

Once Again 181

Chapter 181

"We got the registration forms for now."

Maru handed the forms over to Taesik. There were four third years who were just there by name, two new first years, and four second years.

"Oh, new kids from our class."

"Yes. I just wanted to fill in the numbers for now."

Clubs with less than ten people didn't have the luxury of a clubroom, so Maru met the quota using ghost members.

"You must be thinking of finding other members next week."

Taesik leaned backwards with a troubled look.

"Is there an issue?"

"The rules have changed, unfortunately. The school recently had a meeting about this after they received a request from a student."

Taesik got up from his seat and walked out of the teacher's office, Maru followed behind him. Taesik ordered two cups of coffee from the vending machine next to the school store before walking over to a corner.

"The faculty talked about how some clubs had clubrooms since the beginning of school. The principal seemed oddly willing to talk about this topic for some reason. Usually, he leaves this kind of stuff to the school council."

"...Could it be..."

"The school council decided to let other clubs try having clubrooms as well and the faculty agreed. So they decided to perform an investigation on all clubs that had clubrooms for more than five years. Ah, sorry, they already finished the investigation and made their decision."

"So what happens to the acting club?"

"We're losing the clubroom. The reading, music, and toys club get to keep their clubs due to their results in various national competitions, but not us."

"So the winter competition wasn't appealing enough."

Taesik nodded.

"I couldn't say anything to the school wanting to let other students have a chance at getting their own clubrooms. Especially since they are right."

Taesik gulped down the chilled coffee, Maru finished his in one gulp as well.

"How long do we have?"

“The third week of March.”

“It’s going to take a while to move all of the props.”

“Worse, finding a place to keep all of it.”

“You don’t happen to have a storage room somewhere, do you?”

“Of course I don’t. What made you think I would?”

“I was just asking out of false hope.”

Maru was reminded of a time when the landowner decided to raise his rent. It must’ve been an obvious decision to the landowner, but Maru recalled the feeling of having his world crumble around him when he heard it. It almost felt like he got betrayed by his own house, even though that house was never actually his, to begin with. It was the same with the school, the clubroom wasn’t actually theirs. It was the school’s and there was nothing they could do about the school’s decision.

“We’ll have to find a new place first.”

“I’ll help as much as possible.”

“Do you know of a storage space the school doesn’t use?”

“Don’t know. I’ll take a look around.”

“Thank you.”

Maru returned to the classroom after finishing his conversation with Taesik, Daemyung greeted him with a bright smile.

“How’d it go? Did it work?”

“Nope, we’ll have to leave.”

“What? Really?”

“The rules have changed. Can’t do anything about it. We’ll have to leave.”

Maru gave back the registration forms he collected from his classmates.

“What the, what’s going to happen to you guys then?” Dojin asked worriedly.

“We’re screwed, obviously.”

“...Is it because I left?”

“You’re definitely not enough to influence this decision, so don’t worry. Explain to the others as well. We’re doing this because the school’s telling us to do it, not because you guys left.”

Maru didn’t want the former members feeling guilty over this, they left because they all had their own paths to walk. Maru didn’t want to place any unnecessary burdens on them.

“So how did this happen out of nowhere, then?”

“Well, that’s the odd thing.”

The principal probably took a liking to the school council’s suggestion. After all, the man disliked the acting club as is. But why did the school council speak out against it to begin with? Maru tried asking the vice president’s friend, but he didn’t get a decent response.

“I just know that the idea came out and it reached the principal’s ears.”

Was it just coincidence?

“Let’s head to the clubroom after lunch. We’ll need a plan if we want to move everything out.” “So we really are leaving, huh,” Daemyung sighed.

It was a done deal, so they couldn’t help it. They’d be better off trying to plan things out as fast as possible. On their way to the cafeteria after their fourth period, they ran into Taesik.

“They said there wasn’t a good place inside the school.”

Bad news never comes alone, does it? The school didn’t even have a single storage room to spare.

“Thank you for looking.”

“I’m looking for clubs willing to give up their clubrooms, but this isn’t easy either.”

“You probably won’t find any, since people dislike letting go of things they have.”

“Right. But I still have hope for now.”

“We’re going to organize the clubroom after lunch. We’ll start with the heavier stuff close to the door first.”

“And we’d moved everything just two months ago too.”

“We can’t help it, I guess. Please enjoy your meal.”

“You too.”

Outside the school... Maru didn’t have a very good place in mind. Just as he walked with a deep frown on his face, his back suddenly turned hot with a loud slapping noise. Yoonjung was smiling awkwardly behind him when he turned around.

“D-did it hurt a lot?”

She seemed to misunderstand the reason behind his expression.

“It’s fine. I was just frowning because of something that happened. Did you have business here?”

“...I heard the news about the clubroom.”

“Right.”

“Did you find a place yet?”

“Mr. Taesik couldn’t find a good place, so I’m a bit stuck. We’ll have to move out.”

“Out? Out where?”

“That’s the issue.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows. There were only residences next to the school, was there a building that could house their stuff nearby?

“What about a tent?” Yoonjung asked with her index finger pointing to the air.

A tent, huh.

“We could get a shipping container.”

“A c-container?”

“Used ones go for about two million won, so it should be a short term good solution. Oh, it might actually be a bit cheaper around now.”

Just as he was thinking a little more about the solution, he heard Yoonjung let out an exclamation of surprise.

“You really know everything, Maru.” “Yes, well.”

“You should’ve been the president after all.”

“Mm, that’s how things turned out.”

“Really? What about Geunseok?”

“Something happened to him. He left.”

“Really?”

Yoonjung widened her eyes, then left saying that she’d be talking to the boy.

“She’s the same as ever.”

“She’d be popular with the boys too if she wasn’t so energetic all the time.”

Maru could only nod at Dojin’s statement.

“A container, though? Can you even buy that?” Daemyung asked.

“There’s quite a lot of supply. If we ask the right people, we could even get it delivered for free. It could be even cheaper if all we’re looking for is a waterproof one.”

“B-buying one? You said it was over two million.”

“Well, if we can get permission from the school, there’s no reason not to.”

“What about the money?”

Maru smiled at Daemyung.

“Alright, we found one solution, so let’s eat.”

“No, but what about the money?”

“Let’s go. Noodles for lunch.”

“What about the money?!”

Daemyung chased after Maru with a confused expression.

* * *

“Who was that girl at lunch? She was pretty.”

“Someone who’s into me.”

“Seriously?”

Geunseok shrugged at his friend. Yoonjung came to ask him why he left during lunchtime. He was annoyed at her for asking so many questions, so he just told her that he found the club annoying. He led her on a bit because it was cute watching her asking him to come back, but he had no intentions of going back. Well, not that he could to begin with. His dad wouldn’t allow it.

Nothing bad happened on the day his dad found out, thankfully. But he was told to give up on acting completely. Geunseok knew that he wouldn’t be able to change his father’s mind at all.

“Hey, Hong Geunseok.”

He met his friend right in front of the council room, it was the council’s vice president. A few days ago, he gave his friend a little suggestion. To change the rules so that more clubs would be able to use clubrooms.

“Your request went through.”

“Really?”

“The senior really liked it. The principal was a fan too.”

Geunseok smiled.

“That’s good.”

“Why did you ask for a change like that out of nowhere?”

“Just because? Fairness, I guess?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Ah, I was going to hang with a few girls, want to join?”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Fine. Food’s on me.”

He felt better already. He’d need to wait to hear the specifics, but the acting club would probably have to move out because of this. Geunseok walked up to the fourth floor through the central stairs. He

noticed that the acting club's door was open. Looking inside, he could see the club members moving several props.

"What are you doing?" Geunseok asked, suppressing a laugh.

"Organizing."

"Organizing? Why?"

"They said we need to move out, so we don't have a choice. Want to help?"

"You think I'm as free as you people?"

He almost let his laughter slip out, Geunseok turned around after wishing them luck. He felt good already watching them being put to work, it'd take a lot of effort to move all of those props.

'Should've acted tame from the start, fucker.'

Geunseok took a look at the sign of the acting club before stepping downstairs. Acting was pretty fun. He didn't have many regrets about stepping away from it, it definitely had its own charm. Too bad his father didn't allow it, it wasn't like he could rebel against the man anyway. Only crazy people like his brother did that, thinking about his brother made Geunseok's stomach twist. His brother managed to get recognized, disgusting. The person who couldn't even chase after his shadow was now acknowledged by his father.

"I hope you fucking fail. All of you."

Geunseok took a step forward with a bitter frown.

* * *

"I didn't think you'd contact me out of nowhere like this."

"I happened to have the time and I also happened on some troubling news."

Hong Janghae took a sip of the porridge a fancy waitress had brought him. This multi-leveled Chinese restaurant wasn't that big, but it was a place that many celebrities frequented. Janghae knew very well how difficult it was to reserve a seat here.

"Geunsoo told me that you enjoy Chinese food."

"Yes, quite a bit. This is a place I've been meaning to visit for quite a bit. I didn't think my first time here would be for such an occasion."

He came thanks to Junmin's invitation today, Janghae was a fan of the food and the quiet environment here.

"Do you drink?"

"I enjoy it."

Junmin put in an order after hearing that, a golden bottle of alcohol arrived shortly after.

"Please, have a drink."

He took a glass from Junmin. The orange lighting of the restaurant attached an ethereal quality to the alcohol, Janghae poured Junmin a glass, too.

"This drink is good as an appetizer. Let's talk after our meal."

"Sounds good."

Janghae didn't refuse, he was hungry. He slowly savoured each dish from the courses. The tantan noodles in the jade dish were the most inspiring. Once the meal ended, Junmin opened his mouth to speak.

"I heard Geunseok left the acting club."

Janghae nodded.

"I made him do it. Geunsoo is a very stubborn boy. I wasn't able to stop him because of that, but Geunseok's different. He listens to me very well. He returns to his rightful path with just a few words."

"I see."

Janghae let go of the glass he was holding just a moment before. He had the feeling he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"I dislike small talk."

"Me too. So I'll cut straight to the chase."

Junmin put his two hands on the table.

"What do you think about letting Geunseok continue acting?"

Chapter 182

"Acting? My son?"

"Yes, that's right."

"My, I'm a bit shocked."

It's only been a few days since he told his son not to take after his older brother.

"I think I'm good with having just one son stray off the right path."

"I'm not forcing it, of course. I'm just asking you to open up to the possibility of letting your son try acting for two more years. So that the boy has options to succeed."

"Success... Do you think Geunseok has what it takes to be successful in acting?"

"For now, yes."

"For now?"

"As you know, Geunseok doesn't really have a process. He has the motivation to become successful, but he doesn't really know what he wants to do."

“He’s not matured, after all.”

“That’s why I’m asking you. I understand that Geunseok wasn’t taking his studies lightly even when he was acting?”

Janghae smiled slightly in pride.

“He always placed first.”

“I don’t know if you know this, but the team Geunseok was in charge of won the cultural recognition award in their last national acting competition.”

“I never heard of this.”

“It wasn’t first place, but he did manage to earn the acting club its first award in a few years.”

“Hoh, he did?”

“Yes.”

“So he really might have talent after all.”

Janghae took a sip from his oolong tea, he was wondering what Junmin was thinking of right now. Did his younger son have that much talent?

“What do you think about letting him do acting so long as it doesn’t interfere with studies?”

“I still think that time would be better spent on studying instead.”

“Grades don’t linearly improve with the amount of time invested. It’s best to think about efficiency.”

“You mean…”

“If you allow it, I’ll arrange a good teacher for Geunseok. They’re people who studied abroad, so I’m sure you’ll take a liking to them.”

“Personal tutoring?”

Junmin took out a small folder without saying any more, inside were documents detailing several people who graduated from famous foreign colleges.

“I’m confident that this wouldn’t negatively impact Geunseok’s grades.”

Janghae closed the folder to look at Junmin. He was starting to become increasingly suspicious. Why was this man so desperate to have Geunseok become an actor?

“Is Geunseok really worth this much investment?”

“He’s definitely worth it, but there’s something else as well.”

“Something else?”

“Yes. Sir, what do you think a person needs most when they grow?”

Janghae didn’t even hesitate with his answer.

“Hardships.”

“Indeed. I agree.”

“You think my son will become a hardship for someone else?”

“If I were to be direct, then yes. It won’t be a bad contract though. If Geunseok follows my curriculum well and decides to go into acting after high school, I plan on giving him my full support. I promise you that I’ll raise him with every method I have available to me. I’m a bit embarrassed to say this, but... With my name value, it’s not that difficult to have your son appear on every major TV channel.”

“Hmm.”

Janghae stroked his chin. He did take his time researching this Lee Junmin in his spare time, he knew very well that this man wasn’t bluffing right now.

“And even if Geunseok loses interest in acting, I won’t cut my support for his education. What do you think, isn’t this an alright deal for his current value?”

“It’s not just alright. It’s amazing. It does make me curious. Just who are you planning on raising to use my son as a stepping stone?”

Janghae continued with a small pause.

“Also, what would you do if my son reverses the outcome?”

“I just have to raise Geunseok in that case. No need to think that hard.”

“Weren’t you planning on sacrificing my son because you cared very much for the other side?”

“Sacrificing? No way. I like Geunseok. I like people with value, not people who can’t do anything even after taking my money. If you can’t rise up, then you’ll only get trampled on. I want to lead the people who are capable of rising up.”

Janghae had to change his impression of Junmin. He thought the man was just a nice, gentle representative of a management company last time. Completely different from the man right now who was incredibly cold and calculating. He was showing his kinder qualities to Geunsoo, who succeeded, and coldness to Geunseok. Janghae emptied his glass of alcohol before letting Junmin pour some more.

“Fine. Let’s do it.”

“Good decision.”

“Please take good care of him. Geunseok’s a bit frustrating, but he does make good results as long as he focuses.”

“I am well aware.”

Janghae emptied his new glass immediately.

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Junmin took out his phone after meeting Janghae.

“Geunsoo.”

- Yes, senior?

“Where are you?”

- I went to Maru’s school to pick him up. I think it’ll take some time though.

“What’s up?”

Junmin received word of Maru’s situation through the phone.

“Alright, I’ll take care of it, so take Maru down there as soon as you can. You’ll be there by dawn if you leave now.”

- You care about him a lot, huh?

“I care about him just as much as I cared about you. At least he didn’t leave home like someone else. There’s no helping the fact that I’d care a lot more about him than someone else who ran away penniless.”

- Wow, sounds like one crazy dude. You’re talking about Ganghwan, right?

“Shush, just hurry up. Teacher’s probably waiting.”

- Understood.

Junmin took out his notebook and checked his schedule. Thankfully, he was free until next weekend.

“Alright then.”

Junmin took out his phone again and called lawyer Park, he immediately hung up after getting a voice message. Just a few minutes later, he got a call back from lawyer Park.

- What’s up?

“Do you have time?”

- Time? What do you mean by time?

“You remember meeting the chairman of this one high school because of Maru’s case?”

- Chairman? Oh! Of Woosung High? Of course, I do. We drank quite a bit together.

“I was wondering if I could see him today. For a favor.”

- A favor? Are you planning on branching out into schools now?

“Not at all. Just come to restaurant Yongjung for now. You like their fried rice, don’t you?”

- Are you trying to flex on me? Meeting at a place like that just for fried rice?

“So? Not coming?”

- No, of course I am. By the way, what would you even have done if I didn't have a retainer agreement with you? Do you think you can just call people like me out in an afternoon?

"I know you're not that busy with your current case, so get over here. You can leave your current work to someone under you."

- Ugh. So, you're planning on seeing that chairman now?

"I mean, it's dinnertime. Might as well meet him here."

- I'll try asking him then.

"Don't ask. Make him come here."

- I hate how you always make such troublesome requests.

"But you always do them."

Junmin closed his phone and waited. Lawyer Park was a very straightforward person, he always told you what he could and couldn't do. If the man was hitting back with a joke like he did just now, then it meant that he could do it.

Junmin drank from the tea the employee gave him as he waited. After about thirty minutes, lawyer Park entered the room. The man took off his blazer immediately and hung it over his chair.

"So hot. It's Spring already."

"It's just March. Isn't Spring still a bit of a way off?"

"I get hot easily."

"Anyway, the chairman?"

"He's coming soon. He didn't understand what I meant by the CEO of JA production, so I just told him you're someone big in the entertainment business."

Lawyer Park complained about the lack of food immediately after taking a sip of cold water.

"I'll order a full course once the chairman arrives, so be patient."

After about twenty more minutes of waiting, the chairman arrived as well. The man had a smile on his face, but his eyes were betraying his true feelings. Junmin stood up to greet the man with a smile.

"Hello. The name's Lee Junmin."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Cha Iltae."

Junmin ordered the food immediately as the chairman sat down. Since he ate with Janghae earlier, Junmin settled on some fruit for himself instead.

"I'm a bit shocked by the sudden call."

"I apologize. I should've scheduled a meeting at a later time, but I wanted to see you in a hurry, which is why I contacted you through him."

Junmin pointed at lawyer Park as he spoke, who smiled as he picked up a piece of chicken.

"I see. But why did you want to see me...?"

"You're probably very busy, so I'll cut straight to the chase. It's about the acting club."

"Acting club? Woosung High's acting club?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"I wanted your help regarding them."

"Help... Are they disappearing or something?"

"Not necessarily, I just heard that the school's kicking them out of their clubroom. So I wanted to get a shipping container into the school to give them some storage space. I was wondering if that would be okay."

The chairman gave lawyer Park a little glance. The two of them started off on an incredibly bad footing, but they ended up becoming good friends by the end of the school violence incident.

"This friend pays people back in multiples. If it doesn't harm you much, I think it'd be good to take him up on his request."

"If you say so, lawyer Park. There's space for a shipping container behind the school, so the acting club is free to use one."

"Thank you. Oh, and one more thing."

"What is it?"

"Could you pass along a message to the principal?"

"What?"

"To allow the acting club to split in two later on. A student will probably request for such in the near future. I hope you can allow this to happen."

"Two acting clubs? Why?"

"Well... Let's just call it greed."

"Mm, it's not very difficult, so I can easily do it. Is that really enough?"

"Yes. More than enough."

"Haha, I was actually quite nervous. Lawyer Park introduced you as someone amazing, so I thought your request was going to be equally troublesome."

The chairman became noticeably more relaxed.

"I can fulfill requests like these anytime, so please contact me whenever you want."

“Thank you. Ah, let’s get back to eating, shall we? Before the food gets cold.”

Junmin smiled.

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“I’ll be back either late Sunday or early Monday. Yes. Please don’t worry. It’s like... camping.”

“Please don’t worry, mother! I’ll take care of Maru!!”

Geunsoo was shouting right next to Maru, who hung up after hearing his mother tell him to be careful.

“Juwangsan National Park? At this time of day? Mr. Junmin’s a bit too much sometimes.”

“You can sleep on the ride, but I have to keep driving. Ugh, what a life.”

“Want me to take over?”

“I’m not planning on an early grave.”

The car slid down the highway with ease, a sharp blast of wind whistled into the car through a small gap through the window.

“What’s Senior Moonjoong doing over there, by the way?”

“Getting his feel for acting back. You’ll see when you get there.”

“What am I supposed to do once I’m there?”

“Study.”

“Study?”

“The auditions for the movie starts next month. Weren’t you preparing for it?”

Maru nodded. Auditions. Auditions for the movie adaptation of the book Moonjoong gave him... so it was this close already, huh.

“Teacher probably wants to demonstrate how he prepares. I think he wants you to snag a role.”

“That’s quite a bit of pressure.”

“That’s why you need to work hard. There’s a lot of people counting on your success.”

“Me? But I didn’t even do anything.”

“Eh, there’s probably a reason why all the bigwigs have their attention on you regardless. They probably saw something inside you that you can’t see yet.”

Maru looked down at his hand. It was nice knowing that he was in the spotlight, but it really was a bit stressful. He wasn’t very confident just yet, acting on a stage was entirely different from an audition.

“Ah, Ms. Suyeon’s going to be there, by the way.”

“That’s not good news.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to get close to her. Her personality isn’t compatible with mine.”

“I-is that so.”

“Yes.”

“You’re very direct, aren’t you?” Geunsoo smiled awkwardly.

Chapter 183

“Til next time.”

The chairman got into his car after shaking hands.

“So it went well?” Lawyer Park asked.

Junmin nodded with a smile.

“But why is Lee Junmin of all people taking the time to take care of little kids?”

“The more time an investor spends on his investment, the more he’ll get out of it.”

“You think Maru has that much value?”

“There’s that and I didn’t want to lose Geunseok so abruptly. It’d be nice to see both brothers become a pair of stars in the Korean entertainment business, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Ugh, again with that habit of yours, you were like that since college. Then again, you always liked to profit off of other people’s success.”

“I mean, the only thing I got out of my fifteen years of acting was just debt. That’s when I realized that I couldn’t make it big by myself.”

He realized a long time ago that he had no talent in acting, the reason why he tried it regardless was because of false hope. He has spent his mid-thirties struggling to make it big. He realized his foolishness when the theater company he worked at crumbled to the ground.

“Why don’t you travel and get some rest now? I’m sure you have more than enough money at this point.”

“Nope. I don’t want to retire yet. There are still so many things I haven’t done.”

“You’re still greedy, after producing so many big stars in Korea?”

Junmin nodded. Money no longer motivated him, it didn’t matter if he threw away all his money to get what he wanted.

“There are many people who are good at acting. They’re all great, but they don’t meet my requirements. They’ll never meet it.”

“...I think that person’s still got you in her grips. What was her name again?”

“Jung Haejoo.”

“Right. Her. I remember that time. It was around now. You were laughing like a madman, telling me you finally found it.”

“Right. She was the one person who really met my standards. Someone who could’ve become a true star.”

“I don’t want to bring up a dead person, but I was curious from the beginning. Did you like her?”

“...She liked dogs very much.”

“So that’s where your love of dogs comes from. Is that why you’re still single?”

“Maybe?”

“Hey, get married already. Don’t get tied down to your past so much. Her acting back then was probably amazing, but was it amazing enough for you to think about it even now? Memories are always beautiful. It can’t be helped that the Haejoo of your memories is better than everyone you’re seeing now. You’re past the age to be chasing after dreams. You should come to an agreement with yourself and enjoy life a bit more.”

“So, that’s why you keep calling me on your anniversary, to keep telling me you’re tired as hell?”

“Ugh, you and your memory.”

Lawyer Park stepped onto his car.

“It’s all subjective in the end. I don’t think there’s an actor who can charm everyone. Lower your hurdles a little bit. Make yourself comfortable.”

“I must look horrid if you, of all people, tells me that.”

“You only just realized? You’ve raised so many people over the past two decades. Just grab anyone on the street and ask them. Ask them if the people you’ve raised are average. Everyone’s going to say that your people are fantastic actors. So stop chasing after your memories. You’re amazing enough as is.”

Lawyer Park left, waving his hand through the window. Junmin watched the car get further away from his vision as he muttered.

“But friend, I’ve already seen it. I know what acting that can caress a person’s soul looks like. As you said, it could just be a ghost of my memories. But I can’t forget it. The play on that day, her acting on that day... I can’t help but chase after it, even if it’s but a ghost. I still haven’t stepped a foot away from the auditorium since that day.”

Junmin pressed down on his hat before walking away.

* * *

They arrived at Juwangsan National Park at around 1am, Geunsoo turned his car towards the still-lit villa.

“We’re here. You must be tired.”

“The one who should be tired is you.”

Maru followed Geunsoo out of the car into the villa. He could feel that there were people inside it, but there was no one in sight. The TV on the first-floor living room was making noises by itself.

“They must all be on the second floor.”

The two of them put down the food they bought on the way before walking up, they could hear noises coming from the room right next to the staircase. A voice of a woman. Geunsoo knocked on the door. A few seconds later, the door opened roughly. A blast of heat hit Maru on the face immediately. Heat not from a heater, but from a person’s energy.

“You’re here?”

Suyeon greeted them with a smile, her eyes glided down to the side onto Maru. Her smile deepened.

“Maru?”

“Yes. Well, hello.”

“You’re still not cute at all.”

Maru dodged Suyeon, who tried to pinch his cheeks lightly.

“Expensive as always. Well, come inside.”

Suyeon smiled as if she was used to this sort of treatment. Inside the room, there was a man with very short hair. In front of the man was a can of beer and a notebook, he raised his horned glasses to look at Maru.

“Who are you?”

Geunsoo was the one to answer that question.

“Mm, a complicated youth!”

Geunsoo spoke as if he was in a play.

“Did you two finally start to get along?”

“Nope, this author still hasn’t told me his name. Isn’t that a little too much, Mr. Geunsoo?”

“He’s just like that, so please be understanding.”

Geunsoo sat down next to the author, Maru sat there as well.

“What were you doing, by the way?”

“That woman was asking me to review her character, so I was watching.”

The man spoke with a very bored tone.

“I’m not ‘that woman’. I’m Kim Suyeon, I told you so many times already, Mr. Author.”

“Geunsoo’s here so I’ll be taking my leave.”

Suyeon blocked the door when the man tried to stand up.

“I’d like feedback from the author, please.”

“I told you already. It’s all good. I don’t know much about acting. Why is a professional like you trying to get feedback from me? Just do what you want.”

Maru smiled a little watching the two, watching Suyeon’s desperate behavior was a little amusing to him.

“Just help her out, why don’t you? You might end up working with her.”

Geunsoo pulled the man back as well, the man glared at Geunsoo before sitting back down.

“Alright then. Since the three of you are all here, please give me some feedback. I wanted to act out this bit right here.”

Suyeon opened the middle of the ‘Twilight Struggles’, she was pointing at the line of the second son’s daughter. Maru could remember the scene almost immediately, it was the result of reading the book ten times already after all.

Suyeon took a deep breath before collapsing down on the floor. She had an incredibly scared, frustrated look on her face, making it almost seem impossible that she was smiling a moment ago. She scratched away at the carpet below her as she slowly opened her mouth.

“...Grandpa, please don’t. Please? Please just calm down. There has to be a misunderstanding. Grandpa, grandpa! Agh!”

Suyeon moved backwards as if she just witnessed a massive snake in front of her. Maru could imagine a scene of an old man striking his dead son with a blunt tool once again. Crack. Crack. Crack. He could hear the horrible noises in his ears.

“Dad! Dad! Dad!”

Suyeon started crawling forwards again, pretending as if she was trying to help someone up. Surely there was a corpse in front of her right now, her expression was colored with desperation and fear. Terrifying, odd noises squeaked its way out from her open mouth. Her abnormal breathing, her trembling eyes, and her lost hands... She hugged the corpse in front of her before abruptly raising her head. She then fell back, as if she was hit by something.

‘As expected.’

A person without talent was sure to fail if they relied on relationships to move up in the world, but Suyeon was different. Setting aside the rumors about her, her acting skills were very real. She stood up from her spot after a short moment, she took a few seconds trying to calm herself without saying anything. Her hand on her chest was trembling slightly.

“How was it?”

Suyeon managed to open her mouth tiredly. Maru looked at the author, the man said ‘very good’ with a bitter smile.

"I told you, didn't I? You're a professional. It was flawless in my opinion. So asking for my feedback is pointless."

"I don't think so."

Suyeon was speaking confidently again.

"You see, people are very good at judging art even if you don't teach them about it. They have an objective standard for what good art looks like. I'm asking you, the author, as a result. Did my acting just now satisfy your standard? You said trying to get feedback from you was pointless? No way! I can tell from your face that you think my acting is bad."

Maru had to change his impression of Suyeon right there, she was greedy for success and she was talented. She was showing him right here that her eating up other men, in the end, was just one of her abilities. Of course, this made him want to distance himself from her even more. He did realize though that he should probably maintain a good relationship with her. After all, who knows when they might end up working together?

"You're very persistent."

"You just realized?"

The man raised his book with a shake of his head.

"The daughter of the second son realized throughout the conversation that she would likely die with her father. That's why she's desperate. I don't know how to put it, but you're missing that. It looks very uncomfortable to look at your acting, but I can't sense desperation from it. That's all I can say."

Suyeon put on an incredibly satisfied smile.

"See? You can do it if you try."

"Can we rest now? I've been stuck here for an hour already."

Suyeon stepped out with a nod, Geunsoo and the man followed behind her. The room was empty, Maru picked up the book from the floor and read the part Suyeon acted from again.

"Desperate."

"What is it?"

Maru reflexively looked up, the man was looking at him from the doorstep. Didn't he walk down with Geunsoo?

"You look dissatisfied."

"It's not much."

"So just tell me. What is it?"

Maru thought for a second, it was probably very rude to criticize someone else's creative work. Especially when said criticism came from a high schooler, he should just say something else here.

"I hate it when people make up words to avoid answering properly."

Maru smiled bitterly and closed his book, so this was someone who only preferred honesty, huh.

"I just didn't really like this part."

"Where?"

"She hugged the corpse on the floor shouting father.' This woman saw her grandfather murder her father cruelly. She even saw the man continuously strike her father's corpse even after death."

"Right."

"The woman wants to live. She has enough judgement to be able to speak even after witnessing a murder. There's even a scene of her trying to persuade her grandfather just before this one."

"So?"

"I found it a bit odd for her to hug her dead father when her life was in her grandfather's hands. I wondered what it would look like if she grabbed his pants and shouted grandfather instead... It's nothing big."

The man stretched out his hand as soon as Maru finished, he seemed to be asking for a handshake.

"I'm the person who wrote this book."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Gwak Joon, right?"

That was the name on the book's cover.

"That's right."

The handshake was very sudden, but Maru accepted it regardless. Right then, he heard a banging noise from downstairs. It was Suyeon.

"What are you doing upstairs?"

"We were just about to get down," Gwak Joon responded.

Suyeon glared at Gwak Joon before turning to Maru.

"Maru, this person's very cheap. He still hasn't told me his name after all this time."

"What? But the book..."

"That's his pen name. What an odd author, don't you think?"

Maru looked at Gwak Joon confusedly. He could see the man put an index finger over his lips behind Suyeon's back.

"Haha."

"What?"

"You're totally being played."

“What are you talking about?”

“Who knows?”

He could smell a spicy aroma from downstairs when he stepped out, his stomach was starting to churn in hunger.

“Did you eat?” Gwak Joon asked.

“Nope.”

“Let’s eat first. I’m a night owl so this is about the time I wake up. How about you?”

“I’m the same.”

“Alright, we can talk after the meal then.”

“Sure.”

Suyeon followed behind them with an annoyed shake of her head.

Chapter 184

“Where’s Senior Moonjoong, by the way?” Maru asked as he sat down.

“He said he needed to think, so he went out,” Suyeon answered.

“At this time?”

Was the man walking on a mountain at one in the morning?

“I think he just wants to organize his thoughts from somewhere quiet. More importantly, how’s the gamjatang? Good, right?”

“Bit salty for me.”

As soon as Maru responded, Gwak Joon followed up with ‘definitely salty’. Suyeon’s eyebrows rose up a little bit.

“Don’t eat it if you don’t want to. You know you look like an asshole if you complain about food though, right?”

Suyeon smirked. Gwak Joon immediately got up to grab cereal and milk from the fridge.

“Want some?”

“Yes please.”

Maru would gladly eat blocks of salt if it was for ‘her’, but definitely not for Suyeon. He poured the cereal in milk and topped it with some almonds.

“You’re too much.”

“I hear that a lot. Let’s go upstairs.”

Gwak Joon told Geunsoo that he would be taking Maru for the time being. Geunsoo tried to get up as well but sat back down upon receiving Suyeon's glare.

"Ugh, the men here are all just..."

Maru and Gwak Joon got to the second floor, leaving Suyeon to fume by herself downstairs. They entered a room that was a distance away from the staircase.

"Come in."

Maru followed the man inside, there were two desks and a single bed inside. One of the desks matched the overall design of the villa and the other one was a well-used, beaten steel desk.

"I can't write if I'm not on that desk," Gwak Joon said, pointing at the steel desk.

He seemed to be the type that couldn't work without certain things, Maru encountered such people in his officer worker days as well: the employee who became nervous without her doll on the desk, the supervisor who needed to have his family picture on the table, and the vice president who always needed to sign contracts with a fountain pen.

'It's almost dreamlike, but I did live through those moments.'

Maru briefly recalled faint memories of those people before they faded away as quickly as they came. He looked at Gwak Joon's desk with a sense of déjà vu as a result, he could feel the author's energy almost emanating from the table. The post-its that were stuck all over the table, the edges that became blackened from overuse, the drafts that were strewn all over it, and the laptop...

"You were writing a novel?"

"When I can't type on the laptop, I escape to paper. It does make for a nice change of pace."

It was an interesting use of the word 'escape' for Maru, he nodded as he walked towards the windowsill with its opened windows. The wind blowing inside was cold, but the air coming from the mountain was very refreshing.

"This is a good place to write."

"Yes, I agree."

They didn't continue their conversation until after they both finished eating.

"That part from before... Did you think of it on the spot?"

Gwak Joon asked as he put the empty bowl on the wooden table.

"No. I started thinking the part needed a fix on my fifth read. It's not weird without the fix though."

"No, that part you caught is definitely a mistake."

"A mistake?"

“A mistake that happened when I exchanged drafts with the editor, the final draft was one where the daughter hangs off of the grandfather. It’s written a little less dramatic than the way you put it though, I didn’t want her approaching a bloody old man for the sake of survival.” “I see.”

For sure, having the daughter scramble backwards out of fear would be more realistic than her hugging the old man’s waist.

“But by mistake, you mean...”

“They ended up printing from one of the past drafts. It was a mistake. Well, my mistake. I should’ve read it one last time before I gave the go-ahead for the print.”

“Can you fix it on the second print?”

“There’s no way my work would get a second print. The world of novels is a very competitive place.”

“But don’t you think you might get a chance if your movie succeeds?”

“That would be nice. I would be able to focus solely on writing if it did. I thought it was funny hearing that you needed money to write in the past, but I’m really suffering because of it now.”

Maru knew that many authors had trouble earning money. It would be best for the author to live solely off of money from their publications, but he did hear that most authors worked multiple jobs to survive.

“For sure, opening other people’s wallets is a very difficult thing.” “You sound like a know-it-all.”

“I worked part-time in the past.”

Among other things. Maru glanced at the post-it notes on the steel table, they must be ideas for Gwak Joon’s next projects. The notes were filled with odd scribbles. “Gun”, “Yum yum yum”, etc... What would he do there? Stuff like that.

“Were you writing your next novel?”

“Novel? No way. I was just scribbling my daydreams.”

“Twilight Struggles was almost too good to be just called a daydream. I did read it ten times after all.”

Gwak Joon smiled lightly at that, Maru felt as if he just caught something rare from the man.

“You were auditioning, I heard?”

“How did you know?”

“Mr. Moonjoong told me that he had a kid he wanted to work with.”

“Wow, how troublesome. That makes me nervous already.”

“Nervous? You don’t seem like the type that gets nervous.”

The man glanced at Maru through his horn-rimmed glasses, he had very good senses. In the end, Maru gave in and told the man he wasn’t nervous at all.

“The delinquent role, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Are you preparing for it in any way?”

“Other than reading the book? No. I don’t even know what to prepare for since I know nothing of auditions.”

The number of people he would be auditioning in front of, how many lines he’d need to act out, if he needs to mix in movement... He knew none of it. He knew he’d have to pay attention to it one way or the other, but he was busy enough as is with the acting club.

“I don’t know how auditions work either, so I can’t tell you much on that front. I can, however, tell you my thoughts when I wrote your character though.”

Gwak Joon sat on the table and motioned Maru close to him, he picked up one of the notebooks on the corner of the table.

“This was what inspired me to write *Twilight Struggles*.”

It was a little scrap of an article from a newspaper, a case of murder. Maru remembered it, it was about a young man who planned out his parents’ murder during desperate times amidst a financial crisis.

“Do you know the backstory of this case?”

“Wasn’t he caught? I know he had to serve his sentence.”

“That’s the end result, but the story that took place to the end was incredibly sad. The mother called the insurance company when she was stuck in her flaming house at her last moments. She checked that her son would receive the money on her death. She apparently sighed in relief when she got confirmation.”

“.....”

“That’s what made the insurance company wonder if this was a fraud. They launched an investigation and that’s how they found out that this was first-degree murder.”

It was a heavy story. The son sold his parents to survive while the parents worried for their child until the very end.

“That’s when I became curious. Would all parents sacrifice themselves for their children? How would parents that gave away their everything to let their children live on feel? What if they regretted their decision?”

“So that was the start of the novel.”

“That’s right. ‘*Twilight Struggles*’ is a novel that had all familial love stripped away from it. There is no joy in this novel. Everyone walks to their own path of self-destruction until the very end. But there is one person who smiles at the end.”

“The... old man.”

“That’s right. As a result, the movie I envisioned was something absolutely filled with madness. I hoped that all of the characters would be overtaken by insanity. The moment an old man’s hope in a crumbling gray city shatters, the movie starts accelerating to its eventual doom.”

Gwak Joon flipped the page on the notebook, he flipped through several pages of scribbles before reaching a certain page.

“This is the delinquent.”

There was just a single word and a drawing on that page. A revolver and a word reading “trigger” below it.

“I spoke with the scenario writer and the storyboard author. The delinquent appears for thirty seconds in the movie and his lines are only ten seconds long. But that thirty seconds is critical to the movie’s story.”

Gwak Joon raised his head, his eyes were filled with confidence for his story.

“I told everyone who joined this project to give these thirty seconds to me because this is the moment that blows life into this story. As I wrote this book, I spent a full month editing the delinquent’s lines. I wanted to keep working on it, actually. Even now, I still want to keep working on it. That’s why I want the actor for this role to be crazy, like me.”

Maru was faced with a passionate soul. The man looked like a crow on the outside, but inside, the man was like a molten core. His fervour was almost palpable. Then again, that was probably why he could write a novel like this in the first place.

“It’s an important hint, isn’t it?”

“Consider a gift from a like-minded person. I judge people purely based on their first impressions. I don’t believe second or third impressions truly matter. In that sense, I like you. I’d like to see you act out that scene.”

“But you don’t know much about me at all.”

“I just said, I judge people based on their first impressions.”

Gwak Joon handed Maru his notebook.

“Read this. And try it. There are lots of people downstairs you can ask for help from in terms of the audition. I don’t particularly like the woman, but she is very talented.”

Maru nodded.

“Can you just give something like this to me, by the way? Don’t you need this?”

Gwak Joon raised a finger to his head and poked it.

“It’s all in here. The paper was only necessary to organize my ideas.”

“...Ah, yes.”

Maru couldn't even say anything in response with how confident the man sounded. He took a look at the notebook before realizing there was a familiar 'S' logo written on it, it was from Seoul university. Flipping the notebook, he realized it was from the law faculty.

"Um, this school..."

"I lost interest in the middle, so I dropped out."

"Dropped out of Seoul University's law school?"

"Why?"

Maru looked at Gwak Joon with a slight smile, perhaps this man's writing was filled with madness because the man himself was slightly crazy.

'To think he'd drop out of a dream school for practically everyone in Korea...'

The world really was unfair. How could it just give all the talent in the world to someone like him?

Chapter 185

"Weren't you scared?" Maru asked as he closed the notebook.

"Of what?"

"When you dropped out. Many people spend 12 years of their lives working with Seoul University as their goal. Yet you dropped out regardless. Weren't you scared of what might happen afterwards?"

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Gwak Joon started spinning his pen between his fingers.

"My father always loved to talk about law school. He said law school was heaven on earth and it would be my sole goal in life. That made me believe I'd have to go to law school when I grew up. I didn't know why I had to go to college, like everyone else at the time. I just thought I had to go because, well, my parents wanted me to."

The man was right. Maru was whisked into college as well since everyone else had gone at the time, he didn't want to stray from the norm.

"The current state of society makes it so that you have to work to bring capitalists profit. To these capitalists, the greatest form of profit are laborers that don't question their decisions. Not the smart people, mind you. So how would you go about making these laborers?"

"If you want to make submissive ones... education."

"That's right, education. This country's education is completely centered on making easy to manage people. It's a very efficient factory in that sense. Ok then, tell me this. If that factory creates an unusual part, what would the factory call that part?"

"A defective product."

“Exactly. This country doesn’t accept diversity or uniqueness at all. They think you’re crazy to try to escape this factory they built for you. Things were the same when I dropped out of college. They told me that I was crazy for giving up a possibility for an easy life.”

Gwak Joon suddenly tightened his grip on his pen.

“Was I scared? Of course I was. Was I nervous? Incredibly so. Because I was transitioning from a machine to becoming a human. I’m not trying to mock those who stay in the factory lane. If they stay on that route and have a definitive goal for themselves, that makes them human as well. But I do wonder sometimes. How many people actually do the things they do because they want to do it?”

Maru might’ve laughed at the man in his previous life, but he could understand the man now. At some point in your life, you start getting desensitized to everything. The word ‘why’ disappears from your vocabulary. Why do I study math? Why do I go to school? Why do I study, to begin with?

You start accelerating, in the bad sense of the word.

The barricades set on the sides of the road stop looking like barriers, they start looking like the environment instead. Instead of wondering what’s on the other side of those barricades, all you care about is how fast you can go on the road. When you start seeing those who try to get out of those barricades, you end up only being able to say one thing.

You’re crazy.

When you see those who actually go over those barricades and succeed, once again you can only ask one thing.

How the hell did that guy succeed?

“If you keep following a path because that’s what you’ve done for the past twelve years of your life, then what becomes of the eighty years you still have left in front of you? I dropped out as such a thought occurred to me. I don’t want to recommend my path to anyone, but I did manage to do what I wanted in the end. Personally, I’m satisfied.”

“Wouldn’t you have regretted your decision if you weren’t even able to get a single book out?”

“If that was the case, I would’ve been sighing every time I looked at Seoul University’s logo. But even so, I’d rather regret having done something rather than be relieved that I didn’t do something. Regrets spawn from decisions. I’d rather have the freedom of choice rather than be free from regret.”

Freedom of choice.

“I suppose some of that mentality applies to the old man in the book as well.”

“The old man lived that life as well. He invested his all into his children like everyone else around him. He raised his children and expected filialty from them. But in this horrible cycle, a mere pebble in the road can break this relationship completely. The real world proves this time and again, as a matter of fact.”

“So the old man made a decision in the end. Through murder.”

“He wanted to prove himself, no matter how violent the method was.”

The old man lived an average life. In the end, he decided to throw away that mundaneness of himself. Was the old man happy as he murdered his own children?

“I personally think that the parent-child relationship should be a lot more relaxed than it’s supposed to be right now. Humans are very annoying creatures. Most animals can take care of themselves after just a year. But human children need twenty, sometimes even more, years of looking after. It’s absolutely ridiculous. That’s why you have parents who think of children as a sort of insurance. They invested through their effort into raising their child, so they expect that much back in return from their kid. I greatly dislike that mentality.”

“Parent-child relationships would certainly improve without that mindset.”

“Right. Of course, I get why parents think this way. It *is* a huge investment, after all. But I think that’s precisely why parents and children need to draw a line on both emotional and financial investment. The parent should allow their child to live freely after raising them. The child should live a life of their own. Rinse and repeat. Don’t pressure your child and don’t see them as insurance.”

It made sense. Every parent wanted to see their child do well. Why? Digging deeper into that question reveals some complicated and sometimes disturbing reasons. Maru tried looking back to his own past, he somewhat remembered chastising his own daughter for doing badly in a test. He recalled his ruthlessness to his daughter at the time. Did he do that for his daughter? Because he really cared for her future?

Perhaps what he really should’ve done is cheer her on, telling her she worked hard. She must’ve gotten chastised enough at school, so could he really scold her again in the name of love? All his life, Maru told himself that home should be a place to rest your body and soul. Realizing that he’d betrayed that notion when it came to his daughter made him let out a laugh of self-mockery.

If he scolded his daughter for bad grades and praised her for good ones, then what became important to him were grades. He loved his daughter and not her grades. So why did he scold her? Perhaps he, too, was thinking of her as an investment of sorts.

“Raising your own child is a responsibility. The moment you try to use the logic of contracts into that relationship, it’s ruined.”

The child can’t choose their parents, the child gets born through the parents’ decision. So, raising a child is the parent’s responsibility. The parent needs to make sure that the life that they gave birth to by their own volition can grow up to be independent.

“Perhaps I was mistaking responsibility for love.” “What?”

“It’s nothing. Just talking to myself.”

The conversation they had today gave Maru insights in raising his child. He shouldn’t look at the minor benefits that his child would bring him, rather look at the child itself. This idea struck closer to home than just the idea of ‘familial love’.

The two of them talked more about the book for another twenty minutes after that, Maru asked several questions that came to him as he read the book. He got answers to some and they contemplated several of the other questions together.

“Interesting, isn’t it? I was the one who wrote the book, but I always discover something new when I talk about it with someone else. That probably means I’m still inexperienced.”

Just as Gwak Joon put his pen down, they heard a sound of an engine from out the window. The bright light of a car’s headlights struck their window briefly before disappearing.

“He’s back.”

Gwak Joon got up from his seat. Was it Senior Moonjoong? Maru stepped down the staircase as well.

“I was wondering why it was so quiet.”

They could see an empty soju bottle, Suyeon was sleeping on a sofa and Geunsoo was passed out right under it. It hadn’t even been an hour. Maru shook his head as he walked to the front door, the sounds of the engine stopped from out the door. Moonjoong stepped inside shortly after, wearing a big padded jacket.

“Welcome back,” Gwak Joon said.

Maru tried to greet the man as well, but Moonjoong looked a bit odd. The old man looked at the two of them with disinterest before heading straight to the second floor.

“...He looks really mad.”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

Gwak Joon seemed totally aware of what was happening.

“Help me make some tea. It’s supposed to be that woman’s job, but she’s clearly passed out right now.”

Maru put some water on boil using the coffee pot in the living room. In that time, Gwak Joon put a spoon of honey into a teacup. They put the boiling water on top of it and headed to the second floor. Gwak Joon knocked on the room on the left side of the staircase.

“Sir, this is Joon. I have some tea for you.”

There was no immediate response from inside. A few moments later, Moonjoong opened the door with a tired expression. He looked absolutely exhausted, but his eyes had some warmth back in it.

“Sorry about before. I had some scraps left inside still. Come inside.”

Maru paid particular attention to the man’s walk. He was stumbling a little bit like someone who just finished a marathon. What in the world was this person doing in his car?

“You should warm up a little,” Gwak Joon said as he handed the cup over.

Moonjoong looked a lot better with a sip of honeyed water inside him.

“You did it today as well?”

As well? Maru waited for Moonjoong's reply. The man slowly responded after taking another sip of water.

"It was worse than yesterday. Thanks to it, I was very annoyed when I saw the two of you earlier. I wasn't able to get all of the emotional scraps out of me."

"Won't you ruin your health at this rate?"

"It's not that bad. Well, I suppose I should try to limit myself considering my age, but... This is very fun."

Moonjoong smiled happily, the man didn't match himself at all from when he first entered the house. What happened?

"You must be confused."

Maru nodded.

"I wondered if I made a mistake in front of you."

"Haha, nothing of the sort. Just..."

Moonjoong looked up into the ceiling.

"I'm in the process of becoming the 'old man'."

Chapter 186

Moonjoong let out a small sigh after taking a sip from the tea.

"I was a little bit lost since I've never acted out a role like this one, but preparing for it is still as fun as ever."

"Did you go to the lake again, sir?"

Moonjoong shook his head at Gwak Joon's question.

"No, I went to a better place. It helps me focus. There isn't anyone around either."

"It'd be troublesome if someone was there. You'd get reported for sure."

"That's true."

It was difficult to grasp what the conversation was about. Maru opened his mouth silently.

"...A report?"

"I get a little bit loud."

"You're not just loud. It's spine-chilling. Watching you act makes me reach for the phone almost instinctively, sir. I almost dialled 119 yesterday."

Gwak Joon sounded like he was joking, but his words weren't light at all. Moonjoong waved his hand with a laugh.

“What about you, then? You sound like you’re having a tantrum when you write in your room. It honestly made me wonder if you were crazy.”

“My tantrums are nothing compared to you, sir.”

It seemed the two men already formed a deep bond, that was unexpected. Gwak Joon seemed like an incredibly logical and judgemental person to Maru, someone who was as far away from jokes as one could ever be. The way he was talking to Moonjoong seemed to Maru like that of two old friends, he even had a light smile on his face.

That wasn’t all. The man was speaking lightly, but still maintaining his politeness. Maru felt like he was looking at two very experienced, very skilled giants from the way they treated each other. Two titans of their respective field who recognized each other.

“You must have something to say to Maru, sir.”

Gwak Joon got up from his seat.

“I’ll take this away.”

He opened the door with the teacup in his hand.

“Goodnight.”

“Yes, good night.”

Gwak Joon left, only then did Moonjoong finally take off his coat.

“Joon is an incredible person. It’s difficult for someone his age to have such a mindset. He feels like a very mature, full person on the inside.”

“I think so as well.”

“Did you talk with him for a bit?”

“Yes. I learned a lot from him. He changed the way I thought about things a lot as well. He’s a bit sharp around the edges, but that only adds to his charm.”

“He’s very sharp indeed. That’s what makes him who he is. He doesn’t look at things the way most do. He would rather cut it vertically, horizontally, and then even disassemble it completely in the end. Thanks to it, he often brings a new perspective to the table that others haven’t considered before. I’ve worked with many authors, but there weren’t many I could really address as such... Joon is a great author for sure.”

“He seemed very embarrassed by that title.”

“I like that part of him too.”

Moonjoong sat back down.

“Right, didn’t you tired getting here?”

“Geunsoo treated me well.”

“He’s working very hard as a driver.”

It was a six hours long round trip. By the sounds of it, this certainly wasn’t Geunsoo’s first trip. Knowing how difficult long-distance driving was, Maru felt pretty bad for Geunsoo. The man said he was fine with it, but the accumulated fatigue must’ve been immense. It was obvious from how he was sleeping in the living room.

“I have to ask him to drive me up again tomorrow. I feel very bad about it.”

“Massage his shoulders some time.”

“Yes. I really should.”

“Anyway, did you read the book?”

“Over ten times, yes. It’s a problem. I can’t let go of it once I put it in my hands.”

“Joon’s book is an amazing piece of work. You get sucked in as you read it.”

“I think so as well.”

“That’s what worries me more. We’re going to have to surpass the original work without hurting it. There are numerous writers and sub-writers working on the scenario still, but they still don’t like the latter part of the movie. We can’t even properly work on the storyboard without the script and the scenario either.”

“I heard the term in the morning as well, but what *is* a storyboard?”

“Ah, yes. You haven’t seen it before. I keep talking to you as if you already know everything about the industry. How odd.”

“I’ve only started acting half a year ago. I have a lot to learn.”

Moonjoong nodded and started looking around the drawers next to him, he grabbed one of the papers in front of the stand and gave it to Maru.

“This is a storyboard. It’s a little bit different for every author, but generally, it looks like this.”

Maru started turning the pages one by one. There were drawings inside little rectangles on the paper, almost like 4-cut comics in newspapers. Outside the rectangles were a bunch of words he didn’t recognize.

“Industry terms. Mostly regarding camera work. The director uses this to plan out the angle and the position of the camera before actually filming. A good storyboard is a movie of its own.”

Maru flipped through as he listened to the man’s explanations, there were a few pages with very detailed cuts and few pages with more words than pictures. It wasn’t difficult figuring out the overall plot of the movie despite not knowing all the words.

“There wasn’t anything like this back in my days. It’s rather new to the industry. It lets the director see their final product before filming and it reduces having to travel so much for filming.”

“So it’s like a manual.”

“That’s right. A very kind manual for a good movie.”

“So the filming will start once the storyboard for ‘Twilight Struggles’ is complete?”

“Correct. I heard we finished the introduction and most of the main plot. Once the screenwriter finishes the latter parts, we can go straight into filming.”

“And the auditions would happen before that. I heard it was next month.”

“It got delayed a little bit. It’ll probably be the first week of May.”

“A little more than a month, then.”

Maru responded as he stared into the storyboard, the paper had a very detailed description of how the director wanted to see each scene. There was probably no better piece of work than this in trying to see what was going on inside a director’s head. Maru’s hand came to a stop after flipping through a few more pages, they were blank like Moonjoong had said.

“Movies are pieces of art that take a truly large number of people to create. That’s why you have to act with even more care and focus. Being unable to act adequately in a movie is rude towards everyone else who’s worked with you on it.”

Heavy words. The plays performed by school clubs were created by the pitiful few members of the club, that made it much less pressuring as a result. It would feel bad if the play failed, but at least you weren’t hurting other people as a result. The story was different in a movie though, hundreds of people worked together to make a movie. Filming, sounds, lighting, editing, special effects, action scenes, location scouting, sets, food... Even Maru knew that a single movie would cost an incredible amount of money.

“The scary thing about films is that the actor is the only person who’s going to be on screen.”

Moonjoong spoke with a very scary look. He didn’t seem to be explaining the movie industry to a student, it looked like he was warning a fellow actor of the industry.

“Hundreds of people gather to complete a single movie. But in the end, the deciding factor of success largely lies in the actor’s ability. No matter how good the story is and no matter how fancy the special effects are, if the actor on the screen is just a wooden doll, it can never succeed. That’s why you always need to stay nervous.”

There are times when high budget films crash and burn while low budget films rake in an incredible amount of cash. Most of the time, the amount of cash invested directly correlated with the amount of money the movie was going to make, but the complete opposite could happen very easily as well. As Moonjoong said, everything was up to the actor in the end. There were directors who could overcome an actor’s shortcomings for sure, but in the end, they too liked to work with skilled actors.

“It makes me feel like I’m choking sometimes. Whenever the staff says we need to succeed and tell me how much money went into the project, I want to run away. The director keeps asking for more retakes, the whole set gets filled with a nasty, cold air... It’s a horrid combination, especially coupled with the fact that I can’t act to their satisfaction.”

“How did that movie go?”

“We managed to turn up a profit, thankfully. Back in my day, we used to have hundreds of movies coming out yearly.”

“Hundreds?”

Moonjoong nodded.

“Because there weren’t any other forms of entertainment back then. It was shortly after our liberation as well, so many of us wanted to jump in with the intent to revive our culture. Many of us became odd by the end because of money though. That’s why I moved back into the playwriting business.”

Moonjoong’s story was rich with history. Then again, the man was there from the very beginning. Just listening to his story gave Maru valuable knowledge.

“You must’ve felt very odd thinking about standing in front of the crowd again.”

“To be honest, I’m nervous. Almost as if I was back shooting my first film. I’m also a little amazed that so many people are willing to risk their money on an old man like me.”

“Please don’t say that. There were so many people who came to the Myungdong Art Theater just to see you.”

“You’re only getting better at complimenting people by the day, aren’t you?”

“I might as well be the tongue in your mouth, sir.”

Moonjoong raised his eyebrows a little bit with a mock frown before smiling again.

“I hope you don’t lose that confidence. Please succeed in the audition.”

“I’ll try my best. But there’s no way good actors won’t come to audition for a project like this one. I’m a little scared that I might not come through in the end.”

“Regardless, try your best. At least try for the delinquent. The more time you spend in the industry, the better you’ll get.”

“I understand.”

“Ah, by the way, the time...”

“It’s 2:33am.”

“Time for bed, I see. You should go to sleep. We have somewhere to be tomorrow morning.”

“Somewhere to be?”

“I didn’t call you here just to talk to you. I wanted to show you something. Something that could help you with your acting.”

“Is it the lake, by any chance?”

Moonjoong nodded slowly.

“Geunsoo will be joining us as well since he has a role he’s trying to get.”

“Which role is it?”

“The third son. The one that dies first.”

“Isn’t there a fight scene? I recall the old man wasn’t able to take the son on his first blow in the book.”

“That’s right. We’ll have to roll on the ground several times. I’m exercising again because of it. I’m going to have to lose more weight as well.”

Only then did Maru realize that the man looked much skinnier than last time.

“An old man who lives by picking up scrap pieces of paper can’t afford to be this fat.”

“You aren’t going to become unhealthy by doing this, are you sir?”

“I spent half of my life acting. If I can’t even control my body, I might as well give up my title as an actor.”

He seemed to have slowly lost weight over time through maintenance. Perhaps Moonjoong had an idea of what the ‘old man’ was going to look like by the time he got the book and started modifying his body accordingly. In any case, the man was amazing.

“I’ll be taking off then, sir.”

“Right. Close the windows before you sleep. The air gets very cold at night.”

“I understand.”

“Be sure to cover up your belly as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

Moonjoong sounded like a worried grandfather. Maru stepped outside, his chest feeling a lot warmer than before.

Chapter 187

Suyeon opened her eyes slowly, having been woken up by the sunlight hitting her eyes. The rays shined through the window in the terrace. She got up as she wiped her eyes, only then did she realize she was on a sofa.

“What the.”

She remembered drinking soju with Geunsoo last night. She was planning on drinking until he got drunk, but it looked like she fell asleep first. Looking around, she could see a well-organized set of bottles next to the trash can. Geunsoo must’ve cleaned everything up first.

“Hah. He’s just so difficult to deal with.”

Alcohol often makes a person’s mind soft and malleable, Suyeon had never seen a man who could push a woman away in that state until now. Of course, she didn’t actually want to approach Geunsoo like that. She only wanted a closer relationship with him. Maybe even marriage, if they fit together well enough. He had become more and more appealing the longer she talked to him.

“Dating, huh.”

Suyeon hugged her legs with a smile, she gave up on normal romance in her first year of college. She went into the school of arts with many dreams, she fell in love with a passionate senior and Suyeon thought their love would last forever.

Her first time at the hotel was very painful, but the man was happy and that in turn made her happy. After that day, their dates became a symbol of sex. Every time the two of them met up, they had sex. Suyeon wanted to make different memories with the man of course, but he only wanted sex. Having believed sex was just a way of expressing one’s love for someone, Suyeon followed him. Eventually, they started meeting less and less. Whenever they did, sex was all they did together.

Even then, she believed what they had was love. After another half year of this, he broke up with her. Through text, he told her that they seemed to have gotten sick of each other so it would be best that they don’t meet again.

Suyeon didn’t believe depression was a real thing before then, she actually looked down on people who said they had depression. Adults who couldn’t even control their own emotions? What a joke, she thought. But the day she got the text, she just sat there on her bed staring emptily into the air all day. That’s when she realized, so this is how people die.

She went to the school again to try to recover a little bit. Thankfully, she didn’t see the senior. He apparently took a break from school, she decided to spend her time trying to recover from her initial shock.

That was when one of her good friends asked her out on a date, he was very careful about it and also shy. He stuttered three times over asking her out to watch a movie with him, he didn’t seem anything like the senior from the past. He looked like a young boy who was stepping into unknown territory for the first time in his life, Suyeon felt love again looking at his face.

Her second relationship wasn’t as fast as her first one, it was slow and soft. Unlike the senior, her friend had a difficult time even trying to grab her hand. Suyeon was relieved, so not everyone was like the senior. After a month, Suyeon took the initiative to grab hold of his hand first. They were moving very slowly, it took her just a single month until she had sex with the senior, it took a month between her and her friend to hold hands. Suyeon remembered squeezing his hand hard because his shocked expression was absolutely adorable.

She felt love sprouting inside of her again, light shone through the darkness in her heart. Energy returned to her life and she started enjoying the time she spent with him. During winter break of her first year, she went on a trip with him. They went to see the winter sea where they walked the empty beach together, that’s when she realized that they would have sex for the first time. She was right, there was a single booked room. Despite this, she felt comfortable. She knew she wouldn’t get thrown away. So they spent their first night together. And what greeted her was... a disappointed smile.

- This isn’t your first time?

Suddenly, her friend looked at her like a dirty used toy. After that, he had very rough sex with her. Suyeon had to suppress a scream, she felt all sorts of disgusting, horrible emotions welling up inside of her. Her friend collapsed on top of her after tiring himself out.

- So, was it good, huh? How was mine in comparison?

That's when she realized, this boy wasn't nervous out of consideration for her, he was just lacking confidence. He got on top of her again at dawn, he kept asking her if she was satisfied. Suyeon remembered just staring at the ceiling dumbly all the way till the morning. She snapped out of it at the sound of his snoring and made her way back to Seoul. She got a call, she ignored it. Time passed and she became a second year.

The first thing she heard when she came back to school was, "Kim Suyeon is a prostitute". It wasn't very hard to find the source of that rumor, it was that friend. He very proudly told his friends that he 'screwed that bitch' like some sort of a war hero, that's when Suyeon became afraid to go to school. At the same time, several men approached her asking her if she was alright. Men who never even talked to her in the past, they looked very intently at her breasts and legs.

There were some people who were truly worried, yet they didn't help. It felt like her emotions had completely disappeared out of her, it felt like she was turning into a doll that could only breathe. When she was almost drowning in despair, she ran across that senior again. He greeted her with a bright 'hello', there was a woman she didn't know standing next to him. That greeting hit Suyeon in the head with a bang. She finally realized something. Her purple, beat-up heart became colored in bright blue, her vision cleared and her breathing came back to her.

She ran forward and gave the senior a kiss on his lips. The girl standing next to him screamed and he started frantically trying to explain. Suyeon grinned looking at the two. So that was what it was. So this was what all relationships were like, it was just a game. The one who wants it loses, the one who craves it loses. You can't let the other side be satisfied, you always need to make it so that they crave you enough to come back.

After that day, Suyeon became free. She formed relationships without thinking about anything else. By giving other people the satisfaction of love, she took back material goods for herself, a win-win relationship for everyone. After all, all men wanted was 'love' in the form of sex.

There was a man during this time who told her that she shouldn't live this way, that she should think more about herself. Suyeon almost fell for it. Maybe she could try entrusting herself to him? The result was a disappointment, they became awkward after sex. She didn't get any response back from him no matter how many words of love she whispered into his ears. As they ended the relationship, the man told her this. He was sick of it, Suyeon could only laugh. Didn't he start this knowing that would happen? What happened to the person who was so sure that he could take care of her? Or perhaps... she was the one who ruined everything? She caused the relationship to break down? She was the bitch in the relationship?

Ah well, she didn't feel anything particular upon that realization. Her heart had too many scars on it for any further feelings of pain, it was for the best. These scars would serve as armor that would protect her. After that point, she became a lot more reserved in using her body. She lived like a nun, two semesters' worth of breaks was enough to get rid of rumors about her. Suyeon became a gentle lady, she could be as perverted as anyone out there, but she kept that side of her under wraps.

She loved again when the rumors died down completely. Love without love, she realized that giving her body to the other side was the last resort. Even when the man was desperate for sex, she didn't give it.

Sex was her ultimate weapon, but it was also a double-edged blade. Once she used it, she would only be seen as used goods. So she only did it when it really counted, enough for her to ensnare a man's soul. By the time she graduated from college, she became a well-established actress thanks to it. She even debuted in a drama.

A result of perfectly making use of hard work and relationships.

"Men are all the same."

She extended her legs out of the sofa with a low grumble. Right then, her feet stepped on something squishy, she raised her legs back up in shock and looked down.

"Sorry, but I don't have a fetish for being stepped on."

It was Geunsoo. He was rolled in a blanket like a caterpillar.

"W-why are you..."

"I was sleeping."

Geunsoo stood up and started folding his blanket. Suyeon usually kept her calm through most things, but right now she could only stare dumbly.

"You should fold your blanket as well, now that you're up."

Geunsoo stepped up to the second floor with a yawn. At the same time, the author came back down on the stairs. The author looked at her with an annoyed look before stepping into the kitchen, he walked out with some cereal and stared at her again.

"What!"

"Do you really have no idea? You should learn to take care of yourself at this age."

He was right so she couldn't even say anything in retort, Suyeon grit her teeth as she folded her blanket.

"Satisfied?"

"If you're done, you should go apologize to Geunsoo."

"...What?"

"You don't remember? It got very cold here, so I tried to wake you up with Geunsoo. You just wouldn't move. So Geunsoo tried to get you up himself. That's when you woke up and slapped him on the face. You swore at him telling him not to touch you. And then you stuck yourself in that corner of the kitchen. Don't tell me you don't remember this either?"

"....."

"Geunsoo got hit all over the place as he tried to put you back on the sofa."

The author clicked his tongue.

"If you aren't a child, learn to take care of yourself. It's none of my business what happened to you in the past. Just don't hurt others using it as an excuse. It's incredibly annoying to have to deal with it."

Suyeon stepped up the stairs after giving the man a glare. On her way up though, she apologized to him. Once she got up, she saw Geunsoo come out of his room. She noticed a long cut on his cheek. She looked down at her hands. One of her fingers had a bit of manicure missing.

“Um, I’m sorry. I heard I hurt you last night.”

“This? It hurts a bit but it’s not anything important. It doesn’t look like it’ll scar anyway.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Well, if you are, could you prepare some lunch? We’re going to need food for Senior Moonjoong and Maru when they come back.”

Suyeon looked down at her wristwatch. It was 11am. Geunsoo passed by her with a nonchalant expression.

“Um, if you ever need anything from me, please feel free to ask. I feel like I owe you something.”

“Sure.”

Geunsoo came to a stop on the way down.

“Oh, that reminds me.”

He looked up to her.

“Did you ever sob loudly?”

The question came out of nowhere. Suyeon subconsciously shook her head, she never cried. She was always too tired to do so when she got betrayed. Later on, she just didn’t have a reason to cry at all.

“Well, I’ll give you a list of sad movies later on. You should take your time crying from watching them.”

Geunsoo made his way back down with a grin. That’s when she remembered, she was stuck in the corner last night shaking quietly by herself. She must’ve looked pitiful.

“Does crying solve anything? It’d just make me look more pitiful.”

She spat those words out without even thinking about it, Geunsoo responded to the question quickly.

“You wouldn’t just be pitiful if you forgot how to cry. Well, I think you’ll figure it out regardless.”

Geunsoo ended the conversation with just that. Suyeon felt her eyelids trembling, it’s been a while since she received sympathy from a man. It made her oddly excited, she was reminded of her past self for a second.

“Can you watch one with me then?”

“Don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“A girl with a pretty smile called Miso told me that crying women are invincible. That’s why I try to stay as far as I can from crying women.”

With that, Geunsoo disappeared from her vision. Suyeon stepped down the stairs herself feeling oddly competitive. She didn't feel bad though, for some reason.

"Did Teacher and Maru go out?"

"At dawn, yes. Around six?"

"Where?"

Geunsoo turned to look at the front door upon hearing the question.

"Somewhere a little spine-chilling."

* * *

Knock knock knock.

Maru opened his eyes. The door opened ever so slightly and Moonjoong entered the room.

"It's about time we head out. Would that be alright with you?"

Maru checked the time with his phone. It was 5:50 am.

Chapter 188

Maru gave himself a shake after getting up. He put on a coat and socks that he hung next to his bed.

"You'd best wear a scarf. It's very cold outside."

"Thank you."

He wrapped the scarf Moonjoong gave him around his neck. Moonjoong was dressed in hiking clothes, with a cane in one hand and a bag in the other.

'A cane?'

It wasn't a walking stick that people liked bringing to hikes, it was an actual cane that old men used for walking. Did his knees get worse? Moonjoong smiled lightly when Maru looked at the man worriedly.

"It's just a prop. Don't worry."

"A prop?"

Maru recalled that the old man of the book walked with a cane as well, the old man liked to go out on walks in hiking clothes with his cane when he was off work. Moonjoong was in character already.

"I'll hold the bag, sir."

He put the bag over his shoulder and walked downstairs, he could hear faint sounds of breathing in the dark room. Suyeon was lying down on the sofa, while Geunsoo slept right below her.

"They're young."

Moonjoong smiled silently and put a blanket over the two of them. Maru noticed that Suyeon's eyes were a little puffy, she must've cried. A vixen like her, crying?

'I guess she just yawned a lot?'

They put a blanket over the two of them before stepping out of the building. Moonjoong got onto the sedan next to Geunsoo's car, Maru followed and sat in the passenger seat.

"We'll head downtown first. I know you probably have a lot of questions, but please just observe for today."

The car slid forward with a slight tremble, it ran over the unpaved road with ease at a good pace. Moonjoong drove a lot like how he lived, Maru noticed. When they finally left the mountain range, they were greeted with asphalt. The sun still hadn't come up yet, they crossed the cold fog and headed straight to town.

Since the region was surrounded by mountains, they didn't run into a single car on the way. The sun reared its head as they drove. After driving for a full two hours, they finally reached the city. The little farms dotting the scenery finally disappeared and their view started getting slowly replaced with grey buildings.

"Let's eat first."

Moonjoong parked his car next to a bean sprout soup restaurant. There were about seven people in the restaurant right now. It was eight in the morning, so the people eating here were most likely to be nearby factory workers. The bottles of makgeolli on their table was proof enough of their difficult workday.

"Do you like bean sprout soup?"

"Red, white, I'm a fan of both."

Moonjoong smiled as he ordered two bowls, an old lady got up from her seat to prepare their meal. She scooped some rice into each bowl before pouring some soup on top, Maru noticed that she actually poured off the soup several times and replaced it over and over again.

"This takes a lot of work, but it really changes the flavor of the rice. Finding a place that still does something like this brings joy to my heart."

Maru set up the spoons and chopsticks as Moonjoong spoke. A little later, the old lady put the two bowls on their table.

"Enjoy your meals."

"Yes, thank you very much."

Maru sprinkled a spoonful of red pepper powder over the white soup before taking a long sip. The hot, refreshing broth slid down his throat, the taste of it was incredibly savoury. Just as he thought he'd have a very nice meal for himself, a hand suddenly entered his vision. The hand was holding some roasted mackerel, an omelette, and some stir-fried pork.

"Have some of this, too."

The old lady put the food on their table with a little smile, Maru found himself a little confused. This was a little too much food for appetizers.

“Please, you don’t have to.”

Moonjoong spoke with a bit of an embarrassed look, the old lady smiled nervously herself before turning away.

‘Eh?’

That just now... felt like the type of nervousness that a young girl would show.

“Do you know her?”

“...A fan.”

“Aha.”

No wonder the lady kept glancing their way.

“Shouldn’t you give her a signature or something?”

Moonjoong instinctively looked sideways at that question, Maru looked over as well. Right next to the old calendar that turned yellow with age was a piece of laminated paper. Looking closely, he could make out the words ‘Yoon Moonjoong’ written on it. Maru smiled a little at Moonjoong’s embarrassment, so he had a side like this to him as well.

“Please come again.”

They stepped out of the store after their meal. The weather was cold still, but the soup in their stomach made it feel less so.

“I won’t be talking much from now on. I might even pretend I don’t know you. Don’t feel offended by it.”

“I understand.”

Moonjoong cracked his neck sideways before leaning on his cane with a deep sigh, Maru let out a small exclamation as he watched the man deflate. The old man in the novel invested his all into his children and lived by picking up trash paper. It would look odd if someone like this looked healthy, so this was why the senior was losing weight.

“Follow me slowly.”

Moonjoong suddenly sounded a lot colder than before, he also walked in a hurried pace as well. His feet took off almost as soon as his cane reached forward, it was almost as if he was getting chased by something. Maru followed him from a bit of a distance.

The place Moonjoong headed to was the town hall. Or rather, the little pavilion right next to it, there were a bunch of old men sitting in it. There was a drum burning hot with a fire nearby where even more old men gathered next to it, either staring forward with blank expressions or conversing with each other.

It was nearing nine now. The old men just kept coming, Moonjoong stumbled forward himself and took a seat on one of the chairs nearby. He was staring emptily into the air, making him look entirely different from his usual self.

Just like this, he blended in.

Maru slowly inched forward towards the pavilion himself, he didn't want to interfere. There were a few Korean chess boards at the pavilion, two old men were playing a game at the moment.

"Is Kim not coming?"

"Dunno. He'll come when the time comes."

"Wasn't he stumbling around yesterday?"

"He's been like that all the time. Here, checkmate."

The chess piece moved with a loud clack. Maru sat a little bit away from the two old men, this place seemed to be the hot spot for the elderly people in town. Maru observed Moonjoong from a distance. What did the Senior come here for?

Eventually, a white-haired man walked up to Moonjoong. That was when the senior finally opened his mouth to extend a greeting. The white-haired old man must've been a friend Senior made here. Maru couldn't hear anything about what the two were talking about, but they were clearly having a good time.

For a second, Maru was reminded of Ganghwan. Moonjoong's face overlapped with Ganghwan's as he remembered the story about living with homeless people for several months. The white-haired man moved away after talking joyfully with Moonjoong, Maru observed the man carefully as well. This old man had an old bicycle. There was a plastic shopping basket that one would see in grocery stores attached to it, which was filled with scrap paper.

Moonjoong stood up to walk towards the old man, the old man handed Moonjoong the basket before disappearing somewhere else. Maru stood up when Moonjoong waved for him to come closer.

"I will be picking up scrap paper from near here now."

"What should I do?"

"Nothing. Just watch."

Moonjoong pushed forward the rusty bike. He moved without stopping, he was clearly familiar with the geography of the neighborhood. He spun around the local store to find some paper and turned towards the house on the other side of the street. There was a bunch of paper, plastic, and other miscellaneous trash laid out right below one of the streetlights. Moonjoong dug through the pile of trash picking out the recyclables himself.

Right then, a woman walked out of the house next to the streetlight with a massive frown.

"Hey! Old man! What do you think you're doing, going through the trash like that?"

Maru made sure not to intervene here.

"I'm sorry. I'll clean it up afterwards."

"You're too much. Aren't you the person who ripped a hole in the trash bag last time?"

"I've never done such a thing."

"Liar. You obviously live off of doing stuff like that. Tsk."

The woman clicked her tongue before throwing a bag of trash in front of Moonjoong.

"What the hell does he think he's doing at that age? No wonder there's no one taking care of him."

She stepped into the building spewing incredibly hurtful insults casually, Maru walked towards Moonjoong with a frown.

"Are you alright, sir?"

"I'm fine. I'm used to it."

Moonjoong smiled as if nothing special had happened, that smile of his rubbed Maru the wrong way. It was the type of smile found on a businessman during an important transaction.

More so than what the lady had just said, Maru was disturbed by this smile. It felt like the entire person changed, the person who always said wise words to him was nowhere to be found. Instead, the person standing in front of him was an old man sick of life.

Moonjoong motioned for Maru to move away. As soon as Maru did, he went back to digging through the trash. After he was done, he grabbed his bike to move to his next destination. By the time he was done and was back at the town hall, three hours had passed. The original owner of the bike was standing next to the building.

"Thank you."

"It's nothing. I'm sorry I couldn't get you more. I'm still very bad at this."

"This is still enough for a bottle of makgeolli. I'll go sell it quickly, so just you wait."

The old man disappeared with his bike. Moonjoong sighed and sat down on the bench next to the town hall, it was a small distance away from the pavilion.

"It smells."

"Because you sorted through so much trash. Is this even worth it? I feel like I can get a sense for things just by observing how you work..."

Moonjoong was horribly abused. For someone as respectable as him to be insulted so early in the morning, how was any of this helpful towards acting?

"Feel, yes. Observing is enough for you to get a feel for how things are. People are smart, after all. But you see, having a feel for something and actually doing it are two completely different things. If I didn't do all of this myself, I wouldn't have gotten insulted. If I didn't experience this, my character would be incomplete. I can obviously leave what I can imagine to my imagination. But if I can do it, I might as well try it."

Moonjoong looked down at his dirtied hands with a proud smile, it was the smile of someone who created a masterpiece.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Of course. Thanks to the lady, I learned what kind of an environment the old man was living in. Well, I’ve heard things like that plenty of times already though.”

“Plenty of times?”

“I tried picking up scraps of paper in Seoul before I came here. There were some who wished me good luck. But most people looked at me like some object of amusement. It was very interesting. The people who so kindly asked me what I was looking for when I was looking at the pile of trash with a suit on... Suddenly looked so cold and hateful when I wore dirtied clothes. Humans are very judgemental.”

Moonjoong wiped his hands on his pants as he stood up, the owner of the bike had returned with a bottle of makgeolli.

“The rest of today will look like this, so take what you can from it.”

Moonjoong looked like he was born here as he walked towards the bike owner. He laughed loudly and blended along with the rest of the old men, but the laughter of the men here had a tinge of sadness within.

“You see, my daughter...”

“My son, he...”

“My grandson...”

There were many stories being exchanged between the men. None of them was ever about themselves. Maru was able to realize from it what life looked like when progress ceased, the only thing that remained was a terrible sense of loneliness.

‘An old man... and the old man.’

The real twilight struggles weren’t as far away as he thought.

Chapter 189

Maru felt like some sort of foreign substance. The old men would occasionally glance at him with incredible confusion, they seemed to wonder what a young man like him was doing there. He thought about playfully approaching them, but as soon as he took a step towards them, their confusion became hostility. Was it because Maru was an outsider?

Right then, an old man started walking nervously towards the town hall, the man was clearly coming here for the first time. The old man walked near the area, seemingly not knowing what he should do. Right then, one of the old men in the pavilion walked out to greet the new one with a smile. He dragged the new person into the pavilion as if this was their old friend.

“First time?”

“Well, yes.”

“Where did you live before this?”

“In Seoul with my children...”

“Oh my, so we’re from the same place! Everyone here has come down from Seoul. We all came down to take a break after raising our kids. The air here is so refreshing after all.”

Right, right. The people around all exclaimed in agreement. The old men sat the newcomer down in the middle before continuing to play Korean chess, the new person fit in within minutes.

So being an outsider had nothing to do with it. Thinking about it for a second, Maru quickly realized the difference between him and the new person.

‘Age.’

Maru walked around the town hall a bit after getting up from the pavilion. Most of the old men clicked their tongue at him, they looked incredibly hostile for some reason. Eventually, his eyes met with one of the older men in the group. The man looked around for a second before motioning at Maru to follow him.

The two of them met up behind the town hall building.

“You won’t get anything good out of staying here, so you better get going.”

“I’m sorry if I sound rude, but could I know why people here seem to hate me?”

“None of us really hates you. It’s just that all of us here have been burnt very badly by our children before.”

“Burnt?”

The white-haired old man looked at a passing scrap of paper bitterly.

“Everyone here has been cut off by their children. We all say that our kids are the best. But none of them actually comes to visit us ever. The only young people in this small town are the factory workers. Really, the only people that live in this town are us, seventy-years-old men.”

Maru was unable to spot a single child in town. Not even a shadow of them, despite hours of wandering. Come to think of, there wasn’t even a school nearby or any entertainment businesses. The entire town felt abandoned.

“None of us wants to admit that we’ve been abandoned. But we all know it. We know we’d spend the rest of our lives here and die in the same manner. That’s when our kids will finally come to take our corpses back. We’ve seen this happen more than just a few times.”

Meeting your children upon your death... Maru felt a little bit guilty inside as well, he didn’t even call his parents back in his previous life. He always said that he would go visit, but he never actually did. Aside from holidays, he seldom visited his parents.

“It’s absolutely pitiful. The only thing we have left to be proud of are our absent children. So we become childish and stubborn as a result. That’s why so many of us look hostile to you. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but I don’t think you’ll be treated well if you stay.”

The old man stepped away with a click of his tongue. Maru stood there on the spot contemplating the amount of loneliness the old man must’ve felt, it was just like ‘Twilight Stuggles’. They’ve all sacrificed their lives for their children, yet they were stuck here.

‘Would they feel happy inside?’

None of them looked too trusting of a young person like him. Was it a result of betrayal? Perhaps the book wasn’t just trying to convey a message of madness, perhaps it was a commentary of sorts. A surprisingly big stone that’s thrown into the pond of society.

Maru watched as Moonjoong listened to the old men around him, they say actors start off as imitation. Going further, the actor needs to develop his own personality within that imitation. That gives the actor his own voice, a voice that speaks to the masses.

Perhaps Moonjoong was trying to understand these old men not because he wants to act well, but because he wants something more out of it? Maru crossed his arms and started to think. An actor who doesn’t just imitate, but carries with him a lifetime of hurt... He was starting to get an idea of what he wanted to be.

* * *

“Sir, can I ask you something?”

“Any time.”

“Why did you make rounds around the town on someone else’s bike? I’m sure you could’ve gotten the experience you needed with your own bike.”

The two of them returned from the city after sunset. This time, they were in a soft tofu soup restaurant as they spoke.

“The most sorrowful thing in the world to a person is to have their job stolen from them. I can’t do such a thing. Plus, these people have their own rules. They try not to cross paths, and if they do, they work at different times. I can’t just interrupt their entire system because I want to experience their way of life.”

“I see. I didn’t think that deeply about it.”

Their soup arrived in the meantime. It would’ve been very bland if Maru had the tastes of someone more his age, but this was perfect for him right now.

“We’ll do another lap after the meal before heading somewhere else.”

“Could it be, the paper...”

Moonjoong shook his head with a smile. After the meal, he went to a nearby grocery store to buy a large amount of bread and milk. Moonjoong headed towards the houses near the town hall afterwards, Maru chased after him with full bags in hands. The group of houses looked like they would crumble at any

moment. Once they walked through the rusted doors, they found an old man watching TV inside. Maru bowed before maintaining a little bit of distance.

"I brought some snacks."

"Oh dear, you shouldn't have."

The two of them spoke for a little while. Moonjoong was mostly on the side of listening.

"Take care."

"I'll see you next time."

Moonjoong stepped out to knock on the next house. And the next one. And the next. Moonjoong visited around ten houses, listening to each old man along the way.

The last one asked them to have some coffee, so Moonjoong and Maru sat together on the patio as they drank.

"Your grandson?"

Moonjoong laughed at the old man's question and nodded, to which Maru nodded with a smile as well.

"You two look very nice. I have a granddaughter around your age as well. I hope she's well."

"She couldn't come over during the holidays?"

"Why would they? They're busy. Just a phone call is enough for me."

The old man responded casually, but it failed to hide his frustrations inside. After finishing the coffee, the two of them stood up. The old man asked them to stay, but it was getting a bit late at this point.

Moonjoong stepped out and looked up at the sky. Maru followed suit. The lack of streetlights here made the stars stand out a little in the darkening sky.

"Being old means that you can't become as honest as you were in the past. That's why old men are often wistful. There are too many stories here that I can only relate to."

Moonjoong's sigh became a white puff of air that flew up towards the sky. Though the breath disappeared very quickly, the emotion lingered on. Moonjoong looked incredibly depressed.

"The reason why I decided to take this job wasn't just because I liked the writing. It was because it was showing a reality that was incredibly hard to face."

Moonjoong started walking with Maru close behind, almost like he was his disciple.

"I am but a single actor. A forgotten one at that. Not many people would pay attention to me if I started speaking out in the streets. But using art, I can start to gather a little bit more attention. What I want isn't anything amazing. I just want to stimulate the minds of people when they watch this movie. I would like nothing more than to change their whole perspective on the situation, but obviously, I'm not talented enough."

"You're amazing as is, sir."

Maru wasn't just saying that to compliment the man, he was honest. Moonjoong laughed in response.

"This movie will be a success for sure. Many people will watch it. Many people will think about it as well."

"What, are you a prophet?"

"Of sorts, yes."

"Haha, you."

Before they even knew it, they were back in the sedan.

"Where are we headed now, sir?"

"A quiet lake nearby."

"A lake?"

He recalled where Moonjoong was yesterday.

The car drove down the dirt road again. After just a few moments, a body of water came into their vision. It was a massive lake, one so big that it was difficult to spot the other side. Moonjoong alighted and opened the trunk, Maru frowned when he realized what was inside.

A hammer, and a bag of rice.

"This is..."

"Something to help me grow my cruelty."

Moonjoong dragged the bag of rice towards the lake. That alone looked like a scene from the movie by itself, when the old man kills his third son and throws the corpse into the lake.

"In order for a movie to send a message to society, it must first become popular. For that to happen, the makers of the movie need to put their souls into it. Meaning, they need to put their best into their work. I'm trying to act out the role of a pitiful old man... but also a cruel killer."

Moonjoong looked at Maru after putting down the rice bag.

"From now on, I'll say some very cruel words. Don't come near me until I tell you I'm done."

Moonjoong's eyes almost seemed clouded with madness, it was impossible to conceive that this man was the smiling old man from earlier in the day. Moonjoong took a deep breath before smacking the rice bag with his hammer.

"You son of a bitch! I wouldn't feel good even if I ripped you to pieces! You don't even know how to recognize your own parents!"

Every time the hammer hit the bag, a disgusting sound rang out. Moonjoong stumbled sideways as he smacked the bag continuously, the sounds coming out of his mouth no longer sounded human.

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Hatred seemed to have surged out of the man. Moonjoong struck the bag with a bestial roar, the bag of rice was torn apart a little more with each strike from the hammer. After spitting out many horrific, night unspeakable words, he finally collapsed to the floor exhausted. Maru approached Moonjoong out of worry. Despite it still being winter, Moonjoong was sweating furiously.

“Sir, are you alright?”

“I’m good. Don’t worry about me.”

Moonjoong spat out a breath of air as he fell back. He was healthy, but he was still in his seventies. Maru was worried. Who knows if something goes wrong here?

“Have some water, sir.”

Maru put a bottle of water next to the old man before turning to look at the rice bag. The rice was spilling out from the tears. To Maru, the rice seemed like blood.

“What do punches full of hatred and evil look like? What do punches of despair look like? I can only imagine it so much. At some point, I need to take it into my hands and put it into action.”

Maru helped the man get up, who stood with a groan.

“A foolish method indeed, but there’s nothing better than this. I’d have to talk about the actual movements with the stunt coordinator, but it’s all up to the actor to put emotions into these strikes.”

Maru looked at Moonjoong’s trembling hand.

“Let’s go back now, sir.”

“Yes, let’s. It seems I’ve taken up far too much of your time.”

Maru got onto the car with the empty bag and the hammer. Moonjoong caught his breath at his seat for a second before starting up the car. It was now 8 pm.

“Dear. It’s very late already.”

“It’s fine sir. I can just sleep at school.”

“That wouldn’t do. Your studies are important.”

“I may not look it, but my grades are actually on the higher end. Besides that, are you alright?”

Moonjoong’s eyes were bloodshot, probably from the way he swung that hammer. His face was completely pale too. Worst of all, his driving got pretty rough as well. This wasn’t like his normal self, he resembled himself when he came into the house last night. Those uncaring eyes. The way he spoke was polite, but he raised many red flags in term of his condition.

“I’m just calming myself. Don’t worry.”

Moonjoong turned the wheel violently, the car left the lakeside and back onto the road. As they drove on the four-lane road, a bigger car suddenly tried to switch lanes in front of them. Moonjoong clenched his teeth and pressed the horn multiple times. He was looking violently angry, angry enough to try to cause a car crash.

“...Sir?”

It was incredibly worrying watching someone who was usually very calm act like this. At the same time, Maru was confused. Actors often talk about “getting in the mood”. To not just understand the main character, but to mentally and emotionally become that character as well. Looking at Moonjoong gave Maru the feeling that the man wasn’t just trying to act the ‘old man’, but rather become the ‘old man’. Maru didn’t know much about acting, but he had a feeling that these were two very different things. The latter sounded much more dangerous as a matter of fact.

Moonjoong slowed down after a few minutes, he leaned back on his seat like an exhausted person.

“Um... sir?”

“I’m sorry. I lost my cool for a bit.”

The man looked exhausted. Maru wanted to drive in his stead, but of course with his age, he couldn’t. After a while more, the car finally came to a stop. Maru quickly got off and opened the driver’s seat.

“Thank you.”

Moonjoong stumbled out of the seat, Maru walked over to open the front door of the villa as well. Geunsoo came out from the kitchen, having heard all the noise.

“Sir!”

Geunsoo grabbed the man with Maru and headed up to the second floor. Moonjoong repeatedly said he was alright, but he really didn’t look the part. He was completely pale, even more so than Maru originally thought.

“Sir, please think about your age.”

Geunsoo put the man on the bed carefully, Maru ran downstairs to boil some water.

“What? What’s happening?” Suyeon asked in confusion.

Maru didn’t have the time to explain, so he just took the warmed water and ran up to the second floor. He could hear Suyeon walk from behind him.

“Please have some water.”

Moonjoong took a sip with a little smile. He repeatedly brushed himself off as alright, but Maru didn’t believe him one bit.

“I’ll be better once I catch my breath. No need to worry.”

Moonjoong spoke with beads of sweat dotting his face.

“This is too much. Please just rest at home tomorrow.”

Geunsoo took away the books, scripts, and the notebooks away from Moonjoong. He didn’t forget to take the laptop as well.

“I said I’m fine.”

“You saying that is what worries me the most. Please listen to me this time. I’ll call Mr. Junmin if you don’t.”

“Hey, don’t do that. He’s going to make a huge fuss out of it if you tell him.”

“So just rest tomorrow, sir. It would be terrible if the main actor in a movie collapsed before the filming even started. You always told us that rest is another form of training, so please listen to yourself.”

Geunsoo turned off the lights and stepped outside.

“Ugh, his stubbornness is something else.”

“Stubbornness?”

Moonjoong and stubbornness, it sounded like a foreign concept to Maru. Here he thought the word that suited Moonjoong the most was ‘conviction’, Geunsoo shook his head as he made his way down.

“The president of the acting association told me before that ‘he’s really bad at being lax on himself’ before. I thought that was a plus side, and not something to complain about at the time... I understood why it was a bad thing once I actually met Mr. Moonjoong.”

“What does that mean?” Suyeon asked from the back.

“He’s incredibly bad at treating himself well. It’s an incredibly dangerous attitude to have, especially with a perfectionist like him.”

“Ahh, I get it.”

Maru understood as well, Ganghwan had talked to him in the past about immersion. Immersion was about forgetting yourself, he still remembered. If a very talented person attempted to immerse themselves into their role, they would erase their own persona. How dangerous was that?

Geunsoo stepped back into the kitchen to give Maru a cup of juice.

“Do you know about the story of an English actor called Bron?”

Maru shook his head, he’d never heard the name before.

“The actor was incredibly famous. Every time he was in a play, numerous famous people would come to watch. He was famous for just one thing, his incredibly realistic acting. At one point, he took on the role of a father who lost his daughter. After he took on the role, people started saying he has finally gone crazy. When worried friends came over to check up on him, Bron would respond with words like, ‘I can’t remember my dead daughter’s face’.”

“That’s a little terrifying.”

“It might be an exaggeration since it’s just a story. But there are actors who go that far into their roles.”

“So it’s the same for Mr. Moonjoong.”

“Pretty much. He takes everything seriously. It honestly worries me. He was fine doing it when he was young, but... his body can’t keep up anymore.”

Maru thought of the Moonjoong he'd observed all day today. Moonjoong blended in with others and maintained an emotional connection with them, even after getting the information he needed.

Think about it for a second, getting friendly with someone in itself was a tiring act. Moonjoong's role for most of the day today was listening to others and consoling them. How tired must he be if he's done this for several days straight? Even psychologists needed therapy because of their job. Moonjoong was doing all of this himself without break.

It made sense that he was completely pale, the mental strain must've been immense. Afterwards, he started beating away at a bag of rice saying that he needed to act cruel for his role. Even swears started feeling bad to say after a certain point. Perhaps he spent the entire day just whipping at himself.

"He told me to observe him for all of today. I don't think he told me that to just learn anymore."

Moonjoong told Maru to take what he could from this experience, perhaps Moonjoong knew better than anyone just how dangerous this method was.

"Perfection always comes with a cost. The only thing that can be perfect by itself is a god."

Geunsoo downed his cup of juice in one gulp.

"Alright, let's get going. It'll be four in the morning if we leave now. Can you even go to school?"

"Why don't we sleep and leave early in the morning to school instead?"

"Sounds good for me, but what about you?"

"I'm not the one driving. Plus, I can sleep at school."

It was a six-hour drive. Maru wanted to make it as easy for Geunsoo as possible.

"You should get some sleep too, then. We just have to get there by eight?"

"Doesn't matter if it's by nine. Our homeroom teacher is Mr. Taesik."

"Aha, I guess we can be a little late then."

Geunsoo headed up with a wave of his hand, Gwak Joon peeked down from the second floor in the mean time. The man waved his hand at Maru before heading back inside, he looked tired as well. Probably from working on his second work.

"I'm jealous, Mr. Moonjoong seems to like you a lot."

Suyeon commented with a pretty smile, Maru responded with a "yup" before preparing to head up himself. Suyeon grabbed his sleeve.

"Aren't you being a little cold? I'm trying to be nice to you."

"Dad always told me to be wary of people who are nice for no reason."

"Oh, so cold."

Suyeon lightly pinched Maru's cheek.

"I've been wondering for a while now. Why are you showing so much interest in me?"

"Interest? Oh you."

"Oh, it's not? Thank goodness. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

Just as Maru tried to turn away, Suyeon put one leg over the other. She seemed to be trying to show her sex appeal in those short shorts.

"Please don't be so cold. I only wanted to maintain a good relationship with you. Because I think you'll succeed."

"I hope I do too. I want to be rich."

"Oh, what a coincidence. Me too. We have something in common!"

Maru shrugged.

"Let's keep in touch from now on. Try to help each other out where it counts."

"I don't think I can help you much as a high schooler. Feel free to reach out regardless. I don't think there are any negatives in knowing you either, Ms. Suyeon."

"When will you drop the formalities? Ugh."

"I tend to act politely to people I'm not friends with."

"We're not friends?"

"Of course not."

"Why not? This is our third time meeting already."

"True. But friendship doesn't count on the number of times we met."

"Ugh, so tricky."

"That's just the way I am."

"You don't think that's cool or anything, do you? Acting like that to a girl is a huge minus."

"Of course not. I act cute in front of girls I want to look good too. I'm a man after all."

"Look at you go. Are you sure you're a high schooler?"

"Probably."

"You really don't miss a beat, do you?"

Suyeon rubbed Maru's thighs with one of her legs with an odd smile, Maru stood there scratching his eyebrow. Suyeon's erotic smile slowly faded away and in its place was a frown. Maru smiled.

"That's it?"

"...What?"

“I was hoping you might show me more.”

Maru grabbed her leg lightly to put it back down, Suyeon looked at Maru dumbly.

“I’d like to request something hotter for the next time we meet. Ah, pretty legs, by the way.”

Maru turned around with a smile, it seemed that the rumors about Suyeon were true. He didn’t have any intentions of judging her for it though, it was just her way of life.

“Hahaha! You’re quite a piece of work, aren’t you?”

He could hear Suyeon laughing behind him, Maru yawned as he waved. There were a lot of things he needed to take care of at school. With the audition on top of it, he was going to be very busy.

‘Find my own way of acting... Perhaps that’s what Mr. Moonjoong wanted to show me.’

Acting that made you want to throw your entire body to test its limits. If he mastered it and managed to fine-tune his body closer towards perfection... Perhaps that’s how truly realistic acting was born.