority over the succession companies passed to his eldest son Tae Seok-hyun, who entrusted the work to In-hyuk, trusting his handling of the paper companies—at least, so it seemed.

That arrangement turned into the sharpest blade, enabling Tae Seok-ho to seize the chairman's seat next.

Of course, he could not explain all this as fact.

"There were subtle indications during the TF division's re-audit. The amounts weren't large, and the company types and durations varied, so they wouldn't attract tax investigation. The trades themselves were real, making it hard to flag as a problem. But if

there's only one owner and this has been going on for decades, the scale becomes different."

It must have been an accurate answer, as a sigh escaped Tae Gun-seung.

"Huh..."

"Any large corporation suffers headaches with succession. So I figured you started preparing as soon as you became chairman."

At that moment, Tae Gun-seung stared sharply at In-hyuk with cold eyes.

"Who else knows what you just said?"

The heavy mood extended from Song Tae-ho behind him as well.

"Are you thinking of dealing with those who know?"

"You realize how important this is."

In-hyuk let out a sigh with a hint of laughter.

"That data was partially collected and reviewed by me. Even if it was all gathered, it would be hard for other employees to figure out. Didn't you set it up that way, chairman?"

This time, Tae Gun-seung gave a wry chuckle.

"Ha. Yet you still uncovered it."

"It was just visible to me. Looking into it, the scale was large and the operation long-term, so naturally I thought you were behind it."

"Then, why didn't you say anything sooner?"

It had already been well over a month since the TF division ended.

He hadn't raised the matter, even when he later overturned Taeshin Electronics, so from Tae Gun-seung's perspective, it was only natural to find this odd.

"I didn't see any advantage to bringing it up first."

"Huh, advantage... I suppose so. Makes me embarrassed—shows how sensitively I reacted."

He was startled that of all people, In-hyuk had noticed what he thought was thoroughly concealed.

"I can understand your position, chairman."

"But you're still refusing?"

They returned to the original topic.

Earlier, In-hyuk had given a unhesitating and clear refusal.

"I have nothing to do with the Taeshin Group succession process."

"How can you say that? Your wife is part of the Taeshin family. You're family, too."

"But I'm not Taeshin blood."

At that answer, Tae Gun-seung studied In-hyuk for a moment before speaking.

"Are you thinking of divorcing Ju-ha?"

He got the sense that In-hyuk was drawing a line.

"I can't say the idea has never crossed my mind."

"Is Ju-ha then not to your liking? She may be the prettiest of all my granddaughters. Her temperament is fairly good—though maybe her lack of aegyo is a shortcoming. And she's now the CEO of Taeshin Asset Management—a subsidiary."

The unexpected comments made In-hyuk awkwardly scratch his brow with his thumb.

"That's not the issue."

"Hmmm! Even before, when I mentioned a directorship to Ju-ha and you for the future, you both seemed unenthusiastic. Don't tell me Ju-ha feels the same way?"

"It's similar."

At that, Tae Gun-seung sighed again.

"My goodness... If you're married, you should work on your bond. Was sending her to America for a year the problem?"

"It's not just because of that."

"Is there no way to fix this? Or maybe—you both keep thinking this way but haven't divorced, maybe because you're planning something?"

Although In-hyuk gave only a rough explanation, Tae Gun-seung interpreted it his own way.

"In any case, I must decline your earlier request."

"Then should I ask your uncle-in-law? Or your father-in-law, who stepped down because of you?"

He purposely emphasized "your".

"Well, that's up to you, chairman."

"Why do you think I asked you, anyway?"

This time, In-hyuk was curious.

"You have no immediate candidate and want to get things in order for now, aren't you?"

"Not wrong, but that's not all."

"I'm honestly not that interested."

Maybe upset by In-hyuk's indifference, Tae Gun-seung responded anxiously.

"I'm not getting any of the answers I expected. Strange..."

"Let someone from Taeshin handle Taeshin's affairs. I'm busy enough with my own responsibilities."

When In-hyuk's tone turned firm, Tae Gun-seung let out a deep sigh.

"Even if I grant you whatever you want?"

"How do you know what I want?"

"Whatever. This old man doesn't have long to live—what can't I grant?"

In-hyuk studied him.

Despite a deeply wrinkled face and being well into his nineties, in mobility he was more youthful than most of the executives beneath him.

"You really are intent on sending me to do this."

"That's what I intend."

In-hyuk ran his hand through his hair.

"When do you want me to go?"

He figured that if he refused, Tae Gun-seung would just keep pestering him.

Of course, he could always break things off completely after divorcing Tae Ju-ha.

But there were still issues he needed to resolve, making it hard to decide right now.

Meanwhile, Tae Gun-seung's smile grew deeper, as if he felt he'd won.

* * *

Tae Seok-ho received some news in his executive vice president's office.

"The chairman summoned Kang In-hyuk?"

"I heard he went into the chairman's office just now."

That was Reina Blackwood's reply, seated beside him.

Worry clouded Tae Seok-ho's face.

"What could it be about?"

"I haven't been able to hear beyond that yet."

He was worried that something like the TF division incident might happen again.

"After shaking up the group like that, what else could he be plotting..."

As he kept muttering, Reina answered with a sigh.

"I doubt anything will happen right away."

"Haven't you been giving me half-hearted answers since earlier? You're my secretary here, you know."

"Technically, we're partners. Of course, I'm also handling secretarial tasks without issue."

"Hoo. So, how much friendly stock have we secured? Is it going well? And why haven't you reported on the matters I mentioned last time?"

As he bombarded her with questions, Reina's brow furrowed slightly.

"At present, we have about 22% of the holding company Mulsan shares, including your portion."

"So there's at least 9% left to go?"

Companies rarely split shares cleanly in two; they're typically distributed among several factions.

One needed at least 31% to confront Tae Gun-seung.

As things stood, splits would naturally occur between Tae Gun-seung, Tae Seok-hyun, and Tae Seok-ho.

But with Tae Seok-hyun having stepped down as CEO of Taeshin Electronics, he would likely end up with less friendly stock than the others.

That was actually a positive for Tae Seok-ho.

"The rest will take a bit more time."

"How much?"

Even from Reina's standpoint, they should have secured more shares than the figure she'd just quoted.

But due to the unexpected interventions by Orbis Investment and Lumen Holdings, they'd lost too many shares—twice, in fact.

"The Organization says it'll take at least a month."

"And I'm just supposed to wait in the meantime? Who knows what'll happen by then."

Tae Seok-ho's frustration wasn't resolved.

It was simple—like how the TF division dug through Taeshin Electronics and unearthed information, maybe someone had found his weak points, too.

"We have our own plans, so please be patient. Also, regarding what you asked earlier... they want to meet with you soon."

"Really? When?"

"Sometime soon."

At that, Tae Seok-ho exhaled a small sigh of relief.

Of course, it wasn't a satisfying situation.

Even now, he was dying to know what kind of conversation his father, chairman Tae Gun-seung, and Kang In-hyuk were having in the chairman's office.

Chapter 96

Drifters

As night deepened, a luxurious vehicle entered the premises of a fishing spot on the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province. Shortly after, Tae Seok-ho of Taeshin Trading and his secretary, Reina, got out of the car.

"If you head this way, you'll arrive."

"Do we really have to meet in a place like this?"

It was in the middle of a forest and, to the casual eye, clearly an abandoned spot with not even the faintest trace of light. Reina illuminated their path with her flashlight as she spoke.

"That's how cautious we have to be."

"What kind of person are we even meeting...?"

The ground was a mess, littered with debris and rough, uneven soil. The two of them passed through and entered a building tucked away in the corner of the fishing grounds.

"Are you here?"

A middle-aged man's voice rose out of the darkness, making Tae Seok-ho stop in surprise.

"... And who are you?"

At his question, a lantern was switched on from the side, brightening the surroundings.

Everyone squinted for a few moments at the sudden glare before slowly confirming each other's faces.

The man opposite was the first to extend his hand for a handshake and spoke.

"My name is Im Deok-chang."

"I am Tae Seok-ho. But, may I ask who you represent?"

Without knowing the other's identity, it was difficult to have a proper conversation.

"You may not believe me, but I work for a government agency."

"An agency...?"

As the executive vice president of the Taeshin Group, Tae Seok-ho was already familiar with most public officials in the capital region.

However, the man before him was completely unfamiliar, making him even more suspicious.

"I am with the National Intelligence Service. I serve as the third deputy director there."

"Is that so? Then is this woman also...?"

His gaze shifted to Reina at the same time. If she worked under him, it gave clues about her true affiliation.

"Ah, Reina isn't with my agency. She works for another organization."

"Then why is someone from the National Intelligence Service involved in saving me and doing all this? Don't tell me this whole operation isn't even run by the NIS, but another group?"

At that, Im Deok-chang set his lantern down and smiled.

"There are people acting with grand ambitions. Many businesses are involved as well. I'm sure Reina already explained the purpose to you."

At that moment, Tae Seok-ho recalled the words he heard from her when they first met.

[We act to stabilize wealth and power.]

Unconsciously, he nodded in understanding and replied.

"So that's why you offered to put me in line for the next owner of the Taeshin Group."

"Exactly. We want people who have both capability and ambition. Executive Vice President Tae, you're one of them."

The complexity of the current situation and the appearance of Im Deok-chang muddled Tae Seok-ho's thoughts.

Yet, he found himself certain about what he needed to do.

"So, you mean I'm essential to this plan for exclusive co-prosperity."

Those were also Reina's words from before.

"Hahaha—that's right. That's exactly it."

"But I'm not sure this warrants such a secretive meeting... Is there some special reason?"

Im Deok-chang did not wipe the smile from his face.

"As I mentioned, my position is a big part of it. If word got out that the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service is meddling in corporate affairs, what do you think would happen?"

"It does make sense. It's not exactly a position where you can act openly."

"Thank you for understanding. In any case, there are other agencies and people involved in this besides myself. I simply act as an intermediary."

At those words, surprise flickered across Tae Seok-ho's features.

The third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service was deputy-minister level, just under the director.

For someone of such high rank to play a mediating, not leading, role was astonishing.

"How many people are involved in this?"

"I can't give you an exact number, but it's not a small group. There are even people working from abroad."

"That many?"

"However, just like us, they don't know who else is involved. Myself and a few others are the focal points, building business ties for what you called 'exclusive co-prosperity.'"

Tae Seok-ho nodded slowly before stopping.

"Judging by Reina and the security guards, you have no small amount of capable manpower... Is there some benefit for you in employing such people?"

"Some of the consortium's companies are included. If you rise to the role of chairman, you'll see the infrastructure for yourself."

"I suppose I won't know for sure until then. So, what should I call this group?"

"You mean a name?"

"A group this organized must have a name, surely?"

As the questions continued, Im Deok-chang thought briefly before responding.

"I'll tell you once you stand atop Taeshin."

His tone was firm.

Because of that, Tae Seok-ho couldn't press further and was left with only a look of regret on his face.

"In any case, I trust your questions are mostly answered. And one more thing—please keep what you know about us secret. I'm sure you understand why."

There was a veiled threat there. Tae Seok-ho understood it entirely, making it difficult to ask any more.

"... I'll keep that in mind."

With that, the lantern was extinguished. Darkness returned, and nothing could be seen.

Reina turned on her flashlight again, but Im Deok-chang had already vanished without a trace.

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In-hyuk was, for the time being, away from Seoul and on his way to Texcellence in Cheongju, Chungbuk.

After the RSK acquisition and securing the military uniform bid, he was heading there to check the interim status.

While driving down the expressway, Hong Yu-geon, at the wheel, kept glancing at the rearview and side mirrors.

"We're being tailed."

"Oh, really?"

He casually looked back and saw two suspicious black vans and a sedan following.

He'd known from the start that there were tails—plus, their amateurish style made it obvious they weren't professionals.

Since Baek Si-hwan was in the passenger seat, a little acting was needed.

"What should we do? If things keep going this way, something's bound to happen."

At that, In-hyuk looked to Baek Si-hwan and asked,

"What do you suggest?"

Baek Si-hwan, who hadn't expected the question, hesitated.

"... Excuse me? You mean the tail?"

"You're my secretary and bodyguard, aren't you? Don't you have a manual for handling situations like this?"

"Well..."

But no solution came to Baek Si-hwan's mind.

Watching him, In-hyuk exhaled and addressed Hong Yu-geon.

"Let's turn off toward the factory. Take the route where it's as deserted as possible."

"Okay."

"What are you planning?"

Even at Baek Si-hwan's question, In-hyuk's expression was calm.

"We can't exactly drag them to a police station, can we? So, we'll handle it ourselves."

"Handle it?"

In the meantime, Hong Yu-geon turned off the highway and headed toward the factory road.

The area was rural, lined with scattered houses and wide fields.

"Deserted places around here must be..."

He checked the navigation and changed course. Soon, they entered a vacant lot near a mountain and parked.

The cars tailing them followed suit, recklessly speeding after them as if making it clear they were tailing.

"Director, what are we going to do?"

"First, let's figure out who they are and deal with it."

"With just us?"

The only security on hand were Hong Yu-geon, Van Hester, and Baek Si-hwan.

"If we're outnumbered, I'll lend a hand myself."

Meanwhile, from the opposing vehicles, rugged men got out holding various blunt weapons.

A quick count showed about sixteen—men with the look of street toughs.

"Well, is it even worth bothering the director? Just watch and call the cops if it gets out of hand."

Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester exchanged a glance, then stepped outside.

Baek Si-hwan, sitting in the backseat, couldn't help but follow after them.

The opposing men, once ready, rushed at them.

Puhf—Thwack—Puh-puhf—

In the cold winter air, a brawl broke out in an instant on the vacant lot.

"It really is a mess..."

But the problem was numbers—they only had three on In-hyuk's side against sixteen attackers.

True, each of them was felling foes quickly, but it was difficult to cover for stray enemies wielding weapons.

"Is this unavoidable?"

Eventually, In-hyuk called the police on his phone and got out of the car.

At that moment, a man in a black suit who'd crept around the back lunged with a sharp knife.

Shhk—Crack— Even though it was from his right blind spot, In-hyuk dodged-nimbly, twisted the man's arm, and snapped it upward.

"Argh!"

He'd subdued the attacker with a fast, decisive joint lock.

Three more slipped through and encircled In-hyuk, hesitating as they saw their comrade writhing in pain on the ground.

"Why are you just standing there? Weren't you here to kill me?"

"You bastard...!"

As the man straight in front yelled, the others joined the attack.

Despite the urgency, In-hyuk kept his composure.

His senses, sharpened by tension, made their every move seem slow.

Crack!—Crunch!—

Dodging an incoming attack by bending back, he grabbed and twisted the attacker's wrist, forcing a knife from his hand.

Using the foe's body as a shield, he dodged another knife from the left.

Wham, crunch, snap—

"Aagh!"

This time, he broke a wrist, an elbow, then a knee in sequence.

'So, am I being assessed as well—to see how I fight?'

He'd been feeling Baek Si-hwan's gaze all the while.

Deliberately, In-hyuk used only basic joint locks—never the TMT (Tactical Murder Techniques) he'd learned at UID.

Baek Si-hwan would know about those, considering he also belonged to UID.

That's why, even though In-hyuk tried hard not to betray himself, bits of TMT inevitably slipped into his movements.

WEE-OO, wEE-OO, wEE-OO—

After most of the attackers were handled, they heard police sirens some distance away.

"Phew—! Glad you stepped in, director, so it ended quickly."

"You're saying that because you couldn't finish them off yourselves."

"Hey, I don't have an extra pair of arms—of course we'd be outnumbered, right?"

Hong Yu-geon looked between Van Hester and Baek Si-hwan as if seeking agreement.

Van Hester just shrugged indifferently.

Shaking his head at the sight, In-hyuk straightened the wrinkles in his jacket and addressed Baek Si-hwan.

"When the police arrive, please explain the situation to them."

"Should I hand over the black box footage too?"

"Let Hong take what's necessary and send that over."

"Okay. Aren't you going to ask who's behind all this? Are you just leaving it to the police?"

It was the most important part.

Yet, In-hyuk hadn't so much as touched the attackers who now lay beaten—something that seemed odd.

"They're just drifters who can't even handle a knife. Whoever tried to kill me by hiring this many with such poor skills must be pretty desperate."

Baek Si-hwan asked, surprised,

"Do you have a suspect in mind?"

"More or less. But there won't be any obvious evidence to catch them. They'll have already severed the ties."

When In-hyuk gave no names, Baek Si-hwan's face took on a subtly bitter expression.

Meanwhile, the police arrived at the vacant lot, and Baek Si-hwan stepped forward as In-hyuk instructed.

Chapter 97

Are You an Office Worker?

【Division Director Kang In-hyuk of Taeshin, once again targeted for his life!? In an undisclosed location in Chungbuk, multiple assailants in vehicles tailed and attacked him... Fortunately, the assault was thwarted by Division Director Kang In-hyuk's security guard, but it remains uncertain if his safety can be ensured in the future...】

【A sudden ambush on Taeshin Group's Division Director Kang In-hyuk in an undisclosed location in Chungbuk! The assailants belonged to a violent gang, about 15 people in total... The police have announced that investigations are underway, suspecting they acted on commission.】

【△△ days since Gulf of Guinea pirates hijacked a container ship. The fate of five Korean staff remains unknown. Ship owner Notex expressed hope for a swift rescue...】

【To date, Delta Scourge, the Gulf of Guinea pirates who hijacked the container ship, have made no demands...】

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Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of KQ Group, waited in his office with an expression full of anger for someone to arrive.

Before long, the door opened and his wife, Jeon Hae-in, who was also the CEO of KQ Department Store, stepped in.

"What are you trying to do right now? A sudden press conference?"

As expected, it was a visitor he had not wanted.

Kang Cheon-gyu's forehead bulged with veins.

"Do you really not know why I'm asking?"

At that, Jeon Hae-in flinched momentarily before continuing.

"... What do you mean?"

"You're really going to play dumb like this? Then I have nothing to say to you right now."

As he sighed deeply, the door was knocked and Noh Geun-cheol, his secretary, entered.

"Chairman. It's time for you to go downstairs. Everything is ready below."

"Alright, then."

At that moment, Jeon Hae-in quickly blocked his way.

"What on earth are you going to do?!"

"You'll understand when you see the press conference."

"Are you seriously doing this? If you're mistaken, KQ Group will be criticized by the public!"

Kang Cheon-gyu's steps halted for a moment.

"Criticized? Are you talking about what you did?"

"What did I do?"

Kang Cheon-gyu let out a sigh and brushed past her.

Jeon Hae-in, in a panic, blocked his path once more.

"What are you talking about!"

"Step aside."

"KQ Group only became what it is thanks to my father. How can I stand by and watch you destroy it?!"

"Well, you tell me. You already know what I'm about to do. Why do you say that will ruin the company?"

"That's..."

Unable to speak further, Jeon Hae-in gritted her teeth.

She knew perfectly well why Kang Cheon-gyu was doing this: he was about to announce that Kang In-hyuk was his illegitimate child.

And she herself could not explain, for an obvious reason.

It was she who had dispatched the assailants to kill Kang In-hyuk a few days ago.

If she admitted that she knew Kang In-hyuk was an illegitimate child, she would be confirming it herself.

At the same time, it would further diminish her son Kang Do-young's standing, so she kept her lips tightly sealed.

"If you have nothing to say, you may as well remain silent. We're leaving now."

As Kang Cheon-gyu walked away, he passed Lee Jung-tae, who stood a little distance behind her.

Led by his secretary and staff, he entered the first floor auditorium.

There, a crowd of journalists gathered in advance were already seated.

Click, click, click—

With Kang Cheon-gyu's entrance, the sound of camera shutters went wild.

As he turned on the microphone and tapped it lightly, the flashes and shutter sounds gradually subsided and the room grew still.

"Hello. I am Kang Cheon-gyu, CEO of KQ Distribution. You must be very curious as to why I suddenly called this press conference."

With that greeting, the atmosphere became even more tense.

"First, I want to begin by expressing my sincere apologies."

Kang Cheon-gyu stepped aside and bowed deeply, slowly straightening up afterward.

He then stood at the microphone, glancing over the journalists around him.

The reporters were so shocked by his immediate apology that even their breathing stopped for a moment.

"... I have a son who was born outside my marriage."

As soon as he announced the existence of an illegitimate child, the camera flashes blazed ecstatically once more.

Even so, Kang Cheon-gyu continued speaking without pause.

"For over 30 years, I lived without knowing of his existence, but I recently became aware of him, and I now wish to restore him to his rightful place, which is why I am making this announcement publicly."

"Does the person in question know about this?"

"What is his occupation?"

"Are you considering him as a successor besides Division Director Kang Do-young?"

"What does he do for a living?"

As curiosity grew, journalists began bombarding him with questions.

Thump, thump—

"Sorry, but I will take questions after I finish my statement."

With his heavy tone, the journalists could do nothing but lower their voices.

"No matter how I explain it, it will be difficult to see KQ Group or me in a positive light because of this personal matter. Yet, I have decided I cannot erase the existence of a son I found after 30 years solely for the peace of the Group. That's why I have decided to embrace everything and work even harder for KQ, and this is why I called you all here today."

Kang Cheon-gyu finished and looked around at the journalists.

"That is all I have to say. Now I will take your questions."

To then on, the journalists fired one question after another as if pulling a trigger.

"How old is your son and what is his occupation? Is he a public figure?"

"What was your relationship with his mother?"

"Are you considering him for the KQ Group's successor?"

"Why did you not know about him for 30 years?"

"How did you find him? How did you find out?"

Kang Cheon-gyu gripped the mic again.

"He is 34 years old this year, and his occupation is an office worker. And I can't say he isn't famous."

This was his way of admitting that his son was indeed a public figure.

At the same time, the journalists' eyes shone even brighter.

"Can you tell us his name?"

"Where does he work?"

Kang Cheon-gyu hesitated for a moment, then answered.

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At the same time, Tae Seok-ho was watching TV in his office.

The broadcast was covering the sudden announcement by Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of KQ, that a press conference would be held.

"An illegitimate child for Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu? What the... And he's even holding a press conference?"

The existence of an illegitimate child is possibly the worst kind of owner risk for a conglomerate chairman.

Aside from the personal scandal, such an issue would inevitably cause turmoil over future succession and could impact the stock price.

The internal power struggle would intensify, leaving both the board and shareholders deeply displeased.

Yet Kang Cheon-gyu had decided to brave it and called a press conference.

Meanwhile, on the screen, journalists were bombarding him with questions.

[Are you considering him for KQ Group's successor?]

[How old is your son and what is his occupation? Is he a public figure?]

[How did you find him? How did you become aware?]

[What was your relationship with his mother?]

[Why did you not know for 30 years?]

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Kang Cheon-gyu's expression turned even more serious as he answered.

[My son's name is Kang In-hyuk. He is currently Division Director of M&A/PEF at Taeshin Asset Management. For further details, please refer to the interviews and press releases that will be distributed. As for issues that may arise in KQ Distribution, I will humbly

accept them and do my utmost to resolve them. Though much time has passed, I am truly sorry for causing such a stir in this way, and I extend my sincerest apologies once more.]

With his final words, Kang Cheon-gyu stepped aside and bowed deeply to the camera.

Despite the continuing barrage of questions from reporters, the broadcast of the press conference came to an end, returning to the regular program.

Tae Seok-ho's hand trembled as he clutched the remote, eyes glued to the TV.

"... What? That Kang In-hyuk is Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's son?"

His gaze shifted to Reina Blackwood, who was sitting across from him.

"Did you know about this over there?"

Reina, who had been smiling all along, showed no change in expression.

"I didn't know."

"And him?"

He was referring to Im Deok-chang, whom he had met personally just a while ago.

He knew his name now but was careful not to mention it, fearing a slip of the tongue.

"I just follow orders. I'm not curious about what, or how much, those above me know. Even if I knew, I couldn't divulge it carelessly."

Tae Seok-ho was struck again by her loyalty.

When he first learned of Im Deok-chang's affiliation, he assumed she, too, was with the National Intelligence Service, but learning otherwise was even more surprising.

This was because a powerful organization, whose name he still did not know, had fostered manpower both with extraordinary organizational skills and such loyalty.

But at the moment, the issue was Kang In-hyuk.

Bzzz— bzzz—

Just then, his wife Choi Tae-eun called.

Not only she, but numerous people involved in the management of the company were flooding him with messages and calls for confirmation.

"This is turning into a real headache..."

Kang In-hyuk, who had been derided as a son-in-law on the payroll and a parachuted department manager, was now revealed to also be the son of Kang Cheon-gyu, chairman of KQ Group, right in the middle of his career success.

"Now that I think about it, Kang Do-young was replaced because of Kang In-hyuk, too. Could it be... Did he know that his biological father was Kang Cheon-gyu? Was he aiming for this deliberately? No, that can't be... Truth is, the Taeshin Spintech matter was something father entrusted him with from the beginning."

As he muttered, Tae Seok-ho glanced back at Reina.

He recalled something she'd said to him in the past.

【That's a separate issue. We still haven't figured out who's really behind him.】

He distinctly remembered her mentioning this when she tried to deal with Kang In-hyuk using her own forces.

"So it was Kang Cheon-gyu who backed him? And that sudden change in him was because of that? She must have known this as well. That's why even though Kang In-hyuk was the biggest obstacle in the Taeshin Group succession, she allowed him to remain..."

Tae Seok-ho's calculations matched up in terms of cause and timing.

Of course, a big question remained. KQ Distribution alone could not support Kang In-hyuk's investment expertise.

Had that been possible, it would have been much easier for KQ, not just Limited to distribution, to directly partner with AMK Partners.

"I'll tell you this so you don't take any rash, problematic actions out of misunderstanding."

"What do you mean?"

"Kang In-hyuk has never acted with KQ Group behind him. Just as the press conference stated, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu only recently learned that Kang In-hyuk is his biological son."

With his face set hard, Tae Seok-ho asked quietly:

"Then, Kang In-hyuk's backer... Is it someone completely different?"

"We're still looking into that as well. We're not even sure if there is one. So it's not as you think."

This only deepened the confusion.

"This is going to be a real mess."

"But the board and shareholders probably won't consider CEO Tae Ju-ha for the next successor role. No matter what they do, it will all be tied back to Kang In-hyuk, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's biological son."

"That does seem true."

Tae Seok-ho was quietly impressed.

Rather than disposing of Kang In-hyuk, this situation made it so CEO Tae Ju-ha would face backlash from shareholders and the board, which ironically included Kang In-hyuk as well.

"But this time, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu moved much more hastily than I expected. Of course, someone must have provided the spark."

Tae Seok-ho quickly understood this.

The party behind the attack on Kang In-hyuk still remained unidentified.

But in that context, Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's press conference revealed his true intention.

"Looking strictly at the situation, it's either his wife, CEO Jeon Hae-in, or his son Kang Do-young. But that guy is on a business trip abroad at this timing..."

A few days prior, Kang In-hyuk had departed for business with AMK Partners.

The timing was just too coincidental not to arouse suspicion.

Below the still-on TV, a news summary about the just-ended press conference began running again.

Chapter 98

Isn't that a lie?

△△ Airlines Flight KE5494, bound for Geneva, Switzerland.

Currently, they were flying to their layover at Frankfurt Airport.

Kang In-hyuk sat in first class, working on his tablet.

At that moment, the woman sitting next to him turned her head with a surprised expression.

"How did this happen?"

The woman's identity was none other than Tae Ju-ha.

With the question, In-hyuk briefly looked away.

"What do you mean?"

"This, I mean."

She had also been looking at her tablet. However, unlike In-hyuk, she was checking the news, not working.

The screen showed the news about Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu of KQ Group holding a press conference.

Friends had just sent her related articles via messenger, so she was checking them.

【Taeshin Group Division Director Kang In-hyuk revealed as the illegitimate son of KQ Group Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu! The existence of a son found after 34 years. Separated without knowing the mother was pregnant, then found out the son had been born.....】

Messages to confirm the truth came in waves from others as well.

In the meantime, In-hyuk gave the screen Tae Ju-ha showed him a quick glance and answered indifferently.

"In the end, Chairman Kang couldn't hold back and made it public."

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

"Is this really true? That you are Chairman Kang of KQ's son?"

"You can see for yourself."

Perhaps because the answer was so matter-of-fact, Tae Ju-ha's face filled with disbelief.

"Are you serious right now? More than that, did you already know? Did you discuss it with the chairman, too?"

"I found out by chance, and we did talk about it once. But as for the press conference, he held it without even telling me."

It was obvious that Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu must have gotten anxious, probably after seeing yet another article about In-hyuk's life being threatened.

If the fact that In-hyuk was the biological child of KQ Group's Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu became publicly known, the company's strength would act as a reliable shield.

Of course, even during work, In-hyuk had read the article and could surmise as much.

"Why didn't you tell me beforehand? Don't tell me... does Grandpa know, too?"

"No. I didn't tell him separately, so I doubt he knows."

In-hyuk's past of receiving support from the Taeshin Education Foundation was of no interest to anyone within the group.

He was just seen as a pitiful man who had gotten lucky and became a son-in-law of the Taeshin family.

There was no reason for Chairman Tae Gun-seung to be suspicious about In-hyuk's origins.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"What do you mean? Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu found out and asked me to join KQ, but I refused."

"Why?"

"It's just too bothersome to fight with that troublesome guy."

Who she meant was obvious.

"Is that really a problem? With your management skills, you'd have no issues."

"Not really. I just don't want to."

"Are you sure it's something you can decide on for that reason?"

This was, after all, the successor position of KQ Group — not just anywhere.

Kang Do-young, the previous sole heir until just moments ago, was still far from being qualified as a manager.

If In-hyuk joined KQ and established his position there, no one could surpass him.

"It's simply not that important to me."

"Haaa... What are you really thinking?"

"I just think about what I want to do. Besides, if I transfer to KQ, all the ongoing projects at Taeshin would be stopped, and all the expected profits would vanish."

Tae Ju-ha couldn't deny this.

Usually, another person could take over the work, but since most were connected to AMK Partners, handing over the duties would be difficult.

Moreover, the actual contract with AMK Partners explicitly said that if In-hyuk was not the person in charge, the contract would be nullified.

"So... are you saying you really are the chairman's son, and you rejected his offer to join KQ Group?"

"That's right."

"You really are incredible in so many ways."

In-hyuk shrugged.

Tae Ju-ha, looking resigned, suddenly brought up something she remembered.

"Oh, you said I had something to do in Geneva regarding AMK Partners. What is it?"

That was the reason why Tae Ju-ha, who had not planned to, ended up boarding the plane with In-hyuk.

"To be honest, that was a lie."

"... Excuse me?"

"This is a trip for the chairman. The chairman told me to bring the CEO along, too."

"Grandpa?"

In-hyuk, thinking for a moment, scratched his cheek with a finger.

"There are companies overseas related to the chairman. He told me to visit them and pick something up with the CEO."

"And he told you to bring me along for that?"

"Yes. I don't know why, but he insisted that I bring you at any cost. So I had to say it was for AMK Partners."

Tae Ju-ha had simply wanted to see how In-hyuk worked with AMK Partners, so she accompanied him.

But hearing it was for something entirely different, her face turned even more incredulous.

"So what is Grandpa asking you to pick up?"

"I was only given the bare basics, so I don't know the details. The person in charge will give it to us when we get there."

"... Isn't that a lie, too?"

Having already been duped once, Tae Ju-ha began to distrust In-hyuk's words.

"We'll see when we get there. I should get some sleep until we land."

Finishing his words, In-hyuk reclined his seat and lay back.

"..."

Watching him, Tae Ju-ha frowned and sighed deeply.

* * *

Crash— Crash!

A loud sound rang out inside a single-story house on the outskirts of Itaewon.

On the living room floor, items like glass ornaments, cups, and wooden chairs that had been intact until a moment ago now lay smashed.

Kang Do-young, who had until recently been selected as KQ Group's sole child and heir, had done this.

A little distance away, Ahn Min-gi stood quietly and spoke with caution.

"Division director, please calm down now."

Ever since being harshly reprimanded by Kang Cheon-gyu over the incident at KQ Fabric, Kang Do-young had not shown up for work.

He had stayed holed up at his Itaewon hideout, drinking with women.

Just now, after seeing Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's press conference, he had learned Kang In-hyuk was his half-brother.

"You think now's the time to say that?!"

Crash—

With a shout, Kang Do-young threw a glass. The shards flew, and blood trickled from Ahn Min-gi's face.

Ahn Min-gi calmly took some tissues from the table and pressed them to his face.

"This is exactly the time to act rationally."

"Rational? Unbelievable..."

He was still very drunk.

Even so, Ahn Min-gi remained steadfastly by his side, worried Do-young might cause another accident.

"Even if Kang In-hyuk is the chairman's biological son, legitimacy is important. You're the legitimate eldest son, and he's just a bastard child. Regardless of what the shareholders think, the board won't acknowledge it."

"That aside, do you think Father will take my side? Of all people, when some other bastard shows up claiming to be his son?!"

"He's a Taeshin man. Even if he's the chairman, he can't just appoint someone who's married into a rival family as his successor."

It wasn't wrong.

Hearing that, Kang Do-young calmed a little, slumping into the sofa.

"How sure are you about this? The chairman? The board?"

Ahn Min-gi thought for a moment, then answered cautiously.

"To be honest, I can't be certain about the chairman's true thoughts. Still, officially, Kang In-hyuk cannot be brought into KQ Group. The board would oppose it right away. No one can know what he'd do if he came in."

The answer was much the same as before.

But this time, Kang Do-young seemed to be listening with a bit more sobriety.

"If Kang In-hyuk cuts ties with Taeshin Group and comes over?"

"I can't say it's impossible, but it wouldn't happen immediately. And would madam let it slide? As far as I know, the current board wants you to succeed the chairman."

Kang Do-young let out a long sigh.

"Whoever planned this did it too sloppily. If they wanted to get rid of Kang In-hyuk, they should have used a professional killer or a gun, not just thugs."

For a moment, Ahn Min-gi almost mentioned that there had already been such an attempt in America, but stopped himself. He didn't want to disturb Do-young's barely recovered composure.

"He has a lot of enemies. At this rate, he might end up bringing disaster upon himself sooner or later."

"Do you really think so?"

"Having your life targeted is no easy thing. But I believe this is the third time for Kang In-hyuk already; there's no guarantee there won't be another."

Kang Do-young twitched his face and then took a swig from the whiskey bottle at his side.

"Damn..."

.

.

.

About three hours later.

It was deep into the night.

Baek Ji-woong, chairman of WISE&WIRE Group, climbed the stairs of an old building on the outskirts of Seoul with Do Jung-geol.

On the second floor, in a shut-down teahouse, a man had already arrived.

"You're here?"

This was Lee Jung-tae, Jeon Hae-in's security guard from KQ Group.

"Have you been waiting long?"

"No."

Baek Ji-woong took a seat on a previously cleared sofa.

The other two naturally stood in front of him.

"The other agent? Not here yet?"

"He said he'd be late due to surveillance."

At that moment, the door opened and another man entered.

"Sorry to be late."

The newcomer was Ahn Min-gi, secretary to Kang Do-young.

On seeing him, Baek Ji-woong nodded as if this was expected.

"With another KQ successor suddenly appearing, it must be tough for him."

Ahn Min-gi, in fact, had been part of their group from the start.

He had stuck by Kang Do-young's side for a long time to manipulate things once Do-young became KQ Group's successor.

"I've calmed him down for now. But after this incident, his mental state is pretty shaky and might be harder to control."

"That's something we have to manage. What about Jeon Hae-in?"

This question was directed at Lee Jung-tae.

"Jeon Hae-in is the same. I never expected she'd hire gangsters to do something like that out of my sight. I truly apologize."

Kang In-hyuk, for them, was a tool to push Kang Cheon-gyu to hand over KQ Group's management.

His safety was supposed to be guaranteed, but such an incident had occurred.

Baek Ji-woong pursed his lips and spoke.

"Still, you managed to block it well enough. It even moved the hesitant Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu into action."

There was still a constant stream of follow-up articles about Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's press conference.

This was due to materials KQ Group released after the conference.

Plus, the illegitimate child had recently become famous in business circles as the Taeshin family's son-in-law.

No wonder the media frenzy wouldn't die down easily.

"Thank you for saying so."

"Still... Jeon Hae-in might pull another stunt, so be even more careful."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Lee Jung-tae bowed seriously.

Watching him intently, Baek Ji-woong then shifted his gaze back to Ahn Min-gi.

"Kang Do-young is just the same."

Ahn Min-gi also bowed deeply.

In the now quiet room, Baek Ji-woong let out a soft sigh.

Then, once again, the door opened.

They all turned their heads to see Baek Si-hwan entering. Among the group, only Ahn Min-gi, as his junior, bowed slightly.

"Sorry, I'm late. I was tracking Kang In-hyuk's overseas movements."

Currently, Kang In-hyuk was abroad on a business trip with only Tae Ju-ha and his security guards.

"The destination... was it Geneva?"

"Yes. The company listed it as discussions with AMK Partners regarding investment, but as there's no related business entity there, I had to confirm."

Baek Ji-woong's expression turned subtle.

"Is he trying to expand into Europe?"

Chapter 99

Whenever There Was a Spare Moment

At Baek Ji-woong's question, Baek Si-hwan added a doubt.

"But hasn't Lumen Holdings and Orbis Investment's presence grown recently?"

"They may have reacted because the other side initiated a turf war."

He was referring to the recent Taeshin Group stock price crash event caused by Hyottoko.

At that time, Lumen Holdings and Orbis Investment somehow learned of the situation and made their move first.

That showed just how much influence AMK Partners currently wielded in Asia—it would not be an exaggeration to call it their territory.

The sudden aggressive buying by those two companies in such a setting was enough to provoke them.

"So you think they might be using Kang In-hyuk to probe the situation?"

"That's what I think for now... but something about it doesn't sit right with me. Have we confirmed why Tae Ju-ha went with them?"

Normally, if it was an AMK Partners matter, Kang In-hyuk would have only taken a security guard along.

Even Baek Si-hwan hadn't been able to accompany him yet, so it was only natural to find Tae Ju-ha's sudden presence odd.

"Kang In-hyuk suggested it first. Since it was AMK Partners business, Tae Ju-ha wanted to tag along."

"Hmmm... So, how about USAGI's side these days? Things seem quieter than I expected."

He was speaking of Reina Blackwood, who was currently working as Tae Seok-ho's secretary.

Baek Si-hwan had been checking up on her and Kang In-hyuk, so there was a lot on his mind.

"As you said, there's nothing particularly unusual going on."

Baek Ji-woong's worries deepened.

It was because of what Im Deok-chang of Hyottoko had proposed when they met a while ago.

He'd asked Baek Ji-woong to let go of involvement in Kang In-hyuk's affairs in exchange for transferring Taeshin Trading and Taeshin Electronics shares at a low price.

Accepting that proposal would halve Baek Ji-woong's plan to handle both Taeshin and KQ at the same time.

"As I suspected... They were planning this from the beginning."

"Are you saying Hyottoko deliberately targeted Kang In-hyuk to get involved in this?"

"To be precise, it's probably KQ Group. And their connection to AMK Partners is a bonus."

AMK Partners' fame, having expanded at a tremendous pace in Asia and America, could not be ignored anywhere.

Yet no one had been able to find out about its registered CEO, Gordon Grimes.

In the end, the only way to get in touch was through Norman McGrath, the Korean branch manager.

The organization had tried to make contact through various companies, but their only reply was that all decisions followed the CEO's choices.

But Kang In-hyuk had managed to land AMK Partners business without going through Norman McGrath.

Naturally, it was clear there was something going on.

"What do you intend to do?"

With Baek Si-hwan's question, the others also quietly awaited an answer.

Baek Ji-woong, thinking deeply, came to a decision.

"We'll change our hand. As soon as we buy those shares, we pull out of everything involving Kang In-hyuk."

On hearing this, Baek Si-hwan looked startled.

"... Completely?"

"Yes. For now, Taeshin is more important than Kang In-hyuk or KQ. So, as soon as you finish what you mentioned earlier, find a reasonable excuse and step back."

"But..."

Baek Si-hwan regretted all the trust he had slowly built up at Kang In-hyuk's side until now.

"If you hang around any longer, you might end up in more trouble. Don't dwell on it, just make a clean break."

"... Understood."

"And keep an even closer watch on everything else."

The others nodded.

* * *

In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had arrived in Geneva, Switzerland, and were traveling by car.

There were two cars in total; in the car behind them were Heo Yu-rim, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester, who were accompanying them on this trip.

"I didn't think you'd drive yourself all the way out here."

"I just wanted to. The number of people is a bit awkward, too."

Before they knew it, their car had entered downtown Geneva.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?"

They'd been driving without even using the navigation system.

"I know it well."

He couldn't not know—he had visited this place himself in a previous life.

After driving another 25 minutes, they arrived in an area called Carouge, south of Geneva.

The two parked in front of a building and got out.

"When are you going to tell me why we came all the way here?"

After glancing around, In-hyuk led the way. Watching the others follow behind, he spoke slowly.

"There are some things the chairman asked me to retrieve."

"Retrieve?"

"To be precise, these are the foundational assets for the succession of Taeshin Group. In simple terms... you could call them the weapons that let someone seize the throne."

Even if not for that, Tae Ju-ha could easily understand.

"Don't tell me... you mean he hid company shares overseas?"

"It's for the succession, so I'm sure he prepared all sorts of things. The three of you, wait on the first floor. If we all go in, it might not look good."

Heo Yu-rim, who had been quietly following, looked at him with concern.

"Just the two of you are going?"

"As I said, this is something important."

"Oh..."

Heo Yu-rim's gaze turned to Tae Ju-ha.

"It's fine, so please wait."

With that, Tae Ju-ha and In-hyuk got on the elevator.

"Have you ever been here before?"

To the moment he drove up to when he pressed the elevator button just now, it all seemed strangely familiar.

"No, this is my first time."

"You seem pretty comfortable for a first-timer."

"I'm glad I don't look nervous."

During their brief exchange, the elevator reached the eighth floor.

In-hyuk walked down the hall and pressed the doorbell for the office marked '812'.

"Is this the right place?"

"It is."

A moment later, a middle-aged Caucasian man peeked out.

"Qui est-ce?" (Who is it?)

It was French. At the question, Tae Ju-ha looked at In-hyuk in surprise.

"We probably should've brought an interpreter, huh?"

"No need. Je viens du siège social. (I'm from head office.)"

As fluent French flowed from In-hyuk's lips, Tae Ju-ha was astonished again.

"You can speak French, too?"

"A little."

"... Doesn't sound like just a little."

The man stood for a moment with a rigid face, then spoke again.

"Did you bring the documents?"

"Right here."

He handed over documents he had prepared in advance.

After checking them, the man opened the door wide and let them in.

"Please wait a moment."

Inside, except for the size, the office was not much different from any other company's.

"Are we really here to collect what the chairman left?"

"Let's wait and see."

The middle-aged man came back and asked In-hyuk,

"Who is the beneficiary?"

"This person."

Tae Ju-ha was puzzled as In-hyuk gestured to her.

"Me? What do you mean?"

"If you hand over your passport, the process will move forward."

"Don't tell me... It goes under my name?"

"It can't be me—I'm not part of Taeshin."

"But... Oh!"

As she hesitated, In-hyuk took her passport and handed it over.

"You'll have to do this at other places too."

"How many places are there?"

"Four, including this one."

"That many?"

"That just shows how thoroughly the chairman prepared things."

Realizing it would take a while, the two of them sat on chairs in the office.

At that moment, In-hyuk's phone started vibrating in his pocket.

It was a call from Van Hester, who was waiting downstairs.

[We're being tailed.]

"How many?"

At In-hyuk's Spanish, Tae Ju-ha once again looked surprised.

[Looks like two for now.]

"So it was quiet when we left, but of course someone had to follow."

[What should we do?]

"Leave them. As long as we don't make a move, they'll stay put too."

With that, he hung up.

"How many languages do you even speak?"

"Quite a few."

"When did you learn all that?"

"Just... whenever I had time."

"... Isn't that a bit of an insincere answer?"

Tae Ju-ha looked rather disappointed.

"I didn't know you cared about that."

"..."

* * *

At the National Intelligence Service's third deputy director's office in Korea, Im Deok-chang sat looking worried.

After a long silence, his phone vibrated in his hand.

"What's the situation?"

[Personnel include Kang In-hyuk, Tae Ju-ha, Heo Yu-rim, Hong Yu-geon, and Van Hester. Thirty minutes ago, they arrived at Geneva International Airport. Now they've entered a building in Carouge. However, Kang In-hyuk's security guard is waiting on the first floor, so it won't be easy to follow them directly.]

Upon learning Kang In-hyuk had left the country, Im Deok-chang had used his authority to track his destination.

Thanks to that, he could assign people to tail them even without real-time surveillance.

"You don't know exactly which part they're visiting?"

[I sent someone to check the building's CCTV footage.]

"Make sure to never get caught tailing them."

After a moment, another person's voice came over the line.

[Kang In-hyuk entered unit 812, a place called Monex GmbH.]

The person reporting had just checked the CCTV.

"I'll look into that place."

[We'll keep following them.]

Finishing the call, Im Deok-chang's worries deepened.

Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu of KQ Group had revealed Kang In-hyuk's position as successor, making it clear to everyone.

In the process, with shares as the condition, everything regarding Kang In-hyuk had been handed over to Baek Ji-woong as agreed.

Up to that point, everything was going as Im Deok-chang had hoped.

But now, Kang In-hyuk's sudden trip abroad at this timing was suspicious.

So, though it might be a bit risky, he had put people on their tail.

Meanwhile, he searched the National Intelligence Service's overseas database for information on 'Monex GmbH'.

"Hmm... On the surface, nothing seems out of place."

There were no big red flags in the company registration, certified copies, or financial transaction records.

"Would I have to dig deeper? Why did they even visit here in the first place? For what reason? Is it related to Taeshin Group?"

Unless there was suspicion of a crime, the NIS database only contained surface-level information.

Soon, Im Deok-chang called in a subordinate who had been waiting outside.

"Tell the overseas team to investigate a company in Geneva, Switzerland, called Monex GmbH."

It was the Korean name for Monex LLC.

At this, the staffer replied, looking slightly troubled.

"Unofficially?"

"That's right. And be extra sure it doesn't reach the first deputy director's ears."

When the subordinate left, Im Deok-chang called Reina Blackwood, who was working at Taeshin.

[What's the reason for your call?]

"Is there any way you could obtain data on internal fund transfers? I need to check whether there was any financial flow to a company in Geneva, Switzerland, called Monex GmbH."

[Is this related to Kang In-hyuk?]

"Yes. He's visiting the company in Geneva as we speak."

Silence fell on the other end for a moment.

[I'll try to find out, but it may be difficult.]

"If you ask Tae Seok-ho, surely it shouldn't be too hard?"

Taeshin Trading's executive vice president position held significant authority within the company.

[I heard that after Taeshin Asset Management, the entire internal security system was changed. I might be able to check, but it's almost impossible to do so without leaving a trace.]

That was another project Kang In-hyuk had overseen internally.

"To that extent?"

[There might be some materials available offline; I'll see what I can find.]

"I'll leave it to you."

Having heard her answer, Im Deok-chang's unease only deepened.

Chapter 100

A Raccoon-like Man

Several days had passed.

Im Deok-chang, the third deputy director of the National Intelligence Service, received a report from the subordinate to whom he had given instructions earlier.

"There's really that much of Taeshin's shares involved with those companies?"

Along with Monex LLC in Geneva, Switzerland, there was also a company called Luxanta Exchange in Monaco, which Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha had recently visited, so he had ordered a closer look.

Now that the results were in, it turned out those companies held a significant number of shares in Taeshin Group.

"To be precise, the company employees hold the shares in a distributed manner. Summed up, the two companies own 8.2% of Mulsan and 2.5% of Electronics."

In current value, all together, it reached about 2 trillion won in shares.

"How did such a large chunk of shares end up with them?"

"It appears the shares were gradually acquired over a period difficult to verify. Taeshin Group must have put in considerable effort."

At the same time, Im Deok-chang could guess whose scheme it was.

But, with his subordinate present, he didn't bring up the name.

"I'll check the rest myself, so leave the documents and you may go."

"Understood."

Left alone in the office, Im Deok-chang brought over the documents and began to read.

"Chairman Tae Gun-seung... so this is how he was preparing the succession for Taeshin Group? And not Tae Seok-hyun or Taeseok-ho, but his granddaughter, Tae Ju-ha? And even to an illegitimate child?"

Along with his muttering, Im Deok-chang faintly raised the corners of his mouth rather than becoming serious.

"So, it means Chairman Tae intends to exclude Tae Seok-hyun and Tae Seok-ho from the line of succession."

After thinking it over, he picked up his phone.

[Have you decided?]

It was the voice of Baek Ji-woong, chairman of WISE&WIRE Group, on the other end of the line.

Not long ago, he had agreed to the deal Im Deok-chang proposed, but Im Deok-chang had temporarily held off accepting due to Kang In-hyuk and Tae Ju-ha's suspicious activities.

"I'll go along with your proposal, chairman Baek. But the purchase price should be at 70%, not 50%."

[You expect that much after everything I'm giving up?]

A full 20% increase. In terms of funds, that would be at least 100 billion won more.

Baek Ji-woong couldn't help but be taken aback.

"You didn't think I'd know Kang In-hyuk had refused Chairman Kang Cheon-gyu's succession offer, did you?"

There was a brief silence on the other end.

Information he'd thought was fully contained had leaked out.

[Even if you know, does it change anything? Chairman Kang will do whatever it takes to bring Kang In-hyuk into KQ Group.]

"But he has no interest, does he? And if I'm to poach Kang In-hyuk, I'll need the capital for it."

[Didn't you think our side's purchase point was already pretty high?]

"Well, that's..."

To begin with, the Taeshin Group's stock price crash was Im Deok-chang's doing.

He'd paid a heavy price when Baek Ji-woong swooped in and took the lead.

[So what is it going to be?]

"I'll settle for just 10% more. No higher."

That was 60% of the original purchase price.

Not exactly cheap, but Im Deok-chang's shares were necessary to maneuver Taeshin Group.

[57%. If that's not enough, let's end our deal here.]

The decisiveness in his voice was clear.

Im Deok-chang, holding his phone, began tapping the desk with the fingers of his other hand.

Tap— tap—

"Fine. 57%. How are you going to transfer the shares?"

[We'll draw up a share transfer contract with Mirage International, which holds the shares.]

"You're doing this quite legally."

[This way, I don't have to see you face-to-face, right?]

Hearing that, something occurred to Im Deok-chang.

"When the deal is over, you'll pull back all your people from Kang In-hyuk's side, right?"

[Don't ask what's obvious. And you need to step back as well.]

He was referring to Baek Si-hwan and Reina Blackwood, who each had their eye on the target.

Thus, the call ended.

At the same time, Im Deok-chang wore a sly smile.

The hastily devised plan, based on a chance bit of information, had worked on Baek Ji-woong.

Of course, he couldn't be careless until the actual transfer contract was inked...

...

Meanwhile, after the call, Baek Ji-woong of W&W Group wore a subtle expression.

"Is something wrong?"

Do Jung-geol, observing from beside him, asked.

"He's stubborn, as expected... but something feels off."

"Do you think he's plotting something?"

"To be honest, I thought Hyottoko wouldn't give up his shares. Especially after putting Reina in place the moment Lee Jae-jun was dealt with by Tae Seok-ho's side."

Originally, Lee Jae-jun was Tae Seok-ho's secretary and watchdog—and Baek Ji-woong's man.

With his death and Reina Blackwood taking his place, the confrontation had truly begun.

Of course, it wasn't Hyottoko (Im Deok-chang)'s side that killed Lee Jae-jun.

This was certain, so Baek Ji-woong couldn't make Im Deok-chang's interference a public issue within his organization and could only watch.

"But with Hyottoko failing to secure the shares, won't that become a problem on his end?"

"That's not wrong, but he's such a raccoon-like fellow..."

To earlier, he'd felt an odd, nagging sensation.

"Can't you check through the wire you planted in the National Intelligence Service?"

"They've already been cut. I'm guessing they purged them during the current Taeshin business."

Baek Ji-woong himself had already let some members of the security division go, finding Im Deok-chang's involvement in the game suspicious.

An eye for an eye.

Knowing each other's tendencies so well, what they gave and took hardly differed.

"So what about the deal? If we stall, hyottoko might sense something."

"Let's drag it out, saying we need time to arrange funds. Given the amount, he won't think it strange. Meanwhile, I'll check if he's got any agents moving in secret near him."

"Understood. I'll delay it as much as possible."

* * *

In-hyuk passed through Geneva, Switzerland and Monaco with Tae Ju-ha for five days and four nights, then arrived in Hong Kong.

This time, instead of a company, they went straight to the hotel.

"I know it's important, but tonight, I'm resting no matter what. No interruptions, okay?"

"..."

He gave no answer. He hadn't said anything to her, either.

He'd only managed to grab some sleep in transit hotels and on planes as they moved through Switzerland and Monaco.

Of course, they'd only ridden first class, so it wasn't uncomfortable, but with the ongoing matters of Taeshin Group succession, both she and her secretary, Heo Yu-rim, showed clear signs of exhaustion.

"Understood?"

When In-hyuk just stood silently, she asked again, as if for confirmation.

"Understood. Just let me know when you wake up."

"I'll eat with Secretary Heo here and call you after."

"That's fine, too. Oh, and just in case, if anything happens, don't leave your room under any circumstances. Lock the door, and call either me or these two right away."

Tae Ju-ha asked, slightly tense.

"Wait... Are you saying something might happen?"

"I didn't mention it earlier, but we've been followed since Switzerland. By the way the tail changes with each leg, they're not ordinary guys."

At this, both Tae Ju-ha and Heo Yu-rim looked at In-hyuk in shock.

"Why are you only telling us now?"

"I judged it wasn't immediately dangerous. We hadn't left the airport or stayed anywhere too long. But tonight is different, so you need to be careful."

"Are you sure we're safe?"

"If they meant us harm, they would've tried already. Anyway, that's why I picked a hotel with decent security. Please relax."

With In-hyuk's calm explanation, Tae Ju-ha scowled.

"How am I supposed to relax after hearing that?!"

"It's not like we can't do it, either."

"Haaa... Fine, I get it."

"I'll get a room close to yours, but don't think about coming out—just call on the phone."

"And if you don't answer?"

"Then these two will be in real trouble."

He referred to Hong Yu-geon and Van Hester.

With that, they wrapped up the talk and headed for the lobby.

"2個套房. 請分別給我2個, 3個房間. 還有儘量2個房間近一點的. (Two suites. Each with two and three bedrooms. And please make sure the two rooms are as close together as possible.)"

With fluent Cantonese, the hotel staff completed check-in and got the keys ready.

Watching the process, Tae Ju-ha let out another long sigh of surprise.

"So it's not just English, but also French, spanish... and Cantonese? Did you just pick those up in your spare time?"

"You're perceptive. But do you know Cantonese?"

"I worked with someone from New York who spoke it, so I can at least tell it apart."

Soon after, with keys in hand, the group headed upstairs.

The women took the suite with two rooms; it was a precaution, just in case.

In-hyuk and the others entered the other room.

Hong Yu-geon, looking exhausted, sank heavily onto the couch.

"Those guys are really persistent. Still no sign of the boss?"

"No. But I think I have a hunch now."

At his reply, Van Hester and Hong Yu-geon, who had been heading to the fridge, turned to look.

"Really? Where?"

"I think it's the National Intelligence Service. Someone put their people on us."

In-hyuk went to the fridge with Van Hester, grabbed a bottle of water, checked it by rubbing it with his thumb and palm out of habit, then took a drink.

Once his thirst had eased, he walked over to the balcony and glanced around.

"How do you know?"

Hong Yu-geon's curiosity grew.

"The guy who approached us near the elevator earlier was tailing us. But the radio equipment he was using was standard issue there."

"And you recognized it?"

It was from the time when he belonged to UID in his previous life.

He'd encountered NIS agents during overseas operations before as well.

As UID was a secret special forces unit under the Ministry of Defense, he'd never revealed himself to them.

"Just happened that way."

"How do you know this stuff? And what does the NIS want by following us?"

"Probably related to those guys."

At that, Hong Yu-geon's face hardened.

"... You mean Kooou? You think they have connections in the National Intelligence Service, too?"

"Given the circumstances, it's the most likely explanation."

Several incidents had already proved that Kooou had influence with the police and prosecutors.

Even UID, under the Ministry of Defense where In-hyuk once belonged, had brushed up against them.

There was no reason to think the National Intelligence Service wouldn't be included.

"Who the heck are those guys?"

"Anyway, for now it seems they're just watching for their own reasons. Still, you should be on alert while I'm out."

Saying that, In-hyuk made his way toward the door, prompting Hong Yu-geon to stand up.

"Where are you going?"

"I have an important matter to take care of. It's something I need to do alone, so you two stand guard for the others and take turns resting."

"What if something happens to you out there?"

After the gun attack in America, he was understandably worried.

"They already announced who I am. I won't be in immediate danger."

"I can't tell if that's confidence or carelessness... but if the boss says so, there's nothing I can do."

In-hyuk put on sunglasses and headed out.

When he got to the first floor and hailed a taxi at the hotel's front gate, he confirmed that the NIS tail had resumed.

"請去旺角. (Please take me to Mong Kok.)"

It was the busiest district in Hong Kong.

In-hyuk pulled out his phone and called someone. As the line connected, a female voice spoke in French.

[Je pensais que c'était un no—show. Tu l'as appelé? (Thought it was a no-show, but you called?)]

"I didn't take this job out of boredom."

In-hyuk responded in fluent French.

[So just do as I was hired, right?]

"We'll proceed at the designated place in twenty minutes."

[Okay.]

"Don't get caught—absolutely no funny business."

[Of course.]

Not long after, In-hyuk arrived at Mong Kok. The NIS agents were still following him.

He slipped into one of the crowded alleys and continued walking.

After glancing around, he went into an electronics market to dodge the agents' line of sight.

They scoured the area, searching anxiously.

About five minutes later, In-hyuk, looking just as before, reappeared in their line of sight.